

# Adult Literacy – Literacy for Students Aged 15+

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First of all, adults of all ages can succeed at learning to read. This article will be addressed to you, the potential tutor.

## My definition of adult

Before we start, let me clarify what I mean when I refer to an *adult*. I mean anyone aged 15 or over. People aged 15 have, for the purposes of learning to read, an adult brain.

In some ways, adult students find learning to read easier than small children, and in other ways, they find it harder.

Older students' emotional baggage and lack of belief in themselves make learning harder; so does their fear of failure. But their wider experience of life and the things they have already learnt make it easier for them to learn.

This life experience certainly makes them easier to teach. It's far easier to explain abstract ideas to adults. They also have some knowledge of history, and a far wider vocabulary.

One difficulty you may well face, if you follow my instructions, is that your students may become very angry at times, once they realize just how easy it is to learn to read. This anger, even if it's directed at you because you're the person with them at the time, won't be personal.

## What can cause failure to learn to read?

Some people find it harder to learn to read than others, due to:

- poor concentration or focus;
- poor hearing, which can make it more difficult to hear the quieter sounds in English (so you'll need to pronounce the individual sounds clearly, though not necessarily loudly);

- poor sight, which can make it more difficult to discern the differences between different types of printed letters. (My materials are written in Georgia font, which is regarded as one of the easiest to read.);
- poor fine motor skills (that could make learning to handwrite more difficult); and, most importantly:
- a lack of faith in their ability to learn to read (due to failure to learn to read in the past).

I have only ever had 2 students, I refused to take on. I refused to teach them because I believed they would be unable to learn to read.

These students were so severely disabled that they could not indicate *yes* or *no* in any way – not even by moving an eye or hand. They couldn't even let their parent know they wanted a drink of water.

But other students, who had only mild to moderate disabilities, were able to learn to read. Yes, for those with hearing, sight or other difficulties, there had to be some modifications to the Course.

If you feel your students (I say *students* to avoid juggling *he* and *she*), would be able to succeed if given a bit of extra help, consider my Course.

You could contact me to tell me the difficulties your student is struggling with. Perhaps I could offer suggestions regarding the types of adjustments you could make.

## Dyslexia

In the last few decades, many people who failed to learn to read were labeled *dyslexic*, and the label was regarded as a sign that the student was unteachable.

But in nearly all those cases, it was the method of teaching reading (usually the Whole Word or Eclectic Method) that were at fault. In many cases, being taught using a faulty method lead to poor “brain wiring”, which appears as confusion, guessing, and general “trouble with words”.

Fortunately, the brain can be re-wired with a full Phonics course – one that doesn't rely on Sight Words.

The main reason those methods fail is because they don't make sense; they are not consistent with the way written English works.

## Many students can't learn, if things don't make sense

And the fact that these methods didn't make sense caused other problems, as many of these students were what I call “Engineer types” – the sort of people who can only mentally process things that make sense.

These people are very good with their hands, they fix things and invent things. But if what they're told to learn doesn't make sense, their primary gift, their need to make sense of things, causes their brain to refuse to process the information – and it's assumed the student is stupid, when they're anything but stupid. These students need to be taught material that makes sense.

Another type of student who has trouble with methods of learning to read that don't make sense are the “Creative types” – the sort of people who can take any shape (real or imaginary), and see a 3D model of it in their minds, and move that figure around so they can see all the sides.

As strange as it may sound, these people must be taught to read using a very organized (non-creative) method, because otherwise their creativity causes problems.

These types of students need to learn that reading doesn't require the type of creativity that can flip letters around, shuffle them, or flip words around, or memorise their shape.

That wasn't how written English was designed to work. A number of our letters are the same shape, just in different orientations (think letters b and d, and p and q). And many words contain the same letters (e.g. *was* and *saw*, *slit* and *silt* and *stilt*).

Again, their foundational ability undermines their learning ability, when they're taught using a method that doesn't make sense.

Once students have trouble learning to read, they are often labeled *dyslexic*, and once that happens many teachers give up on them because they assume the student is unteachable.

There's a third type of student who can have trouble learning things, if they're not taught carefully and methodically – people who have processing difficulties. These people can understand anything, if it's taught in an orderly manner, logically, and step-by-step.

But if information is jumbled up or unnecessarily complicated, if there are too many distractions, if students are constantly having to shift their attention from one thing to another.

Another really common problem is that insufficient time is given to thoroughly learn something and think about it, or revise and practice it.

I also wonder if the school environment itself, our cultural worship of speed, and our craving for rapid changes (e.g. the very short length of time a single picture is on the TV), haven't caused many processing problems.

As you can see, there are many reasons why a student might have had trouble learning to read – none of which were the fault of the student.

## Sight Words

Another reason many students struggle to read is too much revision of the wrong thing - Sight Words.

Much of the problem with learning to read English is because students are expected to memorise whole words. This is not how English was designed to be read or written. English was designed to be sounded out and blended.

## The thing that causes adults to fail to read

The main reason adults continue to fail to learn to read is that the same type of method is used to teach them.

This is an Eclectic Method or a Whole Word Method. These methods are easy to spot; they all rely heavily on Sight Words.

The most efficient and effective learn-to-read method is a Synthetic Phonics-based Method.

A Synthetic Phonics Method of teaching reading, is the most consistently successful way to teach reading.

*Phonics* means that the teaching method is based on the sounds in language. In English, there are about 45 sounds. (*About*, because different types of English use a different number of sounds.)

In a Phonics-based course, students are helped to “tune in” to a sound they already know – one they use in their spoken language.

Then students are taught the most common letter (or letter team) that is used to represent that sound in writing.

Once students know the most common ways the sounds are written, and can read words written with those letters, they are taught the alternative ways the sounds are represented – usually with a reason or “rule” that explains when and why that alternative is used.

NOTE: A letter between slash marks represents a sound, not a letter name.

For example, /f/ in **fly** **swat** is written with letter f. But Foreign /f/ in **photo** is written with the ph letter team, because photo is a foreign (non-English-based) word.

And the *synthetic* part of Synthetic Phonics Courses means that students are taught to sound out the words on the page, and are taught to synthesize the sounds (blend them back together into the word).



## How can I help my student learn to read?

In order to be able to successfully teach your student to read, you only need to know if there are any specific difficulties e.g. hearing, speech, sight, or hand problems that might mean you have to make adjustments to how you teach.

In this instance, Dyslexia and processing difficulties are not regarded as specific difficulties, because most if not all of those problems are likely to be solved by the method used in my Course.

The oldest person I have taught was 64. He had retired from running his own business and thought that now he would have time to learn to read. He was staggered to see just how rapidly he became an independent reader.

A daughter taught her 94 year old mother to read, so I know that even very old people can learn to read.

But most adult students learning to read with my Course are older teens and people in their 20s.

## The learn to read method that succeeds

A Synthetic Phonics Method of teaching reading, is the one that most consistently succeeds to teach school-aged and adult students to read. *Phonics* means that the teaching method is based on the sounds in language.

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## There are many courses available

There are a number of excellent Synthetic Phonics Courses available. I recommend that you read some of the other ebooks available on my website, and see if my Course would suit you and your student.

You could use the [How Do I Start Teaching Phonics at Home?](#) ebook. It give you everything you need to be able to teach the first 90 words in my Course.

By the time you’ve read that, if you decide that my Course won’t suit you, you will have learnt exactly what to look for, so that you can assess the other courses on offer.

Then you’ll be ready to be able to teach your adult friend or relative to read. I wish you and your student all success.

## How do you teach basic literacy to adults?

The thing to remember about teaching literacy to adults is that the reason they failed to learn to read in the past, was not due to a lack of effort on their part.

They may have been taught by an incompetent teacher, the method used to teach them may have made no sense to them, or their education may have been severely disrupted for a variety of reasons.

But whatever contributed to their inability to learn to read, they are likely to be carrying a lot of emotional baggage because of the suffering caused by having that problem. And they may well fear and believe that they are too stupid to learn to read. But the fact is that almost anyone who can hold a conversation is able to learn to read.

Anyone who is willing to confront such a terrible fear deserves respect, so treat your potential student with respect, and with kindness. With your help, they can and will succeed, perhaps even beyond their wildest dreams!

## What do I need in order to be able to teach?

The main things you need to have in order to be ready to teach reading (no matter what the age of your students), are patience and perseverance.

An additional characteristic you'll need in order to teach adults is being quick on your feet, as once adult students realize how easy it is to learn to read this way – they'll pick up speed rapidly, and you'll have trouble keeping up with them.

Teenaged students who have the ability to persevere, can learn to read fluently in a couple of months – if their tutor has the time to tutor them for a couple of hours a day.

More mature people often, but not always, start off learning to read very slowly, but they don't stay that way. So be ready for the amount of work covered in each lesson to increase, once skill and confidence improve.

When using this method, your students will gain confidence because they'll realize that you're not going to put them on the spot. They won't have to answer questions such as: *What word would make sense here?* And they won't be given ridiculous instructions such as: *Just look at the word, and say it.* Neither of these activities is reading!

Instead, they will take part in real reading activities, such as: sounding out words, blending those sounds back into words, and comprehending the word they have just said. Their reading words will be on the page in front of them.

## You don't need to be a teacher or trained tutor

You don't need special equipment in order to teach reading. You certainly don't need to be a teacher or trained tutor.

All the training you need will be given in this ebook and the other ebooks on my website. I will only repeat the occasional snippets of that information here, so that you can use it to show your students that they could successfully learn to read using a Phonics-based course.

What you do need is: some general knowledge, a few basic skills, and some basic (parent-level) teaching skills. You also need the [How Do I Start Teaching Phonics at Home?](#) ebook, that's available on my website. It's free.

If you use that ebook and decide you want to buy the Course, you'll find the Course on my website.

You will also need to make slight adjustments to those instructions, because you're teaching adults, rather than younger students. I'll explain more, below.

## Adults have greater understanding

When you teach adults, your students will be able to understand the instructions you give them much more easily than they would if they were small children.

Adults already understand:

- which way to flip the pages when reading;

- the idea that the alphabet letters are used for reading and writing; &
- that things that happened in history affect how we live today, including the way we read and write.

On the other hand, you will be battling against their pre-conceived ideas about literacy, such as their in-built belief that learning to read is difficult, and that it might be too hard for them to understand.

You will also have to overcome their faulty conceptions about how reading works. A few paragraphs in the [How Do I Start Teaching Phonics at Home?](#) ebook compresses several thousand years of literacy history into a few sentences – which is all that’s necessary for students to understand how written English works.

Knowing that information just helps things make sense – which is important, especially for adults.

## Written English nearly always makes sense

The main idea to get across to students is that written English nearly always makes sense. This is could be an uphill battle, as it’s likely that this is inconsistent with their own experience and with what previous teachers have told them.

Nevertheless, by working through a Phonics-based course, they will see for themselves that English usually does make sense. The reason it hasn’t seemed to make sense in the past is that they were not taught by someone who understood how written English works.

Even if you’re not a teacher, if you’re using a properly structured Phonics course, and following the instructions on how to use it, you will be able to teach reading, and your students will become independent readers.

It takes about 200 quick and easy lessons (if you use my Course), for a student to be able to read. Other courses will have a different number of lessons.

The great thing is that because these courses make sense, your students will be able to learn to read, no matter how old they are, or how long it's been since they left school.

## Older students must build the foundation

Don't be fooled into believing that older students can skip some of the work, because "they've already done that work numerous times before".

Not true! If they really understood the foundational principles of reading, they'd be able to read!!!

So don't skip the early work because they (or you) think that it's too basic – unless you want to set your students up for failure, and waste a lot of time and energy.

I don't know how many times a grown adult has said to me, "Oh, THAT'S why blah blah blah!" When they should have known that since early in their learning to read journey.

## The problem with teaching

As a tutor, you're going to come across the major problem with teaching – that it's not a good idea to assume that because you've told someone something, that they have understood it – even if you have explained it frequently and perfectly.

Perhaps, they weren't listening, they were distracted for a moment, they weren't paying proper attention at the time, or they've just plain forgotten, or they had a 'brain glitch' about that particular point and have trouble processing it. (Everyone has brain glitches about some things.)

You will find that there are some things you will have to teach again and again before your students really grasp what you've said. Don't be discouraged about that, that's just one of the joys of Teaching.

At other times, your students will grasp things so rapidly that you'll have trouble keeping ahead of them.

## Adults can be the most co-operative students

One reason older students can make the best students, and can progress amazingly rapidly, is that they understand the advantage of co-operation.

There are two areas of learning reading that benefit greatly from tutor and student co-operation.

One is the speed at which a lesson can be taught. When you teach one of the lessons in my Course, you say the sound for the lesson, and the **memory word** that uses that sound (and a silly sentence that uses that sound. Students don't need to remember this sentence – it's just there to help them be sure they're hearing the correct sound).

You then say a list of words that use that sound – so your students can listen for that sound in real words. Then you repeat each of those words, with your student repeating each word after you – so students can become aware of how their mouths form the sound.

## Adults can be the most motivated students

Students' motivation - measured by the degree of attention they pay to their lessons, pays off later.

Once you know your students can hear and say the correct sound, you show them the picture that illustrates the memory word, and the hand sign that will be used to represent the sound.

The hand sign can be used in a variety of ways, and is often used to avoid students having to switch between reading and writing, and to ensure that you are both referring to the same sound – isolated sounds can be surprisingly difficult to hear.

On the next page is a lesson, so you can see how it's set out. Have a look at it now, before I explain the other major ways that adults make the best learn-to-read students.

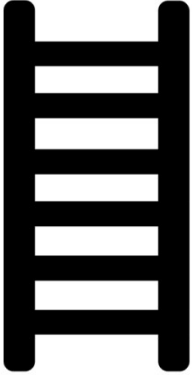
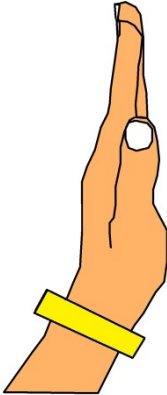


# /l/ in ladder = l

/l/ ladder Little lambs love ladders.



List of /l/ words: **l**adder, **l**aptop, **l**amp, **l**ady, **l**etter box, **l**ight, **l**ate, **l**unch, **t**all, **f**ill, **t**able, **w**obble

	/l/	
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l

l

ill

lid

till

lit

lilt

sill

tilt

stilts

list

still

As you can see from the lesson above, once students have tuned into the sound they're learning, and know the hand sign, you point out the way we represent that sound in writing – and show how the shape of the hand sign is similar to the shape of the letter.

The letter in the box lets you know there's a flashcard for that lesson; you then add the flashcard to the pile of other flashcards that you'll run through at the end of the lessons you've completed the day.

Then, the student sounds out and blends the words. (The Course is cumulative, so students are only shown words that contain letters they have already learnt.)

## Adult students learn procedures most easily

These older students rapidly become familiar with the lesson procedures. When this ease of learning procedures, is added to their high motivation and co-operation, the result often shows up as exponentially faster progress.

A motivated, co-operative, focused adult student can complete in 10 minutes what it takes scatter-brained young students 30 minutes to complete.

## Adults make the best remedial students

And here's where adults make the best students, yet again. When they forget something, or trip up over a pronunciation, etc., I recommend that they try to give the correct answer 3 times. If they have given the wrong answer 3 times (or have just gone blank), you use the following procedure; I call it the Being the Student's Working Memory.

Here's an example of how to be the student's working memory when they can't blend sounds together.

In this example, they've said the sounds correctly, but can't blend them together rapidly enough to hear with the word:

**Student:** /s/ /a/ /t/

**Tutor:** That's right [or some other positive comment].

Now repeat after me:

/s/ /a/ /t/

[Leaving about one "beat" between sounds.]

**Student:** /s/ /a/ /t/

**Tutor:** /s/ /a/ /t/

[Leaving about half a beat between each sound.]

**Student:** /s/ /a/ /t/

**Tutor:** /s/ /a/ /t/ sat

[Say each sound just far enough apart to be separate sounds, then say the word.]

**Student:** /s/ /a/ /t/ sat

Here's another example, of blending a tricky word. Words with several consonant sounds one after the other cause lots of problems. Don't expect students to do something more difficult than they can manage; be content with their sounding out the sounds accurately, if need be, then move on.

**Student:** /s/ /t/ /i/ /l/ /t/ /s/

**Tutor:** That's right.

Now repeat after me:

/s/ /t/ /i/ /l/ /t/ /s/

[Leaving one "beat" between each sound. You might need to do this in 2 parts – 3 sounds per part.]

**Student:** /s/ /t/ /i/ /l/ /t/ /s/

And the student points to each letter.

**Tutor:** /s/ /t/ /i/ /l/ /t/ /s/

[Leaving half a beat between each sound.]

**Student:** /s/ /t/ /i/ /l/ /t/ /s/

**Tutor:** /s/ /t/ /i/ /l/ /t/ /s/ stilts

**Student:** /s/ /t/ /i/ /l/ /t/ /s/ stilts

Remember, don't ask the impossible if they're having difficulty.

Adult students usually know when they don't know, and ask for help. Be a help, without becoming a crutch for them.

Sometimes, students will sound out correctly, but when it comes to saying the word, they'll switch some letters around e.g. sounding out *hospital* correctly, but saying:  
*hos ti pal.*

Don't be concerned; this will sort itself out later. When the right time comes, you can sound out with sounds and hand signs. You can draw attention to the syllables the student is saying incorrectly. Then, you can teach the students the series of hand sign movements for each syllable as you say the word correctly. They can practice that on their own.

Many students find it easier to remember a series of movements, than a series of invisible sounds. This is a major advantage of hand signs – they make those invisible sounds, visible.

## Adults can reason

Sometimes, when your students have a problem, they'll want time to think through the problem for themselves, instead of being given the answer. Let them do this.

You could even offer that option before you step in and act as their working memory.

But don't place them under any pressure, or make them feel disrespected if they'd prefer you to help them out, so they can just get on with the lesson. They might prefer to do their thinking in their own time.

## What's next?

I recommend that you go to the website and download the How Do I Start Teaching Phonics at Home? ebook. It contains all the material you need to know how to teach, as well as the Lessons & Teaching Aids needed to teach the first 90 words in the Course.

To read other free ebooks and other literacy-related information, go to:  
[www.teachreadingathome.com](http://www.teachreadingathome.com)