

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

Post by “Bryan” of July 8, 2026 at 3:48 PM

Let me throw this quote in:

"However, with the study of grammar being twofold [1] the one promising to teach the elements and their combinations and being in general an art of writing and reading, and [2] the other being, in comparison, a deeper ability: not consisting merely in the bare knowledge of letters but also in the investigation of their discovery and their nature, and in addition the parts of speech composed of letters and all other matters of the same kind - it is not our purpose now to invalidate the first; for that it is useful is agreed by all men, and amongst these men we must place Epicurus, although he seems to be bitterly hostile to the professors; in his book *On Gifts and Gratitude* he definitely tries to prove that it is necessary for the wise to learn the written letters [i.e., become literate]. Necessary, as we should say, not for the wise only but for all people."

Sextus Empiricus (fl.c. 200 CE), *Against the Grammarians*, 1.49

But learning to read is of course a lower bar than having a (1) generalized liberal education or (2) specific professional training, both of which Epicurus considered unhelpful, for example:

"...because [the members] of your [Epicurean school], indeed, argue quite well that there is no need for him who is going to be a philosopher to know literature."

Cicero (fl. 65 BCE), *De Finibus*, 2.4.12