



NATIONAL READING SURVEY 2021

KEY FINDINGS



Who are the readers?

Most Australians read a book a year

According to the inaugural National Reading Survey by Australia Reads, 75% of the general Australian population indicate they read or listen to at least one book (in any format) once a year. These are referred to here as 'general readers'.

General Readers vs Engaged Readers

The National Reading Survey by Australia Reads collected data from more than 3,000 Australians across two groups of respondents;

1. general readers from multiple panel sources, collectively representative of Australian state and gender populations over 16 years of age;
2. engaged readers sourced from e-newsletter subscribers of Australian publishing houses and social media followers of Australia Reads – meaning they engage with book related news.

More Australians not reading books at all

Conversely the results show 25% of the general Australian adult population have NOT read or listened to a single book (in any format) in a year. This is a marked increase on the findings of the Australia Council x Macquarie University Reading the Reader survey, which showed 8% of the population had not read a book in a year.

Why do we read?

Reading for enjoyment and wellbeing

The top reasons we read books in Australia:

1. for 'pleasure and enjoyment' (satisfaction)
2. to 'relax and unwind' (wellbeing)
3. to keep 'mentally stimulated' (cognition)



How often do we read?

Most Australians are occasional readers

Taking general readers to be reflective of the Australian adult population, the National Reading Survey shows 42% of us are occasional readers; reading 1 book every 15 weeks at most.

A third of Australians read frequently

The survey also shows almost a third of the general Australian adult population (28% general readers) are frequent or passionate readers; reading on average one to two books a month.

Engaged readers are obsessed readers

Most (37%) engaged readers (those respondents who subscribe to book news) are obsessed book readers – heading towards at least one book every fortnight. Typically, these readers have a big ‘To be read’ pile and read 2-3 books at once.

What are we reading?

Paperback fiction most popular choice

In Australia, paperback books are by far the most frequently read format, followed by hardback, then e-books and lastly audio books. Whereas only 3% of survey respondents claim to have never read a paperback, about a third (34%) claim never to read e-books, and more than half (52%) have never listened to an audio books. Australians are reading far more adult fiction than any other category, followed by adult non-fiction, children’s books, then young adult books.

New releases are not a priority

A huge majority (89%) of Australian readers don’t really mind if the book they are reading is a newly released title or has been out for a while.

Reading Australian books is important

While 77% of Australian readers largely agree ‘it’s important to support Australian writers by buying their books’, 68% actually like to read books by Australian writers and illustrators.

Still reading the classics

Over a third (35%) of Australian readers make a conscious effort to read more of the ‘classics’.

When are we reading?

Bedtime, Weekends, Holidays – Anytime!

Just over half of Australian readers (52%) usually find time to read books right before bed. Weekends are also prime reading time, with 41% of respondents nominating this as when they usually find time to read or listen to books.

Slightly more Australian readers (43%) also nominated finding time to read books ‘anytime’, indicating they fit reading into their schedules around whatever else they have on. And 29% find time to read on holiday when they have less demands on their time from daily life.

Reading is primarily part of our leisure time

A third (33%) of Australian readers dedicate less than 20% of their leisure time to reading books. Almost another third (31%) dedicate between 21-40% of their leisure time to reading books. Only a small proportion (14%) spend more than 61% of their leisure time reading books.

Almost never too much reading time!

Only 3% of Australian readers feel they spend too much time reading! About half of us (51%) wish for more reading time, and the other half (46%) are satisfied with their reading time.

Secrets to reading more

Turn off the TV and put down the phone...

The majority (64%) of Australian readers cited ‘watching TV and movies at home’ and another big proportion (46%) cited ‘social media/internet browsing’ as the other leisure activities most likely to compete for their reading time.

Don’t finish a book you don’t like!

More than half (54%) of Australians who read more books more often typically don’t finish a book if they really can’t get into it – meaning they move on more quickly to the next book for greater enjoyment and pleasure; and have fewer and shorter gaps between books.

Start a TBR pile

More than half (54%) of Australians who read more books more often have stacks of books ‘to be read’ waiting on hand, so they always have books available to choose from when ready.

Read 10 minutes before bed every night

Occasional readers can become frequent readers by reading 10 minutes before bed every night. At the average rate of 300 words/minute, they will read 90,000 words (average length of a novel) a month, and so at least 12 books a year.

What to read next?

Personal recommendations most trusted

The majority of Australian readers (43%) agree that family and friends are their number one trusted source for reading recommendations. As many as 80% agree they are happy to read books recommended by family and friends.

Book professionals next most trusted

Tied in almost equal place as the second most trusted source of book recommendations are bookshops (34%) and professional book reviews (31%), followed by libraries (27%). As many as 76% readers will happily read books recommended by a bookseller or librarian.

Social media least trusted source

Less than 12% of Australians trust book recommendations via social media platforms.

Libraries & Indies make books easy to find

According to Australian readers, the top three easiest places to find a specific title and/browse for a new book to read are:

- 1) An Australian online bookseller (60%)
- 2) In a library (56%)
- 3) In-store at a local indie bookshop (54%)

Buying books

We mostly buy books for ourselves

The number one reason Australian readers buy books is for ourselves – either as a planned purchase (51%), or an impulse buy (50%). Readers are less likely to buy books as gifts – either planned (18%) or on impulse (13%).

Browsing in a bookshop leads to sales

More Australian readers (54%) indicate they've bought books while browsing in-person in a bookshop than while browsing online (38%).

Word-of-mouth is the magic influencer

When it comes to promotional campaigns for specific titles it is word-of-mouth that mostly influences book buying decisions, followed by publicity, then advertising, and then catalogues.

Previous enjoyment of an author #1 factor

The top three factors that positively influence Australian readers when buying books are:

1. Previous enjoyment of book by same author
2. Recommendations of family & friends
3. Descriptive blurb on inside flap/back cover (not including cover review quotes or endorsements which had lowest influence.)

Borrowing books

Libraries save the day for readers

Some Australian readers find it tricky getting to a bookshop in-store (12%) and online (4%). Others simply no longer have a local bookshop (11%).

Limited space for books in our homes

A significant proportion (39%) of Australian readers haven't got enough room to keep books.

Libraries help sustain strong reading habits

Almost all Australian readers (89%) have used a library. Engaged readers (54%) are more likely than general readers (34%) to borrow books instead of buying them, because they spend more time reading more books more often.

Borrowing often only affordable option

A third (32%) of Australian readers deem books too expensive to buy because:

1. price of new book too much to afford (41%)
2. no money after living costs for books (21%)
3. spend on other leisure activities first (14%)

Some like to try first, then buy later

Some (12%) Australian readers love a book they've borrowed from the library so much they buy their very own copy.

Pandemic changes?

Mostly reading the same amount of books

The majority (53%) of Australian book readers believe they read the same amount of books during the pandemic as previously. Some think they read more (38%) and some less (9%).

Mostly buying the same amount of books

The majority (55%) of Australian book readers think they bought the same amount of books during the pandemic as previously. Some think they bought more (29%), and some less (15%).

Rise in purchasing books online

For the most part Australian readers continued buying books from their usual sources – some bought less, and some bought more, with 6% buying more from a local online bookseller.

Pandemic budget constraints

The reasons Australian readers didn't buy books (even if they thought about it) during the pandemic period of 2020-21 was because;

1. it was out of their budget (26%)
2. uncertainty about liking the book (17%)
3. prohibitive postage costs (16%)
4. not looking to buy a book at that time (13%)

Only 8% thought a book poor value for money.

Thanking our partners

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Want to learn more?

To download the full report visit our website:
australiareads.org.au/national-reading-survey/

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