

# Understanding core skills

Research has shown that the word *literacy* is often seen as having negative connotations for some learners, and as not encompassing the breadth of meaning covered by new literacy thinking. A new way of talking about literacy was required to make it more appealing to learners, employers, industry and the communities generally. This led to the development of a national strategy focusing on 'core skills', rather than literacy.<sup>1</sup>

Core skills are:

- Learning
- Reading
- Writing
- Oral Communication
- Numeracy.

These skills are essential for people to participate in our society. People need to communicate effectively in many different ways, for diverse purposes, in a variety of contexts and to think critically about information and ideas.

There is a growing recognition that the challenge is '... not confined to those people with poor basic skills, but extends to all people trying to understand new forms of communication and information as they take on different roles in life and work' (*National Centre for Vocational Education Research 2005*).

It is likely that each new role and responsibility we take on will require new or enhanced core skills. Therefore, we need a range of strategies to adapt to changing circumstances and new challenges, including strategies to help us to learn.

The Australian Core Skills Framework (ACSF) has been developed by the government as a tool primarily for specialist practitioners, but also to assist non-specialists such as RTOs to understand the essentials of performance in the core skills in different contexts.

This section provides basic information about core skills and the ACSF including how it works, and how it is used, and how core skills can be identified within units of competency. This information will aid your basic understanding of the concepts, with a simple model for using the ACSF for core skills analysis provided in the next section of this guide.

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<sup>1</sup> Information in this section is sourced directly (and in parts adapted) from ACSF publications produced by the Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (2008): *Australian Core Skills Framework (A summary)*; and *Australian Core Skills Framework (full version)*.

## How the ACSF works

The ACSF provides a rich, detailed picture of real-life performance in adult learning, English language, literacy and numeracy. It draws on current theory and is also informed by extensive expertise of specialist practitioners in these fields. The ACSF provides:

- A consistent national approach to the identification of the core skills requirements in diverse personal, community, work and training contexts
- A common reference point for describing and discussing performance in the 5 core skill areas.

The ACSF is based on the National Reporting System (NRS) which has been used by LLN specialists since 1995 as a mechanism for reporting outcomes of adult English language, literacy and numeracy provision.

The ACSF describes 5 levels of performance in each of the core skills. A key feature is that it takes into account the factors that influence a person's performance:

- The degree and nature of **support** available
- The familiarity with the **context**
- The complexity of **text**, including written, diagrammatic, visual and oral
- The complexity of the **task**.

[ACSF Appendix 1](#) shows how these variables change across the 5 levels.

At each level within a core skill there are statements, called **Indicators** that describe achievement at this level. Learning, Reading, Writing and Oral Communication have 2 indicators at each level. Numeracy has 3.

At each level within a core skill, a set of **Performance Features** provides more specific information about the Indicators.

At each level, the ACSF groups sample activities according to 6 interrelated **Aspects of Communication** representing the different contexts in which we might use the core skills:

- Personal communication: *expressing identity*
- Cooperative communication: *interacting in groups*
- Procedural communication: *performing tasks*
- Technical communication: *using tools and technology*
- Systems communication: *interacting in organisations*
- Public communication: *interacting with the wider community.*

[ACSF Appendix 2](#) provides examples of what a person is able to do at each of the 5 levels in each of the core skills.

## Using the ACSF

The ACSF recognises that a person may be operating at different levels within the 5 core skills. This can be captured visually in what is called a **spiky profile**.

Using the ACSF, an individual's performance across the 5 core skills can be benchmarked and a 'spiky profile' constructed. This provides valuable information about the individual's areas of strength and specifically identifies any areas where further training could be beneficial.

### How it is applied

Three scenarios are provided below to illustrate how the ACSF works.

#### Scenario 1: Pinpointing strengths and learning needs

Linda's overall spiky profile (Figure 1) shows that her levels of performance vary across the 5 core skills. She has recently been offered a position as a real estate salesperson where she will need to learn skills related to negotiation and auctioneering. While her Oral Communication level is at ACSF level 4, she needs to develop her skills so that she can effectively negotiate contracts, and perform auctioneering with confidence in front of large audiences.

Further analysis of Linda's Oral Communication skills using the ACSF Aspects of Communication (Figure 2) confirm that she would benefit from some training in the *systems* and *public* Aspects focusing on interaction in organisations and with the wider community.

Figure 1.

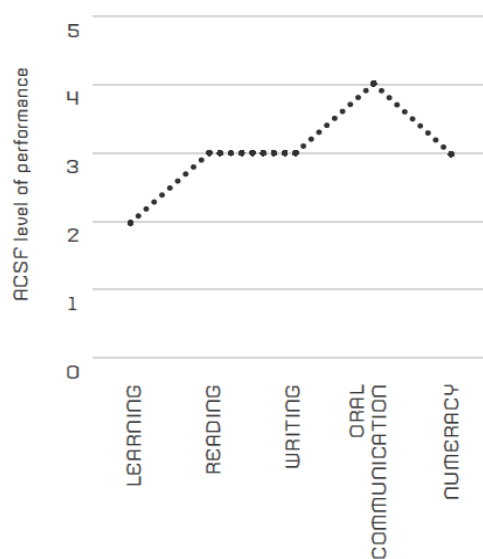
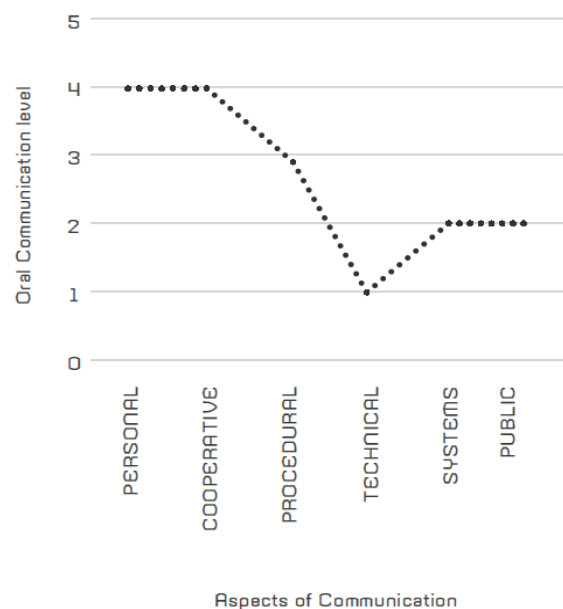


Figure 2.

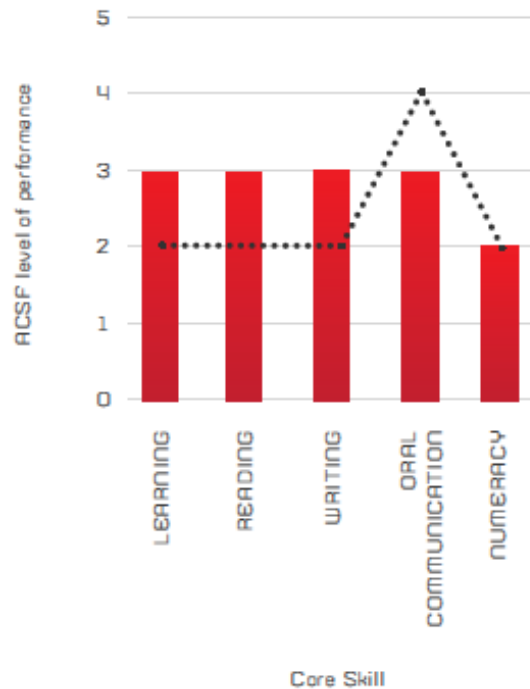


**Scenario 2: Helping a person meet the core skills required of a training program**

Jim has worked for many years as a personal carer in an aged care facility. His workplace has enrolled him in Certificate III in Aged Care so that he can develop his skills in line with industry requirements.

The spiky profile compares his current level of competence across the core skills with those required to undertake the Certificate III. His trainer arranges for Jim to receive additional core skills training to ensure that he will be able to manage course requirements.

- Current level of competence
- ACSF level required

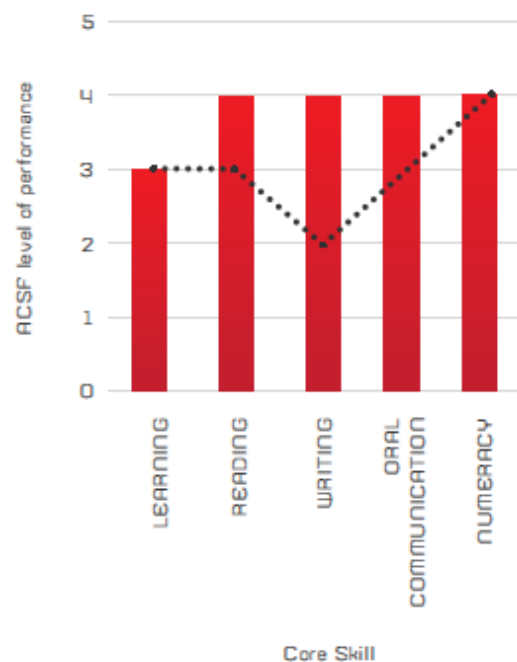


**Scenario 3: Helping meet the core skill requirements of a new job**

Carol has been offered the opportunity to undertake training to prepare for a supervisory position. She has enrolled in the Certificate IV in Business – Frontline Management. A LLN specialist used the ACSF to compare the core skills required for this certificate with Carol's current skills.

The spiky profile shows that Carol would benefit from developing her Reading, Writing and Oral Communication skills, and the LLN specialist will work with the workplace trainer to integrate targeted core skill development with the Certificate IV training.

- Current level of competence
- ACSF level required



## Relationship to employability skills

There are areas of overlap between employability skills and the five core skills of the ACSF. These can be seen most clearly at 'facet' level. For example, a broad range of facets are grouped within the *communication* employability skill, some of which align directly with the ACSF core skills themselves.

Facets within other employability skills are partially captured by the ACSF core skills, while the ACSF core skill of Learning incorporates the three employability skills of *self management*, *learning skills* and *planning and organising*. It is also reflected in *initiative and enterprise skills* and *team work skills*. The table below provides examples of how the ACSF core skills relate to facets of the eight employability skills.

Employability skills and facet(s)	ACSF core skill
<b>Communication skills</b>	
Listening and understanding	Oral Communication
Writing to the needs of the audience	Writing
Reading independently	Reading
Using numeracy effectively	Numeracy
<b>Team work skills</b>	
Coaching, mentoring and giving feedback	Oral Communication
<b>Problem solving skills</b>	
Testing assumptions taking the context of data and circumstances into account	Numeracy
<b>Initiative and enterprise skills</b>	
Adapting to new situations	Learning
<b>Planning and organising skills</b>	
Collecting, analysing and organising information	Learning, Reading, Oral Communication
<b>Self management skills</b>	
Articulating own ideas and vision	Learning, Oral Communication, Writing
<b>Learning skills</b>	
Managing own learning	Learning
<b>Technology skills</b>	
Using IT to organise data	Numeracy

The ACSF has the potential to spell out what employability skills facets such as 'writing to the needs of an audience' or 'using numeracy effectively' actually mean in a specific context. However, it is important to note that the ACSF only provides detailed insights into some facets of each employability skills cluster and therefore cannot be used to rate an individual's level of performance in any of the actual employability skills.

The purpose of highlighting commonalities between core and employability skills relates to the process of 'unpacking' job requirements within units of competency. Tools which are already available for identifying employability skills within units can also be used to identify core skills. A simple model for core skills analysis based on the ACSF is the focus of this guide.

## Model for using the ACSF

As already shown, a comparison needs to be made between the core skill levels required of the workplace outcome, and the current core competence of the individual learner. This allows skills gaps to be identified, and appropriate support to be decided and integrated into learning and assessment strategies.

The ACSF is a tool which can help you with this process. A summary version is provided for non-VET specialists which can be accessed through the DEEWR website at: <http://www.deewr.gov.au/australiancoreskillsframework> It provides details of indicators of competence for each of the 5 core skills, across each of 5 performance levels. It also includes suggested activities to assist you to identify the appropriate ACSF levels and aspects of communication which map directly (or relate) to activities or skills identified within units of competency, as well as the current skills of the learner.

The table below outlines a simple process for using the ACSF to analyse core skills as the basis for integrating extra support if needed, into your training and assessment approach. This model for analysing core skills is explained in more detail later in this guide.

Model	Summary of process
1. Identify core skills required for work	Identifying and mapping core skills within unit(s) of competency against the ACSF to create a profile for the core skills needed to successfully complete a training program.
2. Identify learner's core skill levels	Using an indicator tool to extract information on the current level of core skills of the individual learner. This information can then be mapped against the ACSF to create a spiky profile for the learner. This profile can overlay job requirements to highlight gaps in core skills.
3. Design delivery and assessment processes	Analysing the core skills gaps by comparing the core skills required for the job with the current core skill levels of the learner which have both been mapped to the ACSF to determine a performance level. The identified gaps provide the basis for designing learning and assessment strategies which incorporate reasonable adjustments or other support strategies where necessary, to help learners to develop necessary core skills.

[ACSF Appendix 2](#) provides a summary of the ACSF levels and sample tasks and activities. These will assist you with the analysis of skills against the ACSF. The three steps above are discussed in more detail in the next section '[Model for core skills analysis](#)' where templates and case studies are available to demonstrate how the model can be simply applied.