Literacy is everybody's business
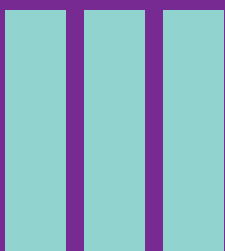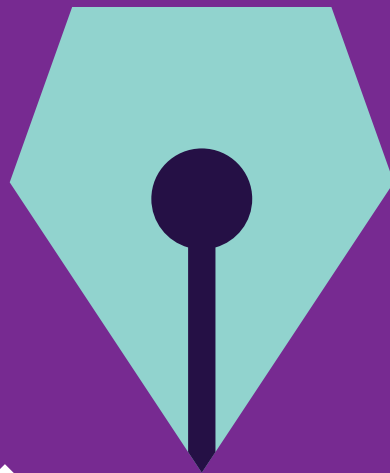
NALA

National Adult Literacy Agency

Áisíneacht Náisiúnta Litearthachta do Aosaigh
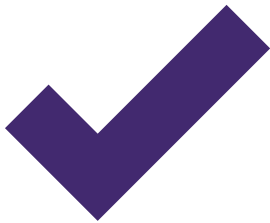
Contents

Some of this guide draws from **NALA's Right from the Start Guide** published in 2009.

We use the term organisation(s) all the way through the guide. We use it to refer to **businesses, services, workplaces and anywhere that engages with the public**.

Section 1

Introduction

Who are we?

We are the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA), a registered charity and membership based organisation. We believe literacy is a human right. We are committed to making sure people with unmet literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs can fully take part in society, and have access to quality learning opportunities that meet their needs.

What do we mean by literacy, numeracy and digital literacy?

Literacy, numeracy and digital literacy are life skills that allow us to take part in, and make sense of, the world. These skills involve listening, speaking, reading, writing, using numbers and everyday technology to communicate, to build relationships, to understand information and make informed choices.

Like life, definitions change and our understanding of literacy changes. The literacy, numeracy and digital literacy skills needed to participate in society are changing all the time, and will continue to evolve.

Literacy is one of the most important skills involved in reaching customers and in making the most of the talents of the staff in any organisation. This may not be immediately obvious, yet there are many routine reading and writing tasks that customers and staff need to carry out.

Tasks for staff	Tasks for customers
Reading signs and notices	Reading and checking bills and invoices
Reading and following instructions, for example health and safety instructions	Reading and understanding information about a product or service
Writing out orders, invoices	Making a query or complaint
Entering information on databases	Following organisation procedures
Communicating with colleagues	Reading, writing and sending emails
Writing and sending emails	Understanding health and safety issues relating to a product or service

Figure 1: Tasks for staff and tasks for customers

Literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs in Ireland

Adult Literacy Survey results [1]
•   One in six (18%) adults (aged 16 to 65) struggle with reading and understanding everyday text. For example, reading a bus timetable or understanding medicine instructions.
•   One in four adults (25%) has difficulties using maths in everyday life. For example, basic addition, working out a bill or calculating percentages.
•   42% of adults struggle with basic digital tasks. For example, they find looking up a website or sending an email difficult.

Literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs in your workplace

Is it possible that…

… without realising it, you may be excluding some people from fair access to opportunities and services because of unnecessary literacy barriers?

… you are losing money because of time spent dealing with misunderstandings, mistakes or complaints?

… without knowing it, you are losing current and potential customers because of unduly complicated literature and procedures?

… some of your staff, including those most talented and creative, are grappling with unnecessary obstacles that stop them fulfilling their potential and giving their best value to the organisation?

If there is even a slight possibility that the answer to one or more of these questions is "yes", then it is very important to investigate it. This guide will help you to do that.

1 CSO (2013). **PIAAC 2012** Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies: Survey Results for Ireland available at **cso.ie**

Section 2

Literacy friendly approach

Why do we need to address this?

There is an increasing awareness of the need for strong literacy, numeracy and digital literacy skills in today's society. NALA is concerned with, on the one hand, encouraging adults with literacy needs to take up learning opportunities while also supporting organisations to be more accessible. Literacy matters in making your services more accessible.

NALA helps organisations and businesses do this by becoming literacy friendly. We have produced this guide to take organisations through a range of approaches that will ensure they are not excluding either customers or staff with literacy needs but rather have policies and practices that are inclusive and progressive. Doing so will enable organisations not only to improve their dealings with adults with literacy needs but also to enhance the efficiency of their operations for all customers and staff.

Why introduce a literacy friendly approach?

Most people's literacy abilities include strengths and weaknesses – at a simple level, someone may be an able reader but not as skilled at spelling or using numbers, for example. We can use reading and writing at many levels, from the most basic tasks to the much more complex demands of the changing workplace and modern society.

As well as this, we use literacy in many different ways for the many different situations we face, even in a single day. Perhaps someone gets a new job and has to improve a particular writing technique or learn how to use a new technology. Or perhaps the bank asks us to fill in a form on the spot to process a transaction. Changes inside and outside work mean that all of us, at different stages in our lives and in response to different situations, have 'literacy' needs.

What does it mean to be a literacy friendly organisation?

A literacy friendly organisation genuinely includes and respects its staff and its customers. It encourages commitment in all parts of the organisation and among all levels of staff to remove literacy-related barriers to access, participation and achievement. Most of all, it understands that challenges with particular types of reading and writing do not indicate a lack of ability as such.

In everyday terms, a literacy friendly organisation means that customers with literacy needs can:

- access its services,
- communicate effectively with services, in different ways,
- apply for positions for which they have an aptitude and relevant experience,
- take part in consultations,
- be treated fairly in light of their general performance and interaction with colleagues and customers,
- understand and apply policies and procedures, and
- receive support (or effective training if a staff member) to help them carry out the specific task.

To remove unnecessary literacy-related barriers, you need to first review and, if necessary, adapt your organisation's overall policies and procedures. Your organisation should then look at its communications and staff training and development practices – and adapt these if needed as well. You may find that updating your policies and practices to be more literacy friendly will benefit all customers, not just those with literacy needs.

To help ensure that any changes have the widest possible impact, it is worth looking at your communications, policies and procedures, and staff training and development to see what you are doing well and what you could improve on.

Literacy friendly quality standards

NALA has developed 10 literacy friendly standards:

	Communications
1	Our staff use **plain English** when **speaking** with people.
2	We use **plain English** in our **written information**.
3	We **check** that people **understand** what we have told them.
4	The **layout** of our office/reception is **clear**.

	Staff awareness and responding sensitively
5	Our staff are **aware** of literacy friendly work practices.
6	Our staff **respond sensitively** to the literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs of people.

	Policies and procedures
7	We have a **literacy friendly policy**.
8	We have **specific ways** to help people find and use important information and instructions.
9	We **support our staff** to improve their own literacy, numeracy and digital literacy skills.

	Evaluating and improving
10	We regularly **evaluate** and continually **improve** our literacy friendly service.

💬 Communications

	Standard	Delivering it in practice
1	Our staff use **plain English** when **speaking** with people.	Plain English is a style of presenting information that helps someone understand it the first time they read or hear it. When you use plain English you: • use clear language when speaking; • give relevant information in the right order; and • help people to understand this information quickly. To use plain English, you first need to put yourself in your readers' shoes. See NALA's Writing and Design Tips at **nala.ie/writing-and-design-tips/**
2	We use **plain English** in our **written information**.	Some top tips are: • DON'T USE ALL CAPITALS, lower case is easier to read. • Use line spacing of 1.5. • Align to the left. • For emphasis: no *italics* or <u>underline</u> - use **bold**. • Use sans serif font such as Arial, not Times New Roman. • Define acronyms - what is NALA, ETB, HSE? • We advise to use the active voice, not the passive.

Passive voice	Active voice
The cheque will be sent.	We will send the cheque.
One to be taken twice daily.	Take one twice a day.

	Standard	Delivering it in practice
3	We **check** that people **understand** what we have told them.	When you give someone instructions, you should take a few minutes to find out if they understand them, by using teach-back. **Teach-back** is a way to assess and confirm that people understand what you have told them by asking them to repeat back the information in their own words. **For example:** "We have talked about your application and I want to make sure I explained it all clearly. To ensure I didn't miss anything can you tell me what you need to do next?"
4	The **layout** of our office/ reception is **clear**.	It is important that your office is easy to get around. Have you considered the signs you use and their wording? Here are some questions to review your environment.

Navigation Checklist ✔

		Yes	No
1.	Are the names of sections clearly shown?	☐	☐
2.	Do signs use a mixture of small and capital letters?	☐	☐
3.	Are signs at the same height on walls so people are not looking up and down?	☐	☐
4.	Are the colours used in signs the most visible (white, green and yellow)?	☐	☐
5.	Are words used to describe items consistent?	☐	☐
6.	If you have a display stand for leaflets, is this clearly marked and laid out for the person to follow easily?	☐	☐

Staff awareness and responding sensitively

	Standard	Delivering it in practice
5	Our staff are **aware** of literacy friendly work practices.	It is important that your staff are aware of and know how to respond sensitively to people with literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs. **Know your customers** There are many reasons why people may find it hard to understand information – these are not always due to literacy needs. Other reasons include age, disability, language, culture, emotion and stress. **'Understanding adult literacy, numeracy and digital literacy' and 'Becoming literacy friendly' courses** NALA has developed one hour online courses which are available on the **Professional Development section** of **learnwithnala.ie**
6	Our staff **respond sensitively** to the literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs of people.	**The Do's and Don'ts** **Do** • Be understanding, sensitive and non-judgemental • Remind the person that what they say is in confidence • Where possible, make time to be supportive • Use plain English - when speaking and writing • Give the person plenty of opportunity to ask questions and use the teach-back method **Don't** • Use jargon • Make assumptions • Suggest someone needs to 'learn to read' • Lose patience or raise your voice

📖 Policies and procedures

	Standard	Delivering it in practice
7	We have a **literacy friendly policy**.	Many organisations adopt a literacy friendly policy. This policy states that they are aware of the literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs of their customers and that they will take account of these needs.

Sample literacy friendly policy

> We recognise that many adults who use our services have literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs.
>
> We will try to be a literacy friendly organisation by committing to:
> - removing unneccessary literacy, numeracy and digital literacy related barriers to accessing our services;
> - using plain English in our written and verbal communications;
> - ensuring our staff have the knowledge and skills required to use a literacy friendly approach; and
> - regularly evaluating and continually improving our literacy friendly approach.

	Standard	Delivering it in practice
8	We have **specific ways** to help people find and use important information and instructions.	When delivering a service, you want to communicate in ways that all your customers understand, particularly when it comes to important information and instructions.

Here are some tips

Highlight the most important information
When you give a person information, you highlight the more important points that are on the instruction sheet. This is useful so they can find this when they go home.

Good 'signposting':
It is good to tell the person what information you need to share with them today. Try to keep to a small number of points that they need to know now. Then tell them where they can get more information if they wish.

For example: "You must eat with these tablets – if not, you will feel sick. There are other side effects but this is the most important one; the others are here in the instruction leaflet if you want to look over them later."

	Standard	Delivering it in practice
9	We **support our staff** to improve their own literacy, numeracy and digital literacy skills.	Many adults would like to brush up on their own literacy, numeracy and digital literacy skills. We use a huge amount of reading, writing and number skills in the workplace.

Think of how many times we use these top skills each day.

Reading	Writing	Numeracy
Understanding health and safety information	Complete details on forms – for example accident report forms	Arrive at work on time and plan the use of time effectively
Read instructions	Fill in time sheets and work related documentation	Write down the sequence of numbers accurately
Read forms	Write telephone messages	Make calculations using addition, subtraction, multiplication and division
Find and read information and reports	Write orders, receipts and invoices	Make necessary calculations of fractions, decimals and percentages

If one of your staff members would like to brush up on their skills they can:

1. Contact the NALA Freephone on **1 800 20 20 65** (Monday to Friday from 9.30 am to 5 pm)
2. Go online to **www.learnwithnala.ie** and start learning straight away.
3. Contact their adult literacy centre in their local Education and Training Board (ETB). Classes are free and in small groups. You will find the list of centres on the NALA website here: **www.nala.ie/find-a-centre**

✐ Evaluating and improving

	Standard	Delivering it in practice
10	We regularly **evaluate** and continually **improve** our literacy friendly service.	As part of using a literacy friendly approach, you should regularly evaluate how you are doing and improve areas where identified. **Here are some ways you can do this:** **Build monitoring into your regular meetings** Build monitoring of using a literacy friendly approach into your management meetings, general staff meetings or quality assurance procedures. At these meetings put 'literacy friendly approach' on the agenda and you can raise any issues that have come up and share how you have dealt with them. This will ensure your service is continually improving. **Have someone responsible for monitoring** It can work well to have a staff member with specific responsibility for overseeing your literacy friendly practices. This ensures that actions to improve your services happen and that other staff are aware of these improvements.

A positive impact

Many organisations have reported great benefits for their staff, for their customers and for the organisation itself because of steps they have taken to support literacy in different ways. Here are some of the benefits they report:

Employees

Increased morale

Better team working

More likely to apply for promotion

Fewer mistakes

More effective performance

Easier to engage in training for new work practices

Customers

More efficient service from an organisation

Fewer complaints or repeat calls for information

Easier communication with the organisation

Organisation

Staff able and willing to take on new tasks

More committed staff

Accurate record keeping

Less staff turnover

Stronger health and safety record

Improved quality of work and job satisfaction

Making it happen

Becoming a literacy friendly organisation involves a commitment to analysing communications, current policies and practices and staff training and development. From there then you can develop an action plan, implement them and review the effectiveness of actions.

Now that you have read Section 2, you may:
- agree that literacy could be an important part of the functions of your organisation or be willing to investigate if this is the case;
- consider that some of your customers or staff, or both, may find it difficult to handle some of the literacy, numeracy and digital literacy demands they meet; and
- be willing to take five simple steps to make your own organisation more literacy friendly.

There are **five step**s to help you to:
- find out the good practice your organisation already uses;
- identify where there may be gaps; and
- look at what actions you can take to change things.

The most effective results will emerge by considering all aspects of your organisation, at all levels.

The flow chart on the next page gives an overview of what is involved in becoming a literacy friendly organisation.

Five steps to becoming a literacy friendly organisation

Step 1
Hold an initial review and planning session

- Identify stakeholders in the organisation
- Explore key issues in literacy and how they affect your organisation

Step 2
Carry out a literacy audit

- Communications
- Staff awareness and responding sensitively
- Policies and procedures
- Evaluating and improving

Step 3
Develop action plans

- Communications
- Staff awareness and responding sensitively
- Policies and procedures
- Evaluating and improving

Step 4
Implement action plans

Step 5
Monitor and evaluate actions to inform further activities

You will find more detail on these five steps in the document **'Making it happen'**.

Appendices

Appendix 1   Signs of possible literacy needs

For customers

If asked to work with written material or read aloud in public, some adults with literacy, numeracy or digital literacy needs may do the following:
- Make an excuse to leave
- Say they forgot their glasses
- Ask someone else to read instead
- Change the subject or create a diversion
- Say they'll take the document home and read it there
- Say their pen has run out
- Get angry or disrupt the situation if they are with other people

If asked to write or to read written material in the course of a telephone conversation, some adults may do the following:
- Use some of the coping strategies listed above
- Ask the other speaker to read out loud the section they are talking about
- Make an excuse to hang up

For staff

If they get training or promotion opportunities at work, some adults may do the following:
- Avoid taking on responsibility or promotion, even when they are capable or have leadership qualities
- When on a training course, avoid working towards qualifications, even when they have potential to progress
- Drop out of a course when qualifications are mentioned
- Fail to turn up on days when reading or writing are used
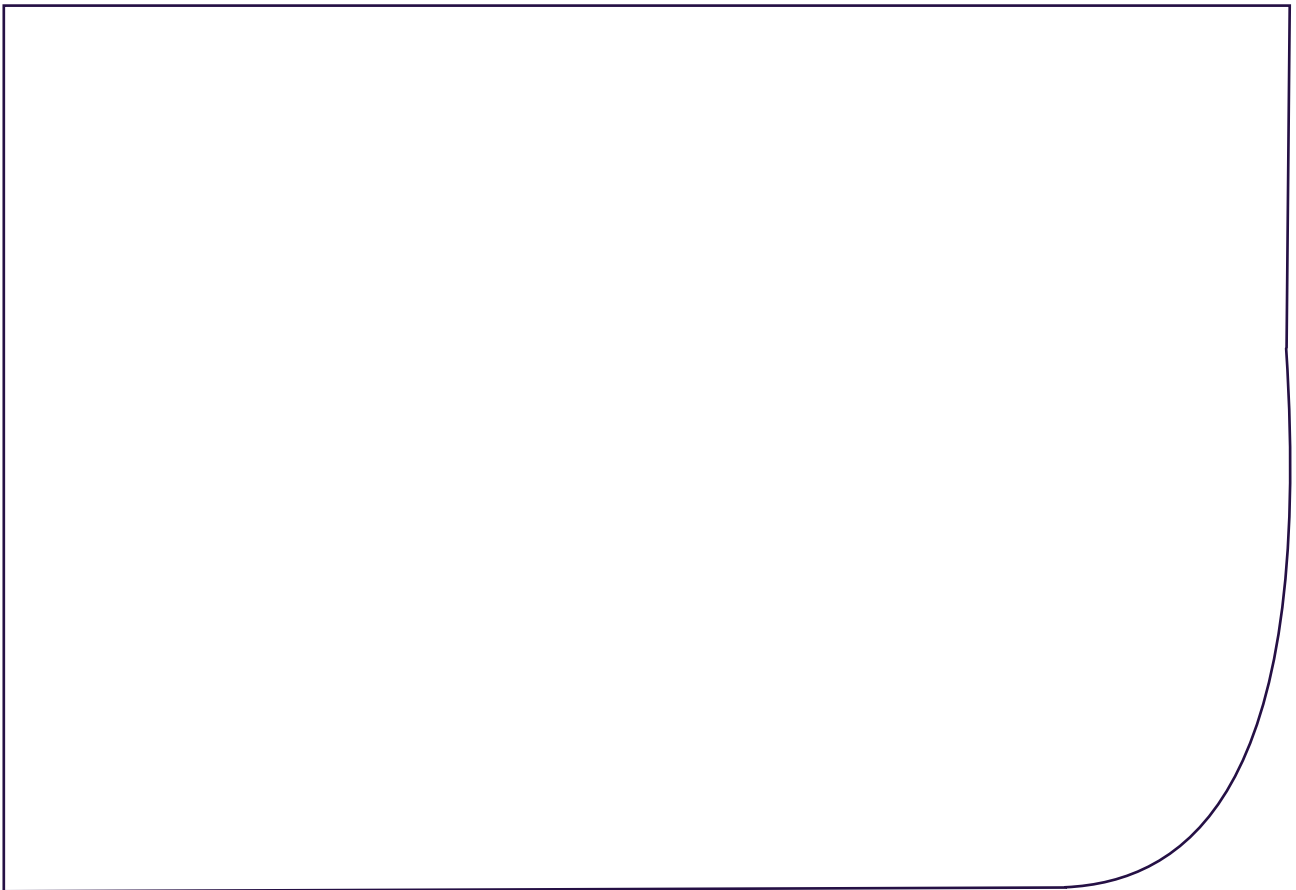
Certain mistakes made during training or work may indicate that the person has literacy, numeracy or digital literacy needs.

Here are some examples.

- Misunderstandings about what someone wants or needs
- Difficulty following manuals or written instructions
- Mistakes in orders
- Wrong use of equipment
- Damage to equipment
- Distracting colleagues from work
- Unfinished assignments or tasks
- Tasks taking longer than they should

You may have noticed some other cues yourself, which you can write in below.

Appendix 2   Organisations that are literacy friendly

Literacy friendly County Carlow

In 2019 Carlow Libraries led a unique collaborative initiative focussing on raising awareness of unmet literacy needs. The initiative produced a report Towards a Literacy Friendly County Carlow outlining the literacy needs in the county, barriers to improving literacy, the supports available and actions needed.

You can view the Towards a Literacy-Friendly County Carlow' report on the Carlow Libraries' website **carlowlibraries.ie**

They also produced awareness videos. Watch the literacy awareness videos at **youtube.com/@carlowcountylibrary**

You will find more information on the Carlow Libraries website.
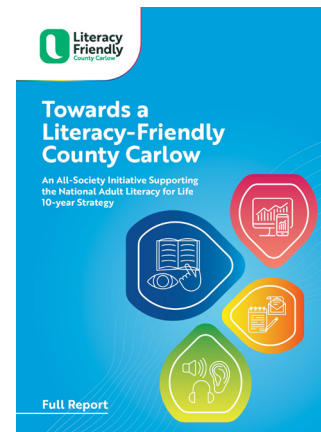
South Dublin County Council (SDCC)

In 2012 SDCC was the first local authority to work with NALA to develop a literacy friendly approach. We did a literacy audit as the initial step in becoming a literacy friendly organisation. The resulting report identified existing good practice in SDCC and actions to strengthen SDCC as a literacy friendly Local Authority.

You can read the report 'Taking Steps to be a Literacy Friendly Local Authority' on the NALA website:
nala.ie/taking-steps-to-be-a-literacy-friendly-local-authority
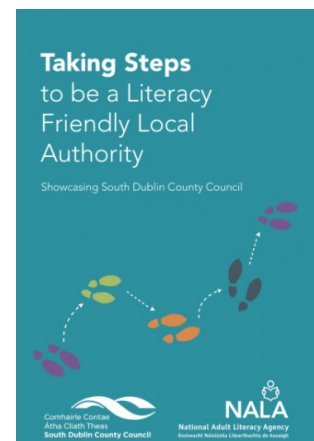
Crystal Clear Mark

The Crystal Clear mark was awarded to pharmacies where there was evidence of, and commitment to, providing a literacy friendly service. This means the pharmacy was taking account of and supporting the literacy and numeracy needs of its customers and communicating clearly. The mark was developed by the Irish Pharmacy Union (IPU), Merck Sharp & Dohme (MSD) and NALA and supported by Healthy Ireland.

We awarded quality mark for 3 years and it was free to apply. To date we have awarded the quality mark to 105 pharmacies in 19 counties.

You will find more information about the Crystal Clear mark on the NALA website **nala.ie/crystal-clear-mark**

Appendix 3   Resources and information

The National Adult Literacy Agency offers a range of supports, including help with implementing this five-step process. We also provide a number of resources about literacy and literacy-related topics. You can find links to these on the NALA website **nala.ie/literacy-friendly-resources**

Dedicated literacy tuition	• **An Employer's Guide to Basic Skills at Work**
	• **Steps to Safety** – a workbook to improve workplace basic education and health and safety
	• Clocking In to Clocking Out resource pack for tutors
	    ○ **Looking after health and safety at work**
	    ○ **Managing your time at work**
	    ○ **Using maths at work**
	    ○ **Supporting diversity at work**
	    ○ **Using technology at work**
	• **Better Handwriting**
	• **Tutors information hub** with access to thousands of categorised tutor resources

Learn with NALA	This service includes: • phone tutoring service, call us for free on **1 800 20 20 80** for more information; • workbooks and learning resources; and • online learning with the **learnwithnala.ie** website. Learn with NALA learners also have the option of working towards getting a certificate from Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI).
Integrating literacy into staff training and development	• **Integrating Literacy Guidelines for further education and training centres** • **Integrating Literacy: Guidelines for vocational and workplace trainers**
Plain English	**nala.ie/plain-english** • **Writing and Design Tips** Summary plain English guidelines • **Checklists for clear documents**

Appendix 4   Training and development options

Adult literacy service (run by your local Education and Training Board)

There are over 100 local adult literacy centres around the country. They provide literacy tuition with trained tutors on a one-to-one basis or in small groups. The service is free and confidential. The local Adult Literacy Organiser meets the learner to discuss what they want and then finds a suitable tutor. They also offer Skills for Work courses providing adult literacy tuition in the workplace.

For information on your nearest service, contact the NALA Freephone support line on **1 800 20 20 65** or go to **nala.ie/find-a-centre** to find your local centre.

Literacy awareness training

This varies from a one-hour introduction to a half-day more in-depth session. It aims to raise awareness of literacy issues, including their causes and effects, and explores ways of responding. NALA has developed two online course on literacy awareness which are available on the Professional Development section of **learnwithnala.ie**
You can get a NALA Professional Development certificate on successfully completing these courses.

Contact NALA's Training Department for further details on **01 412 7900**.

Plain English training

NALA provides workshops to show how to update existing documents and write new ones in a literacy friendly and more accessible format.

Contact NALA's plain English service for further details on **01 412 7900** or fill in the Plain English Services form at **nala.ie/plain-english**

Integrating literacy training

NALA offers a short eLearning module on integrating literacy – you can register for the Integrating Literacy course at the Professional Development section of **learnwithnala.ie**

Contact NALA's Training Department for further details on **01 412 7900**.

Notes

Notes
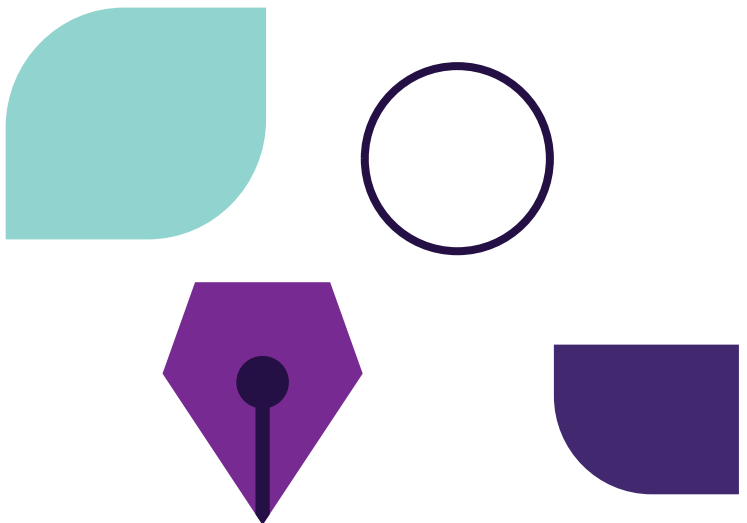
The National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) is a charity and membership based organisation. We work to support adults with unmet literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs to take part fully in society and to have access to learning opportunities that meet their needs. NALA does this by raising awareness of the importance of literacy, doing research and sharing good practice, providing online learning courses, providing a tutoring service and by lobbying for further investment to improve adult literacy, numeracy and digital literacy skills.