

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

Post by “Kalosyni” of July 7, 2026 at 11:45 AM

The question of literacy at the time of Epicurus came to me because I've been thinking about who exactly were the people that were engaging with the teachings of Epicurus...

And because it also answers the question of who was Epicurus writing for...

Quote

Google query: during 341 bc to 270 bc what percentage of people could read philosophical texts in athens greece?

Scholars estimate that overall literacy in ancient Athens from 341 to 270 BC was between **10% and 15%** of the general population. However, the percentage of people who could read complex [philosophical texts](#) was much lower, likely around **3% to 5%**. This specialized reading class primarily consisted of elite, wealthy, and educated adult male citizens. [[1](#), [2](#), [3](#), [4](#)]

While Athenian democracy required basic reading skills to participate in civic duties, reading dense philosophy like the works of [Epicurus](#) or the earlier Platonist and Aristotelian texts demanded extensive formal education, which was heavily restricted by gender and socioeconomic class. [[1](#), [2](#), [3](#), [4](#), [5](#)]

Any women who were present were likely either part of Epicurus' household (unfree slaves)...or educated hetaira...or perhaps wives who were taught by their wealthy philosophical husbands who were part of the school. The only male slave that was specifically mentioned by name in Diogenes Laertius was Mys, who was within Epicurus' household.

So then that leaves the elite, wealthy, and educated adult male citizens and the sons of those men.

And, this also frames the bigger picture regarding Epicurean philosophy as an important consideration in the interpretation of the texts. I can hardly think that Epicurus was telling these elite wealthy men to dispose of their wealth and possessions and become minimalists who only engage with the bare basic necessities in life.

Epicurus was speaking to the same people as Lucretius was... in De Rerum Natura, book 6...which talks about the leaky jar / tainted jar:

[Bailey-6:09] *For when he saw that mortals had by now attained well-nigh all things which their needs crave for subsistence, and that, as far as they could, their life was established in safety, that men abounded in power through wealth and honours and renown, and were haughty in the good name of their children, and yet not one of them for all that had at home a heart less anguished, but with torture of mind lived a fretful life without any respite, and was constrained to rage with savage complaining, he then did understand that it was the vessel itself which wrought the disease, and that by its disease all things were corrupted within, whatsoever came into it gathered from without, yea even blessings; in part because he saw that it was leaking and full of holes, so that by no means could it ever be filled; in part because he perceived that it was tainted as with a foul savor all things within it, which it had taken in.*