



Tutors FAQs

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 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. 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?

Here are some general tips. We also provide additional in-service training which addresses tutoring ESL learners.

- Ask how your learner wants to be addressed.

- Make sure you can spell and pronounce their name correctly.
- Ask them to tell you about their 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.

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 significant impact on their life and on the lives of those around them. Relationships based on dependency will change as they discover their increased independence. Your learner 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 their feelings. They will 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 can 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 their 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 your learner to keep past work in a portfolio so that they can refer 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 practice a new skill with you, and when they feel sufficiently confident, they will go out and use it in a real-life situation. Each time they use a new skill successfully, their confidence will grow, and with it their self-esteem and the feeling that they have control of their life.

Am I expected to take on a social worker role?

What do I do 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 they would like to talk to a staff person. They may want to write about the situation to help them 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 their own education but feels comfortable following whatever the instructor or volunteer decides is best. A passive learner often lacks confidence to be assertive, ask questions or work independently. They may meet with you regularly but develop few new concepts and make few decisions. You need to introduce them 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, do not direct.
- Give the learner choices about activities, order of activities and break time.
- Let the learner take responsibility for determining learning styles.
- Ask lots of open-ended questions.
- Ask for feedback.
- Ask the learner to bring in their own materials.
- Let the learner help plan the next session.

Believe in your learner. A learner often arrives with poor self-esteem and fears yet more failure. Let them know that they have 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 they have already accomplished.

Build on what the learner can already do. As their self-esteem begins to grow, they will gradually come to believe that their ideas are worthwhile. They will become more willing to trust others and to share ideas. Building trust is an 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 do not know things, then it will be easier for them 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. Do not gush. Give praise only when it is due. Be specific. Then your learner will know exactly what they have 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. Encourage your learner to develop strategies for doing this. They may also want to keep copies of useful personal information.



Here are a few suggestions for your learner 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 their resume in the binder.
- Keep a list of books they have read.



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

- Consider their preferred learning style.
- Highlight key words.
- Make flash cards for key words.
- Have a word bank or have the learner create their own wordbook.
- 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. •Practice 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 ten familiar words and write the way you talk. Use a simple sentence structure: subject, verb, and 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 suitable 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." If you are comfortable doing so, it may be time to go out into the community and let your learner practice some of the skills they have 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. Your learner may be more comfortable using a computer than pen and paper. They may need to take a break and come back to this topic. Whatever happens, talk to the learner. It is their decision. Keep feedback flowing. Do not say, "You don't seem to be making progress." Instead, put the responsibility on your- self: "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.

What if the learner and I clash?

Hopefully, you will not find yourself in this position; if you do, do not panic! Consult with a staff person if you feel you need help.

Misunderstandings may occur between individuals. 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. 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 on the next page describes some difficult issues you might encounter as you work with your learner. It offers reasons for their 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 the learner to write a few words over a period of time.
Forgets things very easily	The learner may have a poor short-term memory – encourage practice between classes. They may also be experiencing some personal issues.
Often grasps ideas more slowly than you thought	Build on the learner’s experiences. 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 their experience.
Is quiet and does not want to communicate much	May have had bad experiences with instructors in the past. Gain your learner’s trust.
Chats non-stop	May be nervous and wants to postpone learning. Use their 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 the learner to read and write. Keep materials short. Have plenty of variety.
Is depressed	Your learner may have pressures at home. Be prepared to put prepared lessons aside if you feel they need to talk. Encourage journal writing. Make the learning environment comfortable. Give opportunities for success. Consult staff.
Does not like you	You may remind the learner of someone else. They 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 Tutor Coordinator will need to contact the learner and find out what is happening. Sometimes, all it takes is a call to show you care.