

**National  
Literacy  
Trust**

Change your story

# **Children and young people's writing in Scotland in 2023**

**Christina Clark & Irene Picton, National Literacy Trust,  
and  
Katherine Wilkinson, Scottish Book Trust**

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**Scottish  
Book Trust**  
inspiring readers and writers

# Introduction

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Our previous research has 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<sup>1</sup>). For many children and young people, writing promotes creativity, imagination and self-expression, with many also telling us that they write to support their mental wellbeing and to support causes and issues they care about. A decline in writing engagement should therefore be a cause for concern. Further, in our report around reading<sup>2</sup>, children and young people told us that more representative books would motivate them to read. In the longer term, to ensure children and young people have the literature they need and desire, we must support the engagement of a more diverse pool of young writers now.

However, as this report shows, just a third of children and young people aged 8 to 18 in Scotland told us they enjoyed writing in their free time in early 2023, meaning that two in three children and young people did not enjoy writing in their free time. In addition, just 1 in 5 Scottish 8- to 18-year-olds told us they wrote something daily in their free time in 2023.

This report builds on our previous work<sup>3</sup> to highlight how children and young people in Scotland felt about writing in early 2023. It explores how many enjoyed writing in their free time at home and at school, how often they wrote, what they were writing in their free time, and what motivated and inspired them to write. We hope these insights into children and young people's writing attitudes and behaviour will be valuable for all those working to support writing and all the benefits it can bring.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://literacytrust.org.uk/news/we-call-new-focus-writing-enjoyment-research-shows-sharp-drop-children-writing-outside-school/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://literacytrust.org.uk/research-services/research-reports/children-and-young-peoples-reading-and-writing-in-scotland-in-2023>

<sup>3</sup> <https://literacytrust.org.uk/research-services/research-themes/writing/>

**Just 1 in 3 (32.5%) children  
and young people in  
Scotland told us they  
enjoyed writing in 2023.**

## Method

We conducted our latest Annual Literacy Survey between January and the middle of March 2023. Slightly more girls (58.8%; n = 635) than boys (41.2%; n = 445) participated from Scotland. We also had data from 33 children and young people who would rather not share their gender and 28 who would describe themselves in another way. In line with the national sample, more children and young people aged 11 to 14 (78.5%, n = 896) took part, followed by those aged 14 to 16 (11.8%, n = 135) and then those aged 8 to 11 (6.1%, n = 70). 40 (3.5%) young people aged 16 to 18 also took part.

## Key findings from 2023 include:

### Enjoying writing in free time

- Only 1 in 3 (32.5%) children and young people aged 8 to 18 in Scotland said they enjoyed writing in their free time in 2023, meaning 2 in 3 (67.6%) did not enjoy writing.

### Enjoying writing in free time versus at school

- In 2023, more children and young people aged 8 to 18 in Scotland said that they enjoyed writing at school than enjoyed writing in their free time (40.3% vs. 32.5%).
- Both types of writing enjoyment were positively related ( $r = .527$ ). Indeed, 7 in 10 (71.6%) children and young people who enjoyed writing in their free time also enjoyed writing at school, while 3 in 5 (57.7%) children and young people who enjoyed writing at school also enjoyed writing in their free time.

### **Daily writing in their free time**

- Only 1 in 5 (19.3%) children and young people aged 8 to 18 in Scotland told us in 2023 that they wrote something daily in their free time. While, overall, 1 in 2 (50.4%) told us that they wrote at least once a week in their free time, 1 in 4 (25.9%) said they rarely or never wrote.

### **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 more likely to write daily in their free time. Three times as many children and young people in Scotland aged 8 to 18 who enjoyed writing in their free time also said that they write daily in their free time compared with those who didn't enjoy writing (35.4% vs 11.5%). Conversely, nearly 1 in 4 (23.9%) of those who said that they didn't enjoy writing also rarely or never write.

### **What children and young people were writing in their free time in 2023**

- 1 in 5 children and young people aged 8 to 18 in Scotland said that they wrote fiction/short stories on paper (20.8%) or on screen (20.1%) in their free time in 2023. 3 in 10 (28.0%) said they wrote a diary on paper and 1 in 4 (25.0%) told us they wrote letters on paper in their free time.
- By far the most popular writing that children and young people did in their free time was exclusively online formats, such as personal/direct messages (93.8%) and in-game communications (84.4%).

### **What motivated children and young people to write in 2023?**

We grouped children and young people's motivations to write into three categories: the creative, mindful and social writer.

- The creative writers included the 1 in 2 children and young people who said writing helped them feel creative (47.6%), 2 in 5 who wrote to express their ideas and imagination (41.9%) and nearly 2 in 5 who said that writing helped them express their thoughts and feelings (37.9%).
- The mindful writers included those who wrote because it helped them relax (25.9%) and those where writing made them feel happy (18.9%). 1 in 5 children and young people in this group said that writing made them feel confident (19.1%) and 1 in 4 wrote because it helped them deal with problems (20.1%).
- The social writers included those who wrote because it helped them learn more about the issues and causes they cared about (13.3%) and those who said writing helped them feel connected to the world (9.5%).

### **What children and young people think about writing**

- 1 in 2 (50.6%) children and young people aged 8 to 18 struggled with deciding what to write, and 2 in 5 (44.2%) admitted that they only wrote when they had to. However, nearly 2 in 5 (37.3%) told us that they continued writing even when they found it difficult. 3 in 10 (31.5%) also saw a link between their writing and their chances of getting a better job when they grow up.

### **The writing environment**

- More than 4 in 5 (84.5%) children and young people told us they had a quiet space at home where they could work, read or take time out, meaning 15.5% didn't have a quiet space. Similarly, more than 4 in 5 (82.5%) told us that they had their own desk or table where they could write, draw or do homework, meaning 17.5% didn't.

### **Inspiring children and young people to write**

- When asked what makes them want to write, 1 in 4 (23.2%) children and young people told us that they would write to share a memorable experience. 1 in 10 said that seeing people they look up to talk about writing (11.3%) or hearing friends and family talk about writing (10.7%) would make them want to write.
- More children and young people who had been to creative-writing groups 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 book fairs.

These findings suggest that providing opportunities to inspire writing may positively influence writing enjoyment and frequency. Coordinated action is needed to reconnect children and young people with the creative elements that transform writing into a pleasurable personal practice that supports self-expression, mental wellbeing and participation in civic life.

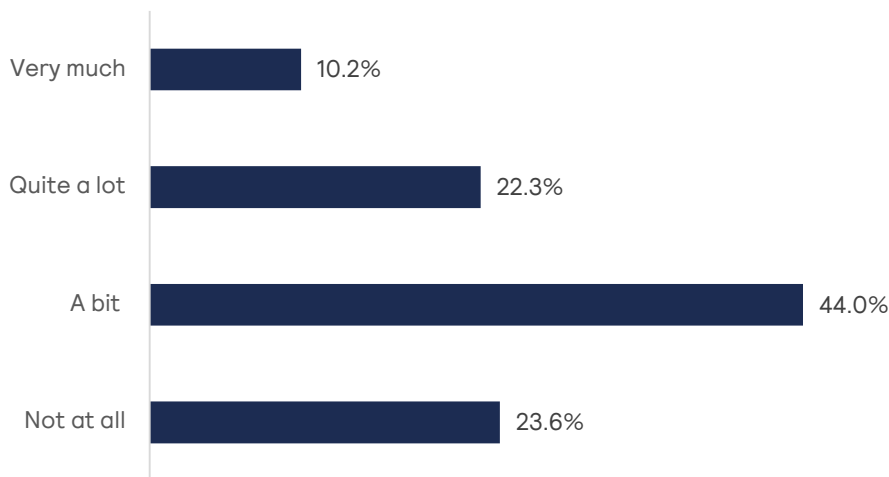
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# Writing in 2023

## Enjoying writing in free time over time

Only 1 in 3 (32.5%) children and young people aged 8 to 18 in Scotland told us in 2023 that they enjoyed writing something in their free time either very much (10.2%) or quite a lot (22.3%, see Figure 1). However, this also means that 2 in 3 (67.6%) children and young people aged 8 to 18 only enjoyed writing a bit (44.0%) or not at all (23.6%).

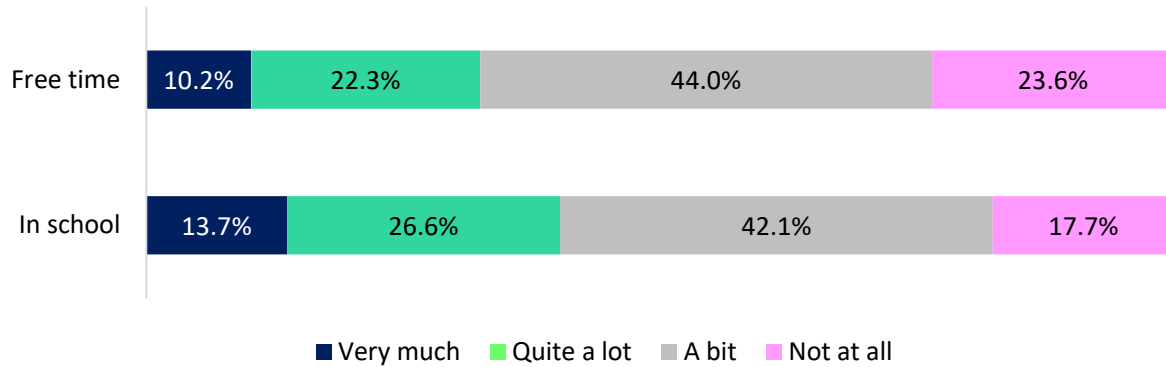
**Figure 1: Children and young people’s writing enjoyment in Scotland in 2023**



### 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 2 shows that a lower percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 said that they enjoyed writing in their free time (32.5%) than said they enjoyed writing during school time (40.3%). Therefore, a slightly larger percentage of children and young people said that they didn’t enjoy writing at school compared with writing at home (59.8% vs 47.8%).

**Figure 2: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 in Scotland who enjoyed writing in 2023 in their free time versus writing at school**



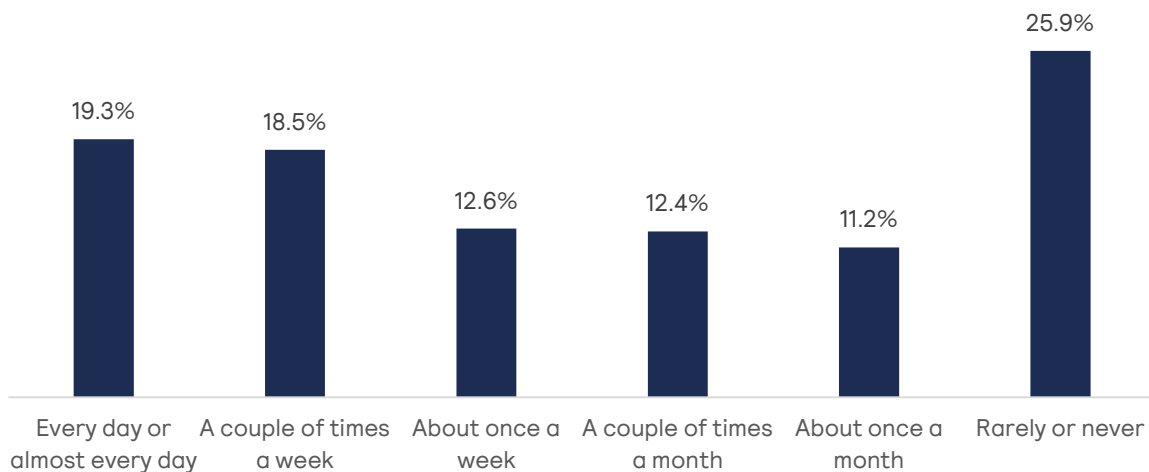
Both types of writing enjoyment were positively related ( $r = .527$ ), indicating that those who enjoyed writing at school also enjoyed writing in their free time. Indeed, 7 in 10 (71.6%) children and young people in Scotland who enjoyed writing in their free time also enjoyed writing at school, while nearly 3 in 5 (57.7%) children and young people in Scotland who enjoyed writing at school also enjoyed writing in their free time.

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## Daily writing in free time

Figure 3 shows the frequency with which children and young people in Scotland write in their spare time in 2023. It shows that nearly 1 in 5 told us that they write daily (19.3%) or a couple of times a week (18.5%) in their free time. Overall, 1 in 2 (50.4%) told us that they write at least once a week in their free time. However, 1 in 4 (25.9%) say they rarely or never write.

**Figure 3: Frequency of writing in their spare time for children and young people aged 8 to 18 in Scotland in 2023**



**The link between writing enjoyment in free time and writing frequency in free time**

There was a moderate positive relationship between enjoying writing in free time and writing frequency in free time ( $r = .558$ ), indicating that those who enjoyed writing write more frequently in their free time. Indeed, as shown in Table 1, three times as many children and young people in Scotland aged 8 to 18 who enjoyed writing in their free time also said that they write daily in their free time compared with those who didn't enjoy writing. Conversely, nearly 1 in 4 of those who said that they didn't enjoy writing also rarely or never write.

**Table 1: Writing enjoyment in free time by writing frequency in free time in 2023 for children and young people in Scotland 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
Enjoyed writing	35.4%	29.7%	14.3%	9.5%	4.9%	2.0%
Didn't enjoy writing	11.5%	13.1%	11.8%	13.9%	14.3%	23.9%

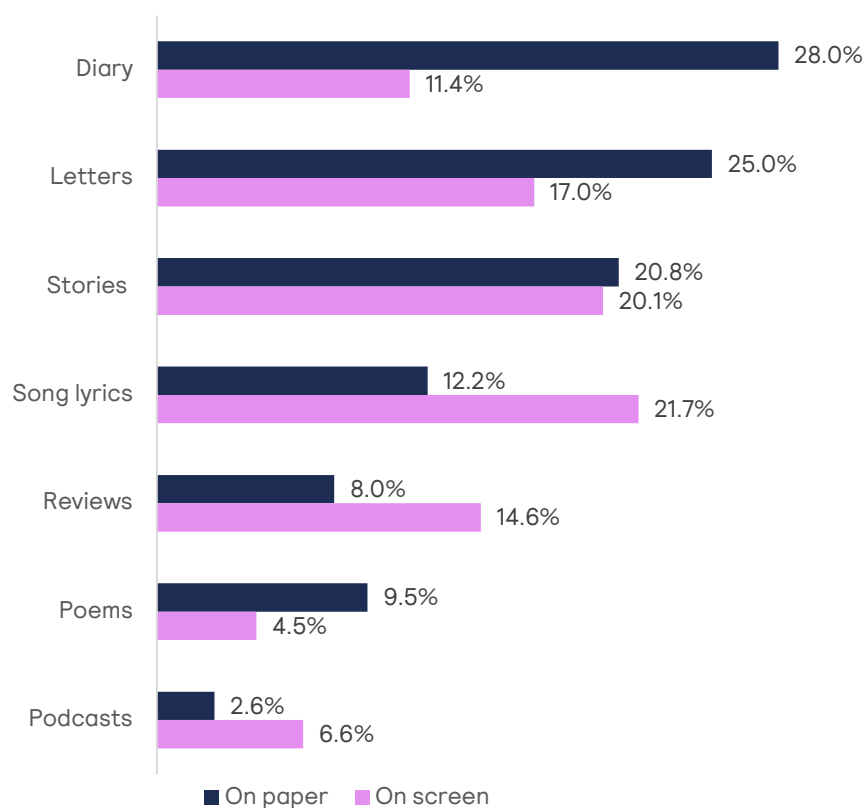


## What children and young people aged 8 to 18 were writing in their free time in Scotland in 2023

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 nearly 3 in 10 (28.0%) children and young people aged 8 to 18 saying they did this (see Figure 4). Writing letters on paper was the second most popular material and format, with 1 in 4 (25.0%) saying they did this in their free time.

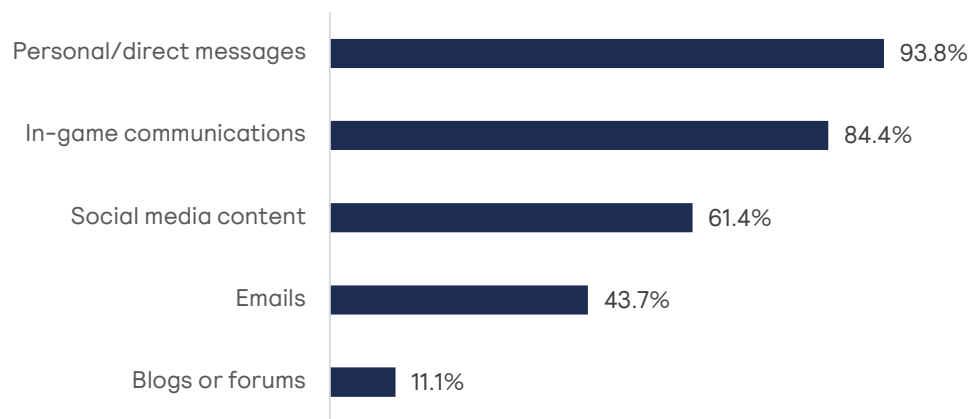
Many (1 in 5) children and young people also reported writing fiction/stories both on paper (20.8%) and on screen (20.1%), with this material the most often written across formats. Song lyrics were mostly written on screen, with more than 1 in 5 (21.7%) doing this compared with just over half as many on paper. While poems and podcasts were among the least frequently written materials, both inspired children to write on paper and on screen in 2023.

**Figure 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 2023**



We also asked whether children and young people wrote a variety of exclusively on-screen formats. As Figure 5 shows, most children and young people (93.8%) said that they wrote personal/direct messages in their free time, followed by over 4 in 5 (84.4%) who said that they also wrote texts or other messages with family and friends while playing video games. Around 3 in 5 (61.4%) wrote social media content in their free time, while 2 in 5 (43.7%) wrote emails. Only around 1 in 9 (11.1%) wrote blog/forum posts in their spare time.

**Figure 5: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 writing various exclusively on-screen formats in their free time in 2023**



## 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 write. We presented children and young people with 10 different motivations to write, which we grouped to form three categories: the creative writer<sup>4</sup>, the mindful writer<sup>5</sup> and the social writer<sup>6</sup>.

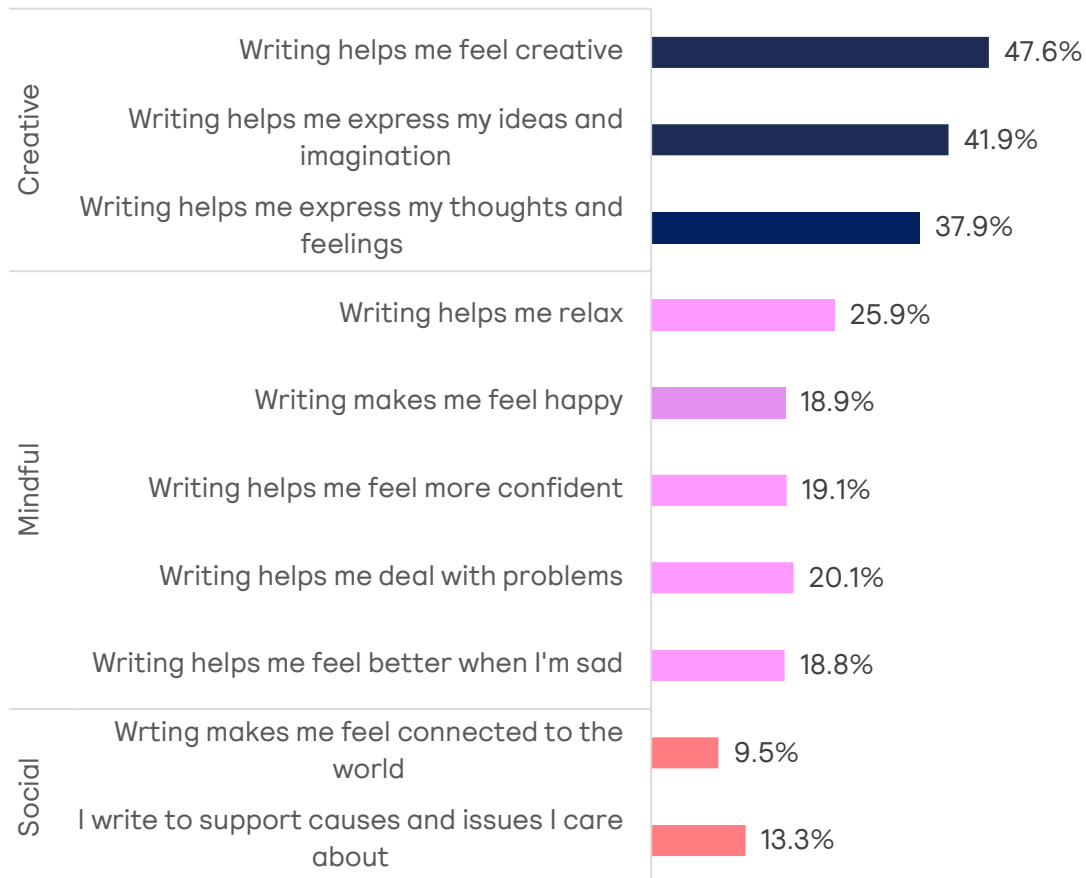
<sup>4</sup> Combining three items: Writing helps me feel creative, Writing helps me express my ideas and imagination, Writing helps me express my thoughts and feelings. Cronbach's alpha = .823. Top quartile of responses being described here as the creative writer (29.1%).

<sup>5</sup> Combining five items: Writing helps me relax, Writing makes me feel happy, Writing makes me feel confident, Writing helps me deal with problems, Writing helps me feel better when I'm sad. Cronbach's alpha = .834. Top quartile of responses being described here as the mindful writer (32.2%).

<sup>6</sup> Combining two items: Writing helps me feel connected to the world, I write to support causes and issues I care about. Cronbach's alpha = .594. Top two categories combined to describe the social writer (24.3%).

Of those who wrote in their free time at least once a month<sup>7</sup>, 1 in 2 (47.6%) wrote because it helped them feel creative, while more than 2 in 5 (41.9%) wrote to express their ideas and imagination (see Figure 6). Writing to support mental wellbeing was also an important motivation for children and young people to write in their free time, with 1 in 4 (25.9%) saying that they wrote because it helped them relax, and around 1 in 5 because it made them feel happy (18.9%), more confident (19.1%) or able to deal with problems (20.1%). Finally, nearly 1 in 10 (9.5%) said writing made them feel connected to the world and 1 in 8 (13.3%) wrote to support causes and issues they care about.

**Figure 6: Children and young people aged 8 to 18's motivations for writing in Scotland in 2023**



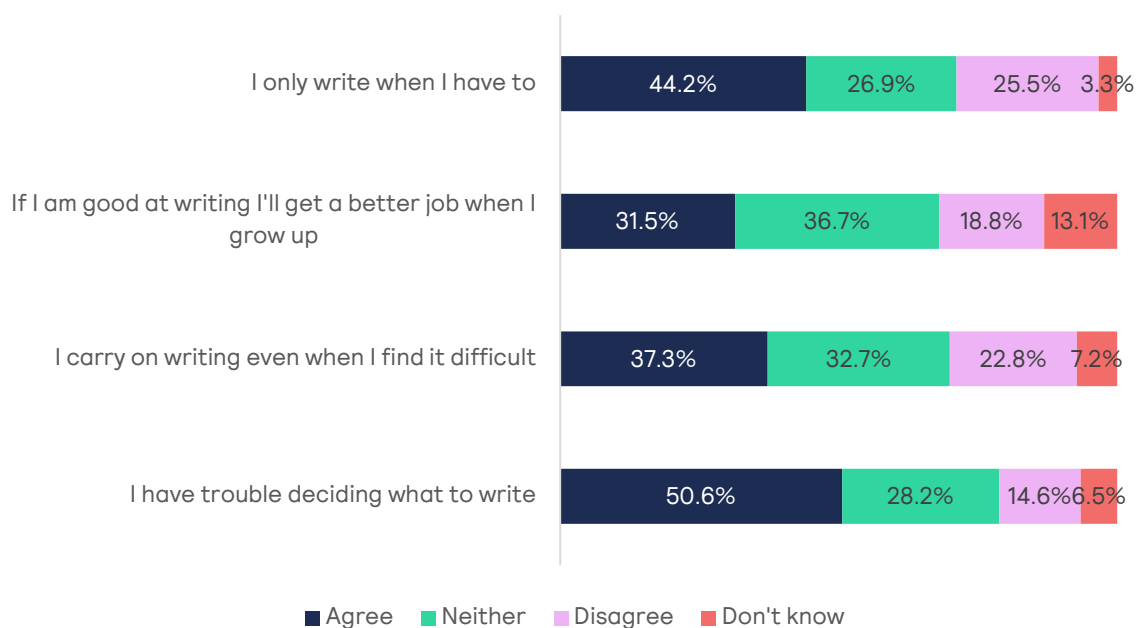
<sup>7</sup> n = 845

## 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 7), nearly 2 in 5 (37.3%) continued writing even when they found it difficult. 3 in 10 (31.5%) also saw a link between their writing and their chances of getting a better job when they grow up. However, 2 in 5 (44.2%) admitted that they only wrote when they had to.

**Figure 7: What children and young people aged 8 to 18 think about writing in 2023**



## The writing environment

We were also interested to explore to what extent environmental factors had an association with children and young people's writing. We know that having access to reading materials (see our report on [book ownership](https://cdn.literacytrust.org.uk/media/documents/Book_ownership_in_2022_final.pdf)<sup>88</sup>) is linked with reading

<sup>88</sup> [https://cdn.literacytrust.org.uk/media/documents/Book\\_ownership\\_in\\_2022\\_final.pdf](https://cdn.literacytrust.org.uk/media/documents/Book_ownership_in_2022_final.pdf)

engagement, but what about access to a quiet space to work, read or take time out, or access to a desk or table to work on?

More than 4 in 5 (84.5%) children and young people aged 8 to 18 in Scotland told us in 2023 that they had a quiet space at home where they could work, read or take time out. This, however, means that 15.5% didn't have a quiet space. Similarly, more than 4 in 5 (82.5%) told us that they had their own desk or table where they could write, draw or do homework, meaning that 17.5% didn't.

## What would make children and young people aged 8 to 18 in Scotland want to write?

When asked what makes them want to write, 1 in 4 (23.2%) children and young people mentioned that they would write to share a memorable experience (see Figure 8). 1 in 10 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 8: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 saying that they would write for the following reasons:**

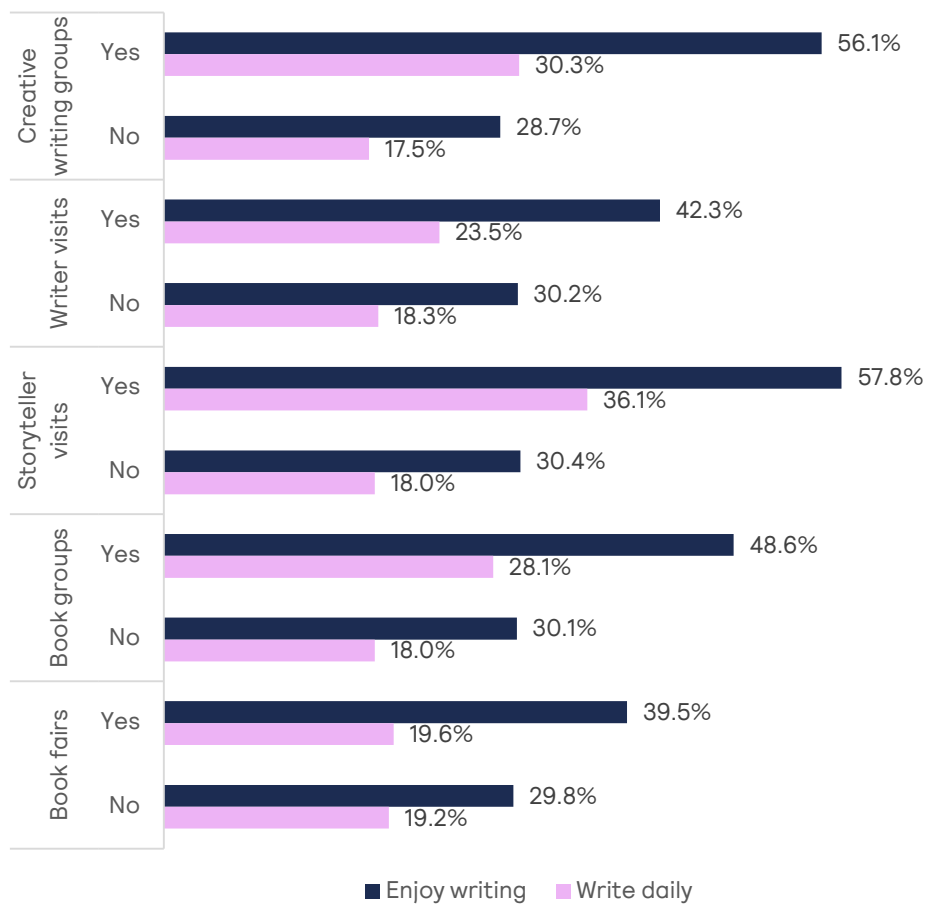


In addition to seeing or hearing people talk about writing and having a memorable experience to share, providing children and young people with the opportunities to get inspired to write, either at school or in the community, can positively influence their enjoyment and frequency of writing in their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

As shown in Figure 9, more children and young people who had been to creative-writing groups 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 book fairs.

**Figure 9: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 in Scotland enjoying writing and writing daily in their spare time by various creative opportunities**



## To sum up

Our previous research shows that writing enjoyment and attainment are linked, with children and young people who enjoy writing being 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, only 1 in 3 (32.5%) children and young people aged 8 to 18 in Scotland said in 2023 that they enjoyed writing in their free time.

This report featured insights on levels of writing enjoyment in free time and at school. More children and young people said they enjoyed writing at school than in their free time: over 2 in 5 (40.3%) vs 1 in 3 (32.5%). These findings resonate with the attitudes of the 50.6% who struggled to decide what to write about.

The report also outlines what inspires children and young people who write in their free time to write for pleasure. Crucially, more of those who wrote in their free time participated in creative-writing groups, 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, expressing ideas and self-expression scoring highly, followed by mindfulness, social connection and social change. Increased awareness of these motivators may help galvanise reluctant writers with approaches that encompass their interests.

It is vital that children and young people are supported to develop their enjoyment of writing, so that significantly more than 1 in 3 can access the attainment, creativity, self-expression and mental-wellbeing benefits of writing for pleasure. Further, efforts to engage more pupils in writing may broaden the pool who look to develop their writing professionally in the future, contributing to an increasingly diverse publishing landscape and in turn motivating more children to read for pleasure.

Scottish Book Trust offers a number of opportunities for funded author visits and residencies through its Live Literature<sup>9</sup> programme as well as resources and prompts<sup>10</sup> to support schools' creative writing activities. A coordinated effort to provide such opportunities may reconnect children and young people with the creative elements that transform writing into a pleasurable personal practice that allows for self-expression and helps them to make sense of the world and participate actively in civic life. At the National Literacy Trust and Scottish Book Trust, we support schools to explore and develop writing-for-enjoyment practices with the radical view that every young person is a writer.

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.scottishbooktrust.com/writing-and-authors/live-literature>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.scottishbooktrust.com/learning-and-resources/creative-writing-for-schools>

## 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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