

Editorial: If you can read this, be thankful

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If we were living in 1800, our ability to read this would place us among just [12 percent](#) of the world's population 15 years and older, which was about 1 billion people.

Imagine this another way: About one-third of the current population of the United States—120 million people—can read, and no one else in the world can read.

Today, the statistic cited above is reversed almost completely. Today, just under 15 percent of the world's population is illiterate. That sounds good, but we must not forget the actual numbers of people who cannot read.

The world's population currently is about 7.7 billion people. Fifteen percent of that is about 1.2 billion people, or about 10 times the number of illiterate people in 1800, though the world's population has only increased 7.7 times.

In other words, though the percentage of illiterate people has decreased, the actual number of illiterate people has increased. And they're not all living in one country. Those 1.2 billion people are spread all over the globe wherever poverty is found.

Why literacy matters

My guess is most of us have been able to read so long we take our ability for granted.

But [if we couldn't read](#), we would be more likely to do poorly in school and/or to drop out of school, which leads to difficulty finding a good job and

lower wages when one is found. Our health might be worse and cost us more because we couldn't understand health information. And—not being able to read—we might not be able to cast an accurate vote.

We might even end up incarcerated. Did you know that the overwhelming majority of inmates did not complete high school and cannot read? And did you know that “inmates who are educated are 43 percent less likely to return to prison?”

But we don't have to worry about any of those things because we can read. Aren't we thankful?

Are we thankful enough to help someone else learn to read?

At an individual level, we can help another person become literate by reading to and with that person. When I volunteered at our local elementary school, one of my favorite things to do was to help children reach their Accelerated Reader—or AR—goal. I don't know who enjoyed it more—me or the children.

Public schools welcome volunteers who will read with children. Give your local school a call to learn how to become a volunteer. It's easier than you may think.

Often, tackling illiteracy requires help from beyond our immediate resources. Organizations like [Literacy Connexus](#), a Texas-based ministry helping churches develop literacy programs for their communities, provide training and resources to overcome illiteracy. They would love to partner with you.

I didn't learn to read by myself. It took many teachers, like one in kindergarten who sat with me helping me read stories about a grasshopper. I couldn't see the point then in reading those stories. But I'm thankful for them, now.

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