

# Introducing the 'Understanding Australian readers' report

*By Anna Burkley*

## Snapshot

Anna Burkey, the head of the Australia Reads, introduces the recently released Understanding Australian Readers report offering commentary on this important reports relevance to school libraries, all educators and the wider community.

It's a persistent and knotty question of our times - how do we get more young people to read? In particular, how do we instil a love of reading in the children and young adults that seem to show little interest, including those readers we sometimes call 'reluctant.'

Many of us have well-honed tactics for creating reading communities, finding ways to energise students around reading, and helping them discover the books that excite and delight them.

We practice these against the noisy backdrop of the world: more fragmented attention spans, higher work and study loads, increased entertainment options, the dominance of technology platforms. The fight for our attention is a profitable one, and these trends are likely to become more pronounced in the decade ahead.



## Understanding Australian Readers

## The reading picture

Rates of long-form reading continue to steadily decline - 29% of young adults haven't read a book in a year, compared to 22% in 2017, and the statistics are similar for other age groups.

Parents, friends, colleagues and staff at school - overall, people are reading fewer books, less frequently. The good news is that half of Australians already value reading - even if they don't read themselves - and most of us want to be reading more. We just need a bit of help to build the habit, for ourselves and our families.

We need to fully understand, and ultimately influence, the trends - to use the most effective tactics we can with our limited resources.

# The reading journey

Reading is so much more than the silent, solo consumption of ink on a page. From the moment we think about picking up a book, to trying to decide what to read, actually getting hold of a book, and then chatting about it with friends - these behaviours are all part of the reading experience.

Each stage of the journey presents an opportunity to influence how people feel about reading.

## Reaching readers

To reach readers, we need to meet them where they're at in their reading journey, and then look at how we make it as easy as possible to add a reading experience into their lives.

That will look different for different groups - the barriers they face, whether confidence, capability, or just not finding the right read - are different.

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The '[Understanding Australian readers](#)' report uses behavioural science to break down these reader groups, and their barriers at each step of the reading journey. Understanding those barriers well can help us choose what tactics to use to best influence them.

We're pretty much getting it right for Avid and Engaged readers - how we approach the other 60% of Australians needs our skill, imagination and tenacity, leaning on this research to help us prioritise.

Aspirational and Ambivalent reader segments represent about a third of Australians age 16+ (and likely a similar amount of younger ages too.) They choose other leisure activities over reading, get distracted, and aren't confident about finding books they'll like. Ambivalent readers

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in particular aren't confident in their reading abilities - their perception of what it means to be 'a reader' can be intimidating and off-putting.

These are important groups to reach - if they are reading, they'll help make reading a norm for those around them! The report has lots more detail, but some examples:

## Reaching Aspirational readers:

- Make reading seem approachable and fun, without pressure on what or how much to read. Find ways to trigger feelings of enjoyment, reminding people that they find reading pleasurable and comforting.
- Encourage peer recommendations, and make those recommendations visible outside library spaces, so they appear elsewhere in the community or school environment.
- Help them fit reading into their existing schedules: promote audiobooks for the school commute, keep a book in their bag, or set up dedicated comfy reading nooks at home and school.
- Share stories of people students relate to rediscovering reading, and case studies of how people fit reading into their lives.
- Avoid triggering guilt or shame about how much or what they are reading - this will lead to avoidance. (This goes for all segments.)

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## Reaching Ambivalent readers:

- Reframe what reading is - you don't have to finish every book, or read lengthy, literary books, to be a 'good' reader. Shorter reads, audiobooks, graphic novels and younger-aged reads are valuable for all ages.
- Validate their reading choices to build their trust and confidence - whatever they choose to read is good reading.
- Make reading a social experience, where conversation about what people like and enjoy is encouraged.
- Show trusted, relatable figures as readers - whether that's an influential teacher, sports coach or parent. The more the better!

## Reaching non-readers

Lapsed and Uninterested non-readers have a crucial difference between them.

Lapsed readers, who would like to read more, still think of themselves as 'a reader'. They need help focusing, and finding books they see as compelling - they're easily distracted. Critically, lapsed readers have fond memories of books and reading.

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Uninterested non-readers do not have positive memories of books. Zero percent of them can recall a single positive reading experience - at any stage in the reading journey. They are bored, frustrated, and uninterested. Early experiences of books have shaped their attitudes as adults, and they are the most difficult group to influence.

Reaching Uninterested readers:

- Connect reading to other activities they enjoy.
- Help them engage across the reading journey - even if they aren't ready to sit and read along, they can still participate in choosing books, displaying them, listening in to read-aloud activities or audiobooks.
- Support them to think of reading as a social experience, that has content and subject matter that interests them.
- Provide access to books that are easy to comprehend, and the autonomy to choose the books that interest them most.

## Your school community

Across your school, and your wider community, there will be a mix of these different types of reader. I hope that this research sparks ideas for activities and messages that could work in your school, to reach those we've traditionally found it harder to engage with.

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I also hope that this report helps to endorse the excellent work that happens every day to engage young readers, providing an evidence base for influencing those around us to invest more time and resources in reading.

Please do share the success that you've had in reaching readers, with SLAV and with us at [Australia Reads](#), so we can use them to inspire other colleagues across the sector.

[Access the full report or the executive summary of the Understanding Australian Readers research.](#)

**Anna Burkey** is the Head of [Australia Reads](#), a national not-for-profit aiming to get more Australians reading more books, more often. Hailing from Scotland, where she was on the founding team of Edinburgh UNESCO City of Literature, she currently lives on Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung lands. After several years in leadership roles with State Library Victoria, leading the Centre for Youth Literature and establishing the Children's Quarter, Anna is working with partners across the country to grow [Australia Reads](#), secure investment in reading, and increase national reading rates. Anna herself is on a mission to connect with great library colleagues, and is happy to share the inside story on the many engagement programs she's been a part of - from the trickier and stickier aspects to the heartwarming moments.