

Literacy

The term *literacy*, generally speaking, refers to the ability to read and write. However, scholars do not agree on a precise definition of the word or on how to determine literacy rates. One common measure of literacy is the ability to sign one's own name. Others focus on reading ability. In addition, historians distinguish between functional literacy—the ability to carry out everyday tasks—and scholarly or religious literacy.

For all these reasons, it is difficult to say just how literacy rates in Europe changed during the Renaissance. However, a few generalizations are possible. For one, literacy rates varied by region, language, [social](#) status, and gender. Second, various factors had an impact on literacy in the Renaissance. These included the scholarly use of [books](#), new methods of teaching, and the arrival of the printing press. However, scholars have not found any direct relationship between the spread of Renaissance ideas and the growth of literacy.

Literacy Rates. At the beginning of the Renaissance, European males had a literacy rate of about 5 to 10 percent. However, this number varied based on social class and location. In some urban areas, for example, merchants might have a literacy rate as high as 40 percent. In the Italian city of Florence, the overall literacy rate may have been 25 to 35 percent in the 1330s. However, there were sharp differences based on sex, wealth, social status, and occupation. In England literacy rates in males may have reached as high as 25 percent by 1530—perhaps even higher within London.

Many factors contributed to the growth of literacy during the Renaissance. Books became more widely available, and the number of schools, universities, and libraries increased. In addition, it became increasingly common to use vernacular* languages, rather than Latin, for business and legal purposes. A healthy economy may also have been a factor in rising literacy rates.

Literacy rates often differed from region to region, both within a country and throughout Europe. In Italy, the city of Florence educated between 28 and 33 percent of boys in 1480, but Venice did not educate that many males until 1586. In Spain during the 1500s, reading spread to the lower classes, and literacy rates were higher than in other parts of Europe. By 1650, 62 percent of all [men](#) in Toledo, Spain, could sign their names.

Reading and writing ability also varied based on occupation or profession. At the end of the 1500s, in the French city of Languedoc, almost all merchants were literate. Yet, in the same city, only two-thirds of all artisans*, one-tenth of all farmers, and one in a hundred laborers could sign their names. Over the centuries following the Renaissance, these social differences evened out. In Sweden, for example, the entire population could read by 1800.

The Impact of Schools. A variety of schools taught reading and writing skills during the Renaissance. Small children learned the alphabet and beginning prayers at "petty" or ABC schools. Some children then moved on to elementary schools—sometimes called grammar schools—where they learned everyday language skills. Some elementary schools, and most secondary schools, focused on teaching Latin. Only after the Renaissance did vernacular languages replace Latin in many secondary schools.

Various organizations ran schools during the Renaissance, including towns, cathedrals, parishes, and guilds*. Some schools operated by charging tuition, while others received funding from the state or from religious institutions. Some schools were boarding schools, and others were located within [walking](#) distance of the students' homes. Wealthy students might be educated privately, by tutors, whereas apprentices* studying with tradesmen learned their literacy skills on the job. In dame schools, [women](#) used their homes to teach basic skills to young children.

Some people became literate without receiving a formal education. Many learned to read and write on their own or from relatives and friends. In the 1500s and 1600s, the Protestants known as Lutherans encouraged parents to teach their children at home.

Books and Reading. As learning grew in importance during the Renaissance, reading became a more valued skill than speaking. The Renaissance scholars known as humanists* played a major role in promoting reading skills. In Italy, for example, humanists aimed to educate boys in the wisdom of the ancient Latin and Greek classics. They believed this type of education would help boys to become useful citizens and good Christians.

The Renaissance and the printing press grew up together, each supporting the other. The increased availability of books promoted the growth of libraries, both private and public. Libraries, in turn, contributed to the growth of private reading and study—although reading in groups remained a popular activity. In general, increasing literacy during the 1500s and 1600s owed less to the Renaissance and humanism than to other changes in religion, government, and the economy. However, humanists did shape the tools that brought about the rise in literacy: schools, teachers, and books.

(See also [Books and Manuscripts](#); [Education](#); [Humanism](#); [Latin Language and Literature](#); [Libraries](#); [Printing and Publishing](#).)

* **vernacular**

native language or dialect of a region or country

* **artisan**

skilled worker or craftsman

* **guild**

association of craft and trade owners and workers that set standards for and represented the interests of its members

* **apprentice**

person bound by legal agreement to work for another for a specified period of time in return for instruction in a trade or craft

* **humanist**

Renaissance expert in the humanities (the languages, literature, history, and speech and writing techniques of ancient Greece and Rome)

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