



The meaning of the term 'literacy' appears to live something of a dichotomous existence. While superficially it is a word widely understood and used by the public, 'literacy' lives a double life as the subject of intense academic debate that aims to attach a concrete definition to what is a complex, dynamic and often mercurial concept.

The idea of the word 'literate' coming to refer to those with the ability to read and write, the definition that's perhaps most popularly attached to the word today, is actually a relatively recent phenomenon. Until the late nineteenth century 'literate' was used as a way to describe those who were familiar with literature or were generally well-educated or read. Since then the word's meaning has morphed to become more inclusive and perhaps convoluted, reflecting the intense academic debate that has taken place throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries in an effort to define and redefine the term. Scholars have used the term 'literate' to describe, not only the autonomous skills characterised as forming an integral part of literacy, such as writing and numeracy, but the application of such skills and how their acquisition affects learning processes.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) regards 'literacy', in an attempt to recognise the diversity of definitions attributed to the term, as being beyond simply "the set of technical skills of reading, writing and calculating . . . to a plural notion encompassing the manifold of meanings and dimensions of these undeniably vital competencies. Such a view, responding to recent economic, political and social transformations, including globalization, and the advancement of information and communication technologies, recognizes that there are many practices of literacy embedded in different cultural processes, personal circumstances and collective structures".

'Literacy', throughout history and across societies, has encapsulated a varying range of skills and erudition, but its antonym, 'illiteracy', has always been synonymous with disadvantage. It is this definition that, perhaps, elucidates the concept best.