



# Solving the reading challenge: rethinking self-study to improve student outcomes

## The problem with reading

Students who read more than their peers are [proven](#) to achieve higher marks in assessments, become more closely involved in class discussions, and to develop superior reading and writing skills.

But there's a notable gulf between what they should be doing when it comes to reading, and their actual reading habits. Studies across a spectrum of academic subjects follow a similar pattern; a low level of reading, leading to a low level of preparedness for assessment.

In a notable study of psychology students by Clump, Bauer and Bradley, **only 27.46% of students admitted to completing their assigned reading before class**, and just 69.98% before an exam. And it's not just psychology undergraduates who are neglecting their homework – similar behaviours have been identified across business, philosophy, sociology, education, planning and science degrees.

*“Failure to complete reading means that more teaching time has to be devoted to didactic explanation of material, rather than the critical reflection and discussion that help students to develop their understanding and academic skills.”*

Lecturer feedback,  
Pearson study

## So what is the problem?

**Students** would [cite](#) time constraints, an insurmountable workload and issues with current assessment practices, while lecturers have suggested short attention spans and an inability to digest complex ideas [could be to blame](#).

Either way, there's a problem. And in the time of COVID-19, circumstances have conspired to make it worse.

In [this survey](#) taken during lockdown, **over 50% of students admitted to spending less time on coursework**.



Despite these misgivings, the students acknowledged the adverse effect of their lack of reading on their studies:

*“I feel lost in class.”*

Business student, King's College London

*“I prefer to do work which I'm assessed on... than reading which will not be checked.”*

Student, University of Dundee

For some, it may have been a matter of [motivation](#), while in Pearson and Wonkhe's own student survey, a lack of engagement with lecturers and peers, and an inability to manage time and adapt to a new way of working were cited as having an abject effect.

**For lecturers**, the situation is compounding an already significant challenge. Not only have they had to rely more than usual on students to self-study during lockdown, any return to face-to-face teaching is likely to be limited over the next academic year and will possibly require a **flipped classroom approach**. Students will need to come to lectures prepared, so precious teaching time isn't wasted running over content they should already have read in advance.

At a macro level, the consequences of students struggling with their studies can be incredibly damaging – an **increase in drop-out rates, mental health issues, deferrals** – and these issues are harder to spot in a more distant cohort.

With time to provide personal attention and feedback becoming even more constrained, how can lecturers **improve student outcomes** without a commitment by students themselves to read the texts they're set?

In this report we look at what can be done to solve this complex reading challenge and improve student chances of success.



## The reading challenge in context

In a [2017 study](#), students at a UK university reported spending an average of 14.1 hours per week reading academic material. In contrast, the university's guidelines suggested they should be spending at least 25 hours per week reading or interacting with academic material – a staggering 44% disparity.

In a similar 2014 study<sup>1</sup> by Pearson, **just 8% of students said that they completed all of the reading required of them.**

*“There's these big hefty books, 600 pages and they might give you two or three chapters... and the chapters are about 100 pages long...”*

the 2019 HEFCE Catalyst project, Transforming Transitions

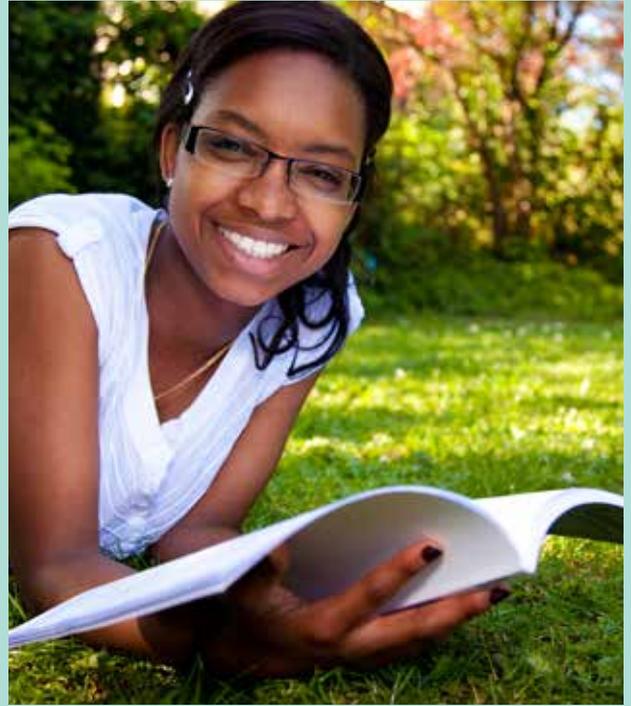
## So what are the reasons?

Seventy six percent (76%) of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they had too much reading to do in the time available.

A further 51% agreed or strongly agreed that the language or content of the assigned reading was difficult to understand, while 46% said they lacked time due to non-academic commitments.

Interestingly, the purpose and value of set texts were highlighted as key concerns. Lecturers were criticised for not explaining or justifying the value of texts by 63% of respondents, while students were making their own judgements on the value of texts to assignments – **67% said they wouldn't complete the assigned reading if it wouldn't aid them in completing their assessed work, while 43% said they wouldn't read everything if they felt it wouldn't improve their chances of academic success.**

Importantly, **80% agreed, or strongly agreed, that they would be more likely to complete required reading if they were tested in class, or digitally, on the reading.**



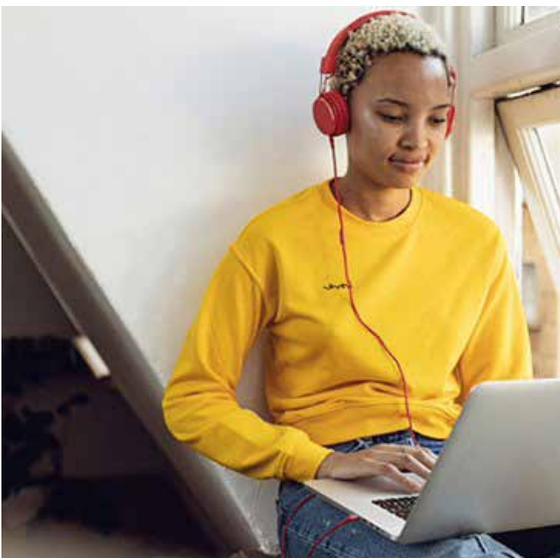
## What do lecturers say?

Unsurprisingly, all of the teaching staff questioned (100%) said that completing required reading would lead to better student outcomes and offer a more rewarding educational experience.

Almost all (96%) said that it would aid their teaching significantly if students completed their required reading – and that students not completing reading was a problem (88%). **Over three quarters said they would welcome the opportunity to track how many students had completed the reading that was set.**

“ I was pleasantly surprised by the extent I could sit back and let the group discuss the question amongst themselves. Normally they wouldn't have reached the stage of reading academic work before a seminar. ”

Lecturer,  
Swansea University



A lack of motivation was highlighted as the common issue: “Laziness...” “Apathy...” “They're not bothered...”, but in [this study](#), comprehension was cited as a core problem, particularly around understanding the connections between ideas and processing complex concepts.

**So how can these barriers be overcome? How can lecturers encourage students to complete their required reading when they struggle with time, comprehension, and understanding the value of their prescribed texts?**



## Could blended learning provide the answer?

Blended learning – the model of combining online and in-person learning in a cohesive experience – isn't new, but its application is gaining momentum as a way to mitigate the impact of events like COVID-19 and to give students a more engaging experience and greater ownership over their learning.

In order to maximise its potential, all interactions should be designed with pedagogical value; online activities shouldn't simply be a direct translation of face-to-face teaching or a replication of core texts, instead they should be designed to leverage the very best aspects of each model.

The key is starting with the learning objectives in the syllabus, then selecting and aligning the delivery method and technology that will best help students achieve their objectives.



Consider:

- What needs to be done in person?
- What needs to be done in real-time vs giving students flexibility?
- What needs to be instructor-facilitated and what can be facilitated via online learning?

The benefit of making greater use of technology is that it can respond to many of the issues wrought by relying on students to read; immersing them in their course materials, helping them to better understand key concepts and providing immediate feedback on their comprehension.

Employed wisely, learning becomes a more student-centred, engaging and supported experience.



## Revel: Engage students and teach your way

Revel from Pearson takes the principles of blended learning and applies them to reading, incorporating interactive tasks to enrich the self-study experience and boost performance.

Cleverly re-imagining core texts –introducing rich media, quizzes and writing activities, it drives greater value from course materials and makes reading more engaging; challenging students and making more effective use of their time away from lectures, so they come to your classroom better prepared.

Because you can shape the tasks within Revel, it can be modeled to the way you prefer to teach; adapting your syllabus to better suit self-learning. Reading and comprehension are continuously assessed and tracked, so you can see who is completing the required levels of self-study and who is struggling, while your students get an immediate understanding of the importance of their set texts to the critical concepts they are required to learn.

Importantly, reading becomes enjoyable and easier to comprehend.

## The learning design behind Revel

Revel was designed around three core principles: reducing extraneous cognitive load, boosting active and constructive engagement, and providing immediate feedback:

### 1. Reducing extraneous cognitive load

Research shows that with a reduction in extraneous cognitive load, students find it easier to process important information and move it from working memory, to long-term memory. If you remove distractions, learning comes more easily.

The content in Revel is segmented into manageable chunks and presented in a coherent and consistent structure. Signalling is used to highlight key material. Fonts, colour palettes and the amount of white space are employed carefully to maintain focus on key information.

### 2. Boosting active and constructive engagement

When students read a little, then do a little, they are better equipped to understand and remember what they are learning.

Interactive media, video, and 'drag-and-drop' diagrams and maps that are carefully placed within Revel texts enable students to actively engage with concepts, without interrupting their reading flow. Short writing activities encourage them to think constructively and master important concepts.

### 3. Providing immediate feedback

Research indicates that the most effective feedback is specific to the task in hand, provides information on how well the student is performing, and demonstrates how the task will connect to subsequent content.

Revel incorporates quizzing throughout texts and at the end of modules, giving students the opportunity to check their understanding before moving on. The feedback is specific, clear and actionable.



## Revel: at a glance

### For educators:

- Teach *your* way: adapt Revel to your curriculum
- Reduce your workload: give students the feedback they need to progress
- Use integrated assessments to identify students who need extra support
- Ensure students are prepared in advance of valuable face-to-face teaching time
- Take study materials from a dry narrative, to an extension of your classroom

### For students:

- Provide a more immersive understanding of the key concepts that are critical to their success
- Make study time more interesting and enjoyable
- Build their understanding to feel better equipped to participate in classroom discussions

## Revel in action

Revel is proving to improve results in universities across the UK.

**87% of students agreed or strongly agreed that Revel helped them to improve their understanding.** (University of Stirling)

**Students who used Revel performed 6% better on average than those students who didn't engage. Those who used Revel for additional revision performed 11% higher on average than their peers.** (Swansea University)

Discover the impact of Revel on reading and academic success with [stories](#) from educators and students.

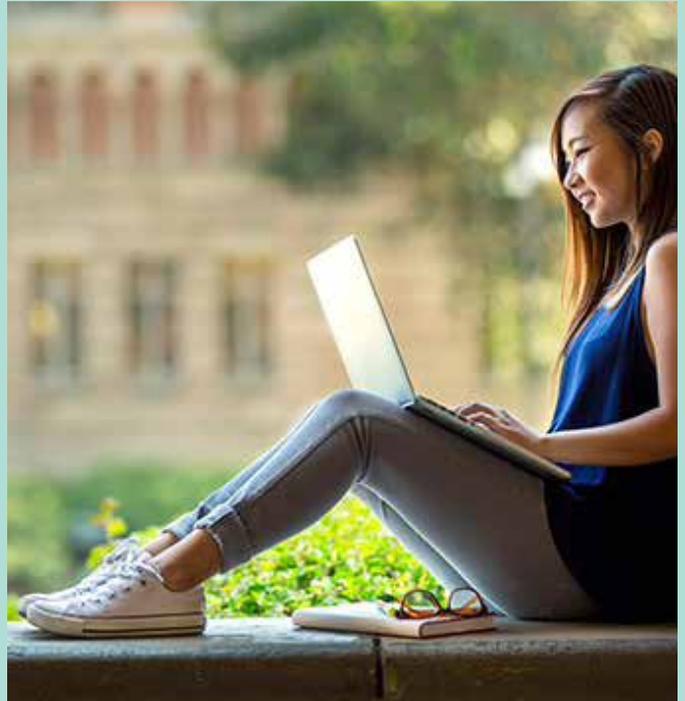
*“The pedagogical design is very strong... we learn by practising, we learn by doing. This takes eBooks to the next level.”*

Educator,  
University of Sheffield



# How are you dealing with the reading challenge?

If you would like to find out more about how Pearson is helping universities improve reading, provide a more engaging student experience and enhance results, visit [go.pearson.com/reading](https://go.pearson.com/reading)



## References

<sup>1</sup>Reading compliance: the impact of students not reading on learning and teaching, Pearson 2014

Here to help you teach and learn without limits.

