

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

Level 2: Intermediate

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. not clear or sharp, either in vision or in understanding, where the edges or details are hard to make out |
| 2. budgets | _____ | b. meet unexpectedly or by chance |
| 3. encounter | _____ | c. constantly experiencing pressure or aggressive behaviour, making someone feel anxious or exhausted |
| 4. grossly | _____ | d. extremely |
| 5. harassed | _____ | e. the possibility or risk that something bad might happen |
| 6. inherently | _____ | f. fill something with objects, pile up |
| 7. rational | _____ | g. based on logic |
| 8. shortsighted | _____ | h. plans for how to spend a set amount of money over a period of time |
| 9. stack | _____ | i. unable to think about the future or the bigger picture, only focusing on what is happening right now |
| 10. threat | _____ | j. in a natural, essential or characteristic way |

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. I think we need to think about the pros and cons and then make a(n)

_____ decision.

2. It must be really exciting to _____ new cultures while travelling abroad.

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

Level 2: Intermediate

3. The internet is posing a serious _____ to local libraries.
4. As I walked away, the houses became _____ and I could no longer see the street signs.
5. My cousin told me she was feeling _____ by some bullies at school.
6. The waitress managed to _____ all the plates on her arm, showing great ability.
7. We need to adjust the project _____, as costs have been higher than anticipated.
8. The city's _____ planning failed to provide enough public transportation options.

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

Level 2: Intermediate

Alfie Packham

6 September, 2024

- 1 “Browsing through books is not a rational activity like using a computer search to find what you want.” For Jamie Page, 66, libraries can provide the kind of chance encounter that you can’t find in bookshops. 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.”
- 2 Page is one of many people sharing how libraries affected their lives after reports of a decline in council-run libraries across the UK. According to the BBC, more than 180 have either closed or been handed to volunteer groups since 2016.
- 3 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. “Any writer will tell you the same thing: those early years of reading, reading, reading for decades – that’s what turns you into a writer,” Child said.
- 4 But libraries aren’t just training grounds for writers, retired accountant Gareth Thomas points out. For Thomas, who is partially sighted, the library was a haven for him growing up in Cardiff in the 50s and 60s.
- 5 “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 all I used to do was read.”
- 6 For Maanuv Thiara, a 30-year-old writer and actor, his local library was a similar escape growing up. “I felt safe in libraries,” he says. “If I was being bullied or harassed at school, the library was a non-judgemental place I could go to.”
- 7 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 now does not open on Wednesdays. But 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.
- 8 It’s the cuts to library staffing that do the most damage, Thiara says. Librarians do far more than stamp books and stack shelves. “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. And they’re grossly underpaid.”
- 9 Sarah Roller, who lives in north London, is one of the library users concerned about the possible cuts to library budgets. “It would be 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.”
- 10 Roller is especially worried that the council might introduce a 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.”
- 11 Web searches aren’t a real alternative to libraries, either, Thiara says. “Yeah, the internet’s free and we’ve all got smartphones. But 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.”
- 12 Page agrees. “We live in a very noisy world. We all need quiet, and libraries provide it.”

© Guardian News and Media 2024
First published in The Guardian, 06/09/2024

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

Level 2: Intermediate

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 as a child led them to become a writer _____
2. remembers a library as a place of security and freedom from judgement _____
3. chose his career due to the influence of a library _____
4. strongly disagrees with the decisions made about the future of libraries _____
5. has observed the lack of care and money his local library has received _____
6. believes that libraries helped him deal with his vision problem _____

4 Key language

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

1. In 1980, he _____ (be) an unemployed graduate wondering what sort of career he might have.
2. For Maanuv Thiara, a 30-year-old writer and actor, his local library was a similar escape growing up. "I _____ (feel) safe in libraries," he says.
3. Thiara now _____ (live) in south London and _____ (use) the libraries there.
4. Tooting library's opening hours _____ (reduce) since he moved there five years ago.

b. Which sentence(s) refer(s) to...

- a. something that is seen as a permanent situation in the present
- b. an action or event that started and finished in the past
- c. an action or situation that started in the past and is still true

c. Now complete the sentences below with the correct form of the verbs in brackets.

1. I usually _____ (go) to the library on Monday mornings so I get all the books I need for the week.
2. I think Sarah _____ (go) to the library last Tuesday and she _____ (meet) Tom there.

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

Level 2: Intermediate

3. Unfortunately, I _____ (notice) that some people _____ (abandon) the local library lately.
4. How often _____ you _____ (visit) libraries in your area?
5. When was the last time you _____ (study) at a library?
6. I know she _____ (help) to raise funds for her local library over the years.

5 Discussion

a. Discuss these statements.

- “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.”
- “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.