

What is literacy?



Literacy is the ability to read, write, speak and listen in a way that lets us communicate effectively and make sense of the world.

The importance of literacy

Lacking vital literacy skills holds a person back at every stage of their life. As a child they won't be able to succeed at school, as a young adult they will be locked out of the job market, and as a parent they won't be able to support their own child's learning. This intergenerational cycle makes social mobility and a fairer society more difficult.

People with low literacy skills may not be able to read a book or newspaper, understand road signs or price labels, make sense of a bus or train timetable, fill out a form, read instructions on medicines or use the internet.

Low levels of literacy undermine the UK's economic competitiveness, costing the taxpayer £2.5 billion every year (**KPMG, 2009**). A third of businesses are not satisfied with young people's literacy skills when they enter the workforce and a similar number have organised remedial training for young recruits to improve their basic skills, including literacy and **communication**.

COVID-19 Research and Policy Observatory

Our research and policy observatory includes up-to-date research, policy and analysis on the impact of COVID-19 on children and young people's learning, literacy and wellbeing.



[Find out more.](#)

Literacy statistics

Our research underpins our programmes, campaigns and policy work to improve literacy skills, attitudes and habits across the UK.

- **Children who enjoy reading and writing are happier with their lives**

Children who enjoy reading are three times more likely to have good mental wellbeing than children who don't enjoy it. [Read more.](#)

- **1 in 11 disadvantaged children in the UK say that they don't have a book of their own**

Children who say they have a book of their own are six times more likely to read above the level expected for their age than their peers who don't own a book. [Read more.](#)

- **Children born into communities with the most serious literacy challenges have some of the lowest life expectancies in England**

A boy born in Stockton Town Centre (an area with serious literacy challenges) has a life expectancy 26.1 years shorter than a boy born in North Oxford. [Read more.](#)

- **1 in 2 children in the UK enjoy reading**

Only 1 in 2 children and young people said they enjoy reading in early 2022, which is as low as the number has ever been since we first asked the question in 2005. [Read more.](#)

- **2 in 5 children in the UK enjoy writing**

In 2022, 2 in 5 children and young people said that they enjoy writing, a slight recovery from 2021, when it was at the lowest level we have recorded since 2010. [Read more.](#)

- **Audiobooks can support wider literacy engagement**

1 in 5 children and young people said that listening to an audiobook or podcast has got them interested in reading books. [Read more.](#)

[See more of our research reports.](#)

Adult literacy rate

16.4% of adults in England, or 7.1 million people, can be described as having 'very poor literacy skills.' Adults with poor literacy skills will be locked out of the job market and, as a parent, they won't be able to support their child's learning.