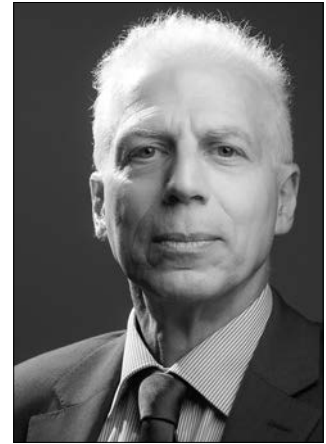


# The Reading Writing Hotline at 30 years

By Don Perlgut

**The 30th anniversary of the Reading Writing Hotline is a wondrous thing. Outside of governments, few existing Australian organisations have played such a long, profound and sustaining national role in marshalling support for adult literacy as the Hotline. Count them: this journal, *Fine Print* – published by VALBEC, with a history back to 1979; and the Australian Council for Adult Literacy (ACAL), founded in 1976.**



The Reading Writing Hotline is a free national referral and advisory service for adults who want to improve their literacy, numeracy and digital (LND) skills. The Hotline is fully funded by the Australian Government and employs experienced teachers who understand the difficulties of callers and the barriers they face. It was originally established as a telephone support line for the 1994 ABC TV series *The Reading Writing Roadshow*. This was a 20-part educational television series funded by the Australian Government that mixed drama, motivation and direct teaching focusing on adult literacy.

The Hotline is a survivor. It has seen 14 ministers and four changes of government over 30 years (Wikipedia, 2024), and kept its institutional home in TAFE NSW, Australia's largest VET and literacy provider.

## By the numbers

The data gathered by the Hotline from callers is one of the most valuable sources of insights into the state of adult Australian reading and writing. Over the course of 30 years the Hotline has engaged with almost 200,000 Australians. In the process, it has uncovered a “previously hidden demand for adult literacy provision” and mapped literacy provision like no other organisation, keeping track of 1,600 Australian literacy providers (Iles et al., 2023, p.33).

For many years, the Hotline averaged about 4,000 calls a year. However, numbers have spiked in recent years during COVID lockdowns and during screenings of the SBS TV series *Lost for Words*. In addition to assisting adults seeking help with literacy, the Hotline provides advice to job agencies, employers, libraries, industry associations and government agencies; its website receives 66,000 visits a year. The Hotline has evolved into an

important source of specialist and policy information in an environment where funding, eligibility, and available programs change quickly (Iles et al., 2023; RWH, 2022).

The purpose of Hotline operations is to maintain an active database and refer callers to providers through its free-call network (see Figure 1), as well as disseminate free resources. This is a massive job: during the two-year period to June 2023, the Hotline fielded 9,532 calls and emails – an increase of more than 10% on the previous two years. The Hotline responded with 19,265 outbound communications comprising follow-up phone calls, texts, emails and mailed resources.

In 2021-2023, almost half of callers responded to broadcasts: 43% from television (including 5% from SBS TV's *Lost for Words* series) and 6% from radio, 25% from the website, 9% repeat callers, 6% word of mouth and 11% from other sources (brochures, posters, social media and recommendations).

Of callers who specified their background, almost 12% identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. Some 70% of callers were native English speakers, 22% non-English speaking background and 4% First Nations language speakers. More than half (56%) of callers were men and 41% women (3% unspecified). The highest number of calls came from people aged 25–44 (37%), then aged 45–64 (29%), age 65+ (14%), age 20–24 (9%), age 15–19 (7%) and 14 and under (3%). More than two-thirds of callers (68%) had not completed secondary school.

## The Australian foundation skills and adult literacy policy “moment”

We sit in a dynamic yet vulnerable “moment” for LND and foundation skills policy development: the National

Skills Agreement, which commenced in January 2024, includes \$142 million for foundation skills (O'Connor, 2024). Yet the Training and Education (TAE) and Foundation Skills (FSK) training packages are the only ones which were not contracted to new Jobs and Skills Councils in 2023 (DEWR, 2023a).

This is a good time to consider how the Hotline supports – and provides crucial consistency to – the sometimes-dizzying array of literacy and foundation skills policies, programs and funding regimes developed by federal and state/territory governments and delivered through a diverse range of providers. Although TAFEs and not-for-profit adult community education (ACE) providers receive about two-thirds of the Hotline's referrals, other providers include private (for-profit) training organisations, libraries, university learning centres, private tutors and Aboriginal-controlled community organisations (Social Equity Works, 2022).

The Hotline participates in the Foundation Skills Advisory Group, which provides advice to the Australian Government Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR, 2022). Jobs and Skills Australia (JSA) lists the Hotline as one of the four most important "data sets" for the upcoming National Study of Adult Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Skills. The other three are the Australian Bureau of Statistics, the Skills for Education and Employment (SEE) Program and Adult Migrant English Program, all many times larger than the Reading Writing Hotline, indicating the Hotline "punches well above" its policy weight (JSA, 2023, p. 8).

Two of the ten policy areas emphasised in the current government's high-profile Working Future: The Australian Government's White Paper on Jobs and Opportunities will rely in part on the Hotline: "broadening access to foundation skills" and "investing in skills, tertiary education and lifelong learning" (Australian Government Treasury, 2023, p. xi). The upcoming Ten-Year National Foundation Skills Strategy – due for completion by December 2024 – will also rely on the Hotline as a major implementation pillar (DEWR, 2023b).

The Hotline's medium-term future appears assured: a November 2023 response by the current government to the Parliamentary Report *Don't Take It As Read* notes the government "appreciates the important work being done [by the Hotline] ... and is committed to continue funding



Figure 1: The core purpose of the Hotline

the service" (Standing Committee, 2022; Australian Government, 2023, p. 25).

### COVID-19 and natural disasters present challenges for adult literacy learners

For adult learners with literacy gaps, recent events make 2024 a particularly complex time:

The COVID-19 pandemic and recent natural disasters have exposed the extent of the literacy gaps for those people who require access to recovery support and disaster relief. Access to such relief involved filling in of forms, often available only online, exacerbating their difficulty. There was an increase in calls to the Reading Writing Hotline during 2020 and 2021 from people needing assistance to access online platforms and to apply for disaster recovery payments and other supports. The increased digitisation of the forms and application processes required to access emergency relief and other government assistance is proving a considerable barrier to many. The impact of the pandemic ... on the access of adults to LND programs, has been marked. It has led to increased isolation, decreased mental health and wellbeing, and further entrenched the digital divide for many adult Australians, especially those experiencing financial disadvantage, geographical or social isolation. (Social Equity Works, 2022, p. 13)

Other research reinforces these findings: ACE providers surveyed by Community Colleges Australia (CCA) reported a COVID-19 impact drop in enrolment numbers of up to 80% during 2020 and 2021, with extra pressures on foundation skills enrolments. CCA members reported adult literacy learners were disproportionately affected by the pandemic: they were the first to leave classrooms during COVID and the last to return. Lack of student engagement was most acute with First Nations learners, people with disabilities and people from non-English speaking backgrounds. Providers also reported trainer shortages, especially in regional and rural locations (CCA, 2022).



**Figure 2: ACE Community Colleges building in Lismore post-flood February 2022 (Source: ACE Colleges)**

The impact of recent climate-induced natural disasters on learners has also been deep and profound. For example, early in 2022, Lismore and Northern Rivers floods caused profound disruption to the region's educational services: flooded teaching locations at ACE Community Colleges in Lismore (see Figure 2) and Byron Community College in Mullumbimby were closed for more than a year. Lismore's destruction was "so intense it looked like a war zone" (Gergis et al., 2023, p. ii; Perlgut, 2023).

Australians with literacy challenges are especially vulnerable to disasters: "Climate change impacts people experiencing financial and social disadvantage first, worst and longest because they have fewer resources to cope, adapt and recover, and because they already experience barriers to services and support," says ACOSS (2023). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians also experience the worst impacts; they were seven times more likely than the rest of the population to become homeless because of the Lismore floods (Perlgut, 2023).

Rural and regional Australians, more exposed to natural hazards, are up to twice as likely to be affected by flooding and bushfires than metropolitan residents, with associated higher rates of mental health stress (Gergis et al., 2023). This vulnerability aligns with lower national literacy rates: rural areas experience lower rates and proportionately greater demand, yet have limited transport, less access to qualified teachers and "thin market" barriers to efficient service provision. Rural literacy providers cite poor access to internet, poverty and undiagnosed learning difficulties or negative past experiences of school as key barriers (Social Equity Works, 2022).

In summary, implications for the Hotline's work from pandemic and natural disasters are:

- An accessible, national telephone-based support and referral service for Australians with low literacy helps meet community needs during disasters. The Hotline's establishment as a distance-based "virtual" service makes it an easy fit.
- The move to online digital services and communication – which massively increased during COVID-19 – has placed many of the 20% of Australians with low LND skills at risk of further disadvantage.
- The Hotline's capability and success will continue to be hindered by lack of literacy provision in certain locations, especially in hard to service outer regional and remote areas. The Hotline reports it cannot refer 13% of callers nationally to literacy services, because none exist in the callers' local areas (Social Equity Works, 2022). People in Northern Territory are worst affected, with no services for 48% of callers (Social Equity Works, 2022).
- The Hotline's original concept – a support service to a national television-based campaign – remains relevant, especially as broadcast TV and radio remain highly accessible during a pandemic or disaster.

## Thirty years

### Early history: The birth of the Reading Writing Hotline

I am not an objective observer of the Hotline's history. I was a member of the Hotline's Steering Committee for seven years while serving as CEO of Community Colleges Australia. And my connection extends further: I played a key role in the early development of the Hotline in 1992 and 1993, as the ABC TV Project Manager of *The Reading Writing Roadshow* television series, as a follow-up to the achievements during International Literacy Year (ILY) 1990 (Bilton, 1992).

ABC TV undertook the series as a co-production with TAFE NSW Open Training and Education Network (OTEN), which also produced and distributed 10,000 copies of *The Reading Writing Roadshow Workbook* to accompany and support the series for home-based distance learning, anticipating that viewers would ring the Hotline for study assistance. (Fun fact: *The Workbook* became a best-seller in at least one inner Sydney bookshop, as reported by the manager at the time.)

### International Literacy Year 1990

The Hotline's genesis goes back to preparations for International Literacy Year (ILY) in 1990, when Australia still took "international years" seriously. The Australian

Government's Department of Employment Education and Training (DEET) had its own "ILY Secretariat", with a high-profile National Consultative Council chaired by Margaret Whitlam AO (Perlgut, 1991). The Australian Government invested in massive research and engagement in preparation for ILY (Wickert, 1989). The first ABC TV series, *Fresh Start*, received funding from DEET, as well as departments responsible for social security, immigration, local government and ethnic affairs (Perlgut 1991).

ABC TV based its ILY activities on the BBC's *On the Move* TV series (1975), a series of 50 short programs intended to stimulate interest and motivation to learn. BBC-1 broadcasts featured a young Bob Hoskins in his first major role (it won a British Academy of Film and TV Award). The BBC followed up with a direct instructional series, *Your Move*, and several radio literacy series (*Next Move*, *Move On*). Crucial to the success of the BBC broadcasts was establishing its own student referral service: the BBC viewed itself both as a broadcaster and as a mass educator involved in national campaigns (Hargreaves, 1980).

By contrast, the ABC was not equipped to handle ILY referrals, which also resulted from a series of literacy programs broadcast on Radio National and other ILY awareness-raising activities. Thus, the partnership with the Hotline's predecessor, NSW TAFE's Adult Literacy Information Office (ALIO) was born – to provide a means to engage prospective learners, their families and employers. My favourite ILY-ALIO promotion that year was placing the ALIO telephone number on eggs sold in supermarkets; a fabulous concept.

ALIO's literacy hotline was originally intended just for 1990, although it continued in a reduced form until 1994 when the present Hotline commenced. The Hotline thus inherits a long history of literacy campaigns first conceptualised by the BBC more than 50 years ago.

### **Production of The Reading Writing Roadshow**

Building on ILY TV broadcast successes, *The Reading Writing Roadshow* became an official TAFE NSW–ABC co-production in 1993 and 1994, during which TAFE's literacy experts were "embedded" with the production team. Pre-planning *The Reading Writing Roadshow* series took almost two years, commencing with an early Concept Paper:

The series is principally targeted at adults with literacy difficulties who have so far been unable to participate in classes or tutoring, because of lack of confidence,

discomfort at seeking help, or lack of appropriate literacy provision in their area... The programs will be designed also to engage attention of a much wider audience. (Bilton, 1992, p. i)

The TAFE NSW–ABC partnership became Australia's most successful broadcaster–educational institution collaboration and provided a strong foundation for future Hotline sustainability and success. It also set the tone for the Hotline's operational and strategic expectations: to maintain the ideals of a *national* service, committed to *community* engagement that reaches large numbers – almost in "continuous campaign" mode.

The TAFE NSW–ABC partnership lasted from 1989 to 1997, ending when ABC TV dropped most adult education activities, in response to budget cuts following the 1996 change of government (RWH, 2021c; Bornstein, 2022). Even after the partnership concluded, the Hotline's values of outreach, engagement and familiarity with mass educational campaigns enabled it to create strong broadcast and campaign collaborations.

### **Evolution of the Reading Writing Hotline from literacy support to literacy referral**

Following ILY, the TAFE NSW–ALIO submission to DEET to manage a hotline was successful, linking to the TV series and making referrals to language, literacy and numeracy providers. The original concept expected a lifespan of 18 months, and that most callers would respond directly to the TV series, which commenced broadcasts in April 1994 (Morgan Hunter Consulting, 1998, pp. 9-10).

DEET provided campaign assistance, commissioning the national health promotion campaign *Life. Be in It* to develop and place national and regional media advertisements for the Hotline, commencing in July 1994 (Morgan Hunter Consulting, 1998; Riordan, 1994). Eminent Australian designers Alexander and Paddy Stitt produced the graphics and script, with words sung by Peter Sullivan and partner (RWH, 2017; Stitt, 2011). Thus, the famous musical jingle was born, focussed on recruiting people to improve reading and writing skills:

Phones were answered by experienced adult literacy teachers who understood the difficulties of callers and the barriers they faced. Often this was the first time that they had admitted to anybody that they had problems with reading and writing, and teachers had to deal sensitively with fears and embarrassment. (RWH, 2019)

Most callers received referrals to local literacy providers, tapping into the need “of filling an information gap for people who need help with their language, literacy and numeracy problems but have not known where to go for help” (Morgan Hunter Consulting, 1998, p. 13).

The jingle has made an enduring addition to Australian popular culture, possibly the only literacy information line in the world to reach such legendary status. A YouTube version of the advertisement (JSF Footage Dump, 2014) has received more than 161,000 views as of late January 2024.

The comments under the YouTube clip present an insightful and frequently moving indication of how the Hotline has impacted the lives of thousands of Australians, as this selection shows:

“I spent six months in Australia 12 years ago and still can’t get this jingle out of my head.”

“This is actually the Australian national anthem.”

“The only phone number I have ever memorised in my 18 years of life. Like, I literally can’t even remember my own number off by heart, yet I remember this.”

“Know it front-to-back, back-to-front, round the side and topsy-turvy. Thanks TV for getting this stuck in my head all the time!”

“This is the first phone number every Aussie kid memorised and it will always be in the back of our brains.”

**The Hotline and broadcast media: Lost for Words on SBS TV**  
Surely the Hotline is the only 30-year-old Australian organisation born from and named after an educational television series. After the ABC TV partnership concluded, the Hotline proved versatile in continuing to use broadcast and mass media to recruit students and promote literacy. For example, from 2021 to 2023, the Hotline paid for six separate national advertising campaigns on national and regional television (commercial and SBS TV), national community announcement campaigns for radio and television and two Google and YouTube advertising campaigns.

The most recent addition to the Hotline’s broadcast partnership successes is collaboration with SBS TV in

providing an information message at the conclusion of each broadcast of the two *Lost for Words* adult literacy series in September 2021 and October 2022 (Figure 3). The reality documentary TV series charts how a group of students are taught literacy. It is hosted by actor Jay Laga’aia, and features literacy teacher Jo Medlin, President of ACAL (UNE, 2021).

The 2021 *Lost for Words* broadcasts stimulated a 42% increase in calls to the Hotline during the month that Series 1 of the show was aired, a powerful indication that broadcast TV still reaches prospective literacy learners – almost 30 years after the original *Roadshow* series.

### Hotline policy development

The Hotline plays an increasingly important national role in the development of literacy policies. Policy makers have relied on its extensive surveys, thousands of calls, analysis of caller requests and trends, and ongoing engagement with hundreds of literacy teachers. “The Hotline provides a voice for people who are often not heard, and ... plays a unique role in ensuring these voices may be heard in policy discussions and program reviews by governments” (Iles et al. 2023, p. 38).

During 2022 and 2023, the Hotline made 20 submissions – a record number – to government inquiries and discussions. Issues the Hotline has contributed to include:

**Connecting the literacy community:** Through its 26-person national Steering Committee, the Hotline has become an important forum for states and territories to share policy and practice, a virtual national industry body for literacy, numeracy and digital literacy.

**Literacy for what purpose?** The Hotline observes there has historically been “an unhelpful [national policy] emphasis on literacy for employment. The main funded literacy program is for job seekers [the SEE Program], however around 80% of callers are not eligible for this program, because they are already working, or are not seeking work as they are carers or have chronic health issues.” (Iles et al., 2023, p.36) Recent policy changes now appear to take a broader community-based approach.

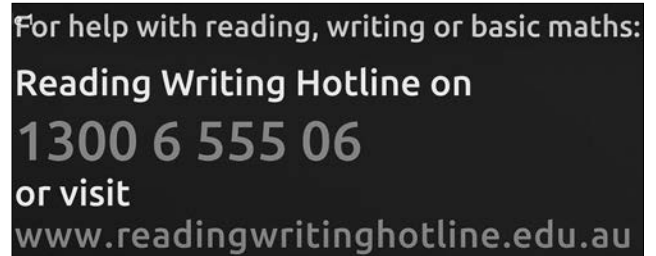
**Community-based teaching:** There is “a need for more informal community-based learning. Accredited literacy classes in colleges are often intimidating and difficult for adults with beginner literacy levels and there are very few pathways in.” (Iles et al., 2023, p.36)

**Under-skilled literacy workforce:** According to the Hotline, “This is in part due to the introduction of the *Foundation Skills Training Package*, [which] no longer mandates university qualified adult literacy teachers.... only the *Certificate IV Training & Assessment*. To be effective, adult reading teachers require expert academic and professional knowledge. The Cert IV qualification does not include this vital theoretical knowledge on how to teach adults literacy or numeracy.... and has resulted in many underqualified trainers.... The Hotline commonly receives calls from Cert IV qualified trainers asking for assistance with strategies and resources to help them, as they don’t feel competent.... A heavy reliance on unqualified volunteer tutors and trainers ... is impacting improvements in literacy levels” (RWH, 2021b).

**Regional, rural and remote Australia** presents special challenges for literacy due to lower educational attainment, reflected in Hotline statistics: in 2021–23 caller locations were: 59% major cities, 36% regional/rural, 4% remote and 1% unspecified. By contrast, 72% of Australians live in major cities, 26% live in regional and rural areas and 2% live in remote regions (AIHW, 2023). “While some online programs are offered, many learners do not have devices, access to the internet or the digital skills to enrol and participate. A national distance mode literacy scheme with postal and phone support options is needed” (Iles et al., 2023, p.36).

**Filling the structure for national literacy provision:** The Hotline has been active in advocating for a national adult literacy office and regional literacy coordinators: a national adult literacy coordination centre for policy advice and resources.

**History of Australian adult literacy:** The Hotline’s history has allowed it to play an important and evolving role in the adult literacy landscape, with “corporate knowledge” of how literacy provision has changed over time: “The early 1990s represented the peak years of adult literacy provision, with a sharp decline in 1996 and a steady subsequent decline. The diverse range of literacy classes that were available in the early 1990s has shrunk and it is now a challenge for the Hotline staff to find an appropriate literacy provider for many callers, so that the role has again changed” (RHW, 2023). No other organisation has had access to longitudinal information on adult literacy requests, provision and unmet demand, particularly from those asking for themselves.

A black rectangular graphic with white text. The text reads: "For help with reading, writing or basic maths: Reading Writing Hotline on 1300 6 555 06 or visit www.readingwritinghotline.edu.au".

For help with reading, writing or basic maths:  
Reading Writing Hotline on  
1300 6 555 06  
or visit  
[www.readingwritinghotline.edu.au](http://www.readingwritinghotline.edu.au)

**Figure 3: Hotline promotion at the conclusion of *Lost for Words*, SBS TV, 2021**

### Concluding thoughts

Here’s my call to Australian Government. Build on what we have already achieved. Utilise the Hotline to its (and your and our) best national advantage. Learn the lessons of mass literacy awareness from the four media “events” that impacted Hotline history: the ABC during International Literacy Year 1990, *The Reading Writing Roadshow* series (1994–97), the contributions of *Life. Be In It* from 1994 and the two SBS TV *Lost for Words* series (2021–22).

Think of a world where the Reading Writing Hotline did not exist. It would almost certainly have to be created by the Australian Government to meet our population’s diverse needs, but at a cost many times the current outlay, with years of planning.

Let’s start another national educational campaign: not just awareness, but again incorporating educational delivery, using one or both our national broadcasters, the Reading Writing Hotline and the network of adult literacy providers – including TAFE and the not-for-profit community sector – to tackle Australia’s literacy challenges head-on. This will mean broadening availability and diversity of courses so anyone can access classes, as well as rebuilding the literacy workforce.

“Mainstream forms of adult literacy provision ... consistently demonstrate their inability to reach the vast majority of their potential clients, and fail the majority of those whom they do reach,” writes University of New England Professor Bob Boughton (Boughton, 2023, p.28). And let us place Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander engagement at the very front of the campaign, posing Boughton’s “fundamental” question: “What adult literacy education practices are most likely to help people with minimal literacy to participate in movements to overcome their inequality?” (Boughton 2023, p.30).

May the Hotline live for another 30 years. With a bit of luck and a lot of hard work, may Australia have no need for the Hotline after that. It's in our hands.

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### Author's note

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