Information Literacy

A Primer for Teachers, Librarians, and other Informed People

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A FreEbook

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Foreword

We live in an Information Society. Our schools, our jobs, even our entertainments, are largely information based. Information Literacy skills are essential to fully participate in, and contribute to, the world we live in. Sadly, most modern information is "owned," filtered, and distributed by large corporate conglomerates whose sole agenda is profit and whose goal for the public is material consumerism, not enlightened citizenship.

The best hope for citizens to understand and function effectively in this data-intensive world is a comprehensive, hands-on, universal education in Information Literacy concepts and skills through the public schools. This course of study can and should be integrated with the traditional school subject areas, but it also should be considered a separate core discipline - especially for purposes of goal setting, curriculum design, and evaluation.

The need to integrate Information Literacy concepts and skills into the K-12 curriculum highlights the importance of the school library media teacher. The school library media center, with its books, catalog, computers, software, internet connection, and web site, is the information center of the school, and the library media teacher is the school's resident expert in literature, reference sources, research skills, software tools, and audio/visual hardware.

Teachers and school librarians, at all grade levels, should develop collaborative working relationships to develop Information Literacy curriculum and to teach Information Literacy skills to all students; and school administrators should actively encourage and support their efforts.

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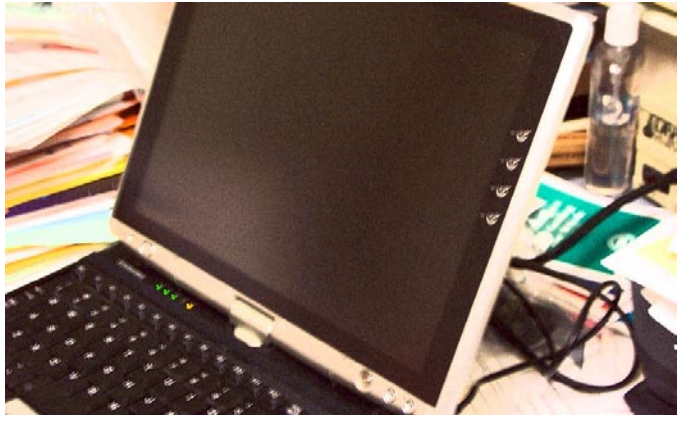
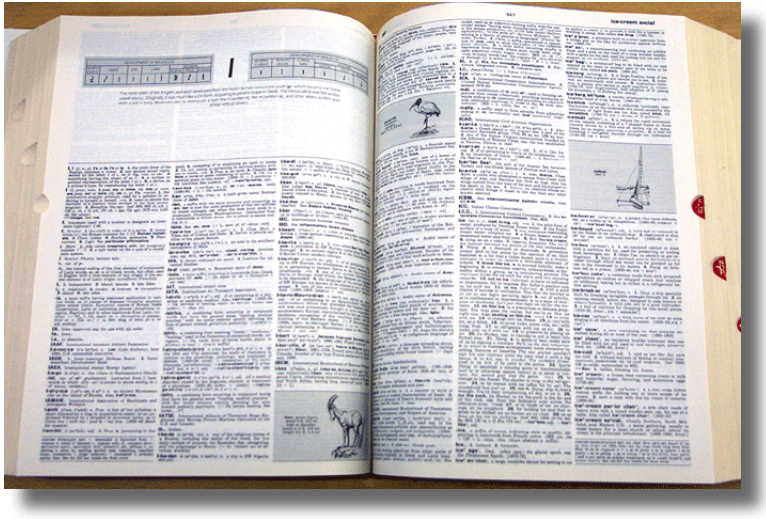


Definitions

The first problem with Information Literacy is trying to describe what it is. Since we are talking about a complex set of interrelated skills, it can be difficult to distill them into a single descriptive sentence. Nevertheless, it is important to settle on a definition because Information Literacy is the defining paradigm of modern education.

Teachers and librarians need to know that there are two official definitions of Information Literacy. The first was established by a national coalition of education groups in the United States and the second, similar, definition was adopted at an international gathering of national Information Literacy organizations.

Clearly, these are the definitions we should all be using. In addition, by adopting these definitions we can begin to move the discussion away from "What is Information Literacy?" and toward "How can we best teach Information Literacy?"



National Forum on Information Literacy

The National Forum on Information Literacy was created in response to the American Library Association's January 10, 1989 *Presidential Committee on Information Literacy: Final Report*. This report called for the formation of a "Coalition for Information Literacy in coordination with other national organizations and agencies, to promote information literacy."

The National Forum is made up of over 90 national, international, and corporate organizations. The forum meets three times a year in Washington,D.C.

The Forum works to integrate information literacy into the programs of its member organizations, supports information literacy projects in the U.S. and abroad, encourages the adoption of information literacy guidelines by educational regulatory bodies, and works with teacher education programs to help new teachers incorporate information literacy into their teaching.

"Information Literacy is defined as the ability to know when there is a need for information, and to be able to identify, locate, evaluate, and effectively use that information for the issue or problem at hand."

The Prague Declaration

The International Conference of Information Literacy Experts was held in Prague, The Czech Republic, in September 2003. The event was co-sponsored by the National Forum on Information Literacy, the National Commission on Libraries and Information Science (NCLIS), and UNESCO (Unitied Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization).

The conference included 40 participants from 23 different countries, representing all seven major geographic areas of the world. Participants noted that advancements in information and communications technologies have increased the divide between the information rich and the information poor. They pointed out that both an effective civil society and a competitive workforce require an information literate citizenry.

"Information Literacy encompasses knowledge of one's information concerns and needs, and the ability to identify, locate, evaluate, organize and effectively create, use and communicate information to address issues or problems at hand; it is a prerequisite for participating in the Information Society, and is part of the basic human right of life long learning."

United Nations Educational,
Scientific and Cultural Organization

Scope

Agreeing on a definition of Information Literacy is just the beginning. The next step is to outline the areas that should be included in this new discipline. Educators refer to this process as defining the "scope" of a field of study. The process of creating curriculum requires one to first decide upon what to include (the scope), and then to outline the order in which information will be presented (the sequence).

Discussions about Information Literacy usually center on technology, occasionally reading and writing are mentioned (at least as prerequisite skills), and sometimes you will hear someone refer to the mass media. The area that is most often overlooked is library skills. That is, of course, unless those having the discussion are librarians!

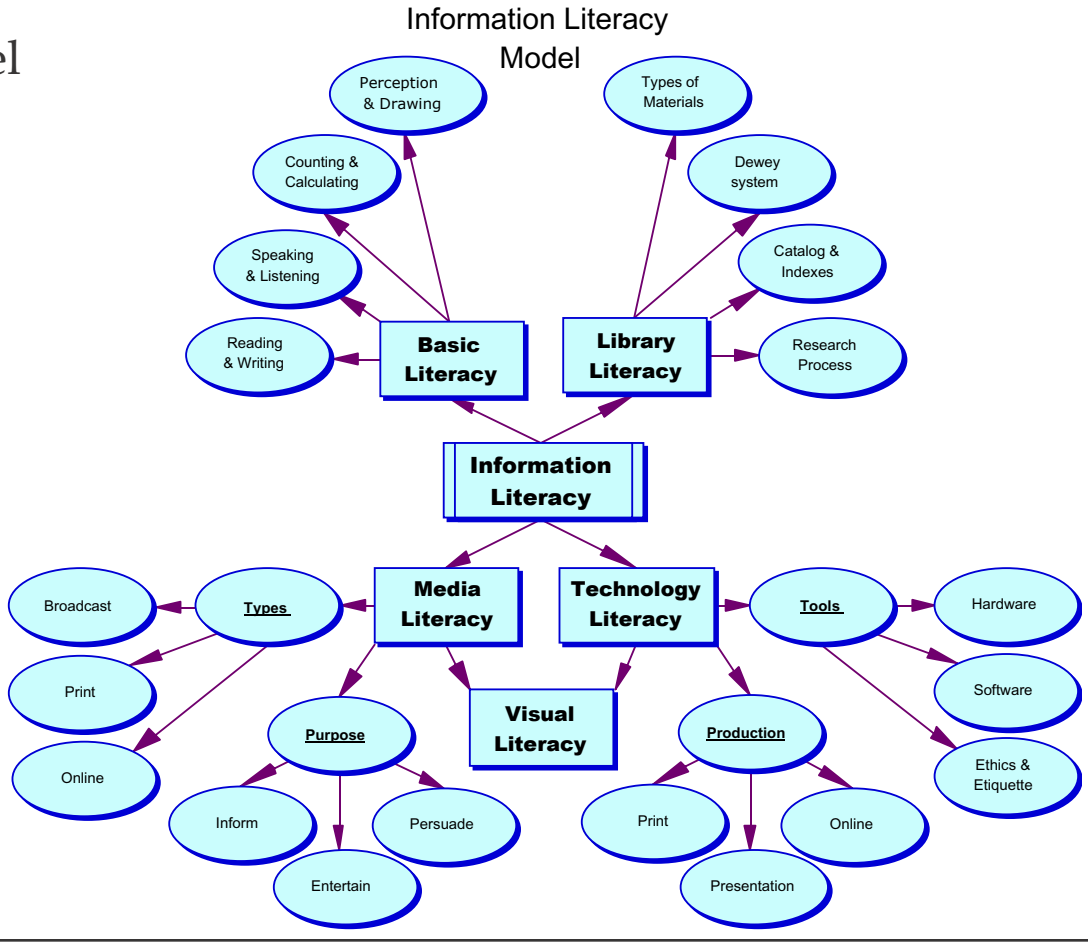
This is a serious oversight because, along with basic literacy skills, effective library skills are the key to becoming Information Literate in any discipline and in any medium.

A complete picture of Information Literacy must include five essential components: Basic Literacy, Library Literacy, Media Literacy, Technology Literacy, and Visual Literacy.

Information Literacy includes five essential components:

- **Basic Literacy**
- **Library Literacy**
- **Media Literacy**
- **Technology Literacy**
- **Visual Literacy**

The Model


Information Literacy Model
Perception & Drawing
Types of Materials
Counting & Calculating
Dewey system
Speaking & Listening
Catalog & Indexes
Reading & Writing
Basic Literacy
Library Literacy
Research Process
Information Literacy
Broadcast
Types
Media Literacy
Technology Literacy
Tools
Hardware
Print
Software
Online
Purpose
Visual Literacy
Production
Ethics & Etiquette
Inform
Persuade
Print
Online
Entertain
Presentation

Basic Literacy

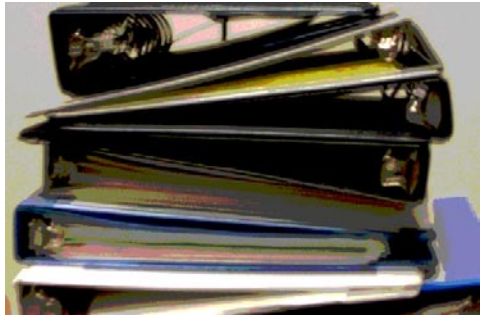
Literacy has long been defined as the ability to read and write; and "readin' and writin'" have long been considered essential components of "schoolin'." The need for reading and writing skills is based on the fact that the accumulated knowledge of humankind is largely contained in books. Those who can read and write have access to this knowledge while those who cannot read and write (ie. the illiterate) have limited opportunities in a society, and an economy, that for decades has become increasingly based on written information.

The problem is that the standard for "basic literacy" is much higher now than it used to be, and it continues to go up. In addition, basic literacy now includes a much broader range of skills than it used to. Unfortunately, too many educators don't see basic literacy as their responsibility. They seem to believe that basic literacy skills are the sole responsibility of the elementary schools. The truth is that one's literacy can and should continue to develop throughout one's childhood, adolescence, and adulthood.

Basic Literacy includes the skills of reading, writing, speaking, listening, counting, calculating, perceiving, and drawing. Every one of these skills should be taught and reinforced by every teacher, in every subject, and with gradually increasing levels of sophistication, in every grade K through 12. In our day, a person lacking any of these skills cannot truly be considered "literate."

Basic Literacy includes:

- **Reading & Writing**
- **Speaking & Listening**
- **Counting & Calculating**
- **Perception & Drawing**



Library Literacy

The school library is the most important (and often the most frequently overlooked) resource in any school. Studies repeatedly show strong positive correlations between student achievement and strong school library media programs.

The connection between the school library and Information Literacy should be obvious. The library is the place where information is stored, catalogued, indexed, and available. The library media teacher, more than any other teacher, understands how to identify, locate, evaluate, and use information.

Giving students frequent instruction and practice in Library Literacy skills is the key to creating Information Literate adults. The school library media teacher is the person best able to help students develop these skills. Unfortunately, the school librarian's opportunity to work with students depends upon the willingness of teachers to work with the school librarian. This means that any given student may or may not receive adequate practice in library skills depending upon which teachers he or she may have over the years.

Library Literacy is too important to be left to chance. Every student needs to understand the difference between fiction and non-fiction. Every student needs to know how to effectively use reference books and periodicals. Students need to understand the Dewey Decimal System as a useful, logical system of hierarchical organization and recognize its similarities to other such systems. Students should use indexes and the library catalog so often it becomes a subconscious skill. Students need to learn and use at least one information problem-solving process, such as the Big Six, to help them become metacognitively aware of of how they find, process, and use information.

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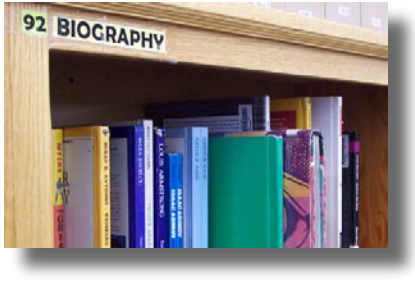

Media Literacy

The insideous thing about modern media is that it appears to be benign. Newspapers, magazines, radio, television, and the internet all seem to be be our servants, available whenever we wish, to provide our choice of information and entertainment. What we rarely stop to consider is that all of these media are operated and controlled by huge corporate media conglomerates that are more than willing to tell us what to believe, how to feel, what is important, who to vote for, and what to buy.

The public schools are the best hope for Americans to learn the skills necessary to take charge of their own lives and, as citizens, to intelligently direct the future of our democracy. The teaching of Media Literacy skills is essential if we hope for our students to become more than mindless, brainwashed, consumers.

Media Literacy includes an understanding of the many different types of media and the purposes for which they can be used. Students should be taught the difference between fact and opinion, and be able to distinguish between information, entertainment, and persuasion. They should learn that all information has a source and that knowing the source, and its biases, is an important part of understanding any information.

Educators talk about "higher order thinking" and about helping students become "more critical thinkers." Nowhere is this need greater than in helping our students become critical, even skeptical, consumers of the mass media.

"We live in increasingly complex times, and unless we teach our children how to read about, watch, interpret, understand and analyze the day's events, we risk raising a generation of civic illiterates, political ignoramuses and uncritical consumers, vulnerable not only to crackpot ideas, faulty reasoning and putative despots but fraudulent sales pitches and misleading advertising claims."

-- David Shaw, media/technology columnist for the *Los Angeles Times,* "A Plea for Media Literacy in our Nation's Schools," Published online at http://www.medialit.org/reading_room/article631.html

Technology Literacy

The explosion of information that created and defines our modern age occurred simultaneously with dramatic improvements in data creation and storage technologies. Realizing the importance of these changes, Americans have made a great effort to put computers and networking technology (including the internet) into our schools.

Early in this effort, there was a trend in the schools to offer courses and training in what was then called "computer literacy." Essentially such courses were about basic computer operations: booting the computer, saving and retrieving files, loading a program, and perhaps some rudimentary word processing skills such as "cut and paste."

Such courses are long gone now. Today even preschool children know how to run programs. It is a mistake, however, to assume that today's students are technologically literate just because they seem comfortable with computers. Like basic literacy, technology literacy is a continuum of skills that can always be improved, and, like library literacy, students receive technology experience and instruction in a hit or miss fashion depending on which teachers they may have over the years.

This is not acceptable in a society as dependent upon technology as ours. Every student deserves a wide range of educational experiences with various types of hardware and software. Every student should be thoroughly grounded in both the ethics and etiquette of technology use. Most importantly, every student should have frequent opportunities to use technological tools to create their own information artifacts — in print, on the screen, and online.

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Visual Literacy

"Visual Literacy means the skills and learning needed to view visual and audio/visual materials skeptically, critically, and knowledgeably." -- Brian Stonehill, Pomona College, Clairmont, California.

Today's students live in a visual society, but few schools teach students how to think critically about visual data. We are bombarded daily wtih visual data both in print and electronically, and yet few of us have the learning and skills necessary to view these images skeptically and knowledgeably.

The fact is that all images are created objects. As such, they cannot be value neutral. They come to us with a message from their creators, and since the creator is often a commercial artist, the message is often a commercial message.

No model looks, in real life, like she does on the cover of a magazine. This is because every magazine cover is "touched up" and "improved" by using tools such as Photoshop. Fortunately, the same tools used by the media are now often available to educators and students (for a price!). The best way to teach students about how the media can manipulate images and sound to create certain effects and to get certain reactions is to let students use technological tools to create and manipulate their own images and sound.

Visual Literacy is the link between Media Literacy and Technology Literacy. Media images and sound are end products created using the tools of digital technology.

"If students aren't taught the language of sound and images, shouldn't they be considered as illiterate as if they left college without being able to read or write?" -- George Lucas

Edutopia Magazine, Issue 1, Sept. 2004 (http://www.edutopia.org/magazine/ed1article.php?id=art_1160&issue=sept_04)

National Standards

The American Association of School Librarians (AASL) and the Association for Educational Communications and Technology (AECT) jointly published the "Information Literacy Standards for Student Learning" in 1998. These standards, consisting of three categories, nine standards, and twenty-nine indicators, provide "a conceptual framework and broad guidelines for describing the information-literate student."

The full text of the Standards is available in the book *Information Power: Building Partnerships for Learning* which is published by the American Library Association (ALA). The book also contains a wealth of additional useful information to support the library media teacher. *Information Power* is the must-have guidebook for every school librarian.

Information Literacy Standards for Student Learning

Information Literacy Standards

Standard 1 The student who is information literate accesses information efficiently and effectively.
Standard 2 The student who is information literate evaluates information critically and competently.
Standard 3 The student who is information literate uses information accurately and creatively.

Independent Learning Standards

Standard 4 The student who is an independent learner is information literate and pursues information related to personal interests.
Standard 5 The student who is an independent learner is information literate and appreciates literature and other creative expressions of information.
Standard 6 The student who is an independent learner is information literate and strives for excellence in information seeking and knowledge generation.

Social Responsibility Standards

Standard 7 The student who contributes positively to the learning community and to society is information literate and recognizes the importance of information to a democratic society.
Standard 8 The student who contributes positively to the learning community and to society is information literate and practices ethical behavior in regard to information and information technology.
Standard 9 The student who contributes positively to the learning community and to society is information literate and participates effectively in groups to pursue and generate information.