The Past and Future of “Literacy”

SIMS 218, Nov. 6, 2006
Geoff Nunberg
The meanings of *literacy*

- Basic alphabetism: “literacy campaign”/“~ rates”
- Skill in using the language: “A literate prose style”
- General “cultural” knowledge: “The new illiteracy”; “A very literate conversation”
- Basic knowledge in some area or field: “economic/geographical/media etc. literacy” (also “numeracy”)
Problems of translation

Note that only English uses one word for all these concepts:

“literacy campaign”/ “~ rates” = campagne d'alphabetisation , Alphabetisierungskampagne (or Lese- und Schreibtest)

“A literate prose style” = un style littéraire/ ”Il a des lettres”

“The new illiteracy”; “A highly literate person” = instruit, cultivé, ("every literate person" = toute personne de culture)

“economic/geographical/media etc. literacy” (also “numeracy”) = connaissance, conoscenza, Kenntnisse etc., Bildung, etc. Cf “la cultura/conoscenza informatica,” EDV- [elektronische datenverarbeitung] Kenntnisse” etc.
Literate, illiterate go back to Renaissance. (Cf noun literate = "one who takes holy orders without university education by demonstrating a knowledge of Latin and Greek"; "lady literate")

... the illiterate sculptor who, having to inscribe the well known admonitory line, “Sic transit gloria mundi,” with great self-complacency, presumed to change the last word to suit his purpose, as descriptive of the day of its inscription, and which he rendered as follows: Sic transit gloria Tuesday(!)

("Loose Leaves by a Literary Lounger," The United States Democratic Review, April, 1844)

But both are rare words until late 19th c.

Cf association of "Illiterate” with “coarse”: "Dear affectionate creature! -- You banished to Abbey-Mill Farm! -- You confined to the society of the illiterate and vulgar all your life!" Emma to Harriet in Emma
Modern sense emerges with formation of new word “literacy” ca. 1880, in America

The [public school] system, be it remembered, is of New England origin, and the New England States have been longest under its influence. The States south of the Potomac are those which were longest without it; and, indeed, in them it has hardly yet obtained favor or foothold. Let us compare the statistics of population, of literacy and illiteracy, and of crime in these two classes of States, carefully eliminating from our calculation the influence of foreign immigration upon the criminal record of the Northern States, which the particularity of the census returns enables us to do. ("The Public-School Failure," by Richard Grant White: The North American review. December 1880, pp. 537-551)

Context of earliest use: census data, voting requirements, race, etc.

Suggests picture of alphabetism as a social phenomenon/subject of civic interest. Cf late-19th c. use of literacy rates as index of modernity & development.
Introductory to compulsory universal schooling
Concerns about immigration, race (freedmen), training of work forces
Growth of “libraries movement” (Carnegie)
Reaction to perceived limitations of school system -- rote learning, inaccessibility to adults

1890: Charles Eliot estimates that it would take a Massachusetts high-school graduate only 46 hours to read aloud all of the books that were assigned in the last six years of the curriculum.

Establishment of library schools (Columbia, 1876), proponents of library movement -- “Apostles of Culture”

Increasing number of libraries:
- 1850: ca. 50 public libraries in US
- 1875: 300+
- 1920: 2500-3000
The Growth of Public Libraries

Subscription libraries (Franklin founds Library Company of Philadelphia: 1731); Town libraries (Boston, 1848; NY, 1849)

UK: Public Libraries Act of 1850 provides for "libraries freely open to the public... in towns in Great Britain and Ireland" passed w/ Conservative opposition

Later: Carnegie libraries. 1700 public libraries in US between 1883 and 1929, 660 in UK
"Go to the nearest Carnegie Library and examine its catalog of books. The chances are five to one that you will find the place full of literary bilge and as bare of good books as a Boston bookshop." H. L. Mencken, 1928
Two Functions of the Library: Political Object

Libraries (and literacy in general) as bulwarks against demagoguery etc.

[To the free library] we may hopefully look for the gradual deliverance of the people from the wiles of the rhetorician and stump orator…. As the varied intelligence which books can supply shall be more and more widely assimilated, the essential elements of every political and social question may be confidently submitted to that instructed common sense upon which the founders of our government relied. J. P. Quincy, 1876
Cf shifting view of importance of literacy as an instrument of social control:

"If you give a nigger an inch, he will take an ell. A nigger should know nothing but to obey his master--to do as he is told to do. Learning would spoil the best nigger in the world. Now," said he, "if you teach that nigger (speaking of myself) how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave. He would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master." *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*
The growth of new wants, presided over by intelligence and culture, is the best lever for raising the status of the idle, quarreling, sensual, ravishing Afro-American. Certainly the infecting of the backward portion of the race with a high estimate of cleanliness, neatness, family privacy, domestic comfort, and literacy is an agent quite as moralizing as the dread of future punishments or the love of an ethical God.

(Edward Alsworth Ross in the Am. Jrn. Of Sociology, 1898)
I have known many persons rise to wealth and respectability by their industry, virtues, and self-taught skill; but from their utter want of training in the proper mode of writing, or speaking, or readiner their native tongue, they are unable to fill the situations to which their circumstances and talents and characteristics entitle them, and in which they might confer great benefits on society. Eggerton Ryerson, Chief Superintendent of Education for Upper Canada, 1849

"Those who have been accustomed to exercise their minds by reading and studying… have greater docility and quickiness in applying themselves to work [and] greater appetite, dexterity or ingenuity in comprehending ordinary processes."

Horace Mann, 1849.
Requirements of Industrialization & The Changing Workforce

Women in bus. schools from 4% in 1871 to 77% in 1900
Growth of immigration, urban in-migration
Literacy rates as indicator of modernity
(In fact, literacy more often an effect of social advancement than a cause.)
The Triumph of "Literacy": 1900-1975

Frequencies of *literate* and *cultured* in JSTOR Journals in Education and Language and Literature
( normalized for corpus size)
Literacy as a respectable “cause” for First Ladies, etc.

Emergence of notion of “functional literacy” after UNESCO report of 1956: “A person is functionally literate when he [sic] has acquired the knowledge and skills in reading and writing which enable him to engage in all those activities in which literacy is normally assumed in his culture or group” But effectively defined as 4th-grade education.

In US, “functionally illiterate” rapidly becomes a loose way of saying “virtually illiterate”

47.5% of the nation - almost 1 of 2 Americans are functionally illiterate!--- Web site of Literacy Now!, Inc.

Dorothy Allison's autobiographical novels and social commentary slices wide the underbelly of Southern female experience--growing up dirt poor and shamed, functionally illiterate in the language of love. Chicago Tribune
[Bennington promotes] the development of literacy in all the important aspects of our cultural heritage. This does not mean merely verbal literacy. ... Bennington is attempting the uphill task of including the nonverbal disciplines of art and science, and this involves a great deal of teaching of elementary literacy, neglected at present in the lower schools except in the verbal subjects. "The Bennington Idea," Lewis Webster Jones, *Jrnl. Ed. Soc.*, 1947

“Economic literacy” from 1950. Soon after: geographic, historical literacy, media literacy, etc.
“Cultural literacy” from E. D. Hirsch: "What every American needs to know," "the basic information needed to thrive in the modern world"

What [Jeanne S. Chall] calls world knowledge I call cultural literacy, namely, the network of information that all competent readers possess. It is the background information, stored in their minds, that enables them to take up a newspaper and read it with an adequate level of comprehension, getting the point, grasping the implications, relating what they read to the unstated context which alone gives meaning to what they read.

List includes: Juno, Sir Galahad, Blarney Stone, apple of discord, "Don't give up the ship," "Close, but no cigar," éminence grise, golden parachute, Fabian tactics, ergo, NIMBY, Eucharist, François Rabelais, Tomas de Torquemada, yarmulke, personal pronoun, Count Basie, W.C. Fields, Walter Lippmann, Foggy Bottom…
“Literacy” becomes a way of claiming status for a subject or body of material as a “basic” form of knowledge, necessary to economic growth, personal well-being and the health of public discourse.

Implies modularity of “basic knowledge” -- Cf Hirsch’s list.

Invests subject with civic importance -- what students “must know” for reasons of:

- Personal development/advancement
- General social & economic welfare
- Health of public discourse
“Why is Information Literacy Important?”

“The Importance of Information Literacy to Individuals, Business, and Citizenship” (ACRL Report)

Information literacy… is a means of personal empowerment. It allows people to verify or refute expert opinion and to become independent seekers of truth.

…There is ample evidence that those who learn now to achieve access to the bath of knowledge that already envelops the world will be the future's aristocrats of achievement, and that they will be far more numerous than any aristocracy in history.

Every day lack of timely and accurate information is costly to American businesses.
Why is Information Literacy Important?

“The Importance of Information Literacy to Individuals, Business, and Citizenship” (ACRL Report)

It is unfortunate that the very people who most need the empowerment inherent in being information literate are the least likely to have learning experiences which will promote these abilities. Minority and at-risk students, illiterate adults, people with English as a second language, and economically disadvantaged people are among those most likely to lack access to the information that can improve their situations.

To say that information literacy is crucial to effective citizenship is simply to say it is central to the practice of democracy. Any society committed to individual freedom and democratic government must ensure the free flow of information to all its citizens in order to protect personal liberties and to guard its future.
Components of Information Literacy (ACRL)

IL = Technological competence + analytic skills

“Fluency” with information technology -- more than “computer literacy.”

“An intellectual framework for understanding, finding, evaluating, and using information--activities which may be accomplished in part by fluency with information technology, in part by sound investigative methods, but most important, through critical discernment and reasoning. Information literacy initiates, sustains, and extends lifelong learning through abilities which may use technologies but are ultimately independent of them.”
Information literacy forms the basis for lifelong learning. It is common to all disciplines, to all learning environments, and to all levels of education. It enables learners to master content and extend their investigations, become more self-directed, and assume greater control over their own learning. An information literate individual is able to:

• Determine the extent of information needed
• Access the needed information effectively and efficiently
• Evaluate information and its sources critically
• Incorporate selected information into one’s knowledge base
• Use information effectively to accomplish a specific purpose
• Understand the economic, legal, and social issues surrounding the use of information, and access and use information ethically and legally
More Specific Skills: University Programs in IL

Choosing a paper topic
Locating and Accessing Information,
   Call numbers
   Boolean searching
Evaluating Information
   “Critical Thinking”
   Evaluating Internet-based Information
Using and Communicating Information
Plagiarism and paraphrasing
Citation
http://www.ala.org/ala/acrl/acrlstandards/informationliteracycompetency.htm

The information literate student evaluates information and its sources critically and incorporates selected information into his or her knowledge base and value system.

Performance Indicators:

1. The information literate student summarizes the main ideas to be extracted from the information gathered.

Outcomes Include:

1. Reads the text and selects main ideas
2. Restates textual concepts in his/her own words and selects data accurately
3. Identifies verbatim material that can be then appropriately quoted
2. The information literate student articulates and applies initial criteria for evaluating both the information and its sources.

   Outcomes Include:

   1. Examines and compares information from various sources in order to evaluate reliability, validity, accuracy, authority, timeliness, and point of view or bias

   2. Analyzes the structure and logic of supporting arguments or methods

   3. Recognizes prejudice, deception, or manipulation

   4. Recognizes the cultural, physical, or other context within which the information was created and understands the impact of context on interpreting the information
3. The information literate student synthesizes main ideas to construct new concepts.

   Outcomes Include:

   1. Recognizes interrelationships among concepts and combines them into potentially useful primary statements with supporting evidence

   2. Extends initial synthesis, when possible, at a higher level of abstraction to construct new hypotheses that may require additional information

   3. Utilizes computer and other technologies (e.g. spreadsheets, databases, multimedia, and audio or visual equipment) for studying the interaction of ideas and other phenomena
Evaluating Web Pages

http://www.lesley.edu/libraryguides/research/evaluating_web.html#purpose

Purpose
E.g., commercial, educational, etc. (domain suffixes)

Authority
Author, credentials, sponsorship, authenticity, etc.

Objectivity

Appropriateness

Currency

Responsibility

Clarity

Accessibility
How Do People Evaluate a Web Site’s Credibility? (Fogg et al. 2002)

What strategies do people actually apply in evaluating Web sites?

Subjects evaluated credibility of sites dealing with E-Commerce, Entertainment, Finance, Health, Opinion/Review, etc. at www.mostcredible.org
Factors Determining Website Credibility
(Fogg et al. 2002)
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# Factors Determining Website Credibility

(Fogg et al. 2002)

## Opinion or Review Web Sites

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Final Ranking</th>
<th>Web Site Name</th>
<th>URL</th>
<th>Average Score</th>
<th># of Times Ranked</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Consumer Search</td>
<td><a href="http://www.consumersearch.com">http://www.consumersearch.com</a></td>
<td>+0.44</td>
<td>39</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Epinions</td>
<td><a href="http://www.epinions.com">http://www.epinions.com</a></td>
<td>+0.31</td>
<td>52</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Students Review</td>
<td><a href="http://www.studentsreview.com">http://www.studentsreview.com</a></td>
<td>+0.28</td>
<td>36</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>E-complaints</td>
<td><a href="http://www.ecomplaints.com">http://www.ecomplaints.com</a></td>
<td>+0.26</td>
<td>35</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Opinion-Pages</td>
<td><a href="http://www.opinion-pages.org">http://www.opinion-pages.org</a></td>
<td>+0.16</td>
<td>38</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>BizRate</td>
<td><a href="http://www.bizrate.com">http://www.bizrate.com</a></td>
<td>-0.19</td>
<td>37</td>
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<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>All Star Review</td>
<td><a href="http://www.allstarreview.com">http://www.allstarreview.com</a></td>
<td>-0.20</td>
<td>40</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Review Centre</td>
<td><a href="http://www.reviewcentre.com">http://www.reviewcentre.com</a></td>
<td>-0.29</td>
<td>45</td>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>The Opinionated Beer Page</td>
<td><a href="http://www.tobp.com">http://www.tobp.com</a></td>
<td>-0.32</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>CardOffers.com</td>
<td><a href="http://www.cardoffers.com">http://www.cardoffers.com</a></td>
<td>-0.41</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What Average Scores Mean

+0.50 = judged as more credible in 75% of pairings
0.0 = judged as more credible in 50% of pairings
-0.50 = judged as less credible in 75% of pairings
Factors Determining Website Credibility
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### Travel Web Sites

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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Yahoo! Travel</td>
<td><a href="http://travel.yahoo.com">http://travel.yahoo.com</a></td>
<td>+0.43</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Expedia</td>
<td><a href="http://www.expedia.com">http://www.expedia.com</a></td>
<td>+0.32</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Trip.com</td>
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<td>+0.24</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>GoNomad</td>
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<td>+0.10</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Travel Zone</td>
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<td>+0.04</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Hotwire</td>
<td><a href="http://www.hotwire.com">http://www.hotwire.com</a></td>
<td>+0.03</td>
<td>64</td>
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<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Orbitz</td>
<td><a href="http://www.orbitz.com">http://www.orbitz.com</a></td>
<td>-0.05</td>
<td>61</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Getaway.com</td>
<td><a href="http://www.getaway.com">http://www.getaway.com</a></td>
<td>-0.28</td>
<td>69</td>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Priceline</td>
<td><a href="http://www.priceline.com">http://www.priceline.com</a></td>
<td>-0.32</td>
<td>76</td>
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<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>United Tours &amp; Travel</td>
<td><a href="http://www.uttravel.com">http://www.uttravel.com</a></td>
<td>-0.37</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What Average Scores Mean

- **+0.50** = judged as more credible in 75% of pairings
- **0.0** = judged as more credible in 50% of pairings
- **-0.50** = judged as less credible in 75% of pairings

Table 11: Ranking and scores for travel Web sites.
Factors Determining Website Credibility
(Fogg et al. 2002)

Comments on Website Design

- *This site is more credible. I find it to be much more professional looking.*
  -- M, 38, Washington

- *More pleasing graphics, higher-quality look and feel* -- F, 52, Tennessee

- *Just looks more credible.* -- M, 24, New Jersey

- *Actually, despite the subject of the Web site, it looks very credible. This may be due to the subdued color scheme and the font used on the left-hand side of the page.* -- F, 29, California

- *The design is sloppy and looks like some adolescent boys in a garage threw this together.* -- F, 48, California
Comments on Information Structure

• *This site is very well organized, which lends to more credibility.* -- M, 33, Illinois

• *This one is more credible because it is more organized.* -- F, 57, Maryland

• *Horrible site, information badly presented. They try to put everything on the front page, instead of having multiple layers of navigation.* -- M, 42, Canada
Factors Determining Website Credibility
(Fogg et al. 2002)

Comments on Company Motive

- *This site looks like its goal is to help you find what you are looking for.* - F, 55, California

- *I would trust this site because it's run by a religious denomination whose aim is socially responsible investing.* - F, 54, New York

- *Seems too "commercial" and therefore less objective.* - M, 52, Texas

- *Doesn't seem credible when they give a product a good review and give you a link to order it too.* - F, 38, Texas
Factors Determining Website Credibility (Fogg et al. 2002)

Percent (of 2,440 comments)

1. 46.1% Design Look
2. 28.5% Information Design/Structure
3. 25.1% Information Focus
4. 15.5% Company Motive
5. 14.8% Information Usefulness
6. 14.3% Information Accuracy
7. 14.1% Name Recognition and Reputation
8. 13.8% Advertising
9. 11.6% Information Bias
10. 9.0% Writing Tone
11. 8.8% Identity of Site Operator
12. 8.6% Site Functionality
13. 6.4% Customer Service
14. 4.6% Past Experience with Site
15. 3.7% Information Clarity
16. 3.6% Performance on Test by User
17. 3.6% Readability
18. 3.4% Affiliations
Factors Determining Website Credibility (Fogg et al. 2002)

Percentage of Comments Related to Design Look

- Finance: 54.6%
- Search Engines: 52.6%
- Travel: 50.5%
- Sports: 48.8%
- Entertainment: 46.8%
- E-Commerce: 46.2%
- All Sites: 46.1%
- Health: 41.8%
- News: 39.6%
- Nonprofit: 39.4%
- Opinion or Review: 38.1%
Factors Determining Website Credibility
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Percentage of Comments Related to Company Motive

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Opinion or Review</td>
<td>22.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finance</td>
<td>21.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonprofit</td>
<td>20.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-Commerce</td>
<td>19.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health</td>
<td>17.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Sites</td>
<td>15.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Search Engines</td>
<td>14.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travel</td>
<td>12.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports</td>
<td>11.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entertainment</td>
<td>9.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News</td>
<td>5.9%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Factors Determining Website Credibility (Fogg et al. 2002)

Percentage of Comments Related to Advertising

- Search Engines: 24.6%
- Sports: 22.7%
- Health: 21.3%
- Opinion or Review: 16.6%
- Nonprofit: 13.9%
- All Sites: 13.8%
- Travel: 10.5%
- E-Commerce: 10.5%
- News: 9.3%
- Entertainment: 8.9%
- Finance: 8.3%

Percentage of Site Evaluations
Factors Determining Website Credibility (Fogg et al. 2002)

Percentage of Comments Related to Name Recognition and Reputation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Percentage of Site Evaluations</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>E-Commerce</td>
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<tr>
<td>Finance</td>
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<td>News</td>
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<tr>
<td>Opinion or Review</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
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</table>
Factors Determining Website Credibility (Fogg et al. 2002)

Percentage of Comments Related to Information Bias

- **News**: 30.2%
- **Opinion or Review**: 23.8%
- **Nonprofit**: 15.4%
- **Health**: 14.8%
- **Entertainment**: 14.2%
- **All Sites**: 11.6%
- **Sports**: 9.9%
- **Finance**: 8.5%
- **Search Engines**: 3.8%
- **E-Commerce**: 2.6%
- **Travel**: 1.9%
Factors Determining Website Credibility (Fogg et al. 2002)

- Percentage of Comments Related to Writing Tone

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IL = Technological competence + analytic skills

“Fluency” with information technology -- more than “computer literacy.”

“An intellectual framework for understanding, finding, evaluating, and using information--activities which may be accomplished in part by fluency with information technology, in part by sound investigative methods, but most important, through critical discernment and reasoning. Information literacy initiates, sustains, and extends lifelong learning through abilities which may use technologies but are ultimately independent of them.”
Some Search Projects

• From ACRL White Paper: A group of upper-middle-class women in the junior League has read about increased incidences of child abuse. They want to become better informed about the elements of child abuse: What brings it on? What incidents have occurred in their own community? What services are available in their community? What actions might they take?

• What have people said about "information literacy"? What programs are being developed? How specific are they?

• When did people first start to talk about "curling up with a good book"?

• How have Democrats been using the language of religion and values since the 2004 election? What are some examples of people focussing on the Democrats' languages as a problem over the years?

• What has been the pattern of book sales in the US over the past ten years?