NEWS LESSON

The Books We Buy and the Attention We Cannot Keep



BEFORE YOU READ

1 Warm up

Talk about these questions with a partner.

1. What makes you put a book down after a few pages?
2. Would you rather reread a favourite or try something unfamiliar?
3. Where do you find it easiest to pay attention?

2 Key words

These words are in the article. Write the letter of the meaning (A to H) in each box.

1	**inherently**	☐	A	a number of things coming one after another
2	**comparatively**	☐	B	in a way that is so simple or honest that it removes doubt
3	**disarmingly**	☐	C	by its very nature
4	**succession**	☐	D	a comparison that explains one thing by another
5	**exhaustion**	☐	E	when you compare it with something else
6	**analogy**	☐	F	morally good
7	**virtuous**	☐	G	a state of being extremely tired
8	**novelty**	☐	H	the quality of being new and interesting

3 Read

Read the article and underline the key words from task 2. The paragraphs are numbered.

Reading has not vanished, but the routine that allows sustained attention may be eroding.

1 The novel is open and the intention is sincere. Then a notification interrupts, one message leads to a headline and the reader returns unable to remember the previous paragraph. The book has not become less interesting in ten minutes; the thread of attention has been cut. Increasing numbers of people describe this experience even when reading was once one of their favourite activities. The problem may be less a rejection of books than the disappearance of the routine that once protected them.

2 Research suggests a more complicated picture than the familiar claim that nobody reads any more. A 2025 study drawing on two decades of American Time Use Survey data found that the proportion of adults reading for pleasure on an average day fell from approximately 28% in 2004 to 16% in 2023. The survey asks people what they did on a particular day, so it measures reading on an ordinary day, not whether anyone read at all during the year.

3 Yet Pew Research Center reported in 2026 that around 75% of American adults had read at least some of a book during the previous year, a measure that has remained comparatively stable. Both findings can be true. Occasional reading may persist even as the practice of reading regularly becomes less common.

4 Smartphones undoubtedly compete for attention, offering constant opportunities for novelty and interruption. A novel asks readers to remain within an unfolding argument or imagined world; a phone promises a succession of immediate rewards. But attributing every change to digital technology glosses over other pressures. Exhaustion, precarious working lives, limited access to books and the absence of quiet spaces can all undermine the habit. Reading also becomes less inviting when treated as a test of cultural sophistication rather than a source of pleasure.

5 In August 2026, the novelist Naomi Alderman proposed a programme modelled on the Couch to 5K running scheme. Her eight-week approach encouraged people to rebuild reading stamina through progressively longer sessions, beginning with manageable periods rather than ambitious targets. The analogy is useful because it replaces an unhelpful moral judgement with the idea of practice. Someone who struggles to concentrate is not necessarily lazy or incapable; they may simply have lost a routine that needs rebuilding.

6 There is reason to avoid romanticising books as inherently virtuous or dismissing audiobooks and digital formats as inferior. Reading takes different forms, and sustained engagement with a complex text can occur on a screen as well as on paper. Nor is finishing more novels automatically a measure of intelligence. The more persuasive argument concerns the capacity to follow ideas over time, tolerate uncertainty and resist the expectation of constant stimulation. Those abilities matter beyond literature, including in education and public debate.

7 The practical response may be disarmingly modest. Read something genuinely appealing, set aside a short period free from notifications and allow the habit to develop without turning it into another productivity target. A book need not compete with a phone on the phone's terms. Its pleasures are slower, less immediate and sometimes demanding. That difference is precisely what makes reading worth preserving, not as a badge of refinement, but as a way of paying attention to something long enough for it to change how we think.

Sources: The Guardian. Picture: AI illustration.

4 True, false or not given

Circle **T** (true), **F** (false) or **NG** (the article does not say).

1. Someone who read a few pages of one book last year could count in Pew's figure without being counted in the daily-reading figure. (T) (F) (NG)
2. The writer regards audiobooks as a poorer way to read than print. (T) (F) (NG)
3. Alderman's programme asks participants to keep a reading diary. (T) (F) (NG)
4. The writer implies that difficulty concentrating does not necessarily show a personal failing. (T) (F) (NG)
5. The writer argues that smartphones are the only pressure on reading. (T) (F) (NG)

5 Vocabulary

Complete the sentences with words from the box. Two words are not needed.

attributing	dismissing	persist	prolong	provoke	resist	tolerate	undermine

1. Constant interruptions can _____ a reader's confidence long before the last chapter.
2. Few readers can _____ a book that makes no effort to hold their interest.
3. Even keen readers find it hard to _____ the pull of a glowing screen.
4. Even as screens multiply, the habit of reading aloud to children continues to _____ in many families.
5. Critics are wrong in _____ the decline in reading entirely to one cause.
6. Teachers who insist on _____ comic books as lightweight may put off reluctant readers.

6 Word forms

Use the word in brackets to make a word that fits the gap.

1. Treating reading as a test of cultural _____ makes it less inviting. (SOPHISTICATED)
2. Few readers found the critic's claim _____ , since it ignored the survey data. (PERSUADE)
3. Critics accused the film of _____ a harsh period of history. (ROMANTIC)
4. The _____ offered by a phone is far more immediate than that of a novel. (STIMULATE)
5. Someone who skips a chapter is not _____ lazy. (NECESSARY)

7 Language focus: phrasal verbs

Complete the sentences with words from the box. Two words are not needed. At this level, many phrasal verbs are idiomatic and fairly formal. Notice that the particle stays in the sentence and you supply the verb.

brush **fix** **gloss** **play** **rule** **shy** **tie**

1. Politicians often _____ over the awkward details of their plans.
2. Doctors could not _____ out stress as a cause of the headaches.
3. Many adults _____ away from long novels because they fear losing the thread.
4. He tends to _____ aside any criticism of his habits.
5. Publishers may _____ down how few people finish what they buy.

SPEAK

8 Talk about it

Discuss in pairs or small groups. Give reasons for your answers.

1. What would make reading feel like a pleasure again?
2. Does an audiobook give you what you want from a book?
3. Would reading ten pages happily beat finishing a book you disliked?

9 Role-play: ten minutes a day

Work in pairs. Read your card, then have the conversation. Swap roles and do it again.

Student A · the friend who wants to read more

You've bought lots of books but you hardly open them. Ask your friend to join you for ten quiet minutes of reading every evening, with phones off. Explain why it would help.

Student B · the friend who loves scrolling

You're tired after work and scrolling relaxes you. Ask questions and explain your worries. You can say yes, no, or yes with a different plan.

Useful phrases

I'd love to get back into reading.
Could we try ten minutes a day?
I'm too tired by the evening.
What if we switched our phones off?
That's a fair point, but I'd rather start small.
Let's give it a week and see how it goes.

Afterwards, tell the class: did you agree a plan, and is it realistic?

ANSWER KEY

2 Key words

1 C · 2 E · 3 B · 4 A · 5 G · 6 D · 7 F · 8 H

4 True, false or not given

1 T · 2 F · 3 NG · 4 T · 5 F

5 Vocabulary

1 undermine · 2 tolerate · 3 resist · 4 persist · 5 attributing · 6 dismissing

6 Word forms

1 sophistication · 2 unpersuasive · 3 romanticising or romanticizing · 4 stimulation · 5 necessarily

7 Language focus

1 gloss · 2 rule · 3 shy · 4 brush · 5 play

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