

Beyond Books: Reading Culture amongst Malaysian Students

A survey on primary and secondary students' reading behaviour



Acknowledgements

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Introduction

While Malaysia maintains a high general literacy rate of 94.64%, national and global data suggests that reading proficiency levels are a cause for concern with many students struggling to engage meaningfully with texts, particularly in academic contexts.

According to the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2022 results, Malaysia ranked below the international average for reading, with less than half of participating students achieving the minimum proficiency benchmark. This decline, from a score of 415 in 2018 to 388 in 2022 reflects broader challenges in cultivating sustained reading habits and critical literacy.

To support schools in their efforts to nurture critical reading skills amongst students, it is essential to understand the habits and attitudes of young people towards reading.

This report presents findings from a nationwide survey of 1,168 primary and secondary students. It explores how frequently students read, what motivates them, and the barriers they face. The data sheds light on how reading is experienced at home, in schools, and through digital platforms, and what influences shape these behaviours.

The goal of this survey was to gain additional insights into the reading habits of Malaysian primary and secondary students and identify the key factors influencing their reading behaviours. By examining their reading habits, access to resources, the influence of environmental factors, and the role of technology, this survey aimed to gather data that can inform the development of targeted educational offers which promote reading among children and youth.

Survey Objectives

Reading Habits:



How often do students read?
What do they enjoy reading
and why?

Access to Reading Materials:



What is the extent of student's
access to books and where do
they source them?

Impact of the Home and School Environment:



How do reading environments,
parents, schools, and role models
shape reading?

The Use of Technology for Reading:



How is digital access
reshaping reading habits?

Survey Design and Demographics

Definitions and Concepts

For the purpose of the survey, reading is defined as the meaningful decoding and comprehension of text in both print and digital formats. Reading in print refers to paper-based material while reading in digital formats refers to online material accessed on electronic devices.

Demographic Data

In order to generate these insights, an online questionnaire was utilised to gather responses from both **primary and secondary school students**. The language used for the questionnaire was English and included a combination of closed-ended and open-ended questions enabling the analysis of mainly quantitative trends while also allowing room for qualitative insights into student attitudes and reading culture.

Survey data was completed by a sample size of **1,168** respondents.

1. Age Distribution

Overall Primary students:



19% Lower primary
(under 10 years)
46% Upper primary
(10 - 12 years)

Overall Secondary students:



17% Lower secondary
(13 - 15 years)
18% Upper secondary
(16 - 18 years)

2. Gender



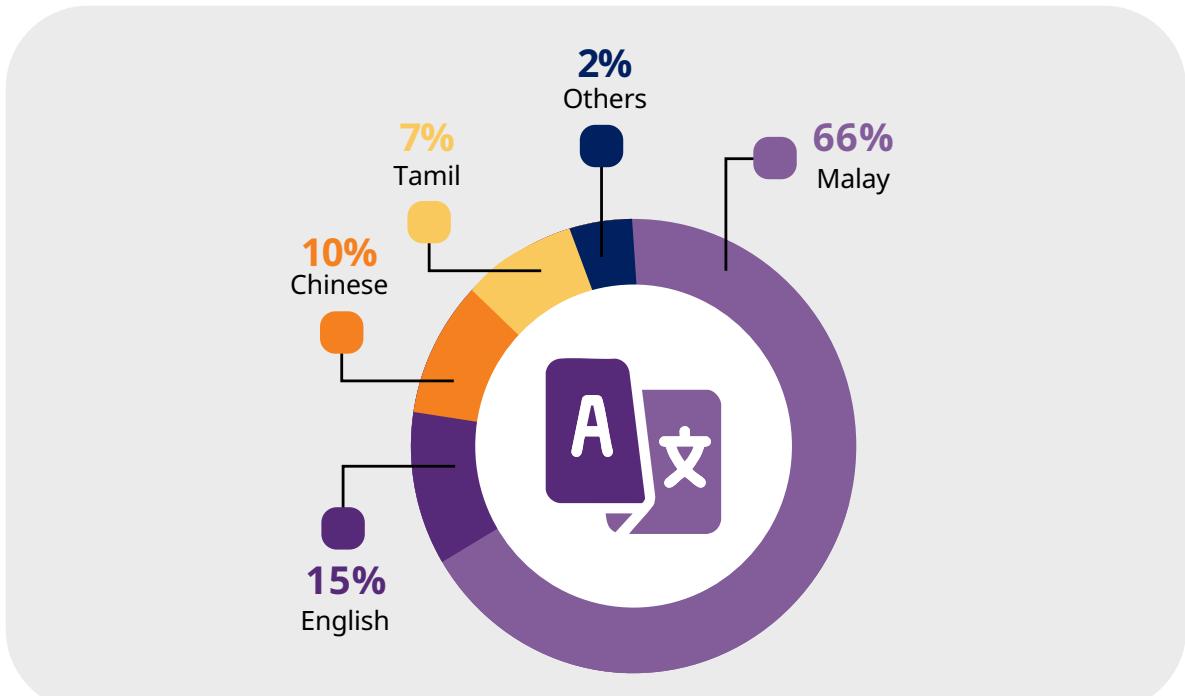
3. Household Income

Approximately **one in four survey** respondents come from lower-income households, as indicated by their participation in the government's free meal programme at schools.



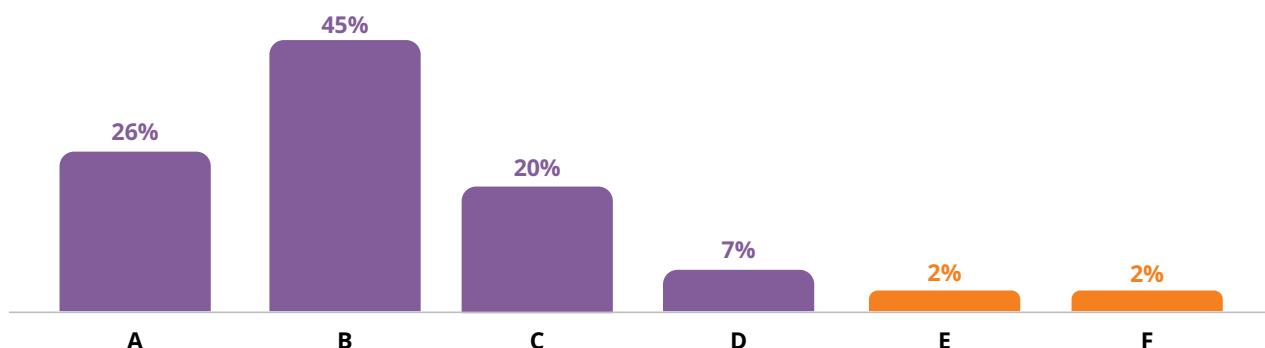
4. Language Used at Home

The majority of respondents speak Malay at home, while a sizable minority use English, Chinese, or Tamil, reflecting Malaysia's multilingual environment.

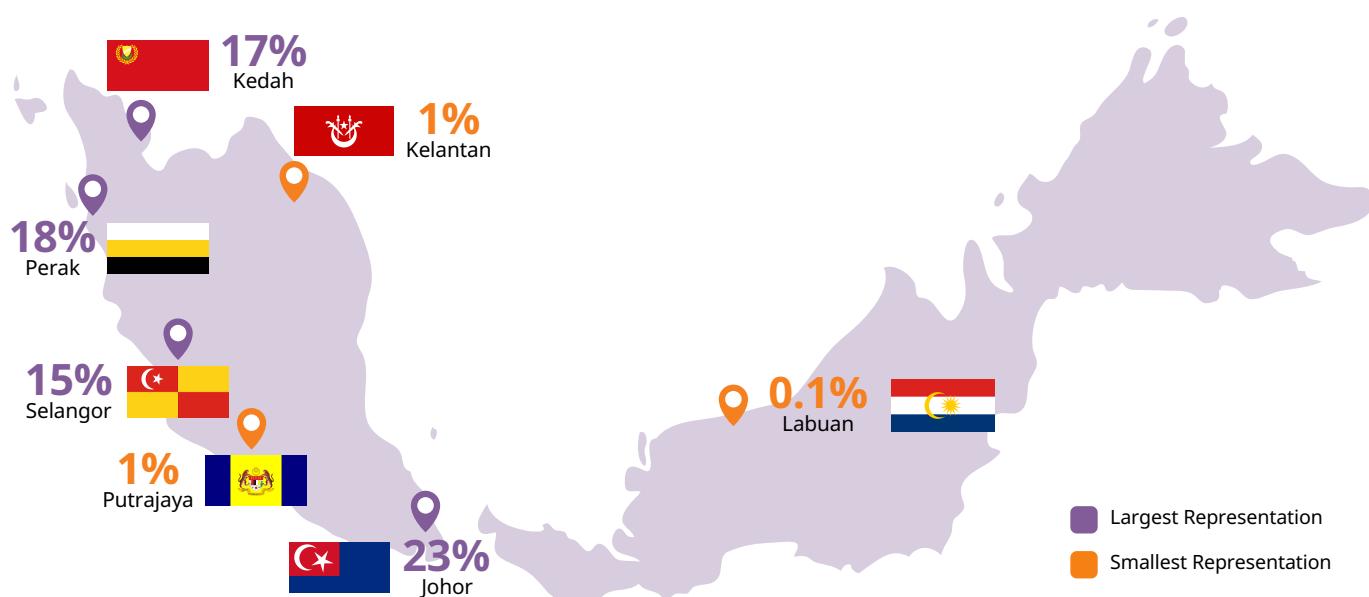


5. Academic Achievement (Self-reported Average Grades)

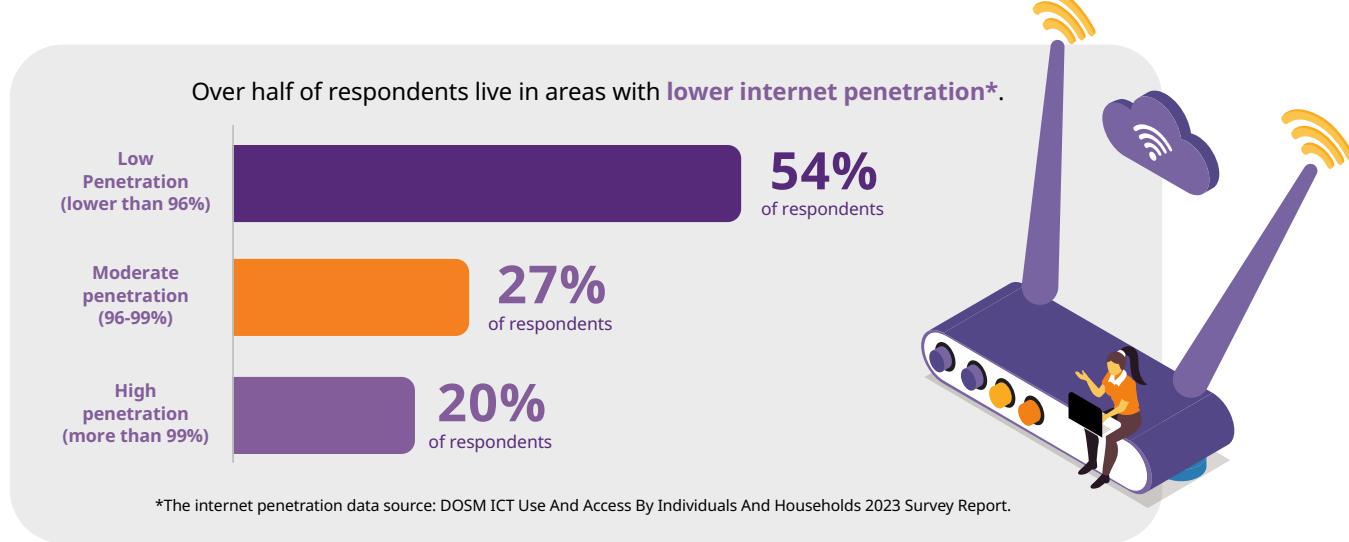
65% of students report average-to-good performance at school, while only 2% are failing.



6. Distribution by State



7. Internet Penetration



Key Findings

1



Reading Habits

Students demonstrate strong academic reading habits but show weaker engagement with self-initiated leisure reading. Their reading preferences are shaped by **digital access, peer influence, and language preferences**, with genres like comics, fantasy, and science appealing most, while enjoyment and learning being primary motivators. Students from **low-income households** are **less likely** to read for pleasure than their more affluent peers.

To cultivate a thriving reading culture, schools and communities should focus on fostering interest-driven reading. This can be achieved by utilising digital platforms and visually appealing genres. Expanding access to culturally relevant reading materials can make reading both enjoyable and inclusive, particularly for students from lower-income backgrounds.

2



Access to Reading Materials

Students' reading habits are strongly shaped by access to books and supportive environments rather than external rewards. The availability of reading materials at home, school, and online, combined with encouragement from parents and teachers, drives consistent reading, while reliance on incentives like certificates has minimal impact. **Primary students** tend to **depend on schools**, while **secondary students** primarily use **online platforms and bookstores** to source books, with digital divides shaping access in low-internet regions.

To encourage sustainable reading habits, interventions should focus on expanding both physical and digital access to books, enhancing school and community libraries, and cultivating supportive environments at home and school, rather than relying on extrinsic rewards.

3

Impact of the Home and School Environment



Easy access to books is a critical factor, as are quiet, dedicated reading spaces, yet **one-third** have **fewer than 10 books** at home, and a small minority have **none**, whilst **fewer than half of students** have a distraction-free area in which to read. Early and regular parental involvement, such as **reading aloud**, is also strongly correlated with sustained reading motivation.

Families can cultivate positive reading habits in children, fostering deeper engagement and enjoyment of books, by modeling reading and establishing structured reading routines from young. Schools and reading programmes can further reinforce these efforts by encouraging reading for pleasure.

4

The Use of Technology for Reading



Digital reading is now a central part of students' reading habits, with **71%** using devices for **at least an hour daily**. **Frequent readers and secondary students** are **more likely** to read on digital devices, particularly phones, highlighting a trend of increasing digital integration with age. About **18%** of students face barriers that limit their use of digital devices, though many maintain reading through print books.

Given the strong link between frequent reading and digital device use by Malaysian students, educational strategies should actively incorporate digital resources. By providing guidance to students and parents on online safety and sourcing appropriate reading materials, interventions can also enhance digital literacy from young.

SECTION 1

Reading Habits

Reading Frequency

Reading Habits were measured based on respondents' self-reported reading frequency in two contexts:



Reading at School



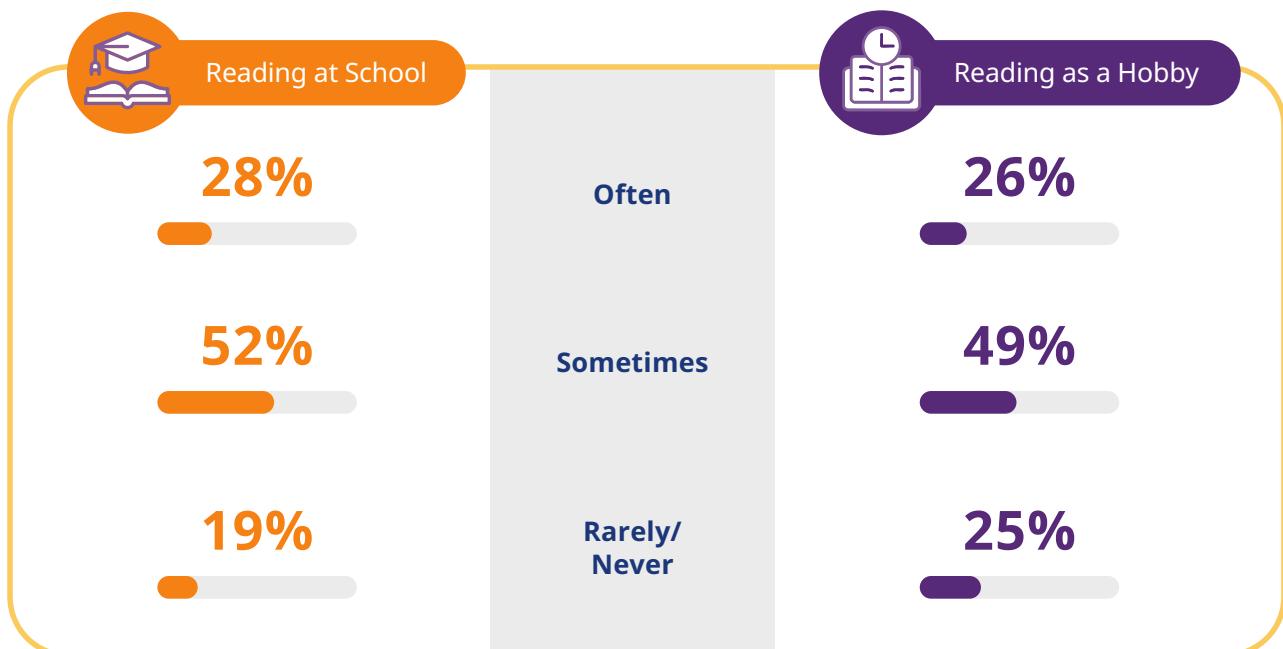
Reading as a hobby

Respondents selected from the options below:

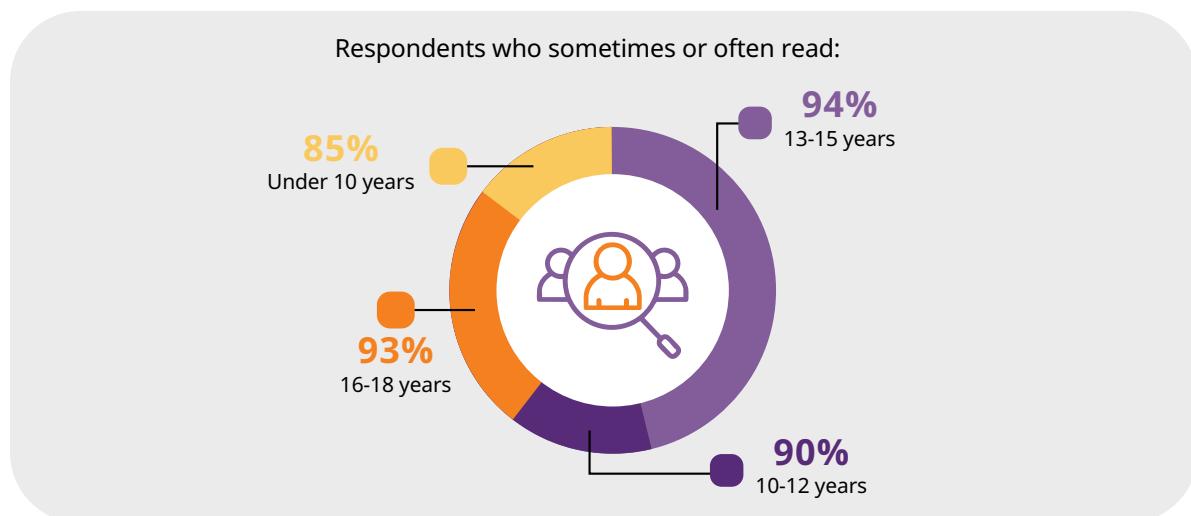
- Never
- Rarely (less than 7 hours a week)
- Sometimes (1-2 hours a day)
- Often (3+ hours a day)

For analysis, good reading habits or frequent readers were defined as respondents who reported reading Sometimes or Often.

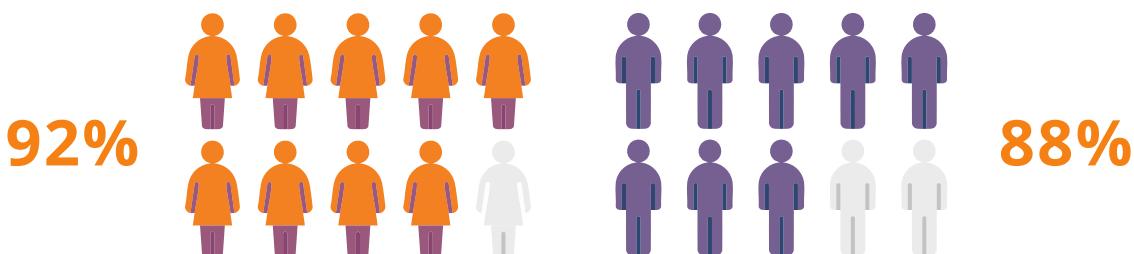
Overall, 80% of students have good reading habits at school but more than a quarter of respondents do not read as a personal hobby.



Reading culture is strongest in adolescence, possibly due to higher academic demands and peer influence.



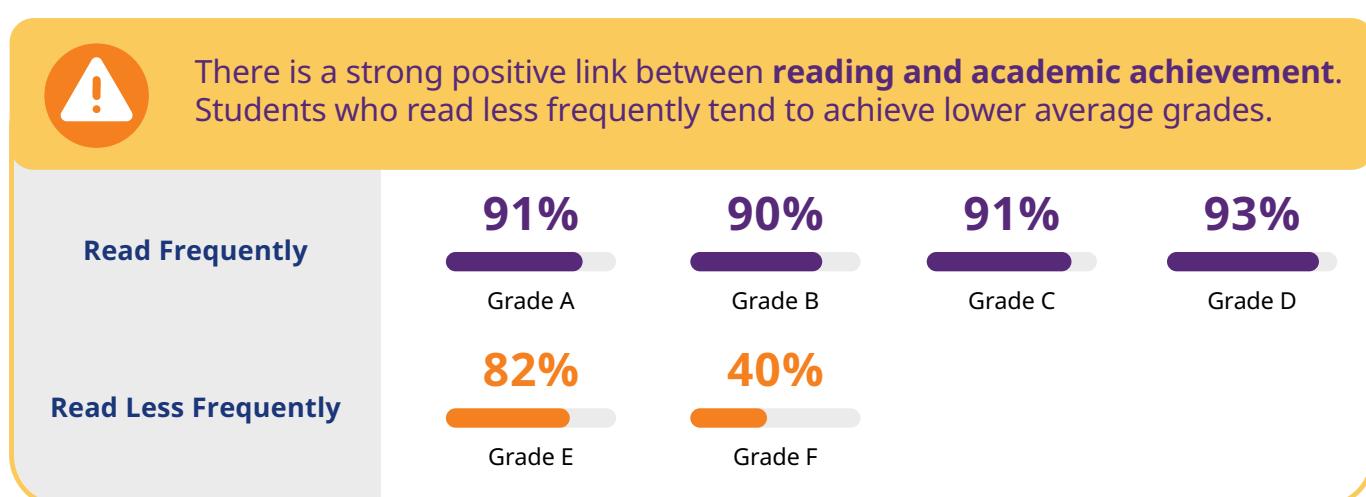
Female students are slightly more inclined towards regular reading compared to male students.



Students from low-income households (indicated by receipt of free meals) are twice as likely to read infrequently compared to their peers from higher-income households.



There is a strong positive link between **reading and academic achievement**. Students who read less frequently tend to achieve lower average grades.



Book Genre Preferences

Comics and Graphic Novels stood out as students' favourite reading materials.

Most popular genres



19%
Comics &
Graphic Novels



14%
Science



11%
Science Fiction
& Fantasy



11%
Mystery, Crime
& Detective

Moderately popular genres



10%
Adventure



7%
History

Least popular genres



6%
Romance



6%
Sports



5%
Humour



5%
Hobbies



4%
Travel

Students' reading choices are most strongly influenced by personal and online recommendations.

22%

Recommendations
from friends and family



20%

Online platforms
/social media



18%
Browsing in
libraries/bookstores



16%
Movies/shows



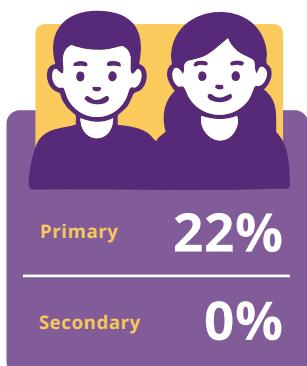
12%
School/teachers



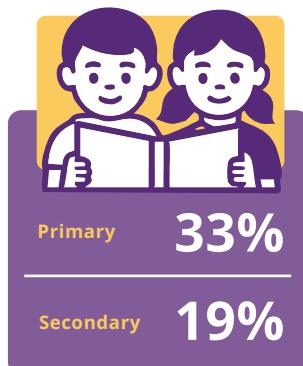
12%
Parents

The influence of teachers and parents declines with age, while digital influences and self-driven choices increase.

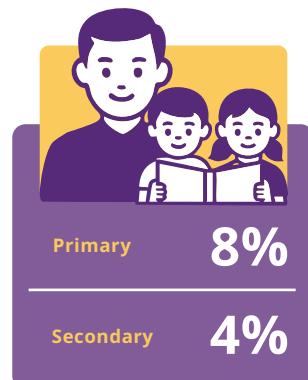
My parents choose my books



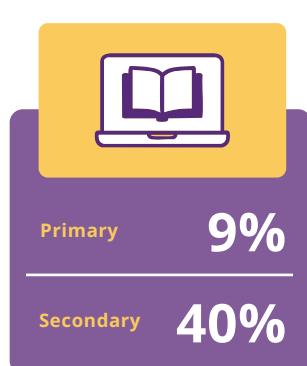
Recommendations from friends or family



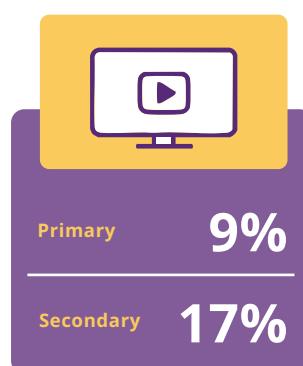
Recommendations from school or teachers



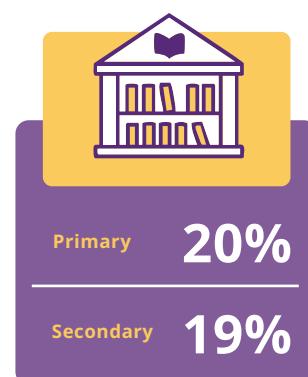
Online sites or social media



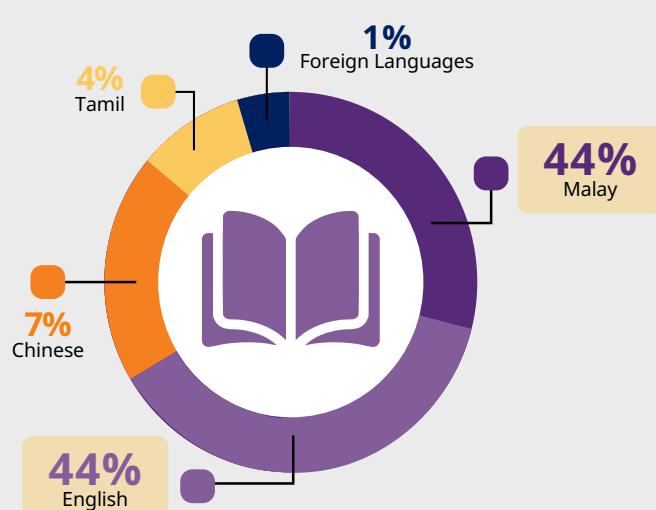
Watching movies or shows



Browsing in libraries or bookstores

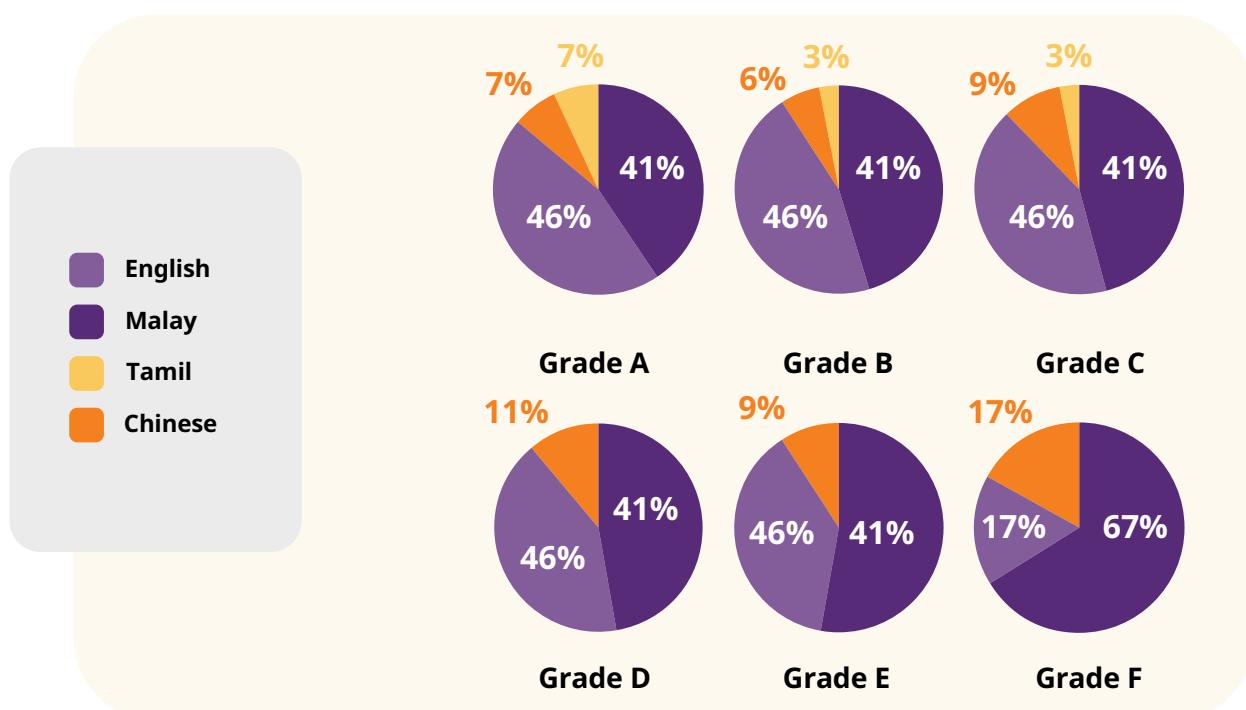


Students predominantly read in Malay and English.

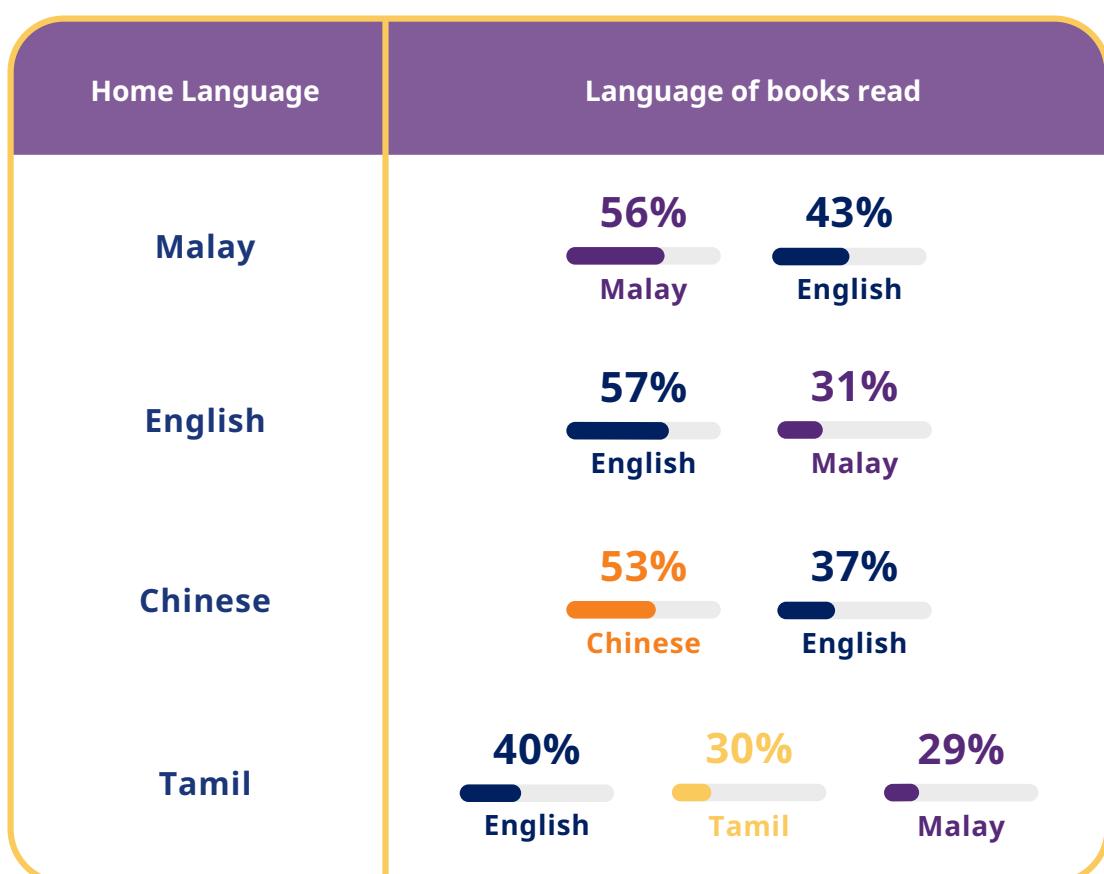


Students with higher grades tend to read mostly English and Malay language books.

Students' academic grades and language choices in the books

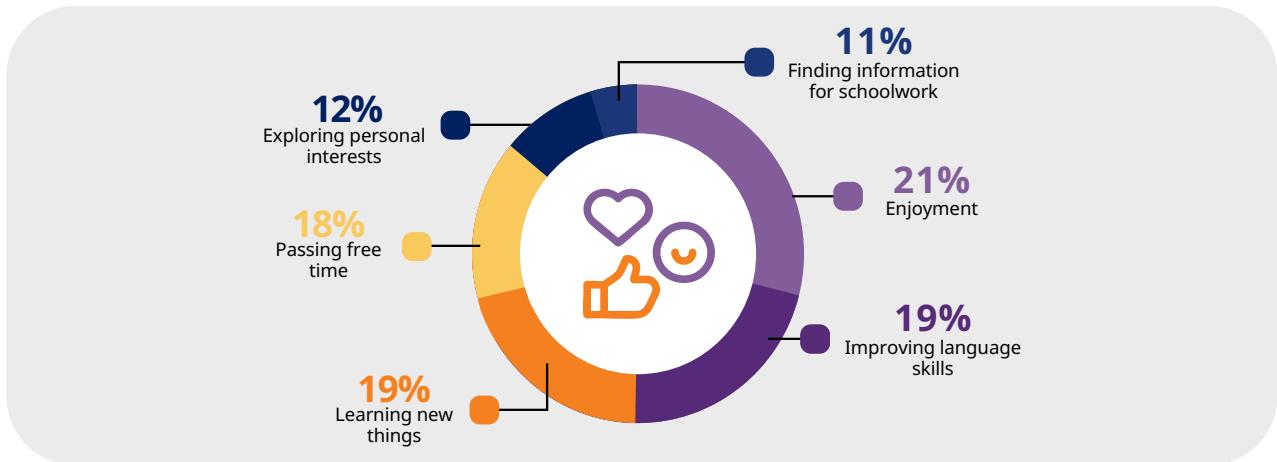


Students tend to read in their home language, but high levels of bilingualism and multilingualism are evident.

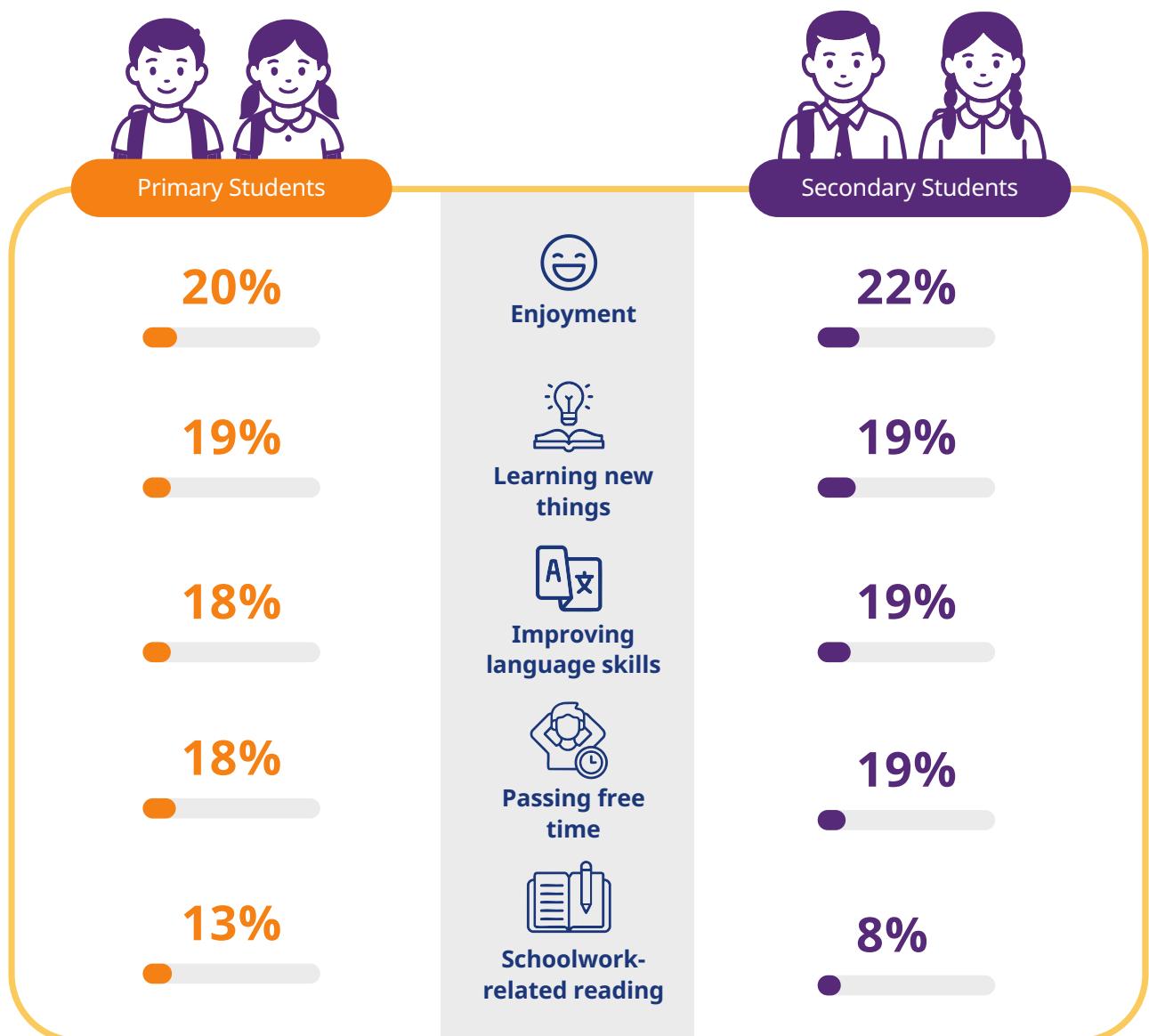


Motivations for Reading

Students Read Mainly for Enjoyment, Learning, and Language Improvement.



Younger students associate reading with both fun and academic growth, while older students read more for personal enjoyment, skills development, and leisure.

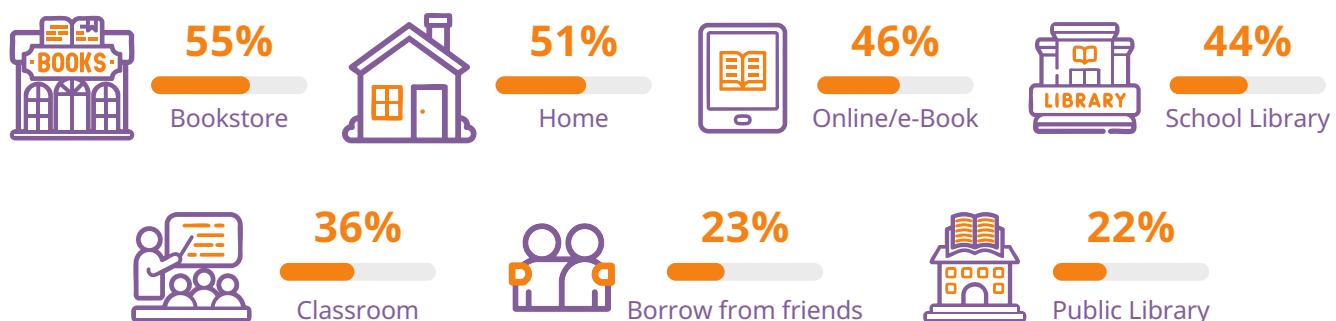


SECTION 2

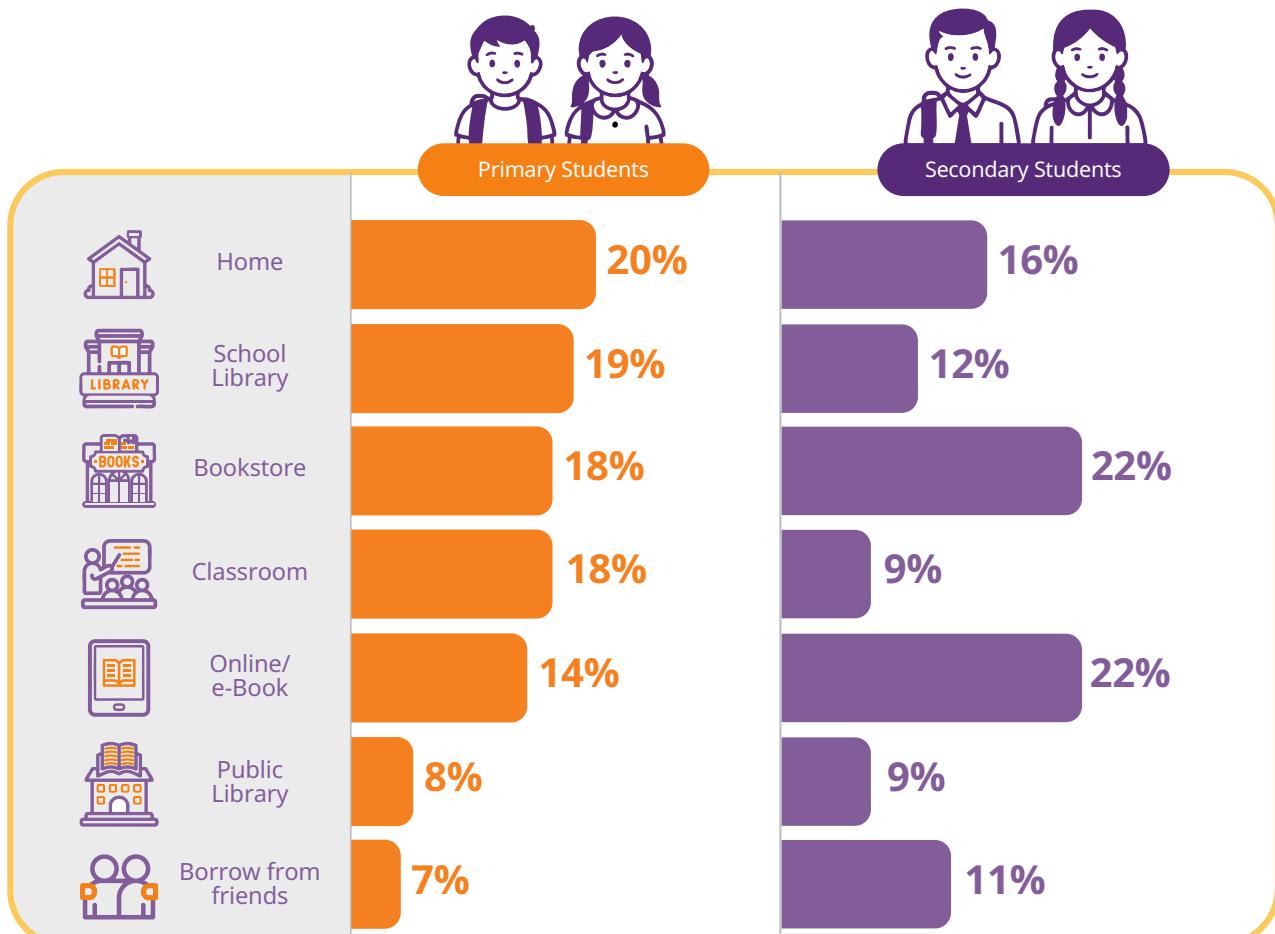
Access to Reading Materials

Source of Books

More than half of all respondents source their reading materials mostly from bookstores and home, while digital books and school libraries are also frequently used sources.



Primary students tend to get books from school, whereas secondary students show more independence by acquiring books online and from bookstores.



Factors Influencing Reading Habits

Respondents were asked to identify factors that make it easy for them to read. They could select **one** of the following options:

- a nearby library
- books in my classroom
- books available in languages I like to read in
- dedicated reading time at home
- a certificate or reward for reading more
- nothing, i don't want to read more
- a nearby bookstore with affordable books
- free online books
- dedicated reading time at school
- joining a book club
- my parents or teachers encourage me

39%

of respondents cite access as important, with language, affordability and location being key enablers for reading.



14%

cite having books available in languages they like to read as important.



14%

cite free online books as important.



11%

cite a nearby bookstore with affordable books as important.

Many respondents view a supportive environment as a key enabler for reading with:

- 22% citing dedicated **reading time at home** and **encouragement from parents or teachers** as strong motivators; and
- a further 29% citing Books in the classroom resources and dedicated reading time at school as important.

This suggests that structured time and encouragement from adults play almost as important a role as book availability.

- Notably, only 6% of respondents identified external incentives, such as **certificates or rewards**, as a motivating factor for reading.

SECTION 3

Home and Role Models

Availability of Books at Home

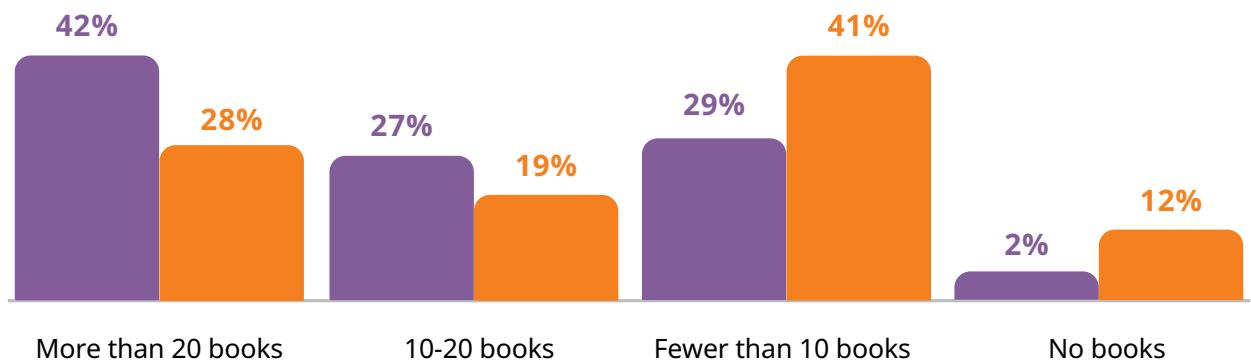
The majority of respondents have at least some access to books, but nearly 1 in 3 have fewer than 10 books at home, indicating limited exposure to reading materials.



There appears to be a correlation between home book availability and reading frequency. Frequent readers are most likely to come from homes with more than 20 books whereas infrequent readers are more likely to have fewer books at home.

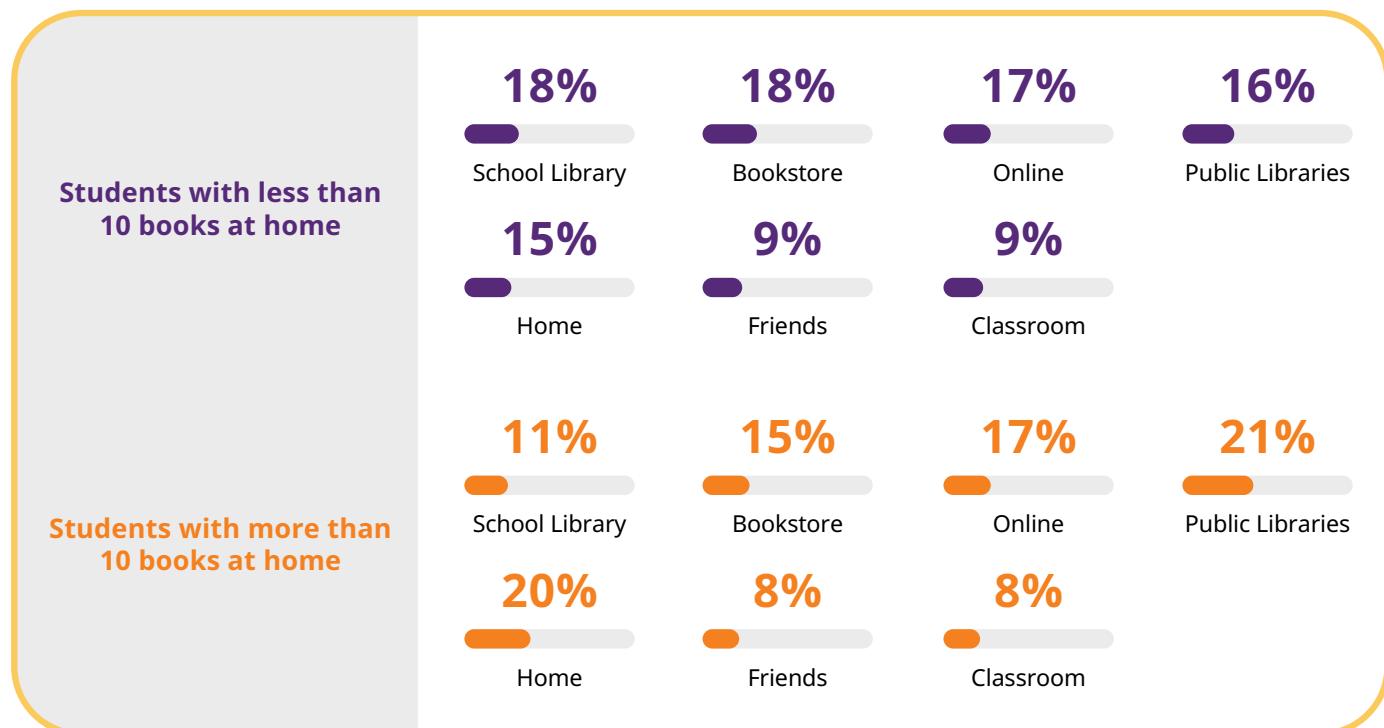
Numbers of Books at Home

Legend:
■ % of frequent readers
■ % of infrequent readers



Not surprisingly, respondents with limited books at home tend to rely more on school libraries and bookstores than those with a lot of books at home who most often source books from public libraries and their personal collections.

Sources of Books



Access to a Quiet Reading Space

Most respondents have a place to read at home, but fewer than half enjoy a truly quiet, distraction-free space. About a third say their home reading area can be noisy, roughly one in ten prefer to read at school, and fewer than one in ten report having no quiet space at home.

47% Quiet Room

34% Place with distraction or noise

10% School library or classroom

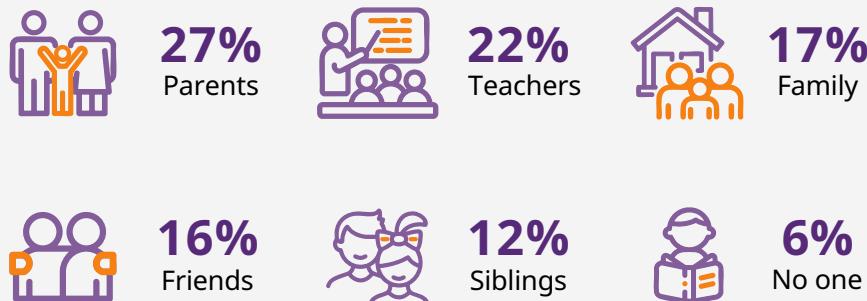
9% No quiet space



Role Models

Parents are the strongest encouragers, but teachers, peers, and family also play a key role. 6% of respondents report having received no encouragement at all.

Sources of Encouragement



Data suggests little difference in reading frequency between those who are encouraged and those who are not, perhaps due to required reading during school lessons.

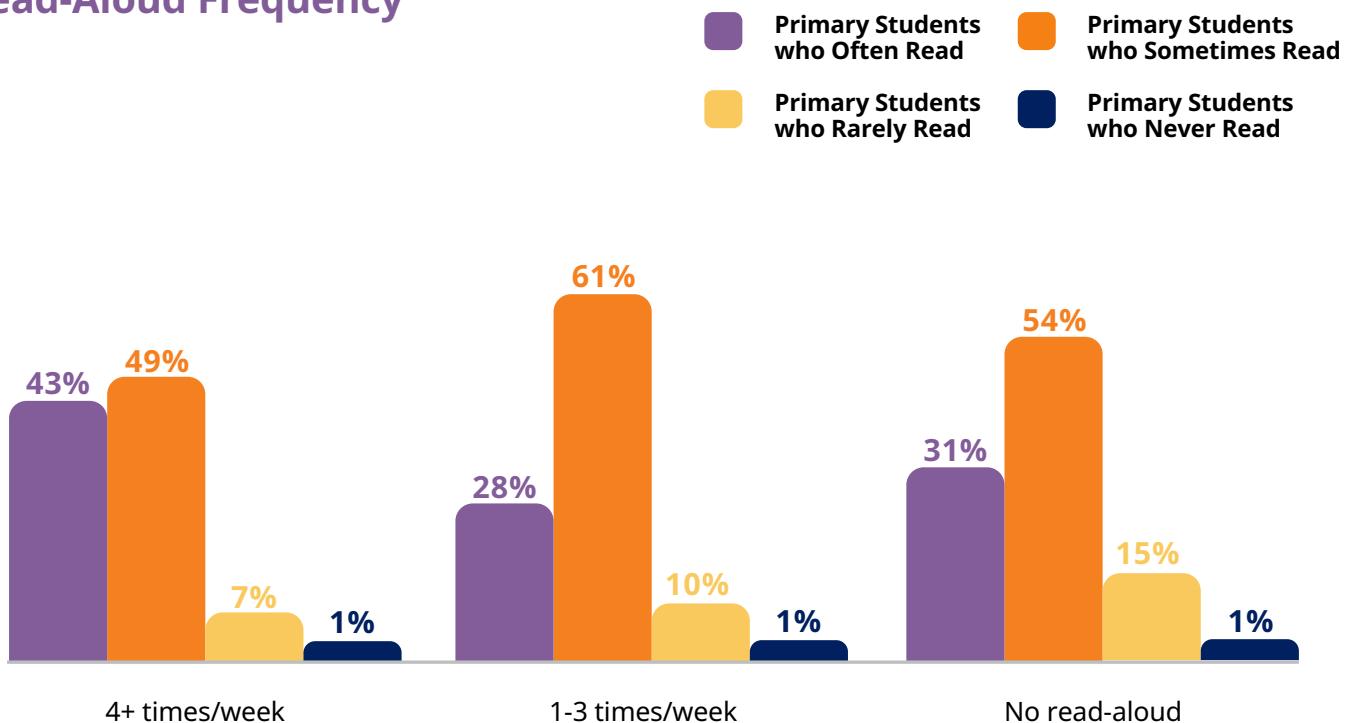
Read-Aloud by Adults vs Primary Students' Reading Frequency

Only 6% of primary student respondents report that adults never read to them. All others have read aloud sessions at least once every week.



Primary students who are read to more than four times per week show the strongest tendency to have good reading habits. In short, the less students are read to on a regular basis, the less likely they are to be frequent readers.

Read-Aloud Frequency



SECTION 4

The Use of Technology for Reading

Use of Digital Devices for Reading

The use of digital devices for reading was measured based on respondents' self-reported frequency of use.

Respondents selected from the options below:

- Rarely (less than 7 hours a week)
- Sometimes (1–2 hours a day)
- Often (3+ hours a day)



For analysis, frequent use of digital devices for reading was defined as the percentage of respondents who reported reading on devices **Sometimes or Often**, while infrequent use was defined as the percentage of respondents who reported reading on devices **Rarely**.

Overall Frequency of Using Digital Devices for Reading

71%

of students use digital devices for at least one hour a day, showing moderate to high integration of digital devices into their reading habits.

Frequency of digital device use for reading:

- 29% - Rarely
- 49% - Sometimes
- 22% - Often

Survey data suggested that there is no significant difference between respondents from lower-income households and their peers from higher-income households in terms of device use for reading. There was also no significant difference in relation to the levels of internet penetration in their respective states.

Primary vs Secondary Students



68% vs **77%**



reported frequently reading on digital devices

Frequency of digital device use for reading:



- 32% - Rarely
- 53% - Sometimes
- 15% - Often

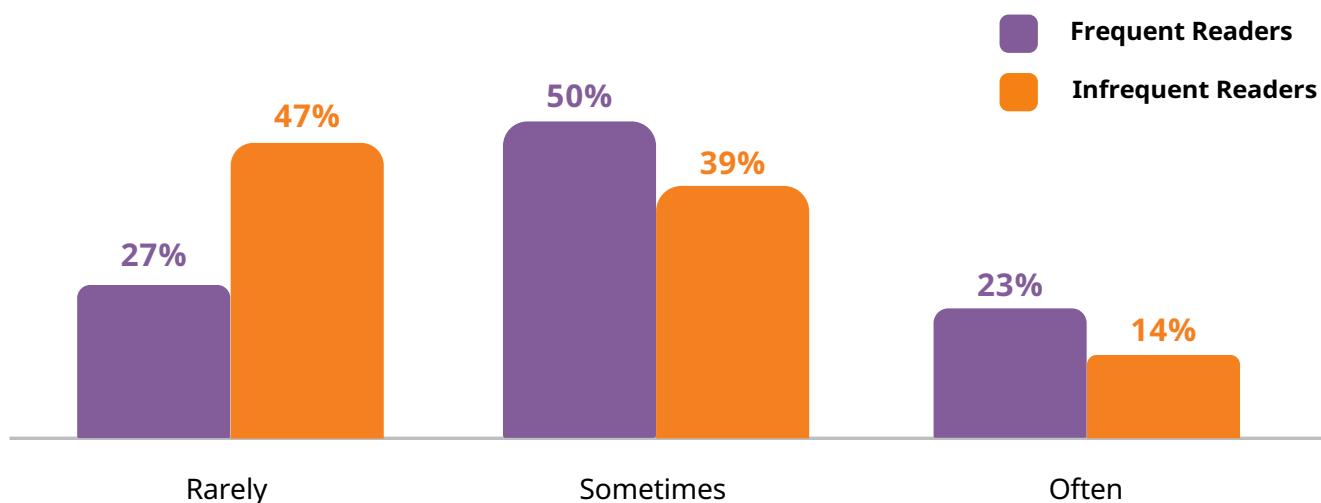


- 23% - Rarely
- 41% - Sometimes
- 36% - Often

Digital Device Usage Among Frequent Readers

Of the respondents reporting to be frequent readers, 73% read on digital devices on a daily basis, compared to 53% of infrequent readers, suggesting a positive correlation between reading frequency and use of digital devices.

How frequently they use digital devices to read



Digital Devices and Reading Habits

Use of Digital Devices for Reading

Respondents were asked 'What types of digital devices do you use for reading at home?' and could select all that applied from the following options, also selecting never, rarely, sometimes, often:

- Phone
- Ipad / tablet
- I don't use any digital devices for reading
- My parents don't allow me to use digital devices for reading.
- Computer
- e-reader (kindle)
- I don't own any digital devices
- The data or WiFi at home is not good enough for reading online or downloading.

While most respondents reported using digital devices for reading, 18% face barriers—mainly parental restrictions, lack of ownership, and poor internet quality.

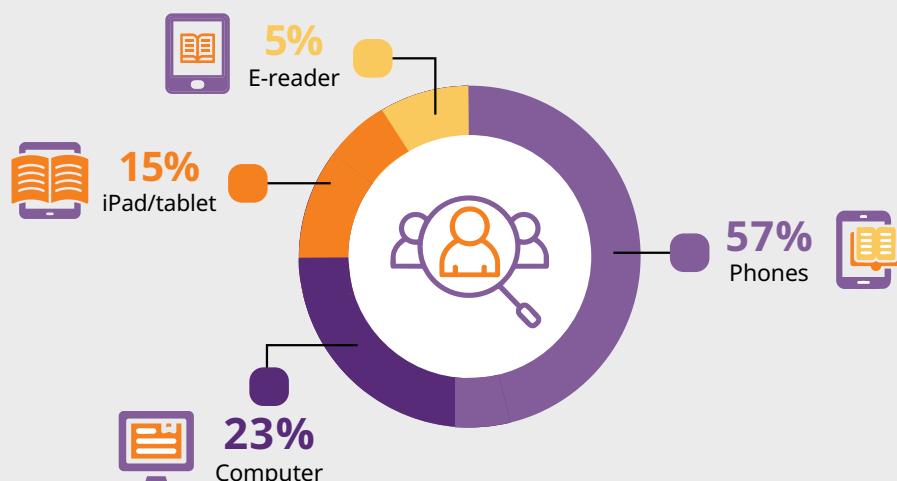
82%

use some form of digital device for reading.

18% who say they **don't use** devices cited the following:

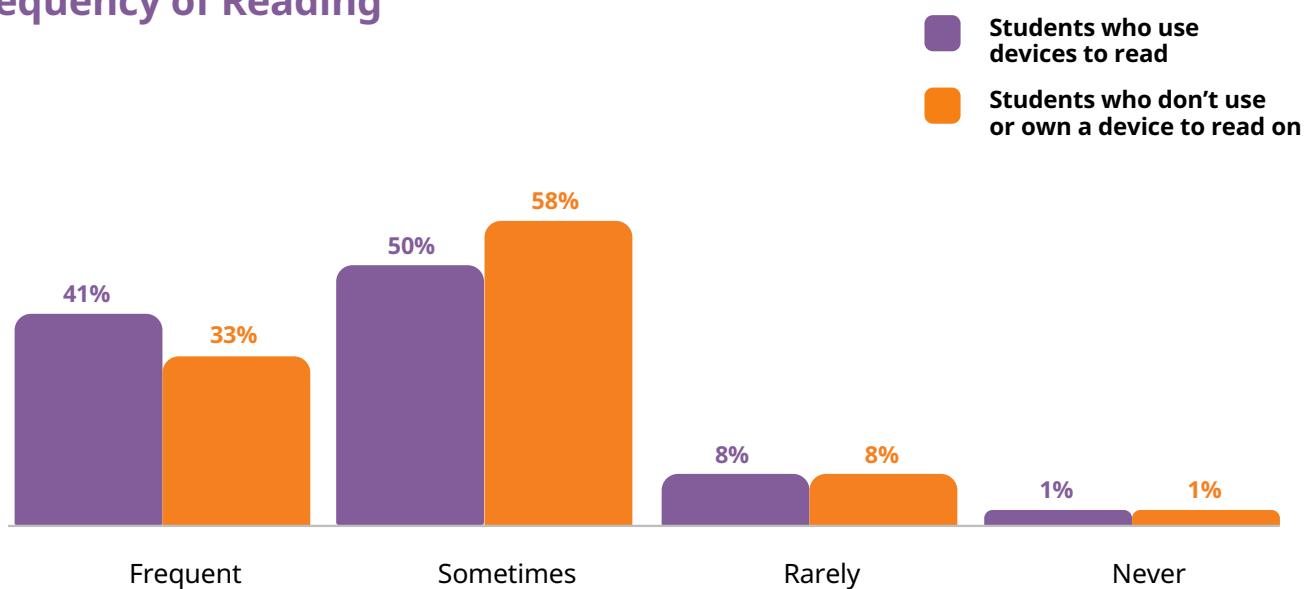


Phones dominate as the primary digital reading device, far outweighing computers and tablets, whilst E-readers remain niche.



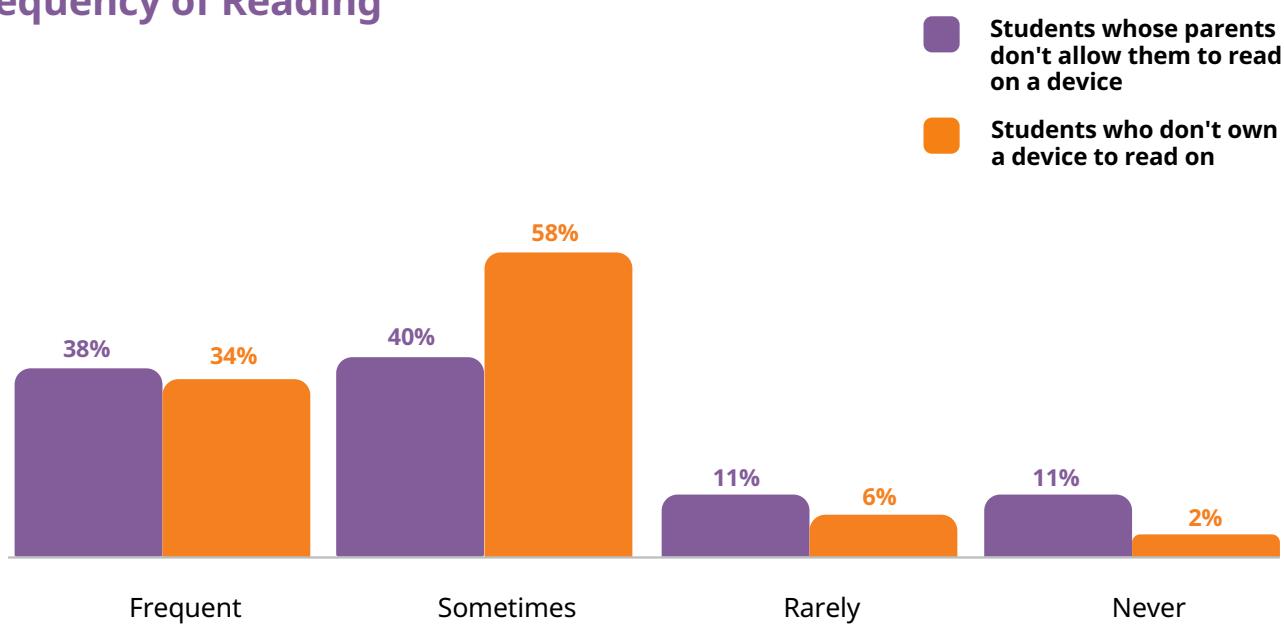
There is a **positive link** between students with access to digital reading materials and more frequent reading. However, students who don't use or own a device to read on still sustain frequent reading habits.

Frequency of Reading



Survey data suggests that students who aren't allowed devices read less frequently than their peers who **don't own** devices.

Frequency of Reading



Reading Preferences – Paper vs Digital Devices

Reading Format Preferences

43%

of students are format-flexible, embracing both paper and digital devices when reading.

Amongst students with a clear preference, twice as many chose paper over digital devices for reading, with the price of books cited by some as a barrier to reading on paper.

Reading on Paper VS Reading on a Digital Device



43%

like reading both on paper and digital devices



30%

prefer paper



14%

prefer digital devices



30%

would prefer paper but find books too expensive



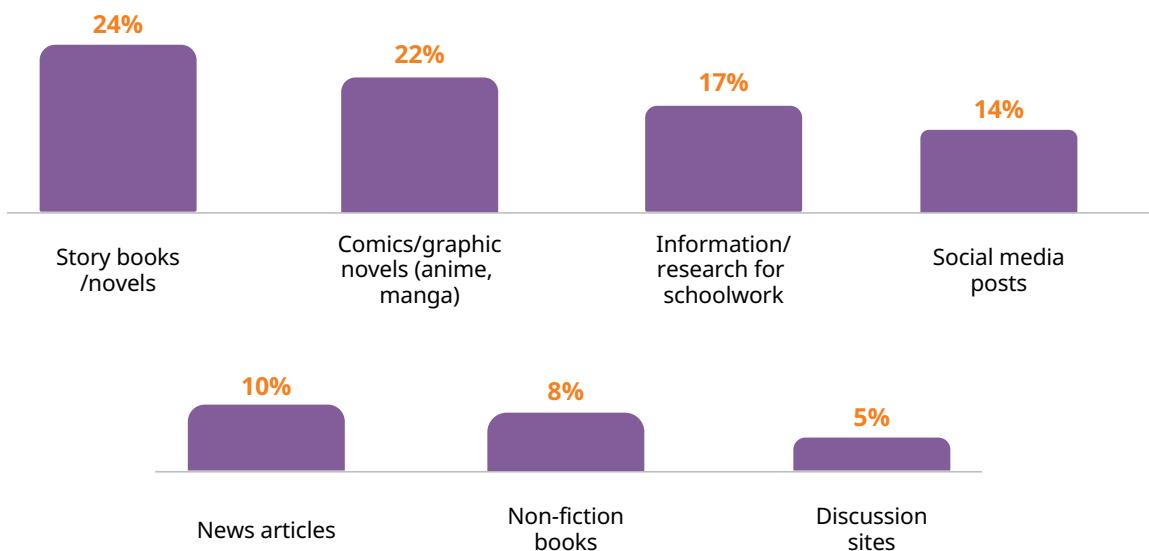
14%

prefer digital but do not own a device

What Students Prefer to Read on Digital Devices

46%

of respondents stated a preference for story books and graphic novels, mirroring their general preferences for book genres. Not surprisingly, schoolwork and social media posts were the next most cited reading matter.



Access to free reading materials and books otherwise unavailable to them were most cited by respondents as things they like about reading on a digital device.



11%

Free reading materials



19%

Access to books unavailable physically



17%

Convenience of reading online



16%

Learning independently (without teacher/parent)



11%

Comfortable reading on screen

Although reading on digital devices is popular, 11% acknowledged that they get distracted and some face difficulty in finding good books.

#1



11%

Distraction (social media/games)

#2



7%

Difficulty finding good books online



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