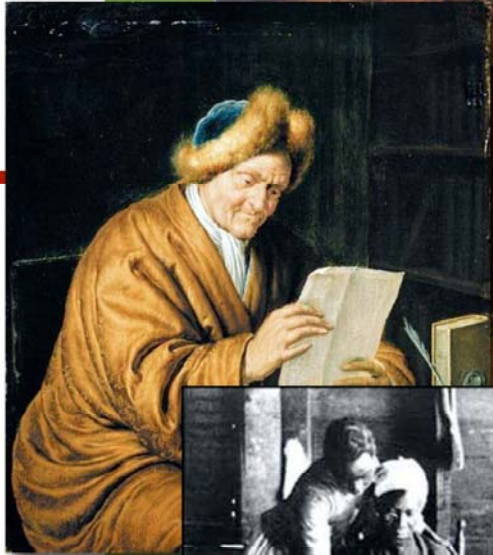


# The Growth and Transformation of Literacy

IS103  
History of Information  
Oct. 15, 2007  
Geoff Nunberg





# Today's Agenda

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What do we mean when we talk about "literacy"?

What factors have militated for increased literacy in the past?

Why did literacy become a focus of 19th century social policy?

What (conflicting) powers have been ascribed to literacy?

E.g., does literacy lead to radicalized consciousness or to a more easily controlled workforce and citizenry?

Is enhanced literacy always a cause of individual social advancement and group prosperity?

What is "information literacy" and why does it matter?



# The Emergence of the Modern "Informational System," Round 4

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Many, if not most, of the cultural phenomena of the modern world derive from [the 18th century] -- the periodical, the newspaper, the novel, the journalist, the critic, the public library, the concert, the public museum. \*† Perhaps most important of all, it was then that 'public opinion' came to be recognized as the ultimate arbiter in matters of taste and politics."

--Tim Blanning, *The Culture of Power*

\* *Not to mention the dictionary and encyclopedia-- GN*

† *Or for that matter, the beginning of the postal service and mass literacy.*



# "Literacy": Two Histories

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Literacy as a phenomenon (social, individual)

Literacy as a concept/ "The literacy myth" (Harvey Graff)



# History of *literacy*, etc.

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*Literate, illiterate* go back to Renaissance. (Cf noun *literate* = "one who takes holy orders without university education by demonstrating a knowledge of Latin and Greek"; "lady literate")

But both are rare words until late 19th c.



# "Literacy": a linguistic curiosity

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The meanings of *literacy*, *literate*, etc.

Basic alphabetism:

“literacy campaign”/ “literacy rates”

Skill in using the language:

“A literate prose style”

General “cultural” knowledge:

“The new illiteracy”; “A very literate conversation”

Basic knowledge in some area or field:

“economic/geographical/media etc. literacy” (also  
“numeracy”)



# Problems of translation

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Note that only English uses one word for all these concepts:

“literacy campaign”/ “~ rates” = *campagne d'alphabetisation*, *Alphabetisierungskampagne* (or *Lese- und Schreibtest*)

“A literate prose style” = *un style littéraire* / “*Il a des lettres*” / *uno style colto*...

“The new illiteracy”; “A highly literate person” = *instruit, cultivé*, (“every literate person” = *toute personne de culture*)

“economic/geographical/media etc. literacy” (also “numeracy”) = *connaissance, conoscenza, Kenntnisse etc., Bildung, etc.* Cf “la cultura/conoscenza informatica,” EDV- [elektronische datenverarbeitung] *Kenntnisse*” etc.



# Literacy: The Original "Technology Adoption"

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Complicating the notion of "literacy rates."  
Literacy varies according to:

1. Levels of individual skill.

Cf Stone's five levels of literacy in pre-industrial Britain, from ability to sign name to extensive literacy in English & classical languages.

Historians tend to measure literacy as simple "alphabetism"  
-- why?





# Literacy: The Original "Technology Adoption"

---

Complicating the notion of "literacy rates."  
Literacy varies according to:

2. Range of social functions requiring literacy:  
What do people need literacy for?



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What do people need literacy for?



# "Functional Literacy"

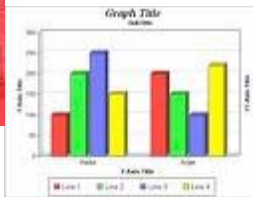
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Emergence of notion of “functional literacy” after UNESCO report of 1956: “A person is functionally literate when he has acquired the knowledge and skills in reading and writing which enable him to engage in all those activities in which literacy is normally assumed in his culture or group” But often defined in practice as 4th-grade education.



# "Functional Literacy"

What does "functional literacy" entail in modern America?



**Form B283**  
Rev. October 1998  
Department of the Treasury  
Internal Revenue Service

**Noncash Charitable Contributions**  
Attach to your tax return if you claimed a total deduction of over \$500 for all contributed property.  
See separate instructions.

OMB No. 1545-0048  
Attachment Sequence No. 55  
Form 4871 (10/98)

Name (Last, first, middle initial)  
John Black

Address (Street, city, state, and ZIP code)  
Goodell 144th St. and Old L.

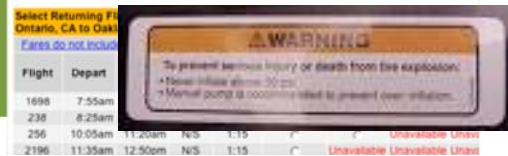
Section 4—List in this section only items for which you claimed a deduction of \$5,000 or less. Also, list certain publicly traded securities even if the deduction is over \$5,000 (see instructions).

Part I Information on Donated Property

1	2a Name and address of the donee organization	2b Description of donated property
A	Goodell 144th St. and Old L.	Bedding & Linens - Books, Movies & Music - Clothing, Footwear & Accessories - Furniture, Lighting & Home Decor - Sporting
B		
C		
D		
E		

Part II Other Information

Flight	Depart	Arrive	Stops	Travel Time (hrs:min)	Refundable Anytime \$1119	Restricted Fares \$101	Advance Purchase \$91
2373	6:10am	7:25am	N/S	1:15		Unavailable	Unavailable
2808	7:30am	8:45am	N/S	1:15		Unavailable	Unavailable
991	8:45am	10:00am	N/S	1:15		Unavailable	Unavailable
2109	9:55am	11:10am	N/S	1:15		Unavailable	Unavailable
111	11:15am	12:25pm	N/S	1:10		Unavailable	Unavailable
898	12:45pm	2:00pm	N/S	1:15		Unavailable	Unavailable
84	2:45pm	3:55pm	N/S	1:10		Unavailable	Unavailable
3765	3:40pm	4:55pm	N/S	1:15		Unavailable	Unavailable
835	5:05pm	6:20pm	N/S	1:15		Unavailable	Unavailable
988	6:50pm	8:05pm	N/S	1:15		Unavailable	Unavailable
464	8:00pm	9:15pm	N/S	1:15		Unavailable	Unavailable
582	8:50pm	10:05pm	N/S	1:15		Unavailable	Unavailable





## "Functional Literacy"

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In US, “functionally illiterate” rapidly becomes a loose way of saying “virtually illiterate”

*47.5% of the nation - almost 1 of 2 Americans are functionally illiterate!-- Web site of Literacy Now!, Inc.*

*Dorothy Allison's autobiographical novels and social commentary slices wide the underbelly of Southern female experience--growing up dirt poor and shamed, functionally illiterate in the language of love. Chicago Tribune*



# Literacy: The Original "Technology Adoption"

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Complicating the notion of "literacy rates."

3. Is literacy individual or group achievement?

Cf role of public readers, letter writers, etc.







# Literacy: The Original "Technology Adoption"



"I ADVISE NOT TO EAT JELLY DOUGHNUTS WHILE WORKING AT YOUR KEYBOARD ANYMORE."

Complicating the notion of "literacy rates."

3. Is literacy individual or group achievement?

Compare with levels of "computer literacy" in modern developed societies.

Issues of "multimedia literacy"



## Factors influencing the growth of literacy (Stone)

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Social stratification

Job opportunity

Religion

Social control

Demographic patterns

Economic organization

Political institutions





# Social and Religious Prerequisites for literacy

## Growth in literacy

Protestant > Catholic, North > South

Literacy rates highest in Scotland, Sweden, New England, Wales...

But there is also a relatively high literacy rate in Catholic areas of Northern Europe (Bavaria, Rhineland), which tended to be wealthier with more commercial development and more towns.

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An Old World and a New World

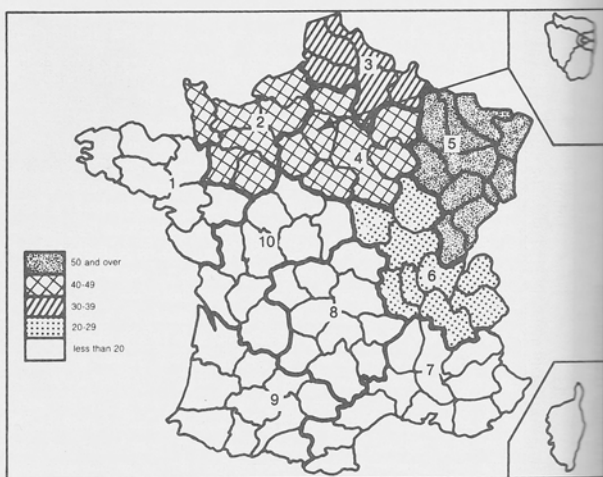


Figure 6.2. Proportion of Signatures on Marriage Registers (Men and Women), 1740-1789

Source: Houdaille, "Les signatures," p. 69.

"une France double"

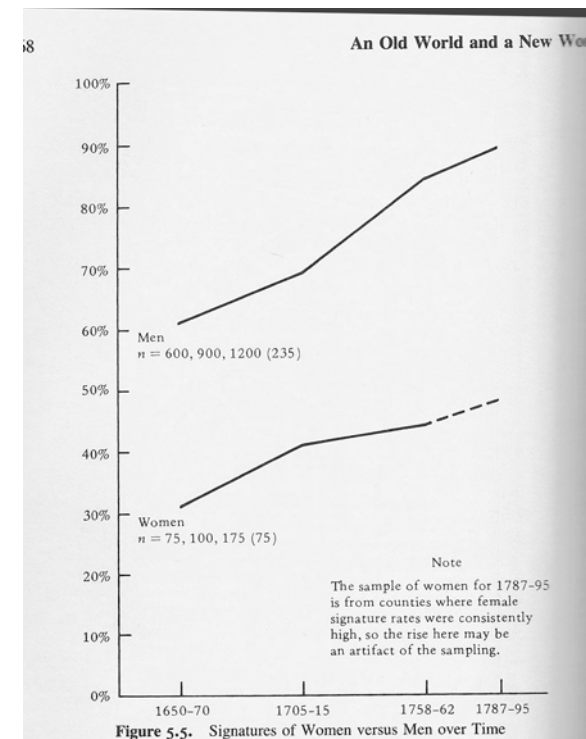
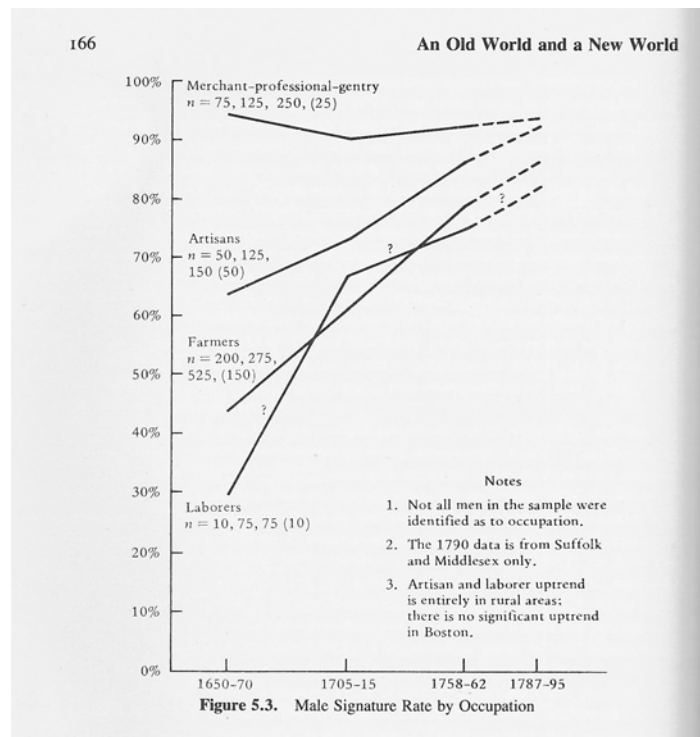


# Social Prerequisites for Literacy, 2

## Growth in literacy

Urban > rural

Men > women





# Literacy and Education

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Education should be a vehicle for producing literate society per societal requirements...  
But often fails to achieve these goals for historical, symbolic, class reasons



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# The historical legacy



"The educational structure at a given time is therefore the product of a long development and may contain many elements and insitutions which cannot be explained, much less defended, except on historical grounds." Lawrence Stone





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If you were designing UC Berkeley from scratch and without attention to the history of such institutions, what features would you probably omit?



# The historical legacy



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If you were designing UC Berkeley from scratch and without attention to the history of such institutions, what features would you probably omit?

summer vacations

"commencement"

Semesters

cum laude, valedictorian, etc.

Sabbaticals

"major" & "minor"

freshman composition (both terms)

"Doctor of philosophy/master of arts"

bachelors degree

"liberal arts"

curriculum

"Greek" system

SAT exams?



# Literacy and Social Control

---

Conflicting views of literacy:

1. Instrument of increased political consciousness, which can instill "dangerous ideas."

Too much education "would make everyone unfit to follow the plough." Bishop Samuel Wilberforce, 1857





# Seditious Epigraphy in the Renaissance... and now



The "talking statue" in the P. del Paquino, Rome, with posted "pasquinades"



# Education and Political Power

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"Educate first, agitate afterwards. Ignorance, superstition, and timidity [timorousness] are the weapons which our oppressors have used most effectively in the past.

-- *Palladium of Labor*, 1873

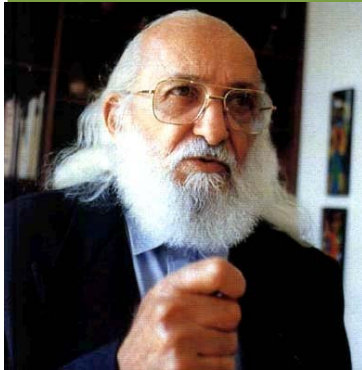


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Cf Paulo Freire on literacy as the “pedagogy of the oppressed” and a means for disrupting the “culture of silence.



# Rise of the Radical Press



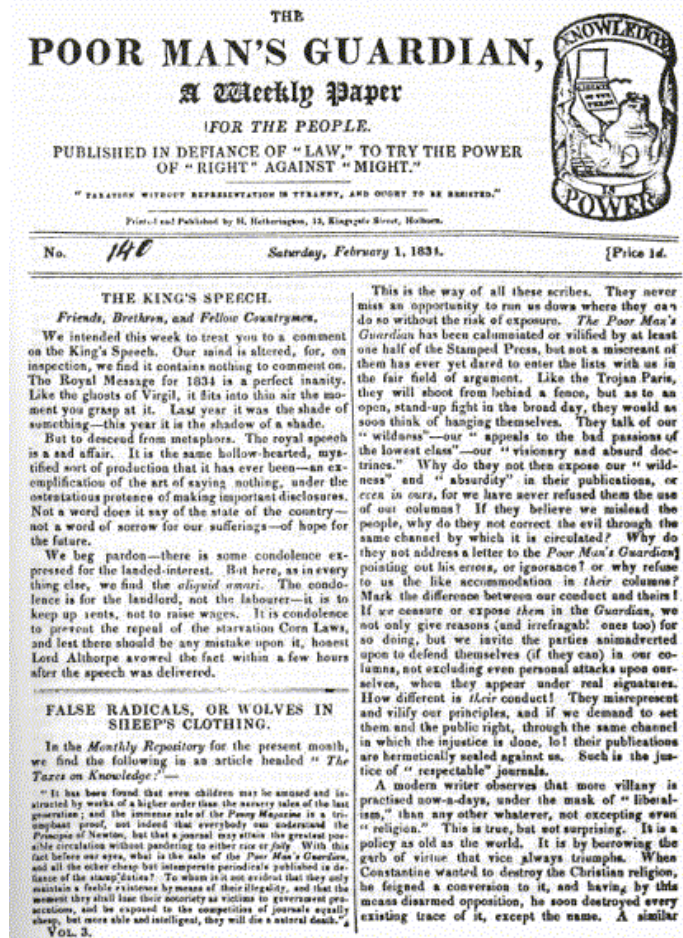
Cobbett

William Cobbett's *Political Register* in Britain achieves 44,000 weekly circulation in 1816 (as pamphlet, to avoid 4d. newspaper tax).

1819: Richard Carlile's *Republican* achieves greater circulation than the *Times* after Carlile is imprisoned for sedition.

## The Republican.

No. 2. Vol. I.] LONDON, FRIDAY, SEPT. 3, 1819. [PRICE 2d.







Lector in  
Key West, 1920's



# "Group" Literacy and Political Consciousness

## Cf *lectores* in Cuban cigar factories:

Followed creation of cigar-makers' union in 1857; *lector* paid for by workers (85% illiteracy rate in Cuba at the time)

Readings included novels & histories, also newspapers (esp. *La Aurora*, political paper est. for cigar makers)

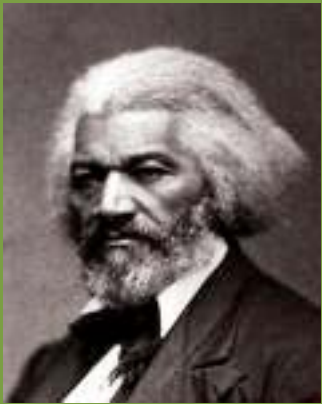
1866: Political Governor of Cuba issues edict making it illegal "to distract the workers of the tobacco shows.... with the reading of books and newspapers, or with discussions foreign to the work in which they are engaged."

Practice resurrected by cigar makers in US (esp., Key West)



## Literacy & Slavery

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Cf ante-bellum view of dangers of literacy:

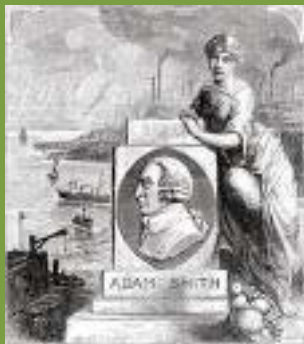
"If you give a nigger an inch, he will take an ell [a cloth measure equal to 6 hand breadths]. A nigger should know nothing but to obey his master--to do as he is told to do. Learning would spoil the best nigger in the world. Now," said he, "if you teach that nigger (speaking of myself) how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave. He would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master."

*Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, 1845*



# Response: Emphasize Moral Importance of Literacy Instruction

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Literacy also regarded as instrument of social control, which guarantees political stability and workers' tractability.

Claude Levi-Strauss: writing functions to "facilitate the enslavement of human beings."

"The more [the poor] are instructed, the less liable they are to the delusions of enthusiasm and superstition, which, among the ignorant nations, frequently occasion the most dreadful disorders."

Adam Smith



# "The Uplifting of the American Negro"

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The growth of new wants, presided over by intelligence and culture, is the best lever for raising the status of the idle, quarreling, sensual, ravishing Afro-American. Certainly the infecting of the backward portion of the race with a high estimate of cleanliness, neatness, family privacy, domestic comfort, and literacy is an agent quite as moralizing as the dread of future punishments or the love of an ethical God.

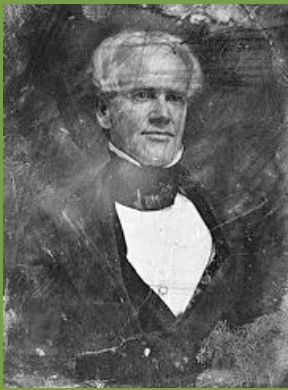
(Edward Alsworth Ross in the *Am. Jrnl. Of Sociology*, 1898)





# Literacy and Social Control, cont.

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"Those who have been accustomed to exercise their minds by reading and studying... have greater docility and quickness in applying themselves to work [and] greater appetite, dexterity or ingenuity in comprehending ordinary processes." Horace Mann, 1849.

Organisations use literacy as a proxy for cooperativeness and 'trainability' among recruits. Once such a belief is institutionalised in selection procedures, it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy and the organisation is never confronted with contradictory instances. Kenneth Levine, *The Social Context of Literacy*, 1986



## The Lone R

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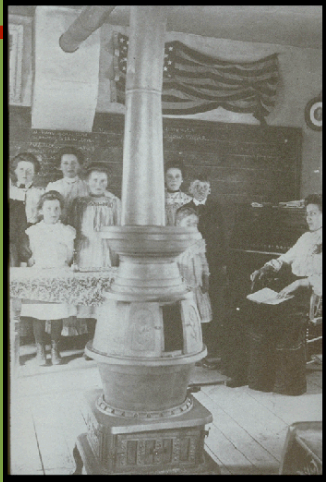
"Reading will help to mend people's morals, but writing is not necessary." Jonas Hanway

"It is not proposed that the children of the poor be taught to write and cypher." Anglican National Society for fostering education.



# The Spelling Bee: the oral culture of literacy

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"Perhaps [the teaching of orthography] is best done by Pairing the Scholars, two of those nearest equal in their Spelling to be put together; let these strive for victory each propounding ten words each day for the other to be spelt. He that spells truly most of the other's Words; he that is Victor most Days in a Month, to btain a prize, a pretty neat Book of some Kind useful in their future Studies."

B. Franklin, 1751





# The Spelling Bee: the oral culture of literacy

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## Popularity of the spelling bee:

"Thar's a new game down in Frisco, that ez far ez I can see  
Beats euchre, poker, and van-toon, they calls the "Spellin' Bee."  
...O little kids, my pretty kids, down on your knees and pray!  
You've got your eddication in a peaceful sort of way;  
And bear in mind thar may be sharps ez slings their spellin' square,  
But likewise slings their bowie-knives without a thought or care.  
You wants to know the rest, my dears? Thet's all! In me you see  
The only gent that lived to tell about the Spellin' Bee!"

--Bret Harte

1875: 4000 attend spelling bee at the Academy of Music in Philadelphia.



# The Spelling Bee: the oral culture of literacy

---



"Spelling was my forte, as is natural for a child of tenacious memory and no judgment." Horace Greeley, of his childhood around 1820



Winning words from Scripps National Spelling Bee in decade following 1925: *promiscuous*, *intelligible*, *fracas*, *gladiolus*, *knack*.

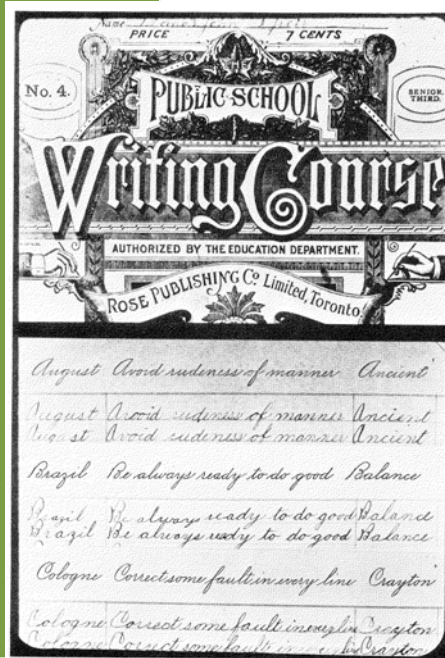
Winning words in recent Bees: *xanthosis*, *vivisepulture*, *euonym*, *opsimath*, *succedaneum*, and *prospicience*.




# Emphasis on Moral Advantages of Literacy Instruction

Literacy can be instrument of social control.

Explicit moralistic content



28




LESSON XX.

claw	jaw	shawl
crawl	law	spawn
dawn	maw	straw
haw	paw	thaw
hawk	raw	yawn

The beef is quite raw; will you roast it? A flail is used to part the grain from the straw. The hawk takes its prey with its claws. A worm can crawl, but a hare can run. Heat makes the ice thaw. I will rise as soon as day dawns. What part of a bird is the maw? Haws are the fruit of the thorn. Why do you yawn? Pull the tooth from my jaw. A fish spawns. Fine shawls are made from the hair of the goat. Puss has hurt her paw.

God gave this law to men, that they should love him more than all things in the world.

29



LESSON XXI.

cause	fraud	pause
clause	gauze	sauce
daub	laud	vault

James daubs his clothes with clay. Pause at the stops or points. It is fraud to take what is not yours. To laud is to praise. Read this clause. Jane has torn her gauze frock; that is the cause of her tears. Let me have sauce to my fish, if you please. It is not my fault, if you do not learn to read. Paul is a man's name. Wine is kept in vaults. You must not vaunt or boast of your skill.

LESSON XXII.

cloud	ground	proud
couch	hound	shout
flour	mount	sour
gout	mouse	south

This fruit is sour; I found it on the





# What's learned in "grammar school"

---

Literacy can be instrument of social control.

Building “mental discipline” (from faculty psychology)

The study of grammar is "an employment calculated to exclude those frivolous pursuits, and that love of ease and sensual pleasure, which enfeeble and corrupt the minds of many inconsiderate youth, and render them useless to society."

Lindley Murray, 1817

The overthrow of grammar coincided with the acceptance of the equivalent of creative writing in social behaviour. As nice points of grammar were mockingly dismissed as pedantic and irrelevant, so was punctiliousness in such matters as honesty, responsibility, property, gratitude, apology and so on.

John Rae, Headmaster of Westminster School, 1975



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The young gentlemen [at Dr. Blimber's academy] were prematurely full of carking anxieties. They knew no rest from the pursuit of stony-hearted verbs, savage noun substantives, inflexible syntactic passages, and ghosts of exercises that appeared to them in their dreams.

Dickens, *Dombey and Son*







# What's learned in "grammar school"

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Literacy as an instrument of social control.

The modern fetishization of grammar:

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John Rae, Headmaster of Westminster School, 1975



# The rise of "literacy" in late 19th-c America

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Introduction of compulsory universal schooling

Increase in immigration, urban in-migration

Introduction of women into the workforce

Women in bus. schools from 4% in 1871 to 77% in 1900

Rise of both radical politics and of political parties and "boss" system makes both conservatives and reformers eager to create literate public.

Literacy seen as a source of individual social advancement and societal development. Literacy rates become an indicator of modernity.



# History of *literacy*, etc.

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Modern significance of literacy emerges with formation of new word “literacy” ca. 1880, in America

Let us compare the statistics of population, of literacy and illiteracy, and of crime in these two classes of States, carefully eliminating from our calculation the influence of foreign immigration upon the criminal record of the Northern States, which the particularity of the census returns enables us to do. ("The Public-School Failure," by Richard Grant White: The North American review. December 1880, pp. 537-551)

Context of earliest use: census data, voting requirements, race, etc.

Suggests picture of alphabetism as a social phenomenon/subject of civic interest. Cf late-19th c. use of literacy rates as index of modernity & development.



# Socio-Economic Benefits of Literacy

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I have known many persons rise to wealth and respectability by their industry, virtues, and self-taught skill; but from their utter want of training in the proper mode of writing, or speaking, or reading their native tongue, they are unable to fill the situations to which their circumstances and talents and characteristics entitle them, and in which they might confer great benefits on society.

Eggerton Ryerson, Chief Superintendant of Education for Upper Canada, 1849



# Socio-Economic Benefits of Literacy?



But assumptions about literacy and social advancement are not always justified.

"The literate English farm labourer of the late eighteenth century fared no better (and possibly even worse, due to the prejudices of his employer) than his illiterate companion." Laurence Stone



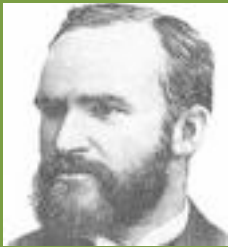
In 19th-c. Canadian cities, "Only rarely was the achievement of literacy [among workers] sufficient to counter the depressing effects of inherited characteristics, of ethnicity, race, and sex. The process of stratification, with its basis in rigid social inequality, ordered the illiterates as it did those who were educated." Harvey Graff, *The Literacy Myth*





# Literacy and the Libraries Movement

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Melvyl Dewey



Andrew  
Carnegie

Reaction to perceived limitations of school system -- rote learning, inaccessibility to adults

1890: Charles Eliot estimates that it would take a Massachusetts high-school graduate only 46 hours to read aloud all of the books that were assigned in the last six years of the curriculum.

Establishment of library schools (Columbia, 1876), proponents of library movement -- “Apostles of Culture”

Increasing number of libraries:

1850: ca. 50 public libraries in US

1875: 300+

1920: 2500-3000



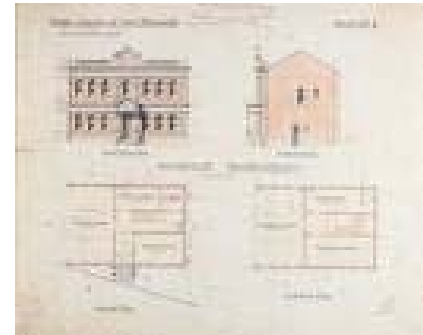
# The Growth of Public Libraries



Subscription libraries (Franklin founds Library Company of Philadelphia: 1731); Town libraries (Boston, 1848; NY, 1849)

UK: Public Libraries Act of 1850 provides for "libraries freely open to the public... in towns in Great Britain and Ireland" passed w/ Conservative opposition

Later: Carnegie libraries. 1700 public libraries in US between 1883 and 1929, 660 in UK







# Functions of the Library: Political Objectives

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Libraries (and literacy in general) as bulwarks against demagoguery etc.

[To the free library] we may hopefully look for the gradual deliverance of the people from the wiles of the rhetorician and stump orator.... As the varied intelligence which books can supply shall be more and more widely assimilated, the essential elements of every political and social question may be confidently submitted to that instructed common sense upon which the founders of our government relied. J. P. Quincy, 1876



# Reservations about Carnegie Libraries

Figure 2. "Forbidden Fruit," an 1865 engraving after a painting by A. Toulmouche



Source: CRBibliothèque des Arts décoratifs, Paris.

Concerns about popularity of "immoral fiction" and availability of seditious works

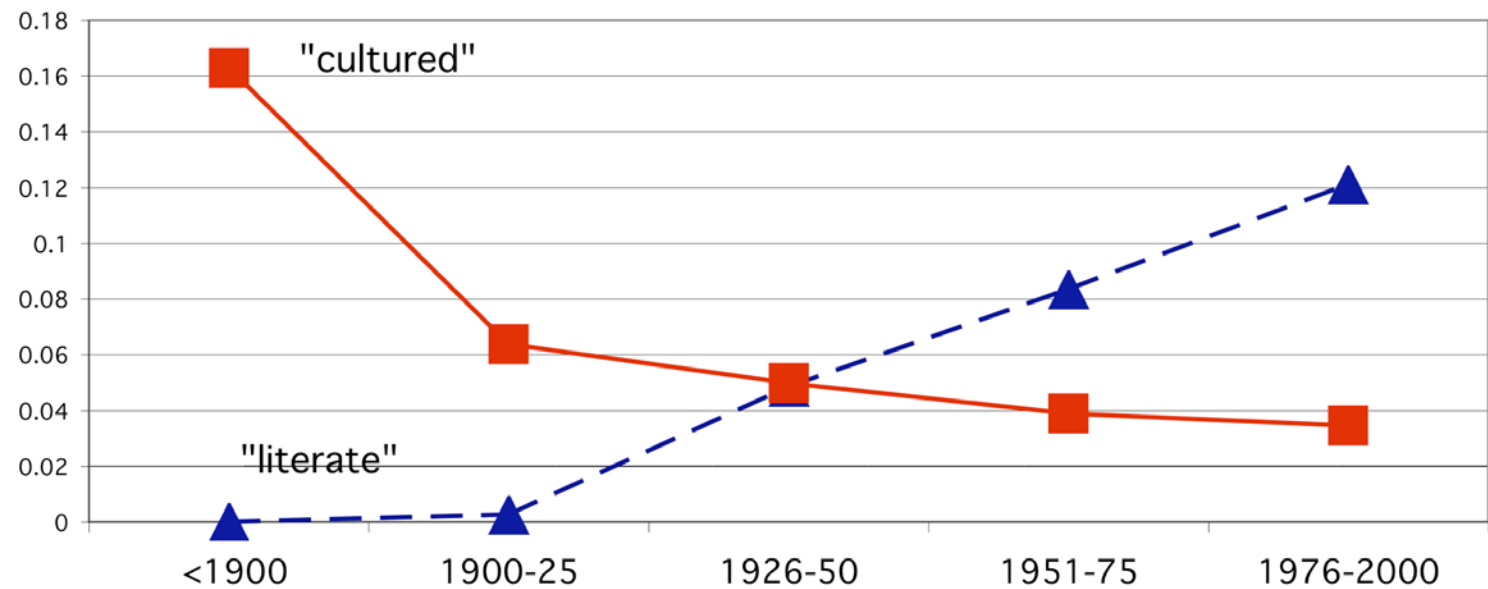
"Go to the nearest Carnegie Library and examine its catalog of books. The chances are five to one that you will find the place full of literary bilge and as bare of good books as a Boston bookshop." H. L. Mencken, 1928





# The Triumph of "Literacy": 1900-2000

Frequencies of *literate* and *cultured* in JSTOR  
Journals in Education and Language and Literature  
( normalized for corpus size)





# Extension of “Literacy” to Other Fields

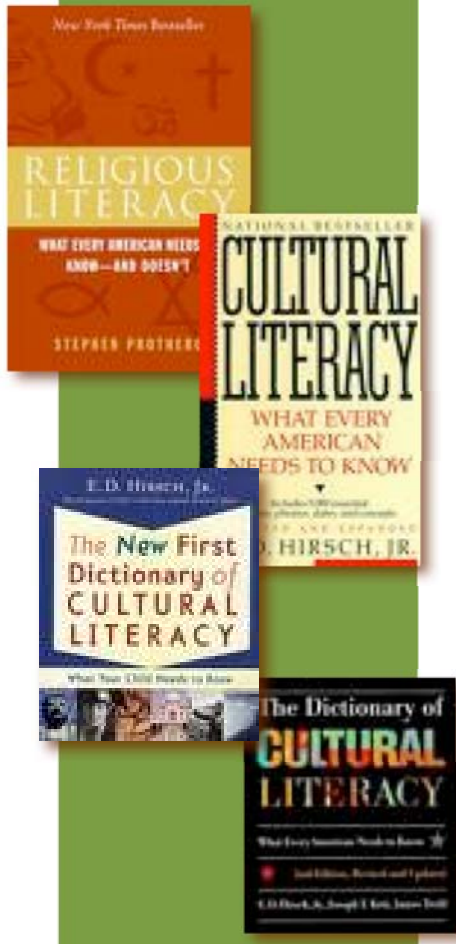
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[Bennington promotes] the development of literacy in all the important aspects of our cultural heritage. This does not mean merely verbal literacy. ... Bennington is attempting the uphill task of including the nonverbal disciplines of art and science, and this involves a great deal of teaching of elementary literacy, neglected at present in the lower schools except in the verbal subjects. "The Bennington Idea," Lewis Webster Jones, *Jrnl. Ed. Soc.*, 1947

“Economic literacy” from 1950. Soon after: geographic, historical literacy, media literacy, etc.



# Extension of “Literacy” to Other Fields



“Cultural literacy” from E. D. Hirsch: "What every American needs to know," "the basic information needed to thrive in the modern world"

What [Jeanne S. Chall] calls world knowledge I call cultural literacy, namely, the network of information that all competent readers possess. It is the background information, stored in their minds, that enables them to take up a newspaper and read it with an adequate level of comprehension, getting the point, grasping the implications, relating what they read to the unstated context which alone gives meaning to what they read.

List includes: Juno, Sir Galahad, Blarney Stone, apple of discord, "Don't give up the ship," "Close, but no cigar," *éminence grise*, golden parachute, Fabian tactics, *ergo*, NIMBY, Eucharist, François Rabelais, Tomas de Torquemada, yarmulke, personal pronoun, Count Basie, W.C. Fields, Walter Lippmann, Foggy Bottom...



## What does “Literacy” entail?

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“Literacy” becomes a way of claiming status for a subject or body of material as a “basic” form of knowledge, necessary to economic growth, personal well-being and the health of public discourse.

Implies modularity of “basic knowledge” -- Cf Hirsch’s list.

Invests subject with civic importance -- what students “must know” for reasons of:

- Personal development/advancement

- Social controllability

- General social & economic welfare

- Health of public discourse



# Why is “Information Literacy” Deemed Important?

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## “The Importance of Information Literacy to Individuals, Business, and Citizenship” (ACRL Report)

Information literacy... is a means of personal empowerment. It allows people to verify or refute expert opinion and to become independent seekers of truth.

...There is ample evidence that those who learn now to achieve access to the bath of knowledge that already envelops the world will be the future's aristocrats of achievement, and that they will be far more numerous than any aristocracy in history.

Every day lack of timely and accurate information is costly to American businesses.





# Why is “Information Literacy” Deemed Important?

“The Importance of Information Literacy to Individuals, Business, and Citizenship” (ACRL Report)

It is unfortunate that the very people who most need the empowerment inherent in being information literate are the least likely to have learning experiences which will promote these abilities. Minority and at-risk students, illiterate adults, people with English as a second language, and economically disadvantaged people are among those most likely to lack access to the information that can improve their situations

To say that information literacy is crucial to effective citizenship is simply to say it is central to the practice of democracy. Any society committed to individual freedom and democratic government must ensure the free flow of information to all its citizens in order to protect personal liberties and to guard its future.