

'A shell of the place it used to be': the importance of libraries – and their fragile future

Level 1: Elementary / Pre-Intermediate

1 Warmer

a. Work with a partner. Add words to the word cloud.



2 Key words

a. Complete the definitions for key words from the text. Then, check your understanding of the words by using them to complete the sentences below under them.

browsing budget bullied damage decline

1. treated someone in a mean way _____
She suffered a lot at school because some classmates _____ her.
2. when a number or an amount goes down gradually _____
There has been a _____ in the number of people visiting the library.
3. reviewing a collection or a group of things looking for something to buy _____
I spent hours _____ for a good book.
4. a planned amount of money to spend on a project _____
Is that the _____? That's definitely not enough to buy everything we need!
5. partial destruction or harm _____
The fire caused a lot of _____ to the library.

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protagonist

replace

stack

underpaid

unexpected

6. organise something in a group or pile _____

Can you _____ those books by size on the shelf?

7. change something for something else

We need to _____ this printer – it's not working!

8. when someone receives little money compared to the amount of work they do

Do you think librarians are _____, or do you think their salaries are fair?

9. the main character in a play or book _____

The _____ was very brave and overcame all the obstacles she faced.

10. something that happens in an unusual way

His reaction was completely _____ – he never does that!

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6 September, 2024

- 1 “Browsing through books is completely different from using a computer to find what you want.” For Jamie Page, 66, libraries offer the kind of unexpected meeting that you can’t find in bookshops. In 1980, he was still thinking about what kind of career he could have. One day, at a library in Kensington, he found a book on bacteria. “I found it fascinating,” he says. “It started my career and I’ve worked in science ever since.”
- 2 Page and many others are sharing how libraries changed their lives after reports of a decline in libraries across the UK.
- 3 Author Lee Child told the BBC that his crime-thriller protagonist Jack Reacher wouldn’t exist without Birmingham’s libraries, which might close. “Any writer will tell you the same thing: those early years of reading, reading, reading for decades – that’s what makes you a writer,” Child said.
- 4 Maanuv Thiara, a 30-year-old writer and actor, says he “felt safe in libraries”. “If I was being bullied at school, the library was a safe place I could go to.”
- 5 Thiara now lives in south London, where the library’s opening hours have reduced since he moved there five years ago. He also notices cuts when he visits his hometown. “There are fewer staff and you can see there’s no money behind it,” he said.
- 6 It’s the cuts to staffing that do the most damage, Thiara says. Librarians do much more than stamp books and stack shelves. “I’ve seen them help people who don’t speak English print a form for a visa and take them through the whole process. And they’re very underpaid.”
- 7 Sarah Roller is another library user worried about the possible cuts to library budgets. “I think the council only views a library as part of the arts and culture budget. But it’s about social care as well.”
- 8 Roller is especially worried about the introduction of self-service systems that replace library staff. “It would make libraries feel like very different places,” she says. “Librarians are always full of great recommendations.”
- 9 Web searches can’t replace libraries either, Thiara says. “When I’m Googling stuff, I’m always distracted. I’ve got 17 tabs open at the same time. In the library, you can focus.”
- 10 Page agrees. “We live in a very noisy world. We all need quiet, and libraries give us that.”

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3 Comprehension check

a. Read each statement carefully and identify the person who made it. Write the correct name next to each statement: Jamie Page (JP), Lee Child (LC), Gareth Thomas (GT), Maanuv Thiara (MT) or Sarah Roller (SR).

1. thinks libraries and reading helped him to become a writer _____
2. went to a library to feel secure _____
3. chose his career because of a book _____
4. disagrees with the decisions made about the future of libraries _____
5. thinks his local library hasn't received enough money _____

4 Key language

a. Complete the following sentences from the article with the correct form of the verbs in brackets.

1. Browsing through books _____ (be) completely different from using a computer to find what you want.
2. For Jamie Page, 66, libraries _____ (offer) the kind of unexpected meeting that you can't find in bookshops.
3. "Any writer will tell you the same thing: those early years of reading, reading, reading for decades – that's what _____ (make) you a writer," Child said.
4. hiara _____ (live) in south London.
5. "There _____ (be) fewer staff, and you can see there's no money behind it," he said.
6. "I _____ (think) the council only views a library as part of the arts and culture budget."
7. "Librarians _____ (be) always full of great recommendations."
8. "When I'm Googling stuff, I' _____ (be) always distracted."
9. "We _____ (live) in a very noisy world. We all _____ (need) quiet, and libraries give us that."

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5 Discussion

a. Discuss these statements.

- “It’s the cuts to staffing that do the most damage. Librarians do much more than stamp books and stack shelves.”
- “When I’m Googling stuff, I’m always distracted. I’ve got 17 tabs open at the same time. In the library, you can focus.”

6 In your own words

- Do some online research on the libraries available in your local area and the services they offer.
- Share your findings with the group, highlighting any problems you find.
- Listen to what your classmates found out. After everyone has shared, talk together about how you could make these libraries even better.
- Vote for the three most interesting ideas to improve the library.