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Definition: **literacy** from *Collins English Dictionary*

n

1 the ability to read and write

2 the ability to use language proficiently

Summary Article: **Literacy**

From *Key Concepts in Education*

Most children learn to talk fairly easily. In contrast, learning to read and write is a laborious process. It is the ability to read and write which makes a person 'literate', with varying degrees of fluency.

The first 200 years after the introduction of the printing press saw a rapid growth in literacy, so that around a third of men in England (but fewer women) could read and write to some extent. There was then a huge increase in the nineteenth century, and by 1900 the majority of the population was literate. There were still a few pockets of illiteracy, mainly in large cities.

Arguments were already raging about methods of teaching reading, and whether children's understanding was good enough. In 1895, one of Her Majesty's Inspectors gave his views:

Of intelligent reading, however, there is but little, and more determined and persistent effort on the part of teachers is needed, to get children to understand what they read. It is but seldom that they are able to give a synonym for an ordinary word in their reading lesson or to express the meaning of a phrase or sentence in their own words.

(Committee of Councils on Education 1845–99 Minutes and Reports, London HMSO)

These arguments continue. It has been stated that nowadays a quarter of children leave primary school unable to read. What actually happens is that over 80 per cent leave with a 'level 4' or better in English (level 4 being the 'expected' level at age 11). Of the remaining children, many have reached level 3 – so it is not true to say they cannot read; they can read, but not well enough to get level 4. There is a small number of children with specific learning difficulties who are unable to read.

How literate do people need to be? For their own safety, they need to read road signs, and instructions. 'Functional literacy' has been described as the ability to read a tax form (which is demanding, in every sense of the word). 'Higher-order' reading skills include inference, deduction and an understanding of the effect of language. These skills are necessary in everyday life in order to recognise when someone is trying to pull the wool over our eyes.

Enjoyment of reading comes beyond mere functionality. 'Reading for pleasure' usually means fiction, or 'literature' (novels and poetry which have achieved status in a society). People who read for pleasure are fluent readers who respond to the writer's choice of language. Appreciation of literature widens our experience and understanding of others. However, reading fiction is not a moral virtue in itself. Many people prefer to read non-fiction.

Similarly, there is a basic level of writing which is necessary in order to function in society. More

advanced writers enjoy crafting the language, whether they are writing a report, or a story. The crucial factor is whether a piece of writing – however short – communicates clearly to the audience for whom it is intended.

In schools, children's literacy has to be good enough to cope with the demands of all subjects, not just English. Even practical subjects require reading, for example, understanding information, and writing, in planning and evaluation. These demands were recognised in the Bullock Report (*A Language for Life*, DES 1975) which coined the phrase 'language policy across the curriculum'.

The problem is that good readers and writers get better because they enjoy using their skills, and children who are weaker in literacy do not improve at the same rate, so the gap widens across the years.

In 1997, the Literacy Strategy was launched in primary schools to address some of the difficulties inherent in teaching reading and writing. This established a rigid methodology through the Literacy Hour, but it has become more flexible over the past 10 years. It now addresses speaking and listening as well as reading and writing, although strictly it is the last two that make a person 'literate'. However, it is obvious that the development of spoken language skills is crucial to the ability to read, write and communicate well.

Nowadays phrases such as 'IT literacy' and even 'emotional literacy' are used, which stretch the word beyond its original meaning.

FURTHER READING

- Meek, Margaret (1991), *On Being Literate*. Oxford and London: Bodley Head.
- Millard, Elaine (1997), *Differently Literate: Boys, Girls and the Schooling of Literacy*. London: Falmer Press.
- The Bullock Report (1975), *A Language for Life*, London: DES.

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