

Henry of Grosmont:
To be or not be literate?

Description

That is the question the 14th-century nobleman asked of himself

By Irwin Rapoport

Henry of Grosmont, the **first Duke of Lancaster** (1310-1362) and grandfather of England's King Henry IV and great-grandfather of Henry V of Agincourt fame, ("The game's afoot: Follow your spirit, and upon this charge Cry 'God for Harry, England, and Saint George!'") was a talented and gifted general and administrator, but until later in life, he did not have one key set of skills that made him feel complete.

And what exactly did he lack? The answer is simple – he could neither read nor write. Henry enjoyed immense wealth and prestige, which he worked hard to earn and acquire – simply being a cousin of King Edward III was not enough to secure royal favour and appointments.



Henry of Grosmont, 1st Duke of Lancaster – Image: [British Library](#), Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

We take the ability to read and write in one language as a given, let alone two, and Henry could easily have lived his entire life without having such skills. But it irked him that others had skills, which he did not possess. I undertook several Google searches to learn what led him to undertake this effort but I can only surmise that he felt incomplete and envied those who could. This was a positive instance where envy fuelled a desire to better oneself and inspire others to educate themselves and ensure that their children would learn to read and write at a young age.

According to the [Wikipedia page](#), “an intelligent and reflective man, Grosmont taught himself to write and was the author of the book *Livre de seyntz medicines*, a highly personal devotional treatise. He is remembered as one of the founders and early patrons of [Corpus Christi College, Cambridge](#), which was established by two guilds of the town in 1352” and “More is known about Lancaster’s character than that of most of his contemporaries through his memoirs, the *Livre de seyntz medicines* (“Book of the Holy Doctors”), a highly personal treatise on matters of religion and piety, also containing details of historical interest. It reveals that Lancaster, at the age of 44 when he wrote the book in 1354, suffered from gout. [5] The book is primarily a devotional work, organized around seven wounds, which Henry claimed to have received, representing the seven deadly sins. Lancaster confesses to his sins, explains various real and mythical medical remedies in terms of their theological symbolism, and exhorts the reader to greater morality.”

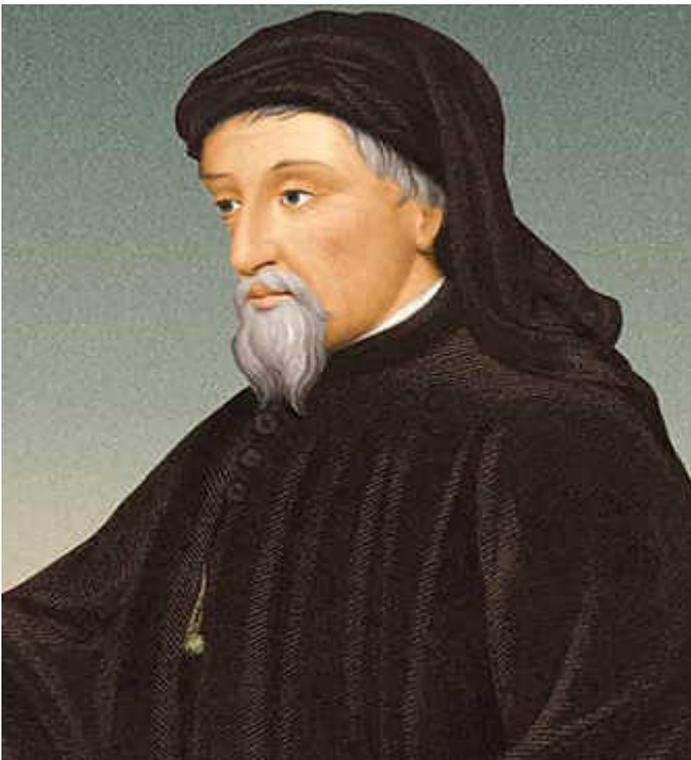
I was also unable to secure the measures that he undertook to acquire reading and writing skills but no doubt he was able to bring together the necessary resources to accomplish this feat. It speaks well of a man who was extremely accomplished and had the drive and energy to succeed.

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His son-in-law, **John of Gaunt**, was a friend and patron of poet [Geoffrey Chaucer](#), which one can easily imagine would make Henry very proud for maintaining the family tradition of promoting literacy and literature. Like Shakespeare, we are indebted to Chaucer for his contribution to English literature. Many English professors have pointed out that Chaucer, due to the version of English that he wrote in, does not receive the same level of fame that The Bard has achieved.

However, I digress from the main theme of this article – learning to read and write and its importance, not only to be able to thrive in a world dependent upon literacy but to better appreciate the world and fully partake in it.

I do not recall the exact moment when I was able to read or express my thoughts in the written word but I clearly remember learning the alphabet and drawing letters and being able to read my [Dick and Jane books](#) in the early years of elementary school. It was either in Grade 6 or 7 or early high school, I was given **Grammar Made Easy** as a textbook. It was a big book with a yellow cover.



Geoffrey Chaucer – Image: National Library of Wales, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

Of course, by citing the books that aided my ability to read and write, I am dating myself. Every generation, in every country and civilization that has achieved literacy, has had its essential textbooks and teaching methods. Some were effective, some were brutal and tough, and others were gentle and appreciative of the learning



abilities of children at various ages. As public education has expanded and become the norm, the science of how children and adults learn has improved immensely and as we learn more about the brain and how it develops and functions, our advances will only improve and be more effective in the home and in classrooms.

Suffice it to say, I learned how to read and write and appreciate literature, poetry, and plays. This has been a positive in my life and I cherish my personal library and public libraries and the important roles that they fulfil, even in an age when some people question whether we should maintain public libraries.

In Grade 6, one of my teachers read **J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*** aloud to the class. I couldn't wait for her to get to the end and, thus, I purchased my own copy at Classic's on St. Catherine Street near Guy Street. I quickly got through all three of the books in ***The Lord of the Rings*** trilogy. I have fond memories of that bookshop and I do my best to shop at local bookshops in Montreal. A community without a bookshop, be it for new or used books, is missing something. The same applies to public libraries. Westmount, Cote Saint Luc, Montreal West, Pointe-Claire, Beaconsfield, and other cities take great pride in their public libraries. It is always excellent to see large numbers of people attend book sales at public libraries which not only stimulate reading and literacy but raise funds for the libraries to purchase new books.

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I have not written a book or a short story yet, but I have written [articles](#), as you, the reader, can attest to. Literacy has had a great impact on my life and it is a similar situation for billions of others. It's hard to imagine a world without widespread literacy.

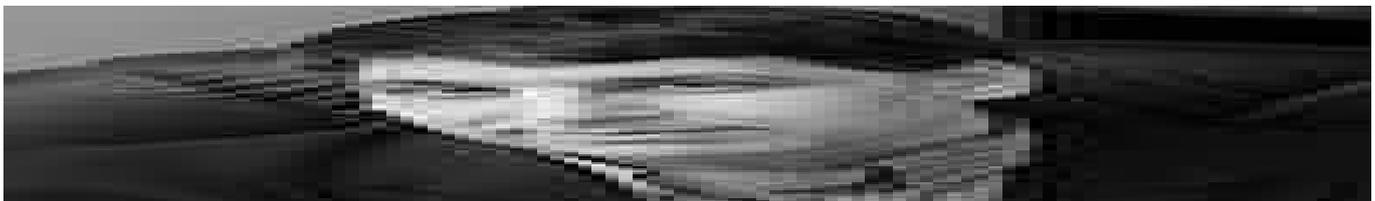
Henry of Grosmont took literacy seriously and without question or hesitation, I do not doubt that he would be very proud of the way many countries in the world have emulated his personal desire to be literate and aided billions to do the same.

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Irwin Rapoport is a freelance journalist and former school commissioner with the Protestant School Board of Greater Montreal (1990-1994). He is currently a candidate in Ward 3 for the English Montreal School Board elections.



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