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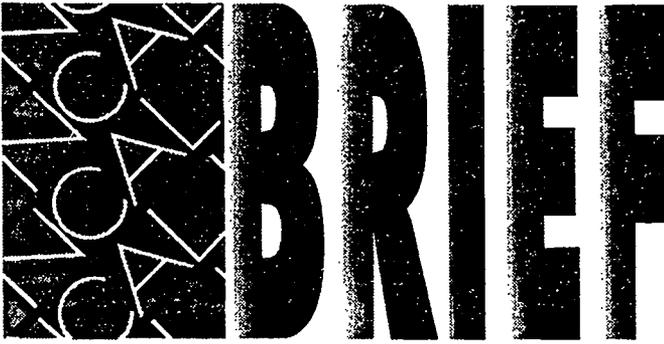
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ABSTRACT

Available literature pertaining to the following topics was reviewed: cognitive skill retention across the life span, literacy and basic skills retention, and policy implications of skill retention work. Among the key findings of the review were the following: (1) available evidence suggests that adult literacy skill retention may vary dramatically according to the individual adult learner, his/her prior knowledge, and the type/duration of instruction; (2) there are few limits on memory or learning capacity, and retention of information increases as understanding of the meaning of information deepens; (3) extensive retraining is often necessary before skilled performance can be achieved after regular practice of the skill in question has ceased; and (4) the increased difficulties in reading acquisition often experienced by adults appear to be social or social-psychological in origin rather than based in cognitive deficits. Policymakers were advised to be aware that the retention of adult literacy skills may be a critical factor in long-term program outcomes (e.g., stable employment). It was concluded that service providers and teachers can benefit from knowing that the relearning process can be more rapid if the original learning experience includes increased guidance and strategies for remembering. (MN)

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# BRIEF

## *Use It or Lose It? The Problem of Adult Literacy Skill Retention*

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Based on NCAL Technical Report TR94-07  
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### KEY FINDINGS:

- Available evidence suggests that adult literacy skill retention may vary dramatically according to the individual adult learner, his/her prior knowledge, and the type and duration of instruction.
- Retention of information is increased as understanding of the meaning of the information is deepened; there are few limits on memory or learning capacity, according to recent research.
- Extensive retraining is often necessary before skilled performance can be achieved after regular practice of the skill has ceased.
- The increased difficulties in reading acquisition that older adults often experience appear to be social or social-psychological in origin, rather than based in cognitive deficits.

### KEY RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Policymakers need to be aware that the retention of adult literacy skills may be a critical factor in long-term program outcomes, such as stable employment.
- Service providers and teachers can benefit from knowing that the relearning process can be more rapid if the original learning experience includes increased guidance and strategies on how to remember.

### INTRODUCTION

In the fields of adult literacy and adult education, most researchers have focused exclusively on the acquisition of skills and abilities. Few empirical studies have assessed American adult learners after they have exited from literacy programs, and there has been very little systematic investigation of skill retention. Thus, it is difficult to know whether the literacy skills learned in America's adult education programs are likely to be retained for very long. Policymakers lack the facts and figures regarding skill retention that they need in order to make informed decisions regarding adult literacy funding, programs, and curriculum development.

### METHODOLOGY

This paper is a literature review that covers what is known about (a) cognitive skill retention across the lifespan, (b) studies of literacy and basic skills retention, and (c) policy implications of skill retention work.

### IMPLICATIONS

Although some researchers have focused on issues related to the retention and loss of workplace and occupational skills, and the subsequent need for retraining, little of this work has been applied within the literacy research field. The present review suggests that there should be more communication between adult literacy researchers and vocational skills researchers. One workplace study provided evidence that individuals in an industrial training and retraining experiment showed quicker relearning when given guidance on how to better remember. Another study found that there was substantially more retention when the trainees were informed of the possible loss of skills following the training session and were given strategies for trying to limit forgetting. The ultimate effectiveness of literacy training could be greatly enhanced by the simple expedient of increased guidance and strategies on how to remember the skills being taught.

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## FURTHER READING

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