

During the time of Epicurus, who could read well enough to study philosophy?

Post by “Kalosyni” of July 7, 2026 at 7:01 PM

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Quote

There is significant, explicit textual evidence detailing Epicurus’s deliberate reliance on written texts as a central tool for learning, **specifically designed to substitute for or supplement oral teaching.** [1]

Unlike Socrates, who famously rejected writing in favor of oral dialogue, Epicurus was a highly prolific writer who engineered a text-based educational system. The core textual evidence for this includes: [1, 2, 3]

1. Epicurus's Own Statements on Epitomization

In the surviving introductions to his letters preserved by [Diogenes Laërtius](#), Epicurus explicitly states that his written texts are meant to act as a substitute for direct instruction. [1, 2]

- **The Letter to Herodotus:** Epicurus explicitly writes that he has prepared this text as an epitome (an abridgment) for those who "are unable to study carefully all my physical writings" or "**cannot digest the more detailed books.**" He states the text is designed so that even advanced students can have a ready handbook to memorize and recall core principles without needing a teacher present. [1, 2, 3]
- **The Letter to Pythocles:** The prologue notes that the text was written specifically to provide a handy, easily memorable distillation of natural philosophy to help the reader navigate life when oral guidance isn't available. [1, 2]

2. Evidence from the Herculaneum Papyri

The recovery of the [Herculaneum library](#)—which preserved the carbonized scrolls of the Epicurean philosopher [Philodemus](#)—provides physical and textual proof of how the school operated. [, 2]

- Philodemus’s treatise **On Frank Criticism (Peri Parresias)** describes the pedagogical structure of Epicurean communities.

- The texts reveal that when Epicurean groups spread across the Mediterranean, away from Epicurus's physical presence in Athens, they relied entirely on **reading, copying, and dissecting Epicurus's written texts** as the structural foundation of their regular community meetings. [[1](#), [2](#), [3](#), [4](#)]

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