

The State of the Nation's Adult Reading: 2024

Focus on... Reading, Skills Development and Career Opportunities

Introduction

[New research](#) from The Reading Agency reveals that half of all adults in the UK don't read regularly for pleasure, with 35% of adults having dropped their regular reading habit.¹

Yet, regularly reading for enjoyment and out of choice is linked to greater cultural awareness, general knowledge, skills and higher lifetime earnings². In fact, over 1 in 4 UK adults told us that reading helped them learn a new skill (26%).

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.³

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 third set of insights from our nationwide survey tracking adult reading engagement in the UK, currently the only report of its kind. The following research focuses on the nation's relationship with reading and how a regular reading habit can positively benefit an individual's skill development and career.

Key findings: Skills development and career opportunities

Motivations for reading

Almost 1 of every 2 UK adults (45%) agree that reading is important to them in learning about new things. Other cited motivations for reading were to build knowledge and understanding (38%), to learn about new people and cultures (29%) and to help find a good job or promotion (9%)

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.

² J. Billington (2015) [Reading Between the Lines: the Benefits of Reading for Pleasure](#); Pro Bono Economics (2021) [Paying the Price: The cost of very poor adult literacy](#)

³ The Reading Agency (2024) [Reading Facts](#)

Barriers to reading

We asked UK adults about what prevents them from reading. Our research shows that UK adults face barriers to reading relating to lack of free time, financial reasons, lack of access to books and bad past school or home experiences with reading. In fact, a lack of free time prevented 1 in 3 UK adults (33%) from reading regularly for pleasure.

Benefits of reading

Our research shows that a regular reading habit is associated more often with learning a new skill and boosting creativity. In total, more than 1 in 4 UK adults (26%) told us that reading helped them learn a new skill and 24% of UK adults told us that reading had boosted their creativity.

Differences by reading habit

Our research also evidences how regular readers and lapsed/non-readers have differing perceptions of reading and experience differing benefits of reading. For example, 3 in 10 regular readers told us that reading had helped them boost their creativity compared to only 1 in 5 lapsed/non-readers.

Further analysis of our data suggests that promoting reading as a key tool for skills development and career opportunities has the potential for engaging people who read less regularly. Lapsed/non-readers are more likely than regular readers to see reading as important in finding a good job or obtaining a promotion.

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.⁵ 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. 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.

Focus on... Reading, Skills Development and Career Opportunities

Motivations for reading: Skills Development and Career Opportunities

To explore people's motivations for reading, we asked UK adults to share why they find reading important. Two of the five most common motivations for reading listed by respondents, 'to learn about new things' (45%) and 'to know and understand' (38%), were connected to skills development and career opportunities.⁴

Looking at all the motivations for reading that related to skills development and career opportunities, UK adults told us that reading was important to them...

- ... to learn about new things (45%)
- ... to know and understand (38%)
- ...to learn about new people's and cultures (29%)
- ...to help them find a good job or promotion (9%)

Motivations for reading: Gender differences

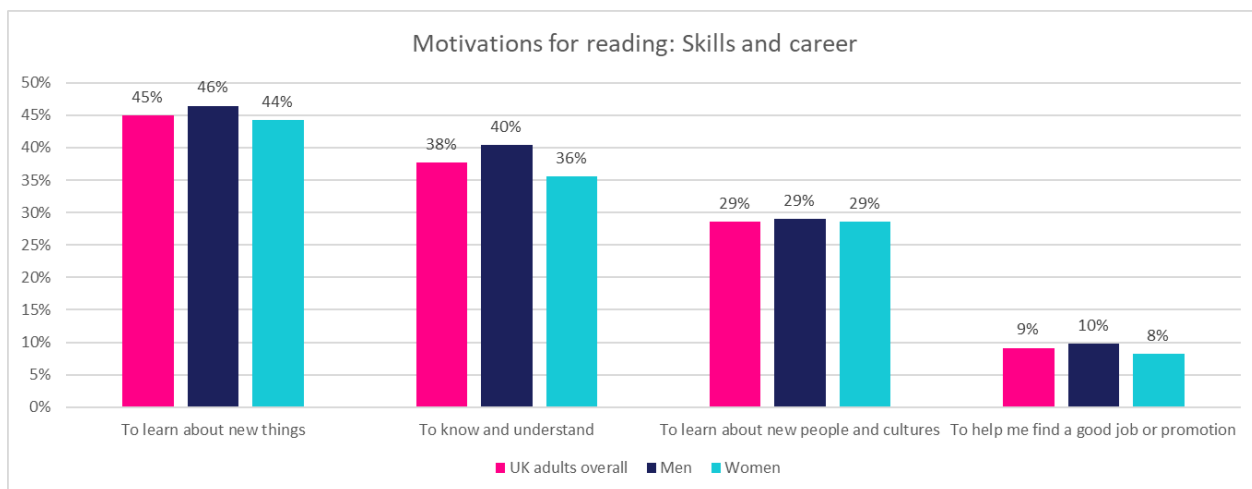
The data suggests that UK men were more likely to be motivated to read for a reason related to skills or career opportunities than UK women. This is in contrast to findings from our last report that showed that women were more likely than men to be motivated to read for a reason related to health and wellbeing. The data from this report shows, UK men were more likely to find reading important to them to learn about new things (46% of men to 44% of women), to know and understand (40% of men to 36% of women) and to help them find a good job or promotion (10% of men to 8% of women).⁵

A comparative breakdown of these results can be seen in Figure 1 below.

⁴ Twelve response options provided. Response options available as 'tick all that apply'; therefore, percentages may exceed 100%.

⁵ N(men)=956 and N(women)=1013

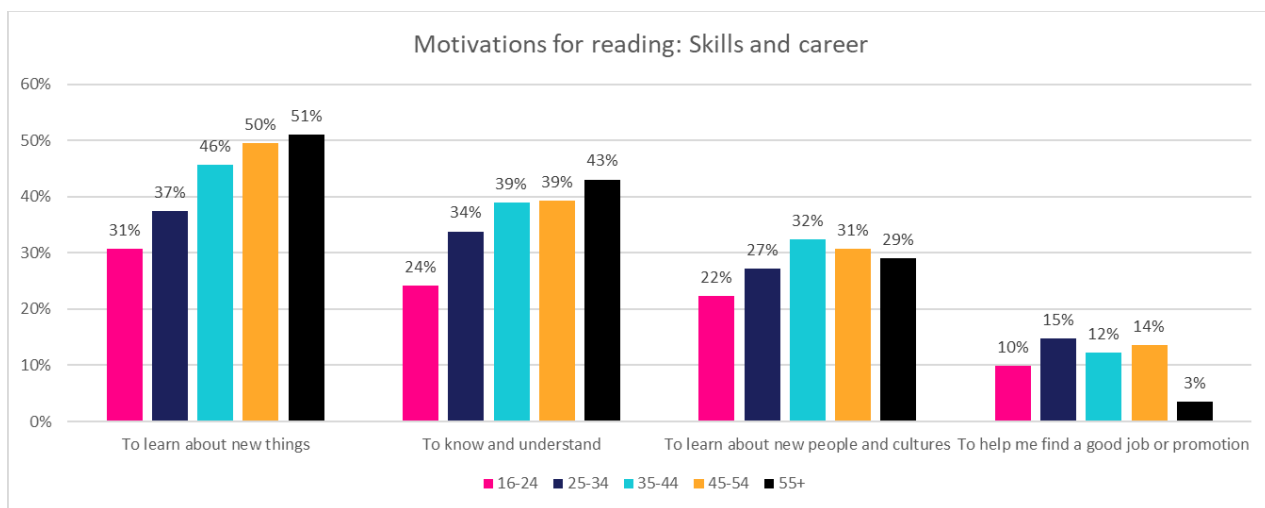
Figure 1. Breakdown by gender of skills development and career opportunities-related responses to 'Why, if at all, is reading important to you?'



Motivations for reading: Age differences

Amongst age groups, those aged 55+ were more likely than other age groups to respond that reading was important to them to learn about new things (51%) and to know and understand (43%).⁶ Respondents who listed reading being important to them in helping them to find a good job or promotion were most likely to be of the 25-34 age range. A comparative breakdown of these results can be seen in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2. Breakdown by age of skills development and career opportunities-related responses to 'Why, if at all, is reading important to you?'



⁶ N(16-24)=273, N(25-34)=331, N(35-44)=318, N(45-54)=303 and N(55+)=778

Barriers to reading: Skills development and career opportunities

The data captured through this research has also helped us better understand the challenges people face along their reading journeys. For many UK adults, factors affecting their skills development and career opportunities have acted as a barrier to starting or maintaining a regular reading habit:⁷

- Around 18.2 million UK adults⁸ (33%) said that **lack of free time** prevents them from reading more regularly.
- 4.4 million UK adults (8%)⁹ said that **financial reasons** were a barrier that stopped them from reading.
- Just over 3.8 million UK adults¹⁰ (7%) listed **a lack of access to books** as a barrier to reading more.
- 3.3 million UK adults¹¹ (6%) either stop reading or struggle to maintain a good reading habit due to **a bad past experience with reading at school or at home**.

Barriers to reading: Gender differences

Observations of the data showed that a higher percentage of women list lack of free time as a barrier to reading more than men (36% of women to 31% of men). However, there was a slightly higher percentage of men than women that cited financial reasons (9% of men to 8% of women), lack of access to books (8% of men to 7% of women) and bad past experiences with reading at school or at home (7% of men to 6% of women). A comparative breakdown can be found in Figure 3 below.

⁷ All extrapolations calculated using the percentage of 'Skills development and career opportunities reasons, such as lack of free time or financial reasons' answers multiplied the ONS 2022 mid-year UK population figures (aged 16+): 55,190,347.

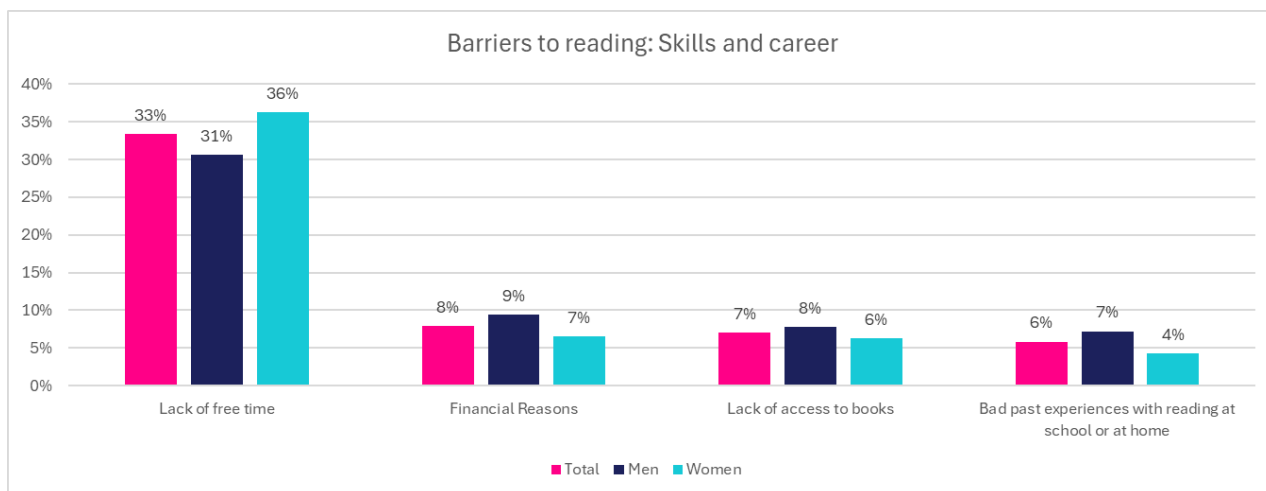
⁸ Extrapolation calculated using the percentage of 'Lack of free time' related answers multiplied the ONS 2022 mid-year UK population figures (aged 16+): $0.33 \times 55,190,347 = 18,212,815$

⁹ Extrapolation calculated using the percentage of 'financial reasons' related answers multiplied the ONS 2022 mid-year UK population figures (aged 16+): $0.08 \times 55,190,347 = 4,415,228$

¹⁰ Extrapolation calculated using the percentage of 'a lack of access to books' related answers multiplied the ONS 2022 mid-year UK population figures (aged 16+): $0.07 \times 55,190,347 = 3,863,324$

¹¹ Extrapolation calculated using the percentage of 'a bad experience with reading at school or at home' related answers multiplied the ONS 2022 mid-year UK population figures (aged 16+): $0.06 \times 55,190,347 = 3,311,421$

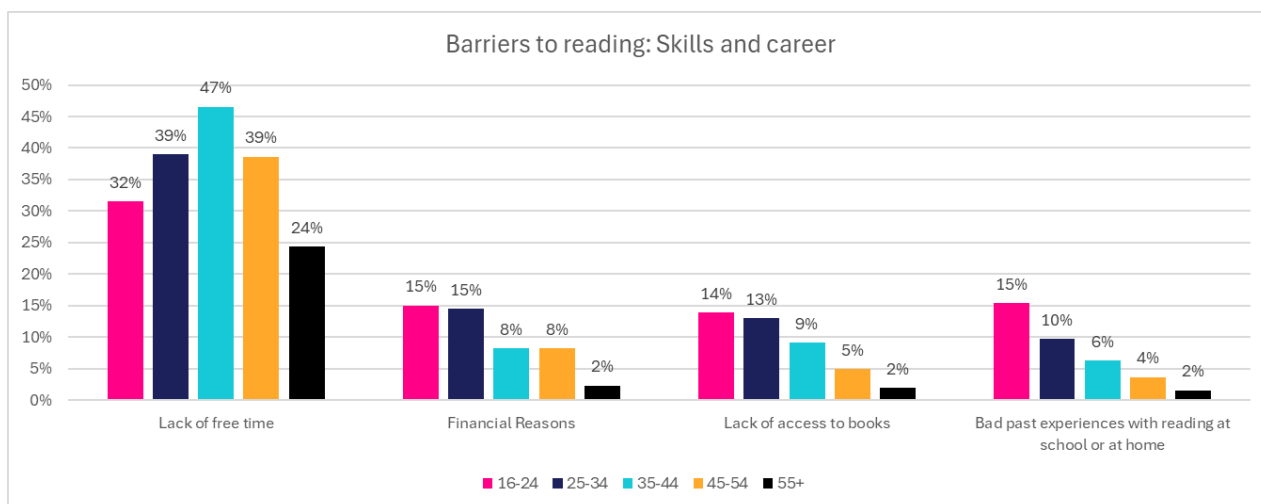
Figure 3. Breakdown by gender of skills development and career opportunities to 'What, if anything, stops you from reading?'



Barriers to reading: Age differences

Lack of free time became more of a barrier to UK adults with reading as they became closer to the middle age range. In fact, the 35-44 age range was the most likely to cite lack of free time as a barrier to them reading more (47%). By contrast, bad past experiences with reading at school or at home were less likely to be listed as a barrier among older age groups. The 16-24 age range was the most likely to list this reason as a barrier to reading (15%). Lack of access to books was also a more common barrier reported by younger participants, with 14% of 16-24-year-olds facing this issue. A breakdown of these responses can be found in Figure 4.

Figure 4. Breakdown by age of skills development and career opportunities to 'What, if anything, stops you from reading?'



Benefits of reading: Skills development and career opportunities

We also asked people to share the difference reading has made to their lives. Benefits related to skills development and career opportunities, such as learning a new skill and enhanced creativity, came in the top half of positive outcomes cited across all UK adults regardless of their reading habits. This is in line with an established link between career opportunities and regular reading in the wider research as a whole. Adults that have low literacy levels and do not regularly engage in reading have lower lifetime earnings. Over the course of their lifetime, the average worker with low literacy levels will earn £33,000 less than they would if they had a basic level of literacy.¹²

Overall, participants stated that they had experienced the following skills-related benefits from reading:¹³

- Learn a new skill (26%)
- Boosted creativity (24%)
- Started a new course (12%)
- Started a new career or business (9%)

Benefits of reading: Gender differences

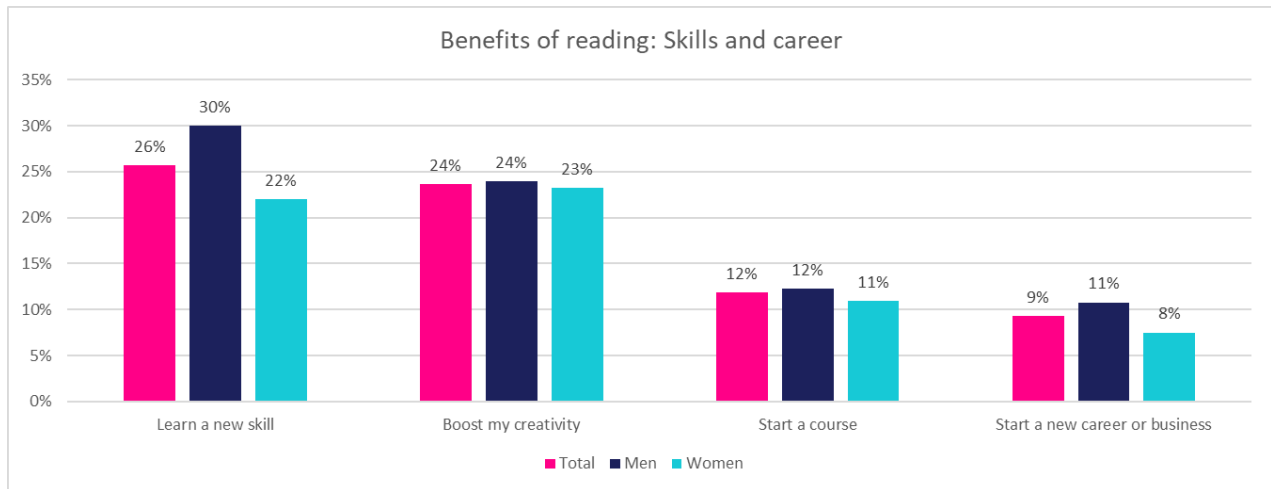
Similarly to men and women's perceived motivations for reading, UK men were more likely to list a benefit that related to skills development and career opportunities than UK women. In fact, around 30% of UK men had listed 'learning a new skill' as a benefit they had experienced from reading compared to 22% of UK women – reflecting an 8 percentage point difference.

Men were also slightly more likely to list boosting their creativity (24% of UK men compared to 23% of UK women) and starting a new career or business (11% of UK men compared to 8% of UK women) as reading-related benefits they had experienced. A breakdown of these responses can be found in Figure 5.

¹² Pro Bono Economics (2021) [Paying the Price: The cost of very poor adult literacy](#)

¹³ Sixteen response options provided. Response options available as 'tick all that apply'; therefore, percentages may exceed 100%.

Figure 5. Breakdown by gender of skills development and career opportunities to 'What, if anything, has reading helped you with?'



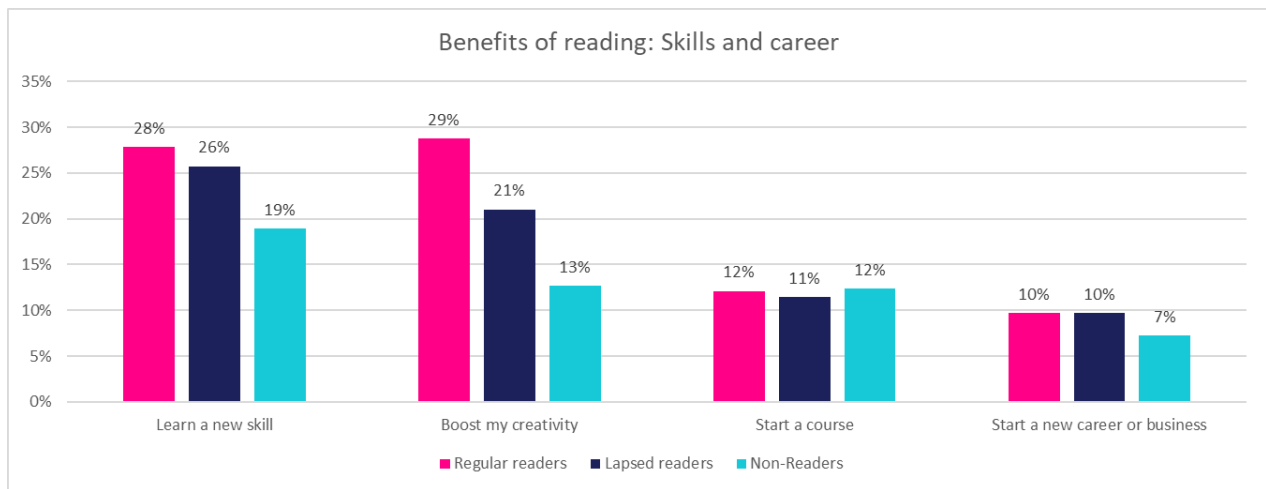
Differences by reading habit

The Reading Agency examined differences among regular, lapsed and non-readers' reading perceptions and attitudes. Whilst regular readers and lapsed/non-readers reported similar benefits from reading, some key differences did emerge.

- For instance, both regular readers and lapsed/non-readers were equally as likely to list starting a new course as a benefit they had experienced from reading (with 12% of both groups listing this) and a similar proportion of regular readers (10%) to lapsed readers (9%) had started a new career or business. However, regular readers were more likely to report that they had developed a new skill and boosted their creativity through reading: Over 1 in 4 regular readers (28%) said they had benefitted from reading as this led to them learning a new skill. This compares to 24% of lapsed and non-readers.
- Almost 3 in 10 regular readers (29%) said reading had boosted their creativity, compared to just 2 in 10 (19%) lapsed and non-readers.

A breakdown of these responses can be found in Figure 6 below.

Figure 6. Readers habits' skills development and career opportunities responses to 'What, if anything, has reading helped you with?'



Additionally, lapsed and non-readers were more likely than regular readers to list reading as being important to help them find a good job or promotion (10% of lapsed and non-readers vs 8% of regular readers).¹⁴ This indicates a perception amongst these groups as to the value of reading as an activity offering practical purpose as opposed to its wider social or wellbeing related benefits. Skills development and career opportunities could potentially be an important future consideration in engaging these types of UK adults.

What's next?

This third set of insights into the nation's reading habits demonstrates the positive difference reading can make to our lives, with a regular reading habit being associated with a range of skills development and career opportunities-related benefits. It also shows the financial, access or time usage barriers that some UK adults face in starting or maintaining a reading habit, making it even more important to support UK adults to continue reading throughout these challenges.

We have launched our [State of the Nation's Adult Reading: 2024 Overview Report](#) and will be releasing our 'Focus on...' series of reports over the coming weeks, including:

- Focus on... Reading and social connections
- Focus on... Family reading
- Focus on... Regional insights

¹⁴ N(regular readers)=998, N(lapsed readers)=699 and N(non-readers)=291