



Change your story

Children and young people's writing in 2026

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Our recently published analysis of more than 55,000 children and young people's open-ended responses highlighted the complexity of their relationship with writing ([Bonafede & Clark, 2026](#)). Drawing on children and young people's own accounts, the report showed that writing engagement is shaped by a combination of emotional, cognitive, behavioural and environmental factors. Experiences of writing ranged from developmental and self-expressive to effortful, conditional or actively avoided. Importantly, these experiences were not fixed. Positive and negative perceptions of writing often coexisted within the same young person, shifting according to context, purpose and circumstance.

Against this backdrop, the Annual Literacy Survey has continued to track children and young people's writing engagement over time. Over the past decade, our research has revealed a steady and concerning decline. Since 2010, fewer children and young people have reported enjoying writing in their free time, while daily writing outside the classroom has become increasingly uncommon. By 2024 and 2025, both writing enjoyment and daily writing had reached their lowest recorded levels.

This report continues to explore how writing engagement is evolving, and what trends reveal about how children and young people perceive and experience writing beyond the classroom in 2026. It looks in detail at how writing enjoyment and frequency vary by age, gender and socioeconomic background, and considers how these factors interact with writing confidence. In addition, it examines the different formats through which children and young people choose to write in their free time.

We asked **125,375** children and young people aged 5 to 18 from 479 schools across the UK who took part in our Annual Literacy Survey about their writing in 2026 (see **Appendix A** for more information on the methodology and sample).

What this report shows

In 2026, we saw small but notable increases in both writing enjoyment and the frequency of daily writing. While these changes may suggest early signs of recovery, they must be understood within the broader context of long-term decline. Overall engagement remains low, and levels of enjoyment and frequency continue to fall significantly short of those seen prior to 2019. Overall, the findings point to a broader pattern of reduced engagement with writing outside the classroom, highlighting how important it is to support children and young people in building a meaningful and positive connection with writing in their everyday lives.

Key findings in detail:

Writing enjoyment in free time

Writing enjoyment showed a small increase in 2026, interrupting the downward trend seen in recent years, although overall levels remain low:

- Just under 3 in 10 (28.7%) children and young people aged 8 to 18 said they enjoyed writing in their free time in 2026, up 2.1 percentage points from 2025.
- Writing enjoyment among children aged 5 to 8 also rose slightly to 61.7%, although levels remain well below those seen before 2019.
- More girls than boys enjoyed writing across all age groups.
- Writing enjoyment continued to decline with age, with the lowest levels among those aged 11 to 16, followed by a small increase among those aged 16 to 18.
- Children and young people receiving free school meals (FSM) were more likely to enjoy writing than their non-FSM peers, continuing a long-standing trend.

Daily writing in free time

Daily writing in their free time also increased slightly in 2026 but it remains uncommon for most children and young people:

- Just over 1 in 9 (11.9%) children and young people aged 8 to 18 said they wrote something daily in their free time, up slightly from 10.4% in 2025.
- Since 2010, daily writing in free time has fallen by 15.1 percentage points, meaning that 56% fewer children and young people now write daily compared with 15 years ago.
- Daily writing declined with age, with nearly 2 in 5 children aged 5 to 8 writing daily compared with around 1 in 10 of those aged 11 and older.
- More girls than boys wrote daily across all age groups.
- More children and young people receiving free school meals reported writing daily than those not receiving FSMs.

Writing confidence

While enjoyment and frequency remain low, most children and young people express confidence in their writing:

- Around 2 in 3 children and young people aged 8 to 18 described themselves as confident or very confident writers.
- Confidence was higher among younger children and declined across adolescence before rising slightly among those aged 16 to 18.
- In contrast to enjoyment and frequency, confidence was similar for boys and girls.
- More non-FSM pupils reported being confident writers than their peers who received FSMs.

The relationship between writing enjoyment, frequency and confidence

Examining writing enjoyment, frequency and confidence together shows that these aspects of writing are closely linked, but do not always move in the same way:

- Nearly 3 in 10 (28.5%) of those who enjoyed writing wrote daily, compared with just over 1 in 20 (5.1%) of those who did not enjoy writing.
- However, writing was still common among those who did not enjoy writing: more than 1 in 4 wrote at least weekly, and over half wrote something at least once a month.
- Writing enjoyment showed a moderate to strong relationship with writing frequency ($r = .615$), while the relationships between confidence and both enjoyment ($r = .342$) and frequency ($r = .307$) were weaker.
- While children and young people who enjoyed writing were more likely to be confident and to write often, confident writers were not exclusively high-frequency writers, and a notable proportion did not enjoy writing. This suggests that confidence is not associated with frequent writing and enjoyment alone.

What children and young people write in their free time

Looking at what children and young people choose to write helps to bring this picture to life and shows how writing fits into their everyday lives. Children and young people continued to engage with a wide range of writing formats in 2026, both on paper and on screen:

- Paper remained the dominant medium for reflective and sustained forms of writing, particularly diary or journal writing, freewriting and letters.
- Screens were preferred for formats linked to music, media and communication, including song lyrics, scripts and reviews.
- Personal and direct messages were the most commonly written digital formats.

These findings highlight a complex picture of writing in children and young people's lives. While overall engagement remains low, writing continues to play an active role in many young people's everyday experiences, often in ways that sit outside traditional definitions of writing for pleasure. The challenge, therefore, is not only to increase how often children and young people write, but to support them in finding value, relevance and confidence in writing as part of their daily lives.

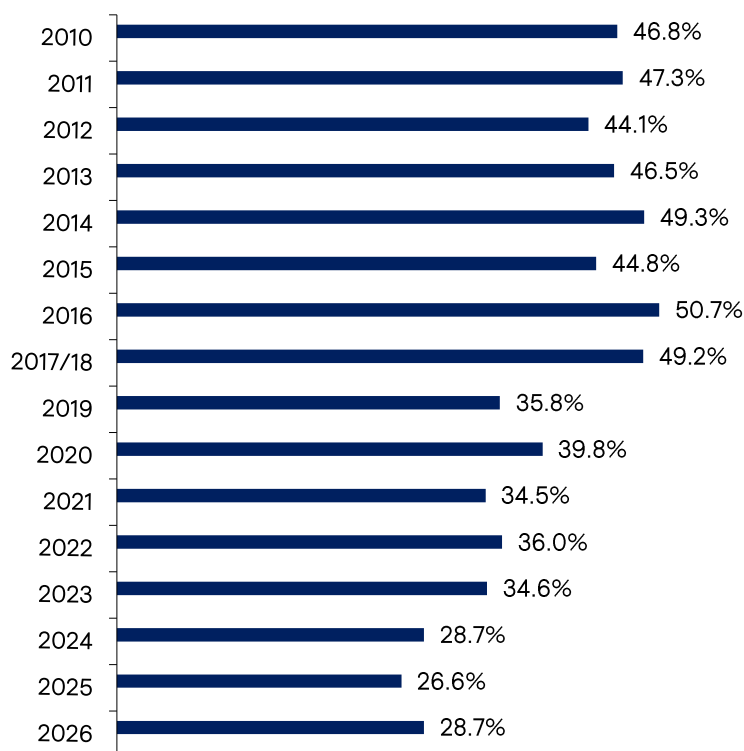
Writing in 2026

This report focuses on the writing that children and young people do during their free time. Before responding to the questions on writing, children and young people were reminded that writing referred to any writing they did outside of their homework, whether on paper or on a screen.

Writing enjoyment in free time

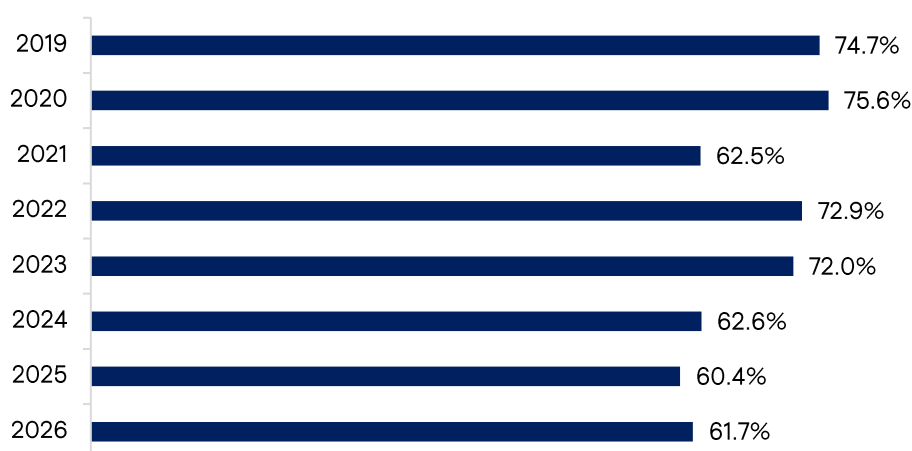
In 2026, just under 3 in 10 (28.7%) children and young people aged 8 to 18 said they enjoyed writing in their free time. This represents a small increase of 2.1 percentage points compared with 2025 (26.6%), suggesting a modest uptick following last year's low point (see Figure 1). While the longer-term trend remains concerning, this is an encouraging early signal, although it remains to be seen whether this marks the start of a sustained improvement.

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 2026.



In 2026, 61.7% of children aged 5 to 8 said they enjoyed writing in their free time, which is up slightly from 60.4% in 2025. Although levels have fluctuated over time, writing enjoyment among younger children remains notably lower than in 2019 (74.7%).

Figure 2: Percentage of children and young people aged 5 to 8 who enjoyed writing in their free time either very much or quite a lot from 2019 to 2026.



Who enjoyed writing in 2026

As shown in Figure 3, more girls than boys said that they enjoyed writing in their free time across age groups. In 2026, around 2 in 3 girls aged 5 to 8 said they enjoyed writing compared with around 3 in 5 boys. Among those aged 8 to 18, around 1 in 3 girls said they enjoyed writing compared with around 1 in 5 boys.

Writing enjoyment also varied by age. Around 3 in 5 children aged 5 to 8 said they enjoyed writing in their free time, compared with 2 in 5 children aged 8 to 11 and around 1 in 4 of those aged 11 to 14 and 14 to 16. Levels were slightly higher among those aged 16 to 18, where just under 3 in 10 said they enjoyed writing.

More children and young people receiving free school meals, our proxy of socioeconomic background, said that they enjoyed writing in their free time compared with their peers who did not receive FSMs. Please see **Appendix B** for differences in writing enjoyment by nation and region in England

Figure 3: Percentage of children and young people aged 5 to 18 who enjoyed writing in their free time in 2026 by gender, age group and FSM uptake (8 to 18s only).

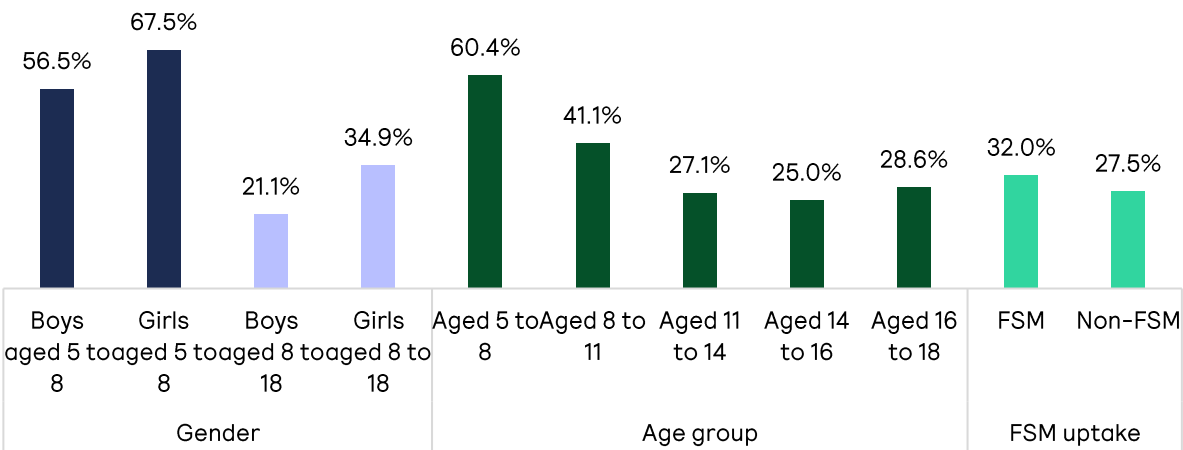


Table 1 shows writing enjoyment levels of those aged 8 to 18 between 2010 and 2026 by gender, age group and FSM uptake. Compared with 2025, writing enjoyment among children and young people aged 8 to 18 increased slightly across all groups in 2026. Small increases were seen for both boys and girls across all age groups, and among those receiving free school meals and those who did not. The largest increases were among those aged 11 to 14, 14 to 16 and 16 to 18.

While the overall pattern of differences remains similar, there were some small shifts in gaps between groups. The gender gap widened slightly (by 1.0 percentage point), while the gap between those receiving free school meals and those who did not narrowed (by 1.6 percentage points). Differences between age groups also persisted, although increases among older age groups suggest a slight narrowing at the upper end.

Table 1: Writing enjoyment levels for children and young people aged 8 to 18 between 2010 and 2026 by gender, age group and FSM uptake.

	Boys	Girls	8–11	11–14	14–16	16–18	FSM	Non-FSM
2010	37.8%	55.1%	61.0%	44.3%	34.3%	47.1%	46.9%	46.6%
2011	38.1%	56.5%	66.7%	44.3%	35.9%	45.9%	45.9%	47.3%
2012	35.1%	52.4%	52.1%	41.0%	35.8%	40.3%	43.4%	43.7%
2013	38.0%	55.4%	56.3%	42.4%	36.0%	34.8%	47.9%	46.0%
2014	40.5%	57.5%	57.4%	47.2%	38.8%	38.4%	51.0%	49.1%
2015	35.9%	50.7%	63.1%	41.3%	31.3%	42.8%	46.7%	43.3%
2016	42.7%	52.8%	69.7%	47.4%	36.9%	40.4%	54.7%	50.0%
2017/18	40.9%	57.4%	68.5%	46.5%	36.0%	37.8%	50.1%	48.8%
2019	27.3%	44.5%	54.5%	32.4%	24.8%	27.9%	42.0%	33.8%
2020	34.5%	44.7%	53.4%	38.2%	29.3%	33.3%	44.9%	38.6%
2021	32.1%	42.3%	47.5%	35.6%	27.0%	28.9%	38.4%	33.6%
2022	29.9%	40.8%	52.0%	34.9%	26.6%	30.9%	40.8%	34.3%
2023	28.9%	39.5%	51.6%	32.6%	26.4%	28.5%	38.6%	32.9%
2024	22.1%	34.6%	47.4%	26.3%	21.8%	23.1%	34.2%	26.1%
2025	19.9%	32.7%	40.9%	24.5%	21.4%	25.7%	31.1%	25.0%
2026	21.1%	34.9%	41.1%	27.1%	25.0%	28.6%	32.0%	27.5%

Since 2019, the gender gap in writing enjoyment among children aged 5 to 8 has fluctuated but narrowed overall (see Table 2). The gap stood at 14.4 percentage points in 2019 and 11.0 percentage points in 2026, although it widened slightly in the past year (from 10.1 percentage points in 2025).

This overall narrowing reflects a steeper decline in writing enjoyment among girls than boys over time. However, the most recent data suggest a small reversal of this trend, with a slight widening in the gender gap between 2025 and 2026.

Table 2: Writing enjoyment levels for children aged 5 to 8 from 2019 to 2026 by gender.

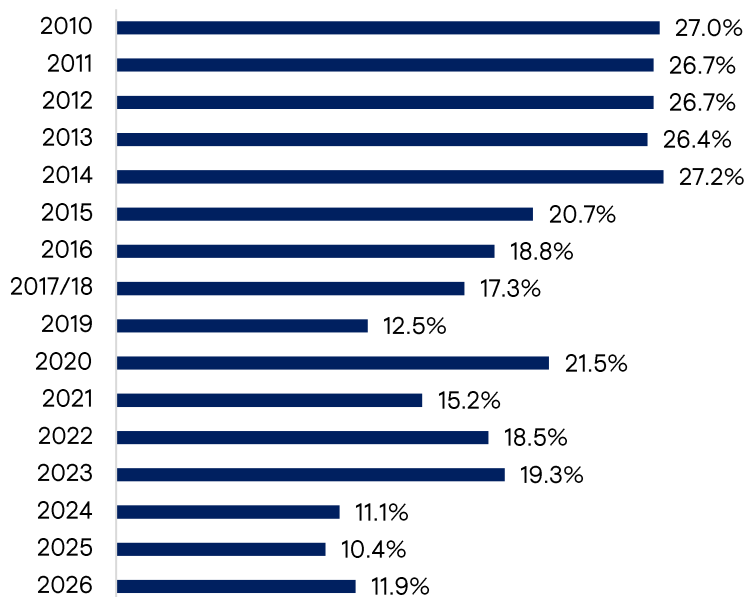
	Overall	Boys	Girls	Gender gap (percentage points)
2019	74.7%	67.3%	81.7%	14.4
2020	75.6%	70.1%	81.1%	11.0
2021	62.5%	52.5%	71.7%	19.2
2022	72.9%	67.5%	79.1%	11.6
2023	72.0%	67.6%	76.6%	9
2024	62.6%	55.7%	69.1%	13.4
2025	60.4%	55.2%	65.3%	10.1
2026	61.7%	56.5%	67.5%	11

Daily writing in free time

In 2026, just over 1 in 9 (11.9%) children and young people aged 8 to 18 said that they wrote something in their free time on a daily basis. While this represents a small increase compared with 2025 (10.4%), daily writing in free time remains uncommon among children and young people.

Figure 4 shows levels of daily writing in free time over time. While there have been some fluctuations, including a sharp decline between 2023 and 2024, the longer-term trend remains concerning. Since 2010, daily writing in free time has fallen by 15.1 percentage points, meaning that 56% fewer children and young people now write daily in their free time compared with 2010. While the latest increase is an encouraging finding, it remains to be seen whether this marks the start of a longer-term shift.

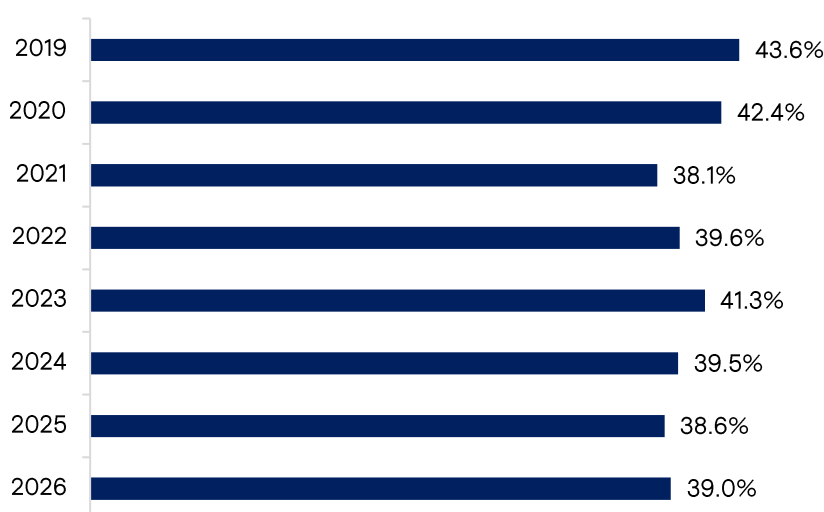
Figure 4: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 who wrote something daily in their spare time from 2010 to 2026.



Looking at just those aged 5 to 8 in 2026, nearly 2 in 5 said they wrote something daily in their free time, more than three times the rate reported by those aged 8 to 18 (see Figure 5). While levels have remained relatively stable in recent years, there has been a gradual decline since 2019.

Overall, daily writing among children aged 5 to 8 has decreased by 4.6 percentage points over this period. The small increase between 2025 and 2026 suggests a slight uptick following recent declines.

Figure 5: Percentage of children and young people aged 5 to 8 who wrote something daily in their spare time from 2019 to 2026.



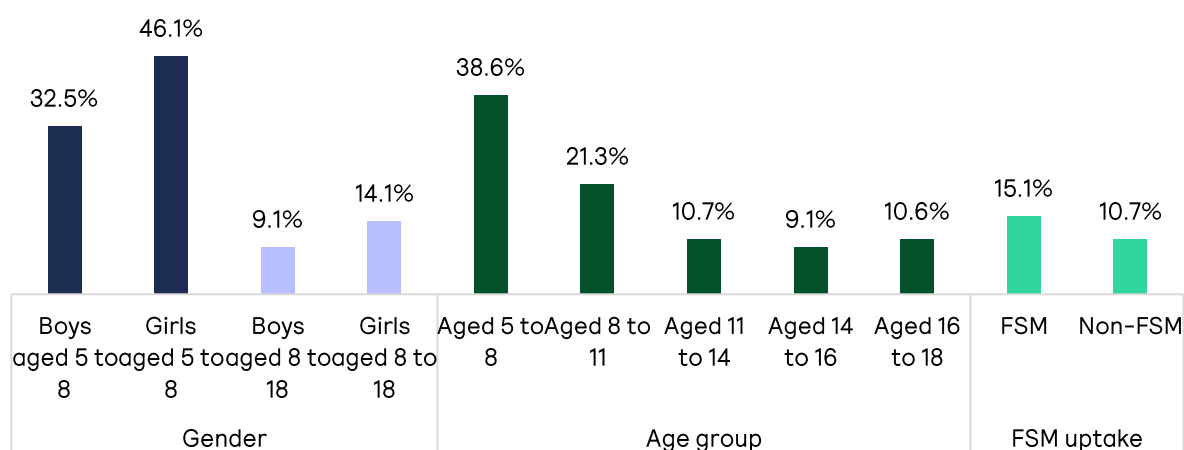
Who wrote something daily in their free time

In 2026, more girls than boys said that they wrote something daily in their free time, both among those aged 5 to 8 and those aged 8 to 18 (see Figure 6). Among younger children, around 2 in 5 girls said they wrote daily compared with around 1 in 3 boys, while among older children and young people, around 1 in 7 girls said the same compared with around 1 in 10 boys.

As with writing enjoyment, levels of daily writing decreased with age. Around 2 in 5 children aged 5 to 8 said that they wrote something in their free time daily, compared with around 1 in 5 of those aged 8 to 11. Around 1 in 10 of those aged 11 and older said the same, with little variation across the older age groups.

More children and young people who received free school meals said that they wrote something daily in their free time than their peers who did not receive FSMs, mirroring patterns seen for writing enjoyment. Differences by geographical region can be found in **Appendix B**.

Figure 6: Percentage of children and young people aged 5 to 18 who said that they wrote something daily in their free time in 2026 by gender, age group and FSM uptake (8 to 18s only).



Compared with 2025, daily writing in free time among children and young people aged 8 to 18 increased slightly across most groups in 2026 (see Table 3). Increases were seen for both boys and girls, with the gender gap remaining broadly stable. Daily writing in free time also rose across most age groups, particularly among those aged 8 to 11 and 11 to 14, although levels among those aged 16 to 18 fell slightly. The percentage of children and young people who said they wrote something daily in their free time also increased for those receiving free school meals and those who did not, with the gap between these groups remaining broadly similar.

Table 3: Daily writing in free time levels in children and young people aged 8 to 18 between 2010 and 2026 by gender, age group and FSM uptake.

	Boys	Girls	8-11	11-14	14-16	16-18	FSM	Non-FSM
2010	21.5%	32.3%	26.2%	27.1%	28.2%	37.3%	30.3%	26.6%
2011	20.8%	32.7%	27.3%	27.0%	25.0%	30.8%	29.6%	26.2%
2012	21.0%	32.6%	27.1%	26.8%	25.9%	29.4%	27.5%	26.6%
2013	21.1%	31.8%	27.1%	25.5%	26.6%	39.4%	29.1%	25.8%
2014	21.9%	32.2%	28.1%	27.3%	23.9%	38.3%	29.0%	26.9%
2015	17.1%	24.0%	24.6%	20.8%	15.8%	20.2%	24.6%	20.2%
2016	15.9%	21.7%	24.1%	18.1%	14.5%	13.4%	23.6%	17.9%
2017/8	14.3%	19.9%	22.1%	16.8%	13.8%	11.2%	21.1%	16.7%
2019	9.9%	14.9%	18.8%	11.3%	9.4%	7.7%	17.1%	11.4%
2020	18.8%	23.8%	24.7%	21.6%	18.5%	15.4%	24.2%	21.0%
2021	12.6%	17.4%	23.3%	15.9%	10.9%	9.9%	18.5%	14.3%
2022	15.8%	20.7%	24.1%	18.7%	13.8%	11.6%	22.3%	17.5%
2023	16.5%	22.1%	28.2%	18.8%	13.7%	12.3%	23.6%	17.9%
2024	8.6%	13.3%	23.6%	9.1%	8.7%	12.3%	14.8%	9.5%
2025	7.8%	12.7%	17.2%	9.0%	8.5%	11.6%	13.6%	9.6%
2026	9.1%	14.1%	21.3%	10.7%	9.1%	10.6%	15.1%	10.7%

The gender gap in daily writing among children aged 5 to 8 has fluctuated since 2019 (see Table 4). Focusing on the past year, the gap widened from 10.1 percentage points in 2025 to 13.6 percentage points in 2026, reflecting an increase in daily writing among girls alongside a slight decrease among boys.

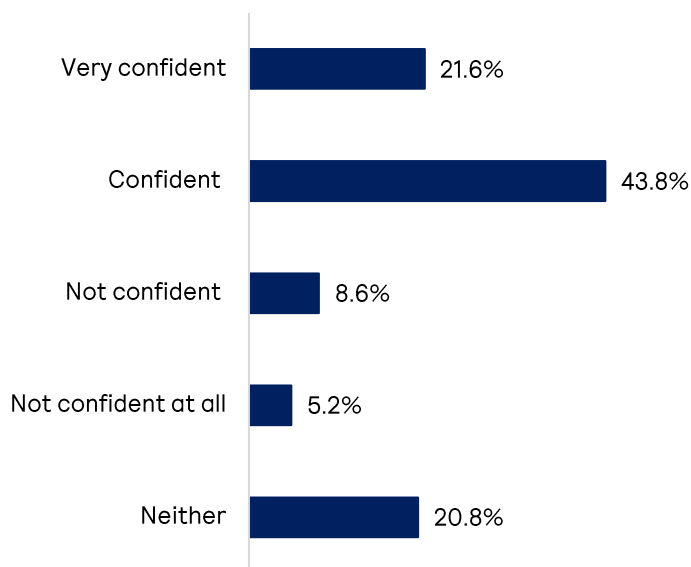
Table 4: Daily writing levels for children aged 5 to 8 from 2019 to 2026 by gender.

	Overall	Boys	Girls	Gender gap (percentage points)
2019	43.6%	35.7%	50.4%	14.7
2020	42.4%	51.1%	61.2%	10.1
2021	38.1%	30.4%	45.2%	14.8
2022	39.6%	33.0%	46.0%	13
2023	41.3%	35.2%	47.5%	12.3
2024	39.5%	33.5%	45.3%	11.8
2025	38.6%	33.3%	43.4%	10.1
2026	39.0%	32.5%	46.1%	13.6

Writing confidence

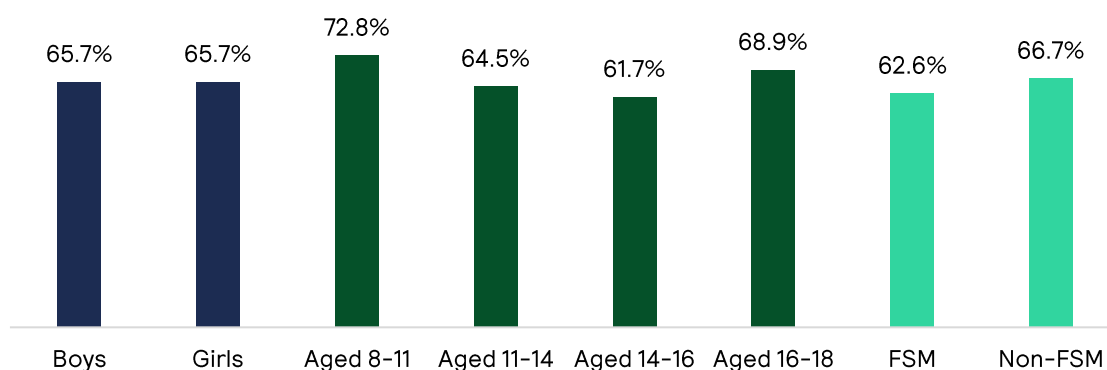
In addition to their enjoyment and frequency of writing, we also asked children and young people aged 8 to 18 how confident they feel when they write. As shown in Figure 7, around 2 in 3 rated themselves as confident or very confident. However, around 1 in 3 reported low or uncertain confidence in their writing, suggesting that many children and young people lack confidence in themselves as writers.

Figure 7: Children and young people's (aged 8 to 18) confidence in their writing skill in 2026.



In 2026, the same percentage of boys and girls told us they were either very confident or confident when writing (see Figure 8). More children aged 8 to 11 also said this compared with their older peers. In contrast to the trends seen in writing enjoyment and daily writing, more children and young people who didn't receive FSMs told us they were either very confident or confident, compared with their peers who received FSMs.

Figure 8: Children and young people's (aged 8 to 18) confidence in their writing skills in 2026 by gender, age group and FSM uptake.



The relationship between writing enjoyment, frequency and confidence

The previous sections looked at writing enjoyment, how often children and young people write, and how confident they feel. This section explores how these aspects of writing are linked.

A clear pattern emerges when looking at enjoyment and writing frequency (see Table 5). In 2026, nearly 3 in 10 of those who enjoyed writing said they wrote something daily, compared with just over 1 in 20 of those who did not enjoy writing. At the same time, writing was far from absent among those who did not enjoy it. More than 1 in 4 wrote at least weekly, and over half wrote something at least once a month, showing that low enjoyment does not necessarily mean the absence of writing.

Table 5: Writing enjoyment by writing frequency in 2026 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	28.5%	33.3%	16.0%	11.9%	5.2%	5.0%
Don't enjoy writing	5.1%	11.1%	11.1%	13.2%	13.0%	46.6%

The enjoyment–frequency pattern is also reflected in a strong statistical relationship between writing enjoyment and frequency ($r = .615$). Put simply, those who enjoy writing tend to write more often. However, enjoyment and frequency do not tell the whole story.

Writing confidence is related to both enjoyment and frequency, but the relationships are weaker ($r = .342$ and $r = .307$ respectively). This suggests that while those who enjoy writing and write more often are more likely to feel confident, confidence is shaped by more than enjoyment and how often they write.

Clear differences also emerge when comparing levels of frequency and confidence in those who enjoy writing with those who do not (see Table 6). Those who enjoy writing were far more likely to be confident and to write frequently, with 61.8% falling into the high-frequency group. In contrast, among those who did not enjoy writing, confidence was lower and writing was less frequent. While 76.7% still described themselves as confident, nearly 6 in 10 were low-frequency writers.

Table 6: Writing enjoyment by writing frequency and writing confidence in 2026 for children and young people aged 8 to 18.

	Confident	Not confident	High frequency	Moderate frequency	Low frequency
Enjoy writing	93.7%	5.8%	61.8%	27.9%	10.2%
Don't enjoy writing	76.7%	22.8%	16.1%	24.2%	59.6%

A similar pattern is seen when we look at those who report being confident and those who do not alongside their writing frequency (see Table 7). Low confidence tended to go hand in hand with writing less often, whereas confident writers were not concentrated in any single group and appeared across the range of writing habits.

Table 7: Writing confidence by writing frequency in 2026 for children and young people aged 8 to 18.

	High frequency	Moderate frequency	Low frequency
Confident	36.3%	27.1%	36.6%
Not confident	13.1%	16.2%	70.7%

These findings show that writing enjoyment, frequency and confidence tend to cluster in moderately predictable ways. Those who enjoy writing are generally more likely to write often and to feel confident, while those who write infrequently are more likely to lack confidence. However, the relationship between these variables is not straightforward. A notable percentage of those who do not enjoy writing still write at least monthly, and lower enjoyment does not preclude confidence in writing ability. Finally, a sizeable percentage of confident writers do engage with writing often.

Overall, findings suggest that writing confidence may develop through a wider range of experiences rather than being solely linked to how frequently individuals write or how much they enjoy it.

What children and young people write in their free time

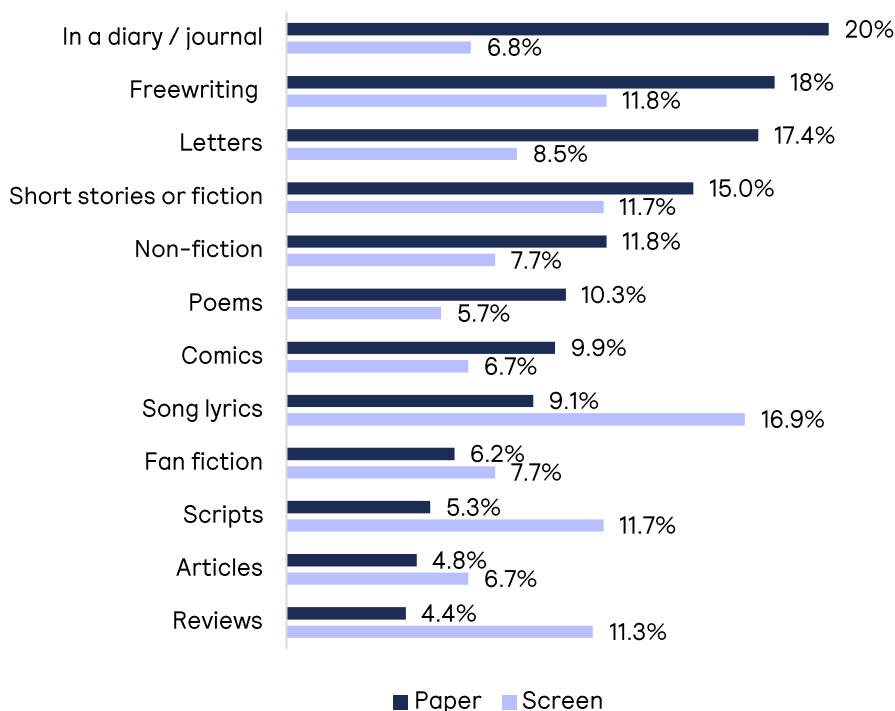
Exploring the formats in which children and young people choose to write at least once a month helps build a clearer picture of how writing fits into their everyday lives and how preferences vary by medium, enjoyment and background.

As shown in Figure 9, children and young people aged 8 to 18 engaged with a wide range of writing formats in their free time in 2026, both on paper and on screen. Paper remained the dominant medium for more reflective and sustained forms of

writing, particularly diary or journal writing, freewriting¹, letters, and short stories or fiction. These formats continue to suggest that paper plays a key role in supporting self-expression through writing.

In contrast, screens were preferred for formats linked to music, media and communication. Song lyrics were the most popular screen-based genre, followed by scripts and reviews. Articles and fan fiction writing were also more likely to be written on screen than on paper, highlighting the role of digital writing in informational and audience-facing contexts.

Figure 9: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 writing in various formats on paper or on screen at least once a month in 2026.²



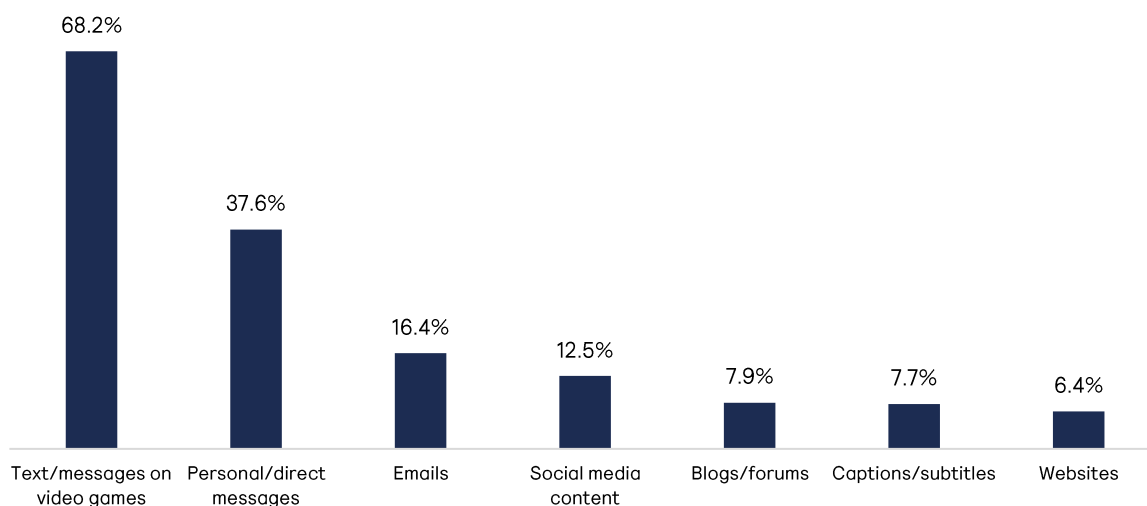
¹ Freewriting is a writing practice that entails continuous unedited composition, prioritising the spontaneous flow of ideas over grammatical accuracy, stylistic conventions or structural coherence. It is frequently employed as a generative strategy in the early stages of writing or as a technique to overcome creative obstacles. Additionally, freewriting is often used in both facilitated and self-led therapeutic settings, where it can support emotional expression, self-reflection and personal insight.

² We asked: 'Do you write any of these in your free time at least once a month, not counting what you write for school?' The options were described as follows: *Song lyrics, in a diary/journal, scripts (for podcasts, YouTube or TikTok videos, plays or films), reviews (for books, films, TV series, products or podcasts), short stories or fiction, fan fiction, non-fiction (writing about real things), comics (including manga), letters, or freewriting (letting your words flow without stopping to think).*

Overall, these trends reinforce a divide between personal, reflective writing on paper and digitally mediated, performative or media-related writing on screen.

We also asked children and young people aged 8 to 18 whether they wrote any screen-based formats. As shown in Figure 10, personal or direct messages, including messages on video games and text messages were the most commonly written digital formats. Fewer children and young people told us they wrote websites, captions or subtitles, and blogs or forums.

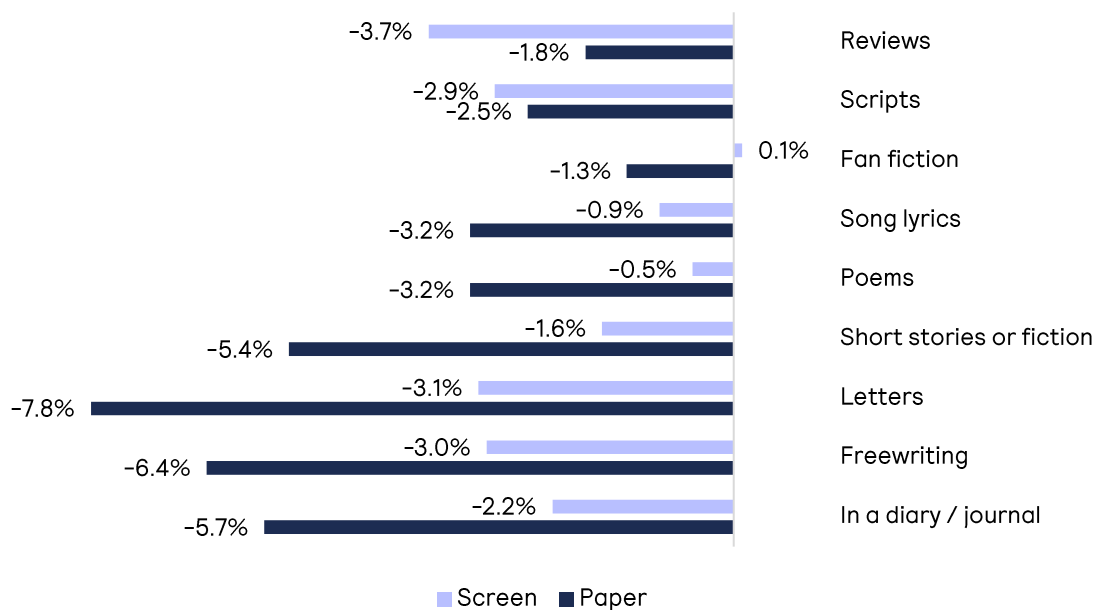
Figure 10: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 writing in various digital formats in their free time in 2026.



Writing formats over time

Compared with last year, fewer children and young people aged 8 to 18 reported writing any of the listed formats (see Figure 11), whether on paper or on a screen, apart from fan fiction, which saw a modest increase of 0.1 percentage points. Across all formats, writing on paper experienced a steeper decline than writing on screen. The most significant drop was in writing letters and freewriting on paper.

Figure 11: Percentage-point difference in children and young people aged 8 to 18 writing in various formats (on paper or on a screen) in their free time between 2025 and 2026.



Writing formats by gender, age group and FSM uptake

Girls reported writing a wider range of formats than boys, particularly on paper (see Table 8). This difference was most pronounced for diary or journal writing, which was written by almost three times as many girls as boys on paper. Considerably more girls also engaged in freewriting, short stories, poems and song lyrics across both media.

While boys generally reported lower engagement across most formats, fan fiction, comics and articles attracted more balanced participation. These findings point to continuing gendered preferences in writing.

Table 8: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 writing in various formats (on paper or on a screen) in their free time in 2026 by gender.

	On screen		On paper	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
In a diary/journal	4.0%	9.3%	9.6%	29.8%
Letters	6.7%	10.1%	11.8%	22.8%
Freewriting	8.2%	14.7%	12.0%	23.5%
Short stories/fiction	9.0%	13.8%	11.5%	18.1%
Comics	6.7%	6.2%	10.2%	9.3%
Non-fiction	6.9%	8.4%	9.5%	13.9%
Poems	3.8%	7.3%	6.3%	13.9%
Song lyrics	12.9%	20.5%	4.6%	13.2%
Scripts	10.7%	12.6%	3.5%	6.8%
Fan fiction	6.0%	8.5%	5.4%	6.6%
Articles	7.1%	6.3%	4.7%	5.0%
Reviews	9.7%	12.7%	3.3%	5.4%

As shown in Table 9, younger children consistently engaged with a broader range of writing formats than older age groups. Children aged 8 to 11 were the most active writers across almost all formats, particularly for expressive and creative writing on paper, such as diaries, letters and freewriting.

Engagement declined steadily with age, especially for paper-based writing. By the ages of 16 to 18, fewer young people were writing across most formats, with the sharpest drops seen on paper in short stories or fiction, comics and non-fiction. In contrast, many writing on screen such as reviews diaries, poems and non-fiction remained relatively stable into later adolescence This suggests that some forms of on-screen writing remain more resilient into later adolescence than paper-based writing.

Table 9: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 writing in various formats (on paper or on a screen) in their free time in 2026 by age group.

	On screen				On paper			
	8-11	11-14	14-16	16-18	8-11	11-14	14-16	16-18
In a diary/journal	9.0%	6.6%	5.9%	6.1%	22.5%	20.5%	15.9%	17.3%
Letters	11.2%	8.5%	6.5%	5.8%	21.5%	18.0%	12.2%	10.7%
Freewriting	14.2%	12.2%	8.9%	7.5%	21.1%	19.0%	11.9%	11.0%
Short stories/fiction	13.8%	11.7%	10.3%	10%	19.4%	16.0%	8.4%	6.4%
Comics	10.2%	6.7%	4.5%	3.0%	14.6%	10.5%	4.6%	2.9%
Non-fiction	11.1%	7.4%	6.1%	7.6%	17.1%	12.0%	6.6%	6.6%
Poems	8.7%	5.3%	5.0%	5.5%	15.2%	10.3%	6.5%	6.0%
Song lyrics	20.3%	17.8%	11.6%	7.1%	12.3%	9.5%	5.6%	4.8%
Scripts	16.2%	12.0%	7.9%	5.3%	6.6%	5.6%	3.2%	2.6%
Fan fiction	9.4%	7.6%	6.9%	5.8%	10.0%	6.3%	2.9%	1.6%
Articles	10.1%	6.6%	4.7%	4.5%	7.7%	4.9%	2.6%	2.0%
Reviews	13.6%	11.1%	9.8%	11.7%	6.8%	4.3%	2.7%	2.6%

Differences by socioeconomic background were generally modest (see Table 10). Screen-based writing stood out most clearly for FSM pupils. Slightly more children and young people receiving free school wrote across most formats on screen.

On paper, the pattern was more mixed, with slightly more non-FSM pupils engaging in diaries, letters, freewriting, short stories or fiction. Overall, these findings suggest that socioeconomic background plays a limited role in shaping writing format preferences.

Table 10: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 writing in various formats (on paper or on a screen) in their free time in 2026 by FSM uptake.

	On screen		On paper	
	FSMs	Non-FSMs	FSMs	Non-FSMs
In diary/journal	8.4%	6.3%	18.7%	20.6%
Letters	9.8%	8.1%	16.1%	17.8%
Freewriting	13.5%	11.3%	17.1%	18.2%
Short stories or fiction	12.8%	11.5%	13.6%	15.3%
Comics	8.9%	5.9%	10.2%	9.6%
Non-fiction	9.1%	7.3%	12.1%	11.6%
Poems	7.0%	5.3%	11.0%	9.9%
Song lyrics	20.1%	15.9%	8.9%	9.2%
Scripts	14.0%	11.0%	5.5%	5.2%
Fan fiction	9.7%	7.2%	7.2%	5.8%
Articles	7.7%	6.3%	5.5%	4.5%
Reviews	12.4%	11.0%	4.4%	4.3%

Writing formats by writing enjoyment

Differences by enjoyment were pronounced (see Table 11). Children and young people who enjoyed writing engaged with a much broader range of formats, across both paper and screen, compared with their peers who did not enjoy writing. This gap was especially evident in expressive and creative forms of writing. For example, considerably higher percentages of children and young people who enjoyed writing wrote short stories or fiction on paper compared with those who did not enjoy writing. Similar gaps were seen for freewriting, fan-fiction, non-fiction and poems.

However, children and young people who did not enjoy writing still reported some engagement with paper-based writing as they reported keeping a diary or journal, writing letters and engaging in freewriting. Smaller but significant proportions also reported writing short stories or fiction, non-fiction and comics on paper. On screen, around 1 in 7 wrote song lyrics on paper, while around 1 in 10 wrote scripts or reviews.

Although participation levels were substantially lower than among those who enjoyed writing, these findings suggest that digital formats related to music and

communication, and reflective writing on paper may provide accessible writing experiences for children and young people who don't enjoy writing.

Table 11: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 writing in various formats (on paper or on a screen) in their free time in 2026 by whether or not they enjoy writing.

	On screen		On paper	
	Enjoys writing	Doesn't enjoy writing	Enjoys writing	Doesn't enjoy writing
In a diary / journal	12.2%	4.9%	34.8%	15.0%
Letters	14.0%	6.5%	28.4%	13.8%
Freewriting	23.5%	7.5%	33.6%	12.6%
Short stories or fiction	23.8%	7.4%	28.9%	10.1%
Comics	11.2%	5.0%	16.7%	7.6%
Non-fiction	14.6%	5.2%	21.5%	8.3%
Poems	12.4%	3.2%	20.6%	6.6%
Song lyrics	23.7%	14.7%	17.2%	6.3%
Scripts	17.8%	9.7%	10.3%	3.5%
Fan fiction	14.9%	5.1%	12.0%	4.1%
Articles	10.5%	5.4%	8.6%	3.5%
Reviews	17.5%	9.2%	8.2%	3.0%

Discussion

While tentative signs of improvement are beginning to emerge, findings from the 2026 Annual Literacy Survey confirm that writing engagement remains under significant pressure. While writing enjoyment and daily writing in free time have increased slightly compared with 2025, both remain far below levels seen a decade ago. Fewer than 3 in 10 children and young people enjoy writing in their free time, and daily writing continues to be uncommon, particularly among older age groups. These figures highlight the scale of the challenge and the importance of sustaining efforts to foster writing engagement.

At the same time, findings point to important areas of resilience. Many children and young people continue to write in their free time even when enjoyment is

limited, and a wide range of formats shape how writing features in their lives. Writing remains closely tied to creativity, reflection and everyday communication, particularly through formats linked to music, media and self expression. Notably, the persistence of writing among those who report low enjoyment challenges simplistic narratives of disengagement and highlights writing as a flexible, adaptive practice rather than a static set of behaviours.

This fascinating complexity is echoed and further illuminated by our recent thematic analysis of more than 55,000 open-ended responses, which offered insight into how writing is experienced in children and young people's everyday lives ([Bonafede & Clark, 2026](#)). The findings highlight how engagement is shaped by a dynamic interplay of emotional, cognitive, behavioural and social factors, and identify a spectrum of orientations towards writing – from keen to ambivalent to averse – showing how engagement can be sustained, conditional or fragile. Taken together, findings suggest that writing engagement is fluid rather than fixed, varying not only between individuals but also across contexts and purposes. This reinforces the importance of fostering writing in ways that are meaningful, flexible, and responsive to children and young people's lived experiences.

The relationships between enjoyment, frequency and confidence explored in this report help to further clarify this picture. Findings reinforce that children and young people's relationships with writing are more complex than a straightforward link between enjoyment, frequency and confidence. While enjoyment and frequent writing are clearly associated with greater confidence, confidence itself is not confined only to those who write often or enjoy writing most. This highlights the possibility that children and young people may develop confidence in writing through a wider range of experiences and purposes. Equally, the continued engagement in writing among some lower-enjoyment writers suggests that writing remains embedded in lived experience even when it is not always experienced as enjoyable. This points to the importance of recognising writing as a multifaceted practice through which children and young people negotiate identity, communication, achievement, and participation. Ultimately, findings highlight the need to move beyond linear explanations of writing engagement and attend more closely to the diverse ways in which children experience and make sense of writing in their everyday life.

These broad patterns are not experienced equally across all groups. Girls, younger children and pupils receiving FSMs report higher levels of enjoyment and engagement, while boys and older teenagers are the most disengaged. However,

these differences are not uniform across all forms of writing. Boys, for example, show some engagement with formats such as song lyrics, scripts and reviews, suggesting that these formats can be a gateway into writing through interests linked to popular culture and media.

Trends in writing formats more generally also provide important context. Paper continues to be the dominant medium for reflective and sustained forms of writing, such as diary writing, freewriting and letters, while screens are more strongly associated with formats linked to media and communication. These distinctions suggest that how children and young people choose to write in their free time remains closely tied to both medium and purpose, with different forms of writing fulfilling different roles in their everyday lives.

Overall, the 2026 findings point to a mixed but stable picture. While long-term declines in writing enjoyment and frequency remain evident, the small increases seen this year suggest that recent disengagement has not continued at the same pace. Writing remains embedded in children and young people's lives in varied and uneven ways, shaped by enjoyment, confidence, frequency and format choices. Continued monitoring will be essential to determine whether the changes observed in 2026 represent a short-term fluctuation or the beginning of a more sustained shift in writing engagement.

Acknowledgements

A huge thank you to all the schools that took part in our survey this year.

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.

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Suggested reference for this report is [Bonafede, F. & Clark, C. \(2026\). Children and Young People's Writing in 2026. London: National Literacy Trust.](#)

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Appendix A

About the Annual Literacy Survey

The Annual Literacy Survey, run annually since 2010, includes questions about reading, writing and listening as well as about children and young people's home learning environment and access to resources at home. Questions about reading relate back to 2005 when we first asked children and young people about their reading enjoyment, behaviours and attitudes in a large-scale survey. Questions about young people's use of AI to support their literacy have been included since 2023, and questions about speaking and listening were added to the survey in 2024.

We made four surveys available in 2026: one for children aged 5 to 8 (Year 1 to Year 4, or Primary 2 to Primary 5 for Scotland), one for children and young people aged 8 to 18 (Year 4 to Year 13, or Primary 5 to Secondary 6 for Scotland), and their translations into Welsh. The surveys contain similar questions but the one for the younger age group is shorter and more pictorial, while the one for those aged over 8 had questions more relevant for that age group. The 2026 survey contained 18 questions for those aged 5 to 8 and 43 questions for those aged 8 to 18.

Taking place from January to the middle of March every year, schools are recruited from autumn onwards through our networks, newsletters and social media followers, as well as through partner organisations. Participating schools receive a school-specific report as a thank you, which means that they can compare their responses to those received nationally once we've published the national reports.

125,375 children and young people aged 5 to 18 from 479 schools took part in our Annual Literacy Survey in 2026. 7,050 answered a shorter survey for those aged 5 to 8, while 118,325 answered longer surveys for those aged 8 to 18.

Sample description

The make-up of our 2026 sample was largely comparable with that of 2025 and previous samples. Tables A1 and A2 outline the sample in detail.

Table A1: Sample breakdown of children and young people aged 8 to 18 in 2026.

		n	%
Gender	Boys	55,039	46.5%
	Girls	58,692	49.6%
	Would rather not say	2,567	2.2%
	Describe another way	2,027	1.7%
Age	8-11	15,888	13.4%
	11-14	81,412	68.8%
	14-16	16,326	13.8%
	16-18	4,699	4.0%
Free-school-meal uptake (FSM)	FSM	19,417	16.4%
	Non-FSM	83,186	70.3%
	Don't know	11,255	9.5%
	Would rather not say	4,467	3.8%
UK region (by nation)	England	108,571	91.8%
	Wales	2,933	2.5%
	Scotland	4,248	3.6%
	Northern Ireland	2,067	1.8%
England region	North East	6,214	5.3%
	North West	12,600	10.6%
	Yorkshire and Humberside	7,406	6.8%
	East Midlands	7,928	6.7%
	West Midlands	8,345	7.1%
	East of England	16,249	13.7%
	London	11,705	9.9%
	South East	23,320	19.7%
	South West	14,760	12.5%

Table A2: Sample breakdown of children aged 5 to 8 in 2026.

		n	%
Gender	Boys	3,167	44.9%
	Girls	3,376	47.9%
	Would rather not say	149	2.1%
	Describe another way	65	0.9%
	No response	293	4.2%
UK region (by nation)	England	5,174	75.3%
	Wales	333	4.8%
	Scotland	1,183	17.2%
	Northern Ireland	182	2.6%
England region	North East	737	14.3%
	North West	530	10.3%
	Yorkshire and Humberside	366	7.1%
	East Midlands	350	6.8%
	West Midlands	729	14.1%
	East of England	944	18.3%
	London	895	17.3%
	South East	125	2.4%
	South West	493	9.5%

Appendix B

Writing enjoyment by geographical region

Differences in writing enjoyment among children and young people across the UK were small in 2026 (see Table A3). Wales and Scotland reported slightly higher levels of writing enjoyment than England, while Northern Ireland was lower.

Within England, there was some regional variation. Children and young people in London and the Midlands were more likely to say they enjoyed writing than those in other regions, while those in the South East reported comparatively lower levels.

Table A3: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 enjoying writing in their free time in 2026 by geographical region.

England	28.6%
North East	28.4%
North West	28.2%
Yorkshire and the Humber	28.8%
East Midlands	30.8%
West Midlands	30.4%
East of England	29.0%
London	30.9%
South East	26.9%
South West	27.3%
Wales	33.7%
Scotland	30.3%
Northern Ireland	23.5%

Daily writing by geographical region

Differences in daily writing in free time among children and young people across the UK were small in 2026 (see Table A4). Wales reported slightly higher levels of daily writing than England, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

Within England, there was some regional variation. More children and young people in the East Midlands, West Midlands, North East and Yorkshire and the Humber said they wrote something daily in their free time than those in other regions, while those in the South East reported comparatively lower levels.

Table A4: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 writing daily in their free time in 2026 by geographical region.

England	11.8%
North East	12.6%
North West	11.4%
Yorkshire and the Humber	12.5%
East Midlands	14.3%
West Midlands	13.2%
East of England	11.9%
London	11.8%
South East	10.7%
South West	10.8%
Wales	16.5%
Scotland	12.8%
Northern Ireland	10.0%



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