

# Engaging Adults with Low Literacy Levels

## Discussion Activity

Michaela Stone is a 32-year-old white, female refugee from Belarus. Two years ago, she emigrated with her father. She has a Russian bachelor's degree in accounting and a master's in accountancy teaching. She had been teaching accounting and statistics in a college there.

She lives alone and knows few of her neighbors. Her father lives nearby in subsidized housing. She currently works as a bookkeeper with a non-profit community center for Russian emigres. Although she speaks English with her co-workers, much of her job requires her to speak Russian.

To supplement her income, she works 7 hours a week as a bookkeeper for a small dental practice. In addition, she still cooks and cleans for her father, which leaves her little free time for community activities or continuing education. Most of her free time is spent reading, in both English and Russian.

To help herself assimilate, she watches TV to gain cultural information and get ideas for conversation. Her goal is to improve her English so that she can pass the Test of English for Foreign Learners and enroll in college. She took it once and was 10 points away from passing. She says she will take it again when she has time to study.

*What do you think is important to keep in mind about this person?*

*What books/resources would you recommend [1 fiction and 1 non-fiction]? Why?*

*What are your general thoughts about this person? Where does your brain go when talking to/about them? What kinds of questions would you ask them?*

Tom Addington is a 27-year-old laborer who lives with his wife and 3 young children in a rented house in a rural area. He describes himself as a family man, and his children are very important to him. He does mostly seasonal farm labor and is currently paid by the hour in exchange for rent, but next year he hopes to grow his own tobacco “on shares” since he owns no land of his own.

He doesn't have a bank account and has never filed a tax return. The family receives food stamps and is on WIC. He has never been able to get a driver's license due to his low reading skills. He lives in an area where the only public transportation is the school bus, and the shopping town is 20 miles away. To shop, go to the doctor, or visit their kids' school, he and his wife must ask family members for a ride.

He dropped out of school when he was 17 and feels resentment towards school because he never learned to read well. He is confident in his math skills and possesses strong technical skills. His only adult schooling occurred in a correctional institute when he was “in a little bit of trouble.” He was pleased with the experience, although “I'm kinda bashful, you know. Cause I just won't let anybody come in and try to learn me to read, something like that, 'cause I know it makes them angry, and I get angry and just don't want to do nothing.”

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What kinds of questions would you ask them?*

Yvette Evans is a 26-year-old single parent of 9-year-old Jessica and 5-year-old Jarvis. They live in a public housing project in an inner-city neighborhood. Her apartment is small and sparsely furnished. She does not like the community and chooses not to have contact with her neighbors. She keeps her family in the house most of the time. Except for one or two friends and her boyfriend, Yvette has little social interaction or support.

Yvette works 20-30 hours a week as a waitress from 5 pm until sometimes midnight. Her children go to a babysitter while she works. She is proud of being able to work and earn money for the things her family needs. She is working to try and lift her family out of poverty.

Both of her children are in school, and both have speech problems. She has sought help for these problems and is supportive of the children's schools.

Although she liked elementary school and got good grades, her later school years were characterized by isolation and disconnectedness. She completed most of 12<sup>th</sup> grade and got grades that were "ok" despite having Jessica when she was 16. However, because she had to move with her mother before finishing 12<sup>th</sup> grade, she never got a diploma or GED. She has tried multiple adult education programs but had to quit due to either time conflicts or not feeling integrated or engaged in the class. She hopes to find a way to succeed in a GED program: "I like math, and I'm good at spelling. I can read. I made it to the 12<sup>th</sup> grade!" She doesn't particularly like to read, but she reads when necessary. She does not read books, newspapers, or magazines. She has never voted and doesn't seem interested in current events.

Her most immediate dream has been to purchase things for her bare apartment. She acquired a new couch, chair, and TV through a rent-to-own program which has, however, saddled her with debt and decreased ability to stop working long enough to participate in a GED program. Her goals are to raise her children in a loving and positive way, complete her GED, and find skilled employment that pays above survival wage.

*What do you think is important to keep in mind about this person?*

*What books/resources would you recommend [1 fiction and 1 non-fiction]? Why?*

