

## Background Questionnaire

### **What is the role of the background questionnaire in the National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL)?**

The NAAL background questionnaire collects an abundance of information from NAAL respondents about characteristics and factors related to adult literacy, including information not covered in the NAAL forerunner, the [1992 National Adult Literacy Survey](#) (NALS). In addition to information about age, race/ethnicity, gender, language, education, income, and employment, the enhanced 2003 questionnaire collected information about past and present participation in welfare; job-related training; use of technology, including computers, e-mail, and the Internet; health-related conditions and activities; and literacy practices such as parents' reading to their children. This background information enables NAAL to report scores and track performance by specific demographic and other characteristics that are of interest to [policymakers](#), employers, educators, health communicators, program directors, and [researchers](#).

### **How does background information from the questionnaire help policymakers and other stakeholders?**

A better understanding of the relationship of various background characteristics to low literacy performance—and of the literacy needs of specific audiences—enables policymakers, program developers, and others to develop more effective programs and services targeted to the needs of identified segments of the population. For example, federal and state policymakers can use such information to identify and improve literacy services for the [least-literate adults](#), with the aim of narrowing the gap between low- and high-performing groups; to inform workplace literacy and job training programs; and to encourage further research on the factors associated with low literacy. In addition, health communicators can identify target audiences for specific types of information and tailor materials to these audiences' literacy strengths and weaknesses.

### **What are the 10 categories of questions (and number of questions per category) on the 2003 NAAL background questionnaire?**

- General and language background (19)
- Education background and experiences (19)
- Political and social participation (12)
- Labor force participation (15)
- Literacy practices (7)
- Job training and skills (10)
- Demographic information (9)
- Family literacy (5)
- Household income and welfare participation (12)
- Health (10)

### **How is the background questionnaire administered?**

Trained interviewers read the questions aloud in English or Spanish from the screens of laptop computers, and they record responses directly on the computers. A **computer-assisted personal interviewing (CAPI) system** is programmed to skip questions that are not relevant to a particular respondent. For example, if the respondent answers “no” to whether he or she has taken an “English as a second language” course, CAPI will skip a follow-up question about how long the course was taken. Because the questions are targeted in this way, no single respondent is asked all of the questions.

The interviewer assures respondents that their answers will remain confidential to the fullest extent allowable under law and will be reported publicly only as part of group totals. First names only are collected in the CAPI system and they are deleted prior to data delivery. All project staff are required to sign and have notarized an affidavit of nondisclosure provided by NCES.

### **How does questionnaire administration accommodate the needs of adults with disabilities and those for whom English is a second language?**

Individuals with disabilities are accommodated because the study protocol for all respondents requires that interviewers administer the questionnaire one-on-one in the respondent’s home. Additionally, interviewers are trained to be sensitive to any individual who might need to take additional time to respond to questions.

Individuals for whom English is a second language are accommodated by having the questions asked in either English or Spanish (but the text is always in English).

### **Is there more than one version of the background questionnaire?**

There are two versions of the background questionnaire. One is administered in homes to the nationally representative main NAAL sample and the SAAL sample (19,714 respondents in 2003). A second version of the questionnaire is administered in prisons to the NAAL prison sample (1,173 respondents in 2003).

Many questions—including questions that ask about demographics, educational background, and literacy practices—appear on both background questionnaires. However, other questions are tailored for the specific populations. For example, the household background questionnaire includes questions asking parents about literacy-related activities they do with their children that would not be possible in a prison environment. The prison background questionnaire includes specific questions about classes and literacy-related activities in prison.

*For more information about NAAL and its components, visit the NAAL website at <http://nces.ed.gov/naal> or contact Sheida White, NAAL Project Officer at the National Center for Education Statistics, by e-mail at [Sheida.White@ed.gov](mailto:Sheida.White@ed.gov).*