

# Oh, What A Tangled Web We Must Weave: What is Literacy?

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## Abstract

The definition of literacy has changed over the last five decades. Through the eyes of a young mother as she matures, this paper explores the transforming definition of literacy over time. After first addressing the question of why a definition of literacy is needed, UNESCO's published definitions are used to facilitate insight into how the definition has morphed and become more complex and the factors that have contributed to that change. Finally, I add my own definition of literacy.

She wearily opened her eyes and blinked away the sleepiness as she looked around, hoping the scene would have changed. Even as she took in the rough upholstery in front of her face, her knees tucked close to her body, she knew. Everything was the same as the night before when she had shoved the two armchairs together and crawled into the space smaller than a baby's crib. Her children were spending the summer with her ex's mother, and she was trying to get far enough ahead to provide a stable home for all of them. She also knew it was not working.

Cradling her head in her hands, she thought back to the day little more than a decade ago when she and her sisters had sat down at the kitchen table and carefully penned a note to her uncle, who was halfway across the world serving in Vietnam. It was the early 70s. The letter would take days to reach him. Each of them would take turns writing on a thin piece of paper. They had a small space to fill with their greeting. The letter was only to be one or two undersized pages. The envelope was thin enough to see through easily. The letter needed to be light enough so that the cost of mailing it did not make their mother cringe—airmail was expensive. Their mother had worked tirelessly to help them craft perfectly formed sentences and, in doing so, also helped the girls improve their communication skills such as reading and writing. Each of them would eventually

graduate high school at the top of their classes. So why was she here now, working the kinks out of her legs as she stumbled to the shower?

She shook the pointless ruminations from her head. She needed to get to her day job at the construction site. As she passed the third armchair that served as her closet, she grabbed the two sets of clothes needed for the day, the jeans and t-shirt and the waitress uniform she would need for the night job. She looked around the attic room and focused on the gratefulness she felt toward her coworker for letting her couch surf on her armchairs. She was willing to do whatever it took to be able to tuck her boys in at night again, but as she looked around the tiny space and the two sets of clothes, she knew something was going to have to change.

She hopped on the bus and let her mind wander over her situation. She had watched an episode of *MacGyver* the night before. It was one of her favorite things to do with her boys. Richard Dean Anderson was hot. Her boys did not need to know that. To them, she pointed out the critical thinking, analysis, and problem-solving skills used by the hunky main character. These were what she focused on now. She knew her soft skills in critical thinking, analysis, and problem-solving were good, but by the mid to late 80s, the young woman's solid proficiency in reading and writing was no longer sufficient to function and succeed in 80s modern society. Jobs beyond entry-level were not within reach. She was going to have to add to her pool of intellectual resources. *MacGyver* had spent two years studying physics at MIT. She could do that. Well, maybe not MIT, but the local community college was doable. She had taken a couple of classes just out of high school, but she had let marriage and raising children get in the way and dropped out. The marriage had failed, but the children now would serve as her motivation to swallow her pride and navigate the welfare system. Section 8 housing was better than the armchairs. More importantly, she could watch *MacGyver* with her boys again. No matter what it took, never again would they live under separate roofs.

College financial aid helped her enroll in engineering, science, and math classes. The work-study program planted her in the school's computer lab. The computers were state-of-the-art in the late 80s; IBM PCs with a 40MB hard drive partitioned into two 20MB hard drives and two 5.25" floppy disk drives. She blinked at the screen displaying her first "Hello World" programming success; her love of computers and the digital world was born. She knew she had left the upholstered armchairs behind. She sporadically continued her education, but as a female who had not yet completed her degree, she had to tiptoe and sometimes elbow her way through the computer industry. She eventually landed with a small but mighty group of designers and developers. Her job of designing and testing custom software was challenging, stimulating, and deeply satisfying—Moore's Law of Doubling meant faster and cheaper computers (Rotman). Faster and cheaper meant hours of studying over the years to keep up with the emerging

technologies and new languages.

Now, as that same tiptoeing and elbow-throwing female, I find myself attempting to finish the college degree I contemplated on that liminal bus ride over forty years ago. Staring at three computer monitors, trying to manage six open browser windows, twenty-seven tabs, four Word documents, and five apps, I try to answer the question, What is literacy? My history had proven that the ubiquitous answer, the ability to read and write, was not enough. Even adding the rungs of critical thinking, problem-solving and analytical skills to that two-railed ladder to success was not enough to keep me from riding the bus with a change of clothes stuffed in my backpack. Like most of the solutions in my life, the road to the answer went through asking why? Why do I even need a definition of literacy (besides the obvious, I need to pass this class and finally get my degree reason)? To understand, I can reach back and borrow a concept from the industry that has served me so well over the years.

Software development has a concept of the definition of DONE.

Each feature is carefully and deliberately dissected, often to a mind-numbing degree. It is an iterative and increasingly more granular process until developers, stakeholders, and domain experts have a set of agreed-upon objectives that, when complete, comprise the definition of done, DoD (and the developers can get paid) (Schwaber and Sutherland). High literacy rates have been correlated to better access to economic opportunity, better nutrition, and environmental sustainability (Peterson). Educators, institutions, and governments need to measure literacy to build programs and invest resources to promote that success for students and the citizenry. A quote by management guru Peter Drucker is used often in business, “You can’t change it if you can’t measure it.” I would extend Drucker’s quote by saying, you can’t measure it if you don’t know what “it” is. So, what is the DoD with respect to literacy?

In 1958, for statistical purposes and to improve the international comparability of their data, UNESCO declared “a person is literate who can, with understanding, both read and write a short simple statement on his everyday life” (UNESCO 1958). My 1970s kitchen table companions and I received a solid education in reading, writing, and understanding short, simple statements. We had what should have been a stable ladder to success. By their 1958 standards of measure, UNESCO would stamp us DONE. That 1958 DoD was not enough to keep me from waking up separated from my children, cramped from sleeping on two armchairs on that summer day in the mid 1980s.

The early measurements of literacy focused on the *fundamental skills* of reading and writing. More recently, *functional literacy*, which addresses whether a person’s educational level is sufficient to function in modern society, has emerged as a truer measurement (120 Years of Literacy). By the early 80s, UNESCO’s definition had also grown to address functional literacy. “A person is functionally literate who can engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for

effective functioning of his or her group and community and also for enabling him or her to continue to use reading, writing and calculation for his or her own and the community's development" (UNESCO 1978).

The digital revolution and the internet began around 1980 (Clarke). The textile-laden bus passenger had the foresight to know this would change things. New and multiple literacies were going to be required for success. She would need to build a web, not climb a ladder. Exponential growth in the software industry would mean constant training and studying to keep skills honed and knowledge relevant. Navigating everyday life would become more complex and require literacy across multiple domains. Brandt and Clinton paraphrased the research of New Literacy Studies theoretician Brian Street. Social context organizes literacy, not the other way around (Brandt and Clinton). On a 2001 Paris trip, I would use my new email literacy to engage with my environment. My long-distance communication involved an internet café, a credit card, and those distinctive dial-up tones, not airmail. The digital revolution had introduced new literacies I needed to communicate and function effectively in my social context. Computer literacy enabled me to log on to a computer and email while looking at the Eiffel Tower and eating a croissant. Financial literacy kept me from going broke on international long-distance calls on a cellular phone.

I fully and enthusiastically entered the digital world. By the mid-2010s, I had worked remotely in and around the computer industry for over fifteen years. I had never seen the faces of some of the people with whom I worked. Others were only two-dimensional renderings on a piece of glass. The literacies I needed to function and navigate were constantly changing and evolving. I fought to keep up, and my web of literacies was getting tighter and more intricate.

By 2018, communication was instant and constant. From the glass observation deck of the Willis Tower in Chicago and across 1000 miles, I sent one of the 70s kitchen table occupants a video I had just recorded on my cell phone. I had panned the horizon and slowly turned the cell phone camera to point 94 stories straight down. I listened on the phone while my sister watched the video on her computer. I giggled at the acrophobic panic attack that ensued as only a big sister can.

As I time-travel forward and observe my experiences, the ever-going web of literacies necessary to navigate effectively in my modern world demands a more intricately woven definition of done. I needed a definition that encompassed the more complex web of multi-literacies described by the New London Group in the mid-1990s (Multi-literacy). In the 1970s, proficiency in reading and writing was sufficient. Paper maps and postcards would have been the way to travel around the city and send a greeting. By the time I reached the observation deck of the Willis Tower, Google Maps on the mobile device glued to my hand had replaced paper maps. The airmail letter was now an instant message with a video attachment.

UNESCO's current definition of done for literacy is more encompassing. "Literacy is the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute, using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts. Literacy involves a continuum of learning in enabling individuals to achieve their goals, to develop their knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in their community and wider society" (UNESCO 2005).

In reviewing the UNESCO definition of literacy over time, the focus has shifted from fundamental skills to the ability to function in society. The 1958 definition aligns with the idea that literacy is the ability to read and write. The current definition reflects the need to address the interconnectivity of the strands of multi-literacies in the contexts that influence what we need to learn to be successful.

My current DoD with respect to literacy spins a much more complex web than the dual-railed ladder of reading and writing. *Literacy is the ability to gain understanding through written, oral, visual, or digital material and use that understanding to communicate effectively with others, create new ideas, and function and succeed in society.*

Literacy is more than just gathering information and knowledge through reading and writing. Literacy is comprehending information and developing competency across a web of multiple domains in a way that allows us to transfer what we learn to new situations. It causes us to ask questions, to use the knowledge that we gain in one domain to succeed in another. It allows us to create something new. These literacies weave a web with interlocking contact points that enable us to comprehend, achieve and succeed in the world around us.

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