

Introduction to Digital Literacy

Three Tips for Supporting Newcomers' Digital Skills Development

This tip sheet will help you incorporate digital literacy into your case management practice to support newcomer clients in building self-sufficiency. When clients improve their digital literacy skills, they gain confidence and are better equipped to engage with you, other service providers, and their new communities. Use the tips and resources below in coordination with your organization's broader digital access work on connectivity, devices, and online safety. For more guidance on digital access, see Switchboard's resource on [Increasing Newcomers' Digital Access](#).

1. Recognize what digital skills your clients already have and pair with their goals.

Effective case management should always begin with identifying your client's goals and assessing the skills and strengths they already have. The same is true of empowering newcomers to increase their digital literacy skills. Start by **asking open-ended questions about the client's digital literacy goals**, including how they would like to use their digital skills. A client who wants to apply for a job will need different support than a client who wants to communicate with their child's school via an online portal. Next, **discuss any digital skills the client already has**. For example, many clients may already use a smartphone for social media or have created an email address. These are **transferable skills**. For instance, logging into an account is often similar regardless of the portal.

After discussing their goals and skills, it may be useful to have the client **take an assessment** of their digital skills so you can approach the next steps for learning through a strengths-based model. By highlighting their existing strengths and transferable digital literacy skills, clients will feel more empowered to learn. [Northstar](#), a program recognized by the U.S. Department of Education offers free digital skills assessments designed for real-world skill development. Below are examples of these assessments:

- Basic computer skills assessment asking if the client can identify a power button or the camera
- Essential career search skills assessment asking the client which tasks are important to finding a job
- Social media and daily technology use assessment asking if the client can add a contact or adjust a privacy setting

Digital literacy refers to the skills needed to use digital tools in everyday life.

Digital access is the ability to connect and use digital technologies. This includes connectivity, devices, digital literacy, and online navigation and safety.

2. Build or strengthen digital literacy in your program.

After learning about your clients' existing digital literacy skills and goals, select a curriculum for your program that aligns with their needs. **Quality curriculum should be sequenced so skills build on one another and incorporate tasks relevant to newcomers' daily lives.** For example, if clients want to increase their financial literacy and eventually pay their bills online, start with online safety and using mobile banking apps, and later introduce budgeting tools like spreadsheets.

A strong curriculum is also focused, contextualized, and paced to clients' needs. Review a variety of planning guides or frameworks before selecting specific resources. For example:

- The National Digital Inclusion Alliance (NDIA) [planning guide](#) covers needs assessments and lesson selection for building a digital skills curriculum.
- The City of Seattle's Digital Equity Initiative developed a useful comparison of skills including the basic Gateway skills, like reading or being able to move a mouse, or skills that bridge learning pathways. See page 12 of their [digital initiative](#).
- The DQ Institute developed the first global standard for digital literacy, skills, and readiness. Digital Intelligence (DQ) competencies—the ability to use technology wisely, safely, and confidently in everyday life—are listed in eight areas in their [framework](#) and can provide some digital skill must-haves for your program.

3. Offer self-paced learning and use free resources.

Schedule time to discuss with clients how much of their learning will be done with you, in a classroom, and independently. Incorporate a mix of group instruction and self-paced learning to reinforce skills between lessons. **Self-paced learning is valuable for accommodating different schedules and learning speeds.** The platforms and resources below are free and accessible, and they offer a variety of options for different literacy levels:

- The Public Library Association at [DigitalLearn.org](#) offers courses in English and Spanish covering email, Internet navigation, cybersecurity, and online job applications
- World Education has an open repository, [The Digital Skills Library](#), organized by skill level
- [Marylanders Online](#) offers a five-module curriculum on computer basics for those interested in learning digital skills on their own
- [EnGen](#) integrates English with digital skills to cover dozens of industry-specific courses such as hospitality, finance, and manufacturing
- The [Colorado Assistive Tech Program](#) lists accessibility features for a variety of devices and operating systems, with a clear breakdown between Windows, macOS, iOS, and Android

You can also look into regional options like [Bringing Education + Technology To You \(BETTY\)](#), a Goodwill mobile computer lab and training team in Texas, Georgia, Pennsylvania, and Ohio that brings digital literacy training to the community. If you're outside these areas, look for mobile digital literacy programs offered by local Goodwill affiliates, libraries, or community colleges.

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