

The State of the Nation's Adult Reading: 2024 Report

Introduction

New research from The Reading Agency reveals that half of all adults in the UK don't read regularly for pleasure, and over 1 in 10 – that's 5.9 million people – find reading difficult.¹ Sadly, lack of engagement with reading limits life chances and choices.

The Reading Agency's work with adults aims to create a world of opportunity where everyone can access the benefits of reading. Reading makes us more aware and informed; it makes us more empathetic and understanding of other people and cultures; it supports our health and wellbeing and, importantly, increases our ability to learn new skills and communicate our ideas more effectively.²

For 22 years, The Reading Agency has built a robust evidence base relating to the reading habits of people of all ages across the UK, supported by extensive research and evaluation. Through this work, we've identified a gap in the evidence base on adult reading in the UK. Using our expertise in this field, we're now releasing the first set of findings from our nationwide survey tracking adult reading engagement in the UK, currently the only report of its kind. This research takes a deep dive into the state of adult reading habits in 2024, including reading frequency, confidence, benefits, barriers and attitudes.

This first set of insights from our data focuses on the nation's reading habits and the barriers people face in starting or maintaining a reading journey.

Key findings

Fewer UK adults are reading for pleasure

The data reveals a large decrease in the number of people reading regularly with only half of UK adults (50%) now reading regularly for pleasure, down from 58% in 2015. Among young people aged 16-24, a quarter (24%) have never been regular readers. Reading for pleasure here includes magazines, graphic novels, audiobooks, blogs, and more – not just books.

Barriers to reading

Nearly 3 in 10 people struggle to finish what they read (30%) or focus on reading for more than a few minutes (28%). Low reading confidence is also a common barrier, with 11% finding reading 'always' or 'usually' difficult, rising to 22% among young adults.

¹ Reading engagement measures and survey developed by The Reading Agency using our Reading Outcomes Framework. The research was conducted by Censuswide with 2,003 UK nationally representative consumers, between 02/04/24 - 04/04/24. Censuswide abide by and employ members of the Market Research Society which is based on the ESOMAR principles and are members of The British Polling Council. Extrapolation calculated using the percentage of 'Always somewhat difficult', 'Always very difficult' and 'Usually difficult but sometimes easy' answers combined multiplied the ONS 2022 mid-year UK population figures (aged 16+): $0.1083 \times 55,190,347 = 5,977,114.58$

² The Reading Agency (2024) [Reading Facts](#)

Generational differences

Younger adults (aged 16-34) face the greatest barriers to reading, including lower enjoyment (55%), difficulty focusing (42%), and challenges finding relatable content (39%).

What's stopping people from reading?

Non-readers say lack of enjoyment and difficulty finding interesting content are major barriers. Lapsed readers attribute their decline to life events, health issues, and time spent on social media.

Benefits of reading

Regular readers report higher wellbeing and life satisfaction compared to lapsed and non-readers. They also benefit from improved sleep, concentration, empathy, and creativity.

Methodology

This survey and the reading engagement measures used to understand adult reading habits in the UK were designed by The Reading Agency using our Peter Sowerby Foundation-funded Reading Outcomes Framework. This Framework identifies the outcomes of reading for pleasure and provides a set of tools to help us measure these.³ For the purposes of this survey, 'reading for pleasure' was defined as reading that takes place by choice rather than for work or education, and could include reading material such as books, e-books, magazines, audiobooks, graphic novels, poetry, blogs and more.

The research was conducted by Censuswide with 2,003 UK nationally representative consumers aged 16 years and over, between 2 and 4 April 2024. Censuswide abide by and employ members of the Market Research Society which is based on the ESOMAR principles and are members of The British Polling Council.

Data related to change across time is benchmarked against the following studies commissioned by The Reading Agency and conducted in 2015, 2020, 2021 and 2022:

- Data from 2015 is drawn from an online survey by Vision Critical conducted among 4,164 randomly selected British adults age 18+ from 12-13 January 2015.
- Data from 2020 is drawn from an online survey by Populus Omnibus survey, with 2,103 UK nationally representative consumers 16+, between 15-16 April 2020.⁴
- Data from 2021 is drawn from an online survey by Populus Omnibus survey, with 1,638 UK nationally representative consumers 16+, between 16-18 April 2021.⁵
- Data from 2022 is drawn from an online survey by Censuswide, with 2,008 UK nationally representative consumers 16+, between 7-11 April 2022.⁶

³ The Reading Outcomes Framework was developed in collaboration with stakeholder organisations including Arts Council England, Association of Senior Children's and Education Librarians (ASCEL), BookTrust, Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP), National Literacy Trust, Publishers Association, Scottish Library and Information Council (SLIC) and the Society of Chief Librarians (SCL).

⁴ The Reading Agency (2020) [New survey says reading connects a nation in lockdown](#)

⁵ The Reading Agency (2021) [Re-reading puts a smile on the nation's face, says new survey by The Reading Agency](#)

⁶ The Reading Agency (2022) [A quarter of UK adults keep up their lockdown reading habits](#)

The results have been statistically weighted according to current data on age, gender, region and socioeconomic status from the most recent Census data to ensure the sample is representative of the entire adult population of the UK.

Overview of trends

Adult reading habits

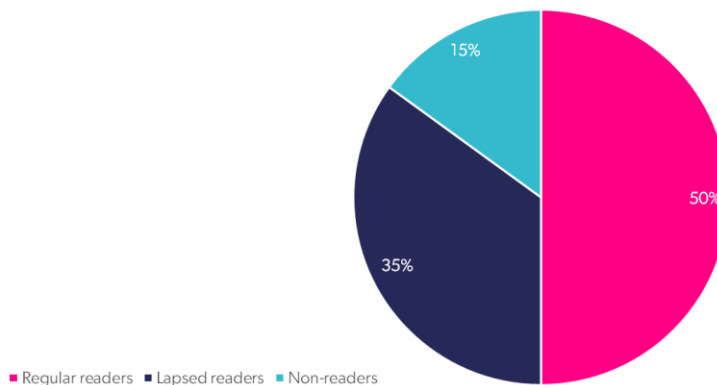
Only half of UK adults (50%) now say they read regularly for pleasure, with 15% revealing that they've never been regular readers.⁷ Well over one-third of all UK adults (35%) are now lapsed readers – meaning they used to read on a regular basis but have since dropped the habit.

This means that the more than 27 million UK adults who do not read regularly are missing out on the physical, mental and financial benefits that have been proven to come from reading.⁸ This is particularly concerning, given the evidence that per capita, incomes are higher in countries where more adults reach the highest levels of literacy proficiency.⁹ Studies also indicate better health outcomes as well as clear wellbeing impacts, with those who read for pleasure reporting higher levels of self-esteem and ability to cope with difficult situations and fewer feelings of depression.¹⁰

A breakdown of the nation's current reading habits is visualised in Figure 1 below.¹¹

Figure 1. Breakdown of responses to the question 'When thinking about reading regularly for pleasure (i.e., at least once a week), what statement is true for you, if any at all?'

UK adults' reading habits (at least once a week)



⁷ N=2,003 for all statistics unless indicated otherwise.

⁸ Extrapolation calculated using the inverse percentage of 'I regularly read for pleasure' multiplied the ONS 2022 mid-year UK population figures (aged 16+): $0.517 \times 55,190,347 = 27,688,997.0899$

⁹ OECD (2013) [OECD Skills Outlook 2013: First Results from the Survey of Adult Skills](#)

¹⁰ J Billington (2015) [Reading between the Lines: the Benefits of Reading for Pleasure for The Reading Agency Quick Reads](#), University of Liverpool

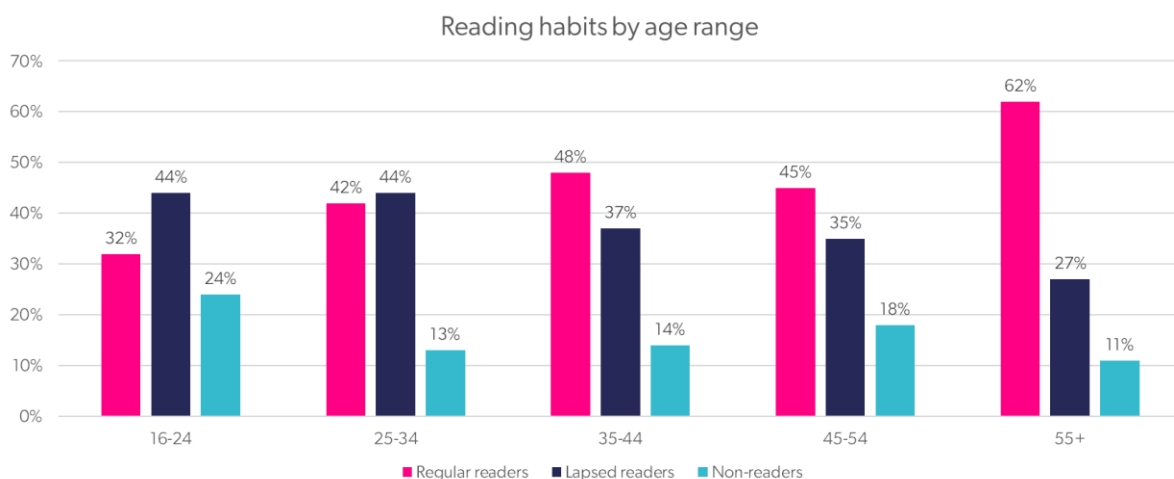
¹¹ 'Regular readers' defined as those who responded 'I regularly read for pleasure'; 'Lapsed readers' as 'I used to read regularly for pleasure, but I rarely or never read nowadays'; and 'Non-readers' as 'I don't read for pleasure now, and have never been a regular reader'.

Reading habits: Change over time

Comparing this data with a study conducted in 2015, our research identifies that these figures mark not just a notable decrease in the number of UK adults reading regularly but also a stark increase in the number of non-readers. With only half the nation (50%) now saying they read regularly, down from 58% in 2015, we see a steady decline of 13.8%.¹² However, the number of non-readers has increased more sharply in recent years, with 15% of the nation now saying they do not currently read for pleasure and have never done so regularly. That's a rise of 88% since 2015, when just 8% of UK adults were non-readers.¹³

The data also indicates the potential for this trend to continue growing in scale, with younger adults being less likely to read than all other age groups. One-quarter of young people across the UK (aged 16-24) say they've never been a regular reader, with an additional 44% already being 'lapsed readers'. By contrast, 62% of those aged 55 years or older consider themselves regular readers. A breakdown of the nation's current reading habits by age range is visualised in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2. Age-range breakdown of responses to the question, 'When thinking about reading regularly for pleasure (i.e. at least once a week), what statement is true for you, if any at all?'



Reading material

Our research also highlights clear differences in the types of reading material UK adults engage with, depending on their frequency of reading. Regular readers, for example, favour longer-form content such as books, with 69% reading a fiction title (including

¹² Data from 2015 drawn from an online survey by Vision Critical conducted among 4,164 randomly selected British adults age 18+ from January 12-13 2015. The results have been statistically weighted according to the most current data on age, gender, region and education from the most recent census data to ensure the sample is representative of the entire adult population of the UK. In 2015, 58% indicated 'I regularly read books for pleasure'.

¹³ Methodology for 2015 as above. In 2015, 8% agreed 'I don't read books for pleasure now, and have never been a regular reader'.

audiobooks and e-books) at least once a week.¹⁴ By contrast, while lapsed readers may have dropped their regular reading habit, some told us they do still read occasionally, with almost 1 in 3 reading magazines at least once a week (31%).¹⁵ Almost half of non-readers (47%), meanwhile, say they read news articles at least once a week, consistent with this group's motivations for reading as being for specific information only.¹⁶

Library use

Looking more widely at reading habits, approximately one-third (34%) of the nation are current library members, while over a quarter (26%) have let their library membership lapse.¹⁷ More than half of UK adults say they borrow books from their local library (55%), with 16% doing so at least once a week.

Of the 55% who borrow books from their local library:

- 16% borrow books at least once a week
- 15% borrow books at least once a month
- 9% borrow books every 1 to 6 months

On top of this, over half of UK adults (52%) say they enjoy visiting a bookshop or library – regardless of how frequently they do so.

Barriers to reading

Through this piece of research, we also built a picture of the challenges people face along their reading journeys, to better understand how to support the nation to start – and then maintain – a regular reading habit.

We found that even many keen and confident readers were hitting barriers to reading – across the UK, approximately 3 in 10 adults say they find it hard to finish what they're reading (30%) or to focus on reading for more than a few minutes at a time (28%).¹⁸

The data highlighted several barriers to reading, with lack of time (33%) and the distraction of social media (20%) cited as the primary obstacles for UK adults. Almost 1 in 4 (23%) shared 'I cannot find things to read that interest me'.¹⁹

Low reading confidence also appears to be a key barrier to reading for many UK adults. More than 1 in 10 (11%) say they find reading 'always' or 'usually' difficult, rising to 22% of young people (16-24 years).²⁰ Men are more likely than women to report that they struggle with reading (12.1% vs 8.7%).

¹⁴ N=998

¹⁵ N=699

¹⁶ N=291

¹⁷ 34.25% of respondents are currently members of a library. 26.01% used to be library members but are not anymore.

¹⁸ 'Somewhat like me' and 'Very much like me' answers combined.

¹⁹ 'Somewhat like me' and 'Very much like me' answers combined.

²⁰ N=604. 'Always somewhat difficult', 'Always very difficult' and 'Usually difficult but sometimes easy' answers combined.

Generational differences

Younger adults between the ages of 16 and 34 appear to be facing the greatest barriers to reading, as compared with the UK average across all ages:²¹

- They enjoy reading less (55% vs 69%)
- They struggle to focus on reading for more than a few minutes at a time (42% vs 28%)
- They can't find things to read that interest them (36% vs 23%)
- They don't feel represented in reading material, agreeing that it's difficult to find books featuring characters with experiences similar to their own (39% vs 25%)

Barriers for lapsed and non-readers

While a lack of free time is the strongest factor in stopping people from reading, some other patterns have emerged by analysing the data across reading habits, with a focus on understanding the barriers for non- and lapsed readers.

Non-readers told us they haven't picked up a reading habit because they struggle with reading (13%), can't focus on it (49%), don't enjoy it (25%), or can't find things that interest them (16%).²² Almost 3 in 5 non-readers said they only read when they have to (57%).²³

Lapsed readers, by contrast, have generally fallen out of a reading habit because of issues with their physical or mental health (17%) or vision (13%) or experiencing a difficult life event, for example, bereavement, losing a job or getting a divorce (11%).²⁴ Some also listed too much time spent on social media (26%).²⁵

Figure 3 below highlights the barriers faced by lapsed readers in detail.²⁶

²¹ Respondents were asked to respond to a series of statements and log how much they agreed that these statements sounded like them. The findings here combine responses for 'Somewhat like me' and 'Very much like me'.

²² N=291. Response options available as 'tick all that apply; therefore, percentages may exceed 100%.

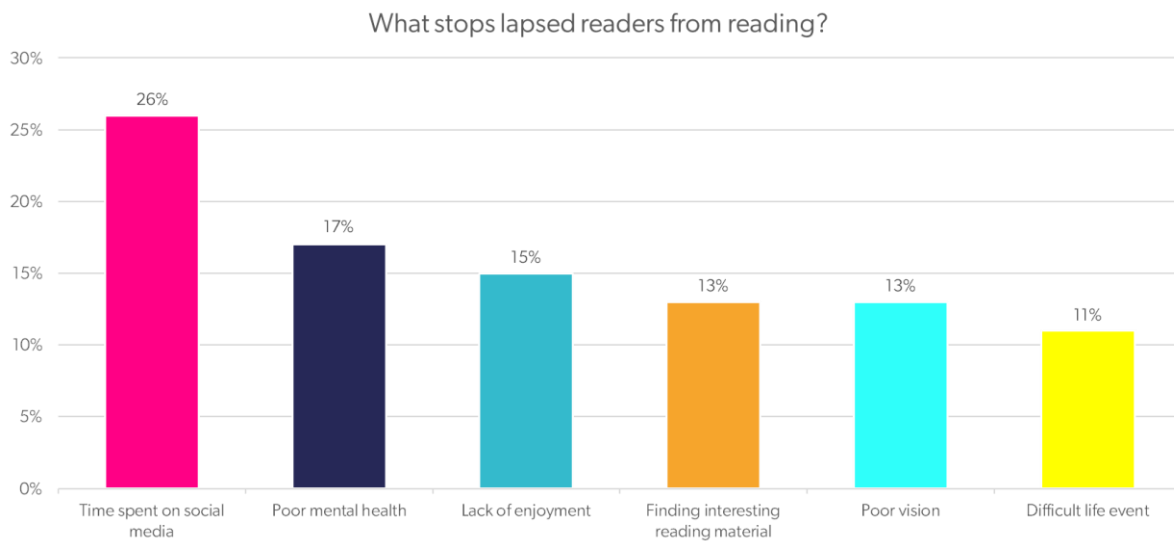
²³ 'Somewhat like me' and 'Very much like me' answers combined.

²⁴ N=699.

²⁵ Response options available as 'tick all that apply; therefore, percentages may exceed 100%.

²⁶ Sixteen response options provided; the top-six options chosen are visualised in Figure 4 (excluding 'lack of time'). Response options available as 'tick all that apply; therefore, percentages may exceed 100%.

Figure 3. Lapsed-reader responses to the question, 'What, if anything, stops you from reading?' Top six responses, excluding 'lack of time'



What are the benefits of a regular reading habit?

The evidence base demonstrating the wide-ranging benefits of reading for pleasure is clear.²⁷ To help build this picture further, we asked UK adults to share the difference reading has made to their lives.

Regular readers told us more about the many ways reading for pleasure has helped them. The top five benefits they experienced from reading were that it...²⁸

1. Improved mental health and wellbeing (44%)
2. Contributed to a better night's sleep (41%)
3. Improved concentration levels (34%)
4. Helped with a better understanding of other people's feelings and different life experiences (30%)
5. Boosted creativity (29%)

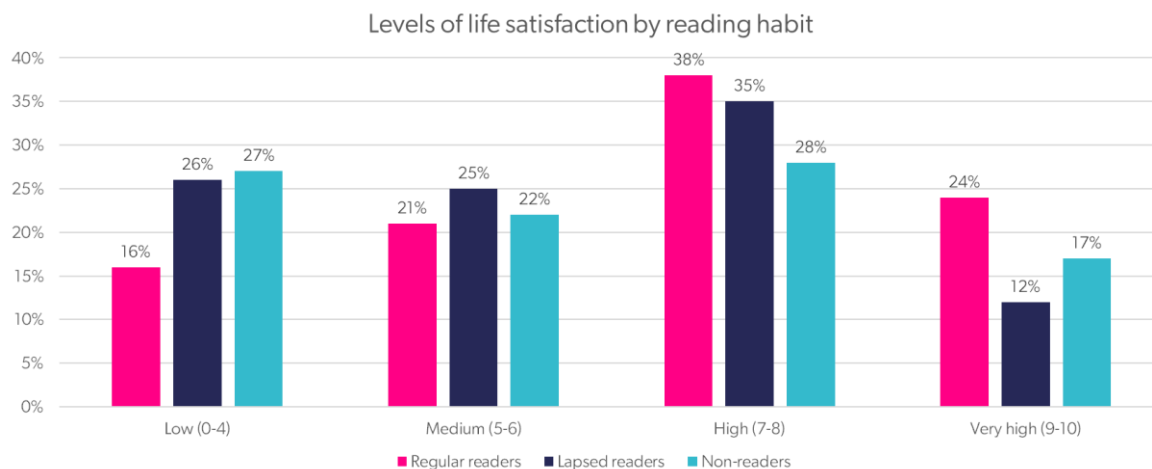
Our data also shows a correlation with positive health and wellbeing. The UK's regular readers report higher wellbeing and fewer feelings of loneliness than both lapsed and non-readers. Almost half of regular readers reported the highest levels of life satisfaction (46%) compared to lapsed readers (27%) and non-readers (31%), as outlined in Figure 4 below.²⁹

²⁷ The Reading Agency (2024) [Reading Facts](#)

²⁸ N=998. Sixteen response options provided. Response options available as 'tick all that apply'; therefore, percentages may exceed 100%.

²⁹ N=998; N=699; N=291, respectively. Life satisfaction measure and categories in line with ONS [Personal well-being guidance](#)

Figure 4. Levels of life satisfaction by reading habit



Similarly, almost 1 in 4 regular readers (23%) say reading helps them feel connected to other people.³⁰ Our research shows that adults who read regularly for pleasure are less likely to report that they feel lonely: 15% of regular readers say they feel ‘often’ or ‘always’ lonely compared to 18% of lapsed readers and 20% of non-readers.³¹

How can we ‘reboot reading’?

Despite the many barriers people experience in starting or maintaining a reading habit, our data indicates that positive attitudes towards reading – as well as a desire to read – are shown across all age groups and current reading habits: 69% of UK adults enjoy reading, and almost 3 in 5 (59%) say there are lots of things they want to read.³²

Watching films and TV shows and listening to podcasts/audiobooks has provided a route into reading for many people, especially lapsed readers. For example, 2 in 5 lapsed readers (41%) said films and TV shows had got them interested in reading books and 28% said the same about podcasts or audiobooks.³³ Even 1 in 5 non-readers (19%) agreed that films and TV shows had piqued their interest in reading.³⁴

Figure 5 below highlights the top six reasons UK adults told us they find reading important, indicating a range of factors related to health and wellbeing, skills development and social connections that could be used to help support readers to start or maintain a reading habit.³⁵

³⁰ N=998

³¹ N=998; N=699; N=291, respectively. Loneliness measure and categories in line with ONS [Measuring loneliness guidance](#)

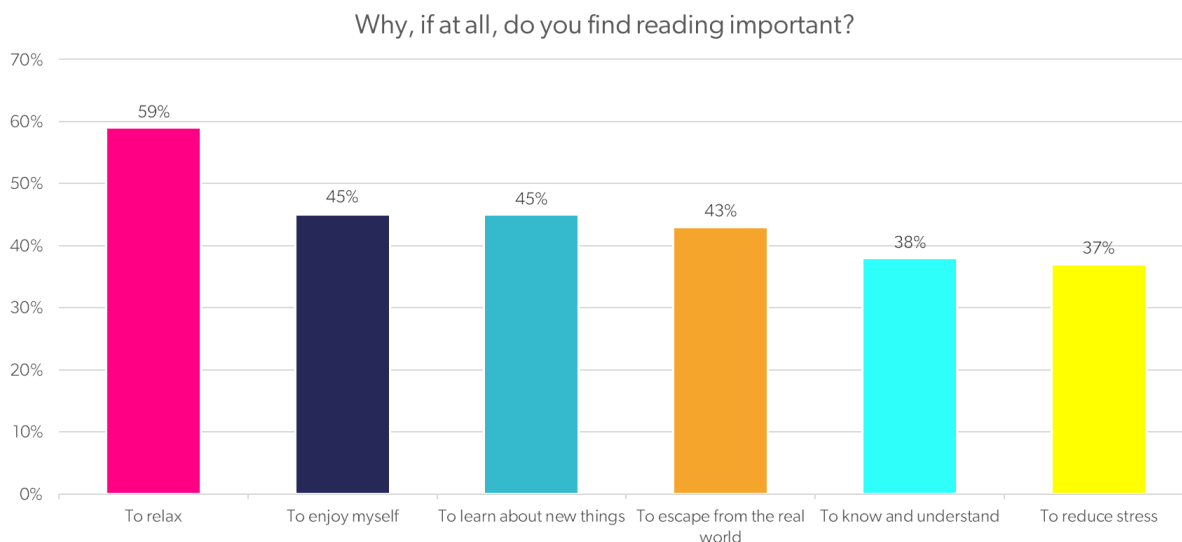
³² ‘Somewhat like me’ and ‘Very much like me’ answers combined.

³³ N=699

³⁴ N=291

³⁵ Twelve response options provided; the top-six options chosen are visualised in Figure 6. Response options available as ‘tick all that apply’; therefore, percentages may exceed 100%.

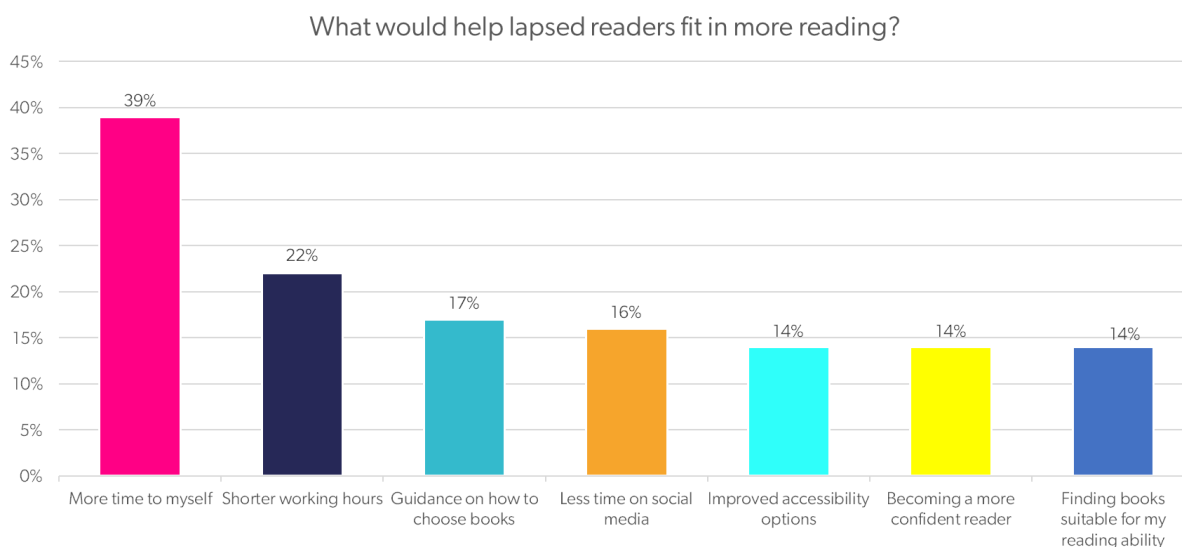
Figure 5. Breakdown of responses to the question, 'Why, if at all, do you find reading important?'



Focusing specifically on our lapsed readers, in addition to factors such as having more time to themselves (29%) or shorter working hours (22%), this group told us that increasing their reading confidence is a key factor that would help them start again (14%) – as well as support and guidance on how to find books that interest them (17%), that are suitable for their reading ability (14%), or that are in more accessible formats like audiobooks or large print (14%).³⁶

Figure 6 below highlights the top factors that would help lapsed readers fit more reading into their lives.³⁷

Figure 6. Breakdown of lapsed-reader responses to the question, 'What, if anything, would help you fit in more reading?'



³⁶ N=699. Response options available as 'tick all that apply'; therefore, percentages may exceed 100%.

³⁷ Sixteen response options provided; the top-seven options chosen are visualised in Figure 6. Response options available as 'tick all that apply'; therefore, percentages may exceed 100%.

What's next?

This first set of insights into the nation's reading demonstrates some concerning trends in the number of people starting or maintaining a reading habit, but also some insights into how we can help overcome those barriers and the positive difference reading can make to our lives.

We will be releasing our 'Focus on...' series of reports over the coming weeks, including:

- Focus on... Reading, health and wellbeing
- Focus on... Reading, skills development and career opportunities
- Focus on... Reading and social connections
- Focus on... Family reading
- Focus on... Regional insights