

Initial Assessment

A Policies and Best Practices Guide for
Literacy and Basic Skills

Developed in
consultation with
LBS practitioners
2024-2025

Table of Contents

Project Overview	2
Introduction	2
Initial Assessment	3
Section One - Developing Assessment Policies	4
Organization.....	4
Process.....	4
Assessment Selection.....	5
Onboarding.....	6
Shared Protocols - with other LBS Organizations	6
Outreach	6
Assessor	7
Implementation.....	7
Section Two - Assessment Best Practices.....	8
Building Rapport	8
Creating a Safe Space	9
Scheduling an Assessment.....	9
Introducing an Assessment	9
Administering an Assessment	10
Marking an Assessment	10
Providing Feedback.....	11
Using Assessments to Build Learner Plans	12
Thank You	14

Project Overview

Introduction

Initial Assessment - A Policies and Best Practices Guide for LBS

This document was developed as part of a 2024-2025 business plan deliverable funded by the Ministry of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development (MLITSD). Partners include

- Learning Ontario Central South
- Quality in Lifelong Learning (QUILL) Network
- Literacy Northwest
- Adult Basic Education Association (ABEA)

This guide draws on the information gained during 4 working group meetings facilitated for Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) practitioners in 2024.

Document Structure

Section One “Developing Assessment Policies” includes information that can be used to develop assessment policies for LBS organizations and assessors.

Section Two “Assessment Best Practices” includes assessment best practices covering all stages of the assessment process.

Assessment Database

In addition to this document, an Assessment Database was developed. It lists 35 initial assessment tools available to LBS assessors. This database can be found on the [Literacy Resources and Discussion Forum](#).

Ontario Adult Literacy Curriculum Framework - Foundations of Assessment

Throughout this guide we reference information from the [Ontario Adult Literacy Curriculum Framework Foundations of Assessment](#) (MLITSD, 2011). It is referred to in this document as the Foundations of Assessment.

The Foundations of Assessment document outlines the rationale, philosophy and approach to assessments. It includes information about the value for learners and how assessments help to ensure progress is being made. This document also provides information for LBS organizations to guide continuous improvement. It outlines the types of assessment – intake (initial), ongoing and exit and it explains how results are used. It includes a range from informal procedures to standardized assessments or tests to measure precisely how much a learner has progressed along an established scale. Note - Learner Gains is not used in LBS.

Initial Assessment

This “Initial Assessment - A Policies and Best Practices Guide for LBS” focuses on the initial assessment. In the Foundations of Assessment document this assessment is referred to as an intake assessment. “An intake assessment is administered either before or at the point when a learner begins [their] literacy program” (p. 3).

In our work we discovered that not every LBS organization completes an assessment at the time of learner intake. So, we chose to refer to this assessment as an initial assessment to recognize that it is the first assessment completed. It can be done at any time in the first few meetings with a learner.

An initial assessment is used to

- determine eligibility
- identify suitability markers to support eligibility
- identify potential barriers
- determine if a referral is needed to
 - another LBS organization
 - an EO partner
 - a community partner
- determine the competency levels of the learner, based on the OALCF

- determine the starting place for training
- guide learner plan development

Section One - Developing Assessment Policies

Organization

The Foundations of Assessment document includes a section called “Fair assessment principles” (p. 2). It includes policies to guide all assessments (initial, ongoing and exit). One of the recommendations included in the fair assessment principles section for LBS organizations is that “Written policies should be in place for guiding all assessment decisions” (p. 3).

Best Practice - LBS organizations should develop specific policies to guide assessment protocols and create a culture of continuous improvement in assessment administration. The following section includes a series of questions that will help you review or write policies to guide initial assessments in your organization.

Process

How does your organization

- decide who has the task of completing initial assessments with learners?
 - Is this a task for all practitioners, or is it role specific?
 - Does the same practitioner administer the assessments, build the learner plans, find the curriculum and guide the training or are these tasks divided between practitioners?
- ensure that assessment results are secure and confidential?
 - How are assessment filed?
 - When are they destroyed?
- share results with external partners?
 - What is your process for sharing assessment results?
 - What consent forms are used?
- use assessment results to refine your process?

- Do you gather and analyze assessment feedback from learners?
- Do you use statistics to assess your process and identify barriers. For example, what percentage of learners return after the assessment?
- Do you gather feedback from practitioners to assess the process?
- Do you gather feedback from partners that refer to you?
- create a safe space around assessments?
 - How does your organization define safe space? What does it mean and how is it implemented?
 - How do you learn what a 'safe space' looks like to a learner?
- handle Case Management System (CaMS) data entry?
 - When are learners entered into CaMS? Do you wait until a milestone has been completed? Does this happen when the learner plan is developed and signed or are there other considerations? Note - learners must sign the learner plan before it is entered into CaMS.

Assessment Selection

- Have you reviewed the [Assessment Database](#)?
 - When deciding on an assessment tool, consider cost, training, administration time, needs of learners, standardization vs flexibility, and formal vs informal assessment.
- Does your organization currently use one assessment or a range of assessments?
 - What are the advantages and limitations of your current assessment option(s)?
 - Is your assessment of choice aligned with the OALCF? If not, how easy would it be to do?
- How are assessments selected for your organization?
 - Who decides for the organization?
- Do you offer in-person, online, group and individual assessment options?

Onboarding

How does your organization

- ensure specific training for those who are responsible for administering assessments?
 - Note - some assessments require formal training.
 - Note - if you only have one assessor, ensure staff are cross trained.
- ensure all staff, regardless of their role, understand the value of assessments, the process and how they are used?
- ensure everyone understands the protocols for administering assessments and providing feedback to learners?
- ensure everyone understands protocols for maintaining learner files and confidentiality?
- ensure everyone understands how assessment results are used to build learner plans?

Shared Protocols - with other LBS Organizations

- Do you have an agreement with other LBS organizations in your region? If so, do you have a process in place for sharing assessment results when a referral is made?
This ensures learners are not asked to repeat an assessment unnecessarily.

Outreach

How does your organization

- introduce, explain and promote assessments to referral partners?
 - Do you have a collective message?
 - Do you have written material to share?
- handle requests from partners for assessment results?
 - What is your organization's consent policy?
- communicate with stakeholders with the goal of building a collaborative approach?

Assessor

Best Practice - LBS organizations develop specific policies to guide assessors/practitioners in implementing initial assessments.

Implementation

How do practitioners

- decide when to do an assessment?
 - Is it always at the first meeting or can they wait until the second or third meeting to do the assessment?
- decide which assessment tool to use with each learner?
 - Does your organization use one assessment tool, or a variety of tools?
 - If a variety of tools are used
 - Do the practitioners/assessors choose the tool?
 - Is there an approved list of assessment tools to choose from?
 - What is the decision-making process used? What is considered? For example, do you consider learner needs and goals, goal path, past educational and work experience?
- share results with learners?
 - Are organizational protocols in place for providing feedback? Is training provided on these protocols?
 - What are the guidelines for the assessment tool you are using?
- use the results to guide learner plan development?
 - Do you use the ministry template, or do you have your own agency learner plan?
 - How are the assessment results used to inform learner plans?
- use assessment data to advocate for the needs of a learner?

Section Two - Assessment Best Practices

The following list of best practices has been compiled using feedback that came directly from LBS practitioners. It's important to note that each organization is different. You should review ministry requirements ([Foundations of Assessment](#)) and your own policies for assessment to decide which best practices fit for your learners and overall organization.

Building Rapport

It's always important to build a rapport with learners. The first few meetings are an opportunity to make a connection with a learner and get to know them. This includes being welcoming, making eye contact and smiling. There are other best practices that will make the introduction of the assessments easier.

- Create space for learners to share their story.
- Ask learners what they want, rather than directing them.
 - This may be the first time they are asked what they want in a long while.
- Ask learners what you can help with? What do they hope to get? What are they seeking?
- Ask learners about their short- and long-term goals, hopes and dreams.
- Ask open ended questions to help you understand the learner's background, barriers and challenges and how you can better support their success. A few recommendations from practitioners are included below.
 - What kinds of activities do you enjoy?
 - What are your interests?
 - Tell me about your past experience (this can include work and or school).
 - What challenges might prevent you from reaching your goals?
 - What is your favorite way of learning something new?
 - Tell me about a time you had to learn something new.
- Learn what success looks like to the learner.
- Be clear and honest about what your organization can offer.

- Present other community resources. Offer to help make the connection if they identify a need outside of what you can offer.

Creating a Safe Space

- Work as a team to define what is a safe and welcoming space. Is it clear to everyone what this means and how this environment is created?
 - Consider the physical space, your process and what is said. For example, how is assessment introduced?

Scheduling an Assessment

Many assessors recommend doing the assessment at the second or third visit. This is because

- the learner is more comfortable
- there is a lot of intake paperwork that can be a distraction during the first meeting
- the learner will be more committed to their decision to move forward
- the assessor has time to get to know the learner and their goals so they can make better decisions about which assessment tool(s) to use

Note - We recognize that some LBS organizations administer an assessment during the first visit if there is time and space available.

Introducing an Assessment

- Call it something other than an assessment because for many learners, the word assessment can cause anxiety.
- Ask the learner what they need to be comfortable.
- Explain that it's not a pass/fail and that it's not a test.
- Explain the process in detail. For example, how much time it will take, can they use a calculator and can they ask for help. Let them know when they will find out the results.
 - You want to avoid surprises.
 - Ask them if they have any questions.

- Tell them they can skip any questions they are uncomfortable with or can't answer.
- Explain the reason for doing the assessment. For example, the results will help connect training to your goal and your specific needs.
- Explain the benefits of doing an assessment – what they will get.
 - Example - You will know your strengths and needs related to your goal.
 - Example - You will have a starting point so you don't repeat training for things you already know. Your training will be customized for your needs.

Administering an Assessment

- If more than one assessment tool is used in the organization, the assessor will need to decide which assessment tool to use.
- Ensure learners have a comfortable place to work, free of distractions.
- Present a few pages at a time (if the assessment is long and paper based) rather than providing the entire assessment all at once.
- Give people as much time as they need to complete the assessment.
- Look for non-verbal signals that the learner is uncomfortable. For example, they might click their pen, fidget or look away.
- Don't continue if they are stuck or upset. Allow them to stop the assessment process at any time.
- Thank them for doing the assessment.
- Arrange a follow up time to provide feedback.

Marking an Assessment

- Score the assessment using the instructions provided.
 - For example, can you provide partial marks?
- Use the results to confirm eligibility.
 - If they're not eligible or you can't meet their needs, be prepared to discuss other options.

- Research the learners goal using resources such as [OaSIS](#) so you have the information you need to guide learner plan development.

Providing Feedback

- Ask the learner about their experience with the assessment.
 - Did they experience any challenges? Were any areas too difficult or too easy? Did any area cause anxiety? Was it what they expected? Were there any surprises? Was there anything missing?
 - Is there anything specific they would like to discuss?
- Present learners with the results.
 - Avoid indicating the results as a number, score, percentage or pass/fail.
 - Assure them that the results are confidential and aren't shared with anyone unless the learner provides written permission to do so.
 - Does the learner feel the results will support their goals? Does it give them the information they need?
- Begin with their strengths.
 - For example, "You have shown you are strong in..." or "Your results indicate you already know..."
 - Assure them that they won't not need to work on things they already know.
- Start with one area of need.
 - Start with the main area of need based on their goal or the one area of need they expected the assessment to find.
- Let them know they are a good fit for your program and offer service.
 - Ask if they would like to continue the discussion now, or if they would like time to think about it.
 - Assure them that the service is confidential.
 - Explain that the service they receive will be customized and tailored to their needs.
- If they aren't a fit for your program, explain this and provide a warm handoff to another program or service.

- Explain, that with their permission, you can share their assessment results with another program, so they don't have to repeat the process.
- If they choose to continue, you can discuss their schedule and what they can expect next.
 - Discuss any challenges they might encounter, and any concerns.
 - Talk about ways to mitigate any barriers up front so strategies can be prepared.
 - Use assessment results to identify possible wrap-around service needs. Consider current life situations, mental health supports, newcomer supports, internet access and drivers' licence, transportation and motivations.
- Book their next session to develop a learner plan.

Using Assessments to Build Learner Plans

- While some people may prefer to work on one skill at a time, it's helpful to include other skill areas related to a goal. This is a 'real way to learn' as tasks generally use many skills together.
 - Focus on learning a set of skills needed for a specific task.
 - Provide examples of tasks that are typical of the learner's goal to illustrate how multiple skills are needed to complete the task.
- Provide a short outline of one task and explain how this is a starting point to help them build their learner plan.
 - Explain how you will work collaboratively with them to design a series of tasks that will allow them to build the skills they need.
 - Explain that they will be provided with practice activities to complete that will help them build their skills.
- Explain that the final task will be a culminating task/activity that will incorporate all the skills they have built and demonstrate their readiness for their next steps.
 - They will have the time they need to gain the required skills to ensure they're successful in this final activity.

- Work with the learner to develop the learner plan that is linked to their assessment results and matched with their specific goal.
 - This document will guide their next steps and help them monitor their own progress.
- Use assessment results to tailor learner plans that are realistic and achievable.
 - Build on what a learner is good at already.
 - Consider past successes at work and learning.
- Connect the plan directly with their short- and long-term goals.
 - Assessment results can be used to identify a starting point and help determine next steps to their long-term goals.
 - Integrate longer range planning into the learner plan.
- Outline options and engage the learner in developing their learner plan.
- Reassure learners that when they approach the end of their learning plan, you will develop a transition plan together.
 - Support will be provided as they prepare to move on to their next step.
 - Someone will check in with them regularly for a year after they complete their upgrading to see how they are doing and provide any additional support or referrals.

Final Step: Review the [Foundations of Assessment](#) document for information about ongoing assessments (milestones) and exit assessments (culminating tasks).

Thank You

On behalf of Learning Ontario Central South, Adult Basic Education Association (ABEA), Literacy Northwest and Quality in Lifelong Learning (QUILL) Network, we are grateful to the many working group participants from across Ontario for sharing their insights and recommendations that were critical in helping us to build this document! A special thank you to Shannon Lee, Executive Director with Community Learning Alternatives for helping to develop these best practices.

