

ESL Literacy Readers Guide

Introduction

This guide accompanies 40 theme-based ESL literacy stories. Included in this guide are extension ideas to enable you to create comprehensive, theme-based lessons for adult ESL literacy learners. These stories are not intended to be read in isolation; rather, each story will serve as the foundation of a lesson that incorporates not only extensions in the classroom but also in the community.

The stories were written by ESL instructors at Bow Valley College who have extensive experience working with adult ESL literacy learners. These instructors have a vested interest in stories that will work in the literacy classroom. Many of the stories were piloted in Bow Valley College ESL literacy classrooms to ensure their suitability for learners at different levels of language and literacy development.

Great strides have been made in recent years in the field of ESL literacy; practitioners are currently better able to identify literacy learners and understand and address their learning needs than ever before. However, the lack of resources suitable for the ESL literacy classroom continues to be a challenge for instructors. ESL literacy instructors – almost without exception – have had to create their own materials or modify available materials significantly

to suit the needs of their learners. Stories written for mainstream ESL learners are usually inappropriate for literacy learners due to a myriad of factors, such as inappropriate font, pages that are too cluttered, and minimal whitespace. Materials written for adult (non-ESL) literacy learners usually contain unfamiliar sentence structures and vocabulary that is quite different from what works for literacy learners, for whom vocabulary-building must also be emphasized along with the acquisition of literacy skills. Finally, children's literature can sometimes be used, but often the vocabulary, sentence structures, and subject matter are inappropriate for adults.

The stories in the Bow Valley College collection have been written specifically with adult ESL literacy learners and their needs in mind. Text, structure, and vocabulary were important considerations. The themes were carefully chosen to be both of high interest to learners and, more importantly, relevant to their lives. Every effort was made to ensure the stories would authentically represent learners themselves. The events and issues that a typical learner may experience provide the themes and most of the photographs that accompany the stories are not stock photos, but photos of real learners at Bow Valley College.

Explore the ESL Literacy Readers at: <https://centre.bowvalleycollege.ca/tools/esl-literacy-readers>

There are two versions of each of the Readers. The Audio Book allows you to preview the contents of the book. The Print PDF has the book laid out for printing as a booklet.

You can use the Learner Page to access the Readers with your learners. The simple and uncluttered webpage is designed especially for learners. All 40 of the ESL Literacy Readers are available in a digital audio book format.

Visit the ESL Literacy Reader Learner Page at:
<https://centre.bowvalleycollege.ca/learners/readers.php>

Using the Stories

There are 40 stories in total, organized into seven different levels. At each level there is a description of the text, structure, and vocabulary used. At the lowest level the stories have a large photograph and one simple sentence per page. At the highest level the stories are two pages with 4-5 paragraphs, more complicated structures, and a variety of idioms and vocabulary.

Learners work best when they are reading at instructional level. This means learners know and can read most of the words on the page. However, this is not meant to lock learners into a specific level of reader. Learners can use a reader at a slightly higher level if there is enough support and scaffolding. Learners can also use readers at a lower level for pleasure reading and to build confidence.

The text, structure, and vocabulary of the readers are scaled across seven levels. Each level is a little more challenging than the last. The differences between the levels are intentional, including the range of vocabulary used, the length and structure of the sentences, and the format of the text. At the lowest levels, the readers are in large, print-like font, with one sentence per page and limited wrap-around text. The font, sentence structure, and layout change across the levels, as learners develop their literacy skills and are better able to read authentic text.

These stories, no matter the level, are meant to be read in a highly supported class environment after a great deal of pre-teaching. There is meant to be a limited amount of new text on every line. This way, learners are able to focus on their new vocabulary and emerging literacy skills rather than being overwhelmed by a lot of unknown words. As well, the stories contain a lot of repetition/recycling to give learners success in reading and to make the stories accessible when they want to read them again independently later on.

Learners need to come away from lessons with the understanding that reading is more than just decoding words. It is an interactive process with meaning-making at its core. To support meaning-making, we need to give learners texts that they will be able to both decode and understand.

Before you give the story to learners:

Introduce the theme. Introduce key concepts to help learners use their own experience. This is necessary for learners to integrate new information; it gives them a starting place. For example, for the Winter theme, ask questions like: What do you think of winter in Canada? How many winters have you been in Canada? What's the weather like in your first country? Bring pictures to start discussions. Talk about winter safety, what kinds of clothing people wear in winter in Canada, how people may feel depressed in winter, what to do if the busses are running late in winter, etc.

Teach all new vocabulary. Use flashcards, pictures, realia, and real life examples/situations to do this. It is critical that emphasis be placed on oral language first to ensure comprehension. Some of the higher level stories have idioms – teach these explicitly. Make sure learners have a way to record this information if they choose. Ideally, the new vocabulary should be taught orally over a period of time, perhaps a week or two, before it is introduced in writing, especially at the lower levels.

Vary the types of activities and support material to address different learning styles and needs. Practice new vocabulary in a variety of ways until learners are comfortable using it. They should experience the vocabulary in many oral activities before they have to read and write it. Continue to use flashcards for matching and play games like Pictionary, charades, etc. Use surveys where learners can ask each other questions related to the theme where answers to the questions can be the new vocabulary you teach.

Teach challenging or key grammar structures. If there is a new or difficult grammar structure in the story, practice it, orally and then in writing, until learners are comfortable with it. Strategies such as choral repetition can be helpful with this. While getting learners to master the names of verb tenses is not the goal, explicit, supported, and spiraled instruction on how to use grammar structures is important. Ask the class or write a sample sentence on the board; for example, when talking about looking for a job and job skills, ask or write on the board, “What can you do?” or “What are you good at?”. Ask learners to help you answer the question and write the answer on the board, e.g. “I can serve food.” Try this again with the sentence stem “I can...” Ask learners to stand up, walk around the classroom, and ask three people this question.

The employment story “Pooja’s New Beginning” has sentences like, “I loved working at...” and “I enjoyed chatting with...” Use this as a support to a grammar point for the week on using “I like,” “I love,” “I don’t/didn’t like,” etc. As you teach, make charts to hang on the wall that you and the learners can refer to regularly. All new information put on the walls reinforces what has already been taught.

Teach reading strategies explicitly before and during reading. You can’t assume that learners have the strategies to read and understand text. Teach reading strategies from the very earliest stages of reading development. Model the strategy use.

Some of the strategies you can teach:

Previewing. This can be done in several ways. For lower-level learners, large pictures alone, such as the title page of the readers, can be used. More advanced learners can read the title as well as look at the pictures to get an idea of what the story is about prior to reading it. This helps them to start thinking about the story.

Activating Background Knowledge. Learners already have some experience or perceptions of the topic. Help learners to recall these experiences. The experiences

are a foundation for new learning and are critical to understanding the new text.

Predicting. Learners predict what might happen in the story, or when reading stops at a certain point, learners predict what might happen next. Predicting gives learners a purpose for reading and facilitates learners’ interaction with the text. Don’t assume that learners automatically check their predictions. Learners need support to do this as they read.

There are many more reading strategies that are essential to successful reading and need to be taught explicitly.

After reading the story:

Continue to practice the same vocabulary and grammar. Copying, matching and word search exercises are good examples of follow-up activities that reinforce vocabulary from a story. A collaborative jumbled sentences activity could be done where large flashcards with a single word on it are handed to learners and they have to line them up in proper order. They then sequentially read their word so that a full sentence from the story is read aloud. This activity can also be done at an individual or paired level with smaller flashcards of jumbled sentences from the story. Learners can then copy the sentence.

Use the word lists. At the back of each of the stories that are in booklet form, we have designated a page for a “word list” of relevant vocabulary. The instructor and the learners can decide which vocabulary is important to learn or remember. Some possible ways to use the word lists:

- The instructor can determine which words are useful to the learners and have them copy the list.
- The instructor and learners can together review vocabulary from the story and create a class list of new or relevant words.
- Each learner can decide which words are important for him/her to learn and remember, and unique lists can then be created by individual learners.

Discuss concepts in the story. What do you think of the story? Invite learners to relate to the story. What did they do on a cold day? What do they do to save money on groceries? What kind of job do they have now (or would they like to have in the future)? Learners often share their own experiences on a topic. These can be indicators of what learners really want to know about these issues. (e.g. Where do I get a winter coat that I can afford? What do I do when my toe turns blue?) Use learner conversation to discern what's important to them and what you'll teach next.

Practice the story again. Read the story again as a group. Or if learners are reasonably confident and strong when they read the story, have them read in pairs. (In a multi-level classroom, learners working at a higher level can read with learners at a lower one). Encourage learners to read the same story at home. Let learners know that re-reading familiar stories is an excellent way to build confidence and skill. Bringing out the story again after a few weeks' time is also beneficial.

Write about it. Use ideas that come out of classroom discussion to come up with ideas for writing. Or, learners can write similar stories about themselves, using the original story as a frame. This provides learners an opportunity to use the new vocabulary in another way. This type of exercise can be adapted according to the level of the learners: for example, in lower levels, sentence stems can be provided along with a word bank, while learners working at higher levels can create sentences more independently. If the story contains a form or formatted text, make a simplified one and have learners fill it out. At lower levels learners can make a shopping list and at higher levels they can fill out simplified teacher-made job application.

Create art. Learners can draw pictures to describe something they've experienced, they hope for, or they feel. Some learners have never drawn before, so make sure you support learners with examples and suggestions. Collages are another way to express thoughts, ideas, and feelings. Expose learners to a variety of media.

Story strips. Give the learners a copy of all of the pictures in a story on flashcards and ask them to put the pictures in order. This can be done as a class activity in a pocket chart or as an individual activity at their desks.

Working with the story in a variety of ways gives learners an opportunity to experience and deepen their understanding. It supports meaning making and gives readers a chance to experience success regardless of their language ability. Learning language can be a positive, non-threatening experience for everyone if we provide low-risk activities.

Working in Themes and Connecting to Real Life

Themes play a very important role in any ESL classroom. Theme teaching is important because it provides real-life contexts in which to deliver specific outcomes. By changing thematic units within a period of study, instructors can recycle outcomes in a fresh context. This is especially true in the ESL literacy classroom, where authentic topics and real-life activities are of utmost importance to making lessons meaningful. With this in mind, themes were carefully selected in the writing of the stories. You will notice that themes recur in stories throughout the levels. Our hope was that this would facilitate the recycling of themes as learners progress through the different levels, to assist in the spiraling of previously-learned vocabulary and knowledge base. As well, the repetition of themes takes into consideration the multi-level

classroom, thereby allowing learners working at different levels to learn within the same theme, while at the same time, read books that are at an appropriate level.

The use of themes goes beyond providing a meaningful context, a cohesive framework for individual lessons, and the facilitation of spiraling. Theme-teaching allows for a natural progression into practical, real-life extension activities – activities that go beyond the classroom and have both a basis in authentic printed material and application in the community. With that in mind, we have compiled a list of suggested extension activities that correspond to the themes you will find in the stories.

Food/Shopping/Money

Real-world print	Sample activities
<i>Flyers</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • identify food items • find and compare • cut out food items and glue them on a page in categories (e.g. fruit, dairy) • take a field trip to grocery store or farmers' market
<i>Canada Food Guide</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • identify food groups • classify foods from a list into food groups • discuss healthy vs. less healthy food choices
<i>Food containers (boxes, cans, labels)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • read labels; identify food words • read ingredients • understand nutritional content (fat, sodium, calories)

<i>Recipes</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • read simple recipes • understand cooking vocabulary (stir, beat, chop) • make simple recipe in class (e.g. fruit salad)
<i>Grocery store signs</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • take a field trip to a grocery store; learners find prices for various food items

Housing

Real-world print	Sample activities
<i>Catalogue/magazines</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • find pictures of furniture/appliances • cut them out and glue into categories, according to rooms in a house
<i>Rental application form</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • identify words on the form/fill out form • discuss rights as a renter
<i>Newspaper/classified ads</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • read classified ads • understand abbreviations in ads for apartments/homes (DD, W/D, util.)

Transportation

Real-world print	Sample activities
<i>Bus pass</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • identify bus pass among other wallet items • identify months/years on bus passes • sequence selection of bus passes by month
<i>Transit map</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • find one's own route number on map • note meaning of various symbols on map
<i>Low-income bus pass application</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • locate basic personal information items on form • fill out form

<i>Transit sign</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • find route number, stop number, transit phone number on a transit sign
<i>Driver's license</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • locate and show driver's license to classmates • discuss class 5 vs. 7 designations • identify specific words on a license (Alberta, name, birth date)
<i>Traffic violation ticket</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • find information: reason, date, amount
<i>Street map</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • locate specific places • discuss how you would get from X to Y (take Crowchild Trail; turn left...) distance ("Is it far or near?")

Employment

Real-world print	Sample activities
<i>Job application form</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • identify vocabulary on forms • fill out sample forms
<i>Classified ads/web postings</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • vocabulary; understanding common abbreviations (F/T, ref., exp.)
<i>Resumes</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • definitions • understand resume format/style, point form
<i>Pay stubs</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • find information (wage, hours worked, date)
<i>Job schedule</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • identify days and times on schedule • read print formatted in a table • discuss "FT" vs. "PT" hours of work and shift work

Leisure

Real-world print	Sample activities
<i>Brochure from a local recreational facility</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• find information: location, hours, prices
<i>Library card</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• visit local library• find areas from library signs• search on the computer• find books (browse or find specific items)

Health

Real-world print	Sample activities
<i>Alberta Health Care card</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• locate their/their children's AHCs• find relevant information (number, date of birth, first and last names)• copy children's names and ID numbers
<i>Medicine bottles</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• look at labels and identify purpose of medicine, correct dosage for various age groups, and contraindications (e.g. "Do not drive after taking this medicine")
<i>Doctor's note</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• find information: reason for absence, date, doctor's name

School

Real-world print	Sample activities
<i>Enrollment form</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• identify where information is written• fill out the form
<i>Sick note</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• find information: date, reason for absence, signature• practice writing a sick note for a child
<i>Brochure from a college</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• identify classes offered, times, dates, and fees

Clothing

Real-world print	Sample activities
<i>Catalogue or flyers</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• look at pictures and identify clothing items• cut out pictures of clothing and glue onto a page, e.g. a collage of winter wear• cut out clothing and glue onto a page divided into categories, e.g. summer vs. winter or inside vs. outside• find pricing for different clothing items; discuss concepts of “cheap” and “expensive”

Conclusion

These stories are designed to be useful foundations upon which to build interesting, meaningful, and relevant lessons. They may also serve as inspiration to create stories for the learners you work with. Instructor-created materials are often superior to any others as they are designed for a specific group of learners by someone who knows their experiences and abilities first-hand.

The following is a list of best practices in the creation of ESL literacy stories:

1. Choose relevant themes. Learners will understand and better relate to stories that speak to their everyday lives.
2. Keep vocabulary simple. Stories should consist primarily of vocabulary familiar to learners; only a few new words should be introduced in a reading. Repetition of key words is critical, particularly with the lower levels.
3. Choose fonts carefully. Font type and size are both important. Fonts should be clear, easy-to-read, and larger than in non-literacy materials. At the lower levels, the font used should not contain the script version of “a”; however, it should be introduced in higher levels as it is found in most authentic print.
4. Include plenty of whitespace. An uncluttered page is critical in stories written for ESL literacy learners. The amount of whitespace can decrease with higher levels. Our stories can be used as models for this.
5. Use authentic pictures. Good pictures facilitate comprehension a great deal. The more realistic the pictures are, the more easily learners will interpret them. A photograph is easier than a drawing, for example.