

Literacy

by Robert A. Houston

Between ca. 1500 and ca. 1800 most Western European societies moved decisively from restricted to mass literacy. This article outlines the spectrum of skills that made up early modern literacy, charts the changing social and geographical distribution of literacy in early modern Europe, offers economic, religious, political and cultural (including linguistic) explanations for change and assesses the importance of this momentous change for European social development after 1800. It deals not only with reading, writing and counting, but also with communication processes that encompassed the worlds of oral, aural and visual culture.

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Introduction: The Literacies of Early Modern Europe

Between the Renaissance and the age of Romanticism, Europe experienced the beginnings of a profound transformation from restricted to mass literacy. In 1500 very few people could read and write, but by 1800 a majority of adults in north-western Europe were literate, some able to enjoy an unprecedented volume and variety of print and writing.¹

▲ 1

Early modern literacy was made up of several skills, which are best seen in terms of bands in a spectrum of communication rather than discrete categories. The reading of print or writing was possible at two levels. Some people could decipher texts, read them aloud and memorise them in a mechanical or ritual way, though their personal understanding may have been questionable. They possessed intermediate or semi-literacy. Those with a better education who were more deeply immersed in printed and written culture could comprehend the text with greater precision, reading and thinking silently to themselves. They could understand new texts as well as familiar ones. However, "reading" was not restricted to written or printed words alone. People could gather information and ideas from looking: interpreting pictures and prints in broadsheets and "chapbooks" (pamphlets) or watching and participating in plays and processions.

▲ 2

If they wanted to transmit their own thoughts other than through speech, people had to learn to write, or rather compose – an advanced skill which required considerable training and practice, and which effectively meant "full" literacy for most people. The other, more common, level of writing was copying: writing without necessarily understanding. It was at this stage that people learned to sign their names on documents, and this ability is commonly used as an indicator that someone could read and understand printed and written texts in the language they used in everyday life. Literacy comprised a spectrum of skills including a facility with prose, documents and numeracy. Historians can examine prose literacy (reports on, or summaries of, tests of reading ability) or elements of document literacy (signing a court deposition, contract, or marriage certificate), but quantitative historical studies of numeracy are few. At one level, doing sums was an essential part of everyday life and the inability to count up to ten or to deal with money was a way of identifying the mentally impaired in civil court processes. Beyond that, reckoning had been equated with reasoning by the seventeenth-century English thinker Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) (→ [Media Link #ac](#)) and even the celebrated Scottish philosopher David Hume (1711–1776) (→ [Media Link #ad](#)) spared "abstract reasoning concerning quantity and number" from his penetrating scepticism. According to Hugo Grotius (1583–1645) (→ [Media Link #ae](#)) in *On the Law of War and*

Peace, "God himself cannot make twice two not be four" (Book 1, Cap. 1, Title X, 5). The new eighteenth-century vocational training for business, trade and the military all included substantial components of arithmetic and mathematics, promoting a greater familiarity with numbers and precision in their use.²

▲ 3

Further along the spectrum, a small minority of men could also copy or compose in Latin, the international language of learning throughout the Middle Ages and the early modern period, or in another pan-European language like French, giving them "full" literacy. Even those who had none of these skills were not culturally isolated for they could listen, i.e. hear a priest's sermons (→ Media Link #af) or a friend reading aloud or participate actively or passively in discussions with their peers.³ Gesture remained a subtle and important form of non-verbal communication and there were many other "languages" such as ways of giving and receiving gifts that created a rich world of interaction and exchange, power and persuasion.⁴ Literacy is a relative concept that has meaning only in specific economic and social contexts, but historians tend to rely on universal, standard and direct indicators such as the ability to sign one's name on a document. Using this measure it is clear that there were social distinctions in the ability to use a writing instrument throughout the early modern period. Men were more literate than women, rich more than poor, Protestants more than Catholics and town dwellers more than countryside folk.

▲ 4

Determinants and Dynamics of Literacy

The enduring inequalities in literacy that existed in early modern Europe came out of the socially selective impact of the forces for change. The ability to read and write was a function of access to schooling, demand for basic learning, opportunities to practice it and prevailing social and cultural attitudes to literacy. Commercial, religious, administrative and intellectual "revolutions" of the fifteenth century onwards enhanced the access to education and fuelled a growing demand for instruction. The chances of being educated and of acquiring literacy depended on a wide variety of factors in historic Europe: wealth, sex, inheritance laws, projected job opportunities, employments for children and even the language a person spoke. Thus literacy grew because of "push" and "pull" factors. For example, there was the push of religiously inspired (not just Protestant, but also Catholic) educational campaigns. There was the pull of personal religious needs and economic incentives such as a desire for social or geographical mobility. More schools were provided just as more were demanded. Schools were important to learning, but were nowhere compulsory and, because of costs, many children received only a very brief and basic education (→ Media Link #ag). In Sweden and other Scandinavian countries, mass reading ability was achieved almost entirely by learning at home because of the lack of schools among the dispersed and overwhelmingly rural population.⁵ Alpine and Pyrenean areas, too, had strong traditions of self-teaching and of peripatetic pedagogues – and high literacy.⁶ These northern and upland regions show that low levels of economic development, when compared with Europe's material heartland, were not necessarily a barrier to literacy.

▲ 5

The Swedish literacy campaign was designed to consolidate the Lutheran Reformation in that country and many of the advances in reading and writing stemmed from the religious battles of the early modern period. It is commonly asserted that Protestantism is the religion of the Book and most early educational movements came out of evangelical needs. The Duchy of Württemberg had 89 schools in 1520 compared with over 400 by 1600 and across Germany in this period many rulers issued ordinances providing for or regulating elementary education.⁷ Indeed, Protestant countries tended to be more literate than Catholic ones and where the faiths co-existed, as in France, Ireland and the Low Countries, Calvinists were usually more educated than Catholics.⁸

▲ 6

On closer inspection, however, the picture is less clear cut than this simple dichotomy might suggest. Protestants came disproportionately from the artisan, merchant and professional ranks of society, which were characteristically more literate than the lower classes of farmers and labourers. In the north of Ireland during the seventeenth century Protestant farmers were more able to sign their names than Catholic ones, but they were also richer and lived in less remote areas.⁹ Protestants, though, were not invariably superior to Catholics. The Protestant Vaucluse (Provence) had lower literacy in the early nineteenth century than the Catholic Swabian province of Baden, the reason for this being that the German region had more communal property and could thus subsidize schooling.¹⁰

▲ 7

Even vigorous campaigns such as that of Lutheran Pietists in the century after ca. 1680 only slowly overcame broader social factors that created disparities in literacy, leaving pronounced local and regional variations. There was a dramatic improvement in the signing ability of manorial peasants on certain Jutland (northern Denmark) estates during the eighteenth century. Four-fifths of men could not sign around 1720, compared with just one-tenth by 1800. This created a huge gulf in literacy compared with an estate near Odense in the southern province of Fünen, where illiteracy hovered near 90% throughout the century. The gap was not bridged until the middle of the nineteenth century thanks to a continuing fall in illiteracy in the south and a rise in the north, with both areas settling at 30% male illiteracy.¹¹ This example also demonstrates a common pattern: the progress of literacy was far from uniform or consistent. Against a background of rising literacy across eighteenth-century Europe, the ability to sign actually fell in parts of Poland in the second half of the eighteenth century due to political and military disruptions.

▲ 8

At some levels, the dynamic Catholicism of the Counter-Reformation produced results comparable with the Protestant heartlands. Just 40% of the accused adults examined by Spanish inquisitions knew the Ten Commandments well in the 1560s and 1570s compared with 80% by the 1590s, while the proportions of those considered crassly ignorant fell from 50% to under 10%.¹² Campaigns in France, Spain and Italy emphasised memorisation over reading, because Catholic clergy were cautious about unguided reading. Churches interested in the transmission of an approved message tended to focus on the rote learning of prayers and catechisms, and on the (directed) reading of the Bible or other religious texts, something that was as true of Lutheranism as it was of Catholicism. Indeed, the distinction between the faiths was often more subtle than the crude differences in literacy rates – but no less important. Protestants and Catholics had different views on the uses and importance of literacy. Reading scriptures was central to the reformed faith: even if, for Lutherans, instruction focused on catechisms and psalters (→ Media Link #aj) rather than on canonical Bibles, religious books were probably read more frequently among Protestants and the very status of reading was special, especially for Calvinists.¹³ Protestants tended to own more books on a wider variety of religious topics than their Catholic neighbours and to use them differently, accepting the overwhelming authority of what they knew or thought was in a religious book and treating it as a symbol rather than just a resource.

▲ 9

The Reformation dawned on European societies where literacy was restricted. At the end of the Middle Ages, the ability to write was restricted to less than 10% of men and hardly any women possessed it. This fundamental division between the sexes persisted for centuries and throughout the early modern period male achievements almost always overshadowed those by women. For example, one bridegroom in three could not sign Amsterdam's marriage register in 1630 compared with two-thirds of brides. Until the eighteenth century the rate of improvement for men generally exceeded that for women, so that the gap between the sexes seldom narrowed. Amsterdam brides and grooms both saw illiteracy fall between 1680 and 1780: males from 30% illiteracy to 15% and females from 56% to 36%.¹⁴ The literacy of townspeople also grew more quickly than that of rural dwellers and the wealthier merchants and professionals inhabited city centres where concentrations of reading and writing ability were especially high, distinguishing them even from suburban dwellers. By the mid-eighteenth century London and Paris had literacy levels of over 90%, which would not be achieved nationally until the late nineteenth century. In Eastern and Southern Europe nearly the only literate people were town dwellers and rural landowners. The aspect of urban concentration helps explain the high overall literacy of the Netherlands while a rural society like that of Southern Spain, where most people were poor peasants or labourers, had low levels and the main towns were the beacons of literacy.¹⁵ In the great cities of northern Italy, too, schooling had been widely available during the Renaissance, with artisans and traders showing levels comparable to the towns of north-west Europe in the seventeenth century.¹⁶

▲ 10

The change in literacy rates was halting and irregular. Judged by signing, the most pronounced early expansion occurred among the middle and upper classes, among men and in towns. In northern England the illiteracy of the gentry fell from about 30% in 1530 to almost nil in 1600, but that of day labourers stayed well above 90%.¹⁷ Different groups reached "ceilings" or "plateaux" at different times, from which it might take decades to move beyond. The extent of divisions between social groups also varied geographically and over time. In the sixteenth century when literacy was restricted, virtually all those who could read and write came from the landlord, mercantile and professional classes. Beneath them lay a yawning chasm of illiteracy. This stark differentiation was tempered over time as more members of the middle and lower classes like artisans and farmers acquired literacy skills.

▲ 11

For England, lowland Scotland, the Netherlands, north-western Germany and north-eastern France, an expansion of literacy for the middling ranks had occurred by the end of the seventeenth century. For men at least, Castile in the sixteenth century had been on a par with France and England until the second quarter of the seventeenth century. Between ca. 1620 and ca. 1740, however, it failed to develop at the same rate. The literacy of Castilian women crept up only marginally between ca. 1500 and 1740.¹⁸ The second half of the eighteenth century was better for women everywhere in Western Europe. Female literacy grew much more rapidly than male literacy in northern France in the two generations before the Revolution (→ Media Link #ak) thanks to the work of nuns in teaching orders, while in parts of north-western Germany girls began to receive instruction in arithmetic for the first time. Currents of change ebbed as well as flowed.¹⁹ For centuries the leaders in raising literacy, some early industrial towns of Britain and the southern Low Countries saw falling levels in the late eighteenth century as population growth swamped the social infrastructure and child employment created a disincentive for education.²⁰ An important lay voluntary sector, providing Sunday and evening schools, emerged to fill the gap, building on native traditions of self-help, but also following centuries of comparable initiatives in the towns of Catholic Europe.²¹

▲ 12

Language and Literacy

The pace of change was very slow in the east and south, but across much of north-west Europe literacy increased and therefore more options for communication became available. Options about what to read and write depended not only on the possession of the skills of deciphering and forming letters, but also on the language(s) people knew. Until the second half of the seventeenth century the majority of printed books were in Latin. Those with classical training (perhaps one or two per cent of the population) were part of a pan-European culture in the age of the Renaissance, but theirs was a circle that excluded the "illiterate" – the medieval term for those unable to speak, read and write Latin. Latin remained important as a core subject in post-elementary education throughout the early modern period and much culture, even in the age of Enlightenment, was the classical culture of the ancient Greeks and Romans. During the eighteenth century, speaking, reading and writing French came to replace Latin for cultural and intellectual purposes – at least for the elites of Catholic and perhaps Orthodox Europe. French became the preferred language both for diplomacy and for the international exchange of ideas. Eighteenth-century Eastern European aristocrats spoke and wrote French throughout the early modern period, though Church Slavonic was the more commonly used language of learning and literacy in Russia. Both were equally alien to everyday speech for the mass of the peasantry.²²

▲ 13

The example of Russia shows that "learned versus vernacular" was only one of many linguistic oppositions in early modern Europe. The vernacular was increasingly used in education, print, government and administration. Yet even within small countries many tongues could be spoken (→ Media Link #am), which had important implications for literacy. Seven out of ten of the inhabitants of Wales knew no English and could speak only Welsh in 1800. France was a linguistic patchwork. In 1790, French (*langue d'oïl*) was the dominant language in just 15 of 89 *départments*; out of a population of ca. 28 million, six million French could not understand French at all; a further six million could understand it, but spoke it only imperfectly; 30 patois were spoken plus foreign languages like Flemish, German or Basque; only three million could speak French "properly".²³ The linguistic and literacy maps of Europe resembled each other: in areas where the language of everyday life was not that of instruction, interaction with outside authority or printed literature, literacy tended to remain low. Regions of France where the *langue d'oc* predominated remained less literate than those that used the *langue d'oïl* until the twentieth century. Western Ireland presents another example. Roughly 55–60% of those born in the 1770s spoke only Irish. Three-quarters of those in the western counties of Munster, Connacht and Donegal (with 45% of the population) were Irish speakers at the end of the eighteenth century, compared with just 10% in the remaining 20 counties, which had 55% of Ireland's population. Eastern Ireland was in effect literate Ireland. The prevalence of Irish speaking was also low and literacy high in much of Ulster because of the predominance of English-speaking Presbyterians, many of whom were of Scottish origin or descent.²⁴

▲ 14

Reading and Orality: Ways of Communicating

Much research into early modern literacy has focused on the ability to write and most quantitative analysis has adopted this measure. However, literacy "is above all a technology or set of techniques for communications and for decoding

and reproducing written or printed materials".²⁵ There are indeed many reasons to believe that reading was a more widespread skill. Children of the lower social classes, who made up 50–90% of the European population, generally received no more than 3 to 4 years of education, if they were schooled at all. This meant they learned only to read. For adults, reading had more religious and recreational value than writing, which was by no means essential to everyday life. Thus it might have been the case that in countries like Italy and France during the eighteenth century two or three women could read for every one woman who could write. Churches that focused on this basic skill had more rapid success than those that tried to promote schooling. As noted earlier, the Lutheran campaign for religious literacy in Scandinavia produced remarkable results. As late as the mid-seventeenth century just a third of adults were able to pass the church's tests for reading, but a century later more than four out of five men and women could read set religious texts.

▲ 15

Directly or indirectly, studies showing apparently extensive reading suggest that cultural access was much broader than what is implied by the figures for signing. Yet "reading" often meant memorisation and, without practice, the reading skills possessed by many ordinary people meant they were ill-equipped to discover the new literature of the Renaissance, the Reformation and the Enlightenment. That print and writing may therefore have had a limited impact on ordinary people who were ostensibly "readers" is plain from the social distribution of book ownership and the sorts of titles people had in their collections. Book ownership of the kind recorded in post mortem inventories was growing (notably in France and England), but it remained principally the preserve of middling and upper class males. The 3,931 subscribers to the first edition of the Enlightenment's "Bible", Denis Diderot (1713–1784) (→ Media Link #ao) and Jean le Rond d'Alembert's (1717–1783) (→ Media Link #ap) *Encyclopédie* (1751–1765), must have been affluent to afford its high price. Nevertheless, we must be alert to the possibility that reading was more widespread than writing, especially among poorer men and women as a whole. After all, women of the *haute bourgeoisie* or the landed classes (and especially unmarried ones it seems) read periodicals and novels, used circulating libraries, joined reading societies, attended the theatre and concerts, collected prints and bought paintings. Women also seem to have been a crucial part of the anticipated audience for Enlightenment literature. Book production grew dramatically. Perhaps 150–200 million copies may have been turned out during the sixteenth century and 1,500 million copies were printed in the eighteenth century, feeding on and nourished by the growing literacy.²⁶ The writing of familiar letters (→ Media Link #aq) became commonplace among the middling and upper classes of north-western Europe.²⁷

▲ 16

Yet literate female writers in these classes were not typical and there remained a climate of scepticism about educating women beyond the limits of the conventional sphere. The existence of social forms, which privileged visual, spoken and sung communication (such as the French *veillée* or evening gathering and the German *Spinnstube* or spinning circle) and which were dominated by ordinary women, suggests that their cultural lives continued to be shaped in terms of an oral/aural and visual framework.²⁸ Males were educated to participate in the public sphere and women in the private or domestic one. This usually meant that girls gained religious knowledge, learned to read and were given practical instruction in gendered skills like "housewifery". In Mediterranean countries where gender roles were most firmly delineated, it was long held to be positively undesirable to train girls in more than the rudiments of religious morality. These gendered attitudes are most obvious in regions of Europe where literacy was less valued. In the south of Italy and in parts of Eastern Europe such as Hungary, reading and writing were uncommon for either sex. The people of these regions actively preferred oral testimony and scribal records to written and holograph forms, a cultural mindset that was not changed until the nineteenth or even twentieth century. Even in areas where signing ability was more extensive, peasant populations continued to rely on oral communication and learning-by-doing for most of life's needs.²⁹

▲ 17

For all the obstacles, dead ends and inconsistencies in the development of reading and writing, literacy certainly expanded between 1500 and 1800. What can be said about its uses? Reading tastes changed, notably from the practical to the recreational. New value was placed on originality and novelty in writing. The real growth area in reading material was not the staple texts, which people perused carefully, but the more varied, ephemeral, and entertaining fare that was becoming available. Readers ranged more widely among literary forms, where previously they had focused on a few texts. Between 1700 and 1789, 1,200 French language periodicals of at least one year's duration were published. History and travel books became more popular.³⁰ While by all measures literacy was on the rise in the eighteenth century, not everyone could enjoy its products, possibly for reasons of cost and availability or because of limited education. As late as 1750, one authority assigns critical reading ability in the German lands to just 10% of the population, while another reports that fewer than 5% of the men in part of northern France were reckoned "well educated" in surveys conducted in 1802 and 1804.³¹ The fully literate indulged themselves in its novelties – a sort of reading frenzy – while

the semi-literate remained within their traditional mental world. In his autobiography, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832) (→ Media Link #ar) recounted childhood memories of enjoying chapbooks about magic, chivalry and saints, which had changed little for centuries. Europe was well on the way to mass basic literacy by 1800, but there were still pronounced divisions in access to and uses of literacy's products.

▲ 18

In the late seventeenth century, literacy played a far greater role in people's lives than it had in the late fifteenth century. By 1800 it was central to economic, social and cultural life in north-western Europe. Among other things, it had become an integral part of bourgeois and elite sociability, which was a keynote of the Enlightenment and the cornerstone of the new "public sphere" of broadly based political criticism.³² Literacy's products were mulled over and modified, dissected and developed in salons, coffee houses and taverns. Theatres and concert halls enhanced the role of the oral and the visual. This was, nevertheless, a new cultural world which depended on fluent reading and easy access to print culture.³³ Literacy had become a vital link in the chain of communication and reading and writing skills were being used differently. Texts began to take on different social and psychological functions. Those read aloud in clubs had the specific function of bringing people together, while personal reading was a supplement to, rather than a substitute for, convivial and sociable interactions.³⁴ In an age when virtue, happiness and taste acquired new social and cultural meanings, late eighteenth-century diaries and autobiographies were increasingly written to explain, express and improve the secular self, rather than serving as an opportunity for spiritual and moral reflection as in the seventeenth-century.³⁵

▲ 19

Change came slowly, but the potentially revolutionary impact of literacy is plain. The ability to decipher letters, words, phrases and sentences and then, perhaps, even compose texts was a skill that opened many doors. The conservative aspirations of early education campaigns were quickly transcended as men and women began to read, contemplate and discuss the scriptures, providing their own independent responses to the messages of the written word. In the eighteenth century, newspapers flourished in Northern Europe, feeding on political differences, but also tapping into extensive literacy and a hunger for its products, thus helping to create a well-informed, articulate and potent public opinion. English newspapers were numerous, cheap, widely distributed and largely uncensored. Furthermore, approximately a quarter of their space was devoted to advertisements – as befitted "a polite and commercial people".³⁶ French newspapers of the eighteenth century were almost exclusively devoted to government-approved reporting of politics. Subscriptions, moreover, were expensive and their circulations were limited.³⁷

▲ 20

The periodical press is a reminder of the potential of writing and print to make an impact, but also of its dependence on existing social and cultural attitudes and political structures. Growing literacy might have simply created demand for more of what people had always read. Pious books made up nearly half of those owned at death in nine western French towns around 1700 compared with less than 30% in 1789. The most striking feature of German book ownership of ordinary people in town and country alike is the continued significance of religion in an allegedly more secular age. Even in the closing decades of the eighteenth century, no more than a fifth of books owned by people from Tübingen had an obviously secular subject matter, and in the Württemberg village of Laichingen the figure was close to zero. Book ownership was largely stimulated by Lutheran Pietism rather than by Enlightenment precepts. This does not mean that change did not occur, for it may be that the population of the eighteenth-century was more interested in devotions and meditations on practical morality rather than on old-style divinity. Yet as late as 1800 and across south-west Germany, works of modern literature were largely to be found in the libraries of the upper classes.³⁸

▲ 21

Conclusion: 1800 and Beyond

The last two centuries have seen a titanic struggle between secular and ecclesiastical powers for control of the crucial resource of education.³⁹ The state could ultimately claim victory and is now the principal organiser of education, even if it was not originally responsible for the transition from restricted to mass literacy. Its role was to pass permissive or prescriptive legislation rather than to provide much in the way of funding. Regarding curricula, governments endorsed best practice rather than introducing it. Many of the advances in literacy were stimulated or facilitated by the state, yet most of Western Europe achieved mass literacy long before the introduction of compulsory, universal and free education because parents, local communities, the church and influential figures drove most educational developments. Only

in those "enlightened absolutist" states with cameralistic policies and a pressing need for administrators and soldiers was there anything like a public provision of education.⁴⁰ Even then the training provided was small-scale and specific, with changes being realised only slowly. When a law was passed in 1774 by Maria Theresa of Austria (1717–1780) (→ Media Link #as) obliging all children aged six and above to be sent to school, only some 30,000 attended, perhaps a sixth of those of "school age". By 1784, the figure had risen to 119,000 – around three-fifths of those eligible – and to nine-tenths by 1828. Opposition on the grounds of cost to Joseph II's (1741–1790) (→ Media Link #at) plans to abolish all tuition fees in elementary schools resulted in a compromise where boys were enrolled free, while parents were charged for educating their daughters.⁴¹

▲ 22

Understanding modern European literacy is impossible without an appreciation of the social, cultural, intellectual and political forces that promoted or hindered its historical development. It was only in the late nineteenth century that regular and extended school attendance became a central part of the educational process for British children and not until after 1945 in Eastern and Southern Europe. Around 1900, Western Europe was divided between a literate, economically developed and largely Protestant north, a centre with pronounced regional variations, notably France, and a less literate, underdeveloped south, notably Italy. Vast areas of Eastern Europe, furthermore, resembled the far south. The sometimes painfully slow pace of change and the late arrival of mass literacy find their most extreme example in Portugal. Of those inhabitants over seven years of age in 1890, 76% were illiterate, falling only slightly to 74% in 1900 and 70% in 1911. The figure was still 68% in 1930 and it was not until the 1940s that more than half of Portugal's population could read and write – more than a century after England and one and a half centuries after north-west Germany and lowland Scotland had reached that threshold. The legacy of early modern developments created subtler but equally enduring divisions, even in countries that could boast near-universal literacy in 1800. As late as 1921, 30% of Finland's people could not read and write, an achievement inferior to the rate in Italy at that time.⁴² The legacies of early modern literacy are still with us today.

▲ 23

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Appendix

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