

# Questions Tutors Commonly Ask

## How long does it take to learn to read and write?

A good question, but impossible to answer. There are many contributing factors that impinge on a learner's ability to learn to read and write, such as motivation, ability, other commitments and health. When you have been working with your learner for a while, you will begin to have a clearer picture of how long it is going to take.

## What is it like to have problems reading and writing?

Some learners have compared it to being blind. As they learn to read, new windows on the world open for them. They have often lived with poor esteem and feelings of failure. They may have hidden their weak reading from friends, co-workers and even their families with excuses ("I forgot my glasses"). On the other hand, many compensate by developing keen listening, observation and memory skills.

If adults admit their reading and writing problems because they want access to the printed word, then the people who act as their eyes have access to much of their personal information – information that they might want to keep confidential. They are living part of their lives through someone else. This can be demoralizing and a burden to others, especially when it is a parent relying on a child.

## Is there a typical learner?

There is no typical learner! They range in age from late teens to seniors. Some are employed and some are not. Some have completed only elementary school but many have completed Grade 12, especially in high schools that emphasized vocational training. Many learners who have a Grade 12 education function at a much lower level. Some deaf learners have been to residential schools; others may not have had formal schooling. Some learners have learning disabilities but did not get the help they needed when they were young.

All learners will be used to communicating orally in English, with the exception of some deaf and deaf/blind people. Of course, there are varying degrees of fluency. Many learners will continue to refine their English language skills as they learn to read and write.

Because learners enter programs voluntarily, they are often highly motivated to make changes in their lives. They know that their weak literacy skills are holding them back from reaching their goals.

## What do I need to consider when I am working with someone whose first language is not English?

- Ask how your learner wants to be addressed.
- Make sure you can spell and pronounce her name.
- Ask her to tell you about her culture, compare differences and similarities.
- Encourage independence.
- Focus on pronunciation only if errors result in misunderstandings.
- Watch facial expressions and body language.
- Speak clearly and use plain English.
- Avoid idioms and jargon – be as direct as possible.
- Use the active voice rather than the passive voice.
- Use visual clues.

## How do I help to build my learner's self-confidence?

People are usually frightened of change. Your learner is about to start something that will make a big impact on her life and on the lives of those around her. Relationships based on dependency will change as she discovers her increased independence. She needs to take an active part in deciding how to make and deal with those changes.

Recognize the fear that confronts people when they contemplate change. Work together to reduce and overcome that fear. Give your learner the opportunity to write about her feelings. She will probably feel vulnerable and lack confidence. As a tutor, you should accept that these feelings exist. Trust and open communication will help pave the way for change. You are in a position to provide support and encouragement. Believe in your learner.

Past failures often result in poor self-image, sensitivity to criticism and fear of error. This often has the effect of discouraging learners from wanting to use their initiative. One of the ways you can help is to discuss and list the things your learner has already successfully accomplished in her everyday life. The best way to boost confidence is to document progress and acknowledge success. Make the steps small so that there is lots of success. Encourage her to keep past work in a portfolio so that she can refer back to it and use it to measure progress.

Learners do not always absorb new information as quickly as you would expect. The ability to learn does not deteriorate much with age, but the rate of learning might

be slower. Be patient. Use a variety of methods to teach and review. This helps to eliminate boredom for your learner and helps to improve self-esteem.

Your learner will practise a new skill with you, and when she feels sufficiently confident, she will go out and use it in a real-life situation. Each time she uses a new skill successfully, her confidence will grow, and with it her self-esteem and the feeling that she has control of her life.

### **Am I expected to take on a social worker role if my learner needs advice on personal problems?**

You may want to deal with personal problems that involve looking for information or writing letters, but situations where you lack the necessary experience or issues that revolve around personal safety are best referred to staff.

Sometimes you might want to tell your learner that you feel the issue is important and ask if she would like to talk to a staff person. She may want to write about the situation as a way to help her decide what action to take.

### **My learner is very passive. How do I encourage more active learning?**

A passive person rarely plays any role in her own education, but feels comfortable following whatever the instructor or volunteer decides is best. She often lacks confidence to be assertive, ask questions or work independently. She may meet with you regularly, but develop few new concepts and make few decisions. You need to introduce her to the idea of goal setting and making choices. You also need to encourage active participation in lessons.

Here are some suggestions for doing that:

- Guide and facilitate, don't direct.
- Give her choices about activities, order of activities and break time.
- Let her take responsibility for determining learning styles.
- Ask lots of open-ended questions.
- Ask for feedback.
- Ask her to bring in her own materials.
- Let her help plan the next session.

If you are working in a group setting, encourage lots of work in pairs and problem solving in groups.

Believe in your learner. A learner often arrives with poor self-esteem and fears yet more failure. Let her know that she has taken an important first step in coming to the program. Explain that it takes a lot of motivation and perseverance to set aside that fear and settle down to learn. Discuss what she has already accomplished. Build on what she can already do. As her self-esteem begins

to grow, she will gradually come to believe her ideas are worthwhile. She will become more willing to trust others and to share ideas. Building trust is a very important part of helping a learner become more active.

Let your learner know that you are not perfect. If you make mistakes and admit when you don't know things, then it will be easier for her to do the same.

### **What comments can I use to motivate my learner?**

You need to be sincere when you comment on your learner's work. Don't gush. Give praise only when it is due. Be specific. Then your learner will know exactly what she has achieved.

### **How can I help my learner to remember information?**

Your learner will have a lot of new information to remember. Thinking about and recording useful information is an important skill in itself. She may need to develop strategies for doing this. She may also want to keep copies of useful personal information.

Here are a few suggestions for her to follow:

- Keep learning materials in a binder.
- Organize the binder – have dividers to separate work.
- Keep useful word lists.
- Keep examples of personal details in the binder, for reference.
- Keep examples of completed forms in the binder.
- Keep a copy of her resume in the binder.
- Keep a list of books she has read.

Here are a few suggestions for you and your learner to follow:

- Consider her preferred learning style.
- Highlight key words.
- Make flash cards for key words.
- Have a word bank or have her create her own word book.
- Have lists of survival words and a personal vocabulary list.
- Use colour coding.
- Use rhymes or nonsense phrases (mnemonics).
- Look for word patterns and keep lists.
- Use word associations.
- Make connections.
- Practise and review.
- Look back and reread language experience stories on a regular basis.

### **I have found an article that my learner would be interested in, but the English is too hard. What should I do?**

You may choose to rewrite the information using plain/clear English. You can do this while still respecting the reader's level of understanding. To do this, you will need to think of the person you are writing for and why you are writing. Be a reporter. State the *who*, *what*, *when*, *where* and *why*. Organize your ideas; put the important ideas first. Keep the writing simple and use the active voice. Limit the length of sentences to around 10 familiar words and write the way you talk. Use a simple sentence structure: subject, verb, object. Avoid jargon and use active verbs.

If reading material is at a difficult level, such as citizenship material or drivers' information, read it aloud with your learner and then discuss the material.

### **What do I do if I run out of teaching ideas?**

This can happen to anyone. It is a good time to talk to staff in the program. They have lots of valuable experience to share with you and can point you to some useful resources. Network with other tutors; ask staff to organize "Tutor Nights." It may be time to go out into the community and let your learner practise some of the skills she has learned with you. Going to the bank, mall, grocery store or library may be just what you need to get you out of the rut.

### **I don't feel as if we are getting anywhere. What do I do next?**

If you feel your learner is not making progress, then try to find other ways to present the material to her. She may be more comfortable using a computer than pen and paper. She may need to take a break and come back to this topic. Whatever happens, talk to her. It is her decision. Keep the feedback flowing. Do not say, "You don't seem to be making progress." Instead, put the responsibility on yourself: "I don't seem to have found the right way to teach this yet. Do you have any suggestions?" This is another time when it is good to get the support of staff.

### **How do I work with a multi-level group?**

In a group situation, it will usually be the instructor who is facilitating the group. Nevertheless, you may wish to think about this subject, as the instructor may invite you to work with the group as you become more experienced.

When learners are at different levels, it can be a challenge to develop activities that will meet the needs of all the learners in the group. Here are some suggestions:

- Provide a variety of materials at different levels.
- Use thematic units or project work.
- Pair beginning readers with more advanced readers.
- Rewrite important information in clear language.
- Use non-reading activities (e.g., discussions).
- Use newspaper articles – give different assignments.
- Encourage learners to work things out or solve problems in small groups.
- Get learners to plan activities (e.g., field trips or speakers).
- Read aloud to your group.
- Brainstorm.
- Use activities that involve various literacy skills, such as creating a newsletter or recipe book.
- Gear writing activities to the level of each learner – beginning readers can dictate sentences or write captions for photographs; more advanced readers can write articles.
- Use process writing techniques.

When learners are comfortable in a group setting, learning takes place. The lessons learned in group interaction are an important part of personal growth. Employers are looking for people with critical thinking skills, good communication skills, positive attitudes and the ability to work well in groups. These skills can be developed in a small group setting. Learners have an opportunity to share opinions and explanations. They learn to listen to others, value each other's contributions, consider other points of view and achieve agreement. They also learn how to resolve group conflict. There is interdependence and shared responsibility.

### **What if the learner and I clash?**

Hopefully you will not find yourself in this position; if you do, don't panic. In a classroom setting the instructor will help you to handle the situation. Consult with a staff person if you are working one-on-one with a learner and you feel you need help.

Misunderstandings may occur between individuals or in a group. Reasons vary. It may be because one of you is often late or forgets to show up, or because of certain views relating to culture or religion. Some learners may expect you to be the "boss" and see it as a sign of weakness if you are not. Some learners may find it hard to accept women in authority roles. There may be other gender or cultural issues or problems that relate to personal space or making eye contact.

Whatever the reason, disagreement and conflict will always be a part of our lives. In itself, conflict is neither good nor bad. However, it is important to deal with situations as they arise. They can be a learning experience for you and your learner. Use them as a teaching opportunity. How you handle disagreements can

encourage your learner to adopt some of your strategies. This may help with some life skills issues. Here are some suggestions for resolving disagreements:

- State the problem from your perspective.
- Focus on the issue or behaviour, not the person.
- Use “I” statements: “I’m not happy when you...”
- Ask how the other people involved see the problem.
- Acknowledge the significance of the other person’s comments.
- Maintain the self-confidence of the others involved.
- Separate fact from opinion.

### What are some of the other issues that I might encounter?

The table below describes some difficult issues you might encounter as you work with your learner. It offers reasons for her behaviour and suggestions for dealing with the issues.

It is important to keep staff informed if your learner loses motivation or misses a few sessions. Do not let this become a problem.

Issues	Reasons and suggestions
Prefers not to write things down	Offer to do the writing or get her to write a few words over a period of time.
Forgets things very easily	She may have a poor short-term memory – needs to practise between classes. May be affected by other personal problems.
Often grasps ideas more slowly than you thought	Build on her past experience. Present concepts in a variety of ways.
Never finishes a story	Use materials that can be covered in one lesson.
Knows more about some topics than you	Learn from her experience.
Is quiet and does not want to communicate much	May have had bad experiences with instructors in the past. Gain her trust.
Chats non-stop	May be nervous and want to postpone learning. Use her experience in lessons.
Has difficulty starting new habits	It is hard to unlearn mistakes. Be patient.
Is too nervous to concentrate for long	Helping to cope with learning is as important as teaching her to read and write. Keep materials short. Have plenty of variety.
Is depressed	She may have pressures at home. Put prepared lessons aside if she needs to talk. Encourage journal writing. Make the learning environment comfortable. Give opportunities for success. Consult staff.
Does not like another member of the group	She may feel other learners are taking up too much of your time. There may be cultural differences. Discuss with the instructor.
Does not like you	You may remind her of someone else. She may feel you are not interested. Talk to program staff if you cannot resolve the issue or you would like advice.
Is tired	Learning should be in short chunks and varied. Perhaps you could arrange a different meeting time.
Stops coming	You or the instructor will need to contact her and find out what is happening. Sometimes, all it takes is a call to show you care. Some programs will have a policy regarding attendance.

Harwood, C. (2001). *Handbook for literacy tutors*. Ottawa, Ontario: Ottawa-Carleton Coalition for Literacy. ISBN 1-894593-10-3. Used with permission.