

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

Level 3: Advanced

### 1 Warmer

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



### 2 Key words

a. Match the words with their definitions. All the words appear in the article.

- |                    |       |   |
|--------------------|-------|---|
| 1. blurred         | _____ | a. when something fortunate or beneficial happens by chance, especially when you are not looking for it                                     |
| 2. budgets         | _____ | b. promote or publicly praise something or someone to convince others of its value or importance, especially to accept it or buy it         |
| 3. closure         | _____ | c. the fact of a business or organisation stopping its operations permanently   |
| 4. commodity       | _____ | d. having or showing emotional feelings that are often excessive or overly idealised, especially related to memories of the past            |
| 5. estate          | _____ | e. not clear or sharp, either in vision or in understanding, where the edges or details are hard to make out                                |
| 6. harassed        | _____ | f. a large area of land, including houses or buildings, usually owned by one person or family and used for growing crops or raising animals |
| 7. inherently      | _____ | g. subjected to continuous pressure or aggressive behaviour, making someone feel anxious or exhausted                                       |
| 8. inquiry         | _____ | h. not showing disapproval or criticism of other people's behaviour or opinions; being open-minded and fair                                 |
| 9. non-judgemental | _____ | i. things given or presented as part of a service   |
| 10. offerings      | _____ | j. arrange things in an ordered pile or fill something with objects   |
| 11. sentimental    | _____ |   |
| 12. serendipity    | _____ |   |
| 13. shortsighted   | _____ |   |
| 14. stack          | _____ |   |
| 15. tout           | _____ |   |

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- k. the act of asking for information or investigating something to gather facts or details
- l. plans for how to spend a set amount of money over some time
- m. lacking the ability to think about the long-term consequences or broader view of something, focusing only on immediate concerns
- n. referring to something that is a natural, essential or basic part of something else, intrinsic by nature
- o. a raw material or basic good that can be bought or sold, often used to refer to products like oil, wheat or metals

**b. Use some of the key words from task A and complete the examples. You may have to change the form of the word.**

1. She \_\_\_\_\_ her new book as her best so far, even though reviews suggested otherwise.
2. Her speech was really \_\_\_\_\_, causing many to tear up.
3. She experienced bouts of dizziness, and her vision became increasingly \_\_\_\_\_.
4. Their manager constantly \_\_\_\_\_ them, expecting everyone to be available at all times, even during holidays.
5. A(n) \_\_\_\_\_ attitude is essential if you want to create a safe and welcoming environment.
6. The poor waitress skillfully managed to \_\_\_\_\_ all the plates on her arm, demonstrating her impressive skills.
7. They plan to conduct an internal \_\_\_\_\_ to address all the current concerns about the situation.
8. We need to adjust the project \_\_\_\_\_, as costs have been significantly higher than anticipated.
9. I think their decision was a(n) \_\_\_\_\_ one, only focusing on the short term and ignoring the long-term negative effects it may have for future generations.
10. Human beings are \_\_\_\_\_ sociable, constantly seeking interaction with others.

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*As sources of inspiration, havens from noise or social support service, council-run libraries have had a positive impact on lives all over the UK*

**Alfie Packham**

**6 September, 2024**

- 1 “There’s a random element to life, which I think is important to preserve. Browsing through books is not a rational activity; it’s not like using a computer search to find what you want. Serendipity is another word that comes to mind.”
- 2 For Jamie Page, 66, libraries can provide the kind of chance encounter that you can’t find in bookshops that mainly tout new titles. In 1980, he was an unemployed graduate wondering what sort of career he might have. One day, at Brompton Library in Kensington, he stumbled across a book on bacteria. “I found it fascinating,” he says. “It started my career, and I’ve been working in science ever since.”
- 3 The aptly named Page is one of scores of people to share with us stories of how libraries affected their lives after reports of a decline in council-run libraries across the UK. According to an analysis by the BBC, more than 180 have either closed or been handed to volunteer groups since 2016.
- 4 The author, Lee Child, told the BBC that his crime-thriller protagonist, Jack Reacher, wouldn’t exist without Birmingham’s libraries, which are under threat of closure. “You speak to any writer, and they’ll tell you the same thing: that those early years of reading, reading, reading, reading for decades – that’s what turns you into a writer,” Child said.
- 5 “I’m so sentimental about it and so emotional about it because that building saved my life at the time; it enabled it. It largely created it.”
- 6 But libraries aren’t just training grounds for writers, retired accountant Gareth Thomas points out. For Thomas, 72, who is partially sighted, the library was a haven for him growing up in Cardiff in the 50s and 60s.
  - 7 “I can focus on things that are an inch or two away, but anything further away is blurred. That’s why I was no good at games at school. I got left out, so I did my own thing. So all I used to do was read.”
  - 8 He started to borrow books every Saturday from the age of seven. “My family moved to an estate in Cardiff where the council had opened a new library. I liked having my own library tickets. As I went through school, the libraries in Cardiff were essential for me.”
  - 9 These visits helped Thomas learn to read quickly – “and that’s always been helpful”, he says. “I couldn’t see the blackboard, even if I sat at the front of the classroom. I’m not sure how I managed this, but the teachers used to dictate what they wrote on the board, so I wrote it all down in notebooks.”
  - 10 For Maanuv Thiara, a 30-year-old writer and actor, his local library in Leamington Spa was a similar escape growing up. “I’m a nerd, so I felt safe in libraries,” he says. “If I was being bullied or harassed at school, the library was a non-judgmental place I could go to.”
  - 11 Thiara now lives in south London and uses the libraries there. Tooting Library’s opening hours have reduced since he moved there five years ago and it now does not open on Wednesdays. But he says he notices cuts more when he visits his hometown. “The library in Leamington is a shell of the place it used to be. All of the offerings are much smaller, and there are fewer staff. You can see there’s no money behind it,” he said.
  - 12 It’s the cuts to library staffing that do the most damage, Thiara says. Librarians do far more than stamp books, stack shelves, and shush visitors. “I’ve seen these guys help people who don’t speak English print off a form for a visa and take them through the whole process. Then they’ll patiently help someone who’s homeless. Then they’ll help me with my inquiry about a book, and they’ll know all about it. And they’re grossly underpaid.”

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- 13 Sarah Roller, who lives in Haringey in north London, is one of the library users concerned about the council's proposed cuts to library budgets. "It would be deeply shortsighted," she says. "I think the council only views a library as part of the arts and culture budget. But it's about social care as well."
- 14 Roller, 27, is especially worried that the council might introduce some form of self-service system that replaces library staff. "It would make the libraries feel like very different places," she says. "Librarians there always have time for a chat and are full of great recommendations."
- 15 Web searches aren't a real alternative to libraries, either, Thiara says. "Yeah, the internet's free and we've all got smartphones. But I feel like when I'm Googling stuff, I'm inherently distracted. I've got 17 tabs open at the same time. In the library, you can focus."
- 16 Page agrees. "Quiet is a rare commodity nowadays. We live in a very noisy world, with machines playing loudly on trains and buses and airports and things. We all need quiet, and libraries provide it."

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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. credits libraries and reading as the foundation for his eventual career as a writer \_\_\_\_\_
2. recalls a library as a place of security and freedom from judgement \_\_\_\_\_
3. attributes his successful career choice to the influence of a library \_\_\_\_\_
4. strongly disagrees with the decisions made regarding the future of libraries \_\_\_\_\_
5. has observed the neglect and underinvestment his local library has endured \_\_\_\_\_
6. asserts that libraries provided crucial support in helping him manage his impairment \_\_\_\_\_
7. believes libraries offer the chance to stumble upon rare and distinctive finds not often encountered in bookshops \_\_\_\_\_
8. holds deeply cherished views about a particular library that played a paramount role in shaping his life \_\_\_\_\_

#### 4 Key language

a. Complete the phrasal verbs in the following sentences from the article with the correct particles.

1. One day, at Brompton Library in Kensington, he stumbled \_\_\_\_\_ a book on bacteria.
2. "Those early years of reading, reading, reading, reading for decades – that's what turns you \_\_\_\_\_ a writer," Child said.
3. But libraries aren't just training grounds for writers, retired accountant Gareth Thomas points \_\_\_\_\_.
4. That's why I was no good at games at school. I got left \_\_\_\_\_, so I did my own thing.
5. As I went \_\_\_\_\_ school, the libraries in Cardiff were essential for me.
6. I've seen these guys help people who don't speak English print off a form for a visa and take them \_\_\_\_\_ the whole process.

b. Now match the phrasal verbs in sentences 1 to 6 with their meanings below.

- a. make someone become something else
- b. excluded, not considered for a particular activity or group
- c. find by chance or meet unexpectedly

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- d. help someone understand or complete something by providing clear guidance or explanation
- e. experience, pass through the various stages of
- f. mention or highlight something that may not be obvious to others

### 5 Discussion

#### a. Discuss these statements.

- “It’s the cuts to library staffing that do the most damage. Librarians do far more than stamp books, stack shelves, and shush visitors.”
- “The council only views a library as part of the arts and culture budget. But it’s about social care as well.”
- “[Self-service systems that replace library staff] would make the libraries feel like very different places.”
- “The internet’s free, and we’ve all got smartphones. But I feel like when I’m Googling stuff, I’m inherently distracted.”
- “We all need quiet, and libraries provide it.”

### 6 In your own words

- a. Do some online research on the libraries available in your local area and the services they offer.
- b. Prepare a presentation to share your findings with the group, highlighting the advantages of visiting these libraries and any problems you find.
- c. Listen to your classmates’ ideas and propose ways to improve these libraries.
- d. Write a proposal for the local council presenting your findings and offering suggestions to improve your local libraries to help them regain popularity.