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Toward a Definition of Adolescent Literacy

At its core, literacy is the ability to read and write. While this ability remains the nexus of literacy for adolescents, additional abilities are needed to maximize learning in all content areas. In Wisconsin, we must infuse this core with the ability to invent, design, create, compute, and communicate so that adolescents can make critical judgments, identify and solve real-world problems, and become productive citizens who lead rewarding lives.

In simpler times, the ability to decipher words, and read and write them in a coherent manner, constituted literacy for many. A signature qualified a man to vote. Books were rare; written communication took months to travel relatively short distances; the printing process was painfully slow and limited to highly populated areas. Certain social, economic, and gender groups were not expected to be literate at all. Literacy was viewed as a privilege intended only for some, and “becoming literate” rested on the foundational skills of reading and writing.

What a different world students of today live in! Instant information bombards them on every front: schools, teachers, texts, friends, television, movies, music, blogs, Web sites, chat rooms, artwork, advertisements, and more. Today, the sheer speed at which information is created and shared necessitates a shifting and expanding vision of literacy in the 21st century. The work of making sense of it all and of managing, synthesizing, and analyzing these multiple streams of information now help define literacy.



Reading and writing continue to be essential skills for all students; however, literacy demands become increasingly complex in middle and high school, and students' ability to think critically to construct meaning is crucial. As they move from class to class, learners contend with new and evolving sets of skills that further define literacy within each subject. Students must think visually, build mental models, and interact with others in order to truly grapple with their dynamic and intricate modern world.

Wisconsin's vision sees all students so well prepared to do the work of becoming literate that it is no longer "work" but rather, a function of everyday 21st century life. Literate adolescents operate cooperatively and collaboratively as well as independently and think globally and creatively when identifying and solving problems. They recognize the interconnectedness of their world and the diversity of their experiences. Students understand both the interrelatedness of all content areas and the distinct skills needed to excel in each. Most important, they apply their knowledge and skills to contribute in the broader context of the community and world.