



Change your story

Teachers and writing in 2023

Emily Best

May 2024

Introduction

Teachers and schools across the UK have an immense responsibility for ensuring young people leave school with the literacy skills they need to succeed in life. This is an ongoing challenge, with burnout rates high (Teacher Tapp, 2023) and retention rates low (French, 2023). Post-COVID, where much of the work done to narrow the disadvantage gap was lost, this challenge is tougher than ever. At the same time – and sharing common roots – disadvantage continues to increase for children and young people in the UK. Teachers have the power to effect change when they are empowered to do so.

We are committed to inspiring and supporting teachers through our programmes, training and resources. In 2022, for the first time since 2015 (Clark and Teravainen-Goff, 2015), as part of our [Annual Literacy Survey](#), we ran a survey for teachers and other school staff, asking about their attitudes to literacy as a whole, as well as reading, writing and speaking and listening.¹ We received responses from 1,535 teachers (see methodology below for more detail) from across primary, secondary and other settings. The survey was anonymous, and we asked teachers to tell us about the sorts of provision they had in their schools, and also about their own attitudes to literacy and what they saw their role to be. As outlined below, we were particularly interested in how this would differ across primary and secondary settings, as well as by different roles and levels of seniority.

Teaching writing, as suggested by our report on children and young people’s writing in 2023, plays a key role in supporting writing enjoyment (Clark, Bonafede, Picton & Cole, 2023). In that report, open-ended comments showed appreciation of prescriptive structures and support provided by teachers in 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.”

It is equally crucial, however, to academic success. In the primary curriculum this is made explicit, stating that ‘[t]eachers should develop pupils’ reading and writing in

¹ <https://literacytrust.org.uk/research-services/annual-literacy-survey/>

all subjects to support their acquisition of knowledge' (Department for Education, 2013, p.10). In the secondary curriculum, however, explicit writing is not expected across different subjects even though the Education Endowment Foundation states that 'there is a growing need to ensure that [secondary] students are trained to access the academic language and conventions of different subjects' (Education Endowment Foundation, 2018, p. 7). For this reason, we asked teachers about a range of teaching strategies, and we also asked secondary teachers specifically whether they enjoyed teaching writing and felt confident doing so.

Lastly, we asked teachers about their own writing. Teresa Cremin writes that: 'If teachers are to teach for creativity in writing, then composing at their own level is probably a pre-requisite experience, or is at the very least a potentially valuable one' (Cremin, 2006, p. 416). We were therefore interested to see how teachers felt about their own writing and, particularly with secondary teachers, how this might relate to their confidence in and enjoyment of teaching writing.

This report forms part of a series, alongside reading and whole-school literacy, that outline our findings in relation to these specific areas.²

Key findings

We asked teachers what writing strategies they taught explicitly, including grammar, vocabulary, scaffolding and modelling writing. Across all areas, uptake was around 2 in 5, but this was higher for primary than for secondary. We were also interested to see how secondary school teachers (specifically) felt about teaching writing, and whether they had received training to do so.

- Just 1 in 4 (26.4%) secondary teachers taught grammar explicitly.
- Fewer than half (46.4%) of all secondary teachers said they had received training on how to teach writing but around 3 in 5 said they enjoyed it (58.4%) and felt confident doing so (61.4%).

² See reading and whole-school literacy reports: <https://literacytrust.org.uk/research-services/research-reports/teachers-and-reading-writing-and-whole-school-literacy-in-2023>

Meanwhile, teachers' own writing enjoyment was lower than their reading enjoyment:

- Far fewer teachers enjoyed writing (56.2%) than reading (85.8%).
- Open-ended comments suggested that time was a barrier for teachers when it came to writing for pleasure in their own time.

Our findings suggest that teachers' own attitudes and behaviours may have a bearing on their enjoyment of and confidence in teaching reading and writing.

- More teachers who said they enjoyed reading enjoyed teaching reading (67.6% vs 42.3%) and felt confident teaching reading (66.5% vs 44.4%) compared with teachers who didn't enjoy reading.
- More teachers who enjoyed writing enjoy teaching writing (71.7% vs 43%) and are confident teaching writing (72.8% vs 48.5) compared with those who don't enjoy writing

These findings are broadly encouraging and, while literacy strategies are less explicit in some cases, the commitment to and passion for literacy across the board suggests a hopeful future.

Methodology

We surveyed 1,535 teachers from across different settings, with the majority being from primary and secondary schools.³ The data set comprised classroom and subject teachers, teaching assistants, heads of department and librarians, with several others.⁴ We use 'teachers' here as a shorthand to cover any professional

³ First school/infants school n = 49, Primary school/junior school n = 443, Middle school n = 3, Secondary school/high school/upper school n = 931, Sixth form or other post-16 setting n = 16, All-through school n = 34, Other/not answered n = 59.

⁴ Supply teachers and cover teachers are counted as classroom teachers. Subject co-ordinators are counted as heads of department. Head of phase counts as head of year. Where someone has said they are a trainee, they are counted as being in the role they are training for. Assistant heads are counted as heads. Librarian includes library assistants.

working in a school, including librarians and teaching assistants as well as technical and administrative support staff.

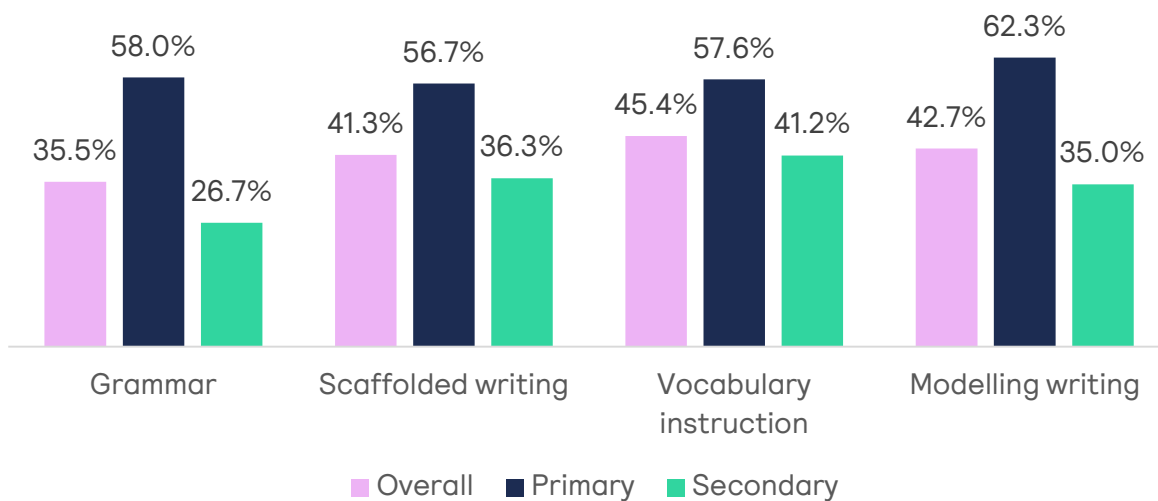
Findings in detail



Teaching writing

We asked teachers about a range of reading strategies, and specifically whether they taught these strategies explicitly. Explicit teaching strategies, as outlined by the EEF, refer to ‘teacher-led approaches focused on teacher demonstration followed by guided practice and independent practice’ (EEF, 2020, p.24). Figure 1 shows those who did so, overall and by whether they taught in primary or secondary schools. Across the board, overall figures were around 2 in 5: the percentage of teachers was lowest for teaching grammar explicitly, while the highest was vocabulary instruction. More primary than secondary teachers said they did so across different strategies. The biggest difference was in relation to grammar, with more than twice as many primary than secondary school teachers saying they taught it explicitly. It is important to note that not all respondents will have direct teaching responsibilities, which may impact on results in some cases.

Figure 1: Teachers who teach writing strategies, overall and by phase



“We have to be careful at KS4 re written coursework, as written scaffolding strategies could contravene examination guidance.”

“The level I teach the students at our school is much lower than the average child. We cover all additional learning needs and have to make big adaptations to suit the needs of the child. A lot of work we do is to help them understand the building blocks or reading and writing.”

“I would say that, despite not necessarily being directly trained in a teaching format, a lot of these I picked up in my own personal education so it is more an unconscious competence for me to pass this on in the work I do.”

Teaching writing (secondary only)

We asked secondary teachers about their confidence and training in, and enjoyment of, teaching writing (Figure 2). 3 in 5 said that they enjoyed teaching writing and were confident teaching it, but fewer than half said that they had received training to teach writing.

Figure 2: Teachers' attitudes to and experience of teaching writing

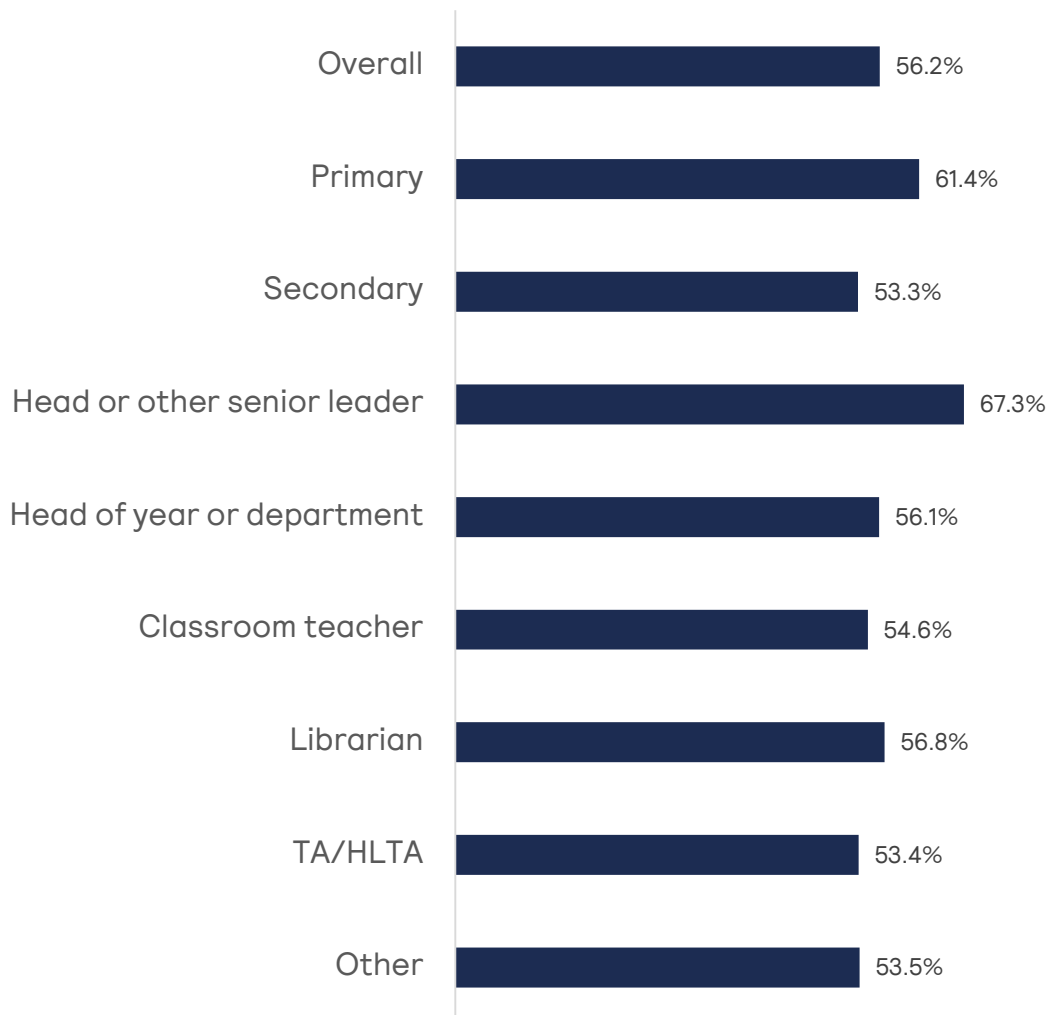


Teachers' own writing



Far fewer teachers enjoyed writing (56.2%) than reading (85.8%). As shown in Figure 3, slightly more primary than secondary teachers said they enjoyed writing. Enjoyment by role was stable except for heads and other senior leaders, both of whom had a higher percentage of writing enjoyment (by over 10 percentage points).

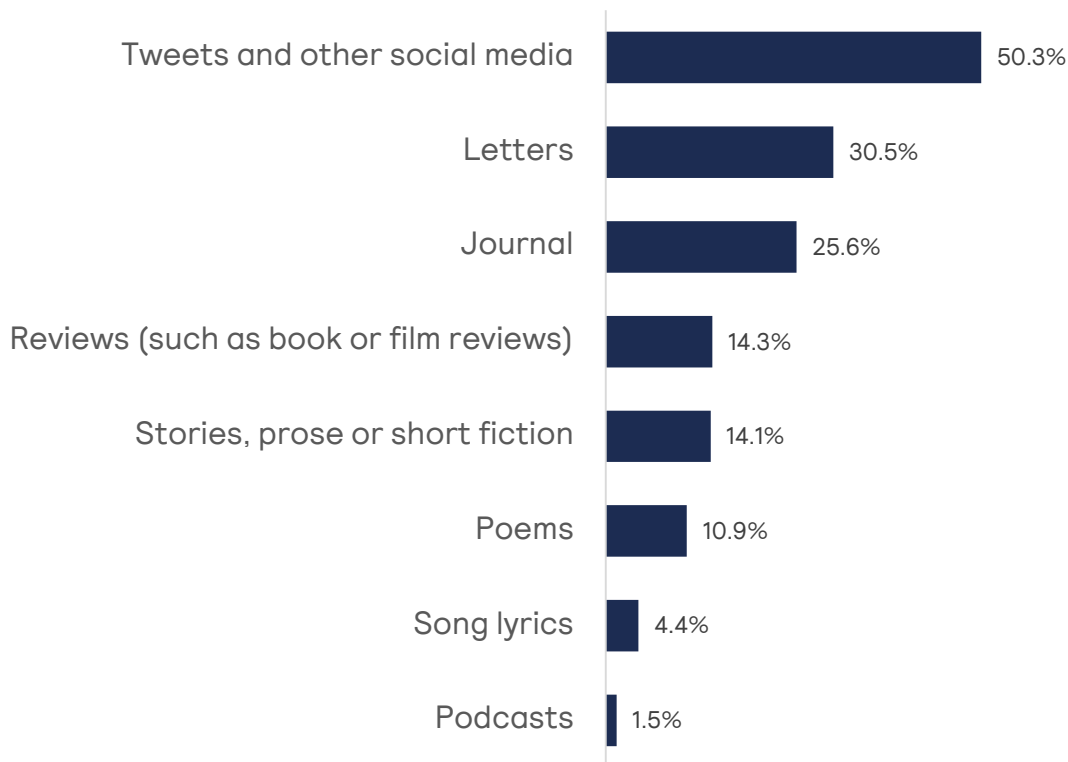
Figure 3: Teachers' enjoyment of writing by phase and role



We also asked teachers what kind of writing they did in their spare time at least once a month (Figure 4). Just over half wrote on social media, which is broadly in line with the general public overall.⁵ Meanwhile, 3 in 10 wrote letters and 1 in 4 wrote in a diary or journal. Far fewer, around 1 in 7, wrote reviews or stories, while just 1 in 10 wrote poems. Hardly any teachers wrote song lyrics or podcasts.

⁵ In 2023, according to Ofcom, nearly 3 in 5 (59%) adults said that they actively used social media apps to share, post or comment (Ofcom, 2023).

Figure 4: Different types of writing done by teachers in their spare time



Others included role-play games, recipes, academic writing and postcards. Open-ended comments suggested that some teachers, both in primary and secondary schools, saw teaching as an impediment to writing:

“I’ve always been an enthusiastic reader but I’ve never personally enjoyed writing. I think, in part, this is because we as teachers rely far too much on writing as a medium of assessment across the curriculum.”

“Ironically, working in education has a hugely negative impact on my capacity to write creatively for myself.”

Meanwhile, several commented on a lack of time restricting their writing:

“I used to write when I had free time. I now have 4 children and NO free time!”

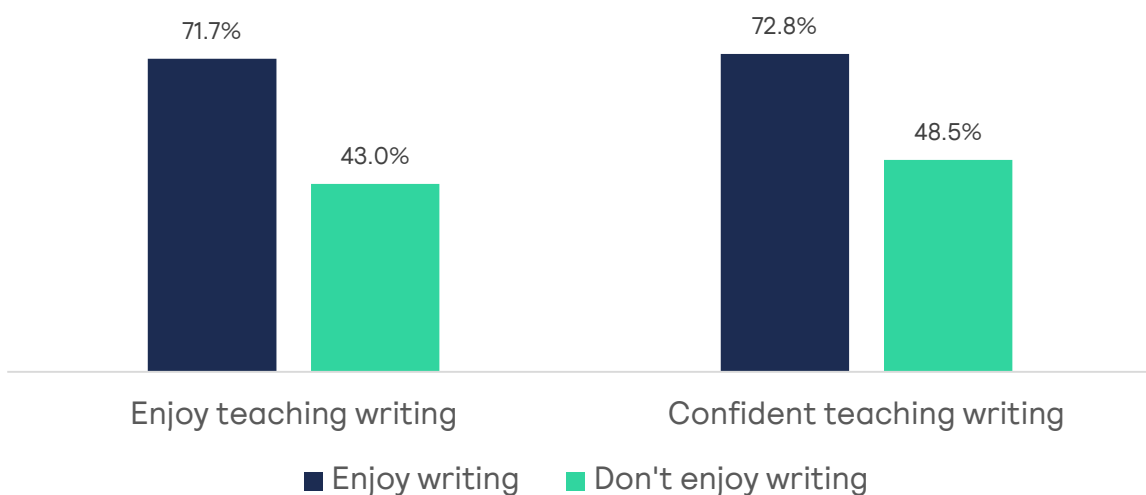
“Sadly, my regular writing is limited to ‘to do’ lists and is mostly school-related; I do enjoy creative writing in the holidays and I hope to do more when I retire.”

“What ‘free time’? I’m a primary school teacher – we regularly work 60+ hours a week.”

Relationship between writing enjoyment and teaching writing

Cremin (2009, p. 418) remarks that ‘[t]hrough sharing their writing, modeling possible ways to express ideas, and reflecting upon their own intentions and choices, teachers can enhance the agency of young writers’. As an alternative to the restrictions and cautions felt by many teachers, and with more time allowed, Cremin’s comments suggest that teachers should be encouraged to embrace creativity, risk and spontaneity in writing. This is supported by our findings: as with reading (see references for report), and as shown in Figure 5, far more of those who enjoy writing than who don’t enjoy writing also enjoy teaching writing and are confident teaching writing.

Figure 5: Teachers’ attitudes to teaching writing compared with enjoyment of writing in their free time



Conclusion

We know that explicit teaching of writing at all levels and across all subjects is crucial to pupils' success, and that teachers developing their own identities as writers – in all genres – can help develop classroom writing practices. These findings reinforce that it can also build enthusiasm for and confidence in those practices. Comments suggest that teachers having more space and time to write and explore these identities could be beneficial.

“Ironically, working in education has a hugely negative impact on my capacity to write creatively for myself.”

We can also see a high level of confidence in and enthusiasm for writing and teaching writing at a general level but underscore that, particularly in the secondary space, more can still be done to develop explicit approaches and to train (and excite and encourage) teachers in writing in their subject. As noted at the start, teachers play a vital role in developing children and young people as writers, helping them build communication skills and with finding their own voice. Many of our [writing resources for teachers](#) can support this.

At a time when teachers and other education staff are under more pressure than ever with limited resources, our priority is to offer support and inspiration for them to embed literacy wherever possible. These findings are broadly encouraging and, while literacy strategies are less explicit in some cases, the commitment to and passion for literacy across the board suggests a hopeful future.

References

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

Clark, C. and Teravainen-Goff, A. (2015), Teachers and Literacy: Their perceptions, understanding, confidence and awareness. London: National Literacy Trust.

Cremin, T. (2006), Creativity, uncertainty and discomfort: Teachers as writers. Cambridge Journal of Education. 36. 10.1080/03057640600866023.

Department for Education (2013), The National Curriculum in England: Key Stages 1 and 2 Framework Document, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a81a9abe5274a2e8ab55319/PRIMARY_national_curriculum.pdf

Education Endowment Foundation (2018), Improving Literacy in Secondary Schools: Guidance Report, <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/education-evidence/guidance-reports/literacy-ks3-ks4>

Education Endowment Foundation (2020), Special Educational Needs in Mainstream Schools: Guidance Report, https://d2tic4wvo1iusb.cloudfront.net/production/eef-guidance-reports/send/EEF_Special_Educational_Needs_in_Mainstream_Schools_Guidance_Report.pdf?v=1715074844

French, Jenni (2023), Teacher Recruitment and Retention in 2023, Gatsby, <https://www.gatsby.org.uk/education/latest/teacher-recruitment-and-retention-in-2023>

Teacher Tapp (2023), Burnout Up – Ofsted out?, <https://teachertapp.co.uk/articles/teachers-behaving-badly-burnout-and-switching-off/>

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 2024. 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: Best, E. (2024), Teachers and 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.