

Seldom-heard voices Adult literacy in the UK

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The context

The UK continues to face a huge adult-literacy challenge, with a sizeable percentage of the UK adult population having very low literacy skills:

- 1 in 6 (16.4%) adults in England¹ are estimated to have very low literacy, which means they may struggle with longer texts and unfamiliar topics
- Slightly more (17.9%) adults in Northern Ireland have very low literacy²
- Over 1 in 4 (26.7%) adults in Scotland might face challenges due to their low literacy skills³
- 1 in 8 (12%) adults in Wales have literacy skills at the level of primary school children⁴

Indeed, the impact of low literacy⁵ on a person's life is more far reaching than many people believe. For example, we know that literacy is related to a person's economic wellbeing and employment prospects. A recent study by Pro Bono Economics, in collaboration with the National Literacy Trust, estimated that the average worker in the UK with very low literacy will earn approximately 7.1% less than if they had a basic level of literacy⁶. This means that

¹ <https://www.oecd.org/skills/piaac/>

² Ibid

³ <https://www.gov.scot/binaries/content/documents/govscot/publications/advice-and-guidance/2010/12/adult-literacies-scotland-2020-strategic-guidance/documents/0112382-pdf/0112382-pdf/govscot%3Adocument/0112382.pdf>

⁴ <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/statistics-and-research/2019-01/national-survey-of-adult-skills-in-wales-2010.pdf>

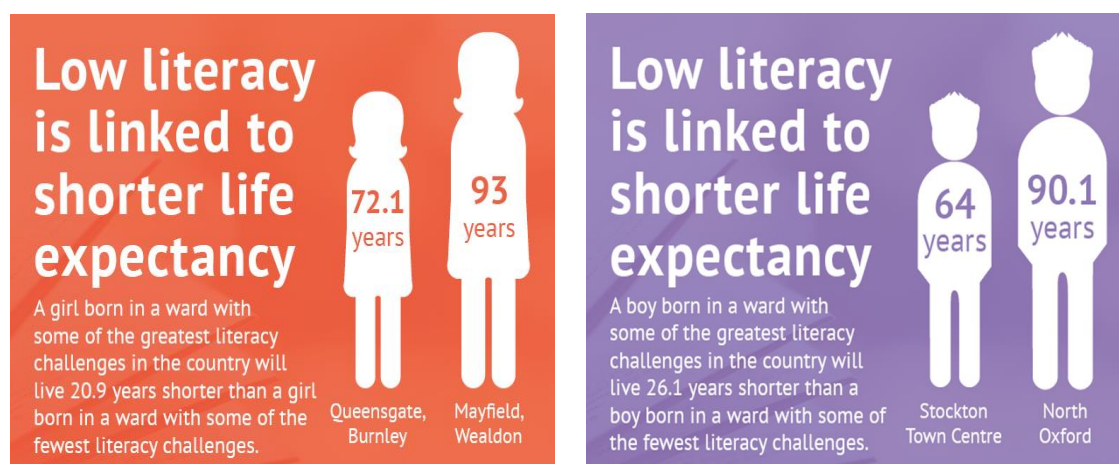
⁵ see appendix for details of literacy proficiency levels as defined the Survey of Adult Skills by OECD

⁶ <https://www.probonoeconomics.com/paying-the-price-the-cost-of-very-poor-adult-literacy>

they would need to work an additional 1.5 years over their lifetime to make up for this disparity. If their literacy improved to a basic level, they could collectively benefit from an estimated annual pay rise of up to £6 billion each year.

We also know that the impact of literacy goes beyond economic considerations and is related to a person's mental and physical wellbeing; their family life; their political, civic and community engagement, and even their life expectancy (see Figure 1^{7,8}).

Figure 1: Life expectancy for girls and boys in areas of greatest and lowest literacy challenges



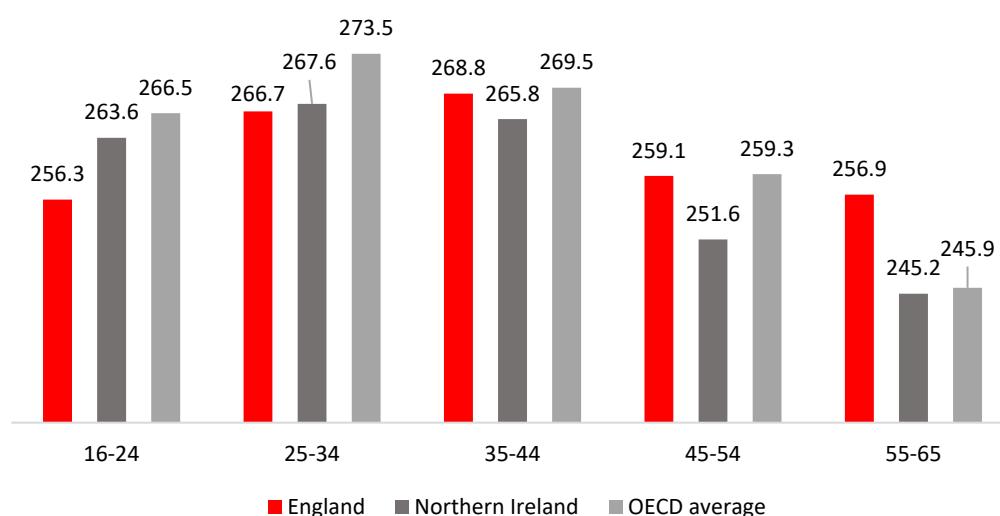
Further disparities in literacy levels in the UK

International data collected by the OECD also suggested that England was the only country taking part in their PIAAC study that saw the oldest age group (55-65) perform roughly at the same level as the youngest age group (16-24) in literacy, indicating long-term stagnation in improvements of literacy levels (see Figure 2). Interestingly, this is not the case for Northern Ireland, where literacy levels decreased from 35-65.

⁷ https://cdn.literacytrust.org.uk/media/documents/2014_09_01_free_research_-_literacy_changes_lives_2014.pdf.pdf

⁸ https://cdn.literacytrust.org.uk/media/documents/National_Literacy_Trust_-_Literacy_and_life_expectancy_report.pdf

Figure 2: PIAAC literacy score by 10-year age groups: England, Northern Ireland and the OECD average, 2016



Source: OECD, 2016⁹

Socioeconomic differences

Also notable from the OECD findings was the diversity of adults with low literacy skills, as they note that many with good qualifications who are active in the labour force also have low literacy skills¹⁰. Nevertheless, there is a clear association between socioeconomic status and literacy levels, and between geographic areas with high levels of economic deprivation and literacy vulnerability¹¹.

Not only is literacy inequality geographic, with those living in deprived areas being more likely to lack basic literacy and numeracy skills¹², adults living in disadvantaged communities who are most in need of improving their basic skills are also less likely to participate in adult education compared with those from more advantaged communities¹³. Access to opportunities for adult-education training aren't as available to those living in rural areas and areas of high deprivation¹⁴. As the OECD notes:

“These results confirm the vicious cycle in which low-skilled workers risk being trapped in a situation in which they rarely benefit from adult learning and their

⁹ OECD. (2016). *Skills matter: Further results from the Survey of Adult Skills* [Table A3.5]. Retrieved from https://www.oecd.org/skills/piaac/Skills_Matter_Further_Results_from_the_Survey_of_Adult_Skills.pdf

¹⁰ <https://www.oecd.org/unitedkingdom/building-skills-for-all-review-of-england.pdf>

¹¹ https://cdn.literacytrust.org.uk/media/documents/National_Literacy_Trust_-_Literacy_and_life_expectancy_report.pdf

¹² https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/356063/Review4_Adult_learning_health_inequalities.pdf

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴

https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/ier/researchthemesoverview/researchprojects/adult_education/adult_education_ier_report_final_2401018.pdf

skills remain weak or deteriorate over time, making it even harder for these individuals to participate in learning activities. The key policy challenge is to help low-skilled adults break this cycle.”¹⁵

To delve further into the geographical and socioeconomic differences in literacy skills, we worked with Experian in 2017 to pinpoint the communities in England with the most acute literacy problems¹⁶. We analysed data from Experian’s socio-demographic classification system, Mosaic, and the 2011 census on the social factors most closely associated with low literacy: low levels of education, low income and high unemployment. From this analysis, we created a literacy vulnerability score for every parliamentary constituency and electoral ward in England. We found that low literacy levels are very localised, with 86% of constituencies in England containing at least one ward with serious literacy challenges.

Insight from those with poor literacy

In 2019 we had the opportunity to get insight on the impact of low literacy from four individuals who agreed to take part in in-depth interviews that were conducted by a consultant on our behalf. The four individuals self-identified as struggling with literacy; there are likely to be a host of reasons for this, ranging from (but not limited to) SEND, dyslexia or a poor experience of education. These interviews indicated that while there were some commonalities in people’s stories in how low literacy impacted their lives, their stories were also unique and varied, suggesting that any support has to reflect these differences and be flexible to accommodate people with different experiences and needs.

Firstly, the interview findings highlighted the links between low basic skills and barriers for employment. Low basic skills were causing employment barriers for all the participants, whether in the form of accessing employment, improving their career prospects or getting the job they want to do:

“But I can’t improve myself, so what do I do? So that’s why I’m a porter, because I can’t improve myself, I can’t ... nothing, you know; I can’t be a lorry driver because I can’t read or write.”

“Yeah, I mean like I say, when you give someone a job interview, they’ve got to fill out a form, you can’t spell, you can’t do any maths they ask you to do, you can’t ... on a job application form, you can’t even fill it out properly. A good job would have probably changed my life.”

“I think because deep down if I knew, I’d like to teach. That’s why I’m in nursery and not Year 6, because I knew I couldn’t do Year 6. I’m with nursery children and they mainly play

¹⁵ <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201415/cmselect/cmbis/557/557.pdf>

¹⁶ <https://literacytrust.org.uk/policy-and-campaigns/all-party-parliamentary-group-literacy/literacy-score-mapping-literacy-need-across-england/>

anyway... Obviously, I know I'd never become a head teacher of a school; but I'd like to maybe become a teacher one day, but I couldn't because I haven't got anything to do that."

Participants also shared experiences of disengagement with education, negative feelings towards school and not gaining qualifications. This reflects findings from previous research that those with low basic skills are more likely to have left full-time education at the earliest opportunity with no qualifications¹⁷. It is possible that interrupted schooling and past negative experiences of school have contributed to their low skills as they have not engaged in learning those skills. The interviews clearly highlight participants' negative experiences with school:

"I didn't go to school a lot, but when I did go there, it was quite difficult really... because of the situation of reading and writing. It made you feel... It makes you feel, because everyone else can read and write and do you know, we was in a low class... everyone got a higher class and everyone would look at you, thinking, 'Ohhh, der-der,' you know and that was embarrassing, you know what I mean? And things like that, you know and we didn't want to look like that kind of person, you know; people ... you know; when you have school people pick on you when you can't do something. But I must say I haven't got picked on, but you know, it was quite frustrating."

"I didn't go to school, didn't like school, hated it. That's probably where ... like you know. I couldn't see how school was helping me with work, if you know what I mean. I didn't ... In my mind, I couldn't see how it was going to help me, you know? And er, I wasn't very good at school anyway. Er, never been good at maths, never been good at spelling or ... you know? Erm, when I was at school, they used to put me in what you call a special class, you know, like for people that didn't get on with school?"

"But I was never in school, I didn't take any of my GCSEs, mainly cos I knew I'd fail 'em anyway, so I didn't bother... So I think that was to the point of why I bunked off, is cos I knew I was gonna fail, because I knew I hadn't got the ability to even spell properly."

Negative feelings, such as anxiety, depression, stress, frustration and embarrassment, are also evident from the interviews overall:

"Because it is quite embarrassing sometimes. It shouldn't be embarrassing, but a lot of people who can't read and write feel embarrassed."

"... 'I can't read.' I had to tell her and she goes, 'Oh, no problem; don't worry.' And she read them out for me, but I was so embarrassed, you know what I mean? And that hurt."

"But even if you can read and write, it can help you so much in life; but if you can't do it, it's very stressful."

"And it makes you lose confidence when you don't know how to spell certain things as well."

¹⁷ https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/21971/1/doc_3912.pdf

“I would like to read and write properly and go on at a certain level, so I wouldn’t look so stupid. I mean I’m not saying people say I’m stupid; but in their mind, they might be thinking that. I’m not saying they’re gonna say it to me, but in their mind, they could be thinking, ‘Oh, he’s stupid.’ You know what I mean? Because that’s how people sometimes ... people might think I’m stupid.”

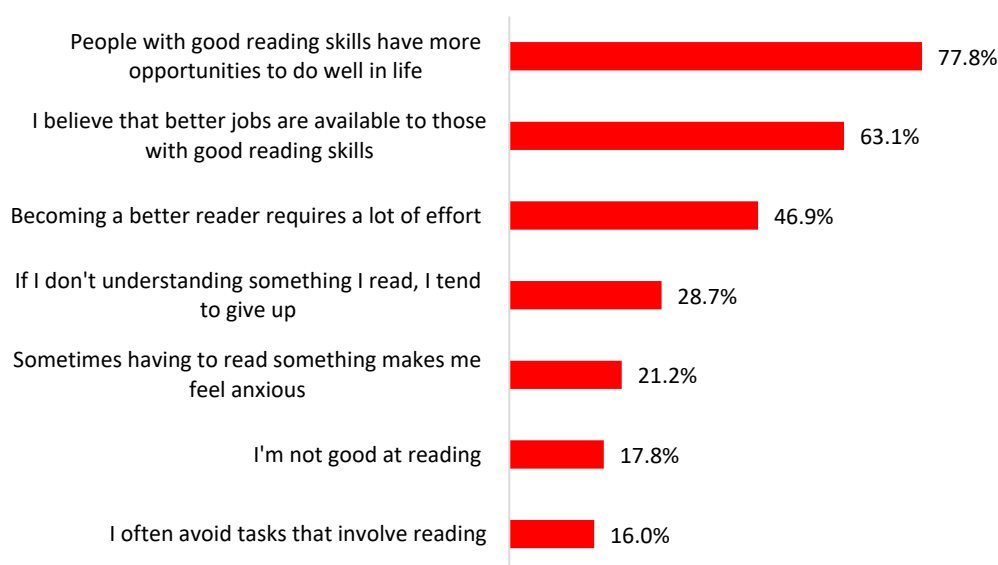
“I mean I do get frustrated cos you know, if I can’t read something, I get very frustrated.”

The interview findings show that while people with low literacy skills are a diverse group with varying life situations and motivations, those living with poor skills share some experiences, such as negative memories of school and negative feelings and emotions associated with the low skills. These findings suggest that practical work aimed at supporting adults with poor skills needs to account for their diverse experiences and offer flexible support to reflect their needs, levels of knowledge and skills, and to break barriers and engage adults in improving their skills in ways that work best for them.

What the wider UK adult population thinks about reading

In addition to many people struggling with low literacy skills, there are also many negative perceptions around literacy (see Figure 3). Even though many people might not struggle with their literacy, 1 in 6 (16.0%) told us in a survey of 2,000 UK adults commissioned in 2019 that they avoided tasks involving reading, while a fifth (21.2%) said that they sometimes felt anxious about reading. Nearly half (46.9%) agreed that becoming a good reader requires a lot of effort, while overall many felt that one’s reading skills are related to job opportunities, with nearly 2 in 3 (63.1%) agreeing that better jobs are available for those with good reading skills, and 3 in 4 (77.8%) agreeing that people with good reading skills have more opportunities to do well in life.

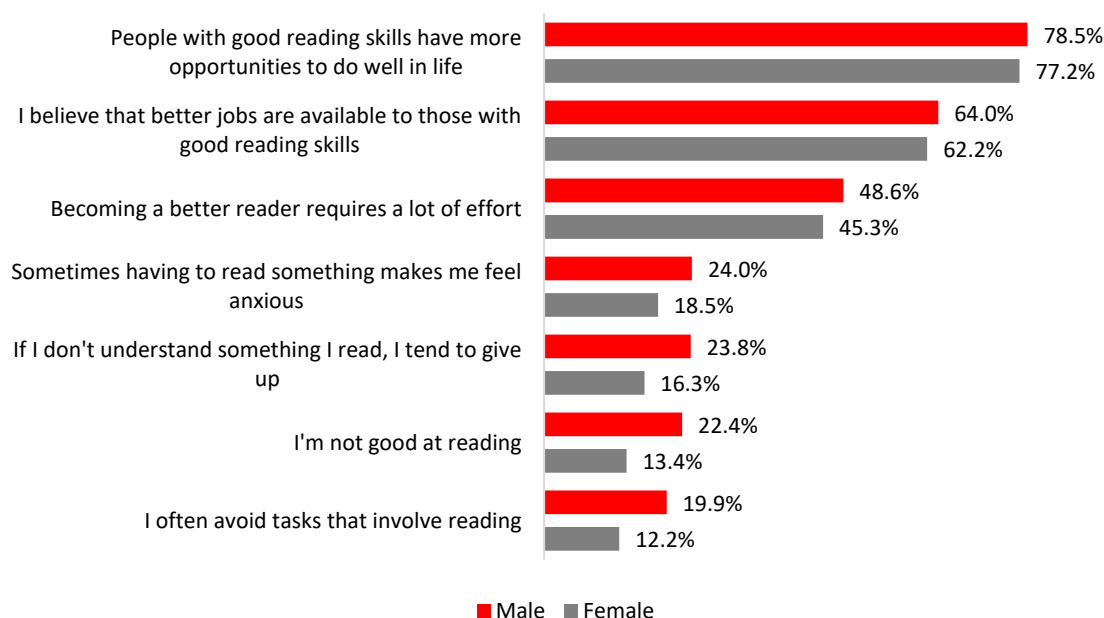
Figure 3: Reading attitudes



Next, looking at reading attitudes by gender (see Figure 4), a similar percentage of males and females agreed that people with good reading skills have more opportunities to do well in life (78.5% and 77.2%), that better jobs are available for those with good reading skills (64.0% and 62.2%) and that becoming a better reader requires a lot of effort (48.6% vs 45.3%).

At the same time, slightly more males than females agreed that sometimes reading something makes them feel anxious (24.0% vs 18.5%), that if they don't understand something they read, they tend to give up (23.8% vs 16.3%), that they're not good at reading (22.4% vs 13.4%), and that they often avoid tasks involving reading (19.9% vs 12.2%). This indicated that more males indicated anxieties around reading – and their reading ability – than females.

Figure 4: Reading attitudes by gender



Looking at age groups (see Figure 5), we see large differences between young adults and older adults. Indeed, while 4 in 5 (78.8%) 18 to 25-year-olds agreed that people with good reading skills have more opportunities to do well in life, almost all (97.2%) people aged 66 and over agreed. Smaller differences were found when it came to believing that better jobs were available to those with good reading skills but, again, more of those aged 66 and over agreed (72.0%) than those aged 18 to 25 (62.8%).

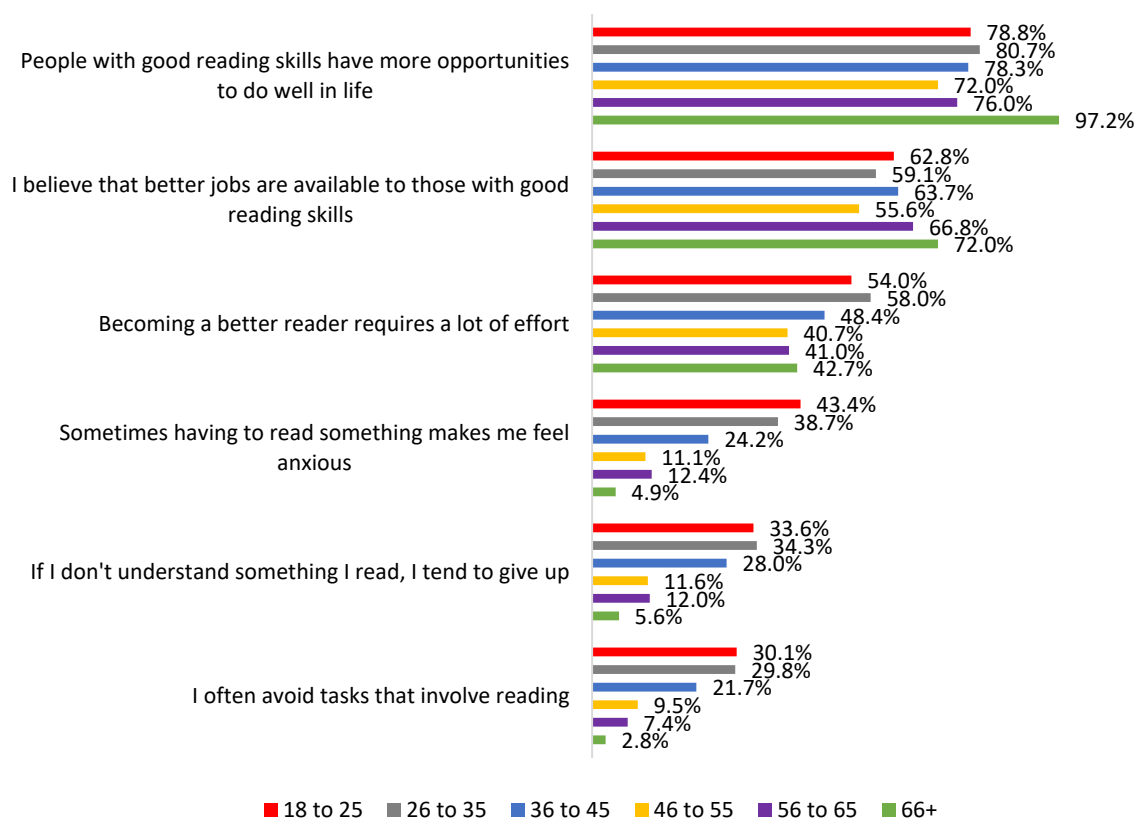
Interestingly, fewer of those aged 66+ agreed that becoming a better reader requires a lot of effort (42.7%) compared with those aged 18 to 25 (54.0%), 26 to 35 (58.0%) and 36 to 45 (48.4%).

Overall, the largest differences by age group were found for attitudes relating to reading anxiety and avoidance. Indeed, while 2 in 5 (43.4%) of those aged 18 to 25 said that sometimes having to read something makes them feel anxious, only 1 in 20 (4.9%) of those

aged 66+ said the same. Additionally, while 1 in 3 (33.6%) of those aged 18 to 25 said that if they don't understand something they read, they tend to give up, 1 in 20 (5.6%) of those aged 66+ said the same. Finally, while 3 in 10 (30.1%) of those aged 18 to 25 said that they often avoid tasks that involve reading, only 1 in 50 (2.8%) of those aged 66+ said the same.

Overall, those from older age groups, particularly those aged 66 and above, displayed more positive attitudes towards reading in terms of the benefits of reading for future job success. At the same time, these individuals were less likely to say that reading made them feel anxious or that they avoided reading.

Figure 5: Reading attitudes by age



Conclusion

This report shows that the UK continues to face a huge adult-literacy challenge: a large percentage of adults have low literacy skills and England has some of the lowest teenage literacy rates in the OECD. These individuals experience negative impacts on personal relationships, wellbeing and health, as well as a greater risk of unemployment or being in low-paid work. If more action is not taken to tackle low literacy in adults, we risk perpetuating and reinforcing an intergenerational cycle of disadvantage.

As part of our work with communities, we explore different opportunities for community and family learning. Some of the major barriers to engagement are those that prevent people in these communities from accessing adult-literacy learning. Throughout our work with communities, we also work with local stakeholders to create local connections that work. For example, we might work with social-housing providers and the FE college, which provides local adult-literacy training. We are also exploring reaching adults through different and unusual settings, such as literacy in laundrettes (based on a US programme), barbers and at community events. With so many young people leaving the school system without adequate literacy skills, the role of adult education will be vital to ensure that every adult has the skills needed to play a full part in social, political and economic life in 21st-century Britain¹⁸.

Also notable is our work with adults in prisons. Indeed, literacy levels amongst the prison population remain significantly lower than the general population, with nearly two thirds (62%) of people entering prisons being assessed as having the literacy skills expected of an 11-year-old^{19,20}. The National Literacy Trust operates a number of programmes to support these adults, with the most-established being Books Unlocked²¹. This initiative donates long- and shortlisted Booker Prize titles to prison residents, coordinates audiobooks on National Prison Radio, and organises author visits to prison reading group.

¹⁸<https://www.learningandwork.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Skills-Poverty-Sep-16.pdf>

¹⁹ [Winter 2021 Factfile final.pdf \(literacytrust.org.uk\)](#)

²⁰ [2011 skills for life survey - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

²¹ [Books Unlocked | National Literacy Trust](#)

Appendix 1: Literacy proficiency levels defined by the Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC) by OECD

| Level | Score range | Description |
|---------------|------------------------------------|---|
| Below Level 1 | Below 176 points | Tasks at this level require the respondent to read brief texts on familiar topics and locate a single piece of specific information. There is seldom any competing information in the text. Only basic vocabulary knowledge is required, and the reader is not required to understand the structure of sentences or paragraphs or make use of other text features. |
| Level 1 | 176 to 225 points | Tasks at this level require the respondent to read relatively short digital or print texts to locate a single piece of information that is identical to or synonymous with the information given in the question or directive. Knowledge and skill in recognising basic vocabulary, determining the meaning of sentences, and reading paragraphs of text is expected. |
| Level 2 | 226 to 275 points | Tasks at this level require the respondent to make matches between the text – either digital or printed – and information, and may also require paraphrasing or low-level inferences. |
| Level 3 | 276 to 325 points | Texts at this level are often dense or lengthy. Understanding text and rhetorical structures is often required, as is navigating complex digital texts. |
| Level 4 | 326 to 375 points | Tasks at this level often require the respondent to perform multiple-step operations to integrate, interpret, or synthesise information from complex or lengthy texts. Many tasks require identifying and understanding one or more specific non-central idea(s) in the text in order to interpret or evaluate subtle evidence or persuasive discourse relationships. |
| Level 5 | Equal to or higher than 376 points | Tasks at this level may require the respondent to search for and integrate information across multiple dense texts; construct syntheses of similar and contrasting ideas or points of view; or evaluate evidence-based arguments. They often require respondents to be aware of subtle rhetorical cues and to make high-level inferences or use specialised background knowledge. |

Source: OECD, n.d.²²

²² OECD. (n.d.). *Key facts about the Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC)*. Retrieved from All text © The National Literacy Trust 2022

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