

# What Is Digital Literacy?

## Digital Literacy: An Evolving Definition

By [Liana Heitin](#)

November 8, 2016

While the word "literacy" alone generally refers to reading and writing skills, when you tack on the word "digital" before it, the term encompasses much, much more.

[← Back to Story](#)

Sure, reading and writing are still very much at the heart of digital literacy. But given the new and ever-changing ways we use technology to receive and communicate information, digital literacy also encompasses a broader range of skills—everything from reading on a Kindle to gauging the validity of a website or creating and sharing YouTube videos.

The term is so broad that some experts even stay away from it, preferring to speak more specifically about particular skills at the intersection of technology and literacy.

The [American Library Association's digital-literacy task force](#) offers this definition: "Digital literacy is the ability to use information and communication technologies to find, evaluate, create, and communicate information, requiring both cognitive and technical skills."

More simply, Hiller Spires, a professor of literacy and technology at North Carolina State University, views digital literacy as having three buckets: 1) finding and consuming digital content; 2) creating digital content; and 3) communicating or sharing it.

### Finding and Consuming

In some formats, "consuming" digital content looks pretty much the same as reading print. Reading a novel on a basic e-reader requires knowing how to turn the device on and flip pages back and forth, but other than that, it isn't so different from reading a book. A PDF of a New York Times article looks a lot like the page of a print newspaper, except that it appears on a screen.

Donald Leu, an education professor at the University of Connecticut and a recognized authority on literacy and technology, describes this sort of digital reading as "offline

### Special Report: The Changing Face of Literacy

[Editor's Note: Learning to Read in a Digital Age](#)

[What Is Digital Literacy?](#)

[How Should Reading Be Taught in a Digital Era?](#)

[Common Core Gives Nod to Digital Skills](#)

[Teaching Shakespeare With 21st-Century Technology](#)

[Do 'Digital Natives' Prefer Paper Books to E-Books?](#)

[Startup Aims to Customize Classroom Book Selections](#)

[As Information Landscape Changes, School Librarians Take on New Roles](#)

[Read the Full Report](#)

reading."

"It's not interactive, ... there's one screen, and you just have to read it," he explained. "It's the same as reading a [paper] page."

The added skills needed for this kind of reading take just a few minutes to teach.

In comparison, what Leu calls "online reading," in which a digital text is read through the internet, requires a host of additional skills. For instance, a New York Times piece viewed on the web may contain hyperlinks, videos, audio clips, images, interactive graphics, share buttons, or a comments section—features that force the reader to stop and make decisions rather than simply reading from top to bottom.

"The text is designed so that no two readers experience it in the exact same way," said Troy Hicks, a professor of literacy and technology at Central Michigan University.

The reader determines, among other things, when to click on videos or hyperlinks, how long to stray from the initial text, and whether and how to pass the information along to others.

The process of finding digital content to read also necessitates different skills than finding print texts. In seeking print materials, students might flip through magazines or head to the library and search through stacks of books. They learn to use a table of contents and an index to locate information within a book.

But part of digital literacy is learning to search for content in an online space. Students have to query a search engine using keywords and navigate those results, including assessing the reliability of particular authors and websites.

### **Creating Content**

Digital literacy also refers to content creation. That includes writing in digital formats such as email, blogs, and Tweets, as well as creating other forms of media, such as videos and podcasts.

Renee Hobbs, a professor of communication studies at the University of Rhode Island, talks about digital authorship as "a form of social power." At a weeklong

"I read on my iPad when Iâ€™m in a car, or when Iâ€™m on a plane when Iâ€™m going to a trip. When Iâ€™m at home, I read regular books," says Shota, a 3rd grade student at Indian Run Elementary School in Dublin, Ohio.

â€”Maddie McGarvey for Education Week

professional-development institute on digital literacy held at URI this past summer, she showed examples of student activists sharing their messages about the Black Lives Matter movement through YouTube videos.

Creating digital content is a "creative and collaborative process that involves experimentation and risk-taking," she said. There's more risk-taking than in print writing because digital writing is so often meant to be shared.

### **Sharing and Communicating**

While traditional writing can be a personal endeavor, digital writing is generally intended to be communicated with others. And digital-writing tools are designed to make that easy to do.

As North Carolina State's Spires and her co-author, Melissa Bartlett, wrote in a **2012 white paper about digital literacy and learning**, "Web 2.0 tools are social, participatory, collaborative, easy to use, and are facilitative in creating online communities."

That makes digital writing a potentially powerful lever for social good, allowing students to "actively participate in civic society and **contribute to a vibrant, informed, and engaged community**," as the ALA notes.

It also makes digital writing a potentially dangerous tool—decisions about when and what to share online can have repercussions for a student's safety, privacy, and reputation.

For that reason, learning about appropriate internet behavior is also a part of digital literacy, many say.

"We need to help kids see they can use digital tools to create things and put things out into the world, but there's responsibility that comes with that," said Lisa Maucione, who attended the URI institute and who is a reading specialist for the Dartmouth public schools in Massachusetts.

### **Evolving Technology**

Because the term "digital literacy" is so wide-ranging, it can cause confusion. What exactly is someone talking about when he or she refers to digital literacy? Is it the consumption, creation, or communication of digital material? Or is that person discussing a particular digital

"It's on a book, on a paperback book because I've been reading like that since I was kid," says Hareem, a 10th grade student at Mineola High School, Mineola, N.Y.

—Mark Abramson for Education Week

tool? Do technology skills like computer coding fall under the digital-literacy umbrella as well?

Some experts prefer the term "digital literacies," to convey the many facets of what reading and writing in the modern era entails.

"The concept should instead be considered plural—digital literacies—because the term implies multiple opportunities to leverage digital texts, tools, and multimodal representations for design, creation, play, and problem solving," Jill Castek, a research assistant professor with the **Literacy, Language, and Technology Research Group** at Portland State University, wrote in an email.

Leu of UConn avoids the term altogether.

"Is someone who is 'digitally literate' equally literate when searching for information, when critically evaluating information, when using Snapchat, when using email, when using text messaging, when using Facebook, or when using any one of many different technologies for literacy and learning?" asked Leu in an email. "I think not." He prefers the term "new literacies," which he said better conveys how rapidly technology is changing. Other experts have used terms like "literacy and technology," "multiliteracies," and "21st century literacies."

But for now, digital literacy seems to be the prevailing term among educators. "I understand this is the term that is popular today," Leu said, "just as I understand a newer term will appear in the future that will replace it."

---

RELATED BLOG

[Visit this blog.](#)

---

Digital Literacy in the 21st Century. The definition of what it means to be "literate" has changed drastically in the past few years. In past times one would be considered literate if they were capable of reading and writing at a basic level. Now with advancements in technology and the internet, literacy has evolved into digital literacy. A huge problem pertaining to digital literacy is our education system's outdated view on what it means to be literate. Schools do not take into account that being digitally literate is a crucial skill in today's world. An example of the importance of digital literacy is the recent explosion of "fake news" media sites. Digital literacy is not a significantly less equivocal concept than that of information services. It is one of numerous new literacies that has been introduced and discussed in various disciplinary contexts during the last couple of decades. Several researchers, most prominently David Bawden (2001, 2008b) and Allan Martin (2006), have attempted to bring analytical order into the discourse by writing comprehensive reviews of the concept of digital literacy and its relation to partly overlapping concepts such as information literacy, library literacy, media literacy and computer literacy. What is digital literacy? Get expert advice and tips from Common Sense Media editors. Understanding digital footprints. What makes digital media so cool -- the ability to interact -- also creates tiny tracks across the web. Kids need to know that whenever they create a profile, post something, or comment on something, they're creating a composite profile potentially viewable by others. Respecting each other's ideas and opinions. To be digitally literate, kids must understand that what makes the web an amazing place is that for this vast virtual world to function properly, we must all be good digital citizens. Next Question. How can I use TV and movies to teach my kids Because digital literacy is so important, educators are increasingly required to teach students digital literacy in the classroom. In many ways, this is similar to what educators have always done in teaching students to read and write. In other ways, however, digital literacy is a brand new skill. Most students already use digital technology, such as tablets, smartphones, and computers, at home. Many students already know how to navigate the web, share images on social media, and do a Google search to find information. However, true digital literacy goes beyond these basic skills. One of the m What is digital literacy? Making sure pupils are employable is an obvious driver for schools. So, developing technical skills is crucial. But digital literacy doesn't just mean IT proficiency (although knowing how to use tech is now an essential life skill). "More than 11 million people in the UK do not have basic digital skills. One out of every 11 completely avoids the internet." Lloyds Bank UK Consumer Digital Index, 2017. Digital literacy is necessary to become digital citizens: individuals responsible for how they use technology to interact with the world around them. However, despite facing a fourth industrial revolution that is set to impact all industries and economies, UK education policy is currently failing to prepare pupils for a new breed of workplace.