

THE
READING
AGENCY

Evaluates



Is reading creative?

Evaluating reader responses to
Inspire's 'I Am A Reader' project

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Introduction

I Am A Reader was an Arts Council England-funded project, delivered by Inspire: Culture, Learning and Libraries, that set out to ask a core question: is reading creative?

The project aimed to give libraries, individuals, and the wider literature sector an insight into public responses to this question through a range of methods and outputs, including:

- bringing together groups of readers, including those whose voices might not be heard, to explore their role as co-creators of fictional worlds, alongside professional writers. This culminated in a co-commissioned anthology of new fiction **Six Stories from I Am A Reader**.
- commissioning the creation of 22 illustrations inspired by the comments of real adult readers. This became the centrepiece of a library touring exhibition and a **virtual exhibition**.
- posing the question: 'do you think you're being creative when you read?' in libraries and via a digital campaign, resulting in more than 500 responses. Many of these responses were compiled as part of **The Little Book of Reader Insights**.

By sharing these outcomes and insights with colleagues across the libraries and wider literature sector, Inspire hoped to ignite a conversation about reading as a creative act and nurture a new understanding of adult readers today; how they talk about reading, what it means to them, and what happens when they open the pages of a book.

The Reading Agency, a UK-wide reading charity, were commissioned to analyse public responses to this question and produce this summative report on what the findings tells us about readers today, how people conceive of reading, and how they talk about reading.

Context: Creativity and reading

The question of the extent to which reading can be considered a creative act spans centuries, with Ralph Waldo Emerson famously addressing the question of creative reading in an 1837 speech:¹

" There is then creative reading as well as creative writing. When the mind is braced by labour and invention, the page of whatever book we read becomes luminous with manifold allusion. Every sentence is doubly significant, and the sense of our author is as broad as the world."

Here, Emerson comments on the value of readers' life experiences and personal viewpoints and understandings in creating meaning alongside the author – each sentence being 'doubly significant' for each individual reader.

¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson (1837) 'The American Scholar' speech

At a reading research conference in 1968, academic researchers picked up this conversation, making explicit the connections between reading and the role of imagination in creativity:²

“ The total act of creative reading demands that the reader produce fresh, original ideas not explicitly stated in the reading material. The reader becomes an active participant – really a co-author – and he adds to what the author has written. Creative reading requires thinking, imagination, and emergence of ideas which are products of the reader’s thoughts. The reader gives something of himself.”

Throughout the following decades, with a particular resurgence in the 1990s, education specialists and academic researchers conducted several studies reinforcing the role of creativity in reading.³ Many of these pieces have also argued for the importance of imagination and creativity in supporting and enhancing the enjoyment of reading.

In 2004, Demos, in collaboration with The Reading Agency, produced an in-depth piece of research exploring this topic in relation to reading for pleasure and the role of libraries.⁴ This study further argued for positioning reading as a creative act:

“ Far from being an act of passive consumption, where the reader absorbs the writer’s words like a sponge, reading in itself is a creative process. No two people read the same text in the same way. [...] We take what a writer gives us and we make it our own.”

While there appears to be a general consensus on this question within the literature, what will become clear throughout this report, by contrast, is the tension between what academics, educators, or cultural institutions consider ‘creativity’ and ‘creative reading’ and how readers themselves conceive of this concept. However, as the Demos report notes, the question of what creativity is or how to define it is one we’ve been grappling with since Socrates if not longer, putting the I Am A Reader project in rich and varied company in posing this question.

Methodology

As part of their I Am A Reader project, Inspire asked the public to share whether they felt reading was creative (‘Do you think you are being creative when you read?’) through an online survey. 501 people responded to the survey, sharing their views on whether they felt they were being creative when they read. This report grounds reader responses within the literature, with the acknowledgement that these views fit within a long and rich history of thought on this subject.

2 Adams (1968) *Creative Reading*

3 Russell (1961) *Reading Research That Makes a Difference*; Adams and Bruce (1982) *Creating the Conditions for Creativity in Reader Response to Literature*; Moorman and Ram (1984) *A Functional Theory of Creative Reading*; Moorman and Ram (1994) *Integrating Creativity and Reading: A Functional Approach*; Moorman and Ram (1996) *The Role of Ontology in Creative Understanding*; Moorman (1997) *A functional theory of creative reading: Process, knowledge, and evaluation*; Padgett (1997) *Creative Reading: What It Is, How To Do It, and Why*; Athanasopoulou and Douzina (2022) *Redefining the Students’ Contact with Literature via Creative Writing and Reading*; Bains, et al. (2023) *Using a willingness to wait design to assess how readers value text*

4 Holden (2004) *Creative Reading: Young people, reading and public libraries*, Demos for The Reading Agency

Sources for this report include the 501 responses submitted as part of the public survey, as well as six sets of notes from the in-depth author/reader sessions held in Nottinghamshire. The question of the extent to which reading is a creative act was posed to participants during the author/reader sessions, raising discussions of creativity and its influence on and relationship with their engagement with reading.

The author/reader sessions were held during January to May 2022, and the public survey was open from February 2022 to September 2023. The survey was hosted online and promoted at the library touring exhibition, as well as through social media channels.

Analytical methods

In addition to the desk research contributing to the brief literature review presented above, methods include comparative analysis of the public survey respondents, as well as qualitative analysis of these data sources. The data was also cut by demographic to understand whether there are any differences or nuances that could be identified across the dataset.

We have employed a data-driven reflexive thematic analysis method to identify, analyse and report patterns or themes within the datasets. In brief, this process involved an initial review of the data to familiarise ourselves with the content and identify repeated words, ideas or concepts (codes). An initial set of more than 50 codes was generated and then grouped together into six core themes and nine sub-themes. We then reviewed these themes by returning to the data to review our thinking, compare against the wider literature and check for possible bias. As part of this review process, we conducted a content analysis, which involved quantifying the occurrences of each code and theme to sense-check the findings and refine the hierarchy of responses.

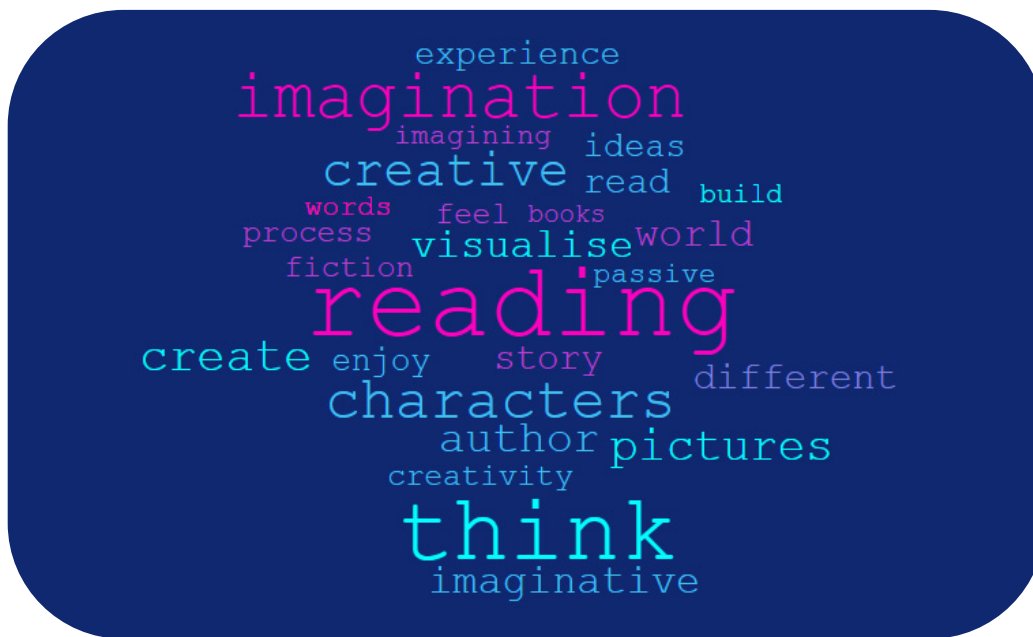
Using the core and sub-themes identified through the qualitative analysis, this report draws together themes from the data to shed light on what this tells us about adult readers today, adults' experiences and relationships with reading, perceptions of reading as a creative act, and how they might use those insights to help engage adult readers in future.

Key findings: Are you being creative when you read?

Approaching this question from a quantitative perspective, the majority of respondents to the public survey felt that reading was a creative activity. Over 3 in 5 respondents (62%) said, 'yes', they are being creative when they read; 1 in 5 (20%) responded, 'no', they are not being creative when they read; and just under 1 in 5 (18%) said they were 'not sure'.

By analysing the responses and approaching this question from a qualitative thematic standpoint, however, the breakdown becomes more nuanced. For example, many of those who chose the response option 'not sure', commented that they had not previously considered the concept of reading as creative, but in now reflecting on the question they did see how creativity was central to the process. Analysing the data across response types shows a strong consensus around reading as an imaginative activity, regardless of whether imagination was immediately understood as 'creative'.

The word cloud below highlights the most frequently used words across the dataset:



Overall, the thematic analysis highlights the diversity of perspective on the nature of reading and its relationship with creativity. Reading is seen almost universally by respondents as an activator of imagination, empathy, and understanding; however, the responses reveal varying views on whether this translates into 'creativity' itself.

In line with these findings, the core themes identified as part of the qualitative analysis include the following:

- 1. Active imagination and visualisation**, meaning readers using their imagination to create mental images.
- 2. Interpretation and personal connection**, meaning reading changing one's thoughts, perspectives, and ideas.
- 3. Reader-author relationship**, meaning recognising and valuing the reader's role within the production of a text.
- 4. Inspiration for other creative activities**, meaning reading inspiring other creative activities or outputs (e.g., writing, drawing).
- 5. Passive vs active creativity**, meaning contested interpretations of the reading process.
- 6. Wider benefits of reading**, meaning aspects such as increased learning, empathy, wellbeing and relaxation.

These themes, and examples of reader responses, are explored in greater detail in the following sections.

Public survey: Responses and demographics

This section provides a breakdown of the type of people who responded to the public survey. Of the 501 responses...

- Almost all said they were regular readers
- Most respondents identified as female
- A wide range of ages were represented
- About 1 in 5 said they had a disability
- The highest level of education attained varied widely

Gender

Respondents were asked to indicate their gender: 85% of whom selected 'female' and 11% 'male'. This gender disparity is not unexpected given what wider research shows around adult reading patterns and engagement with libraries, arts and cultural activities.⁵ However, it should be noted as a factor potentially impacting the content of responses. A detailed breakdown of responses can be found below:

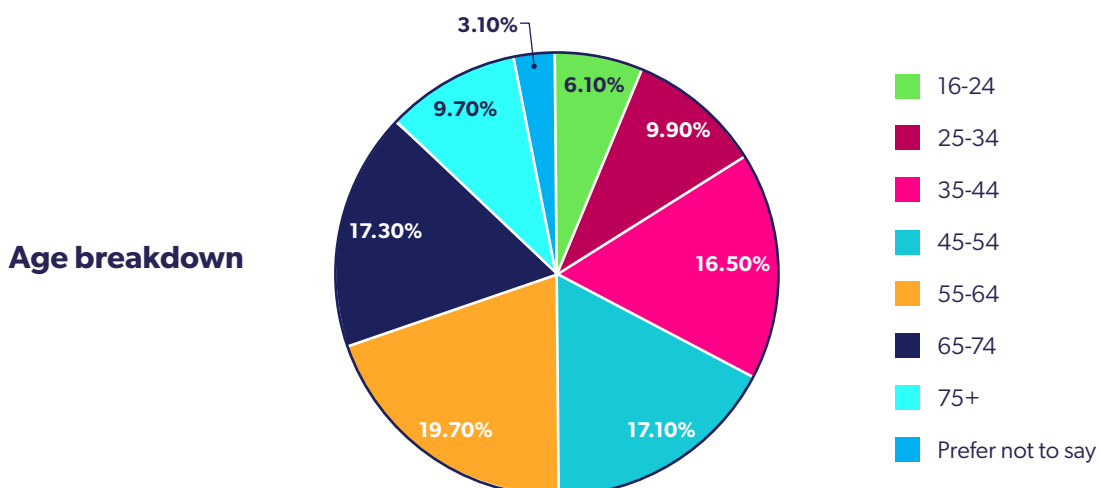
- 85.4% female
- 11.1% male
- 1.7% non-binary or trans [entered as responses into 'free text' field]
- 1.5% prefer not to say

Age

By contrast, responses spanned a wide set of age ranges, with around 1 in 3 respondents between 16-44 years old and 2 in 3 being 45 years or older. A visualisation of this breakdown in age ranges can be found in Figure 1 on the next page.

- 16-24 years old: 6.1%
- 25-34 years old: 9.9%
- 35-44 years old: 16.5%
- 45-54 years old: 17.1%
- 55-64 years old: 19.7%
- 65-74 years old: 17.3%
- 75 years old and over: 9.7%
- 3.1% prefer not to say

Figure 1. Pie chart showing breakdown of ages of survey respondents



Disability

Respondents were asked to indicate whether they identify as a disabled person, or as having a long-term health condition. Of those who responded to this question, 20.1% identified as having a disability or long-term health condition, slightly higher than the average recorded across England (17.7%).⁶

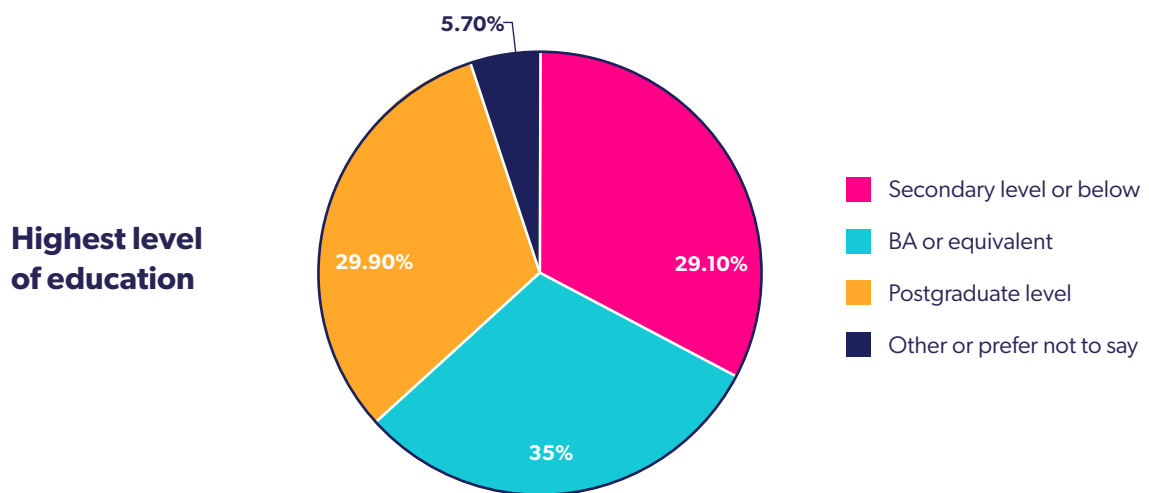
Education

Respondents were also asked to indicate their highest qualification: 32 different types of qualification levels were entered not counting those who selected 'other' or 'prefer not to say'. These were grouped into three primary categories, into which respondents fell relatively evenly:

- 29.1% Secondary level or below
- 35% BA or equivalent (including technical qualifications)
- 29.9% Postgraduate level or higher
- 5.7% other or prefer not to say

This breakdown is visualised in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2. Pie chart showing breakdown of education levels of survey respondents



Reading habits

All but seven respondents can be identified as 'regular readers' (98.6%), meaning they read on at least a weekly basis. These remaining seven said they read once a month or less.

Respondents were also asked to share what types of books they like to read, with an open-text space to list as many types of books or genres as they liked. Most survey respondents could be described as reading 'omnivores', meaning people who read a range of genres and formats.

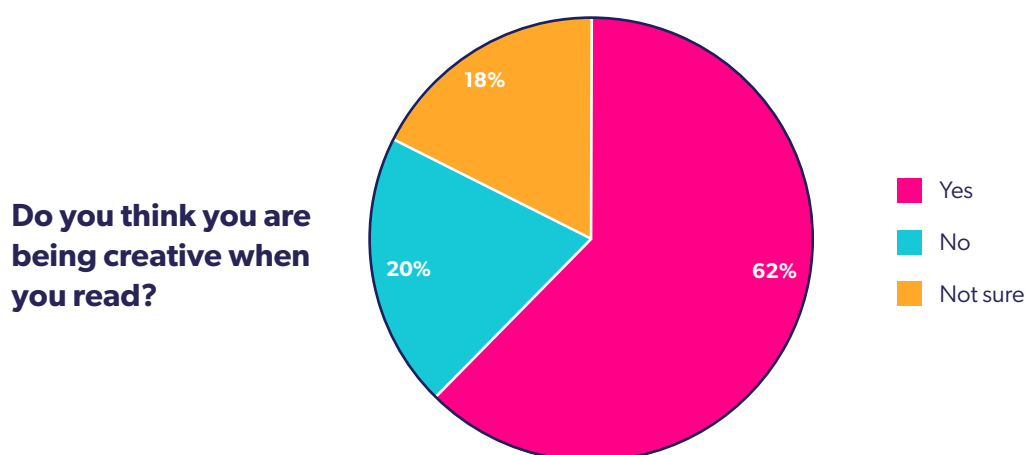
⁶ Disability, England and Wales - Office for National Statistics (ons.gov.uk)

Reading as creative: Quantitative analysis

Approaching the key question at hand in the I Am A Reader project from a quantitative perspective, of the 501 responses received to the public survey, 309 people selected 'yes', 99 selected 'no', and 93 chose 'not sure'.

This breaks down as over 3 in 5 people feeling that we are being creative when we read; 1 in 5 feeling that being creative is not part of the reading process; and just under 1 in 5 not being sure. The proportion of responses is visualised in Figure 3 below.

Figure 3: Breakdown of responses to question 'Do you think you are being creative when you read?'



We also analysed responses to the question of whether or not reading is creative along demographic lines. No clear patterns were evident in terms of frequency of reading or preferred genre or type of reading material. Similarly, responses were relatively evenly spread across education levels and those who had indicated they have a disability or long-term condition.

Demographic differences

Minor differences were evident across the dataset in terms of both gender and age.⁷ The demographics of those who responded 'yes', they think they are being creative when they read, fell into largely the same average proportion for gender as across the wider sample. The age breakdown was very similar to the wider cohort, with slightly more falling into the 16-34 and 55-64 age brackets than across the sample.

For those who selected, 'no', there was a slightly higher proportion of men than women than across the sample average. There was also a higher-than-average proportion for those within the 35-44 and 65+ age brackets.

By contrast, there was a slightly higher proportion of women than men who selected 'not sure' than found across the wider sample. This group also included a higher-than-average proportion of those in the 55-74 age bracket than the average shown across the sample as a whole.

⁷ Proportions of those who identified as non-binary and trans are not discussed in the narrative due to the relatively small number of respondents falling within this category (1.7%).

The demographic breakdowns for responses to each question in relation to the overall sample of respondents is visualised in Figures 4 (gender) and 5 (age) below.

Figure 4. Graph showing comparative demographic (gender) spread of responses to the question 'Do you think you are being creative when you read?'

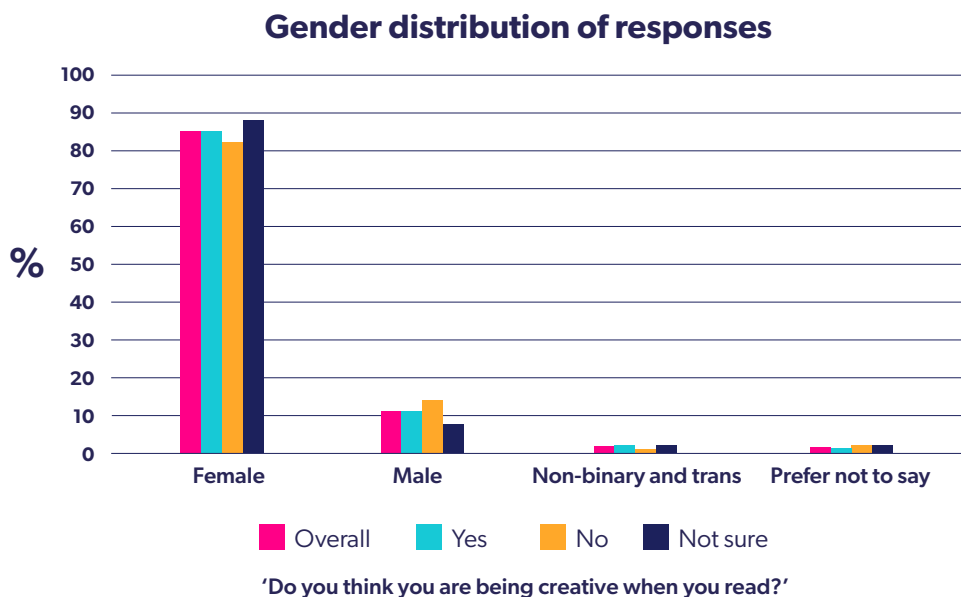
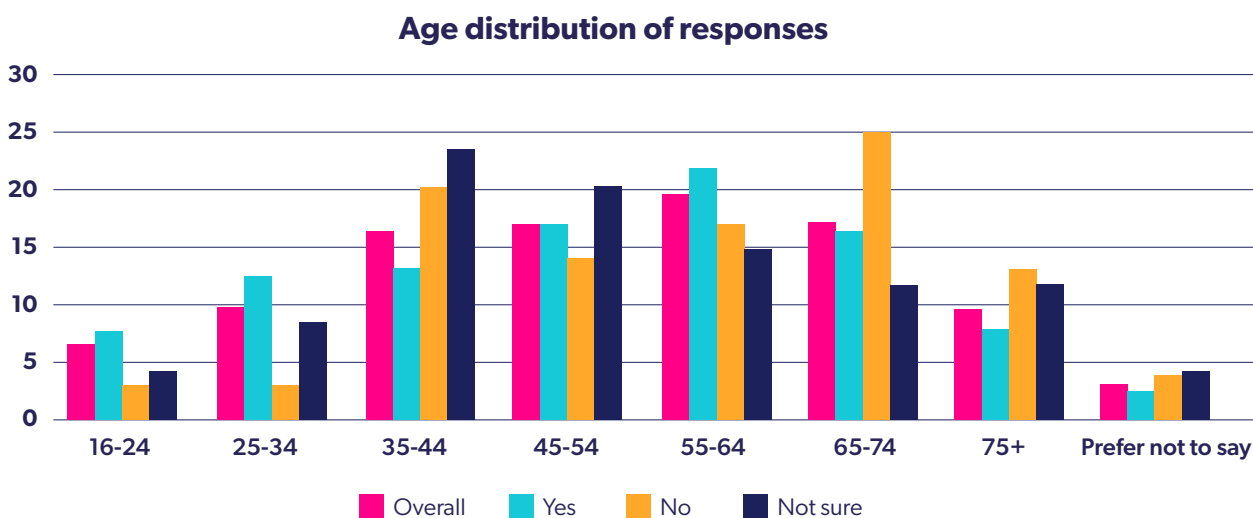


Figure 5. Graph showing comparative demographic (age range) spread of responses to the question 'Do you think you are being creative when you read?'



Reading as creative: Qualitative analysis

In analysing the free-text responses shared by survey respondents, as well as the qualitative data captured through the reader sessions with authors, there was a general consensus across all response types that 'imagination' plays a role in the reading experience in some form; as in the wider literature on this subject, the difference in perception was rooted in perceptions of what constituted 'being creative', meaning, how exactly they understood or defined creativity.

Those who responded 'yes' shared that they found reading creative in multiple ways, for example, by stimulating their imagination and through their own production of wider creative outputs. Those who responded 'no', by contrast, shared a common view that the act of reading fell as a passive consumption of someone else's creative output, despite many also commenting on the ways they used their imagination as part of the reading process. Most of those who responded that they were 'not sure' commented that they hadn't considered the concept prior to the question being posed, but on reflection did see how reading could be viewed as creative.

Questions over the links between reading and creativity also speak to wider research on the benefits of reading. For example, a recent **representative nationwide survey** undertaken by The Reading Agency found that almost 1 in 4 UK adults (24%) said reading had helped boost their creativity, rising to 29% of those who considered themselves 'regular readers'.⁸

The six core themes and their respective sub-themes are outlined below, with selected quotes from respondents highlighting examples of and nuances within each theme.⁹

Theme 1: Active imagination and visualisation

This theme related to readers using their imagination to create mental images, transforming words into visuals in their minds. Imagination and visualisation were mentioned overwhelmingly by respondents, regardless of their response type (yes/no/not sure). Many respondents highlighted the role of imagination in reading, suggesting that visualising characters, settings, and events could be considered a creative act. Respondents often compared the mental imagery they created while reading to making a 'movie' or 'painting' in their minds, indicating active engagement with the text.

This theme can be broken down into two sub-themes: imagination in respect to bringing the words on the page to life in one's mind, and a deeper level of imaginative engagement where the reader 'escapes' their lived reality and feels themselves actually entering into another world.

Bringing words on the page to life

Here, readers described the way they transformed words into visuals, as well as the ways they exercised imaginative agency to, for example, predict where the story might be heading. Many respondents expressed the ways that reading, particularly reading fiction, activated their imagination, sharing examples of the ways reading sparked them to create vivid worlds, characters, and scenarios in their minds. Others explained how these reflections impacted them further, causing them to see their own world in a new way.

As readers shared:

" Dreaming up/imagining the writer's world is creativity."

" I see the story unfolding in my mind's eye - what the characters look like, their surroundings, their thoughts. It's disappointing when TV and film adaptations don't live up to my version!"

⁸ 'Regular reader' defined as reading that took place voluntarily, outside work or education, on at least a weekly basis of any type of reading material. Sixteen response options available as 'tick all that apply' provided for the question 'What, if anything, has reading helped you with?'. 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.

⁹ Respondent quotes throughout this report are presented using the writer's original language. This may include typos, etc.

" It takes me to places that lie outside my normal zone, gently steered by the author. The images I create are uniquely mine though."

" When you read, you imagine a whole world for the characters to inhabit, you have to imagine everything happening in front of you like it's playing out in a film, that to me is creativity."

Escapism and entering another world

For many respondents, reading acts as an escape from reality, providing a chance to immerse themselves in a different world. This escapism is seen as a creative process whereby readers construct 'alternate realities' in their minds. Here, readers described the ways they delved deeper in their imaginations to 'visit' or create new worlds. This involved feelings of immersion into a world co-created with the author, for example, by imagining smells, sounds and textures not explicitly described in the text, or by extending the story beyond the end of a book itself.

As readers shared:

" I believe that I'm creative during reading because I imagine everything that I need in my head, I see all of the characters, places, views, sometimes I can even imagine how something smells or tastes or would feel if it were in my hands."

" I think when I read I am transported into a creative world as my brain interprets the written word into images, conjuring up sounds, smells and textures."

" In my mind I visualise the characters, what they wear, their hairstyle, their expressions. I also imagine the places they live and visit etc."

" Creating a different world in my mind which may impact the real one when I return to it."

" My mind conjures up the images from the words on the page, then later my imagination will bring alternative plot lines."

" You also think about what's going to happen next, what's happened when the story finishes and you don't get to see into those characters' lives anymore."

Theme 2: Interpretation and personal connection

This theme, which was also mentioned by the majority of respondents regardless of response type, relates to personal or emotional connections with the written word. Respondents shared the ways they valued reading for its ability to expand their knowledge and understanding, all contributing to personal growth. Here, readers also described the ways the process of reading and these interpretations have influenced or changed their thoughts, perspectives, and ideas on a topic.

Many respondents emphasised the personal interpretive nature of reading, where readers bring their own experiences and perspectives to the text. This personal engagement is seen by many

respondents as a form of 'co-creation' with the author. This theme is further reinforced by the commonly expressed view that individuals have different understandings of the same text based on their life experiences, or that re-reading a book can result in different interpretations based on new experiences later in life.

As readers shared:

" Reading is about life - it's a valve for altering the world and how we perceive and experience it."

" Very aware of it being a unique interaction between book and reader - even reading the same book at different times in life can create a different interpretation or feeling."

" I think that the reader and the author are somewhat working together to 'create' the book as it is read. People bring their background to books and take different meanings from them depending on that. We all also imagine different visuals when reading. Finally, I think it is interesting that you can often find a book very different if and when you re-read it later in life, as you bring different experiences to it, identify with different characters etc."

Theme 3: Reader-author relationship

This theme relates to readers recognising and valuing their own role within the production of a text. Many respondents discussed the dynamic relationship between the reader and the author, viewing reading as a collaborative creative process. This theme involved varying levels of engagement, from appreciating an author's creativity, which for some was viewed as more passive, to a more active interpretation where the readers themselves are co-creators of a text together with the author.

Appreciation of the author's creativity

Some respondents highlighted that, for them, the process of reading involves filling in the gaps left by the author's descriptions, effectively making the story come alive in a different way for each individual.

As readers shared:

" Alongside the author's words you fill in the gaps and make it become real, in your own head."

" Reading is a collaboration between writer and reader - the writer suggests characters and a story, but the reader uses their imagination to bring it to life."

" I have always thought I learned through reading but that the author was the creative one, however your question has made me wonder if I do 'create' as I read. The question reminds of an author who once came to our reading group and talked to us about his book [that we'd read)]. Through some questions he asked us, he demonstrated that many of the descriptive aspects of the story came from the reader's imagination (in this case, heroine's hair colour, the setting of a dramatic scene - former not stated and latter only hinted at by [the] author but we all had our own clear image of it)."

Co-creation of a text

In this framing, respondents viewed their creative role as central to the art of writing, with one going so far as to describe the author-reader relationship as a 'creative contract'. Here, both the author's words and the reader's imagination are essential in producing a text.

As readers shared:

- " Reading is a creative contract between me and the writer - my imagination is doing a lot of the heavy lifting to make a world of their words."
- " The writer creates the story but it comes to life in my imagination when I read the words on the page. The story is nothing without the reader."
- " The reader owns the reading experience. They are conjuring the world and the situation presented by the writer."
- " I am interacting with the creative process. An author writes in order to be read: I, as the reader, am just as an important a part of that process as the publisher, literary agent, printer, library or bookseller."

Theme 4: Inspiration for other creative activities

This theme relates to the ways respondents felt that reading inspired them to engage in or produce other creative outputs, for example, creative or critical writing, painting, crafting and cooking. For some respondents, these activities held a direct relationship with the act of reading; for others, reading itself wasn't viewed as creative, but its ability to inspire creativity was an important component.

Enhancement of creativity

Here, reading is seen as a source of inspiration that can enhance or spark new ideas and links, potentially leading to creative outputs in other areas. Many respondents commented on the ways that they felt reading enhanced their creativity, for example, by expanding the types of stories, characters and language they held, which they then could draw on to use in their own further creative process. This inspiration also extended to improving other skills, such as learning new vocabulary and developing analytical thinking skills, which some respondents directly linked to creativity.

As readers shared:

- " Reading also increases the stock of characters, stories and language you have in your head, that you then automatically utilise and take influence from whenever you create."
- " Reading sparks off ideas and links that develop to other areas."
- " Using your imagination is being creative. Turning words into pictures in your mind. Learning new vocabulary is creative too. If I am unsure of a new word, I look up the definition. I also look up pronunciation of names etc."

New creative outputs

Here, respondents shared the ways that what they read, or imagined as they read, fed into their own original creative outputs beyond their direct engagement with the text. This involved, for example, cooking, baking or making crafts inspired by books; creative writing or drawing based on characters or stories they had read; or using new vocabulary or information learned to inform a separate creative project.

As readers shared:

" I research mainly history, when it comes to library books, and the reading then leads on to creating insights, talks, discussions and - hopefully in the not too distant future - my own publications."

" Cookery books + craft books may spark creativity and imagination."

" I am developing new ideas/impressions in my head which may lead on to writing or speaking to someone/people or other/new activities."

" If I'm reading poetry, I can often become inspired to write my own, so that is always creative reading for me."

Theme 5: Passive vs active creativity

This theme relates to contested interpretations of the reading process and the definition of 'creativity'. There is a clear dichotomy in the responses regarding whether reading should be considered a 'passive' or 'active' activity. For many who answered 'no' to the question of whether they were being creative when they read, the act of reading is viewed as a passive consumption of someone else's creativity. For others who answered 'yes' or 'not sure', imagination and the act of interpreting and visualising while reading is seen as inherently active and creative.

Some respondents perceived reading as a passive activity because their engagement with a book or other reading material does not result in the direct production of something tangible. On the contrasting side of this argument, those who felt that reading is an active creative process described the ways readers are required to visualise and imagine the scenes, characters, and events described. This perception of creativity as needing to have a physical output reflects wider research and longstanding popular and academic conversations on the topic and definition of creativity, as outlined in the literature review.

Readers arguing the case for reading as a passive activity or requiring a physical output shared:

" Don't think of reading as creative. The story or narrative is there already. The person who wrote it originally is the creative one."

" I'm reading somebody else's creativity not creating my own."

" I'm not making anything that can be perceived by others."

" I don't think I'm being creative, only enjoying the results of somebody else's creativity."

" I may use my imagination but the images I see are created by the words the author has chosen not by anything I have created."

“ I enjoy other people’s creativity but don’t believe that it is me being creative.”

“ Writing is a creative action but reading is more passive”

Readers arguing the case for reading as actively creative shared:

“ Engaging with characters and narrative is not a passive process, the reader actively participates and creates as they read.”

“ I don’t have much imagination in terms of storytelling. So this helps me create and imagine things on the page. It’s a different kind of creative outlet. But I still think it counts. Even if I’m not producing anything physical.”

“ [I] have not thought of myself as being creative when I am reading and it is an interesting idea. Yes, I think I am perhaps being creative when I am reading, either fiction or non-fiction, because I am turning the written words into something visual, I am imagining a reality, event or situation from what I am reading.”

“ There’s a reliance on imagination when reading which makes it an active pursuit rather than something I do passively.”

Adding another layer of complexity to this theme was the tendency for some respondents to differentiate their experiences based on genre, with fiction often cited as more imagination-intensive and therefore more creative. For example:

“ [I] do not read fiction.”

“ I mostly read fantasy so while I read I visualise the characters and scenery - some of which has no ‘real world’ equivalent to draw upon. I also enjoy trying to predict where the story is going, which takes imagination and creativity.”

“ I don’t consciously think of it as a creative activity because it’s me engaging with/consuming somebody else’s creative output. But, for me, reading (fiction and poetry, and non-fiction, to a lesser extent) involves use of the sensory imagination to follow along with the words, and that does sound like a creative thing. So... maybe.”

Theme 6: Wider benefits of reading

Many respondents also used the opportunity to discuss the wider benefits of reading, including learning new things, gaining empathy and understanding, or experiencing improved wellbeing and relaxation. While not necessarily framed by respondents as explicitly creative, it is clear that these outcomes of reading were seen as important and as potentially feeding into the areas of creativity outlined above.

Cognitive engagement and learning

Respondents mentioned the emotional and cognitive aspects of reading, where reading can be stimulating and thought-provoking. Some respondents also made connections to creativity in terms of widening their reading practices, for example by, reading new or different genres.

As readers shared:

- " It clearly extends my experience + widens my horizons - but unsure whether this makes me creative."
- " I don't think creative is the right word. I am being constructive with my time, indulging in a passion and often feeding my brain."
- " Learning about other places, different types of people and historical detail."
- " Reading is hobby, I don't feel creative as I'm learning not creating."

Empathy and understanding

Respondents mentioned the ways reading provides insight into other worlds, lives, and perspectives, broadening their worldviews and fostering empathy. Here, the engagement with characters and scenarios in a book can lead to deeper emotional involvement and reflection, which some also considered a form of creativity.

As readers shared:

- " I am constantly learning, not just new information but empathy, deepening my understanding of the human condition and of myself."
- " We can step into the shoes of others lived experiences, absorbing historical and human detail; enriching our own lives and enabling empathic understanding."
- " It also makes me wonder how I would react/ behave in the same situations."

Wellbeing and relaxation

Respondents mentioned the ways reading supported their mental health and wellbeing, for example, allowing them to feel more relaxed or calm. For some, this increased relaxation then opened a space for wider creativity; while others made a clear distinction between wellbeing benefits and creativity.

As readers shared:

- " I don't see reading as an active creative activity. I see 'being creative' as something where you produce something at the end of the activity, like a piece of art. Reading is just to relax."
- " Although I enjoy reading to relax and enjoy it is passive and therefore not creative."
- " Think of it more for well-being and the author has done the creating, but can see that in my mind I am adding my own thoughts to the author's original work."
- " Even though the words are already printed, the process of taking in the printed words is a form of meditation which I feel calms me and allows me to creatively process the information I'm reading whether it be a novel or academic piece."

Conclusions

The data captured as part of Inspire’s I Am A Reader project reveals that readers’ perceptions of the role of creativity in reading varies widely. Some readers express a view of reading as a passive activity that does not produce tangible creative outputs, while many others see it as an active engagement of the imagination, enhancing their own creative capabilities. This closely reflects a tension seen throughout decades of academic research and philosophical conversations about the nature of creativity itself.

At the heart of reader responses, as well as the wider research, sits a core question: Is the use of imagination ‘creativity’? In 2000, the National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education (NACCCE) developed a definition of creativity as ‘imaginative activity fashioned so as to produce outcomes that are both original and of value.’¹⁰ However, what exactly constitutes ‘original’ and ‘of value’ appears to remain contested, as evidenced by reader responses to this project.

There is a clear distinction in the data captured through this project between those who see reading as a form of personal creativity (‘yes’) and those who view it as merely enjoying someone else’s creativity (‘no’). However, for many of those who answered ‘not sure’ and even some who answered ‘yes’, being posed the question itself caused them to reflect on their personal creative processes, acknowledging that while they may not have initially considered reading as creative, they now recognise the role of imagination and creativity involved in that process. For some, the genre of reading material, especially fiction vs non-fiction, also influences the degree and type of imaginative engagement and perceived creativity.

Many respondents, however, even when they agreed with the concept of imagination as being creative, viewed imagination as a different type of creativity. For these readers, the internality of imagination and the imaginative process itself was distinct from the production of a physical creative output. For others, the use of imagination through reading inspired emotional experiences or further creative activity such as painting or crafting, blurring the lines between consumption and creation.

The evidence also suggests a barrier in perceiving reading as creative for those who don’t consider themselves to be ‘creative’ people. Or, for some who responded ‘no’ or ‘not sure’, that creativity was only associated with reading fiction, and as primarily non-fiction readers, they were not engaging in that part of the reading process. These findings, however, should also be seen as an opportunity to help shift those perceptions and broaden understandings of creativity and the role of reading within that.

Intriguingly, many respondents to the survey frequently shared their views and descriptions of reading by using metaphors or similes, further reinforcing the creativity of engaging with this artform. For example: ***“Reading allows us [...] to go on incredible journeys, or complete unfathomable quests. We can become whomever we chose, do whatever we wish.”***

Regardless of their views on creativity, the experience of reading was universally seen by respondents as providing insight, empathy and personal development to some degree, contributing to an expanded worldview and a richer stock of ideas and language.

10 National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education (2000) *All Our Futures: Creativity, culture and education*

Recommendations

These insights from readers not only illuminate perceptions and experiences of reading, they also give some direction towards the ways libraries and the wider sector can reach and engage adult readers more effectively and creatively.

Based on analysis outlined in this report, the following recommendations are offered to help support and engage communities in ways that emphasise the active, imaginative, and interpretive aspects of reading. These recommendations build on existing activity in libraries and across the sector, with the aim of acknowledging and celebrating the creativity inherent in the act of reading:

Hosting interactive, shared reading experiences

- Reading groups and book clubs: Reading groups and book clubs, already popular activities in libraries and other community spaces, offer an opportunity for readers to share their interpretations and insights of a text. Bringing these groups together with insights explored through this project, could enhance the explicit connections with creativity, for example, by using *The Little Book of Reader Insights* or example discussion guide in the Appendix. This might also include activities such as a book exchange, where group members share books that have particularly sparked their imagination and creativity.
- Author events: Author events, particularly those including group discussions or question and answer sessions, offer an opportunity to help bridge the gap between readers and authors, highlighting the collaborative nature of reading and the value of the reader-author relationship.
- Storytelling sessions: Storytelling sessions or reading books aloud together, either with a reading group or facilitated by a professional storyteller, can help bring stories to life and encourage imaginative engagement with the text.

Encouraging personal interpretation and connection

- Curated booklists and recommendations: Curated booklists or recommendations based on reader interests could be used to highlight books that offer the opportunity to connect with rich imaginative worlds, compelling emotional narratives, or thought-provoking content.
- Creative journals: Readers can be encouraged to reflect on a text by writing down their thoughts, interpretations, and visualisations as they read in a journal or reader response diary. Excerpts from these journals could be used as part of a larger project or exhibition where these entries are shared (anonymously) to showcase diverse reader perspectives.
- Digital reflections: Similarly, readers could create and share digital content related to their reading experiences or interpretations of a text, for example, through social media posts or videos, blogs or vlogs. Content could include thoughts and reflections, reviews, fan art, etc.

Supporting creative expression inspired by reading

- Workshops or learning sessions: Workshops or learning sessions could be used to link reading directly to other creative or educational activities. For example, writing workshops, art classes inspired by a specific book or literature more generally, history walks, or expert talks on the themes and/or historical contexts of a popular title.
- Creative writing and art competitions: Activities or competitions encouraging creative writing, fan fiction, or drawings or art inspired by books could help encourage readers to engage more deeply with the material as well as allow them to express creativity in a more tangible way – bridging the gap between perceptions of reading as a ‘passive’ and ‘active’ activity.
- Exhibits and displays: Libraries and other community spaces could host exhibits or displays highlighting the imaginative worlds of books and reading, including reader-created art, crafts, writing and other creative interpretations. This could also be designed as interactive, allowing visitors to add their own creative contributions.



Appendix

Reading Group Discussion Guide: Exploring Creativity in Reading

This discussion guide can be used to spark conversations on the creative aspects of reading, encouraging participants to reflect on their own reading experiences and how they engage with texts. This guide can also be used in conjunction with [The Little Book of Reader Insights](#).

Active imagination and visualisation

Quote prompt:

"I imagine everything that I need in my head, I see all of the characters, places, views, sometimes I can even imagine how something smells or tastes or would feel if it were in my hands."

- Do you think you are being creative when you use your imagination? Why or why not?
- How do you visualise characters and settings while reading?
- What's an example of a book or genre where your imagination played a significant role?
- How do you feel when a book you've read is adapted into a movie or TV series? Does it align with your imagination?

Interpretation and personal connection

Quote prompt:

"Very aware of it being a unique interaction between book and reader - even reading the same book at different times in life can create a different interpretation or feeling."

- How does reading affect your emotions and imagination?
- How do your personal experiences and background influence your interpretation of a book?
- Have you ever read a book differently when re-reading it at a different point in your life? What impact has that had on your relationship with the text?

Reader-author relationship

Quote prompt:

"The writer creates the story but it comes to life in my imagination when I read the words on the page. The story is nothing without the reader."

- How do you feel about the idea that reading is a collaborative process between the author and the reader?
- How far do you 'fill in the gaps' in an author's work?
- Are there specific books, genres or authors that particularly ignite your imagination?

Inspiration for other creative activities

Quote prompt:

"Reading sparks off ideas and links that develop to other areas."

- Has reading ever inspired you to engage in other creative activities, such as writing, drawing, crafting, or talking about books and reading with others?
- Have you ever written fan fiction, created art, or started a discussion based on a book you read?
- Do you find that reading stimulates your creativity in other areas of your life? How so?

Passive vs active creativity

Quote prompt:

"Engaging with characters and narrative is not a passive process, the reader actively participates and creates as they read."

- Do you think reading is a passive or active activity? Why?
- In what ways do you engage with the story beyond just reading the words on the page?
- Do you ever find yourself predicting plot developments or imagining alternative endings? How does this affect your reading of that text?

Reflections on creativity and reading

Quote prompt:

"I see 'being creative' as something where you produce something at the end of the activity, like a piece of art. Reading is just to relax."

- Do you see yourself as a creative reader? Why or why not?
- How has your view on creativity in reading changed or been reinforced by this discussion?
- What new insights have you gained about your reading habits and experiences?
- How might you incorporate these new insights into your future reading experiences?





About Inspire: Culture, Learning and Libraries

Inspire: Culture, Learning and Libraries is a charitable Community Benefit Society delivering a range of cultural, art, library and learning services. These services are funded by Nottinghamshire County Council, The Arts Council of England, and Education and Skills funding agencies. Our mission is for everyone to read, learn and enjoy culture.

www.inspireculture.org.uk



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Arts Council England is the national development agency for creativity and culture. We have set out our strategic vision in Let's Create that by 2030 we want England to be a country in which the creativity of each of us is valued and given the chance to flourish and where everyone of us has access to a remarkable range of high-quality cultural experiences. We invest public money from Government and The National Lottery to help support the sector and to deliver this vision.

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THE
READING
AGENCY

About The Reading Agency

The Reading Agency is a UK charity with a mission to empower people of all ages to read. Evidence shows that reading improves health and wellbeing, life chances and social connections. The Reading Agency champions access to the proven power of reading by providing activities for all ages. Working with public libraries, prisons, hospitals and other community settings, we reach over two million people a year. But with a UK population of over 67 million that's not nearly enough. We want to get more people fired up about reading because everything changes when you read. Get in touch today to find out more about what we do and to help us on our mission.

www.readingagency.org.uk