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Guide overview and acknowledgements

This guide is to be used as an accompaniment to the three webinars on creating task-based learning activities. It will expand upon and highlight different sections of the webinar. After viewing the webinars, this guide can be used as a reference for developing authentic tasks and task sets for the five LBS paths.

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For further information or to obtain copies of this report, please contact QUILL Learning Network or access an electronic copy at the Task-based Activities portal at <http://taskbasedactivitiesforlbs.ca/>.



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What is a task?

A simple definition is “a piece of work assigned or done as part of one’s duties” (The Free Dictionary). This is really what a literacy task is all about. If we look at the concept that a task we ask a learner to perform is assigned as part of their goal path, then it makes understanding what a task is a little clearer.

Tasks are authentic to the goal path the learner is working towards. This is where the tasks will start to vary – according to the particular goal path. What is authentic to employment is most likely not what is authentic to secondary school credits. This begs the question - what are authentic tasks for goal paths?

Independence – ask yourself what does someone need to do in life along the independence goal path? These tasks will be particular to each learner’s needs. A learner without children will not need to perform the task of writing a letter to their child’s teacher. However, there are some common areas and the following are just a few:

- food, health, cooking
- transportation – bus, vehicle
- time management – appointments, schedules
- money – budgeting, purchasing
- maps – navigating to various sites within a community

Secondary School Credits – ask yourself what does someone need to do while taking secondary school credits? These tasks will also be particular to each learner’s needs, but some tasks will be more common to everyone and the following are just a few:

- multiple-choice tests
- essays – writing (including exam answers) or research projects
- texts – reading to understand and find information
- math calculations (worksheets) and word problems
- time management – school schedules (classes, exams, etc.), punctuality, homework (short and long-term assignments)
- computer use – writing assignments on computer

Post-Secondary School – ask yourself what does someone need to do while attending post-secondary school programming? These tasks will also be particular to each learner’s chosen program, but there will also be some common tasks and the following are just a few:

- registration – this will be particular to each institution but the information is common
- multiple-choice tests
- essays – writing (including exam answers) or research projects
- texts – reading to understand and find information
- time management – school schedules (classes, exams, etc.), punctuality, homework (short and long-term assignments)
- computer use – writing assignments on computer
- maps – navigating through the campus

Apprenticeship – ask yourself what does someone need to do while registered as an apprentice? Once again, the tasks will vary based on the apprenticeship program they have entered, but there are also many commonalities:

- multiple-choice tests
- registration as an apprentice
- texts – reading to understand and find information
- time management – school schedules (classes, exams, etc.), punctuality, homework, school schedules vs. work schedules
- money management – less funds while in school as compared to working

Employment – ask yourself what does someone need to do when becoming or being employed? The tasks will obviously vary based on the sector and actual job, but there are some commonalities:

- workplace forms – applications, insurance forms, accident/incident forms, time sheets, etc.
- money management – pay cheque stubs/records, budgeting based on pay times (weekly, bi-weekly, semi-monthly)
- labour laws – what are employees’ rights?
- time management – work schedules, punctuality
- teamwork and working with others
- soft skills or work habits – self efficacy, self-confidence, grit, etc.

So then what's the difference between a task and a skill-building activity?

If a task is something done as part of a learner's potential goal path requirements, a skill is the learned ability to carry out that task.

Skill-building activities are basically what can be found in the *Learning Outcomes Matrix* and *Level Descriptions Manual* (Essential Skills Ontario, formerly Ontario Literacy Coalition). They are the skills we need to be able to do real-life activities.

In *Understand and Use Numbers*, sample skill-building activities are:

- Addition, subtraction, multiplication and division of numbers (not specific to any situation)
- Understanding numerical patterns and sequencing (e.g. house addresses being even on one side of the street and odd on the other)
- Estimating totals (e.g. teaching the concepts of rounding up or down)
- Understanding decimals, percents and fractions (e.g. what are the formulas, what do the values or parts mean)

In *Find and Use Information* (reading), sample skill-building activities are:

- Understanding phonics for word decoding
- Understanding word recognition techniques
- Understanding reading comprehension and reading between the lines
- Reading for various purposes (e.g. texts, pleasure, news)

In *Find and Use Information* (document use), sample skill-building activities are:

- Understanding the layout of documents (e.g. lists, charts, tables, memos)
- How to use and understand a table
- Understanding flow charts and diagrams
- Understanding the various synonyms used in forms (e.g. Surname, Last Name...Given Name, First Name)

In *Communicate Ideas and Information* (oral communication), sample skill-building activities are:

- Understanding the steps in good communication (speaking and listening) and practice of these skills
- Informal language vs. formal language

In *Communicate Ideas and Information* (writing), sample skill-building activities are:

- How to print and cursive write
- Copying of texts
- Writing simple sentences
- Phonics and word recognition skills for spelling
- Spelling

These are far from definitive lists, but they should be able to help you understand and start to identify the difference between skill-building activities and tasks.

What is a task set as compared to a task?

When trying to find appropriate tasks for your learners on the LBS Task Portal <http://taskbasedactivitiesforlbs.ca/>, it is really important to understand: What is a task set?

If you use the Measure Up website or the tasks found on the Ontario Skills Passport or, more importantly, the LBS Task Portal, it's necessary to understand the difference between tasks and task sets.

So to start, it is important to understand that all the Ontario Adult Literacy Curriculum Framework (OALCF) competencies and the Essential Skills are interrelated and interdependent. You really cannot do one competency without involving other competencies. For example:

- It is difficult to interpret many documents without using some form of reading continuous text (even if only at a level 1). Now the task may focus on the document and may be written at a level 2, but you are also using reading continuous text at level 1.
- In the Digital Technology competency, you cannot create an email without writing continuous text
- When understanding and using numbers, you can also be interpreting documents and reading continuous text
- In the Manage Learning competency, you will most likely also be involved in completing documents
- Try engaging with others and not using some form of communication

A task set is defined as a set of questions (a task is a question) that replicate an authentic experience a learner will have in any of the five goal paths.

When using the portal to look up tasks by skill level, remember the previous information. You will pull up a task set that has a few different tasks; at least one of these tasks will either be focussed on or will have the skill level and competency you have searched for as an embedded part of the task.

It is acceptable to let a learner try a higher-level, embedded skill in a task where the main focus of the task is at the level they are working on.

What this means is it may take a few tries to find a task set that does have tasks with the main competency focus matching your search requirements.

For example, you may search for:

“Find and Use Information: A1. Read continuous text – A1.1 Read brief texts to locate specific details.”

There will be a number of task sets that will appear, but several of these sets really focus on another skill like **A2. Interpreting documents** or **C. Understand and Use Numbers**, and may really be at a higher level focus. The reason for this is that the instructions on the tasks given in writing to the learner, or even some of the reading within a document, is written at a Level 1 and is recognized as such. When searching for the best task sets for your learner, always read the task description to decide if it **really** matches your search.

Developing a task

Keep this question in mind: Is this a skill-building activity or a task-based activity? To make it easier for everyone, think about it like your experience in school. You spent years building your skills, but to make them useful you actually had to use them in some way that is realistic. This concept explains why so many of us who took Calculus or Physics or Chemistry in high school can't remember much about these subjects. We have never actually used the information.

Using the word "imagine" definitely takes the task out of the "authentic" category. Creating unrealistic tasks for the goal path is a problem. Asking a "trick" question for an employment task (a question that really doesn't have an answer within the document) is not authentic to working on the job. When writing a task, always make sure to ask yourself the question: Would the worker do this on the job? (employment/apprenticeship) Would the learner do this in the classroom? (secondary school credits/post-secondary/apprenticeship) and Would the individual do this at home or in the community? (independence).

Your wording of a task will depend on the goal path. When dealing with the employment or apprenticeship goal paths, never use the word "you" in the task, as the learner does not do this job yet. Just reuse the name of the job. For example:

Instead of saying something like "**you** need to move the pipe," you should say "**the plumber** needs to move the pipe."

Wording in the independence goal path will deal with the individual, so the use of the word **you** is fine. **You** can also be used within the secondary school credits and post-secondary school goal paths because learners are familiar with the learning process. This means that they are currently learners and can understand being a student in a classroom. And the tasks will not be about the courses themselves, but about the information that leads to them. The use of the second person (you) can also sometimes be applied to the apprenticeship goal path - when the tasks are related to the classroom part of the job.

You may find some of the above faux pas on the portal. Please bring them to our attention by commenting on the actual task set.

Remember to follow the **Task Writing Checklist** from the workshop (see appendix 2-11).

Gathering authentic documents/task ideas

In order to know if you have to gather more authentic documents, you need to analyze the usefulness of the documents you have:

- Are the documents timely? Do they have any information on them that dates them to previous years?
- Are they clear? While most documents don't follow clear writing principles, some are still better suited for use with adult learners than others. For example, a document written in all upper case letters will be difficult to read.
- Are there a variety of different tasks you can have a learner do with this document?
- Do you have documents that are appropriate for the learners in your program? For example, do you have independence learners who are single but all your documents deal with children? Do you have learners who are on the employment path but all your documents deal with independence? Documents and tasks that are directly related to their goal path will be much more effective in engaging them in learning. Just because you can justify that the learner would need to follow a recipe, that's not why they are in your program.

Also you can use the **Document Checklist** from the webinar (see appendix 1-2).

You need more authentic documents and tasks for your learners' goal paths...so now what do you do?

You don't have to spend hours gathering documents and creating tasks. There are many places where you can find these materials. The first one, of course, is the task-based portal created by the QUILL Learning Network. Here are some other sites that can make your life much easier:

Measure Up (<http://www.skillplan.ca/measure-up>) – this site contains many task sets that cover employment and apprenticeship opportunities. It is written using Essential Skills language, but you can use the information in this guide to help transfer the current skills into OALCF language. These tasks focus mainly on Reading Text, Document Use and Numeracy and do not identify the other embedded tasks involved in completing these activities. The embedded tasks may include Reading Text or Document Use in a Numeracy task set, but will not be recognized. It is our goal that eventually all the task sets on Measure Up will have a cover sheet with OALCF language and will be found on the QUILL portal.

Ontario Skills Passport (OSP) (<http://www.skillszone.ca/cesl/search/index.cfm>) – this site contains task sets (based on the Essential Skills) that cover secondary school credits (they can even be searched by course title), independence, employment, apprenticeship and financial literacy. Once again, it is the intent that eventually all the task sets on the OSP will have a cover sheet with OALCF language and will be found on the QUILL portal.

Canadian Language Benchmarks – It's Essential site (http://www.itsessential.ca/itsessential/display_page.asp?page_id=382) – this site contains some authentic lesson plans and skill-building activities that can lead to task sets. The site is based on the Essential Skills and Canadian Language Benchmark (CLB) levels, but it's a great site to give you ideas for creating tasks.

SkillPlan also has a number of workbooks related to various subjects that you can find on its website for purchase (<http://www.skillplan.ca/tools-and-publications>).

You can't find any tasks or authentic documents related to the path of your learner...so what do you do?

You may have the need to occasionally not only create tasks, but also to find authentic documents that relate to those tasks. Most times, documents for independence can be found on the internet or in your everyday life, but for employment and apprenticeship you may need to gather authentic materials.

Gathering these documents is not as difficult as you may think. Have volunteers help you do this. Don't forget that high school students need to get volunteer experience, so this is something you can ask them to do.

For employment tasks, research local businesses that employ people in the positions you need tasks for. Send out an email or postal letter to them requesting a ½ hour of their time so you can gather authentic documents and learn about authentic tasks done in this job for use in the classroom. Many employers are very open to this. If you plan to put these tasks up on the portal, you will need to get a release to use the authentic documents (see appendix 4-1 for a reprint permission request form).

Questions to ask the employer at face-to-face interviews (these questions can be easily modified depending on if you're meeting with the employer, supervisor, or employee):

- Do you have any documents you use on the job – these can include time sheets, memos, posters, forms, etc.?
- What kinds of reading do you do on the job? If they need prompting, suggest: WHMIS, material handling information sheets, memos, policies, etc.
- What kinds of documents do you use on the job? If they need prompting, suggest: accident reports, insurance claim forms, pay cheque stubs, city forms, union forms, etc.
- What kind of problem solving do you have to do on your job? If they need prompting, suggest an example like: You have a rush job and something is wrong with the main shipment of materials you need to complete the job. How do you solve that problem? Or...You have a photocopy job to complete and the photocopier needs repairs. How do you solve the problem?

- How do you generally find out information on the job to complete a new task or to learn about a new product?
- What kinds of math do you need to do on the job? If they need prompting, suggest: measuring, sequencing, calculations, percent, estimation, etc.
- Do you have to use technology in any way on your job? If they need prompting (many people just think of technology as using a computer or email), suggest: electronic calibrators, equipment that requires information to be inputted to complete jobs, cell phones, scanners, etc.
- Are you ever asked to speak in a group for your job? Suggest: staff meetings, training others, etc.
- Do you work independently or as part of a team? As part of a team, how do you communicate with each other? How do you solve any disagreements on the team?

This is not a definitive list. You are more than welcome to ask other questions and most of the time individuals will start sharing more information than you request!

Levels of the task

OALCF levels are consistent with the Essential Skill levels. This is where you can start using Locate, Cycle, Integrate, and Generate that were explained in the webinar. These terms will be used and explained in more detail in this section of the Guide.

Levelling the task

Similar to the variances of opinion and confusion among practitioners when it came to levelling skills under the LBS Outcomes, there will be discussions and differences of opinion regarding the levelling of tasks. In the Ontario Adult Literacy Curriculum Framework (OALCF), because thinking skills are imbedded in each competency, you need to keep in mind the degree of thinking skills you are asking within the task. If you have made a problem-solving task within a locate task, then you have most likely raised the skill level to a 2. Practitioners should feel more comfortable with levelling tasks if they keep the following concepts in mind:

- Level 1** Requesting or dealing with one piece of information in a variety of ways. It is a locate task (e.g. locate the **answer** to the task). Think of a deck of cards and this is comparable to being asked to “find the Ace of Spades”.
- In numeracy, level 1 is about dealing with one operation. If the operation is adding numerous numbers together, then that is still level 1. If it is about two separate operations requiring you to add numbers, then that is level 2. If it is one equation requiring two or more different operations, then the level raises to level 2 or more.
 - If you are asking for one piece of information, but there are a few distractors (e.g., you ask about what will happen to an impatiens plant at 12 degrees Celsius or less and there are a few other sentences about degrees before or after that answer can be found) before the answer can be found within the document, you can raise the task to a level 2.

- In anything where a table has been used you are automatically starting at a level 2 because even if it seems like a simple table, the individual is required to use columns and rows to complete any task.
- You should be cautious when levelling tasks that require learners to draw inferences. How much of an inference is it? Is it just a step away from a direct match (e.g., “develop” in the document and the task uses the word “developing”) or is it a higher-level inference where the word is completely different (e.g. “develop” in the document and the task uses the word “creation”)? In the latter case, the required level of inference can bump the task level from the end of one level to the beginning of another.
- Caution is also given to where the answers are found within the document. If the answer is nearer the top of the document, it is easier but becomes more difficult the further into the document it is found. Combine the location of the answer with an inference or a distractor and you will have raised the level of the task.

Level 2 Requesting or dealing with more than one piece of information in a variety of ways. This level of task requires a person to cycle and locate the **answers** to the task. Remember the information from level 1 that can increase the complexity and therefore the level of the task. Think of a deck of cards and level 2 is comparable to “find all four Aces.”

Level 3 Requesting or dealing with more than one piece of information in a variety of ways and then using that information in some way. This level requires a person to cycle and locate the answers and then **use** them in some way to complete the task. Think of a deck of cards and level 3 is comparable to “find all the Hearts and arrange them from Ace to King.”

When using a new document and creating tasks, just focus on creating good tasks. Then level them. Until you become comfortable creating tasks in general, you will likely struggle with developing different levels of tasks. As a literacy practitioner, you will have a tendency to write tasks that are at the level of the learners you currently work with. For example, if you mostly work with Level 1 learners, you will probably have a tendency to write tasks at Level 1.

Controlling the complexity of the task is how you can make it a low, middle or high level 1, 2, or 3 task.

Further controlling complexity information

The information in this section has been adapted from *Controlling Complexity* – Julia Lew and Michael Hardt – SkillPlan – BC Construction Industry Skills Improvement Council.

In previous pages, we mentioned some scenarios that can cause a task to be more difficult. Here, we will focus on these concepts.

Using the research and work done by Peter Mosenthal, Michael Hardt, and SkillPlan, the following is a summary of the controlling complexity information. For more details, you may purchase *Controlling Complexity* from SkillPlan.

There are four constructs of question structure¹:

1. **Read It.** Read or listen to the question.
2. **Snap It.** Snap the question into the given and requested parts.
(Types of Requested Information or TORI)
3. **Match It.** Use the given information from the question to match it in the document. (Type of Match or TOM and Competing Information or CI)
4. **Answer It.** Answer the question. (Type of Processing or TOP)

¹ *Controlling Complexity* – Julia Lew and Michael Hardt – SkillPlan – BC Construction Industry Skills Improvement Council

Let's start with the question, which is the Read It part:

"When is the start date for the contract?"

To Snap It:

Given: There is a start date for the contract.

Requested: When is that start date?

Now it's important to look at how the information is requested. The simplest form is *Who*, as the Type of Requested Information is a person. *How*, *Which*, *Why* and finally *What* are the most difficult types of requested information as they are not direct matches like *Where* or *When*. *What* is the most difficult because it can refer to anything and is the most common type of requested information. It is important to teach learners that *What* questions will always have an accompanying word to give them a clue:

- what **time** is the meeting?
- what is the **name** of the bonding solution?
- what is the **total** of the invoice?

To review the Type of Match and Competing Information, look at the information on Levelling the Task (Page 15, as Type of Match can also be referred to as "inference." The same goes for the information on Page 15 for "distractors," as distractors can also be called Competing Information).

The main point is that as a task developer you have to make sure you are not just using the easiest or most difficult forms of TORI, TOM and CI. The reasoning is that in the real world or in academia, learners are not going to encounter only easy questions or only difficult questions; they need a variety of questions to be able to transfer their learned skills from the classroom.

The second point is that by using the TORI, TOM and CI concepts when reviewing tasks, you can re-write the task into easier or more difficult tasks without creating an entirely new task.

Example:

- Who signs off on the contract?
- What is the name of the position that signs off on the contract?
- There are different positions responsible for each part of the contract, but what is the name of the position that signs off on the contact?

These examples go from a simpler level 1 task to a higher level 1 task and yet it's really the same ultimate task.

Type of Processing (TOP) is the answering of the question. There are many takes on TOP, as everyone has their favourite way of processing. However, processing is more noticeable when a task involves sorting, comparing or explaining something.

To really think about this, Michael Hardt has you thinking about the Potato Salad Theory. It's the idea that everyone has their favourite potato salad, and they like the flavour and texture they grew up with as children. They aren't very fond of different or new versions. This happens with processing. And it will be most notable on questions that ask a learner to "explain" and "compare." As a practitioner, you just have to accept that everyone has a favourite potato salad. Follow the handouts from the workshop on the various complexity levels on processing.

Answer Sheet

Developing an Answer Sheet is important for numeracy tasks and very helpful for all tasks. It is one way for other practitioners to review the tasks for you to see if they can come up with the same answer. An Answer Sheet also makes it easier for the next practitioner using the task set to mark their learners' answers.

Vetting your task

You have reviewed and revised your tasks and task sets. The question seems clear and you have written your own answer sheet (the answer sheet is important for numeracy questions). The question you now have to ask yourself is: “Is my task ready to be used?” All of us would like to think that we can write a question or task for learners, as many of us have done it for years. The problem is that a task that seems crystal clear to us may not always be crystal clear to another individual answering your task. This is why it is important to have your fellow practitioners attempt to answer your tasks.

Is it okay to just have colleagues review the task for wording? The simple answer is no. A task’s wording may be excellent, but the intended answer is hard to find within the document. This means if you do not have another person (two or more is best, but one person in a pinch will do) review it, you don’t know if the task will be answered the way you were expecting (or if it even can be answered). It is the same reasoning behind the suggestion that you never try to edit your own work – chances are you will always read what you intended to put there and miss the necessary edits.

Even when a task seems to involve a simple calculation, you’d be surprised how often others struggle to find the correct answer (and we’re not just saying it’s because math scares them ☺). It doesn’t mean the task concept is bad, it just means the task needs re-wording.

Summation

It may seem like there are a lot of things to keep in mind when writing a task. And you may feel like all the information is overwhelming. At first it takes a bit of time, but with practice it will mostly come naturally. You may forget things here and there (e.g., using “you” in employment tasks or overuse of the word “what”), but you will end up making better questions to demonstrate your learners’ skills and to show progress within your program.

The best thing about learning to create tasks is that everyone can share their tasks and the task-based portal will continue to grow. The portal is for practitioners and supported by practitioners...pat yourself on the back for taking the first step!