



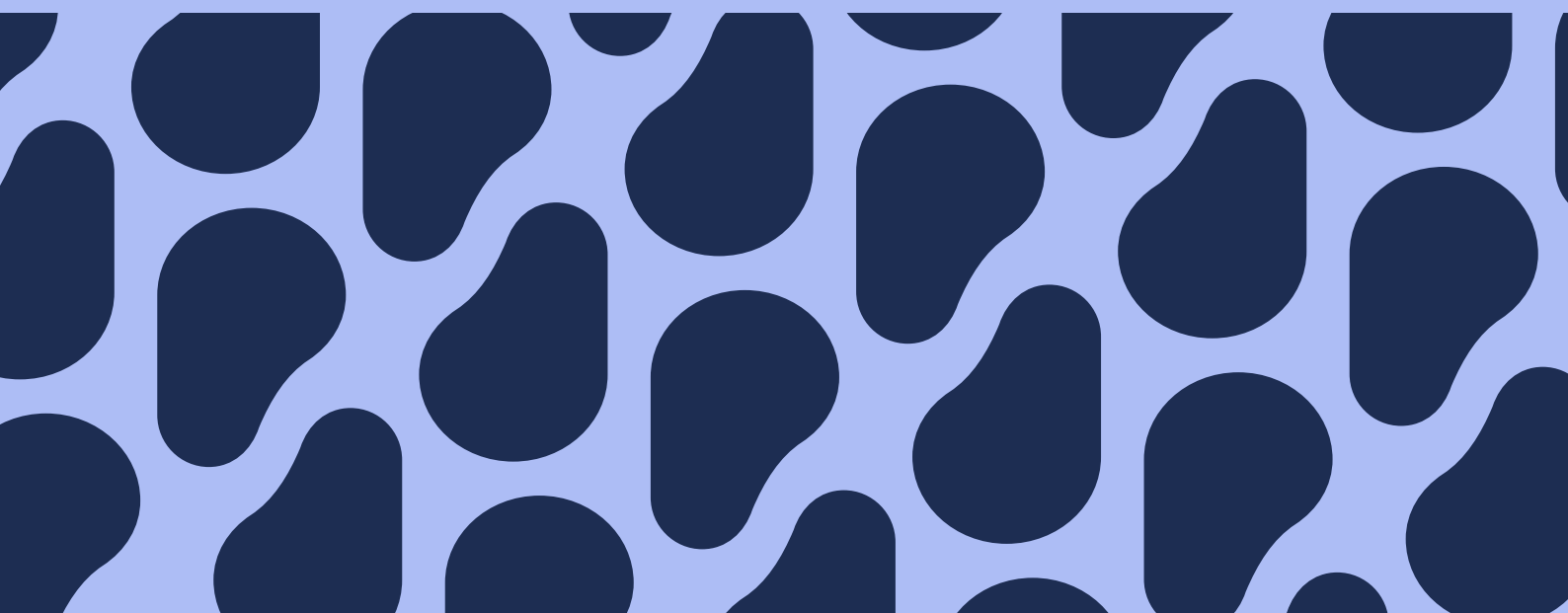
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The future of literacy: Multimodal reading

Literacy for learning: Redefining
literacy for the next generation



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Foreword

In a digital-first world, the ways in which children and young people engage with language are evolving rapidly. Literacy today is no longer confined to printed books and writing with pen and paper – it encompasses digital reading, audio storytelling, visual narratives and interactive media.

At the National Literacy Trust, we believe it is time to reframe what it means to be literate. Our Future of Literacy series explores the reading, writing, speaking and listening skills young people will need to thrive, not just now, but 30 years from now. We examine what literacy will mean for learning, for life and for the workplace. The series draws on the charity's 30 years of experience and convenes the expertise and unique insights of our network of educators and businesses, providing an opportunity for the sector to come together in shaping the future of literacy.



Our first paper, The future of literacy: Multimodal reading, sets out the urgent need for a step change in how we value, validate and embed young people's contemporary reading experiences in homes, schools, businesses and communities. Far from being a threat to 'traditional' literacy, reading across print, digital, audio and visual mediums is in fact a broadening of it, proliferating the benefits of reading for young people's literacy development, critical thinking skills, confidence and wellbeing.

This is also a key focus for the National Year of Reading in 2026, which will redefine reading as a dynamic practice that includes engaging with stories, ideas, illustrations and information across print, digital and audio formats. The campaign from the Department for Education in collaboration with the National Literacy Trust will tackle the steep decline in reading enjoyment across all age groups and put reading back at the heart of our culture.

Together, our Future of Literacy papers explore how the digital world is reshaping literacy whilst offering a hopeful vision for the future where literacy is not a barrier but a bridge to opportunity, equity and lifelong learning.

**Jonathan Douglas CBE, Chief Executive
National Literacy Trust**

Introduction

Literacy is not a static concept; rather, it is a dynamic activity, shaped continually by technological, social, cultural and academic forces. As these forces accelerate, the landscape of literacy is changing more rapidly than at any previous point in history.

Yet too often new experiences of literacy are dismissed as less valid, or even as threats to “true” literate culture. This resistance can have significant consequences for how literacy is taught and supported, resulting in a system that fails to equip young learners with the skills they need to succeed in the workplace and to flourish as individuals and in society. The ultimate impact is to weaken the economy, undermine democratic participation and reinforce social inequity.

Engaging with the future of literacy is therefore a moral, social and economic imperative. As the UK prepares for the National Year of Reading 2026 and curriculum and assessment reviews continue, and alongside the growing presence of generative AI, we face a once-in-a-generation opportunity to redefine literacy in ways that enable schools, libraries, publishers and families to support the literacy skills needed by the next generation.

This first paper in our Future of Literacy project argues that literacy policy and practice must evolve beyond print-based assumptions to reflect how children and young people now read, listen, watch, and create across multiple media. Our goal is to ensure that every child or young person can thrive as a reader – whatever the format.

This paper focuses on three literacy forms – digital, comics and audiobooks – arguing for their conscious and strategic integration into literacy teaching, learning and cultural practice. These formats are already central to children and young people’s lives, and recognising their legitimacy is the foundation for imagining literacy futures in the age of AI, immersive media and new forms of participation.

The future will depend not only on what is new, but on how we reframe and elevate the literacies already shaping young people’s worlds and reimagine what it means to be a reader. By weaving these new literacies into the cultural and educational fabric of our time, we help children and young people claim their identities as readers with confidence, dismantle barriers to opportunity and reframe literacy as a source of empowerment, equity and future possibility.

Therefore, to determine the future of literacy, this paper explores the contemporary experience of literacy to inform our future thinking and deepen our understanding for generations to come.

Produced with the support of Oxford University Press, The Beano, and Audible, we hope this paper will contribute to building a literacy future that reflects the diversity of texts, tools and learners in our communities.

Later papers in this series will explore how this inclusive and contemporary approach to literacy provides the platform for reimagining the future of literacy. The evidence and ideas presented are intended not only to expand our shared understanding of what it means to be literate today, but also to inspire confidence and optimism about the possibilities ahead.

At the same time, we recognise that change can be complex for children, families, educators, policymakers and employers. For this reason, later chapters set out practical strategies alongside policy recommendations to ensure that this vision can be realised at every level of society.



Affirming contemporary literacy: Reading across print and digital media

Supported by Oxford University Press



Exploring contemporary reading

As the boundaries between digital and physical worlds blur, debates around literacy in the digital age are ongoing. These are dominated by the question of whether reading and writing in print or on screen is ‘better’, and more often focus on the cognitive aspects of literacy, such as comprehension ([Delgado, et al, 2018](#)), and less on the affective and behavioural aspects, such as access, content, engagement and motivation ([Hare, et al, 2024](#)).

At the same time, the question of whether children and young people should read from print or screens is both pressing and, in some respects, outdated. Today’s young readers live in a rich media universe, with opportunities to consume stories, information and texts across many formats – printed novels, ebooks, audiobooks, graphic novels, gaming narratives, video sharing platforms and more ([Ofcom, 2025](#)).

This chapter forms part of a wider exploration of children and young people’s experiences of contemporary reading. As an important starting note, while we are conscious of concerns around the potentially negative impacts of excessive screen time, our research also seeks to foreground the many positive literacy behaviours related to digitally enabled reading, writing and communication¹.

For example, our previous research has found that opportunities to read digitally could support wider reading engagement ([Picton & Clark, 2015](#)), not only among the keenest readers, but also in the most disengaged readers and those eligible for free school meals, more of whom reported reading fiction on screen than their peers ([Clark & Picton, 2019](#)). Other research has also distinguished reading ebooks as a positive use of screen time ([Kucirkova, 2024](#)).



Based on these findings, we believe that reading digitally should be recognised as valuable both in its own right and as a pathway into wider print-based practices. When we acknowledge this, we are better able to support children and young people on their literacy journeys in ways that reflect how they encounter texts in everyday life. Reading in print and digitally are not opposite, but different and complementary formats. While each brings distinct benefits and challenges, they both occupy an essential place in the literacy landscape now and in the future.

¹This chapter focuses mainly on reading digitally as its primary focus but our wider research (see, e.g. [Bonafede et al., \(2025\)](#)) also explores questions relating to writing digitally.

Print and digital: Complementary strengths

Print reading, particularly long-form texts, continues to play a vital role in literacy development. Research shows it has benefits for comprehension, memory and sustained attention, especially in younger children ([Delgado et al., 2018](#); [Altamura et al., 2023](#)), while the tactile nature of books supports engagement and shared experiences.

Indeed, our Annual Literacy Survey shows that print remains the dominant medium across most genres over the past two decades, especially for younger children (Picton & Clark, forthcoming). Yet, this dominance can also exclude those who find print reading formats or content inaccessible or uninspiring.

Reading digitally has been consistently popular with a proportion of children and young people taking part in our surveys since 2005, particularly among older age groups. Digital formats provide additional opportunities for keen readers, while also engaging those less likely to connect with print, including many from lower-income backgrounds ([Clark & Picton, 2019](#)).

Its accessibility features, such as adjustable fonts and text-to-speech functionality, can open doors for learners with specific challenges ([Alqahtani, 2020](#)). Moreover, recent research has shown that the so-called “screen inferiority effect” is mediated by age, skill level and context, with digital reading becoming especially beneficial at secondary level and beyond ([Altamura et al., 2023](#); [Grammatikopoulou et al., 2025](#)).

Importantly, digital formats can extend the very idea of reading with video games, for example, offering new ways into stories and literacy engagement ([Picton & Clark, 2020](#)).

Still, moderation is essential: excessive screen use can displace other valuable activities. The evidence suggests, however, that when balanced and purposeful, print and digital reading are not rivals but complementary, each with distinct strengths, and both essential within the modern literacy landscape.

Beyond formats

Our research makes clear that the format is only one part of the story. What matters most for sustained engagement is whether children and young people see reading as personally meaningful.

Findings from our 2025 Annual Literacy Survey show that children and young people are most motivated when reading connects with their interests, hobbies or wider media experiences, such as books linked to films, TV or games ([National Literacy Trust, 2025](#)). Visual appeal, freedom of choice and relevance also play a critical role, particularly for those who report little enjoyment of reading.

This highlights the importance of agency. When young people can select formats and texts that reflect their identities – whether song lyrics, comics, news articles or fan fiction – they are more likely to sustain a positive relationship with reading. Such multimodal pathways expand, rather than diminish, what it means to be literate, offering multiple gateways into deeper reading engagement, underscoring the importance of a literacy landscape that is diverse, dynamic and inclusive.



Changing literacies?

As the definition of “being a reader” broadens, so too must our understanding of literacy skills. Reading today is not only about decoding print but about navigating multimodal environments, assessing credibility and moving fluidly between formats.

Young people told us how they like to move between formats and are able to recognise how and where they are using their literacy skills – increasing their engagement with all forms (Picton & Clark, forthcoming):

“Usually, I play games or videos that include subtitles.”

“I use Booktok a lot and get a lot of recommendations and enjoy seeing what other people think of books I did or didn’t enjoy.”

“I find that I watch the films and then read the books because I see online that there is so much that they missed out in the film that is in the book.”

Skills such as sustained attention, critical evaluation and responsible production of online content and AI literacy are increasingly important. At the same time, traditional competencies, such as spelling, grammar, comprehension and inference remain essential, as well as being integral to the most effective and reflective experiences with new literacies.

This shift calls for a literacy education that balances depth with adaptability, preparing young people to interpret a literary text, analyse a newsfeed, follow a gaming wiki or compose a job application with equal confidence.



Equipping the system

Responses to our recent Future of Literacy survey² from teachers, parents, young people and employers underscored that homes, schools, and communities must all play a role in this transformation.

Findings reflected a widespread recognition that literacy is no longer just about decoding text, it’s about understanding, navigating and questioning information in complex, multimodal environments.

Respondents called for a broader definition of literacy, one that includes critical, media, digital and information literacy knowledge and skills such as evaluating online information, checking facts and sources and awareness of the digital ecosystem.

Our wider research also suggests that teachers value tools such as ebooks for widening the choice of reading materials and experiences they can offer pupils (National Literacy Trust, 2023), but emphasise the need for balance, not technology for its own sake.

Wider concerns about using technology to support literacy also include equity gaps in broadband and devices (Picton, 2019) and, more recently, the risk of over-reliance on AI tools leading to an erosion of foundational writing skills (Picton, et al, 2025).

²Earlier this year, our opening blog invited readers to respond to a survey on this topic literacytrust.org.uk/blog/the-future-of-literacy

Schools remain pivotal: they have a key role to play as they are sites of literacy instruction that can also provide opportunities to access resources that are innovative and inclusive.

While both print and digital formats have a place in classrooms, their roles, purposes, and effectiveness differ depending on context, student needs and the skills being targeted. Print continues to anchor foundational literacy and cultural capital, while digital resources boost engagement, support struggling readers and strengthen reading for pleasure cultures (Picton & Clark, 2015; Picton, 2019; National Literacy Trust, 2023).

Yet without training, infrastructure and professional development, many teachers feel under-equipped to make the most of multimodal tools. Community spaces, especially libraries, are essential for bridging these divides, offering access to diverse resources and fostering shared literacy experiences.

The evidence points towards integration rather than competition. Schools need the resources to provide rich print and digital environments, alongside professional development to help teachers use both effectively. When balanced thoughtfully, print and digital formats can reinforce each other, combining the depth and shared culture of books with the access and inclusivity of digital tools and ensuring that all pupils can engage meaningfully with texts.

Conclusion

Literacy in the digital age is not about resisting change but equipping children and young people to shape it. The most resilient readers are those who can move confidently between formats, discern credibility and adapt their literacy practices to context. Both the printed word and the digital text remain vital, but literacy now demands more: empathy, critical insight, creativity and the capacity to read and write across multiple platforms.

Our task is not to defend one tradition over another, but to reimagine literacy as a living, evolving practice and to ensure that every child has the opportunity to flourish as a reader in the literacies of tomorrow.

The move toward digital reading also highlights a wider transformation – the rise of visual communication. Comics and graphic narratives exemplify how reading is expanding beyond words alone to include image, design and interpretation, which will be explored in the next chapter.

³As a note, we do not take a position on whether schools choose to limit access to phones during the school day, as this is an issue for school and government policy. We rather suggest that opportunities to read in a variety of formats, including digital devices, may be of benefit to some children and young people, and that validation of appropriate reading on devices in personal time should, therefore, not be undervalued or overlooked.



The role of comics and visual literacy in the future of literacy

Supported by The Beano



An enduring relevance

Humans' use of sequential images to communicate predates writing by some 40,000 years, and sequences of images that are identifiable as comics have been published in newspapers in the UK since the 19th century. Yet despite this long-standing presence, comics and graphic novels are often considered a lesser form of reading material and continue to be underutilised in education.

This exclusion is in opposition to the rapid technological developments of the last 30 years which have continued to place texts combining image and word at the heart of communication. From gifs and memes to advanced scientific imaging, the interpretation of images is as relevant to people today as it was to the cave painters of Sulawesi over 45,000 years ago.

Given the frequent use of word and image across many forms of media in the modern era, it is perhaps not surprising that narratives which combine both forms, particularly comics, are growing in popularity and striking a chord with contemporary readers as they navigate the breadth of visual information that modern technology provides access to (Clark et al 2024).

It is now vital to consider the role that comics and other multimodal formats can play in the literacy landscape, and to explore how educators in particular can leverage the form to encourage and develop a wide range of readers, thinkers and writers in their settings.

The National Literacy Trust's Annual Literacy Survey tracks reading attitudes and behaviours over time and in 2025 surveyed more than 110,000 children and young people aged 5 to 18 across the UK. An examination of long-term trends in reading attitudes and motivation highlights how visual texts have remained relevant and engaging to young readers against a backdrop of declining reading for pleasure rates.

Despite wider declining trends, comics and graphic novels have remained unusually buoyant in popularity with print reading of comics dipping only slightly since 2017 (32.2% vs 29.2% in 2025); the shallowest decline of any reading material monitored. Their translation to digital form has proven successful with readers too; while most other forms of reading on screen have stagnated or fallen, comics have bucked the trend with digital reading rates increasing over the last seven years (13.8% in 2017/18 to 14.3% in 2025).

COMICS (R)EVOLUTION!



Responses from children and young people in the charity's latest Annual Literacy Survey suggest that this enduring appeal stems from the relaxation, enjoyment and visual richness comics provide. A dominant theme across the responses was the visual appeal of comics. Children and young people expressed a deep appreciation for the artwork, illustrations, and design that make stories come alive. The visual nature of comics not only attracted them but also supported understanding and engagement:

“ I do enjoy reading my comics/novels a lot because I really like the illustrations and the way they express their feelings. ”

“ I enjoy reading comic books because I think the characters in the comics help me express myself. ”

“ I enjoy reading comic books because I really like the artwork in the comics. ”

“ I like reading comics because it heightens my creative intelligence. ”

Many young readers also described comics as relaxing, soothing, and fun. The format provided an easy, pleasurable way to engage with stories without the pressures sometimes associated with long prose texts:

“ Comics make me relaxed. ”

“ I like reading because it can be quite relaxing and pleasing for the eyes (specifically comics). ”

“ I like comic books the most — they're fun to read with the little speech bubble. ”

“ Reading comics and manga helps me relax. ”



Many also mentioned how comics stimulated imagination and aided understanding. The combination of images and text helped them picture characters and scenes vividly, making the story world more tangible.

I like reading comics as it immerses yourself in another world or reality.

I like reading comics more than word books because they give me more of an image in my head.

I prefer to read scripts or comics as there are already images to help me understand what's going on.

I like comics, they make me feel as if I am in the book.

Some also described comics as more approachable than other forms of reading, helping overcome barriers to engagement. The illustrations, pacing and structure made them easier to follow and more immediately rewarding:

I don't enjoy reading books as much as I want to because I find it very hard to find a good book for me and one I can easily imagine the scenes and characters in my head. However, I find that comics counter those two problems with reading a book, so I find it fun and exciting when I read comics (I love when there are good drawings).

I enjoy reading. I very much do. But the main thing I 'read' is comics/Japanese manga (don't know if that constitutes as reading but...).

Finally, for others, comics helped with self-expression and identity. Some readers connected with characters and storylines in ways that help them express feelings or aspects of themselves.

I enjoy reading comic books because I think the characters in the comics help me express myself.

Multimodal texts like comics and graphic novels have the ability to remain relevant to readers across a changing reading landscape and yet, to date, they have sat outside much of the mainstream thinking around approaches to literacy, particularly within the education system. This chapter will explore system and curriculum changes needed to ensure this opportunity is not lost.



Comics at home

Comics often provide a powerful reading experience at home and can appeal to a wide range of readers and age ranges. Their visual appeal, links to popular culture and the ability to enjoy them quickly and collaboratively make comics well-suited to family reading.

Parents sometimes underestimate comics, assuming they “don’t count” as real reading (Clark et al. forthcoming), but evidence shows they can help develop comprehension, sequencing skills and a lifelong love of stories. Shared comics reading, whether print, digital or web-based, can also foster intergenerational enjoyment, giving families opportunities to talk about characters, humour and narrative together.

Recognising comics as a valid literacy practice at home is therefore crucial in building confidence and engagement among a wide range of readers.

Comics in the community

Comics also play an important role in the wider community. Libraries report that graphic novels, manga and comics are among their most borrowed items, and many now run dedicated comic clubs, zine-making workshops and author/illustrator events to engage children and young people and support them to share often untold, personal narratives.

Beyond libraries, comic conventions and cultural festivals provide inclusive spaces where young people can connect their own reading to wider communities of interest.

Importantly, comics can help tackle issues of equity: weekly comics are often more affordable than other books and graphic novel collections are increasing available in local libraries and accessible through digital lending platforms.

When communities champion comics as a legitimate and valued form of reading, they create opportunities for children and young people who might not otherwise find a way into literacy.



Comics across the curriculum

Our vision for the future of literacy sees visual literacy, including the use of comics, woven across the curriculum in both fiction and non-fiction form. The case for this has a clear evidence base; studies across a range of age groups have demonstrated how comics can be used by educators as an effective tool for engagement, enhancing retention of information and developing critical thinking skills and comprehension across a range of subjects including science, languages and English ([Faria et al. 2024](#); [Aleixo and Sumner 2017](#); [Krusemark, 2016](#); [Jones 2020](#)).

Currently, the use of comics as a teaching tool is not standard practice in either primary or secondary phase classrooms across the UK. Lack of educators’ knowledge and confidence around the form, and a persistent stigma around its legitimacy as both a reading material and a creative output, still limits its use in the sector, despite growing evidence of its impact on attainment, attitudes towards reading and wellbeing ([Comic Art Europe 2025](#); [Clark et al 2024](#)).

Comics offer a unique reading experience; whilst the proliferation of fast paced image based social media encourages us to scroll past, skim the topline information and move on, the image-based narratives in comics have the potential to encourage students to develop skills of slow looking and analysis ([Tishman, 2017](#); [Stewart and Koopmans 2025](#)), both crucial skills which directly link to critical and media literacy.

PICTURE PERFECT!



The explicit teaching of visual literacy alongside traditional literacy education and critical literacy will provide a powerful framework through which we can equip young people to analyse and question information that they are presented with. As well as equipping children with skills to effectively interpret multimodal communication, visual literacy has wider applications across a range of subjects.

The worlds of technology and science are becoming ever more image based, with complex information now best represented in image form. In many aspects of science, including medicine, professionals are required to compare, analyse, interpret and look for patterns across a range of images on a regular basis – skills which can be effectively developed in the classroom across a range of academic subjects (Ogier, 2024).

Literacy and the creative arts

The separation of writing from the creative curriculum and the pressures of the grammatical content of the primary curriculum have contributed to the decline in writing for pleasure (Young and Ferguson, 2021) and present additional barriers when it comes to embedding visual literacy approaches in schools. Teacher confidence to experiment with text types and allow children and young people greater choice of the form, style and topic of their writing is limited by the pressure of curriculum content and the statutory assessment framework (Bonafede et al, 2025).

Another part of the challenge around the use of comics in the curriculum is the way they cross the distinct boundaries of the art and English curricula, but herein also lies huge potential

for the form to drive debate around the ways in which curriculum design has the power to unlock the potential of multimodal forms, like comics, in literacy education.

Communication through drawing should sit across curricula and be developed much more broadly as a tool for thinking and analysis which supports literacy development. Drawing forms a core part of communication for children; from early childhood many children use drawing as a form of communication (Mackenzie, 2023; Kendrick and McKay 2009), embedding narratives into their drawings and creating their own multimodal texts through a combination of spoken word and image (Pitri & Michaelidou, 2025). However, beyond the early years much of this primary use of self-generated image to communicate outside of the art curriculum falls away as the expectations of the writing curriculum begin to dominate and curricula become increasingly siloed.

A vision for the future of literacy would support the use of drawing as a vehicle for thinking and communication across the curriculum, used in tandem with the written word and other media – an approach which accurately reflects modern communication and builds on children's communication preferences.

As well as reflecting modern modes of communication, developing opportunities for children to create comics and other multimodal texts provides vital insight into their world view (Jones, 2020; Kendrick and McKay 2009). Children and young people use the form to explore the mediated world around them and make meaning from it. It provides a platform for the often marginalised voices of children and young people, enabling families, educators and policymakers a direct window into their motivations, interests, experiences and concerns.

Conclusion

Despite their popularity and proven impact, comics and other visual texts remain underutilised in formal education. Yet, the evidence is clear: comics support literacy development, foster critical thinking and enhance engagement across a range of subjects.

Drawing alongside writing is not just for the early years, it encourages students to synthesise information, make meaning visually and verbally, and reflect deeply on content. This process of creation supports metacognition, narrative understanding and the development of visual literacy skills that are essential in a media-rich, image-driven society.

To fully harness the potential of comics in education, systemic change is needed. This includes embedding visual literacy across the curriculum, recognising drawing as a legitimate

form of thinking and communication across subjects, and equipping educators with the confidence and tools to use comics and other visual texts effectively.

It also means recognising the roles of families and communities in legitimising comics as valuable literacy practices, through home reading, library provision and cultural celebration, so that young people encounter support for comics wherever they read. By doing so, we not only reflect the realities of modern communication but also empower young people to become thoughtful, critical, and creative communicators. Comics are not a diversion from literacy; they are a dynamic and vital part of it.

However, if comics invite us to see reading differently, audiobooks invite us to hear it differently as we explore in the following chapter. Both challenge narrow definitions of reading and open-up new ways for children to connect with language and story.



Audiobooks and the future of literacy

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Listening and literacy

Children and young people engage with language in many ways: print, audiobooks, podcasts, comics and video. Listening has moved steadily from the margins to the mainstream. Audiobooks were once a niche medium – produced mainly as ‘talking books’ for visually impaired readers – but are now firmly part of the everyday literary landscape. Their popularity among young people has grown over the past decade, with evidence from our own research showing that more children now say they enjoy listening than reading ([Picton & Clark, 2025](#)). This represents a change that demands attention from educators, policymakers and researchers.

Listening itself is even more enduring. Hearing begins to develop before birth: by around 25 weeks’ gestation, fetuses respond to rhythm, intonation and melody in the voices and sounds around them ([Partanen et al., 2013](#)). In the early months of life, infants’ auditory processing develops rapidly, typically showing increased sensitivity to the expressive contours of their home language ([Kuhl, 2004](#)). From the beginning, then, listening is biologically primary, an evolutionary bedrock of communication and a foundation for later literacy ([Geary, 2008](#); [Pinker, 1994](#)).

Unlike reading and writing, which require explicit instruction, spoken language is acquired naturally through exposure and interaction. Early listening experiences, such as conversations, stories, rhymes and songs, are essential for building vocabulary, phonological awareness and narrative skills ([Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997](#); [Hogan, Adlof & Alonzo, 2014](#)). These oral foundations predict later reading success, as reading builds on existing oral language networks ([Dehaene, 2009](#)).

Listening also plays a profound socio-emotional role. Infants quickly learn to associate voices with comfort, safety and attachment. Exposure to familiar voices, lullabies, nursery rhymes and storytelling not only supports linguistic growth but nurtures wellbeing and positive emotional bonds ([Trevvarthen, 1999](#); [Trainor & Corrigan, 2010](#)). Such experiences establish strong associations between voice, language and story that can last a lifetime.

This distinction matters for literacy policy. If listening is biologically primary, then audiobooks are not an add-on but instead a modern medium for building on one of literacy’s deepest foundations as vocabulary, language structures, comprehension and narrative understanding are first encountered through listening.



Text and audio: Complementary roles

Text remains indispensable but, on its own, does not guarantee literacy for all. Dyslexic readers, children and young people with limited access to text-rich environments or those who struggle with motivation can find text a barrier. Listening offers an accessible complement.

Many children and young people in this year's Annual Literacy Survey described audiobooks as an accessible and enjoyable way to experience stories. Their comments highlight a range of motivations, from relaxation and imagination to inclusion and multitasking, showing that audiobooks can play an important role in fostering engagement and wellbeing.

Many children and young people associated audiobooks with enjoyment and relaxation. They described listening as a calming, immersive activity that stimulates imagination, often linked to bedtime or winding down.

“

I like listening to audiobooks as I find it very calming and like immersing myself in the story.

”

“

I enjoy just listening to an audiobook before bed to help me get to sleep.

”

“

I also like listening to audio versions of books such as Warrior Cats or Wings of Fire so I can close my eyes and picture the story in my mind.

”

“

When I listen to audiobooks they help me focus and relax.

”

“

I enjoy listening to audiobooks because it lets my mind imagine the story in my head.

”

Another strong theme across the responses was accessibility, with audiobooks providing an inclusive way for children and young people with reading difficulties or dyslexia to engage with stories. For them, listening replaces a literacy experience that might otherwise be frustrating or inaccessible:

“

Because I struggle with reading I don't like to do it in my free time, I would rather listen to audiobooks.

”

“

I don't enjoy reading in my free time because I am dyslexic and struggle to read so I just don't, I will sometimes listen to audiobooks though.

”

“

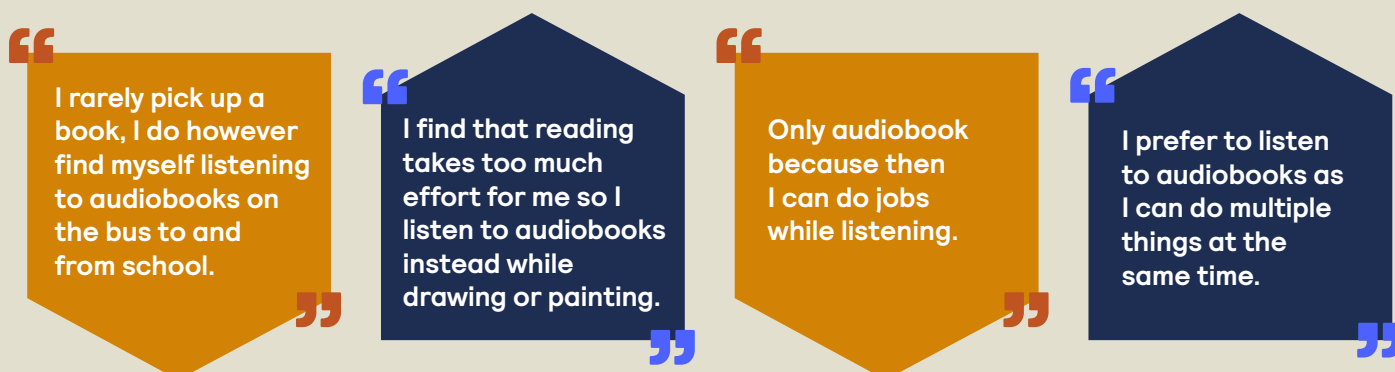
I find it hard to focus in the book and to find the right lines to read so I prefer to listen to audiobooks.

”

Many also expressed a clear preference for audiobooks over traditional reading, often linked to boredom or lack of motivation when reading print:



Finally, many also mentioned the possibility of multitasking – using audiobooks while engaging in other activities, from art to chores to travel.



Audiobooks also expose children to vocabulary beyond their independent reading level, model expressive and fluent reading ([Rasinski, 2012](#)) and bring stories alive through rhythm, intonation and phrasing. Hearing skilled storytelling supports children in internalising rhythm, intonation and phrasing, which in turn improves their own oral and silent reading. Far from replacing text, they can act as a gateway back into it.

Neuroscience supports this complementary view. Brain imaging research shows significant overlap in the neural networks used for listening and reading comprehension ([Buchweitz et al., 2009](#); [Jobard et al., 2006](#)). Listening is not a shortcut but an active process that engages common cognitive pathways.

Listening and reading are not opposites but partners— together they form a powerful route to literacy.



Themes and tensions

Engagement vs depth

Audiobooks clearly engage children and young people: they can listen while drawing, travelling or winding down at night. But questions remain about depth. Maryanne Wolf (2007) warns that “deep reading” skills such as critical analysis and inference develop most strongly in print. The challenge is to ensure that audio builds engagement without displacing sustained text reading.

Equity vs access

Audiobooks engage groups at risk of literacy disengagement. Yet access is uneven: subscription platforms are costly, devices are not evenly distributed and connectivity is limited in some households. Without equitable provision through schools, libraries and community initiatives, the potential of audiobooks to reduce literacy gaps will remain constrained.

Support vs substitution

Listening supports comprehension, vocabulary and fluency, but it does not teach decoding and does not develop the skills of processing and drawing meaning from written text. Audio must be positioned as a complement to, not a replacement for, rich exposure to text.

Cultural perceptions

Despite growing evidence, audiobooks still face perceptions as a “lesser” form of literacy. Paradoxically, they are both mainstream and marginalised, ubiquitous in children and young people’s cultural lives but often underused in education. Challenging these assumptions is essential.



“

Audiobooks are at once a mainstream cultural phenomenon and a marginal educational practice.

”

Everyday practices in homes, schools and communities

Audiobooks are already woven into the fabric of everyday life, though often in fragmented ways.

At home

Families use audiobooks at bedtime, on car journeys or during quiet times. Shared listening can strengthen family bonds, provide opportunities for discussion and allow parents who lack confidence in reading aloud, or who are not fluent readers of English, to share stories with their children. Audiobooks can also enrich multilingual households, allowing children and young people to access stories in different languages and bridging across cultures.

Access remains an issue: many families cannot afford subscriptions, so affordable provision through schools and libraries is vital.

In schools

Where audiobooks are integrated, they can transform engagement and support learning.

Evidence-based practices include:

- Teacher read-alouds with audio support: offering professional narration paired with teaching discussion.
- Fluency practice: modelling prosodic reading across the curriculum in support of strengthening the bridge between word reading and comprehension.
- Critical listening tasks: using pauses to discuss and explore prediction, inference and to summarise.

Professional development is needed so teachers can integrate audio confidently and strategically.

In libraries and communities

Libraries remain essential providers of equitable audiobook access. Digital lending platforms (BorrowBox, Libby, OverDrive) enable free access for families who cannot afford subscriptions. Curated collections can highlight underrepresented voices and offer a diversity of genres and levels. Beyond lending, libraries are increasingly hosting audiobook clubs, storytime sessions and community listening events – positioning listening as a collective as well as an individual experience.

Expanding access to audiobooks

The National Literacy Trust is working with Audible, a leading creator and provider of premium audio storytelling, to pilot new approaches to using audio in education.

From November 2025 to May 2026, more than 1,000 year 9 students across a multi-academy trust in the northeast and Northwest of England will receive free Audible accounts. For many, this will be their first experience accessing audiobooks at scale.

The aims of the initiative are to:

- Increase access to audio content for learning and education.
- Guide discovery and engagement by offering curated audiobook lists.
- Understand listening habits and barriers to engagement.
- Encourage more frequent listening and build a 'listening identity'.
- Ensure inclusion by highlighting diverse, representative content.

Teachers and librarians will also trial the service to explore how audio can enrich classroom practice, while English teachers will lead delivery, supported by resources developed by Audible. Both practitioners and students have helped curate the book lists which will be used through workshops and focus groups.

All participants will contribute to an evaluation led by the National Literacy Trust's research team, providing evidence to inform future practice and policy.

Conclusion

Audiobooks are both old and new. They began as talking books for visually impaired readers but in the digital age they have been reinvented as a mainstream cultural form. Listening is not a marginal skill but a biological foundation of literacy, a pathway into story and a source of wellbeing.

Text remains indispensable for depth, decoding and sustained comprehension. Yet audiobooks offer inclusion, motivation and prosodic models that print alone cannot always provide.

The strongest literacy outcomes emerge not when we choose between text and audio but when we combine them, through practices like Reading-While-Listening (Friedland et al., 2017), shared listening at home and equitable access through libraries.

These different forms of reading – print, digital, visual and audio – do not exist in isolation. They intersect across the spaces where literacy lives: the home, the school and the community. Building a future-ready literacy culture depends on connecting these settings into one coherent ecosystem, something that will be explored in the next section.

Audiobooks should not be seen as competitors to print, but as companions. Working together, they open new doors to literacy.



Homes, communities and schools: Building a multimodal literacy ecosystem

Literacy does not develop in a single setting. Children and young people encounter reading across home, school, and community contexts, and it is the interplay between these environments that shapes their identities as readers. If multimodal reading is to be fully embedded – embracing print, digital, audio and visual formats – then these contexts must work together, not in isolation.

Homes: Everyday literacy practices

Families provide the foundation for literacy development long before formal schooling begins. When parents and carers model reading in many forms – sharing comics, listening to audiobooks together, reading aloud from digital or print books, exploring lyrics or online texts – they validate children and young people’s lived experiences of literacy and signal that all reading counts.

Promoting choice and agency is vital to developing and sustaining literacy engagement. Allowing children and young people to select texts that align with their hobbies, games or wider interests makes reading personally meaningful and enjoyable.

For families, confidence also matters: parents and carers need reassurance that digital, visual and audio formats are not ‘lesser’ but legitimate gateways into story and learning.

Access remains critical. Initiatives that provide both print and digital books, lend audiobooks or equip families with library cards and devices can help ensure that no child or young person is excluded from the literacy landscape.

Shared listening has particular power. Bedtime audiobooks, family storytimes, or listening while travelling strengthen bonds, provide exposure to rich vocabulary and spark conversations that build both literacy and oracy.

For parents who feel less confident reading aloud, or who are not fluent readers of

English, audio can provide an inclusive way to share stories. Drawing and comics also offer powerful entry points for storytelling at home: talking with children about the stories in their drawings, or revisiting beloved characters across generations, creates intergenerational connections and validates children and young people’s own creativity.

Communities and libraries: Hubs of access and equity

Community spaces, particularly libraries, are vital connectors between home and school. They provide equitable access to print, digital and audio resources, as well as spaces for shared cultural experiences.

Free digital audiobook lending platforms such as BorrowBox or Libby ensure that families who cannot afford subscriptions still have access to diverse stories. Curated collections can highlight underrepresented authors and narrators, ensuring that every child and young person can see themselves, and others, in the stories they encounter.

Libraries are also cultural hubs. Festivals, author visits, comic clubs, storytime sessions and community listening events celebrate literacy in all its forms and create spaces where contemporary literacies are legitimised. By embracing comics, manga, audiobooks and multimodal texts alongside traditional print, libraries help expand children and young people’s understanding of what it means to be a reader.

Partnerships between schools, families and libraries are essential. Joint events, shared digital platforms and co-curated book lists can sustain reading practices across settings. In this way, libraries act not only as providers of access but also as bridges between the literacy practices of home and the formal instruction of school.

Schools: Integrating multimodal literacies

Schools remain the most significant structured environment for developing literacy. Here, multimodal integration means moving beyond privileging print alone and designing curricula and pedagogy that embrace diverse formats.

- Curriculum reform is needed to recognise comprehension and critical engagement across print, screen and audio, as well as the ethical use of AI-enabled tools.
- Pedagogical strategies must balance depth and motivation: the sustained focus required by print reading can be complemented by the accessibility and reach of digital and audio.
- Teacher development is central, equipping educators to evaluate digital texts, scaffold engagement with multimodal reading and celebrate contemporary literacies as valid learning experiences.



Teacher insights: Integrating multimodal reading

Teachers themselves call for this balance. In a survey conducted by Oxford University Press, teachers reported being concerned about what they perceive as a decline in children's ability to cope with sustained reading experiences. They attribute this to the pervasiveness of digital distractions.

No-one knows better than English teachers that a world in which fewer people engage with thoughtful literature is a world diminished in compassion, moral sophistication, nuanced debate and creativity.

At the same time, teachers are pragmatic: digital reading is not the enemy. Most recognise that reading in any format can support learning, and that digital texts bring clear advantages in terms of access, inclusivity and motivation.

What matters is that children are equipped to navigate, evaluate and draw meaning from the full range of texts they encounter. Teachers are not resistant to innovation; they simply want thoughtful integration, an approach that honours the strengths of both print and digital, and prepares young people with the skills, confidence and behaviours they will need to thrive in the future.

The survey from Oxford University Press showed that teachers already have many of the

solutions – but they will need help to make them happen:

- **Teachers want curriculum reform:** reading assessments should include digital formats; critical thinking and ethical use of AI should be assessed; and core texts should be more culturally and socially relevant.
- **Balanced integration of technology:** generative AI can be an effective scaffold for writing or discussion; it can be great at assessment and diagnosis, and targeting specific literacy problems; but it is not a replacement for considered reading.
- **Support for teachers and children:** training is needed on evaluating digital and AI-generated content; critical thinking in relation to new text forms must be explicitly taught; and high-quality texts should be available in both print and digital formats, because digital can make texts more accessible.
- **Advocacy for traditional reading:** schools, book-creators and society at large should promote and celebrate the value of 'slow reading' to young people and convey the importance of books with 'big ideas'.

Teachers therefore see reading habits evolving and recognise how newer formats can widen students' access and motivation. Their message is clear: with the right resources and professional development, schools can create balanced literacy environments that honour the strengths of both traditional and new forms.

Case study: Supporting multimodal integration through the work of the National Literacy Trust

Through our [Libraries for Primaries campaign](#), which we co-founded with Penguin Books in 2021 to ensure every primary school in the UK has a designated library space by 2029, we have worked with 1,500 schools to re-establish high-quality print, digital and audio libraries, together with extensive professional development.

We are now looking forward to ensuring that all primary schools in England are so equipped, following a commitment from the government to ensure all state primary schools in the country have a designated library space by the end of the current parliament (HM Treasury, 2025).

Through our community-led, place-based working in 21 communities throughout the UK where low literacy and poverty are most seriously impacting people's lives, we are also partnering with schools and communities to ensure equal access to forms of reading that suit the diverse range of learners' needs.

The National Literacy Trust will also deliver the [National Year of Reading 2026](#), a Department for Education initiative to tackle the steep decline in reading enjoyment across all age groups in the UK. Through building a grassroots reading movement, the campaign will redefine reading as a dynamic practice that includes engaging with stories, ideas, illustrations and information across print, digital and audio formats.

The campaign will position reading as a personally meaningful, modern and social activity and encourage people to use reading as a tool to pursue their interests, express themselves and participate fully in life.



Integrating everyday literacies

Digital reading

Digital reading is now a core part of how children and young people experience stories. From ebooks to online fiction, digital formats offer flexibility, accessibility and motivation, especially for those who struggle to connect with print. Our research shows that reading digitally can engage reluctant readers and support those from lower-income backgrounds, while complementing, not replacing, traditional reading.

At home, digital reading opens new routes into books. Adjustable fonts, read-aloud features and translation tools support a wide range of needs, helping children and young people read independently and with confidence. Access to free or affordable digital texts can make reading more inclusive for families with fewer print resources. When parents recognise that digital reading 'counts', children and young people are more likely to see themselves as readers in both formats.

In schools, digital reading can re-energise engagement and broaden choice. Teachers report that ebooks motivate pupils by connecting with their wider media interests, while also developing digital and critical literacy skills. Used alongside print, digital formats support inclusion and help learners navigate multimodal texts – skills vital for future learning. The strongest outcomes come from balance: using both print and digital to build confidence and depth.

Libraries and community spaces ensure access and equity. Free digital lending platforms such as BorrowBox and Libby allow families without home libraries to enjoy diverse stories. Hybrid initiatives, such as digital book clubs or screen-and-page storytimes, celebrate reading in all its forms. By embracing both print and digital, communities help ensure that every child can read, learn and belong in a modern literacy landscape.

Comics and visual literacy

Comics and graphic novels demonstrate the enduring value of multimodal texts. Despite long being stigmatised as 'lesser' reading, our Annual Literacy Survey shows that they remain one of the most resilient forms of print reading, with only shallow declines compared to other formats, and growth in their digital reading.

For families, comics can be powerful gateways into reading. Their long cultural history creates intergenerational bridges: grandparents and parents often share their love of long-running characters with children, sparking shared reading experiences. Encouraging children and young people to talk about the stories in their own drawings can also develop narrative skills and communication.

For schools, comics offer opportunities to break down misconceptions and support reading identities. Providing access to a wide range of visual texts, not limiting comics to younger or lower-attaining readers, helps legitimise diverse preferences. A cross-curricular approach is particularly powerful: comics can be used to teach scientific processes, historical events or foreign languages, while also encouraging the creation of multimodal texts that mirror real-world communication.



Audiobooks

Audiobooks highlight how listening is both a foundation and a future of literacy. Once confined to talking books for visually impaired readers, audiobooks are now a mainstream cultural form. In our 2024 listening survey, more children and young people reported enjoying listening than reading and many said that listening encouraged them to pick up books.

At home, audiobooks create opportunities for shared storytime, even when parents feel less confident reading aloud. They expose children to richer vocabulary and more varied sentence structures than everyday conversation, and model expressive, fluent reading. Families who listen together often follow up with dialogue about characters, dilemmas or connections to their own lives, building both literacy and oracy.

In schools, audiobooks particularly support reluctant readers, pupils with dyslexia and learners of English as an additional language but also benefit all readers. Effective strategies include Reading-While-Listening, modelling prosody through professional narration and embedding critical listening tasks that ensure audio is active, not passive. Teachers need training to integrate these practices systematically but, where they are used, audiobooks strengthen both literacy and wellbeing.

Libraries also play a pivotal role, expanding access to audiobooks through free digital lending and curating diverse collections. Community listening events, audiobook clubs and family listening sessions can help reframe listening as a collective practice, not just a solitary activity.

Towards a joined-up literacy strategy

What unites these contexts is the recognition that multimodal reading is not a threat to traditional literacy but a broadening of it. Print, digital, audio and visual forms each bring unique strengths. When homes validate everyday literacies, when schools embed them into pedagogy and when communities guarantee equitable access, children and young people experience a seamless literacy ecosystem.

This integration offers more than skill development. It builds confidence, widens participation, supports wellbeing and prepares children and young people to navigate a world where reading is woven across platforms, media and contexts. A joined-up literacy strategy would ensure:

- **Families** are supported with resources, reassurance and access to diverse reading formats.
- **Schools** are equipped with curriculum reform, teacher training and balanced pedagogies that integrate print, digital, audio and visual texts.
- **Libraries and communities** act as hubs of access, inclusion and cultural celebration.

By aligning strategies across home, school and communities, we can ensure that every child and young person has the opportunity not only to read, but to thrive as a reader – critically, creatively and confidently – in the literacy landscapes of today and tomorrow.



The future of literacy: Next steps

As this paper has shown, literacy is evolving – and our approach must evolve with it. Children and young people now engage with stories and information through a rich mix of print, digital, audio and visual media. This shift offers a powerful opportunity to broaden how we think about literacy: not to replace traditional reading, but to strengthen it through new and complementary forms.

The coming years provide a pivotal moment for progress. The National Year of Reading 2026 and ongoing curriculum and assessment reviews create a timely opportunity to embed a more inclusive and future-ready approach to literacy across policy, education and community settings.

The recommendations that follow outline practical steps government can take to ensure every child and young person experiences the joy of reading in all its forms and develops the skills and confidence to thrive in a changing world. This will require whole government action – across departments with responsibilities for education, business, culture and wider.



Recommendations

We are calling on policymakers to adopt the following recommendations:

1. Break down access barriers to reading for pleasure

- Work in partnership with the National Literacy Trust and Penguin Books to rollout and expand the Libraries for Primaries campaign across the UK.
- Make reading for pleasure a core pillar in the implementation of Curriculum and Assessment Review reforms in England, and other curriculum reviews in other nations.
- Recognise the importance of libraries as vital community spaces, secure their future and support their growth as hubs of free and diverse reading.
- Ensure all communities have sufficient resources to overcome barriers of cost, connectivity and device access because where a child comes from should not impact their future.

2. Empower teachers through training and confidence

- Embed multimodal literacy into initial teacher education and leadership standards, so teachers are equipped to use digital, audio and visual texts confidently.
- Ensure that the implementation of Curriculum and Assessment Review reforms (and wider reviews) acknowledge the importance of multimodal literacy, promote reading for pleasure and include clear guidance and training for teachers at implementation stage.
- Provide practical professional development that empowers teachers to use different formats and develop a well-rounded reading for pleasure culture in schools, not simply as curriculum add-ons.
- Share evidence-based strategies, such as Reading-While-Listening, shared comics analysis and digital reading clubs that can engage reluctant readers and sustain motivation.

3. Promote literacy as a core life skill

- Embrace all forms of literacy, including media, critical, health, financial and political literacies as core life skills that enable us to think critically, be creative, participate in democracy and thrive in the world of work and beyond.
- Recognise that the power of literacy to boost attainment, wellbeing, growth, social cohesion and life chances means it is essential to the success of mission-led government.
- Make literacy central to the skills agenda to support businesses with recruitment crises and give our young people the best chance of success.
- Seize every opportunity including the implementation of the Curriculum and Assessment Review, Schools White Paper, National Year of Reading 2026 and beyond, to champion literacy in its broadest sense, promote inclusivity and highlight the value of multimodal literacy for opportunity, wellbeing and imagination.

The opportunity to create a literacy system that reflects the realities of children's lives and prepares them for the world ahead is clear. By working together across government, education, business and community, we can ensure every child can experience the joy of reading in all its forms and build the skills that will define the next generation.

Concluding remarks

The world is changing. Print is vital, but alone it is not enough.

We must keep pace with technological change, societal shifts and emerging trends in literacy to ensure that the next generation can thrive.

A multimodal literacy approach – integrating digital, audio and visual texts alongside print – will ensure every child and young person can see themselves as a reader, feels encouraged to read for pleasure and has the opportunity to build the literacy skills that enrich their lives and communities.

This will require a clear commitment to inclusivity along with partnership working between businesses, the education sector, civil society and governments at local, regional, devolved and national levels. Our next paper in this series will explore the skills needed for the contemporary and future workplace, where integrated print, digital, visual and audio formats are common.

We all have a role to play to ensure the next generation has the tools they need to reach their potential – and action is needed now more than ever.





Change your story

About the National Literacy Trust

Literacy changes everything. It opens the door to the life you want. It's the key to knowledge, confidence and inspiration. It's better results at school, and better jobs. If you grow up without the tools to communicate, without books to read or opportunities to write, it's harder to get where you want to go. We're a charity helping people overcome these challenges and change their life chances through the power of words – reading, writing, speaking and listening. From first words, through school days to training, jobs and beyond.

Together, we're helping people change their stories

Visit literacytrust.org.uk to find out more, donate or sign up for a free email newsletter.

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