

## Introduction

Download the LearnEnglish Themes podcast. You'll find more information on this page:  
<http://www.britishcouncil.org/learnenglish-podcasts-themes.htm>

This support pack contains the following materials:

- The article that you can listen to in the podcast
- An optional language activity based on the article
- Links to other activities on the LearnEnglish website on this theme (literacy).

## Read the article

### Illiteracy

by Linda Baxter

I've written this article and you're reading it. So we are members of the same club. We're both literate - we can read and write. And we both probably feel that literacy is essential to our lives. But millions of people all over the world are illiterate. Even in industrialised western countries, such as the UK and the USA, approximately 20% of the population have 'low literacy levels'. But what exactly does that mean?

My parents both left school at 14. They could read and write, but except for a quick look at the daily newspaper, reading and writing didn't play a big part in their lives. There were very few books in the house. My mother was amazed because the woman who lived next door always wrote a list of what she needed before she went to the supermarket. Why couldn't she remember? We laughed about that for weeks. Our family didn't write lists! And when I was only 14 years old my father gave me an important letter that he'd written to the bank and asked me to check it for grammar and spelling mistakes. And there were quite a lot. He never usually wrote letters or postcards or even Christmas cards. So when he had to write he wasn't comfortable or confident. Does that mean that my father had a 'low level of literacy'? I don't think so.

### What is illiteracy?

There are lots of different definitions of literacy. Some experts define it as having the reading and writing skills that you need to be independent in your everyday life. So, for example, if you can read instructions, write a cheque, fill in a form, - anything that you need to do in everyday life - then you are 'functionally literate'.

Other people say that you are illiterate if you *think* that you are illiterate. In other words, if you feel that you can't read or write as well as you would like to.

If you live in a society where most people are literate then you will feel ashamed or embarrassed and avoid situations in which you have to read or write. The father of a friend of mine finally admitted to his family that he couldn't read when he was 45 years old. He bought the newspaper every day and pretended to read it - and believe it or not, his family had no idea.

### Literacy in the past

We often forget that writing is a recent invention. Many years ago, the word 'literate' meant being able to communicate well in speaking, in other words what we now call 'articulate'. Story telling was an important activity in the past and still is today in some societies. Reading was often a co-operative activity - someone would read aloud to a group, often from a religious text such as the Koran or the Bible.

Only a hundred years ago, in the United States, you were considered to be literate if you could sign your name to a piece of paper. It was an important skill. You were not allowed to vote if you couldn't sign the voting register, so literacy was connected with political rights, and many people were excluded from the democratic process.

Nowadays we see reading and writing as being connected, but that wasn't so in the past. Many people could read, but not write. Writing was a skilled profession. If you needed something written then you paid an expert to write it for you.

And of course, rich and important people have always employed people to write things for them. Important company bosses dictated letters to their secretaries or personal assistants. And now with new computer software you can dictate directly to your computer.

### Is literacy important?

Being illiterate can have a big effect on people's lives. For example, a study in the UK showed that people who write and spell badly are seen as careless, immature and unreliable, and often unintelligent. So it is more difficult for them to

find jobs, even when reading and writing are not necessary for the work.

World-wide statistics show that literacy problems are associated with poverty and a lack of political power. More women than men are illiterate. Illiterate people have worse health, bigger families and are more likely to go to prison. So literacy campaigns must be a good thing. But don't forget that an illiterate person, or someone with a low level of literacy, isn't necessarily stupid or ignorant - and may not be unhappy at all. Knowledge and wisdom isn't only found in writing.

### After reading

#### Exercise 1

For each of the 8 questions choose the best answer.

1. What are the literacy statistics in industrialised western countries?
  - a. 20% of the population can't read or write.
  - b. 20 % of the population can't read or write very well.
  - c. 20% of the population can read but can't write.
2. Why didn't the writer's mother write a list when she went to the supermarket?
  - a. She couldn't read and write.
  - b. She could remember what she needed to buy.
  - c. She didn't like writing.
3. How did the writer help her father with important letters?
  - a. She wrote them for him.
  - b. She typed them for him.
  - c. She corrected them for him.
4. What does 'functionally literate' mean?
  - a. You can read and write well enough to do the things that you need to do.
  - b. You would like to be able to read and write better.
  - c. You can read as well as everyone else in your society.

5. What did the word 'literate' mean many years ago?
  - a. Being able to read a religious book.
  - b. Being able to remember stories.
  - c. Being articulate.
6. How was literacy defined in the United States a hundred years ago?
  - a. Being able to sign your name.
  - b. Being able to read but not write.
  - c. Being able to dictate a letter to someone else.
7. What did the study in the UK show?
  - a. That intelligent people are usually good at writing and spelling.
  - b. That bad writing and spelling give a negative impression of your personality.
  - c. That most jobs today involve reading and writing.
8. Why does the writer think that literacy campaigns are 'a good thing'?
  - a. They can fight illness and poverty.
  - b. Illiterate people are unhappy.
  - c. We learn everything from reading.

#### More activities on this topic

You'll find links to all the following activities connected to the theme of literacy at:

<http://www.britishcouncil.org/learnenglish-central-themes-literacy.htm>

- **Word games:** There are two word games: Practise idiomatic expressions using the word '**read**' and also phrasal verbs using the word '**write**'.
- **Poem: Pronunciation.** This clever and amusing poem explains why English pronunciation is so very difficult.
- **Trivia:** Everything you (n)ever wanted to know about literacy.
- There is also a literacy-related cartoons and some carefully selected external links.

**Answers to comprehension activity:** 1. b; 2. b; 3. c; 4. a; 5. c; 6. a; 7. b; 8. a