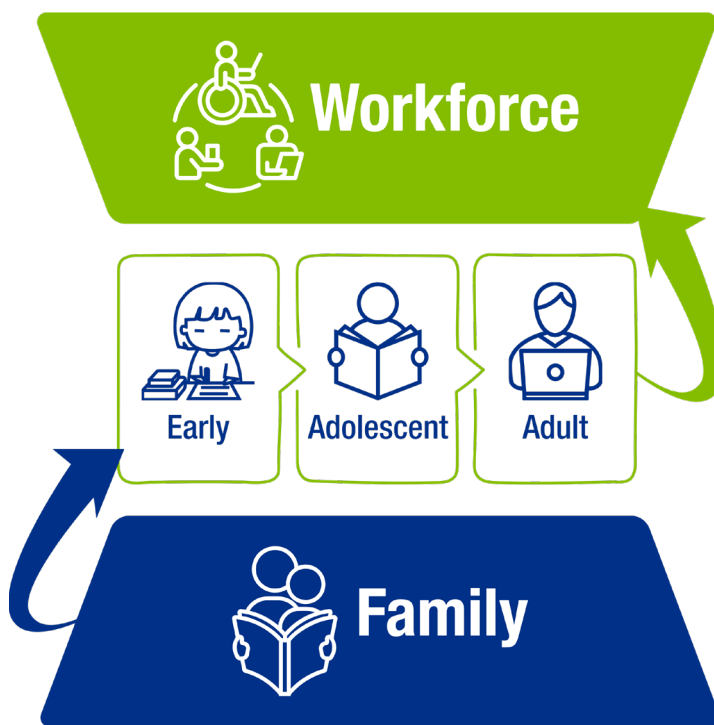


Defining Longitudinal Literacy

This report was written by Andrea Kiely, program specialist, Keaton Markey, research analyst, and Melissa Juarez, former research analyst, of the Southern Regional Education Board.

Longitudinal literacy frames literacy as a continuous journey, with each stage playing a crucial role in shaping personal and professional success. Rather than viewing literacy as a series of isolated phases, this approach frames it as a continuum in which distinct developmental stages build upon and reinforce one another across the lifespan. This framework is grounded in three interconnected skills: comprehending, processing and applying information.



This journey spans from early childhood to adulthood, recognizing that literacy development extends far beyond early education. By addressing literacy needs at every life stage — from preschool to adulthood — it aims to equip individuals with the skills needed to succeed in education, contribute to their communities and, ultimately, support national economic growth.

The Southern Regional Education Board has identified five key elements in this developmental continuum: early literacy, adolescent literacy, adult literacy, family literacy and workforce literacy.

Pillars of Longitudinal Literacy

3

Interconnected Skills:

Comprehending
Processing
and Applying

What does it mean to comprehend, process and apply?

Comprehending refers to understanding the meaning of a text by decoding the language and making sense of its content.

Processing refers to analyzing, organizing and synthesizing information to connect ideas, relate to prior knowledge and develop deeper understanding.

Applying refers to using a full understanding of the text to solve problems, make decisions or create something new in real-world contexts.

Elements of Longitudinal Literacy

Early Literacy

Although children begin their literacy journey at birth, formal literacy instruction typically begins in kindergarten. Early literacy spans the period from birth through third grade. During this time, learners develop a toolbox of literacy fundamentals by learning the alphabet, practicing vocabulary, speaking, reading, writing and completing other activities associated with acquiring language. Developing literacy is an important part of learning how to interact with the world. In this stage, children develop the skills that will serve as a foundation for more complex learning throughout their lives.

In the classroom, educators employ a variety of evidence-based reading practices to improve literacy, according to a 2024 *SRATE Journal* article. These include the science of reading, whole-language and phonics-based approaches. Considerable efforts have been made to identify struggling readers and design initiatives and interventions to prepare them for the next steps in their literacy journey. Ensuring that all students build strong early literacy skills is vital for their future success in school and in life.

Adolescent Literacy

Adolescent literacy refers to the development of language skills between fourth and 12th grade. Research by Jeanne Chall describes a critical point around fourth grade where students transition from “learning to read” to “reading to learn.” In this stage, students have opportunities to read and evaluate more informational texts while developing disciplinary literacy in subjects like math and science. Students come to depend on foundational skills they have already learned and build new ones through activities such as discussing texts, writing essays and presenting their ideas to their peers. Adolescent students may also develop work-based or content-specific literacy skills through career and technical education curricula.

While most literacy instruction happens at school, a 2008 *Harvard Educational Review* article notes that students continue to practice their skills when they read, write and interface with language outside of the classroom. Students develop literacy in their personal lives as part of their identity formation and to foster community. According to *Literacy in the Digital Age*, students develop digital literacy skills to navigate the web, consume online content and gain in-demand skills for the workforce.

Adult Literacy

Adults use a variety of digital and written materials daily to navigate their work and home life. Because of this, adult literacy and workforce literacy skills are necessary to adequately function at home, in the workplace and in community. The continued development of literacy into adulthood is increasingly important. The U.S. Department of Education reports that low adult literacy can have significant negative consequences, impacting individuals, families and the broader community.

The National Assessment of Adult Literacy describes adult literacy as encompassing the skills needed to comprehend prose, documents and quantitative tasks. Things like reading the news, filling out a job application and managing personal finances are all necessary skills to function in society, achieve one’s goals and continue learning. Having the literacy skills needed to be successful at work and manage workplace demands creates a more competent and competitive worker. Researcher Paul Jurmo suggests that increased workplace literacy sets a foundation for lifelong learning and results in a more productive workforce and economy.

Family Literacy

Family literacy focuses on the intergenerational learning between children and the adults in their lives. As the National Center for Families Learning describes, parents and children can work towards success in school and beyond with shared literacy-building activities. These experiences may be planned or spontaneous and can include reading together, telling stories, writing notes or letters, reading recipes or just sharing daily experiences.

Handbook of Family Literacy expands family literacy concepts to recognize that early literacy skills are shaped by what happens not only at school, but also at home through interactions with parents and caregivers. Parents, guardians and other family members stand to benefit from family literacy initiatives as well. Work in the *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy*, along with studies like *Family Literacy Programs: Who Benefits?*, show that as adults join in on these activities, their own skills in language acquisition and development, reading, writing, math and science improve significantly, and they often feel more positive about education overall.

Workforce Literacy

Workforce literacy refers to the ability to perform the skills required to thrive in a variety of work environments. While workforce literacy is commonly associated with adult learners, children and adolescents can begin developing foundational career competencies long before entering the workforce. Workforce literacy skills encompass three core domains:

1. foundational skills like reading, writing and numeracy;
2. success skills like communication, teamwork and time management as mentioned in SREB's report *The Skills Employers Demand*; and
3. technical skills and workplace competencies that directly translate to job-related tasks.

As industries evolve, so do the literacy demands placed on workers, making it essential for educators to prepare students to meet these expectations as they transition from school to career.

In the classroom, workforce literacy can be supported through real-world learning experiences that help students apply academic knowledge in career-related contexts. Research published in *Strata Education* shows that project-based learning, career and technical education and internships allow students to build both job-related skills and success skills like confidence, collaboration and problem solving. Outside the classroom, workforce literacy continues through on-the-job training, professional development and credentialing opportunities that help workers adapt to new industry demands.

Reflect and Analyze

- Think about your daily routine. What tasks do you accomplish using adult literacy skills?
- What are some challenges for people struggling with literacy? How might these struggles show up within each pillar? How can schools, families and communities work together to address these challenges?
- How can you incorporate family literacy activities in your home, classroom or school? How might this look different at various grade levels or in adult education settings?
- How do the five elements of longitudinal literacy feed into one another? How and where do they overlap?
- How might non-traditional learning sites — workforce agencies, community organizations and correctional facilities — also play a role in providing literacy instruction?

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