How Literacy Is Measured: check your reading.

Six questions on one real news article. Each uses a different reading skill, from finding a fact to judging what to trust.

READ THIS FIRST

Do more than half of Philadelphia adults really read at or below 5th grade level? It's time for a new way to describe what they know

Jennifer D. Kobrin, University of Tennessee · The Conversation · August 25, 2026
https://theconversation.com/do-more-than-half-of-philadelphia-adults-really-read-at-or-below-5th-grade-level-its-time-for-a-new-way-to-describe-what-they-know-289464

How to use it. Read the whole article first. Keep it open while you answer, the way you would at the kitchen table. The questions go roughly from easier to harder. The levels are a guide to how hard each kind of task is on the international adult literacy test, not a score. The answer key is on the last page.

DECODE LEVEL 1

1. Paragraph 6 contrasts "academic" reading with "practical" reading. What is the difference?

LOCATE LEVEL 1 TO 2

2. According to the PIAAC data in the article, what share of Philadelphia adults read at or below the test's lowest level?

RESTATE LEVEL 2

3. In one or two sentences of your own, what is the author's main argument?

INFER LEVEL 3

4. Paragraph 7 describes a woman who tested at a third-grade level but wrote a monthly newsletter for her church. What does the author want you to conclude?

COMPARE LEVEL 3

5. Paragraph 1 says over half of Philadelphia adults ages 18 to 64 read at a fifth-grade level or below. Paragraph 5 says 32% of adults 16 to 74 are at or below the lowest level. Why might the two numbers differ?

EVALUATE LEVEL 4 AND UP

6. Paragraph 1 attributes the fifth-grade figure to "a nationwide assessment released in 2020." How would you check where the grade-level wording came from?

Answer key

1. Decode. Academic reading is school-style work, like finding the main idea of a paragraph. Practical reading is using what you read in daily life, like a medication dose or a child's school calendar.

Where to look: Paragraph 6

2. Locate. 32% of adults ages 16 to 74, higher than the Pennsylvania average.

Where to look: Paragraph 5

3. Restate. Describing adults as reading at a fifth-grade level is misleading, because tests miss practical skills and many adults test poorly for other reasons. Philadelphia needs more adult literacy funding, and programs built around adults' real lives.

Where to look: Paragraphs 3, 11 and 29

4. Infer. That a test score or a grade-level label can understate what an adult can actually do with reading and writing in real life.

Where to look: Paragraphs 7 and 11

5. Compare. They measure different things for different age ranges. One is a grade-level translation of test results; the other is the share at or below the test's lowest level. Part three of this series explains that the test itself has no grade levels, so a grade-level figure is someone's conversion.

Where to look: Paragraphs 1 and 5

6. Evaluate. Go to the assessment's own reports from the National Center for Education Statistics, which describe levels, not grades. Then trace the news article the author cites and any analysis that translated levels into grades. For the national "below sixth grade" figure, part three found it came from a foundation's summary of a Gallup analysis, not from the test. The author herself calls grade-level comparisons misleading in paragraph 11.

Where to look: Paragraphs 1, 4 and 11

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