

# Short Paper 1.1: What is Literacy?

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All of the images above are taken from the first page of Google’s image search results if you look up the word “literacy.” Already you can see that *literacy* evokes a wide range of potential definitions, ideas, and representations. The Oxford English Dictionary defines *literacy* as: “The quality or state of being literate; knowledge of letters; condition in respect to education, esp. ability to read and write.” For most people, literacy is literally reading and writing. However, literacy can extend beyond just a basic “knowledge of letters.”

In fact, defining and understanding literacy is a personal, political, pedagogical, theoretical, and cultural act that affects people’s lives in many different ways and on many different levels. Rather than thinking (and writing and reading and imagining) about literacy in terms of a single, fixed definition, you should take into account how ideas about literacy have changed over time and place and varied depending on personal, social, creative, and cultural contexts.

In this course, you will be writing your own definition of literacy, your own concept of what it means to be literate (in different ways), and how and why you arrived at your literacy. The first major assignment you will write is a literacy narrative—your own story of literacy. The literacy narrative expresses, in this case briefly, your understanding, your interrogation, and your expression of literacy.

For this short paper, think about your own life, your own experiences, and your own education and write a brief definition of literacy. What is literacy to you? Consider the following questions and select two or three that you feel most interested in or compelled to answer (do not feel obligated to answer all of them like a laundry list):

- What is the purpose of literacy? What is the purpose of reading and writing, both in and outside of school?
- Have you ever encountered the word “literacy” before? In what situations? What did it mean to you then?
- What does the word “English” mean to you? If English is a foreign or additional language for you, what are your experiences learning it?
- What was your earliest writing or reading experience? How does your earlier writing and reading experiences shape your definition of literacy? How do they shape who you are as a writer today?
- How would you describe your relationship to reading and writing? Do you feel you are a stronger reader or writer?
- What struggles and what successes have you had as a reader and a writer? What are your strengths and weaknesses as a reader and writer?
- Have you experienced or encountered other kinds of “literacy” other than reading or writing? In what situations? Why are they important?

Use your in-class writing on the question “What is Literacy?” as a starting point. Consider also our in-class discussion as you try to formulate and organize your short paper. Specific answers, details, and explications are stronger than broad or generalized or abstract ones. Don’t try to cover too much!

**Turn in:** 1-2 pages, typed, no title page, proper heading, double-spaced, stapled

**Due:** Tuesday, August 21