



International Federation  
of Library Associations and  
Institutions

# Guidelines for Library-Based Literacy Programs



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## Some Practical Suggestions



SECTION ON  
READING

**The IFLA Section on Reading** is pleased to present some practical suggestions for library staff who would like to help our society become more literate. We believe that libraries are uniquely situated to promote literacy. Libraries may develop and staff their own programs or they may support literacy projects sponsored by other organizations.

**The aims of these practical pointers are:**

- ▶ To encourage libraries to become involved in literacy programs
- ▶ To serve as an informal checklist for evaluating library-based programs that are already in place

Our definition of literacy is broad. It includes the development and practice of reading, writing, and numeracy skills (skills related to numbers). These skills encourage the independence, curiosity and lifelong learning of individuals and groups. Such learners contribute greatly to the economic, social and cultural health of the communities and the nations in which they live.

We have written these guidelines as librarians speaking to librarians. We have asked and answered a number of **questions** in the first person to give the sense that we are working with you:

- 1** Who is our audience?
- 2** How do we start planning and developing community cooperation?
- 3** Who are our potential partners?
- 4** What materials are needed and how do we choose them?
- 5** How do we train our staff?
- 6** How do we promote our literacy program?
- 7** How can we tell if we are successful?
- 8** How do we keep our program going?

The activities of each library will be different. They will depend on local factors. We know that the answers we give will not apply to every library or every project. An open mind and good will are keys to the success of any project. These are qualities that are hard to express in a brochure, but we know them when we see them at work among partners.

**The questions and answers are offered as suggestions, not formal guidelines. They are written for library staff who share and wish to implement our belief that libraries and literacy are partners.**

*“Literacy is the key to education and knowledge and to the use of library and information services.”*

IFLA Guidelines for Public Libraries, August 2000

## **Who is our audience?**

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Several target audiences seem suited to library-based literacy programs:

- ▶ Young people who have dropped out of school
- ▶ Unemployed young people
- ▶ Women and older people, who have not had the opportunity to learn or practice reading, writing and numeracy skills (skills related to with numbers)
- ▶ Adults with literacy difficulties
- ▶ People from different countries, languages, and ethnic groups
- ▶ Migrant workers
- ▶ Refugees
- ▶ People in institutions, such as prisons or hospitals

Library staff will want to discuss the program and the needs of the audience they have in mind as they begin to plan. Some of the questions they may wish to discuss with the participants are:

- ▶ Where is a suitable space for classes and practice?
- ▶ What are the best times for the classes?
- ▶ How frequently will the classes be held?
- ▶ What materials will be useful for every learner?
- ▶ Who will be leading the project and what training has the person had?
- ▶ What occasions will participants have to use their new skills?
- ▶ What supports for learning are on hand? For example: posters, computers, videos, radios, and materials for writing and drawing

## **How do we start planning and developing community cooperation?**

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The staff will first want to assess the library service's position in its local, regional, and national context. Libraries work within local and national cultural and educational policies. Library staff will want to respect the cultural patterns in the community. Before a project starts, the library staff will wish to develop a plan that should include:

- ▶ Community information (cultural, social and practical, with statistical information, if possible)
- ▶ A detailed report of overall aims
- ▶ Identification of other groups working in the literacy field
- ▶ A financial plan

The staff will want to discuss this plan with members of the community and partners. The **location** of the literacy program will vary, but library staff should consider places in a community where it will be comfortable for participants to gather. The places may be:

- ▶ Public, mobile, and other types of libraries
- ▶ Healthcare centres, community centres, schools, places of worship
- ▶ Bus and railway stations, factories
- ▶ Beaches, the sports field and even restaurants
- ▶ The home of a community leader

The location should be comfortable, easy to reach, and attractive for the participants. Timing for project activities—for example, when a project should start, how long it should last and when the classes take place—should be developed in cooperation with project staff, local authorities, and project participants. The frequency of the classes is also important. The group should meet as often as it can—weekly if possible—to support the progress of the participants.

## **Involving others**

As well as talking with librarians, teachers and other professionals, the project staff will want to contact key people in the community including:

- ▶ Those who know its history, traditions and culture
- ▶ Those in voluntary and not-for-profit organizations and places of worship
- ▶ Those who work for the local government

Other government officials and people with technical knowledge should also be consulted in the planning, along with key experts in regional and national (or even wider) positions. Representatives from authors' organizations and the media could

join the project staff. Plans should be made to ensure that all the participants can attend the program without fear and can take part freely in the classes. If specific guidelines are needed, in order to respect different cultural traditions, they should be considered in planning for the literacy project and for the work of the library as a whole.

## **Who are our potential partners?**

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There are many groups who provide different types of cultural, information and literacy services to the community. Working together, library staff and these groups will be more likely to succeed in their community. In fact, library staff could be the key link among these various agencies.

**Cultural agencies** with which libraries could cooperate in literacy programs include:

- ▶ Groups of artists, writers, dramatists, or musicians
- ▶ Local, regional and/or national government culture departments
- ▶ National and international cultural associations
- ▶ Cultural groups that produce publications

Library staff could cooperate with many different **educational groups**, including:

- ▶ Schools at all levels; adult education groups; teacher, parents and parent-teacher associations
- ▶ Teachers' and literacy workers' groups
- ▶ Non-governmental education programs and associations
- ▶ Library and information studies departments
- ▶ Local, regional and national governmental departments of education

- ▶ Educational and cultural publishers
- ▶ Readers clubs; reading associations; publishers associations; and booksellers associations

Other **community-based groups and associations** that are potential partners include:

- ▶ Neighbourhood associations
- ▶ Religious groups and brotherhoods
- ▶ Non-governmental organizations
- ▶ Social workers, psychologists, counsellors etc.
- ▶ Community health workers
- ▶ Trade unions
- ▶ Business, media, and political groups

## **What materials are needed and how do we choose them?**

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Materials for library-based literacy programs may be created, donated, borrowed, recycled, purchased or downloaded from the Internet, according to local circumstances. As it is important to use relevant adult learning materials, library staff will want to choose materials of interest in local languages.

These include:

- ▶ Booklets on health, the family and agriculture
- ▶ Information on economic development, the environment and local customs
- ▶ Newspapers and magazines
- ▶ Programming using radio, videos, and the Internet

When choosing materials, library staff should consider:

- ▶ **Design**
  - Is the print large, clear and easy to read?

- Are the paragraphs well-spaced?
- Is the page well-designed, attractive and easy to read?
- Are there illustrations to support the text?

▶ **Language**

- Is the language plain, common usage and in the present tense?
- Does the text avoid difficult dialects, regional expressions, and figures of speech?

▶ **Words**

- Does the writer use short, common words?
- Are technical or difficult words explained and repeated, so they can be learned?

▶ **Sentence and Paragraph Structure**

- Are the sentences and paragraphs simple, short, and clear?
- Is each sentence introduced with a capital?
- Do single thoughts completed in two or three simple sentences make up a paragraph?

## How do we train our staff?

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### Preparation

Preparing staff for participation in library-based literacy programs may occur in different ways. Training may be offered in pre-professional education, in-service training or as continuing education. More often it is given in short courses and workshops, or at special programs during professional meetings. To have a successful literacy program, three types of training may be considered:

- ▶ Training for staff working with the public
- ▶ Training for library staff managers of literacy projects
- ▶ Training for literacy tutors and persons providing services

## **Knowledge and skills required**

All staff, but especially staff working with the public, need general training to provide them with an awareness of the needs of the target group. Some knowledge in the following areas would be useful:

- ▶ An understanding of literacy
- ▶ An understanding of the needs of illiterate people and the role of the library
- ▶ Methods of identifying the target population
- ▶ Types of services the library could provide
- ▶ Knowledge of potential partners

Staff who will be supervising literacy training need all the skills and knowledge listed above. In addition, they need more specific knowledge such as:

- ▶ Knowledge of the diverse needs of illiterate people
- ▶ Understanding the need for networking with literacy providers and community agencies
- ▶ Knowledge about developing, managing and assessing literacy programs

**Literacy tutors**, who will often be community volunteers, need specific training. It should include:

- ▶ Techniques in teaching the adult learner
- ▶ Advocacy training
- ▶ Training on the importance of privacy, respect and trust

## **How do we promote our literacy program?**

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A library literacy program must be promoted, if it is to succeed. Project leaders will want to inform and update the community and other interested groups on their literacy project. These groups include:

- ▶ Library staff, library trustees and/or management or advisory boards; library users
- ▶ Government representatives
- ▶ Other community organizations
- ▶ The media
- ▶ Local cultural and educational groups

The reasons behind the program also need to be explained and made known. The messages should focus on:

- ▶ Why the library is becoming involved in promoting literacy
- ▶ How the library is involved
- ▶ What results the library hopes to achieve from its literacy program

Certain methods are useful in promoting literacy activities. These may include plans to:

- ▶ Develop a working group to help promote the program
- ▶ Provide posters and materials to the local media
- ▶ Create flyers, brochures, and short announcements for the local library, cultural and educational communities
- ▶ Work with partner organizations, when appropriate, in joint publicity efforts

## **How can we tell if our efforts are successful?**

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The library's work in literacy needs to be assessed at regular intervals. We will want to know how effective our efforts have been in meeting the aims of the program and in reaching the intended target audience.

This is particularly useful if a program has been planned without the direct involvement beforehand of the target audience, such as frequently happens with programs aimed at students.

**Areas for assessment** may include:

- ▶ The number of participants who enrolled and completed the program
- ▶ How they evaluated the program
- ▶ How the program benefited the community
- ▶ The effectiveness of the use of literacy resources, e.g. the availability of resources and their use by target audiences
- ▶ The effectiveness of the program location, e.g. the site, buildings, furniture and equipment
- ▶ The convenience of the frequency and length of the program for the participants
- ▶ The structure of the program, e.g. administration, supervision, partnerships
- ▶ The longer-term benefit to the individuals

**Methods of assessment** may include:

- ▶ Interviews with individuals and focus groups from the target audience, including those who have participated in the program and those who have not
- ▶ Writing samples from the learners
- ▶ Interviews with literacy program staff about the effectiveness of the program and its partnerships
- ▶ Staff could also collect information on the number of participants, their attendance and the quality and types of resources used

## How do we keep our program going?

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To continue and to plan for the successful future of library-based literacy programs, library staff may consider:

- ▶ Providing participants and those who have taken the classes with **suitable reading material**, perhaps through partnerships with publishers
- ▶ **Organizing activities and projects** for successful program participants, at the library, and through businesses that might provide employment opportunities
- ▶ **Involving local authorities**, including local governments, in follow-up activities and projects that could provide additional funding for literacy programs
- ▶ **Networking with other groups and organizations** to be sure that the program develops partnership opportunities for the participants and does not operate in isolation from the community
- ▶ **Interesting the media** in some of the success stories



For more information on the Reading Section and these guidelines, please visit:

**[www.ifla.org/VII/s33/sr.htm](http://www.ifla.org/VII/s33/sr.htm)**

The guidelines are listed under "Projects", and translations of the guidelines will appear as they become available.