



# Essentially Yours: Training in the Essential Skills

## What's the Buzz About Essential Skills?

In the September 2007 edition of *Our Voice*, CLO announced plans to provide information and training on HRSDC's nine Essential Skills (ES). As promised, we are pleased to present you with the first installment of "Essentially Yours: Training in the Essential Skills," a project funded by the Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities. Whether your agency is familiar with Essential Skills, or has already integrated them, we are confident the information we provide will prove a valuable resource for agencies and learners alike.

A recent survey indicated that the understanding and use of ES varies within our membership, and there is some uncertainty about how to use ES tools for learners with independence goals. After many years of development at the federal level, Essential Skills are being explored by community literacy agencies as building blocks for LBS programs and learners.

Fear not. Despite ES tools and resources having been created primarily for employment purposes, ES development is not job-specific training. It is skill enhancement that supports life-long learning, benefiting everyone in all facets of their lives. Simplistically, Essential Skills are the skills adults use to manage their daily activities. From making a shopping list to conducting scientific research, Essential Skills range from simple to complex, and can be further developed through experience, instruction, and practice. Essential Skills have been described by HRSDC as the "fundamental skills that make it possible to learn all others," meaning they are the literacy skills that people need to adapt to an ever-changing environment.

ES development is not aimed only at learners with lower skill levels, as statistics show that many high school and post-secondary graduates lack the necessary ES to reach their full potential. While ES development certainly impacts the economy by creating a more capable workforce, it can have a significant impact on adult learners' training plans and success. LBS learners who receive training integrating an ES approach, develop skills that lay the groundwork for progress.

With these bulletins, and the other Essentially Yours initiatives (see The Road Ahead on page 8), CLO hopes to take the mystery out of ES implementation by exploring Essential Skills tools and resources, and showing you how to use them. Let the learning begin!

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**INSIDE THIS ISSUE:**

<a href="#">The Main Course—The Nine Essential Skills</a>	2
<a href="#">Behind the Scenes—The History of ES</a>	3
<a href="#">Testing the Waters—Surfing the ES Site</a>	4/5
<a href="#">An Introduction to ES Profiles</a>	6/7
<a href="#">Essential Skills in Action</a>	8
<a href="#">The Road Ahead</a>	8

# The Main Course

## The Meat and Potatoes

The following are HRSDC's nine Essential Skills and their definitions:

1. **Reading Text:** Reading materials in the form of sentences and paragraphs.
2. **Document Use:** Tasks that involve a variety of information displays in which words, numbers, and symbols are given meaning by their spatial agreement.
3. **Writing:** Writing texts and writing in documents such as filling in forms and non-paper-based writing such as typing on a computer .
4. **Numeracy:** Using numbers and thinking in quantitative terms to complete tasks.
5. **Oral Communication:** Using speech to give and exchange thoughts and information.
6. **Thinking Skills:** The process of evaluating ideas or information to reach a rational decision. (Differentiates between five different types of cognitive functions.)
7. **Working with Others:** Working with others to carry out tasks.
8. **Computer Use:** Using different kinds of computer applications and other related technical tools.
9. **Continuous Learning:** Participating in the on-going process of acquiring skills and knowledge.



**Essential Skills  
have been described  
as the “fundamental  
skills that make it  
possible to learn all  
others.”**

<http://srv108.services.gc.ca>  
Essential Skills Page

## The Gravy

The nine Essential Skills levels have been developed using a continuum of difficulty – ranging from simple to complex, depending on the form and context in which the skill is used.

An everyday life example is using basic numeracy skills to handle such tasks as common monetary transactions; whereas, managing one's own retirement plan demands more complex skills.

In future bulletins the ES complexity rating scale will be described in greater detail relative to Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS), the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), and the Essential Skills Profiles.

**Stay tuned!**

## Behind the Scenes: The History of Essential Skills

The idea of Essential Skills is not new.

The ES approach has been in the works since the early 1990s, when researchers recognized how people negotiate certain skills to function at work and in their daily lives.

HRSDC launched the Essential Skills Research Project in 1994 to examine how the Essential Skills were used in various jobs. This resulted in the development of the Essential Skills Profiles.

Using scales and terminology from a number of sources, including the International Adult Literacy Survey and the Canadian Language Benchmarks, a template was created to show how the nine Essential Skills are used across a variety of occupations. To date, more than 4,500 interviews have been conducted to develop over 200 ES profiles for occupations that require post-secondary education or a high school diploma or less, as described in the National Occupational Classification (NOC) index.

LBS practitioners know that learners may have a number of goals for skill enhancement. ES Profiles can be used to develop training plans and activities to help learners achieve their goals – whether they are independence, further education or training, or employment.

The Ministry of Education and Training recognized the Essential Skills in their Literacy Ontario, 1998 Learning Outcomes Matrix, and suggested using them when developing materials. The ES levels do not directly correspond to LBS levels; however, the ES Profiles skill summary sections contain skill descriptors that are similar to the success markers found in the Learning Outcomes Matrix.

It is hard to ignore the economic impact that low literacy levels has on society. Results from the 2003 International Adult Literacy and Life Skills survey indicate that the number of Canadians functioning at a low literacy level is increasing. Currently, 42% of working-age Canadians function below Level 3 – the level required to fully participate in today's society and adapt to change. The impact of a low-skilled workforce on Canada's economy is astounding. According to the International Adult Literacy Survey (1994-1998), if workers increased their literacy levels by just 5%, the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) would increase by \$18 billion annually. It is easy to see the benefits of supporting ES development.

**Research indicates that a 1% (5 point) gain in Essential Skills scores, on a per worker basis, would increase productivity by 2.5% and Canada's GDP by 1.5%. This gain would be realized year-after-year.**

Source:

IALS, 1994 – 1998

# Testing the Waters

## How New Users Can Surf the ES Site

When you are ready to ride the Essential Skills wave, call up the Internet and type in “<http://srv108.services.gc.ca>”. Easier yet, enter “*Essential Skills*” into your search engine and see where it takes you. Either way, take note that HRSDC’s Essential Skills website has many layers, and once you get there, be prepared to stay a while.



## The Website



- Understanding
- Essential Skills and Workplace Literacy Initiative
- Essential Skills Profiles
- Authentic Workplace Materials
- How Can I Use This Site?
- Tools and Applications
- Workplace Resources
- FAQs

The first thing you will notice is that the ES website is hosted by Human Resources Skills Development Canada (HRSDC). All information on this website is a product of the Essential Skills and Workplace Literacy Initiative. The key products are the ES Profiles and a collection of authentic materials gathered from a wide range of Canadian workplaces. On the homepage, the main menu offers eight links proudly displayed under the Canadian flag icon.

Click on *Understanding Essential Skills* to reveal a compact menu, which, when accessed, reveals the research-based definition of each of the nine Essential Skills. Quick reads on this page include the *10 Myths* and the *levels of complexity* links. Spend some time reviewing the *Readers' Guide* as it provides detailed information about understanding and using the ES Profiles, making it the quintessential resource for serious ES users. The *Essential Skills Online Learning Tool* is more reflective of activities that are beyond LBS Level 1 and 2. You may want to view this tool when you are more comfortable and familiar with ES.

Go back to the main menu and scroll down to *How Can I Use This Site?* for a handy link to ES information adult literacy instructors will find helpful. The page provides a brief guide to using ES Profiles, the Readers' Guide, and authentic workplace materials to enhance your program and help learners set skill development targets.

## The Website - Continued...

Both the *Tools and Applications* and *Workplace Resources* links introduce practitioners to a variety of national organizations and the projects that have been developed to explore ES training. They provide insight into how ES training is being integrated, who is doing it, as well as the stakeholders who are championing the initiative. Be advised that some of the hypertext links are dormant.

The most comprehensive pages are the *Essential Skills Profiles* and *Authentic Workplace Materials* links. They are truly the key resources on the site, and provide detailed information and instructions for implementing ES guidelines and strategies.

Literacy practitioners looking for authentic learning materials will benefit from the variety of workplace resources collected from actual companies and organizations. All materials are authorized for use. Search for more than 60 examples by job title, National Occupational Classification (NOC) category, Essential Skill, or complexity level. Materials include brochures, application forms, checklists, and charts, just to name a few. A *User Tips* link gives practitioners ideas for using the materials creatively. Note that at the bottom of the FAQs page, there is a listing of materials that can be downloaded as a pdf or ordered from the publications office.

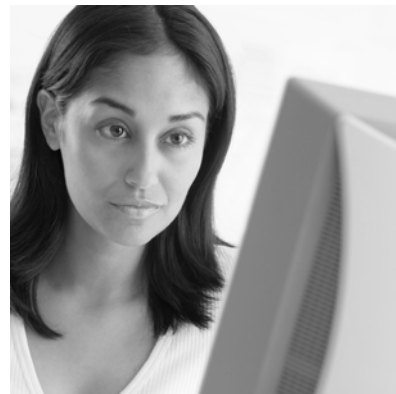
### NEW!

One of the major concerns of community practitioners is that the ES levels don't correspond with the LBS levels, making it difficult to determine how ES profiles could be used with learners with lower skill levels. The *Essential Skills Indicator* is a pilot tool that has been implemented to promote a clearer understanding of ES levels. Currently, the Indicator contains six quizzes that test skill strengths in Numeracy and Document Use, ES Levels 1 through 3. The content provides a snapshot of the increasingly diverse and complex applications of ES at each subsequent level. This tool is ideal for enlightening practitioners, as well as assessing learners.

The final key section of the ES website is the *Essential Skills Profiles*. This is an important tool for ES practitioners and it will be addressed

"I really enjoy the ES website – especially for pulling authentic materials. Book resources don't have the same types of materials."

Karena Holgate, Assessor  
Barrie Literacy Council



## Essential Skills Profiles

### Using the NOC Matrix to Identify ES Skills (and More!)



The Essential Skills website currently has more than 200 ES Profiles. C and D level occupations were completed first, and it should be noted that profiles at these levels represent 65% of all jobs in Canada. The ES profiles are organized according to the nine occupational classifications and four skill levels of the NOC. Many A and B level profiles have also been completed.

Occupations that are rated skill level C usually require secondary school and/or job specific training. For D level jobs, no formal education is necessary, and on-the-job training may be provided by employers. The ES Profiles that would apply to LBS learners include the following types of jobs. Please note that this is but a small sample of the available profiles.

- Clerical and health services support workers
- Intermediate and elementary sales and service personnel
- Transportation and manufacturing equipment operators, assemblers, and labourers
- Trades helpers and labourers
- Primary industry workers
- Material handlers
- Motor vehicle drivers, installers, and service providers

Profiles for A and B levels require apprenticeship, college, or university education. There are currently more than 60 profiles posted, and profiles at this level are scheduled to be completed in entirety by 2009.

The ES Profiles are considered by many ES pioneers as the most important Essential Skills tool. Information gathered during more than 4,500 interviews with workers, managers, practitioners, and leading researchers, describe how each of the Essential Skills are used to perform a variety of job tasks. Many of the skills required are transferable to everyday activities, also making them relevant for learners with independence goals.

ES Profiles are presented in a consistent format for greatest ease of use and, much like the Workplace Resources tool, are searchable by NOC code, job title, and skill level. The search option also offers alternative methods including keyword, advanced search, and most important skills used, reflecting the reality that not all skills required within an occupation are of equal importance.

## Essential Skills Profiles - Continued...

If you were to search any of the ES Profiles, you would find a brief description of the occupation and occupational group, examples of the tasks that define the job— including how each ES is applied - complexity ratings (a topic for further review in an upcoming Bulletin), and anticipated trends that will impact the acquisition of other Essential Skills. Dig deeper and you will discover that not all of the nine Essential Skills are presented in exactly the same way. For example, Thinking Skills is the only category that does not include section summaries. Summaries offer standardized skill descriptions so readers can compare skills across occupational groups. Summary sections also contain terminology that mimics success markers, as found in the Learning Outcomes Matrix, which should help practitioners align the identified tasks with LBS expectations.

Literacy practitioners can take advantage of the ES Profiles by reviewing the tasks associated with each occupation, and determining the ways they correspond to the life or employment goals their learners are working towards. The most important aspect of the ES Profiles for practitioners is how the presented information can inform LBS programming. By reviewing the required skills, specific tasks, and summary information, practitioners can develop activities and demonstrations that will help learners recognize valuable skills that are transferable from daily life to potential employment opportunities.

Let us use NOC 6471, Visiting Homemakers, Housekeepers and Related Occupations as an example. (Note: a major occupational group is identified by the first two digits of the NOC code.) According to the ES Profile, one of the things a visiting homemaker does is provide home management services in private households. This responsibility aligns well with the task of running one's own home. By reviewing the duties under Problem Solving (one of the subheadings under Thinking Skills), it is clear how the examples given reflect performance indicators learners with independence skills could demonstrate. The following excerpts from the corresponding Thinking Skills category illustrate problem solving skills that individuals may employ in their own daily lives.

- Encounter a lack of food to cook proper meals. They find what food they can and make the best of the situation or grocery shop.
- May contend with medical emergencies. They may call an ambulance if the case is too serious for them to deal with.
- May cope with a child's learning disability, which requires special attention both at home and school. They call upon teachers to provide advice and may seek the assistance of special tutors.



## Essential Skills in Action

CLO is eager to hear from community literacy agencies that are in the various stages of implementing ES training. If you have an idea, project, strategy, or question that you would like to share, please contact Mary-Ann Stark, CLO ES Project Consultant, at [fourreds@sympatico.ca](mailto:fourreds@sympatico.ca). With permission, we will post your comments in the next bulletins.

"I would be very interested in finding out more about how ES Profiles tie in with independence related goals."

Karena Holgate, Assessor  
Barrie Literacy Council

"The Windsor Public Library's support group funded a summer project on ES and Adult Literacy to develop learning activities and demonstrations that would provide the appropriate training to enable learners to progress towards their employment goals. A resource binder is being developed to share with literacy providers in the area."

Christine Dean

## The Road Ahead

In the coming months, CLO will develop a variety of materials to better acquaint community literacy agencies with Essential Skills. In addition to three ES Bulletins, we will develop and facilitate two online training sessions via Centra, and produce a self-directed, online ES training module for our Literacy Basics website. Both are scheduled for delivery in Spring 2008. We are grateful to the Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities for providing the necessary funding for this project.

We are also excited to be a part of another ES project, *Promoting Provincial Partnerships: Motivation, Process and Outcomes*, developed and led by the College Sector Committee for Adult Upgrading (CSC). The other two partners are Continuing Education School Board Administrators (CESBA) and the Ontario Native Literacy Coalition (ONLC). Together we have embarked on a precedent-setting journey that will provide opportunity to identify and document the benefits, challenges, and best practices that come with developing a provincial partnership. Our vehicle is an "ES Tour Guide" workbook designed for adult literacy practitioners. The participating project workers will share the trials and tribulations of planning an inter-organizational journey at CESBA's annual conference in April. We will post our itinerary as travel plans are confirmed. Please wish us a Bon Voyage!

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