

Journal of Humanities and Society

ISSN: 2146-4553

available at http: www.econjournals.com

Journal of Humanities and Society, 2025, 1(2), 11-20.

Literary Reading in American Society: Genre, Education, and the Boundaries of Cultural Participation

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Received: 01 October 2025 **Accepted:** 02 December 2025 **DOI:** https://doi.org/10.32479/johas.24525

ABSTRACT

In 2022, 9.2% of U.S. adults reported reading poetry. How many of them would a survey of fiction readers have missed? We use the 2017 and 2022 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts to distinguish the reach of literary reading from the number of forms each reader reported within the same twelve-month period, irrespective of how many works they read. Literary participation fell from 44.2% to 39.6%. Fiction accounted for 4.18 points of that 4.60-point decline, with the rest attributable to people who read poetry or plays without reading fiction. The mean number of forms per literary reader also fell. Even so, the published national estimates allow a small increase in the share reading several forms, because the survey tables leave the overlap among fiction, poetry and plays partly unidentified, whereas for ages 18-24 the upper bound in 2022 lies below the lower bound in 2017. Education differentiated participation more sharply than breadth among readers. Explicitly counting listening added 5.6 percentage points to fiction's audience and 2.3 to poetry's, suggesting that a question about medium can change which people a cultural institution recognises as its public.

Keywords: Public Humanities, Literary Reading, Cultural Participation, Sociology of Reading, Audience Measurement
JEL Classifications: Z11, Z13, I24

1. INTRODUCTION

A reader who encounters a poem in an anthology and a reader who spends the year with a volume of verse each supply one affirmative answer when asked whether they had read poetry at any point during the preceding 12 months. If both also read a novel, neither adds a person to the survey's count of literary readers beyond those already counted under fiction, although the poem itself still has two readers. For a library deciding whether its poetry programme reaches a public, the difference between those counts matters.

The U.S. National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) reported a further fall in the proportion of adults reading novels or short stories in 2022 (National Endowment for the Arts, 2023b). Fiction has long supplied the largest of the three literary audiences distinguished in the survey. We ask how much of the 5-year decline in literary reading can be traced to its changing reach and how much to readers who encountered poems or plays outside that fiction audience.

One part of the answer requires only subtraction. The survey counts readers of fiction once under fiction and once under any literature, so the difference between those percentages gives the share reporting poetry or plays without fiction. A harder question concerns the readers who crossed from one literary form to another, because their number depends on how often the same person appears in two or three genre totals, a detail the national workbook retains only indirectly through its separate totals for fiction, poetry, plays and their combined audience.

Age and education offer two ways to examine that distinction. An educational difference in the proportion reporting any literature can be large even when adults who do read cover much the same number of forms across education groups. We estimate both quantities across the two survey waves and, for the published

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gender and race or ethnicity groups, examine where a modest change in the combined audience conceals a gain in one part of that audience and a loss in another.

A listener poses a different question. If someone heard a poem during the preceding year but answered no when asked about reading one, adding an explicit listening item changes who belongs to the measured audience without changing anything about that person's encounter with the work. For 2022 the survey reports enough information to count these additional listeners separately from people who said yes to both questions.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. The Audience and the Practice

A visit to an exhibition has a place and an occasion. The occasion on which a poem matters to someone may be harder to name: a verse recalled among friends, for instance, may have acquired its importance long after the first reading, when someone else found a use for it. Smith (2024) describes how working-class readers in Scotland lay claim to poems through just such social uses. An annual reading question can register that a poem was read. It cannot tell what the reader kept it for.

Jin (2024) argues for bringing the social organisation of reading into conversation with the reader's experience of a text. A national count addresses the first part of that inquiry only indirectly: it can establish how widely a practice is reported and how unevenly it is distributed, but a table in which 9.2% of adults reported poetry cannot distinguish a single incidental encounter from the repeated use of a familiar poem. The essays collected by Thumala Olave (2022) give ample reason to expect that the same observed act can carry different meanings across settings.

Hiidenmaa et al. (2024) began with Finnish adults who already identified as readers, and within that group they found that adults could report high levels of reading activity across education levels, including among respondents with comparatively little formal schooling. The qualification is easy to lose when comparing studies: admitting only self-identified readers removes from the denominator the very people whose inclusion might produce a steep educational gradient in a national survey that includes people who would never describe themselves as readers. We therefore distinguish the chance of reporting any literature among all adults from the breadth of reading among those who reported at least one literary form.

2.2. What an Annual Reading Question Can Record

Research on reading for pleasure often concerns whether people choose a text and why they persist with it. Cremin and Scholes (2024) examine the tension between cultivating voluntary reading and evaluating it through educational outcomes. Vogrinčič Čepič et al. (2024) likewise review research in which pleasure, motivation and the environment for reading occupy a prominent place. The U.S. arts survey offers a related but narrower observation. Its book item excludes reading required for work or school, but it would be a mistake to infer that every remaining book was experienced as pleasurable, or that compulsory reading contributed nothing to a respondent's literary life.

Dera (2025) distinguishes the reasons students themselves give for reading literature in school and in their leisure time. Such accounts point to a distinction the annual item cannot make, since choosing a novel for a class, persisting because one has promised a reading group to finish it, and taking it up unprompted may all involve quite different degrees of choice. In Dera's (2024) interviews about online reading challenges, participants described both social incentives and self-directed goals. A count of individuals reporting at least one work is better suited to measuring reach than to measuring either motivation or frequency.

A reading public can also form around recommending and discussing books. Dezuanni and Schoonens (2024) examine how short videos invite viewers to learn about books from peers, while Jerasa (2025) attends to cultural and linguistic identity in online reading communities. Reddan et al. (2024) trace how readers acquire curatorial roles across several platforms. These forms of activity make a classification problem immediately practical because a person who recommends a book online and someone who reads it after receiving that recommendation can both contribute to its public life, although the questionnaire gives no way to link them.

2.3. Why Genre and Medium Need Separate Measures

Under the survey's rules, two novels make one form. A novel and a poem make two, even when a reader encounters them between the covers of the same anthology. That convention allows us to count how often adding another form brings someone into the literary public who would otherwise be absent, although the count gives no indication of the distance that same reader might travel between two novelists writing in different traditions.

Listening deserves a separate treatment because it changes the category on a different axis. Tattersall Wallin (2022) describes audiobook listening as a practice embedded in young adults' routines. Someone may listen in circumstances in which looking at a page would be difficult, while another listener might have answered yes to a general question about reading, already treating audio as one way of reading a book. We therefore use the survey's own combined figures and reserve the term listening only for a pattern of answers.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

3.1. Sources, Population and Units

The evidence comes from two public products released in October 2023. The NEA demographic workbook provides the 2017 and 2022 subgroup rates on its Reading worksheet (National Endowment for the Arts, 2023a), while its companion report gives the national reading and listening estimates in Figures 10 and 11 and national genre trends in Figures 8 and 9 (National Endowment for the Arts, 2023b). Both products precede the evidence cutoff of 31 May 2025. The latest survey wave in the analysis is 2022.

The U.S. Census Bureau administered the 2022 arts survey as a supplement to the July Current Population Survey. Respondents

reported activity during the preceding twelve months. Each observation in this analysis is a published rate for one group in one wave (Table 1), with the same group represented several times because the workbook gives its percentage for a novel or short story, a poem, a play and the union of those forms. The 2022 national adult population estimate in the workbook is 255.4 million. It counts adults in the population. Using it as the sample size would make the survey estimates appear far more precise than the underlying interviews warrant.

The workbook reports one national row and 20 subgroup rows per wave. These cover two gender categories, five race or ethnicity categories, seven age groups and six levels of education, and within each classification we retain every published row and use its original label, shortening only long education labels for figures. The same person is represented in each of the four classifications. Adding their totals across classifications would therefore count people repeatedly. No individual record or cross-classified count enters any calculation.

The workbook records the 2017 fiction rate as 41.78%. Figure 9 of the companion report gives 41.8%. Subtracting the 2022 rate from the rounded figure would lose information that is present in the source cells, so throughout the analysis we calculate differences first and round only the reported results, retaining the stored precision of the original percentages until that point. The extra decimal belongs to the published estimate. It gives no measure of sampling uncertainty.

3.2. Reach, Breadth and Overlap

Write F, P and D for the percentages reporting fiction (novels or short stories), poetry and plays respectively. U is the percentage who reported at least one of the three. Fiction is a subset of this union. The additional reach of poetry and plays beyond fiction, O, is consequently the difference between two published percentages. For a comparison of the two waves, a change in any-literature participation separates exactly into the change in fiction and the change in this additional reach.

$$O=U-F,\ \Delta U=\Delta F+\Delta O \tag{1}$$

An increase in O could occur alongside a fall in poetry if the remaining poetry readers were less likely to read fiction. This distinction matters. O counts all readers of poetry or plays who reported no fiction, including those who reported both poetry and plays, but gives no indication of which of these readers came to literature through a programme or whether a particular reader changed genres between surveys.

Table 1: Coverage of the demographic reading tables

Classification	Rows per wave	Genres	Waves	Rates analysed
National	1	3	2	10
Gender	2	3	2	20
Race/ethnicity	5	3	2	50
Age	7	3	2	70
Education	6	3	2	60

Five rates per row comprise book reading, any literature and three literary forms. Population counts are distinct from survey sample sizes

Mean breadth can be recovered from the published table even when the combinations of forms read by individuals cannot. Each yes supplies one unit to the sum F + P + D, and each person who supplied at least one yes contributes once to U, so dividing the first quantity by the second gives B, the mean number of forms reported by a literary reader (Figure 1). Its range is one to three. Ten novels and a single short story both contribute one unit of fiction.

$$B=(F+P+D)/U,\ \ E=F+P+D-U \tag{2}$$

The excess E counts second and third genre responses per hundred adults. Let x_2 and x_3 denote percentages reading exactly two or exactly three forms. Then $E = x_2 + 2x_3$, while the percentage reading several forms is $M = x_2 + x_3$. E alone cannot identify M. What can be recovered is the range of M across all allocations that reproduce the genre margins as well as their union, including allocations in which readers of plays are unusually likely to report the other two forms.

3.3. Exact Bounds and Sensitivity

For each group and wave, we assign a nonnegative population share to each of the eight possible yes/no combinations of the three forms. Their sum is 100. The shares consistent with a yes to fiction sum to F, with analogous constraints for poetry and plays. All seven combinations other than three negative responses sum to U. Minimising and maximising M over this feasible set gives sharp bounds in the sense that a feasible allocation attains each endpoint without requiring the genre choices to be statistically independent.

$$M=\sum_{(i+j+k\geq 2)} x_{ijk},\ i,j,k\in\{0,1\} \tag{3}$$

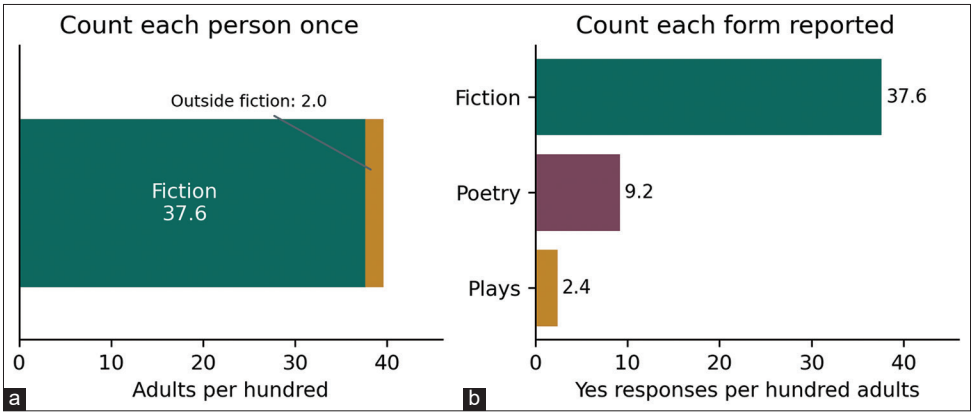
The calculation can also be checked without software. Since $M = E - x_3$ and the percentage reading all three forms cannot exceed the smallest genre, M is at least E–min (F,P,D), and it is also at least E/2 because each multiform reader contributes at most two excess responses. The full optimisation enforces all constraints simultaneously, including the possibility that two forms must overlap once their individual rates and total union are fixed.

For a between-wave change, the smallest possible value is the 2022 lower bound less the 2017 upper bound. Reversing the endpoints gives the largest possible change. This operation compares two cross-sections. Because the published tables impose no longitudinal constraint linking the people in them, both extremes are attainable separately for the specified group. In the rounding check, each of F, P, D and U may move independently by up to 0.05% points so long as the implied combinations remain feasible, and we apply the same tolerance to both waves despite the greater stored precision in some 2017 cells.

3.4. Population Standardisation and Statistical Interpretation

The relative size of an age group matters to the change in the national reading public, so we calculate a fixed-composition comparison by weighting both years' rates with the same 2022 population shares. For group g within one classification, N is the workbook population estimate in millions, w its share within the

Figure 1: Two ways to count literary participation



Panel A partitions the 39.6 literary readers per hundred adults in 2022. Panel B counts 49.2 affirmative genre responses in the same population

classification and C its contribution to the standardised change, with weights that sum to one within each classification, including when the sum of its rounded population figures differs slightly from the national total.

$$w_g = N_{g,2022} / \sum_h N_{h,2022}, \; C_g = w_g \, (U_{g,2022} - U_{g,2017} \tag{4}$$

The largest fall within an age group need not make the largest contribution to the national change, since a smaller fall among many more people can account for more percentage points than a steeper fall in a small group. We use the published 2022 population totals for both waves. Multiplying those totals by 2017 rates produces a fixed-composition comparison, not an estimate of how many adults belonged to each reading audience in 2017.

The NEA flags within-group changes at 90% confidence. We reproduce those flags where relevant. A comparison between two group changes needs its own variance estimate, as does a test of whether the population share reading several forms actually fell. Our bounds answer a prior question: if the published percentages are taken as given, which allocations of readers could have produced them? Allowing for rounding tests the numerical stability of that answer only.

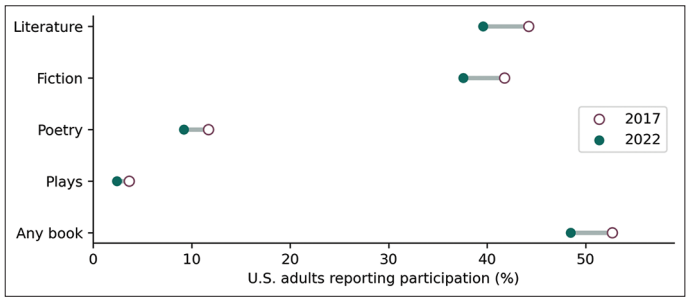
4. RESULTS

4.1. Fiction and the Change in Literary Reach

Of the 4.60 points lost in literary participation between 2017 and 2022, 4.18 came from the fall in fiction and 0.42 from its complement within the literary public. The national rates were 44.20% and 39.60%, respectively (Table 2 and Figure 2). Fiction therefore accounted for 90.9% of the net decline under equation (1), although the two surveys drew separate cross-sections and the 90.9% consequently cannot be read as a fraction of individuals who gave up fiction.

Fiction readers made up 94.5% of the literary public in 2017 and 94.9% in 2022. The stability of that ratio conceals a change in the number of types of reading reported per participant, since in 2017 the three percentages summed to 57.18 for every hundred adults, giving 1.294 forms per literary reader. By 2022 they summed to 49.20, or 1.242 per reader. The numerator can count a reader several times. The denominator counts that person once.

Figure 2: National reading rates in two survey waves



Points give the estimated percentage of adults reading each form. Each pair refers to the same survey item

Table 2: National reach and breadth of literary reading

Measure	2017	2022	Change
Any book	52.70	48.50	−4.20
Any literature	44.20	39.60	−4.60
Fiction	41.78	37.60	−4.18
Poetry	11.72	9.20	−2.52
Plays	3.68	2.40	−1.28
Outside fiction	2.42	2.00	−0.42
Forms per literary reader	1.294	1.242	-0.051

Rates are percentages of adults and changes are percentage points, except in the final row, which counts forms per reader

The largest possible poetry audience outside fiction was small. In 2022, 9.20% of adults reported poetry, but only 2.00% reported any literature without fiction. Even if every one of those adults read poetry, at least 7.20% of all adults must have read both forms, which places at least 78.3% of poetry readers inside the fiction audience even under the allocation that puts the largest possible number outside it. A poetry event could consequently serve many readers while scarcely changing the annual count of adults reached by literature.

The decline in book reading, 4.20 points, looks remarkably close to the 4.18-point decline in fiction, yet establishing that the same readers accounted for both would require a release that crossed the book answers with the fiction answers. The categories overlap only

in part. A short story can appear in a magazine, while a reader's only book during the year could have been a biography.

4.2. How Much Overlap Can the Published Margins Identify?

In 2017 there were 12.98 more affirmative genre responses than literary readers per hundred adults. The estimated share reading at least two forms lay between 9.30% and 12.98% (Table 3), with the lower endpoint allowing all 3.68% of play readers to have read both other forms, so that each contributes twice to the excess. At the upper endpoint nobody reads all three. The national table allows both arrangements.

The 2022 calculation uses 9.60 excess responses. Allowing all 2.40% of play readers to be three-form readers gives the lower bound of 7.20%; assigning none to all three gives the upper bound of 9.60%, which is still above the 2017 lower bound of 9.30%. Hence a small national increase is possible even though participation in each form declined separately. Feasible percentage-point changes range from −5.78 to +0.30 (Figure 3). Rounding all four inputs outward by the stated tolerance widens that interval to −6.13 to +0.65 (Table 4).

An explicit example clarifies the result. At the 2017 lower endpoint, allocate 3.68% to all three forms, 5.62% to fiction and poetry alone, and 2.42% to poetry alone. Assign 32.48% to fiction alone. Their sum is 44.20%, and their contributions to fiction, poetry and plays reproduce the three published margins. In 2022 an allocation of 7.20% to fiction and poetry, 2.40% to fiction and plays, 2.00% to poetry alone and 28.00% to fiction alone reproduces that year's margins without assigning a single reader to all three forms. These are hypothetical distributions; their purpose is to establish what the data allow.

Table 3: National bounds on reading multiple literary forms

Calculation	Lower	Upper	Width
2017	9.30	12.98	3.68
2022	7.20	9.60	2.40
Change	−5.78	0.30	6.08
Change with rounding	−6.13	0.65	6.78

Endpoints are percentages of adults for levels and percentage points for changes. Width is upper minus lower

Table 4: Sensitivity of changes in multiform reading to input precision

Group	Lower Δ	Upper Δ	Lower Δ with rounding	Upper Δ with rounding
All adults	−5.78	0.30	−6.13	0.65
18-24	−11.53	−2.86	−11.88	−2.51
25-34	−3.50	3.62	−3.85	3.97
35-44	−6.74	0.08	−7.09	0.43
45-54	−4.24	0.98	−4.59	1.33
55-64	−5.17	0.02	−5.52	0.37
65-74	−4.24	0.87	−4.59	1.22
75+	−6.13	−2.17	−6.48	−1.82
Grade school	0.76	1.47	0.41	1.82
Some high school	−0.85	2.42	−1.20	2.73
High school diploma	−3.42	−0.23	−3.77	0.12
Some college	−8.29	−2.50	−8.64	−2.15
Bachelor's degree	−6.68	2.07	−7.03	2.42
Graduate/professional	−12.50	0.15	−12.85	0.50

Change bounds in percentage points. Rounding tolerance is±0.05 points for each margin in each year. Row-specific bounds impose no constraints across rows

The youngest age group gives a firmer result. For ages 18-24, the largest feasible multiform share in 2022 was 9.80%, below even the smallest feasible share in 2017, 12.66% (Figure 3), and allowing each margin to move within the rounding tolerance still leaves the upper endpoint for the change at −2.51 points (Table 4). The upper endpoint for adults aged 75 or above is also negative (−1.82 points after rounding). These are restrictions on the published estimates, not tests of a generational effect.

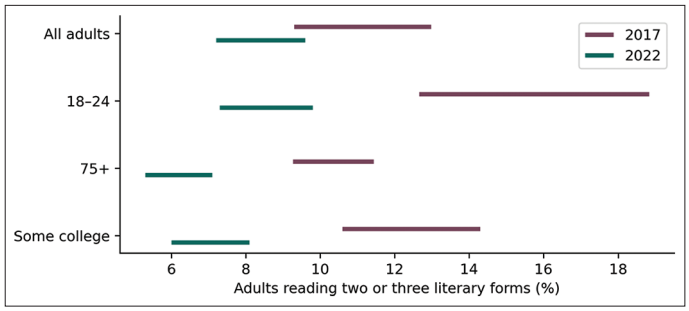
4.3. Age, Cohort Replacement and Population Size

The steepest age-specific decline in literary reading occurred among adults aged 65-74: from 48.26% to 38.90%, a loss of 9.36 points (Table 5). Fiction in this group fell slightly further, by 9.68 points. The difference is meaningful arithmetically. Poetry or plays outside fiction gained 0.32 points, cushioning the fiction decline. At ages 18-24 the same decomposition reads differently. Fiction fell by 3.37 points and additional reach outside fiction fell by 3.13, nearly equal contributions to the 6.50-point fall in literature.

At ages 25-34 the literature estimate rose from 44.81% to 45.20% (Figure 4, Panel A), a difference of 0.39 points that the source does not mark significant, while ages 45-54 likewise show little net change, although a small gain in fiction almost offsets a loss outside it. If attention were confined to the youngest and oldest respondents, the decline visible at each end of the age scale would be easy to read as a common experience, although the middle of the distribution includes groups whose rates scarcely moved. These surveys give a less regular profile.

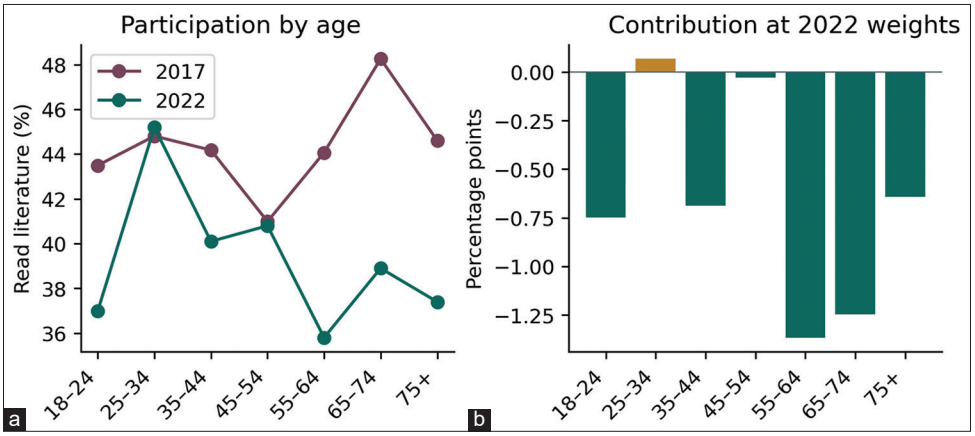
Adults aged 55 and over contributed −3.25 points to a total age-standardised change of −4.65 points, about 70.0% of the net decline (Table 6 and Figure 4, Panel B). The 65-74 group had the steepest fall, but the 55-64 group contributed more because its 2022 population was 42.2 million against 34.0 million. The distinction is between a change inside an age group and its contribution to the fixed-composition total. Neither quantity counts individuals leaving the reading public.

Figure 3: Feasible ranges for multiform participation



Lines give sharp bounds at the published margins. Disjoint lines imply a change in the cross-sectional estimate

Figure 4: Reading across age groups at observed and fixed population composition



Panel A compares within-age rates. Panel B weights each change by its 2022 population share

Table 5: Age-specific changes in fiction and additional literary reach

Age	Literature 2017	Literature 2022	Δ literature	Δ fiction	Δ outside fiction
18-24	43.50	37.00	−6.50	−3.37	−3.13
25-34	44.81	45.20	0.39	0.58	−0.19
35-44	44.18	40.10	−4.08	−4.95	0.87
45-54	40.99	40.80	−0.19	0.76	−0.95
55-64	44.07	35.80	−8.27	−7.54	−0.73
65-74	48.26	38.90	−9.36	−9.68	0.32
75+	44.61	37.40	−7.21	−7.32	0.11

The final two columns sum to the change in literature. Changes use percentage points

Table 6: Age contributions to the fixed-composition change

Age	Population (m)	Weight (%)	Δ literature	Contribution
18-24	29.40	11.51	−6.50	−0.75
25-34	44.20	17.30	0.39	0.07
35-44	43.00	16.83	−4.08	−0.69
45-54	40.00	15.66	−0.19	−0.03
55-64	42.20	16.52	−8.27	−1.37
65-74	34.00	13.31	−9.36	−1.25
75+	22.70	8.88	−7.21	−0.64

Populations are from the 2022 workbook. Contributions are percentage points, weighted at the common 2022 age distribution

The combined share of adults aged 55 and above in the standard population is about 38.7%. Their large contribution to the change reflects both their weight and their falling rates. The calculation cannot tell whether the same individuals read less as they grew older, since some adults who were 60 in 2017 entered a different age band in 2022, and the younger edge of every band was replenished by a different cohort. The two cross-sections do not isolate that movement.

4.4 Educational Differences in Entry and Breadth

Across the six education groups in 2022, the proportion reading literature rose at every step, from 11.7% among adults whose highest reported level was grade school to 60.7% among those with a graduate or professional degree, a difference of 49.0% points (Table 7 and Figure 5). In 2017 the gap was 53.21 points. Dividing instead of subtracting tells a different story. The ratio rose from about 4.47 to 5.19 because the lower rate fell proportionally further. Both comparisons use exactly the same estimates.

Among literary readers, the 2022 means occupied a narrow range, from 1.191 to 1.280 forms (Table 8). Readers in the grade-school group averaged 1.231, above the means for both high school graduates and adults with some college, which puts this group higher on the breadth measure than either of those two groups even though its share reporting any literature in 2022 was the lowest of the six.

The lower bound on multiform participation for the grade-school group in 2022 was 2.60%, above the 2017 upper bound of 1.84%, even as the estimated share reading any literature in this group fell from 15.33% to 11.70%. These two movements can coexist because a smaller literary public may contain a larger number of readers reporting more than one form per hundred adults. This is a logical implication of the point estimates. The 2022 rate for plays in the group is just 0.1%, and the source does not flag the decline in overall literary reading as statistically significant.

Adults with some college reported less multiform reading in 2022 under every allocation compatible with the published group percentages (Figure 3): At most 8.10% could have read multiple forms that year, compared with at least 10.60% in 2017. The gap survives rounding (Table 4). The high school diploma group is a closer call. Its upper bound for the change moves from −0.23 points to +0.12 once rounding is allowed, enough to leave open a small increase as well as a decline in the share of adults reporting more than one form.

4.5. Gender and Race or Ethnicity

Among survey respondents classified as female, literary participation fell from 52.54% to 49.20%. Among those classified as male it fell from 35.21% to 29.50% (Table 9). The female-minus-male gap thus rose from 17.33 to 19.70 points. One of these within-group changes is flagged by the NEA and the other is not, and the difference between the changes is 2.37 points at the published estimates, but testing that difference would require its own standard error.

Table 7: Literary participation across education groups

Education	Literature 2017	Literature 2022	Δ literature	Δ fiction	Δ outside fiction
Grade school	15.33	11.70	−3.63	−1.74	−1.89
Some high school	20.40	23.40	3.00	4.13	−1.13
High school diploma	32.03	25.60	−6.43	−4.50	−1.93
Some college	47.07	39.60	−7.47	−8.07	0.60
Bachelor's degree	57.66	55.20	−2.46	−3.16	0.70
Graduate/professional	68.54	60.70	−7.84	−8.50	0.66

The base is all adults in each education group. Source percentages are subtracted before rounding

Table 8: Breadth among readers and bounds for all adults by education

Education	Forms/reader 2017	Forms/reader 2022	M lower 2017	M upper 2017	M lower 2022	M upper 2022
Grade school	1.120	1.231	1.23	1.84	2.60	2.70
Some high school	1.223	1.201	2.28	4.55	3.70	4.70
High school diploma	1.219	1.191	5.13	7.02	3.60	4.90
Some college	1.304	1.205	10.60	14.29	6.00	8.10
Bachelor's degree	1.319	1.279	13.33	18.38	11.70	15.40
Graduate/professional	1.359	1.280	16.85	24.60	12.10	17.00

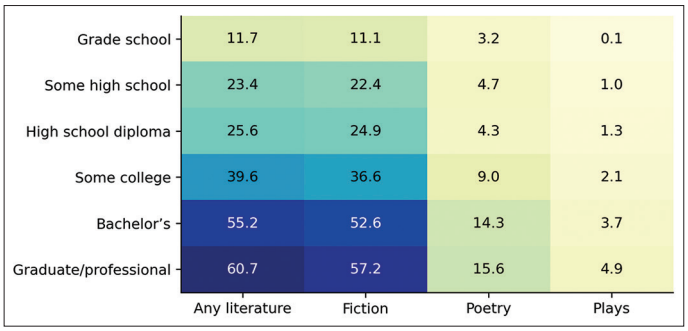
M bounds describe percentages of all adults within each row. Forms per reader uses only adults reporting literature

Table 9: Literary change by gender and race or ethnicity

Group	Literature 2017	Literature 2022	Δ literature	Δ fiction	Δ outside fiction
Male	35.21	29.50	−5.71	−5.32	−0.39
Female	52.54	49.20	−3.34	−3.07	−0.27
Hispanic	29.49	25.80	−3.69	−2.37	−1.32
White	49.87	45.80	−4.07	−4.52	0.45
African American	35.63	32.40	−3.23	−1.39	−1.84
Asian	38.53	30.50	−8.03	−8.14	0.11
Other	44.66	43.50	−1.16	3.54	−4.70

These are two separate classifications. "Other" is the residual category in the source workbook

Figure 5: Literary participation by educational attainment in 2022



Cell values are percentages within each group. The literary union includes adults reading any of the three forms

The race or ethnicity breakdown gives an instructive exception to the national decomposition. In the residual category labelled Other, fiction rose by 3.54 points and additional reach outside fiction fell by 4.70 (Figure 6). Their sum is a modest 1.16-point decline in literature. The group's published 2022 population is 7.0 million, and the source marks the changes in both fiction and literature nonsignificant. The label combines communities that may have quite different reading practices, so even an exact estimate of the aggregate would tell us little about which readers accounted for the rise in fiction or the fall in the reach of other forms.

For African American adults the poetry estimate fell from 15.33% to 8.30%, a change the NEA flags, while the literary union fell from 35.63% to 32.40%, which it does not flag, a contrast that is possible because poetry and fiction audiences overlap. In the Asian category the 8.03-point fall in literary reach is close to the 8.14-point fall in fiction. A comparison of their rates cannot reveal differences attributable to education, to age or to a language of reading, none of which is cross-classified with race or ethnicity in this table.

4.6. Reading, Listening and the Boundary of the Public

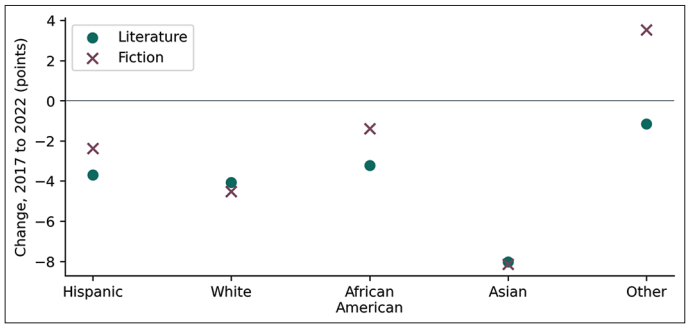
The 2022 survey gives the information needed for an exact overlap calculation across media (Table 10). Let R denote the share affirming reading, L the share affirming listening and V the share affirming either. Then R + L − V reported both, and V − R reported listening only. No assumption about independence enters the calculation. A respondent can belong to both sets even if the work read differs from the work heard, a distinction a library would need to preserve if it wished to know whether listeners returned to a book they had first encountered in print.

$$Both = R + L–V,\ Listening\ only = V–R \tag{5}$$

Adding the fraction who reported listening to fiction (17.6%) directly to the fraction who reported reading it (37.6%) would put the audience at 55.2%. The survey's combined figure was 43.2%. The difference consists of the 12.0% who answered yes to both questions (Figure 7) and would otherwise be counted twice, just as adding the corresponding two book items without checking their overlap would count 15.1% of adults a second time. An audio service can attract substantial use from people a library already reaches.

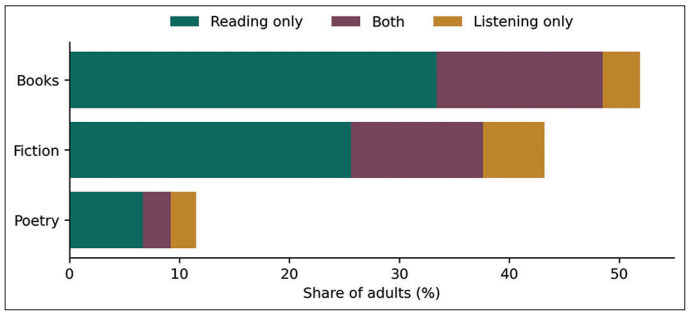
Poetry shows the largest proportional extension among the three rows. The 2.3 points added by listening equal 25.0% of the 9.2% reading estimate, compared with a 14.9% extension for fiction and 7.0% for books. In absolute points fiction has the larger addition. A criterion based on how much an existing public expands proportionally would prioritise poetry here, while a criterion

Figure 6: Literature and fiction across the source's race or ethnicity categories



The vertical axis shows percentage-point changes within each group. These estimates do not adjust for age or education

Figure 7: Where the reading and listening audiences overlap



Stacked segments sum to the audience reporting either activity. "Only" describes responses to the two survey questions

based on the additional share of all adults would prioritise fiction, though neither comparison establishes the returns to investment in a new programme.

Some respondents may have counted listening when answering the original reading question, a possibility the NEA itself raises and one that matters when interpreting the 2.3% who entered the poetry audience only through the explicit listening item. Would those listeners have read a printed poem if no recording had been available? The survey gives no answer. For plays it supplies no comparable estimate of listening at all.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1. What a Public Institution Means by Reach

Imagine evaluating a poetry programme on the number of adults it adds to the literary public. A reader who already reads novels could attend every session and still add zero to that measure. In 2022, poetry and plays together extended the measured reach of literature by only two percentage points beyond fiction, even though poetry alone reached far more adults than that, many of whom had also read a novel or short story during the year. The small increment answers a question about recruitment. It says nothing about what those sessions offered the people in the room.

Smith's (2024) account of readers who attach poems to social relations suggests an alternative question for a programme evaluation: what did people do with the poem after the encounter?

Table 10: Reading and listening audiences in 2022

Item	Read	Listened	Either	Read only	Both	Listen only
Books	48.50	18.50	51.90	33.40	15.10	3.40
Fiction	37.60	17.60	43.20	25.60	12.00	5.60
Poetry	9.20	4.80	11.50	6.70	2.50	2.30

Percentages of adults. The final three columns are mutually exclusive and sum to the combined reach. Source: NEA (2023b), Figures 10 and 11

A participant might return to a familiar text, offer it to a friend or come to value hearing it read in a group. None of those acts requires crossing from zero to one in an annual survey. An institution could measure entry with an attendance or reading question and investigate these other uses through interviews without requiring the measures to agree.

Consider the same two points from the reader's side. Among all adults, 2.0% reported poetry or plays outside fiction (Table 11). Among literary readers, whose share was 39.6%, that amounts to just over one in twenty. For poetry readers, the two points have a different use again: they cap the share of all adults who could have read poetry without fiction, leaving at least 78.3% of poetry readers inside the fiction audience. An institution seeking new participants needs the first number. One choosing whom to invite to a poetry event might find the third more informative.

Educational applications call for similar care. The 2022 high school diploma group reported 25.6% literary participation, compared with 55.2% for the bachelor's group, a gap of 29.6 points. Yet the groups' conditional numbers of forms were 1.191 and 1.279. The ratios measure neither textual complexity nor access to books. What they show is that a large difference in reaching the first form leaves relatively little difference on this particular measure of crossing into another. A second interview question about reading habits could start from that contrast without presuming that a diploma confers a taste for any given genre.

5.2. Literary Publics Across a Period of Disruption

The age profile depends on which change we measure. Adults aged 55 and over supplied roughly seven-tenths of the age-standardised fall, yet it was among 18-24-year-olds that losses in fiction and in reading outside fiction were almost equal, at 3.37 and 3.13% points respectively. Compare adults aged 65-74. They had the steepest decline in entry, while the mean number of forms among those who did read was about 1.249 in both waves, a case in which the audience contracted appreciably while the breadth of its reading scarcely shifted.

An interview with a younger adult might start with the poem or short story they used to encounter in the course of an ordinary week and ask whether the occasion for that reading still arose in the second survey period. For older adults the more immediate question is where opportunities to encounter any work of literature persisted. These are questions for a follow-up study. Some people moved between age bands, and the 2022 reporting period included pandemic disruption. Two survey waves cannot isolate either influence.

Digital reading communities illustrate the risks of working backward from a visible new practice to an explanation for an

Table 11: Reach outside fiction under two denominators

Group	Outside fiction (%)	Literature (%)	Outside fiction per 100 literary readers	Fiction per 100 literary readers
All adults	2.00	39.60	5.05	94.95
18-24	1.70	37.00	4.59	95.41
25-34	2.00	45.20	4.42	95.58
35-44	2.60	40.10	6.48	93.52
45-54	1.70	40.80	4.17	95.83
55-64	1.50	35.80	4.19	95.81
65-74	1.80	38.90	4.63	95.37
75+	1.80	37.40	4.81	95.19

All figures refer to 2022. The final two columns sum to 100 within each group

aggregate trend. Martens et al. (2022) describe how BookTok can support print reading through social activity online. A short video about a book might compete with reading time on one occasion and prompt someone to read on another. Dera (2024) documents motives that differ even among participants in the same kind of online challenge. Testing whether a screen displaced a poem or led someone to it would require information about the order and duration of both activities, whereas these tables supply an annual yes or no to the reading item and no linked measure of platform use.

The listening results give stronger evidence for a more modest claim. Explicitly asking about a medium matters, and its effect differs by literary form. The fiction addition was large in points and the poetry addition large in proportion to its reading audience, a difference that could disappear under an undifferentiated question about books of the kind that Tattersall Wallin's (2022) account of audiobook routines gives us reason to examine. Jerasa (2025) similarly points to practices of expression that readers themselves recognise within online communities. Both lines of work suggest asking participants what they understand by reading before interpreting a survey omission as cultural disengagement.

5.3. Which Conclusions Survive a Change of Scale?

Four ways of reweighting the subgroup changes produce four answers (Table 12). At the 2022 age distribution the standardised decline is 4.65 points; using educational composition it is 5.36 points. Weighting the gender and race or ethnicity rows gives declines of 4.49 and 4.07 points respectively. The figures differ because each comparison holds a different distribution fixed. They must never be added together, and none gives an estimate of the effect of changing a person's age, degree or social category.

Holding the educational composition fixed gives a decline of 5.36 points against the observed national decline of 4.60, a difference worth investigating if 2017 population weights become available for the same categories and at the same precision. A shift in educational attainment could account for part of it. Separate rounding of populations and of the survey estimates could also contribute. The 0.76-point discrepancy does not establish how much is due to either source.

Two kinds of uncertainty call for different remedies. Even a very large survey would leave the national direction of change ambiguous if it released only the same genre margins and those margins still admitted several joint allocations, including ones

Table 12: Changes under alternative fixed 2022 compositions

Composition	Δ literature	Δ fiction	Δ poetry	Δ plays
Age	−4.65	−4.19	−2.49	−1.24
Education	−5.36	−5.07	−2.80	−1.35
Gender	−4.49	−4.16	−2.48	−1.26
Race/ethnicity	−4.07	−3.78	−2.54	−1.24
National, observed	−4.60	−4.18	−2.52	−1.28

Each row applies its own classified population weights to within-group rate changes. Units are percentage points

with very different numbers of adults reading all three forms. Publishing a cross-tabulation would settle the numerical overlap at the estimated rates. Sampling variation would remain. For ages 18-24 the existing margins already determine the direction of change (Table 4), but a test about the population would still require a design-based variance estimate.

A useful release could fit in eight cells. Seven would give the shares reporting each possible combination of literary forms, and the eighth would give the share reporting none. The questionnaire already collects the necessary answers, and where subgroup samples are small the agency could combine or suppress imprecise cells while still publishing the national table that would distinguish readers of all three forms from readers of exactly two.

5.4 Limitations

Historical fiction and speculative fiction count as one form even where the works belong to different literary traditions, whereas reading a single poem and a short play earns two affirmative genre responses regardless of how brief either encounter was. The count has a useful but narrow meaning. Frequency, language, whose work was read and whether someone else read it aloud would all matter to an account of that reader's literary life.

A second limit concerns the public release. Subgroup percentages can support within-group calculations, but the age margins cannot be linked to the education margins to reconstruct younger adults with a particular qualification. The same applies to gender and race or ethnicity. An explanation appealing to overlapping inequalities is plausible as a research question, yet the intersectional evidence required for it is missing here, and individual records, survey weights and appropriate variance estimation would be needed to examine those relationships without attributing group averages to individuals.

The fixed population weights reflect the rounded figures in the published workbook. Percentage-point changes are comparisons of repeated cross-sections. Identification intervals are exact only conditional on their supplied inputs and for the row analysed separately. We have not constrained the subgroup allocations to aggregate to a single national joint distribution across every classification, a restriction that would require compatible unrounded weights and a joint demographic breakdown that the workbook does not supply.

Finally, listening data here describe only certain media and forms during 2022. A respondent may interpret the categories differently

from a researcher, particularly when a performance, online reading or recorded work falls between familiar labels. The figure for plays provides a reminder of that limit. A missing listening entry means there is no estimate for the comparison, even though performed drama plainly has an audience. The same surveys could support a study of theatre attendance, but that would answer a different question about the public for dramatic works.

6. CONCLUSION

Fiction accounts for 4.18 of the 4.60% points lost from the U.S. literary public between 2017 and 2022. The rest came from poetry and plays outside fiction. The number of forms per literary reader fell, yet the published tables still admit a small rise in the share reading several forms, depending on how many of those readers read all three rather than exactly two. Among adults aged 18-24, by contrast, even the largest multiform audience compatible with the 2022 estimates falls short of the smallest one compatible with 2017.

For the public humanities, two findings change how a reading programme might be judged. Education separated adults sharply at the point of entry into literary reading and much less sharply in the number of forms reported by readers. Asking about listening brought additional people into the survey's fiction and poetry audiences, with the larger proportional gain for poetry. A library interested in those encounters needs to ask how a work reached its audience as well as whether the audience grew.

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