In an essay for Professor John Carson's College English I (ENG 10001) class, John A. Huntsman explores the multiple reasons why an astonishing number of U.S. adults are illiterate, citing dyslexia and the methodologies of teaching phonics as contributing factors. In the end, he concludes that adult literacy courses need to be revised in order to encourage students with reading difficulties to be less intimidated and more comfortable with the curriculum.

Despite the brightness of the room, a cold shiver runs up Sandy's back as she enters. Beads of sweat crown her brow, her pulse quickens, and the hairs on her neck leap stiffly to attention. She gauges the huge stranger's distance from about ten to twelve feet away. From the look of him, he'd be able to close that gap in a nanosecond. Her only advantage is that he has not seen her yet. Her mind races, her heart pounds in her chest. Should she have come here? Was this all a big mistake? Should she run, now, as fast and as far as she can from this room and this immense stranger? She can see what he holds in his hand, too, which horrifies her all the more. Blind terror nearly overtakes her as she begins to turn and flee. She glimpses movement by the stranger and slowly turns her head back till her stares lock in a few seconds of shared understanding. The stranger rises, his stature more foreboding than she had imagined, and closes the gap between them by a third. Steeling herself, she bravely steps toward him; this was, after all, her idea, and she'll be damned if she is going to give up without a fight. Another step and they are face to face. His 6'6" frame looms over her as he raises his hand and speaks, at last. "Hi, I'm Bob," he says, pumping her hand firmly as he speaks. Releasing her hand, he points with his right hand toward his left, which is still firmly clutching its enigmatic contents. "I'm going to be your reading tutor," he says through a grin, still pointing toward the object in his left hand, "and this is the first book we'll read together."

The dismal, disenfranchised life of an illiterate person is a frustrating and difficult existence. Illiteracy, even with all the misery it purveys and the breadth of its effect, seems to be linked to a few common factors. They are: the inability to derive meaning from written language due to neurological or cognitive dysfunctions; the age-old debate over phonics versus "look and say" learning; and, a lack of motivation for literacy, linked to apathy and fear, which is perpetuated from one generation to the next.

After overcoming her initial terror, Sandy sat next to Bob, staring blankly into the open book, her mind adrift to a long-forgotten place of silent suffering and isolation. The memories came flooding back from that awful era, of the frequent embarrassments and constant self-loathing, all stemming from her inability to make sense of the mish-mash of vowels, consonants, and punctuation sprawled out before her in black and white. She was amazed and saddened that her seventeen-year hiatus from academia had provided her neither a means for triumphing over her handicap, nor deadened the stinging memories of those past failures. Her teachers thought she was being a "smart-aleck," but it was more like a "short-circuit," Sandy would explain to them. Sandy realizes now that she was, and probably still is, dyslexic.

Most people can associate certain groupings of letters with their corresponding sounds, and can, in turn, form letters into groups to make syllables, and eventually, words and sentences. When one cannot accomplish this, often it is due to a dysfunction of neurological or cognitive processes. Most people are familiar with the term "dyslexia," which is one example of these types of dysfunctions. The existence of these "short circuits" in comprehension becomes easier to understand when the brain's intricate system of interpreting information is better understood. One researcher, Saul Kassin (60), writes about how the steps necessary just to read and repeat the written word "ball" are amazingly complex. The eyes send the impulse to the
visual cortex, then from there, it travels to the angular gyrus, where it is recorded, then to Wernicke's area for understanding, then to Broca's area, where a message is sent to the motor cortex to make your tongue, lips, and larynx operate to repeat the word aloud. This is what it takes just to read the simple word "ball." Dyslexia, while relatively common, is just one of many of these cognitive and neurological obstacles, and may be more treatable than others. Imagine how perplexing this type of handicap must be to those afflicted by it.

For Sandy, as a child, the frequent changing of schools had a disastrous effect. Because her father's job meant transferring to different schools, she never seemed to be exposed to the same reading curriculum long enough to be able to benefit from its use, much less master it. One school would stress the grouping of letters to make sounds. The next would make her try to memorize specific words by their size and shape, to be resurrected later when viewed in another piece of writing, even if a definition could not be recalled. The vast differences in these modes of education served to confound her even further. Even groups of teachers within the respective schools argued the validity of on method over the other. To this day, she wasn't sure which method was better.

Still another potential cause for illiteracy is the age-old debate over phonics versus "look and say" methods of learning. A University of Florida researcher reports that one method for literacy education is "decoding," which stresses recognition of letter formations and their corresponding sounds. Students are taught to sound out words, phoneme by phoneme, or as most people would say "phonetically." According to this study, the argument many have against this type of instruction is that it doesn't give students an instantly utilizable vocabulary or the definitions of the "sounded-out" words. Also, English, many argue, is not very phonetic, in spite of its alphabetical roots. The "look and say" critics' main concern main concern is that students' vocabularies may not be sufficient, nor able to be increased quickly enough, to keep up with the lexicon of ever-advancing texts. U.S. Senator Edward Zorinsky of Nebraska, in a 1986 Time magazine article by Ezra Bowen, criticized the "look and say" method, saying that many children "are not learning to read and therefore not learning much of anything ( )."

For years now, Sandy had fooled everyone from her many bosses to her own unsuspecting daughter. She'd had her share of close calls, though. There was the time she was supposed to help with the school play her daughter was performing in; she said she was too busy learning a new system at work. There were innumerable incidents at work that she'd made excuses for. But this time, excuses weren't going to cut it; she was going to have to learn the new computer system that was being installed or else find a different job, which would, undoubtedly, mean a lower-paying job. Still, as an adult, she didn't want to be sucked into some demeaning program that took her all the way back to reading first grade books. She wanted a program that would address her specific literacy goals, and yet, would not be demoralizing in its approach. She had moments of resolve in the past, but this time there could be no wavering. Terrified or not, this time she simply had to learn to read.

The third common denominator for illiteracy, it seems, is an overall lack of motivation for literacy, linked to apathy and fear, which is passed on to future generations. The University of Florida researcher cited earlier, makes the "lack of motivation" point in her study of the difference in U.S. literacy rates versus those in Japan, where over 90 percent of Japanese mothers read a great deal to their pre-school children, and where, subsequently illiteracy is practically non-existent. She theorizes that Japanese mothers, while they may not know any more about neurological or cognitive disorders, may know more about motivation, at least where their children's reading is concerned. Many illiterate adults in the U.S., however, don't convey the importance of learning to their children, often because they have not gleaned its benefits and rewards for themselves. This motivational breakdown could be due to any combination of factors, but one prominent one is fear. People fear the unknown, they fear change, and they fear failure, both past and present. Illiterate adults fear a reading program that doesn't meet their particular needs and expectations. The Program Administrator's Manual for the Ohio Department of Education's Adult Basic and Literacy Education lists some primary concerns of potential literacy program candidates. It states that adults participate in literacy programs for 1) educational or job advancement, 2) self-improvement, 3) literacy development, 4) economic need, 5) family responsibilities, 6) diversion, 7) launching into a new life, 8) urging of others, and 9) community and church involvement. Reasons for not participating are due to 1) low perception of need, 2) situational barriers,
3) perceived effort (school is difficult), and 4) dislike of school. Competent instructors, relevant curricula, and encouraging dialogue can go a long way in alleviating fears of program participants. Congress, in 1993, directed the National Institute for Literacy to query adult learners across the country regarding their specific wants and needs from an adult literacy program. Their common responses were: access to information to orient themselves in the world; a confident voice with which to express ideas and opinions; the ability to solve problems and make decisions without enlisting the help of others; and, learning how to learn to be able to keep up technology in an ever-changing world. By and large, these are pretty reasonable requests, and when addressed by a competent, customized adult literacy program, fears would most likely be diminished and enrollment rates increased.

Much work is needed to help solve the literacy crisis in America. Those who need help must recognize the need and ask for help. Funds must be allocated, curricula must be augmented, teachers must be trained, volunteers must be enlisted, and barriers must be removed. A wise person once said that even a very long journey is begun by just the first step. However, it is up to each one of us, whether or not to take that first step.