

Children and young people's writing in 2023

Christina Clark, Francesca Bonafede, Irene Picton and Aimee Cole

June 2023

Children and young people's writing in 2023 continues to be at crisis point. Just a third of children and young people aged 8 to 18 told us that they enjoyed writing in their free time in early 2023. This is one of the lowest levels of writing enjoyment we have evidenced since 2010. This means that compared with 2010, the number of children and young people who told us that they enjoyed writing in their free time has decreased by a quarter (26.1%). Equally, only 1 in 5 told us that they wrote something daily in their free time in 2023. Compared with 2010, the number of children and young people who said they wrote something daily in their free time has decreased by over a quarter (28.5%).

It is not only writing enjoyment and engagement that are at low points. Statutory assessment data show that in [2022](#), 69% of pupils aged 11 in England met the expected standard in writing, which is down from 78% in 2019. This means that 1 in 3 (31%) 11-year-olds in England left primary school in 2022 unable to write at the expected level, rising to nearly half (46%) of disadvantaged children.

Previous research found that children and young people who enjoyed writing very much were seven times more likely to write above the level expected for their age compared with those who did not enjoy writing at all (50.3% vs 7.2%, [Clark, 2016](#)). Moreover, children and young people's agreement with statements about writing showed that, for many, it promoted creativity, imagination and self-expression. In addition, many also said that they write to improve their mental wellbeing, for social connections and to support causes and issues they care about. A decline in writing engagement should therefore be a cause for concern.

This report builds on our previous [work](#) to highlight how children and young people felt about writing in early 2023. It explores how many enjoyed writing in their free time, how often they wrote in their free time, what motivated them to write and what they wrote in their free time. Additionally, this year we looked at how much they enjoyed the writing they were doing at school.

Method

We conducted our latest Annual Literacy Survey between January and middle of March 2023. We made two surveys available: one for children aged 5 to 8 (Year 1 to Year 4, or Primary 2 to Primary 5 for Scotland) and one for children and young people aged 8 to 18 (Year 4 to Year 13, or Primary 5 to Secondary 6 for Scotland). The surveys contain similar questions but the one for the younger age group is shorter and more pictorial. It was up to the teacher's discretion which of the surveys their Year 4 pupils completed.

71,351 children and young people aged 5 to 18 from 285 schools in the UK participated in this online survey: 7,285 children were aged 5 to 8 and 64,066 children and young people were aged 8 to 18.

To capture more of the writing experiences and opinions of children and young people, the online survey also contained numerous open-text questions that have been themed and analysed to help contextualise findings in this report.

Key findings from 2023 include:

Enjoying writing in free time

- Only 1 in 3 (34.6%) children and young people aged 8 to 18 said that they enjoyed writing in their free time in 2023.
- Levels of enjoying writing in free time have reduced by 12.2 percentage points over the past 13 years, which means that, over that time, there has been a 26% decrease in the number of children and young people aged 8 to 18 who say they enjoy writing in their free time.
- Enjoying writing in free time was associated with gender, age and socioeconomic background: more girls than boys (39.5% vs. 28.9%), more children aged 5 to 8 (72.0%) and those aged 8 to 11 (51.6%) than those aged 11 to 14 (32.6%), those aged 14 to 16 (26.4%) and those aged 16 to 18 (28.5%), and more children and young people who received free school meals (FSMs) than those who did not (38.6% vs. 32.9%), said that they enjoyed writing in their free time. Enjoyment levels dropped for all children and young people regardless of their background in 2023.
- Fewer boys who didn't receive FSMs told us that they enjoyed writing in their free time (26.8%) compared with boys who received FSMs (35.3%). While more girls who received FSMs said that they enjoyed writing in their free time (41.2%) compared with the other groups, regardless of year, their levels fell the most (3.6 percentage points) between 2022 and 2023.
- More children and young people in Wales said that they enjoyed writing in their free time (41.6%) compared with children and young people in England (34.3%), Scotland (32.4%) and Northern Ireland (23.2%). The percentage for Northern Ireland, however, needs to be treated cautiously as we only had a small sample of pupils.
- In England, more children and young people from the North East (38.7%), Greater London (38.3%) and the West Midlands (38.0%) said that they enjoyed writing in their free time, while the smallest percentage of children and young people who said that they enjoyed writing came from the South East (31.0%) and the South West (29.8%).

Enjoying writing in free time versus at school

- More children and young people aged 8 to 18 said that they enjoyed writing at school than in their free time (43.9% vs. 34.6%).
- Both types of writing enjoyment were positively related ($r = .538$). Indeed, 3 in 4 (74.9%) children and young people who enjoyed writing in their free time also enjoyed writing at school, while 3 in 5 (59.0%) children and young people who enjoyed writing at school also enjoyed writing in their free time.
- Enjoying writing at school was associated with the same demographic profiles as we saw for enjoying writing in free time, with more girls than boys (49.3% vs. 38.4%), more younger than older (66.0% vs. 35.4%), and more children and young people who received FSMs than their non-FSM peers (46.0% vs. 42.5%) saying that they enjoyed writing at school.
- As we saw earlier for enjoying writing in their free time, more children and young people from Wales told us that they enjoyed writing at school compared with their peers from England, Scotland and Northern Ireland.
- Reflecting regional differences in enjoying writing in their free time, more children and young people from the North East (49.3%), Greater London (46.3%) and the West Midlands (47.6%) said that they enjoyed writing at school, while the smallest percentage of children and young people who said that they enjoyed writing came from the South East (40.4%) and the South West (39.1%).

Daily writing in their free time

- Only 1 in 5 (19.3%) children and young people aged 8 to 18 told us in 2023 that they wrote something daily in their free time.
- While daily writing levels have increased slightly over the past year, compared with 2010, the number of children and young people who wrote something daily in their free time has decreased by over a quarter (28.5%).
- Slightly more girls than boys (22.1% vs. 16.5%), more children aged 5 to 8 (41.3%) and those aged 8 to 11 (28.2%) than those aged 11 to 14 (18.8%), those aged 14 to 16 (13.7%) and those aged 16 to 18 (12.3%), and more children and young people who receive free school meals (FSMs) than those who do not (23.6% vs. 17.9%) said that they wrote in their free time daily.
- As in previous years, fewer boys who didn't receive FSMs said that they wrote something daily in their free time in 2023 compared with the other groups.
- More children and young people in Wales (23.5%) said that they wrote daily in their free time compared with their peers in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland.
- In terms of regions in England, more children and young people from the North West (22.8%), the North East (22.0%), East (21.0%) and West Midlands (21.7%) told us that they wrote something daily in their free time compared with their peers in other regions. The smallest percentage of children and young people who said that they wrote something daily in their free time came from the South West (15.7%), followed by the South East (17.2%) and East of England (18.1%).

The link between enjoying writing in their free time and daily writing in their free time

- Children and young people who enjoyed writing in their free time were also more likely to write daily in their free time. This relationship was more pronounced in children and young people aged 8 to 18 compared with those aged 5 to 8.

Writing motivation

- 1 in 2 (50.2%) children and young people aged 8 to 18 said that they wrote to be creative. A further 2 in 5 (40.5%) said that they wrote to express their ideas and imagination or their thoughts and feelings (45.5%). Many also said that they wrote to support their mental wellbeing, with 1 in 4 (24.5%) saying that writing made them feel better, while 1 in 7 (15.5%) wrote to support causes and issues they care about.
- More girls than boys aged 8 to 18 wrote to be creative, to support their mental wellbeing or to feel connected, as did children aged 8 to 11, compared with their older peers. There was very little difference in terms of FSM uptake and being a creative writer. However, more children and young people who received FSMs said that they wrote for social connections compared with their peers who didn't receive FSMs, more of whom, in turn, said that they wrote to support their mental wellbeing.

Attitudes towards writing

- 1 in 2 (48.2%) children and young people aged 8 to 18 struggled with deciding what to write, and 2 in 5 (42.4%) admitted that they only wrote when they had to. However, over 2 in 5 (42.7%) told us that they continued writing even when they found it difficult. 1 in 3 (36.2%) also saw a link between their writing and their chances of getting a better job when they grow up.

Writing formats

- By far the most popular writing that children and young people aged 8 to 18 did in their free time was text/direct messages (89.9%), followed by in-game communications (82.7%). 1 in 4 (26.8%) said that they wrote fiction/short stories on paper in their free time, while 1 in 5 (20.1%) said that they wrote fiction on a screen. 3 in 10 (29.9%) also told us that they wrote in diary and nearly the same percentage (27.0%) wrote letters in their free time.
- In 2023, more children and young people aged 8 to 18 wrote various materials on a screen or on paper compared with the year before. In particular, more children and young people said in 2023 that they were writing reviews on paper, song lyrics on a screen, and poems on paper. However, far fewer children and young people wrote most of the exclusively on-screen formats in 2023, with emails showing the biggest decrease. Only blog/forum posts showed a slight increase compared with the year before.
- More girls than boys also said that they wrote personal/direct messages, emails, and social media content in their free time, while more boys than girls said that they wrote in-game communications, blog/forum posts and podcasts in their free time. More young people aged 14 and older said that they wrote personal/direct messages, emails or social media content than their younger peers, while more children and young people who don't receive FSMs said that they wrote personal/direct messages or emails than their peers who receive FSMs.

Inspiring children and young people to write

- Having a quiet space to work, read or take time out was slightly more strongly associated with writing enjoyment or daily writing than a having a desk or table to write, draw or do homework on.

- When asked what makes them want to write, most (42.9%) children and young people mentioned that they would write to share a memorable experience, while 1 in 4 children and young people said that seeing people they look up to talk about writing would make them want to write (25.5%), as would hearing friends and family talk about writing (25.2%).
- Providing children and young people with the opportunities to get inspired to write, either at school or in the community, can positively influence their enjoyment and frequency of writing in their free time. For example, more children and young people who had been to creative-writing groups or who had taken part in writing competitions said that they enjoyed writing and were writing daily in their free time compared with those who didn't take part. The same was true for children and young people who went to see a storyteller or a writer, who attended book groups, or who went to books fairs.

As we continue to record alarmingly low levels of writing enjoyment among children and young people, alongside increasingly compelling evidence on the benefits that writing for pleasure and regular writing have on children's writing attainment and wellbeing, urgent coordinated action is needed. It is now time to provide considered in and out of school opportunities aimed at reconnecting children and young people with the creative elements that transform writing into a pleasurable personal practice that allows for self-expression and mental wellbeing, and that works as a tool to process struggles, make sense of the world and participate actively in civic life.

Writing in 2023

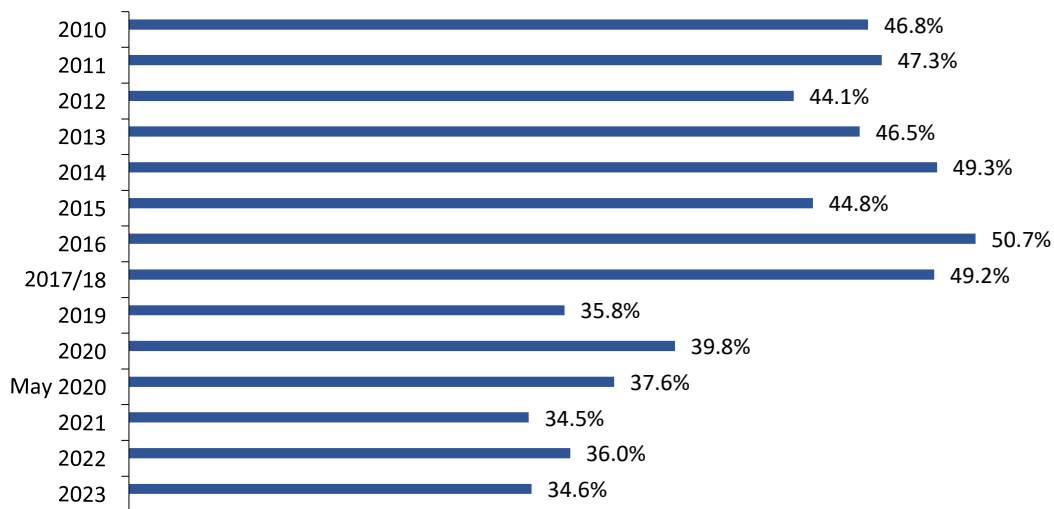
Enjoying writing in free time over time

Only 1 in 3 (34.6%) children and young people aged 8 to 18 told us in 2023 that they enjoyed writing something in their free time.

Figure 1 shows levels of enjoying writing in free time for children and young people aged 8 to 18 over time and indicates that levels for this age group in 2023 were back to the low levels we recorded in 2021, indicating that the slight improvement in writing enjoyment levels in 2022 was not sustained.

Overall, levels of enjoying writing in free time have reduced by 12.2 percentage points over the past 13 years, which means that, over that time, there has been a 26.1% decrease in the number of children and young people aged 8 to 18 who told us that they enjoyed writing. Writing enjoyment can also be seen to fall into two distinct segments over this time, the first from 2010 to 2017-18, during which time between 44% and 51% of children and young people reported enjoying writing. From 2019 to 2023 (apart from a brief uplift in early 2020), writing enjoyment was around 10pp lower, with around 35% saying they enjoyed writing.

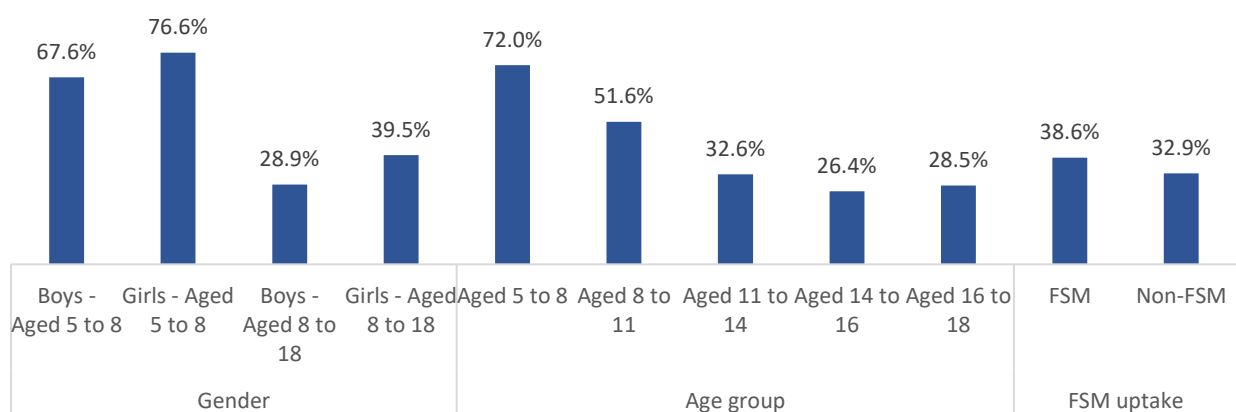
Figure 1: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 who enjoyed writing in their free time either very much or quite a lot from 2010 to 2023



Writing enjoyment by gender, age group and free-school-meal uptake

Who enjoyed writing in 2023? As shown in Figure 2, more girls than boys said that they enjoyed writing in their free time regardless of age¹. Overall writing enjoyment declined with age, however, with 7 in 10 children aged 5 to 8 telling us that they enjoyed writing in their free time compared with 1 in 2 children aged 8 to 11, and 1 in 3 young people aged 11 to 14. 1 in 4 of those aged 14 to 16 and those aged 16 to 18 told us that they enjoyed writing in their free time. More children and young people who received free school meals (FSMs), our proxy of socioeconomic background, said that they enjoyed writing in their spare time compared with their peers who didn't receive FSMs.

Figure 2: Percentage of children and young people aged 5 to 18 who enjoyed writing in their free time in 2023 by gender, age group, and free-school-meal uptake (8 to 18s only)



¹ Boys aged 5 to 8: 46.4% (n = 3,383), girls aged 5 to 8: 49.2% (n = 3,587), 0.7% (n = 54) described themselves another way, 3.6% (n = 261) didn't want to state their gender. Boys aged 8 to 18: (n = 30,077, 46.9%), girls aged 8 to 18: (31,076, 48.5%), 2.3% (n = 1,485) didn't want to specify their gender and 2.2% (n = 1,428) described themselves another way. Aged 5 to 8 = 9.2% (n = 6,444); aged 8 to 11 = 15.8% (n = 10,127); aged 11 to 14 = 66.4% (n = 42,523); aged 14 to 16 = 15.1% (n = 9,667); aged 16 to 18 = 2.7% (n = 1,749). For those aged 8 to 18 only: FSM: 16.3% (n = 10,418); non-FSM: 72.0% (n = 46,116); didn't want to say: 1.6% (n = 1,046); didn't know: 10.1% (n = 6,486). The demographic make-up of our 2023 sample was largely comparable to that of 2022 and previous samples.

The difference between those aged 5 to 8 and those aged 8 to 18 in their writing enjoyment is perhaps most starkly illustrated in Figure 3, which shows a near perfect mirror image.

Figure 3: Levels of enjoying writing in free time for children and young people aged 5 to 8 and those aged 8 to 18 in 2023

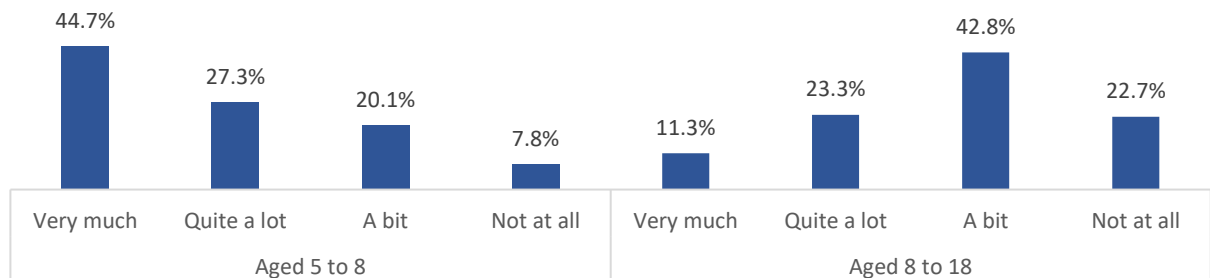
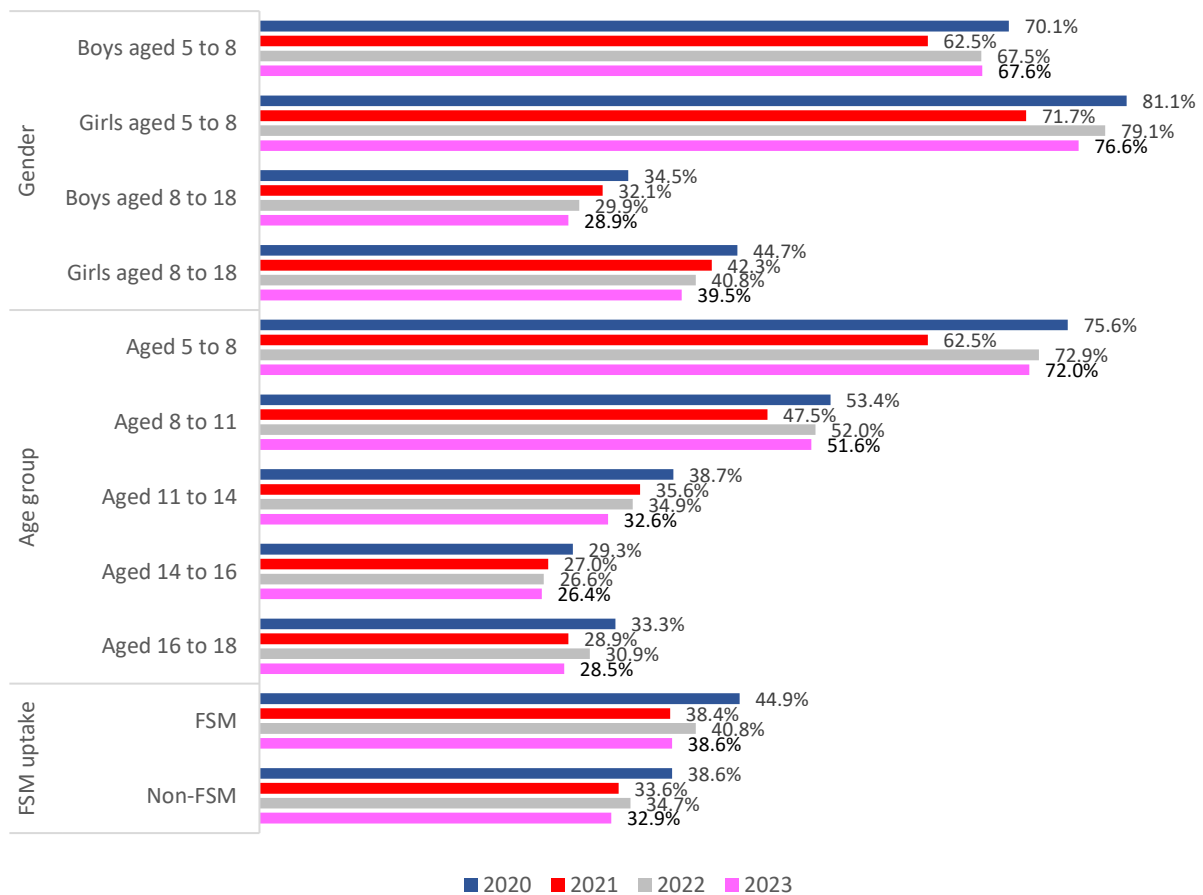


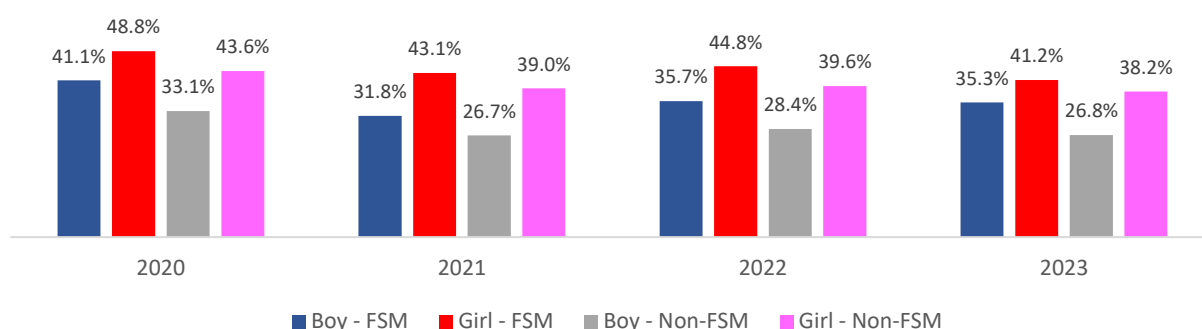
Figure 4 shows that the pandemic had an impact on the writing enjoyment of children and young people regardless of their background, with fewer children and young people saying that they enjoyed writing in early 2021 compared with early 2020 irrespective of their gender, age or FSM uptake status. While levels recovered somewhat across most groups in 2022, they decreased again across the board in 2023.

Figure 4: Percentage of children and young people aged 5 to 18 who enjoyed writing in their free time in 2020, 2021, 2022 and 2023 by gender, age group and free-school-meal uptake (8 to 18s only)



We have been particularly interested in tracking the impact of the pandemic on the writing enjoyment of children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. Figure 5 shows levels of writing enjoyment by gender and whether or not they received FSMs since 2020. Boys who received FSMs saw a particularly pronounced drop in writing enjoyment levels between 2020 and 2021. Their writing enjoyment levels bounced back somewhat in early 2022, only to decrease again slightly in 2023. It should be noted, however, that boys who didn't receive FSMs consistently had the lowest level of writing enjoyment. While more girls who received FSMs said that they enjoyed writing compared with the other groups, regardless of year, their levels fell the most (3.6 percentage points) between 2022 and 2023.

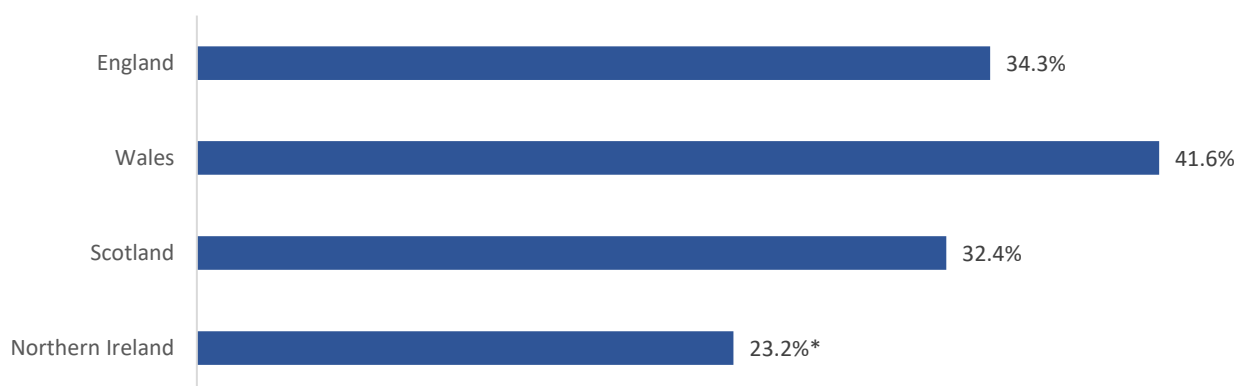
Figure 5: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 who enjoyed writing in their free time in 2020, 2021, 2022 and 2023 by gender and free-school-meal uptake



Writing enjoyment by geographical region

There were also differences in how much children and young people enjoyed writing in their free time depending on where in the UK they went to school². As shown in Figure 6, more children and young people who went to school in Wales said that they enjoyed writing in their free time compared with the other three nations. The percentage for Northern Ireland needs to be treated with caution as only a small number of children and young people from NI took part in this year's survey (n = 138*).

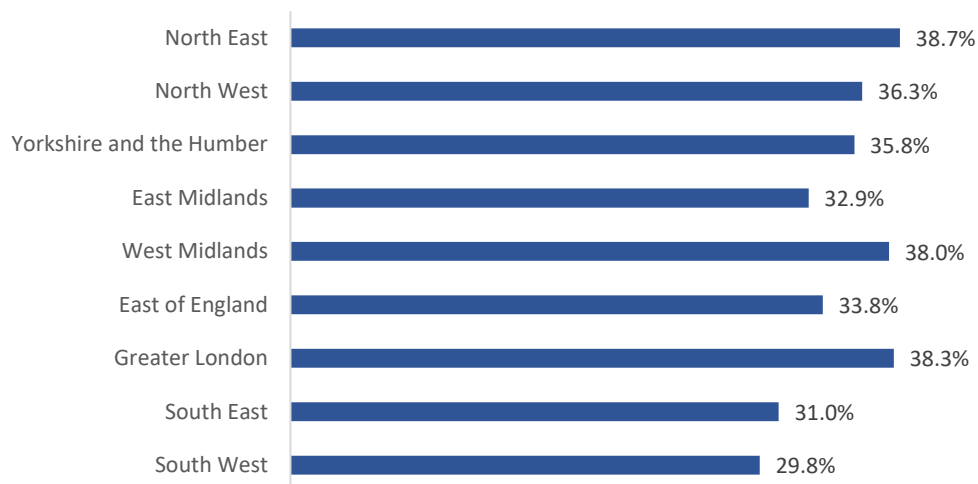
Figure 6: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 who enjoyed writing in their free time in 2023 by UK nation



² 61,329 children and young people aged 8 to 18 from England; 1,541 from Scotland; 1,058 from Wales and 138 from Northern Ireland participated in 2023.

Differences in England are further broken down by region in Figure 7. It shows that more children and young people from the North East, Greater London and the West Midlands said that they enjoyed writing in their free time compared with their peers in other regions. The smallest percentage of children and young people who said that they enjoyed writing came from the South East and the South West.

Figure 7: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 who enjoyed writing in their free time in 2023 by region in England

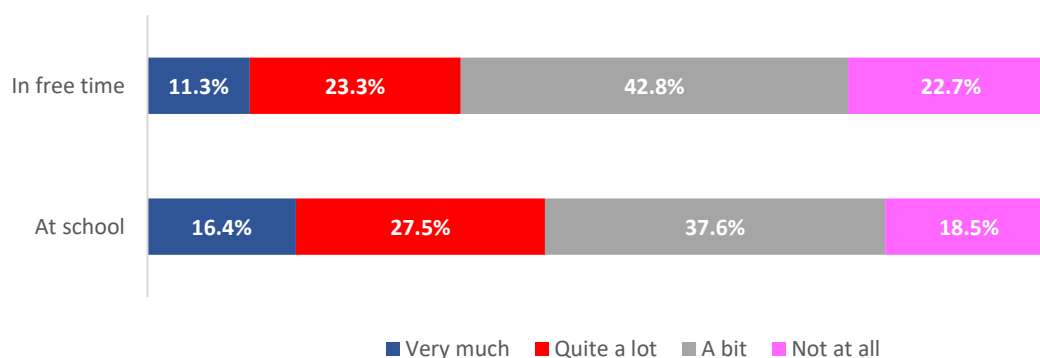


Writing enjoyment in free time versus enjoyment of writing in school time

Traditionally, our survey has focused on how much children and young people enjoy writing in their free time. In 2023, we also included a question to see how this compared with the writing they did at school.

Figure 8 shows that more children and young people aged 8 to 18 said that they enjoyed writing at school than they did in their free time. Overall, over 2 in 5 (43.9%) children and young people enjoyed writing at school either very much or quite a lot compared with 1 in 3 (34.6%) who enjoyed writing either very much or quite a lot in their free time.

Figure 8: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 who enjoyed writing in 2023 in their free time versus at school



Some children and young people told us in the open-ended comments why they enjoyed writing at school more than the writing they did in their free time:

‘I only like writing at school because I can get help. When I write at school I can let my imagination free and let my ideas become one on a piece of paper.’ (Girl, Year 10)

‘I don’t do a lot of writing at home but at school my teacher tells us ways to get better and what to do next.’ (Girl, Year 5)

‘I don’t feel creative when I’m at home because my teacher inspires me to write.’ (Girl, Year 6)

‘Because I write too much in school, and since we do so much of it to the point we are so used to it and it makes us really stressed, I don't like writing in my free time. I like taking a break from my writing constantly and being surrounded in a school environment rather than occupy my free time with something I already do in my regular time.’ (Girl, Year 9)

Others told us why they enjoyed the writing they did at home more:

‘Don’t get me wrong, I think my school is really good and supportive but I don’t really think we students get enough interaction with the lessons or enough freedom when we write because it’s usually just someone else’s writing/animation/etc that we just change up a bit.’ (Did not share their gender, Year 7)

‘I enjoy writing more in my free time than at school because in school they will never tell you to write a story however you want, in any way.’ (Did not share their gender, Year 7)

‘We read quite a lot at school and we write a lot too but sometimes the writing is boring as it’s not things I want to write about.’ (Girl, Year 7)

‘I also like to write my own stories, but when being told what to do or write makes it really stressful and takes the pleasure of writing away.’ (Girl, Year 7)

‘I like writing in my journal, and I like it because it is very relaxing. However, at school I find it stressful and I really don’t like it because the time limit creeps onto me. It is very difficult to complete English assessments etc. with such small-time limits.’ (Girl, Year 10)

‘I find writing quite boring in school as we only ever write SQI³ paragraphs analysing texts and very rarely do creative writing and other forms.’ (Girl, Year 10)

³ ‘Statement, Quote, Inference.’

Both types of writing enjoyment were positively related ($r = .538$), indicating that those who enjoyed writing at school also enjoyed writing in their free time. Indeed, 3 in 4 (74.9%) children and young people who enjoyed writing in their free time also enjoyed writing at school, while 3 in 5 (59.0%) children and young people who enjoyed writing at school also enjoyed writing in their free time.

Indeed, some children and young people told us why they enjoyed writing both in and out of school:

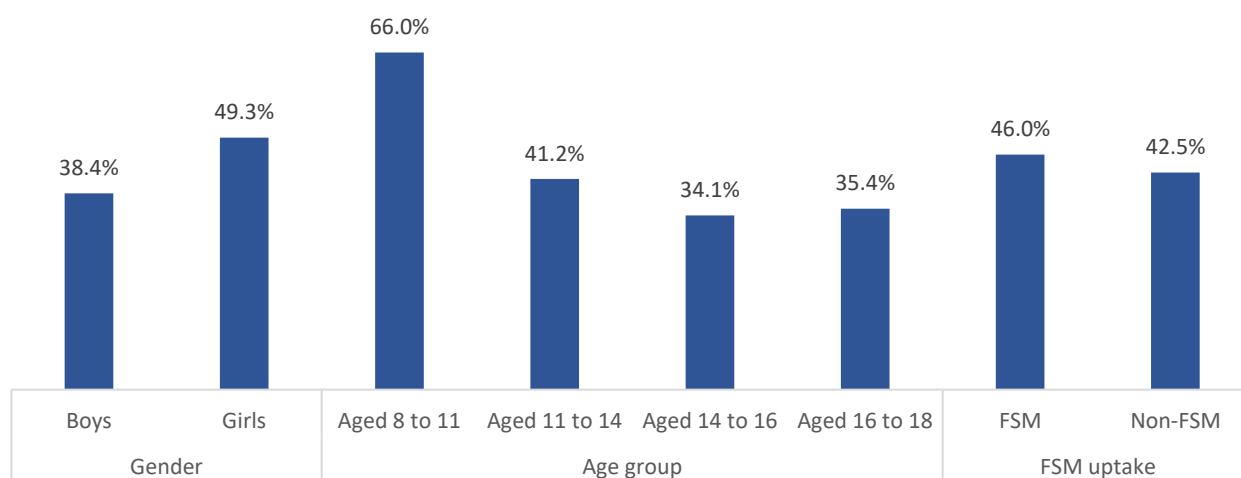
‘I really enjoy reading and writing in my free time but also during school because there is a wide selection that the amazing teachers let you choose from and when I do writing I can always have my ideas and put them towards my writing.’ (Girl, Year 6)

‘I really enjoy reading in my free time, and writing is one of my favourite hobbies, whether that be essays for school or my own writing in my free time. I enjoy writing with friends, especially when it’s based on a shared interest, for example the podcast we all like.’ (I describe myself another way, Year 11)

‘I enjoy making up stories and used to write them down. I enjoy writing in school but don’t like having to do it in a specific time schedule.’ (Girl, Year 7)

Figure 9 shows that enjoying writing at school is associated with the same demographic profiles as we saw for enjoying writing in free time, with more girls than boys, more younger people than older, and more children and young people who received FSMs than their non-FSM peers saying that they enjoyed writing at school.

Figure 9: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 who enjoyed writing at school in 2023 by gender, age group, and free-school-meal uptake



There were also differences in enjoying writing at school depending on where in the UK the children and young people went to school. As shown in Figure 10, more children and young

people who went to school in Wales said that they enjoyed writing at school compared with the other three nations. This follows what we saw in terms of national differences in enjoying writing in their free time. As before, the percentage for Northern Ireland needs to be treated with caution as we only had a small number of children and young people from NI taking part in this year's survey (n = 138*).

Figure 10: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 who enjoyed writing at school in 2023 by UK nation

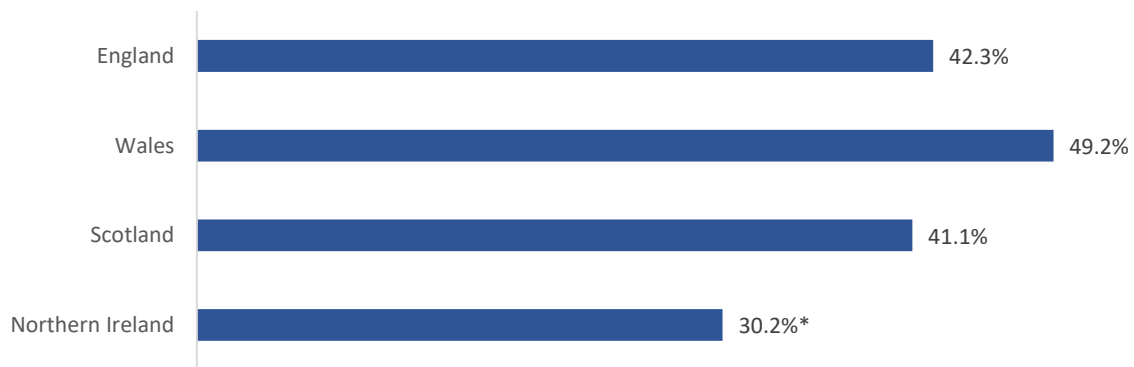
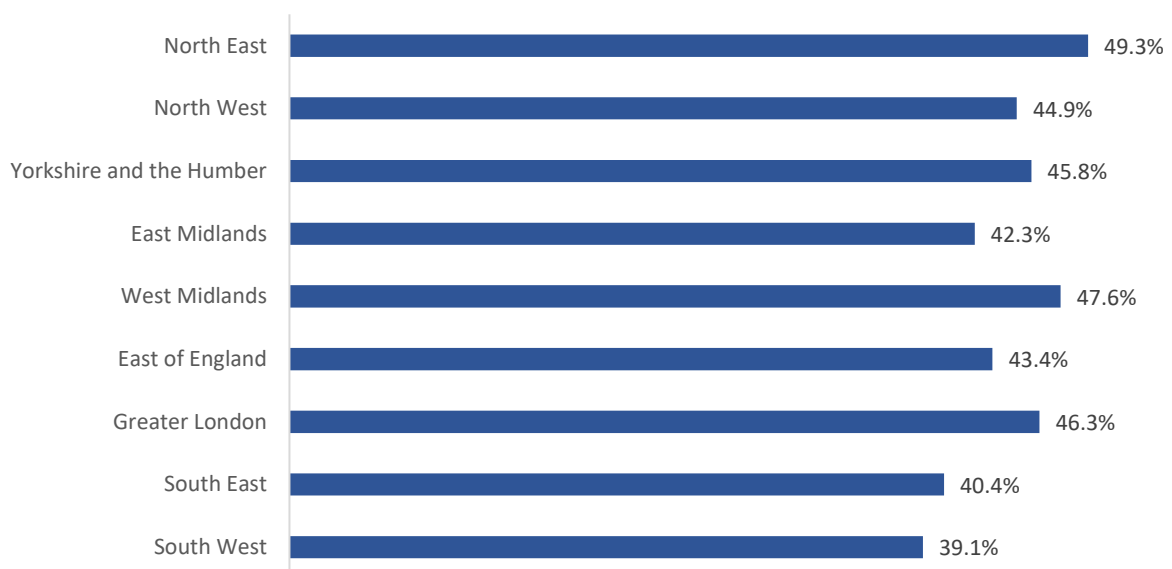


Figure 11 shows that more children and young people from the North East, Greater London and the West Midlands said that they enjoyed writing in their free time compared with their peers in other regions. The smallest percentage of children and young people who said that they enjoyed writing came from the South East and the South West. This maps directly on to the regional differences we saw earlier for enjoying writing in free time.

Figure 11: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 who enjoyed writing at school in 2023 by region in England



The link between writing enjoyment and writing frequency

For those aged 8 to 18, there was a moderate positive relationship between enjoying writing and writing frequency ($r = .514$), indicating that those who enjoyed writing wrote more frequently in their free time. Indeed, as shown in Table 1, those children and young people aged 8 to 18 who enjoyed writing were three times more likely to do so daily compared with their peers who didn't enjoy writing.

Table 1: Writing enjoyment by writing frequency in 2023 for children and young people aged 8 to 18

	Daily	A couple of times a week	Once a week	A couple of times a month	Once a month	Rarely or never
Enjoy writing	33.6%	32.2%	15.8%	9.1%	4.1%	5.2%
Don't enjoy writing	11.8%	14.5%	15.1%	13.7%	12.4%	32.4%

The relationship between writing enjoyment and writing frequency was less strong for those aged 5 to 8 ($r = .349$), but Table 2 shows that twice as many 5- to 8-year-olds who enjoyed writing also wrote something daily in their spare time compared with those who didn't enjoy writing.

Table 2: Writing enjoyment by writing frequency in 2023 for children aged 5 to 8

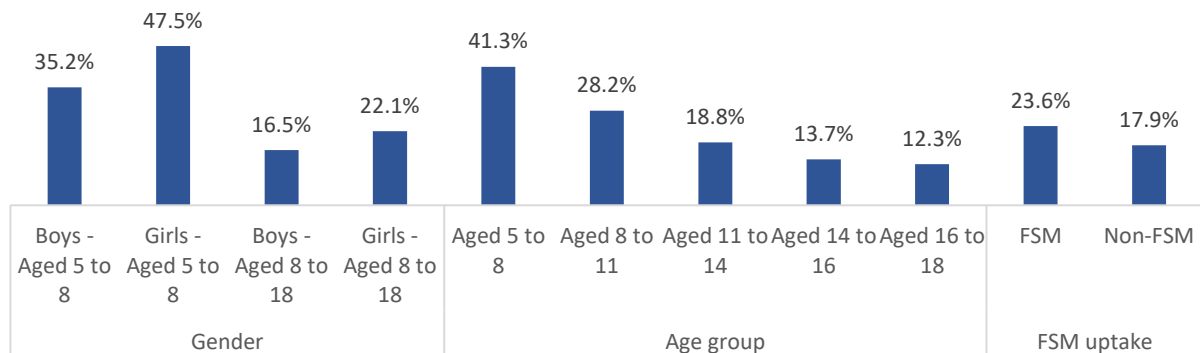
	Daily	1-2 times a week	1-2 times a month	Never
Enjoy writing	48.3%	31.5%	11.1%	9.2%
Don't enjoy writing	23.3%	28.2%	17.1%	31.4%

Daily writing by gender, age group and free-school-meal uptake

More girls than boys said that they wrote something daily in their free time in 2023, regardless of whether they were aged 5 to 8 or 8 to 18 (see Figure 14). However, the gender gap in daily writing for those aged 8 to 18 is half of the one seen for those aged 5 to 8 (5.6 vs. 12.3 percentage points).

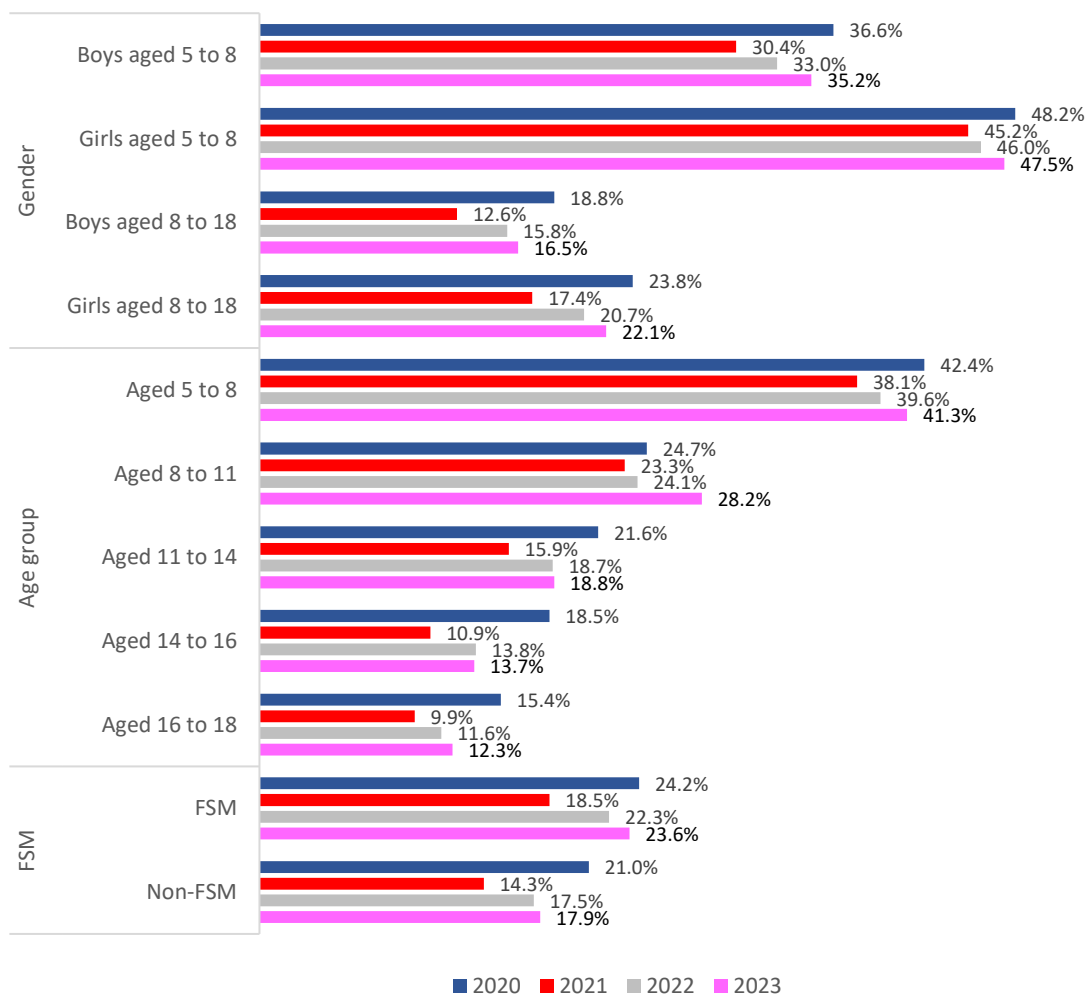
As with writing enjoyment, levels of daily writing decreased with age, with nearly four times as many children aged 5 to 8 saying that they wrote something in their spare time daily compared with those aged over 14. Not only did more children and young people who received FSMs say that they enjoyed writing, more also said that they wrote something daily in their free time compared with their peers who didn't receive FSMs.

Figure 14: Percentage of children and young people aged 5 to 18 who said that they wrote something daily in their free time in 2023 by gender, age group and free-school-meal uptake (8 to 18s only)



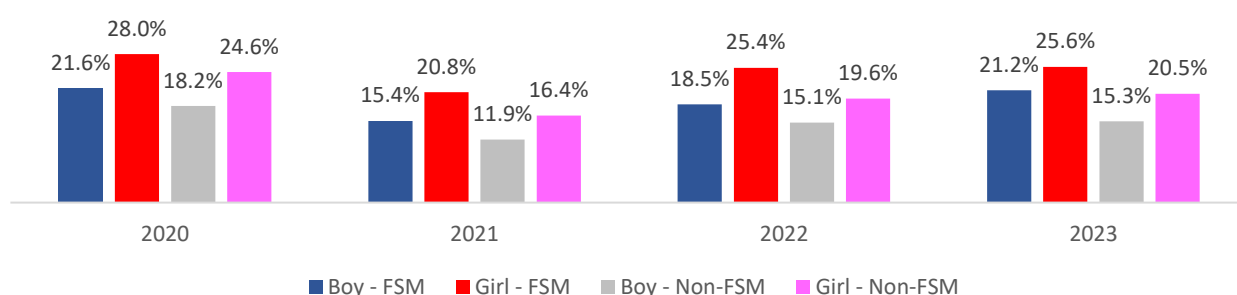
As shown in Figure 16, daily writing declined in all children and young people between 2020 and 2021 regardless of their background. Across the board, daily writing levels recovered somewhat between 2021 and 2022. All of these increases continued into 2023.

Figure 9: Percentage of children and young people who wrote something daily in their free time in 2020, 2021, 2022 and 2023 by gender, age group and free-school-meal uptake



We have also been particularly interested in tracking the impact of the pandemic on the writing behaviours of children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. Figure 17 shows levels of daily writing by gender and whether or not they received FSMs since 2020. It shows that from 2020 to 2021 there was a detrimental impact on daily writing levels regardless of children’s gender and whether or not they received FSMs. By 2022, daily writing rates had recovered, again regardless of gender or FSM status, a trend that has continued into 2023. However, fewer boys who didn’t receive FSMs said that they wrote something daily in their free time compared with the other groups, regardless of year.

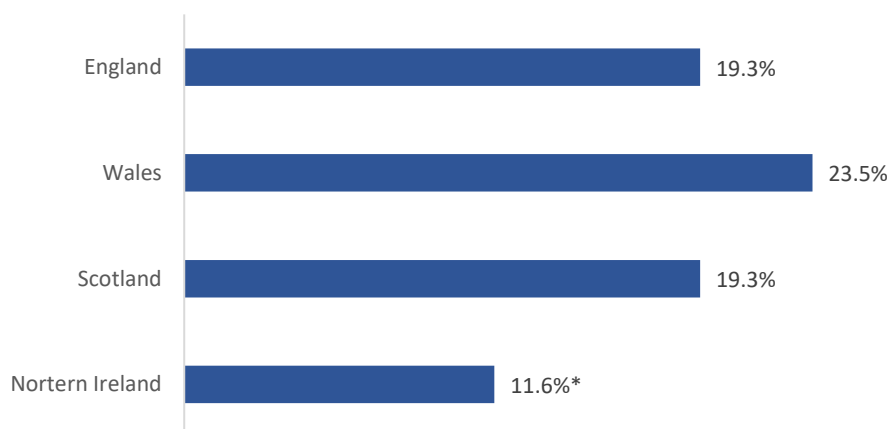
Figure 17: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 who wrote something daily in their free time in early 2020, 2021, 2022 and 2023 by gender and free-school-meal uptake



Daily writing by geographical region

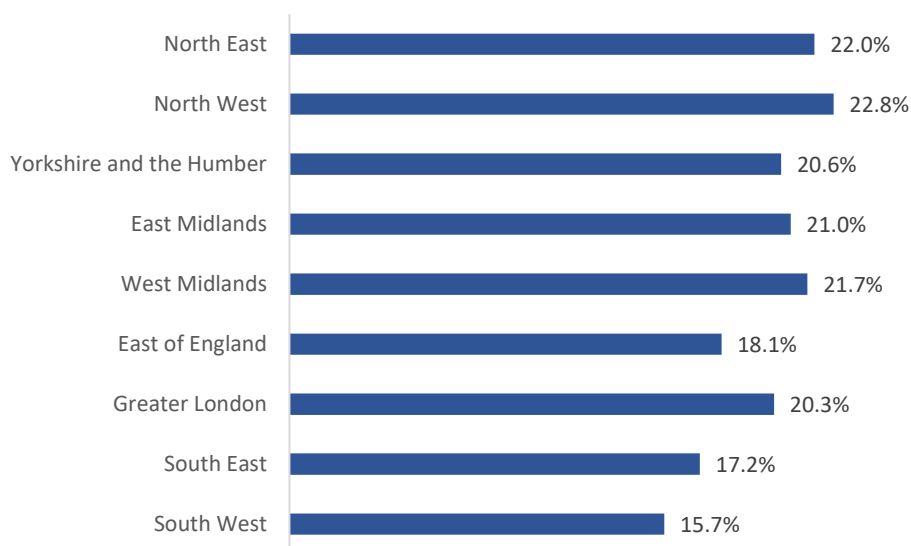
There were also differences in how many children and young people wrote something in their free time daily depending on where in the UK they went to school. As shown in Figure 18, more children and young people who went to school in Wales said that they wrote daily in their free time compared with the other three nations. As before, the percentage for Northern Ireland needs to be treated with caution as we only had a small number of children and young people from NI taking part in this year’s survey (n = 138*).

Figure 18: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 who wrote something daily in their free time in 2023 by UK nation



More specifically, there were differences in daily writing by regions in England (see Figure 19), with more children and young people from the North West, the North East, East and West Midlands telling us that they wrote something daily in their free time compared with their peers in other regions. The smallest percentage of children and young people who said that they wrote something daily in their free time came from the South West, followed by the South East and East of England.

Figure 19: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 who wrote something daily in their free time in 2023 by region in England



What motivates children and young people to write

We also asked children and young people aged 8 to 18 to reflect on the reasons why they wrote. We presented children and young people with 10 different motivations to write, which we grouped to form three categories: the creative writer⁵, the mindful writer⁶ and the social writer⁷. Of those who wrote in their free time at least once a month⁸, 1 in 2 wrote because it helped them feel creative (see Figure 20). Over 2 in 5 wrote to express their ideas and imagination and to express their thoughts and feelings. Writing to support mental wellbeing was also an important motivation for children and young people to write in their free time, with 3 in 10 saying that they wrote because it helped them relax, and 1 in 4 saying they wrote because it made them feel happy or feel more confident. Finally, 1 in 7 wrote to support causes and issues they care about or because it made them feel connected to the world.

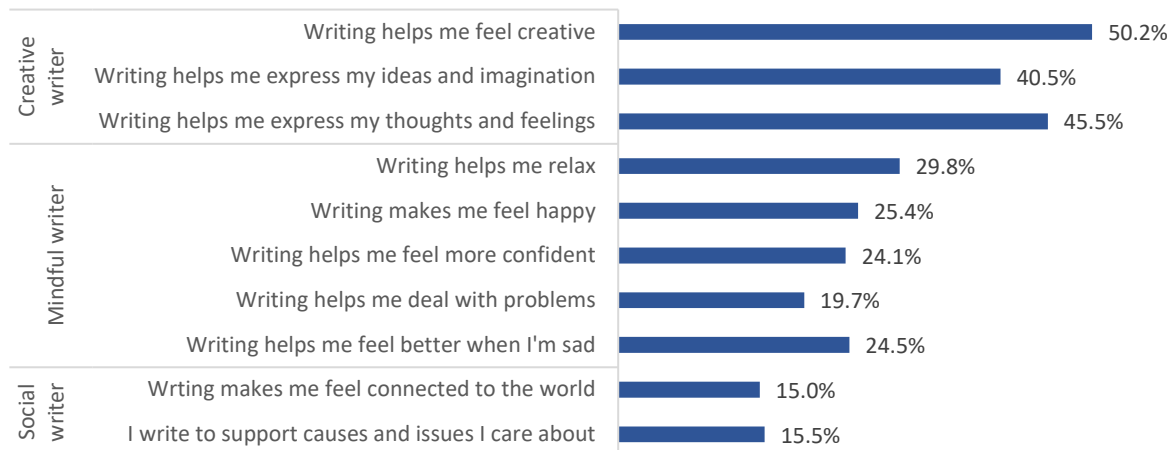
⁵ Combining three items: Writing helps me feel creative, thoughts, imagination. Cronbach's alpha = .823. Top quartile of responses being described here as the creative writer (29.1%).

⁶ Combining five items: relax, happy, confident, problems, sad. Cronbach's alpha = .834. Top quartile of responses being described here as the mindful writer (32.2%).

⁷ Combining two items: connected, causes. Cronbach's alpha = .594. Top two categories combined to describe the social writer (24.3%).

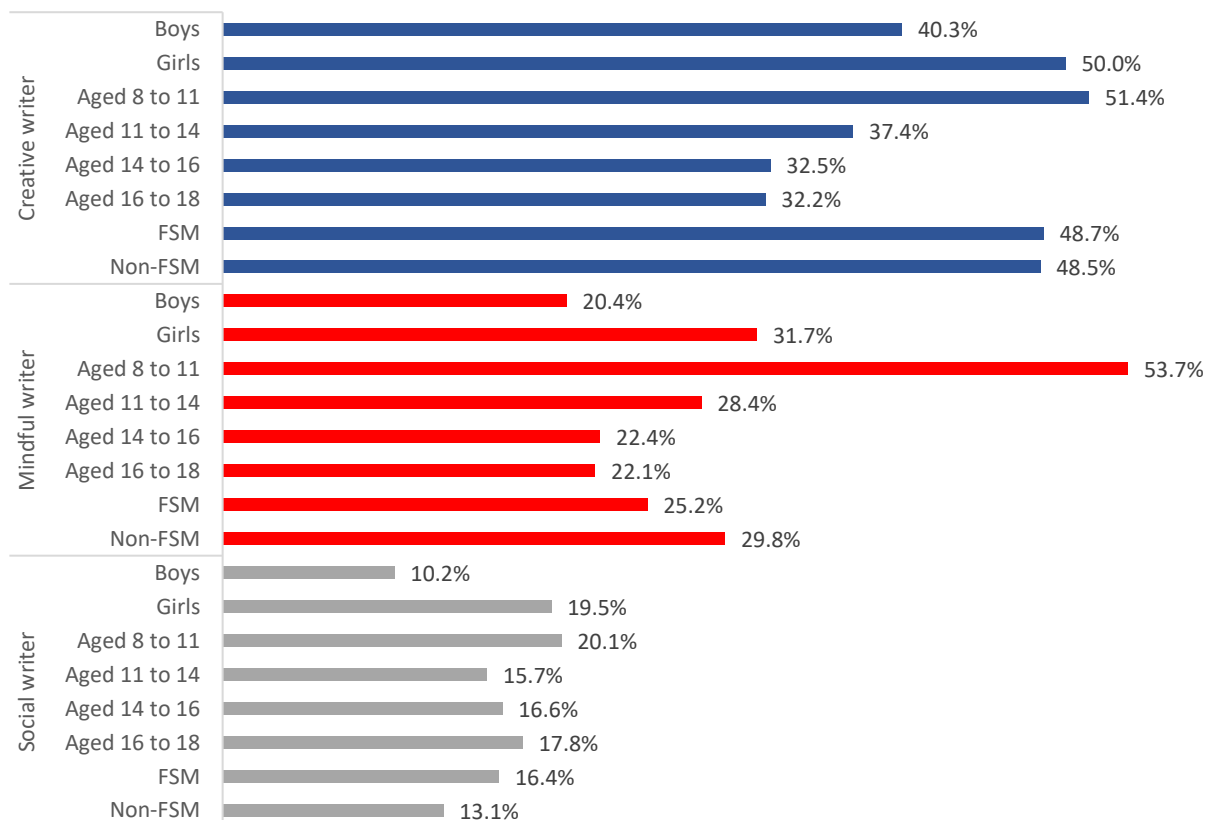
⁸ n = 47,438

Figure 20: Children and young people’s reasons for writing in 2023



We also wanted to know how writing motivations differed by background. Figure 21 shows that more girls than boys were creative, mindful or social writers, while more children aged 8 to 11 were creative, mindful or social writers compared with their older peers. Finally, there was very little difference in terms of FSM uptake and being a creative writer. However, more children and young people who received FSMs said that they were social writers compared with their peers who didn’t receive FSMs, more of whom, in turn, said that they were mindful writers.

Figure 21: Being a creative, mindful or social writer in 2023 by gender, age group and FSM uptake



What children and young people think about writing

We also asked children and young people aged 8 to 18 to agree or disagree with a few statements to see what they thought about some aspects of writing. Encouragingly, even though a large percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 struggled with deciding what to write (see Figure 22), over 2 in 5 continued writing even when they found it difficult. 1 in 3 also saw a link between their writing and their chances of getting a better job when they grow up. However, 2 in 5 admitted that they only wrote when they had to.

Figure 22: What children and young people aged 8 to 18 think about writing in 2023

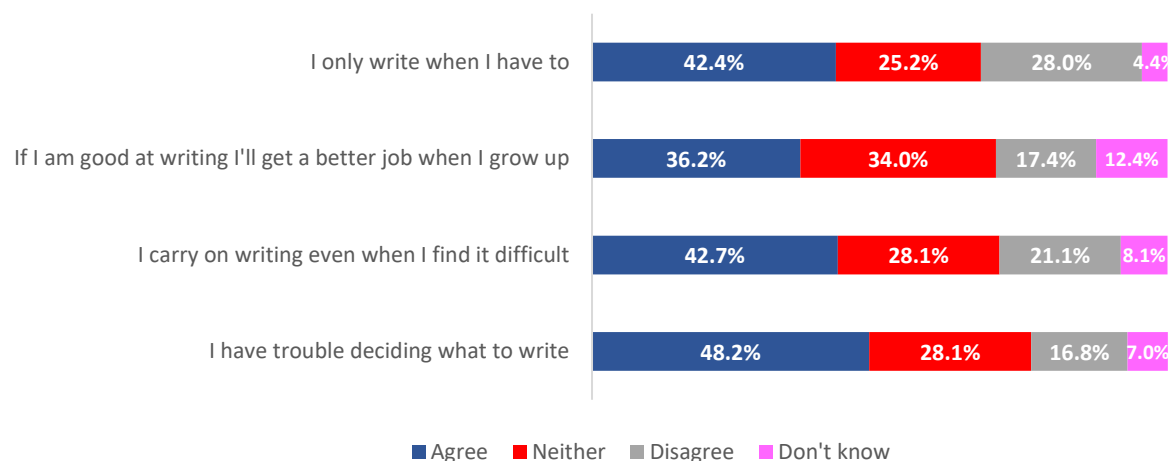


Table 3 shows that more boys than girls said that they only wrote when they had to, while more girls than boys said that they had trouble deciding what to write.

Deciding what to write also appears to be more of an issue for the youngest age group, with slightly more children aged 8 to 11 than those aged 16 to 18 saying this. By contrast, fewer children aged 8 to 11 said that they only wrote when they had to, and more said that they persevered with their writing even when it got difficult and that if they were good writer they would get a better job when they grow up than their older peers.

Slightly more children and young people who received FSMs said that they struggled to decide what to write compared with their non-FSM peers. However, slightly more children and young people receiving FSMs also said that they carried on writing when it was difficult compared with their non-FSM peers.

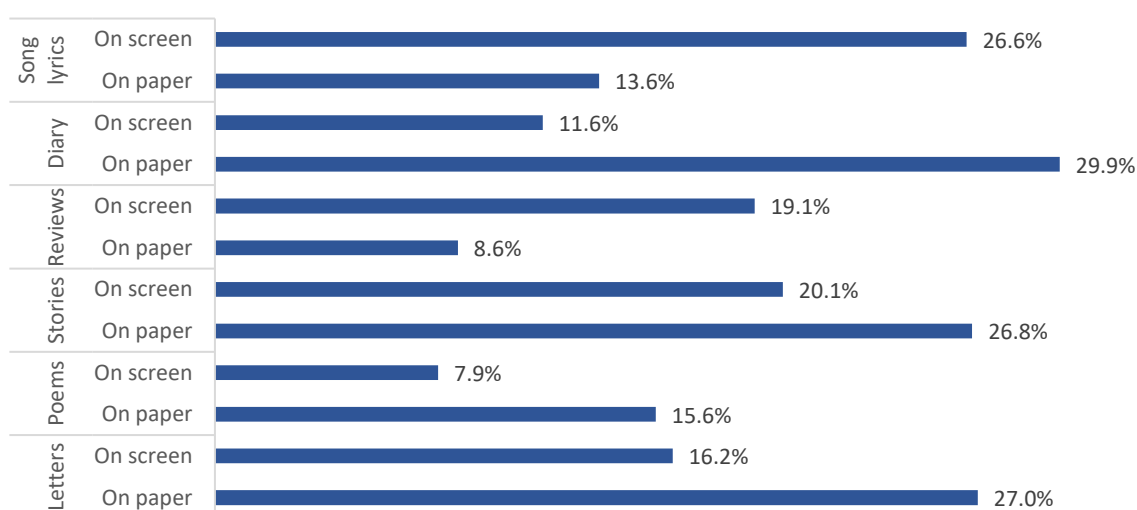
Table 3: Percentage agreement with writing attitude statements by gender, age group and FSM uptake of those aged 8 to 18

	I have trouble deciding what to write	I carry on writing even when it is difficult	If I am good at writing I will get a better job	I only write when I have to
Boys	45.0%	42.4%	36.1%	50.2%
Girls	51.1%	43.5%	36.5%	35.7%
Aged 8 to 11	49.5%	60.9%	43.7%	33.6%
Aged 11 to 14	48.2%	40.4%	34.9%	43.3%
Aged 14 to 16	47.5%	33.6%	33.0%	47.8%
Aged 16 to 18	42.2%	33.9%	42.2%	43.7%
FSM	51.4%	44.2%	35.8%	43.3%
Non-FSM	47.4%	41.7%	36.4%	42.9%

Writing materials and formats

When asked about the writing they did in their spare time at least once a month, on screen or on paper, writing a diary on paper was the most popular material and format, with 3 in 10 children and young people aged 8 to 18 saying they did this. Writing letters on paper was the second most popular material and format, with more than 1 in 4 saying they did this in their free time. Many children and young people also reported writing fiction/stories both on paper (1 in 4) and on screen (1 in 5), with this material the most often written across formats. Song lyrics were mostly written on screen, with 1 in 4 doing this compared with half as many on paper. Overall, poems were one of the least frequently written formats by this cohort of children and young people, both on a screen or on paper.

Figure 23: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 writing various formats in their free time either on a screen or on paper in 2023



Some children and young people told us that they preferred writing on screen because they struggled with their handwriting and they preferred the neatness of typed text:

'I hate writing because my handwriting is very ugly and there is a [bump] in my middle finger because of writing.' (Girl, Year 9)

'I prefer typing stuff up on my computer because it is neater and tidier.' (Boy, Year 8)

'I find typing easier to store and more efficient. I don't write things like stories; I draw them instead. That's just personal preference that school forces individuals to go against, unfortunately.' (Girl, Year 9)

We also asked whether children and young people wrote a variety of exclusively on-screen formats. As Figure 24 shows, most children and young people said that they wrote personal/direct messages in their free time, followed by over 4 in 5 who said that they also wrote texts or other messages with family and friends while playing video games. Around 3 in 5 wrote social media content in their free time, while 1 in 2 wrote emails. Only around 1 in 7 wrote blog/forum posts, while 1 in 10 wrote podcasts in their spare time.

Figure 24: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 writing various exclusively on-screen formats in their free time in 2023

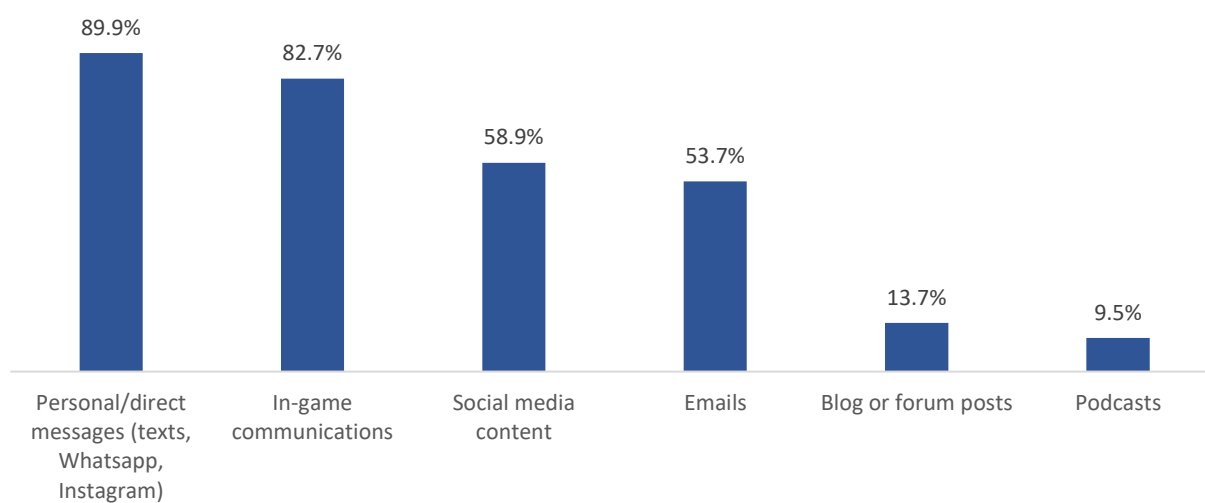
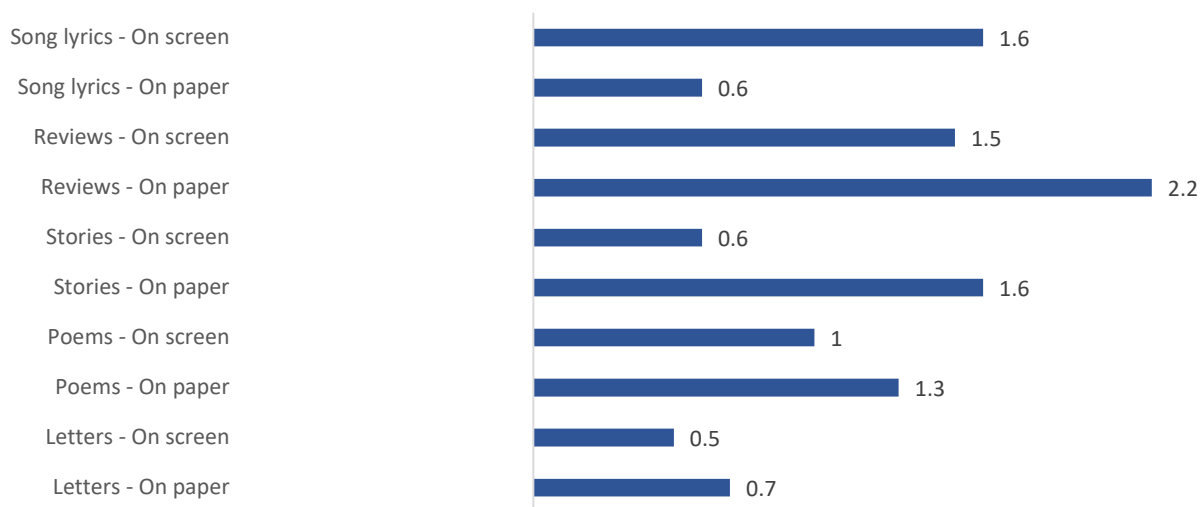


Figure 25 shows that in 2023 more children and young people aged 8 to 18 wrote various formats on a screen or on paper compared with the year before. In particular, more children and young people said in 2023 that they were writing reviews on paper, song lyrics on a screen, and poems on paper.

Figure 25: Percentage-point difference in various formats being written either on a screen or on paper between 2022 and 2023



However, far fewer children and young people wrote most of the exclusively on-screen formats in 2023 (see Figure 26), with emails being the biggest loser. Only blog/forum posts showed a slight increase compared with the year before.

Figure 26: Percentage-point difference in various formats being written digitally only between 2022 and 2023

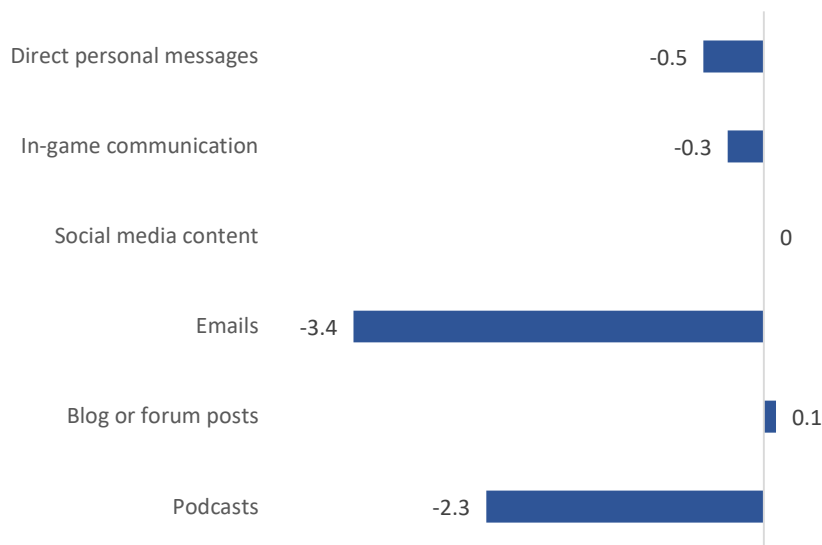


Table 4 shows that across the board (with on-screen reviews being the exception) more girls than boys said that they wrote any of the formats either on a screen or on paper in their free time. Similarly, more children aged 8 to 18 and those who received FSMs said that they wrote these formats both on a screen or on paper than their older peers or those who didn't receive FSMs.

Table 4: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 writing various formats in their free time either on a screen or on paper in 2022 by gender, age group and FSM uptake

	Song lyrics		Reviews		Stories		Diary		Poems		Letters	
	On screen	On paper	On screen	On paper	On screen	On paper	On screen	On paper	On screen	On paper	On screen	On paper
Boys	24.7%	9.2%	20.1%	8.0%	17.6%	23.6%	7.6%	17.1%	6.9%	12.5%	16.0%	23.0%
Girls	27.9%	16.9%	18.3%	9.0%	21.1%	29.3%	14.7%	40.6%	8.4%	18.0%	16.3%	30.6%
Aged 8 to 11	38.0%	20.5%	27.5%	14.6%	26.3%	40.0%	17.0%	41.1%	14.3%	28.8%	22.7%	40.4%
Aged 11 to 14	25.8%	12.9%	17.6%	7.9%	19.3%	26.3%	10.4%	28.8%	6.4%	13.6%	15.5%	25.8%
Aged 14 to 16	18.3%	9.2%	16.3%	4.9%	16.7%	15.6%	10.6%	22.5%	6.6%	9.7%	12.4%	18.1%
Aged 16 to 18	12.8%	7.4%	17.3%	3.2%	18.2%	10.8%	12.6%	21.4%	10.2%	8.8%	12.6%	13.4%
FSM	32.7%	14.1%	22.2%	9.1%	22.8%	25.4%	15.3%	30.8%	10.7%	17.7%	17.6%	27.8%
Non-FSM	24.2%	13.1%	17.8%	8.0%	18.9%	26.3%	10.3%	28.9%	6.8%	14.3%	15.6%	25.8%

More girls than boys also said that they wrote personal/direct messages, emails and social media content in their free time (see Table 5). Conversely, more boys than girls said that they wrote in-game communications, blog/forum posts and podcasts in their free time.

With the exception of podcasts and blog/forum posts, more young people aged 14 and older said that they wrote personal/direct messages, emails or social media content than their younger peers. In-game communications were most frequently written by those aged 11 to 14 and those aged 14 to 16, followed by those aged 8 to 11. Fewer young people aged 16 to 18 said that they wrote in-game communications in their free time.

Overall, more children and young people who didn't receive FSMs said that they wrote personal/direct messages or emails than their peers who received FSMs. In turn, slightly more children and young people who received FSMs said that they wrote any of the other formats compared with their peers who didn't receive FSMs.

Table 5: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 writing various exclusively on-screen formats in their free time in 2022 by gender, age group and FSM uptake

	Personal / direct messages	Emails	Blog / forum posts	Social media content	Podcasts	In-game communications
Boys	87.5%	55.9%	15.2%	57.1%	11.6%	86.4%
Girls	92.0%	52.2%	12.2%	60.6%	7.8%	80.0%
Aged 8 to 11	68.6%	30.3%	16.5%	44.2%	14.6%	75.9%
Aged 11 to 14	94.2%	51.1%	13.0%	62.5%	8.8%	85.2%
Aged 14 to 16	96.1%	73.5%	13.0%	61.3%	7.2%	80.5%
Aged 16 to 18	97.0%	87.2%	14.9%	55.8%	6.1%	74.7%
FSM	86.5%	48.1%	16.3%	63.1%	11.5%	84.3%
Non-FSM	92.2%	57.3%	13.1%	59.2%	8.7%	82.8%

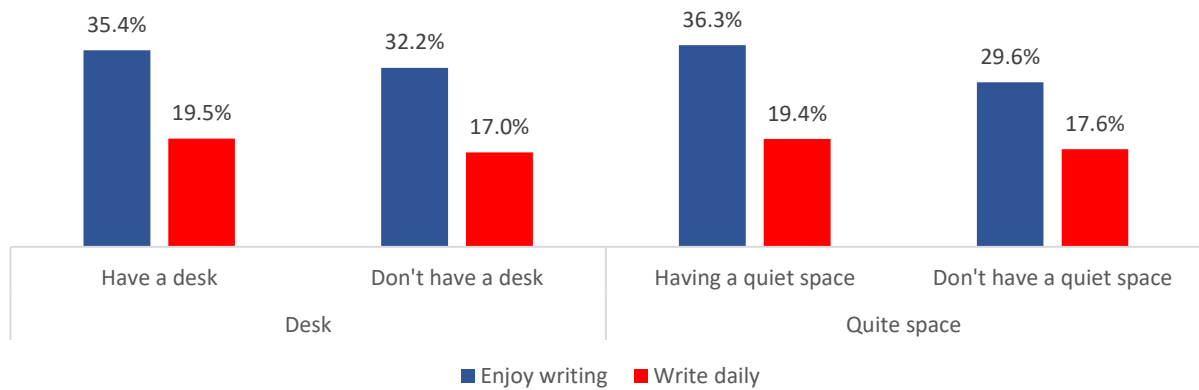
What would engage children and young people in writing?

So far we have looked at how many children and young people enjoy writing, both in and out of school, how often they write in their free time, what motivates them to write, and, if and when they write, what formats they are most likely to write, either on screen or on paper. We have also explored how any of these are associated with some of their background characteristics.

We were also interested to explore to what extent environmental factors, such as access to writing materials, a place to write and conditions such as a quiet space, were associated with writing engagement. Access to writing materials is clearly going to be an important factor. However, having your own desk or table to write, draw or do homework on wasn't strongly associated with either writing enjoyment ($r = .038$) or daily writing ($r = .064$). Having a quiet

space to work, read or take time out was slightly more strongly associated with writing enjoyment ($r = .081$) or daily writing ($r = .083$) than a having a desk (also see Figure 27).

Figure 27: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 enjoying writing in their free time or writing daily in their free time by whether or not they have access to desk/table of their own or access to a quiet space at home



To better understand how we can motivate those who don't write, we asked those who told us that they didn't write to explain why this was. Perhaps unsurprisingly, many told us that they didn't write because they found writing boring:

'I find it tedious.' (Girl, Year 8)

'Writing is quite boring and I'd only write for work or if it is necessary.' (Boy, Year 8)

'Same as reading I find writing boring and I wouldn't enjoy writing when I could be doing anything else. Nothing will make me want to write. Writing is just a really boring task that stresses me out, hurts my wrist and makes get very bored/tired.' (Girl, Year 7)

'I find it boring and see no purpose or benefit that directly affects me.' (Boy, Year 9)

'I find it boring and time consuming; why do it if I don't enjoy it.' (Boy, Year 11)

'I find it a bit boring and it doesn't really serve a true purpose with me.' (Boy, Year 8)

'I don't like to write I find it quite boring. I don't even like doing it at school let alone at home.' (Girl, Year 7)

'I find it boring and would rather imagine stories in my head.' (Boy, Year 8)

Others told us that they didn't write because they had nothing to write about:

'I don't write because I feel that if I was to write then I would be stuck thinking for a long time about what I am going to write. Also because I don't feel that I have creative ideas to express what I want to write about.' (Girl, Year 7)

‘It’s too time consuming, and I’m not very creative or talented so I don’t find it enjoyable.’
(Girl, Year 7)

‘I don’t like writing because I don’t have anything to write about so when I have to write I find it boring because I don’t know how to do it.’ (Girl, Year 10)

‘I don’t write because of the fact that there is nothing really interesting to write about when I have my free time. I don’t have any inspiration on pieces I could write about.’ (Girl, Year 8)

‘There is nothing much that I feel like writing about.’ (Boy, Year 8)

Others see writing as pointless, or a waste of time:

‘Writing feels pointless. The main reason why I don’t write is because after you have finished writing, the paper is probably going to end up in the bin eventually. Writing is fun depending on how skilled you are at it.’ (Boy, Year 8)

‘I find it boring and a waste of time. People don’t need to know what I’m feeling or writing. It doesn’t make a difference to the world at all.’ (Girl, Year 8)

‘I get bored. If no one reads it then what’s the point.’ (Girl, Year 9)

‘Writing is so boring it genuinely pains me to have to sit down and be scribbling words for some meaningless purpose.’ (Boy, Year 11)

‘It wastes time, boring, and unless you are doing it for a purpose like money, there is no reason to do it.’ (Girl, Year 11)

‘Nothing makes me want to write because I think of it as a waste of time and hurting your hand over nothing but part of me knows that you have got to learn to write to get a good job and it is a basic life skill.’ (Boy, Year 7)

And finally, others mentioned dreading being judged:

‘I don’t write because I always feel like my work is being judged and something that would make me want to write would be more creative freedom in school because it makes you feel like you have to fit a criteria of plot points and SPAG rules.’ (Boy, Year 7)

‘Writing seems quite boring. I am quite discouraged to write because when I wrote stories in class I was told that I hadn’t included enough techniques and had somehow convinced myself that I wasn’t a very good writer.’ (Boy, Year 7)

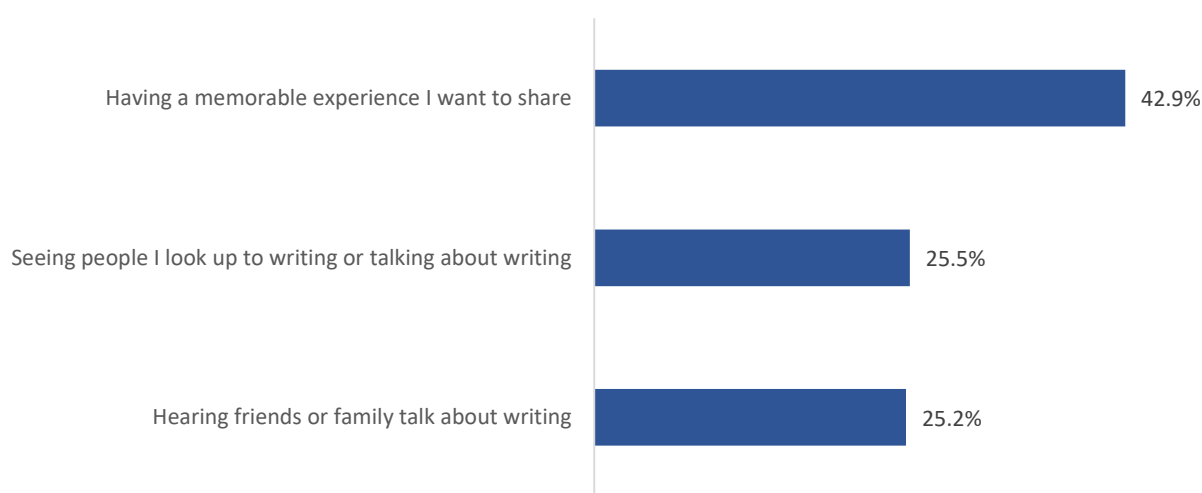
‘I don’t write because I feel like I could be judged on what I write about and how I word it.’
(Girl, Year 6)

‘I don’t write because I feel it’s rubbish and no one will want to read it.’ (Girl, Year 10)

‘I find writing quite boring and I can’t always express myself in the same way as I can when I speak. I might start to write if I am given a topic I care about and people won’t judge me how I have written it.’ (Girl, Year 11)

When asked what makes them want to write, most children and young people mentioned that they would write to share a memorable experience (see Figure 28). 1 in 4 children and young people also mentioned that seeing people they look up to talk about writing would make them want to write, as would hearing friends and family talk about writing.

Figure 28: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 saying that they would write for the following reasons:



Indeed, some children and young people mentioned seeing others write as potential motivators to write:

‘Seeing someone write something really cool in lesson time or on TikTok.’
(Girl, Year 7)

‘What makes me write is people I want to grow up like.’ (Boy, Year 7)

‘Watching my idol write.’ (Girl, Year 7)

While others talked about the importance of memorable experiences:

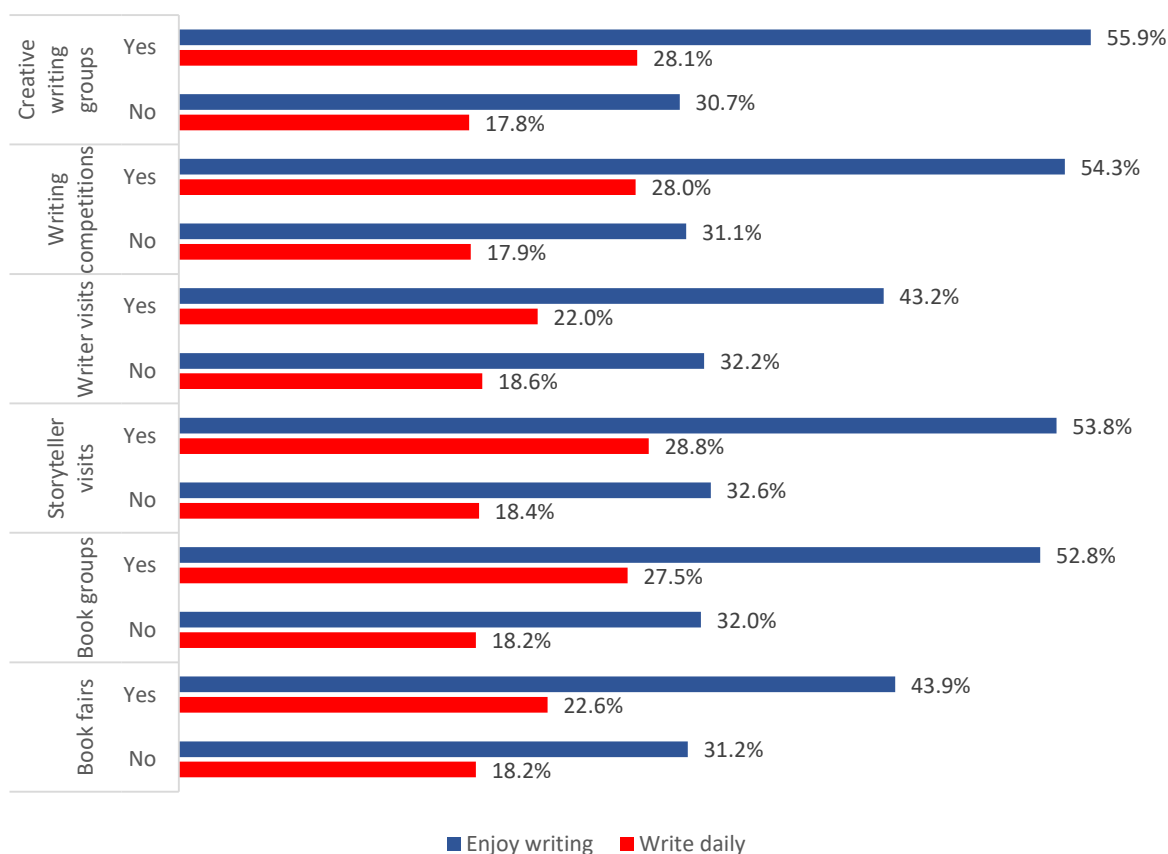
‘I don’t really write in my free time but maybe having a memorable experience I want to share could make me want to write.’ (Girl, Year 7)

‘Something that would make me write would be if I had something really interesting happen in my life I would write a bit about it so I wouldn’t forget.’ (Boy, Year 6)

In addition to seeing or hearing people talk about writing and having a memorable experience to share, providing children and young people with the opportunities to get inspired to write, either at school or in the community, can positively influence their enjoyment and frequency of writing in their free time.

As shown in Figure 29, more children and young people who had been to creative-writing groups or who had taken part in writing competitions said that they enjoyed writing and were writing daily in their free time compared with those who didn't take part in these activities. The same was true for children and young people who went to see a storyteller or an author, who attended book groups, or who went to books fairs.

Figure 29: Percentage of children and young people enjoying writing and writing daily in their spare time by various creative opportunities



To sum up

Our previous research showed that writing enjoyment and attainment are linked, with children and young people who enjoy writing more likely to write above the level expected for their age. It is also important to note the consistent connections our research shows between writing and creativity, self-expression and mental wellbeing.

However, children and young people's enjoyment of writing has been on an alarming downward trajectory since 2017. The modest recovery of 2020 is now an isolated case study overshadowed by a series of record lows with a total loss of 12.2 percentage points over the past 13 years. Only 1 in 3 (34.6%) children and young people aged 8 to 18 said in 2023 that they enjoyed writing in their free time. Additionally, the sharp decline in writing attainment recorded by statutory assessment data in recent years suggests that we are no longer facing a setback but a crisis.

This report featured unique insights on levels of writing enjoyment in free time versus levels of writing enjoyment at school, with more children and young people saying they enjoyed writing at school more than they did in their free time: over 2 in 5 (43.9%) vs 1 in 3 (34.6%). These findings resonate with the attitudes of 48.2% of children and young people who said that they struggled to decide what to write about. The open-ended comments in fact featured an appreciation of prescriptive structures and support provided by teachers in school.

At the same time, children and young people who enjoyed writing more in their free time highlighted time constraints of lessons and assessments, prescribed topics, and the lack of freedom in choosing a writing style as the reasons why they didn't find writing in school enjoyable. This newly identified trend calls attention to the relevance of the creative element intrinsic to writing-for-pleasure practices. In fact, findings indicate that children and young people who engage with creative elements, such as taking up the challenge of self-chosen styles and topics, can develop personal writing practices that inspire them to write in their free time and for pleasure.

The report also clearly outlines what inspires children and young people who write in their free time to write for pleasure. Crucially, more children and young people who wrote in their free time participated in creative writing groups, entered writing competitions, met authors, and attended book groups and book fairs. Furthermore, having had memorable experiences to use as stimuli, along with witnessing role models writing for pleasure, featured as significant sources of inspiration. We have also been able to group what motivates young writers, with creativity (50.2%), expressing ideas (40.5%), and self-expression (45.5%) scoring highly, followed by mindfulness (24.5%), social connection and social change (15.5%). Increased awareness of these motivators may help us galvanise reluctant writers with writing approaches that encompass children's and young people's interests. A coordinated effort to provide more such opportunities may inspire reluctant writers to explore writing-for-pleasure practices.

One other finding is worth highlighting here. Unlike reading enjoyment, where more non-FSM than FSM children and young people said that they enjoyed reading in their free time, more children and young people who received free school meals told us in 2023 that they enjoyed writing in their spare time (38.6% vs 32.9%). Every year since 2010, the National Literacy Trust has consistently found that children on free school meals are more likely to engage with writing in their free time than their better-off peers. This trend has remained steady in the face of a global pandemic and an unprecedented cost-of-living crisis that has forced up the price of consumer goods and services at the fastest rate in four decades. This highlights the potential for writing for pleasure to play a vital role in the lives of disadvantaged children and young people.

However, as we continue to record alarmingly low levels of writing enjoyment among children and young people, alongside increasingly compelling evidence on the benefits that writing for pleasure and regular writing have on children's writing attainment and wellbeing, it is clear that urgent coordinated action is needed. It is now time to provide considered in-school

opportunities aimed at reconnecting children and young people with the creative elements that transform writing into a pleasurable personal practice that allows for self-expression and mental wellbeing, and that works as a tool to process struggles, make sense of the world and participate actively in civic life.

The findings in this report examined alongside pre-recorded trends provide extensive evidence to inform coordinated action that should be intra and interdisciplinary, inter-organisational and, above all, policy-defining. At the National Literacy Trust, we will continue to support schools to explore and develop writing-for-enjoyment practices with the radical view that every young person is a writer.

About the National Literacy Trust

Our charity is dedicated to improving the reading, writing, speaking and listening skills of those who need it most, giving them the best possible chance of success in school, work and life. We run Literacy Hubs and campaigns in communities where low levels of literacy and social mobility are seriously impacting people's lives. We support schools and early years settings to deliver outstanding literacy provision, and we campaign to make literacy a priority for politicians, businesses and parents. Our research and analysis make us the leading authority on literacy and drive our interventions.

Literacy is a vital element of action against poverty and our work changes life stories.

Visit www.literacytrust.org.uk to find out more, donate or sign up for a free email newsletter. You can also find us on Facebook and follow us on Twitter.

Copyright

© National Literacy Trust 2023. You may report on findings or statistics included in this report if you accredit them to the National Literacy Trust.

Suggested reference for this report is: Clark, C., Bonafede, F., Picton, I. & Cole, A. (2023) Children and young people's writing in 2023. London: National Literacy Trust.

We will consider requests to use extracts or data from this publication provided that you:

- Acknowledge that the content is the work of the National Literacy Trust and provide appropriate references in any publications or accompanying publicity;
- State that any views expressed are yours and not necessarily those of the National Literacy Trust.