



USAID
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Digital Literacy

EDUCATION

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Digital Literacy and Education¹

USAID programs, in adherence with the Agency’s [2018 Education Policy](#), prioritize learning experiences that build the skills children and youth in partner countries need to lead happy and productive lives, gain employment, and positively contribute to society. Currently, in the context of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, USAID programs increasingly aim to achieve these objectives via the safe and informed use of digital tools. USAID’s focus on digital literacy enhances beneficiaries’ access to educational opportunities and helps them update their skills, bolstering their employment prospects. Ultimately, by collaborating with partner governments and other stakeholders in the education sector, USAID digital-focused programs prepare educators and learners to leverage digital tools for responsible and effective economic, social, and political participation.

Definition of Digital Literacy

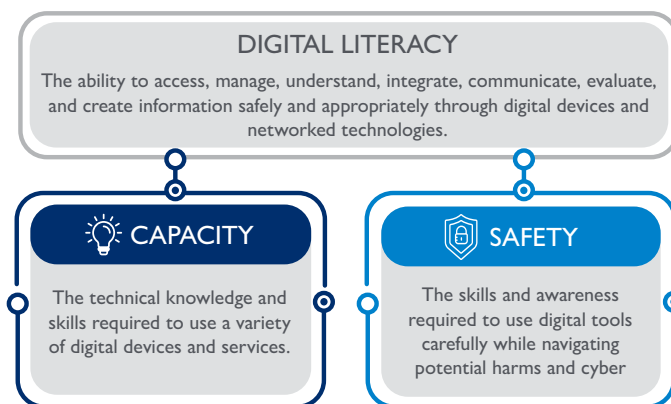


USAID, building on [UNESCO’s definition](#) of the term, defines digital literacy as “The ability to access, manage, understand, integrate, communicate, evaluate, and create information safely and appropriately through digital devices and networked technologies for participation in economic, social, and political life.”

USAID’s Digital Literacy Framework

Two pillars underpin USAID’s definition of digital literacy: capacity and safety.

- **Capacity** refers to the technical knowledge and skills required to use a variety of digital devices and services such as mobile phones; tablets and computers; the Internet; messaging and social media services such as WhatsApp, Twitter, and Facebook; and audio and visual tools.
- **Safety** refers to the skills and awareness required to use digital tools carefully while navigating potential harms and cyber threats successfully. This pillar includes, but is not limited to, strategies for strengthening cyber hygiene,² countering [mis- and disinformation](#), and protecting children and youth from digital harm.



1 Unless otherwise cited, all information in this sectoral brief comes from USAID’s Digital Literacy Primer. Full citation: “Digital Literacy Primer: How to Build Digital Literacy into USAID Programming” (USAID, 2022), Digital Literacy Primer | USAID | Document | U.S. Agency for International Development.
 2 Cyber Hygiene definition: The practices and steps that users of computers and other devices take to maintain system health and improve online security. These practices are often part of a routine to ensure the safety of identity and other details that could be stolen or corrupted.

To effectively and equitably achieve digital access for beneficiaries, USAID’s approach to digital programming must extend beyond the establishment of digital infrastructure and acquisition of Internet-enabled devices to ensure that users possess a nuanced set of skills to meaningfully, responsibly, and safely participate in their digital ecosystems. As explained in the Digital Literacy Primer, USAID takes two primary approaches for incorporating digital literacy into program design:

FOUNDATIONAL ACTIVITIES



Foundational digital literacy activities build digital literacy skills applicable to all aspects of users’ economic, social, and personal lives—a goal in and of itself.

TACTICAL ACTIVITIES



Tactical digital literacy activities prepare target populations to use digital tools in particular sectors to ensure that a specific digital intervention is effective (though digital literacy may not be the singular goal of the activity).

Digital Literacy in USAID’s Education Portfolio

[USAID’s Center for Education](#) supports programming that improves the quality of education for learners from the pre-primary through higher education levels, expands workforce development programs for young people, and provides professional development opportunities for educators and administrators. Through its education programming, USAID increases the familiarity of these education sector stakeholders with digital devices and services.

- Primary and secondary school students:** USAID’s education programming at the primary and secondary levels can include foundational and tactical digital literacy activities to facilitate learning and enhance educational outcomes. The digital skills encompassed in these activities can range from the relatively simple, like how to use a desktop computer, to sophisticated skills such as using mobile coding applications. For example, USAID/Egypt’s Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) School Project (ESSP) supported the development of eleven STEM secondary schools across Egypt, equipping nearly 2,800 students—including over 1,200 girls—with digital knowledge and skills necessary to succeed in the modern workforce. To cultivate a pipeline of highly qualified students interested in specialized STEM schools at the secondary level, ESSP developed STEM-related outreach activities and materials for students as young as Grade 1.³
- Higher education learners:** USAID’s digital literacy work at the higher education level includes increasing student enrollment, including women and girls, in highly specialized STEM fields. Other key elements of this work include improving the quality of STEM instruction and increasing higher education/industry linkages to ensure student readiness for the workforce. For example, the USAID Digital Workforce Development Project in Cambodia is working across higher education institutions to build up and improve their information and communications technology (ICT) course offerings, with the express goal of preparing students to be well-qualified candidates for jobs and internship opportunities that meet the needs of Cambodia’s private sector.⁴
- Out-of-school education or training:** In addition to funding activities designed to accompany traditional schooling curricula, USAID also supports out-of-school



Photo by Claudia Gutierrez

³ “USAID/Egypt Stem School Project (ESSP).” 2017. U.S. Agency for International Development. https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA00THDB.pdf.

⁴ “USAID and the University of California at Berkeley Launch USAID’s Digital Workforce Development Project.” U.S. Embassy in Cambodia. Accessed June 9, 2023. <https://kh.usembassy.gov/usaids-and-the-university-of-california-at-berkeley-launch-usaids-digital-workforce-development-project/>.

job seekers and youth to acquire the skills they need for gainful employment; this often requires equipping learners with the skills required for the digital economy. For example, USAID’s [Opportunity 2.0 Project](#) in the Philippines collaborated with the Filipino [Technical Education and Skills Development Authority](#) (TESDA) to expand access to resources including [TESDA’s Online Program](#) (TOP) courses for out-of-school youth. The project also helped youth access the [Facebook Digital Tayo’s Digital Citizenship and Ethics course](#) and the [Opportunity 2.0-supported “21st Century Skills” course](#), which includes [modules](#) on communications, environmental literacy, digital literacy, and language literacy.

- **Educators and administrators:** In addition to learners, USAID also upskills teachers, professors, and educational administrators in digital literacy so that they can effectively transmit these skills to other learners. For example, the USAID [Tusome program](#) in Kenya deployed tablets to enhance teacher coaching and oversight. After a one-day training that emphasized that the tablets were meant to augment—not displace—existing coaching and support techniques, curriculum support officers received tablets featuring a classroom observation app, a dashboard with national early grade literacy performance data, digital versions of textbooks, and videos modeling the Tusome methods of instruction. According to subsequent studies, nearly 100 percent of curriculum support officers either agreed or strongly agreed that the tablets facilitated more engaging feedback sessions with teachers.⁵ Similar support activities include [USAID’s Cybersecurity for Critical Infrastructure in Ukraine](#) program, which [trained over 300 teachers and professors](#) from Ukraine’s higher education institutions in advanced cybersecurity methods.

Addressing the distance learning/digital literacy misconception

In addition to digital literacy education, digital tools can facilitate distance learning (teaching and learning activities where educators and learners are in different physical spaces). However, distance learning and digital literacy education are not the same: distance learning merely uses digital tools as a teaching medium, while digital literacy education teaches students how to use digital tools for purposes such as critically and safely analyzing information. A long-held approach to learning for learners under challenging circumstances, distance learning quickly became a mainstream educational method during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. Often used synonymously with “distance education,” distance learning takes place through several modalities: audio files and radio broadcasts, video and television broadcasts, mobile phones and smartphones, online learning platforms, and/or printed and digital texts. USAID has developed resources to strategize, monitor, and evaluate the use of these digital education delivery modes, such as the [“Delivering Distance Learning in Emergencies”](#) literature review and the [Distance Learning Interactive Audio and Radio Instruction Online Library](#).



Key Considerations for Digital Literacy in USAID’s Education Portfolio

- ☑ For digital literacy interventions, conduct a needs assessment that examines connectivity, Internet/digital tool usage, existing digital safety knowledge and standards, and the current digital literacy levels of the target audience and community. Based on these findings, design and customize the intervention accordingly so it will have the greatest impact on learning and educational outcomes.
 - » This typically requires interviewing or surveying the target audience about which devices, platforms, and digital tools—and which of these tools’ functionalities—they use, if any.
 - » If the target audience’s digital literacy levels are highly variable, segment digital literacy interventions into different levels.

⁵ “Let’s Read—How Tusome Leveraged EdTech to Improve National Learning Outcomes.” 2021. The World Bank. https://docs.edtechhub.org/lib/3GQXS67C/download/BFJ6H3CI/Myers%20et%20al_2021_Let_s%20Read%20-%20How%20Tusome%20Leveraged%20EdTech%20to%20Improve%20National%20Learning%20Outcomes.pdf

Develop context-specific digital literacy interventions and materials:

- » To increase the (perceived) relevance of digital literacy and digital tools, develop age-appropriate materials in local languages for digital literacy activities aimed at children and youth. It is worth noting that adapting and building on publicly available curricula, toolkits, and resources can be an important starting point when developing new digital literacy materials for USAID programming.
- » Conduct scoping exercises to ensure that future digital literacy interventions address critical digital literacy needs and consider intersectionality. For example, develop tailored digital literacy interventions for girls and young women to minimize the risk of widening the gender digital divide or technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV). Prioritizing and cultivating mentorship opportunities is especially important in the context of gender-specific digital literacy programming, because it creates role models for young women and girls.



Photo by USAID Malawi

To ensure the applicability of digital skills, build and leverage partnerships with vocational training institutes and other similar private sector entities when developing employment or workforce development-related digital literacy activities.

Protecting Children and Youth from Digital Harm:

- » In addition to teaching children and youth how to use digital tools, ensure that all digital literacy curricula and interventions address awareness of and strategies to avoid falling victim to digital harms, such as technology-facilitated gender-based violence and the influence of online mis- and disinformation.
- » Facilitate trainings to build the digital literacy skills of teachers, administrative staff of educational institutions, and caregivers to ensure that they are aware of online digital harms and implement preventive mechanisms to protect students and youth.
- » To protect their privacy and reduce exposure to digital harms, teach children and youth how to effectively use basic online safeguards, like privacy settings.

Institutionalize longer-term digital capacity-building when delivering digital technology-related interventions for children and youth. Incorporating mentoring, coaching, or long-term technical assistance provides longer-term support than periodic trainings alone, and increases the likelihood that learners will apply their new digital knowledge.

Other Resources:

- » About USAID's digital development portfolio in the education sector: USAID's Information and Communication Technology for Education (ICT4E) How-to Note; USAID's Exploring the Landscape for Digital Education: Observations from Kenya, Nigeria, and Senegal
- » About online learning: UNICEF's Guidance on Distance Learning Modalities to Reach All Children and Youth During School Closures; IREX's Checklist for Overcoming Digital Barriers to Inclusion in Online Learning
- » USAID-supported online educational materials: Global Digital Library; Global Book Alliance

For more information on the digital literacy and education nexus in USAID programming, please reach out to digitaldevelopment@usaid.gov.