

## Children and young people's writing in 2017/2018

### Findings from our Annual Literacy Survey

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Last year we focused on celebrating the idea of writing for enjoyment and showed how enjoyment related to many other facets of writing. This year, using data from 47,786 pupils in the UK aged 8 to 18 who answered writing questions as part of our Annual Literacy Survey that we conducted between November 2017 and end of January 2018, we will look at writing more broadly.

We will explore not only how many children and young people enjoy writing but also how often they write in their free time and what type of formats they write, how good a writer they think they are and what they think about writing. We will explore which groups of children and young people are likely to engage in writing and how it differs by geographical location in England.

### Key findings

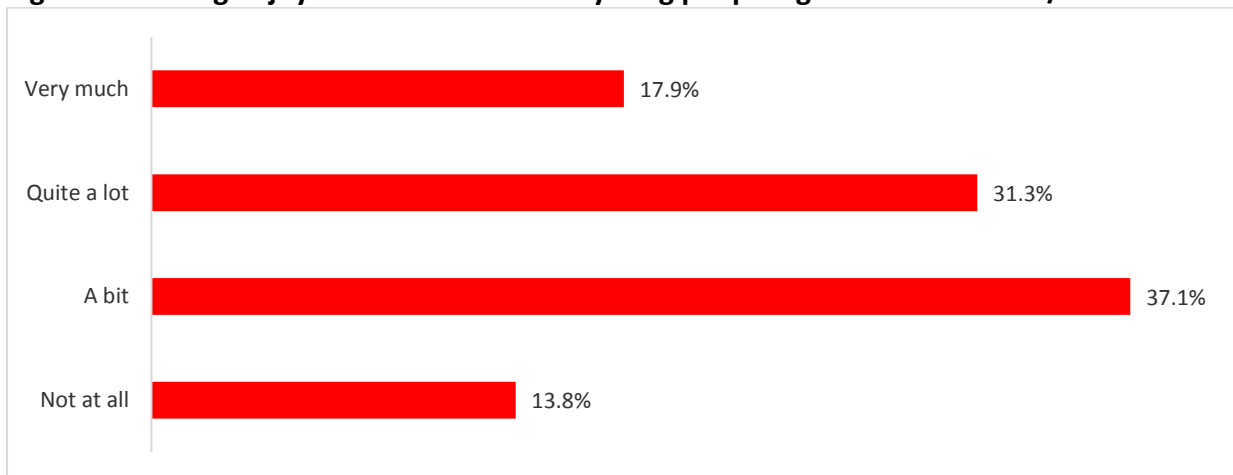
- Half (50.9%) of children and young people in 2017/18 said that they either only enjoy writing a bit or not at all. Overall, fewer children and young people in 2017/18 said that they enjoy writing compared with the year before, decreasing from 50.7% to 49.2%.
- Less than 1 child in 5 (17.3%) said in 2017/18 that they write something that isn't for school at least once a day. Daily writing levels have been falling since 2014, and in 2017/18 we recorded the lowest levels of daily writing since we began asking this question in 2010 (27.0%).
- Most children and young people said that they write text messages (88.1%) and instant messages (77.8%) in their free time at least once a month, followed by short stories/fiction (44.1%) and song lyrics (35.8%). 1 child in 6 also engages in online fiction writing (such as Movellas, Wattpad) at least once a month.
- Most children and young people in 2017/18 agreed with statements that highlight the functional aspect of writing, with 77.6% of children and young people agreeing that writing will help them learn more and 74.7% agreeing that the more they write, the better their writing becomes. Over half of them also agree that they will get a better job if they are good at writing. Fewer children and young people agreed with statements that highlight a fun aspect of writing, with only 41.6%

agreeing that writing is fun, and only 34.0% agreeing that writing is cool. On the flip side, 2 in 5 agree that they only write when they have to. Overall, attitudes towards writing have declined over the past few years.

Generally, girls more so than boys say that they enjoy writing, write something in their free time on a daily basis, write a variety of formats and think more positively about writing. The same is true for pupils who receive free school meals, who are aged 8 to 11 rather than aged 14 to 16 or who are from Asian rather than white backgrounds. Enjoyment of writing, writing frequency as well as attitudes towards writing are also influenced by where children and young people live, with children and young people in Greater London saying that they enjoy it more, do it more often daily and think about writing more positively than children in other regions in England.

**How many children and young people enjoy writing?** Our data from 2017/18 show that less than 1 child in 5 enjoys writing very much, while 3 in 10 enjoy writing quite a lot (see Figure 1). Overall, this means that half of children and young people (50.9%) in 2017/18 said that they only enjoy writing a bit or not at all.

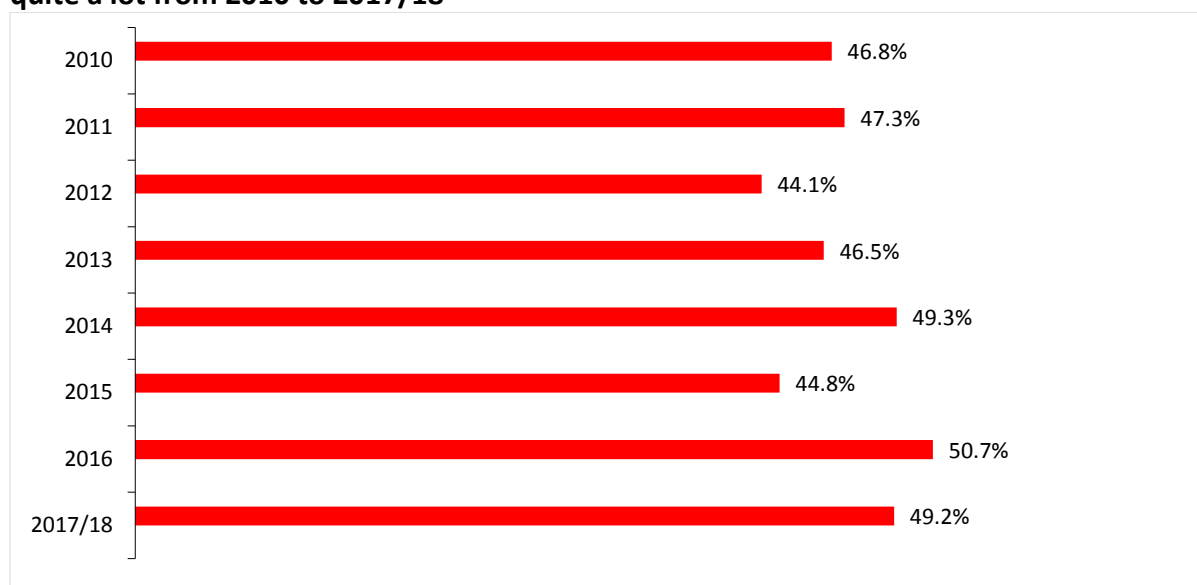
**Figure 1: Writing enjoyment in children and young people aged 8 to 18 in 2017/18**



Fewer children and young people in 2017/18 said that they enjoy writing compared with the previous year<sup>1</sup>. Figure 2 shows that the percentage of children and young people who enjoy writing either very much or quite a lot decreased by 1.5 percentage points between 2016 and 2017/18. This is after we recorded the highest levels of writing enjoyment in 2016 since we first started surveying children and young people in 2010.

<sup>1</sup> This is despite the fact that our 2016 (N = 39,411) and 2017/18 (N = 47,786) samples are comparable in terms of gender, free school meal uptake, age and ethnic background. The difference over time is significant even when those demographic variables are controlled for.

**Figure 2: Percentage of children and young people who enjoy writing either very much or quite a lot from 2010 to 2017/18**



As we saw above, the sample is nearly evenly split into those who enjoy writing and those who don't. So, **who enjoys writing?** Our data from 2017/18 show us that **more girls than boys enjoy writing**<sup>2</sup> (see Figure 3), with nearly 3 girls in 5 (57.4) saying that they enjoy writing either very much or quite a lot compared with only 2 boys in 5 (40.8%).

Age also affects how much children and young people enjoy writing, with **younger children being much more enthusiastic about writing than older ones**<sup>3</sup>. Overall, two-thirds (68.5%) of pupils aged 8 to 11 said that they enjoy writing either very much or quite a lot compared with less than half (46.5%) of those aged 11 to 14 and a third (36.1%) of those aged 14 to 16.

A pupil's socioeconomic background<sup>4</sup>, using **free school meal (FSM) uptake as a proxy, was not associated with enjoyment of writing in 2017/18**. While slightly more pupils who receive FSMs said that they enjoy writing compared with their peers who don't receive FSMs, this difference was not statistically significant.

Finally, there were differences by ethnic background<sup>5</sup>, with **fewer pupils from white ethnic backgrounds** enjoying writing in 2017/18 compared with pupils from mixed, Asian or black ethnic backgrounds. Pupils from Asian ethnic backgrounds were most likely to say that they enjoy writing.

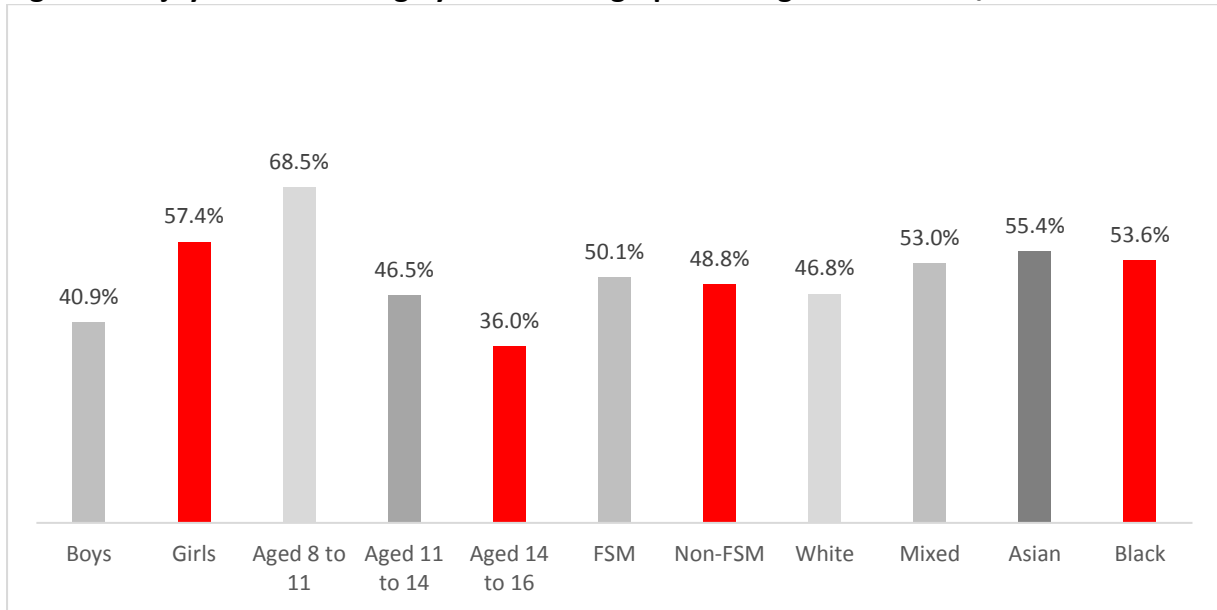
<sup>2</sup> The 2017/18 sample contained gender information on 44,864 pupils (girls = 53.1%, N = 23,815; boys = 46.9%, N = 21,049). 680 (1.4%) identified as "Other", while 1,235 (2.5%) pupils didn't want to share their gender. These latter two categories were excluded from any analyses.

<sup>3</sup> 19.3% of pupils were in Key Stage 2 (aged 8 to 11; N = 9,468), 64.6% were in Key Stage 3 (aged 11 to 14; N = 31,678), 13.3% were in Key Stage 4 (aged 14 to 16; N = 6,535) and 2.4% were in Key Stage 5 (aged 16 to 18; N = 1,179). Pupils aged 16 to 18 were excluded from this analysis due to low numbers.

<sup>4</sup> Our sample in 2017/18 contained 5,730 (11.7%) FSM pupils and 37,844 (77.2%) pupils who said that they don't receive free school meals. 4,162 (8.5%) didn't know whether they receive meals or not and 827 (1.7%) didn't want to say. The latter two categories were excluded from any analysis.

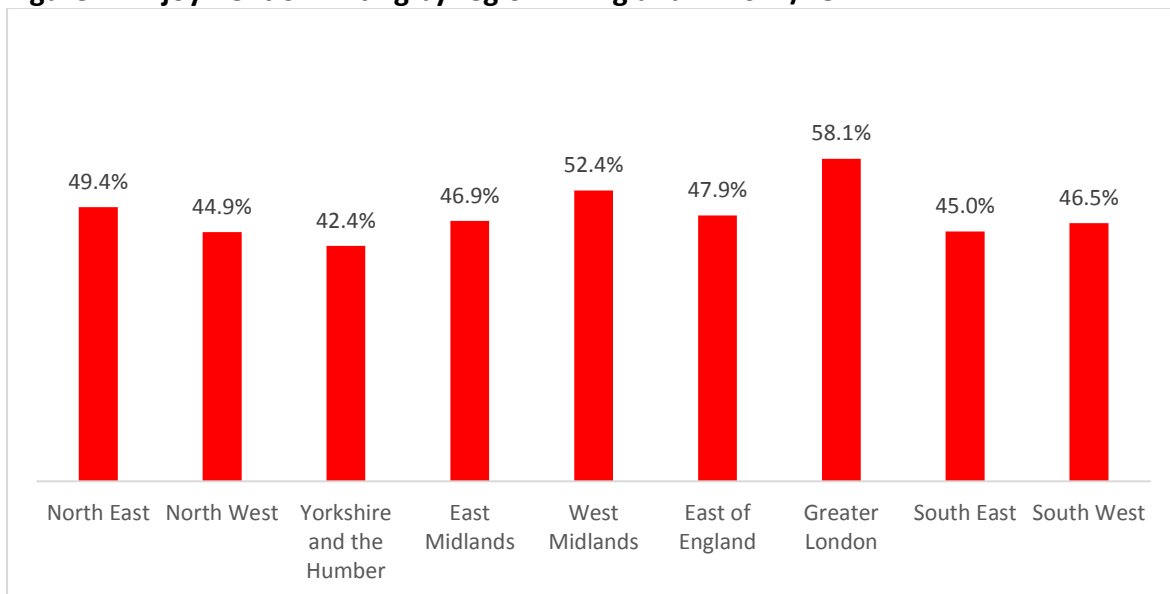
<sup>5</sup> Data by ethnic background were available for 38,624 children and young people: white = 27,726 (71.8%), mixed = 2,452 (6.3%), Asian = 5,842 (15.1%) and black = 2,604 (6.7%).

**Figure 3: Enjoyment of writing by socio-demographic background in 2017/18**



There were also differences in writing enjoyment across the different regions in England<sup>6</sup> (see Figure 4), with children and young people in Greater London reporting the highest levels of writing enjoyment and their peers in Yorkshire and the Humber reporting the lowest levels.

**Figure 4: Enjoyment of writing by region in England in 2017/18**

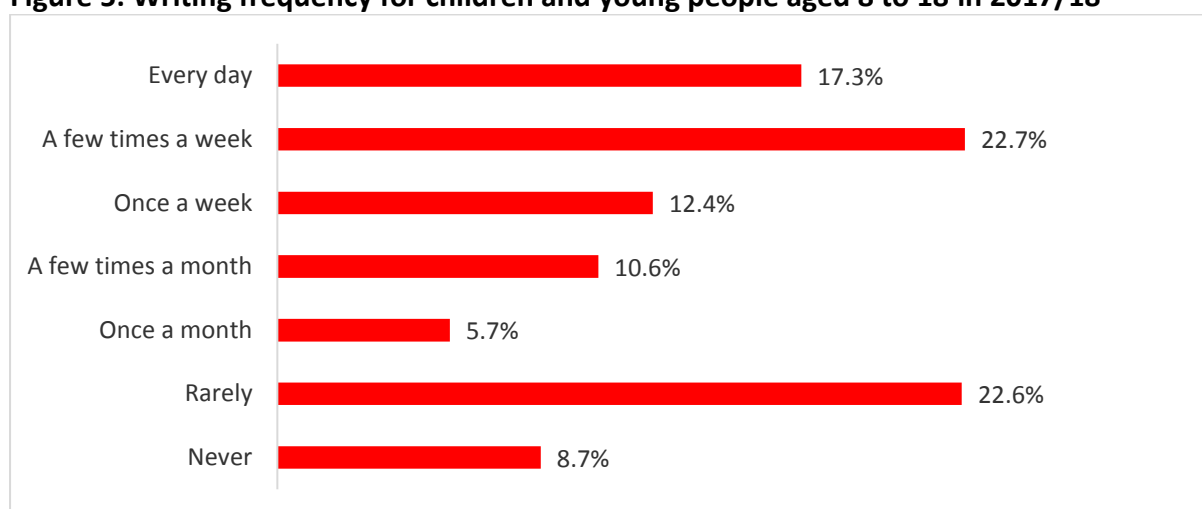


**How often do children and young people write outside class?** Less than 1 child in 5 said in 2017/18 that they write something that isn't for school at least once a day (see Figure 5). Overall, just over half (52.4%) of children and young people said that they write something

<sup>6</sup> North East (N = 6,033; 13.1%), North West (N = 6,364; 13.9%), Yorkshire and the Humber (N = 2,227; 4.8%), East Midlands (N = 4,976; 10.8%), West Midlands (N = 1,822; 4.0%), East of England (N = 4,075; 8.9%), Greater London (N = 11,700; 25.5%), South East (N = 4,685; 10.2%), South West (N = 4,065; 8.8%)

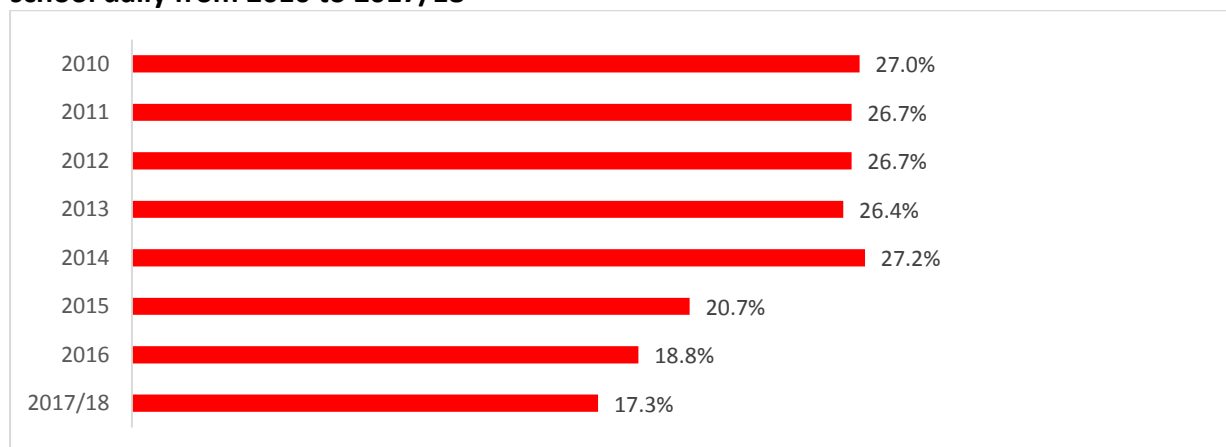
that isn't for school at least once week, while 3 in 10 (31.3%) said that they rarely or never write something that isn't for school.

**Figure 5: Writing frequency for children and young people aged 8 to 18 in 2017/18**



Fewer children and young people in 2017/18 said that they write something daily outside class that isn't for school with the previous year (see Figure 6). Indeed, daily writing levels have been falling since 2014, and in 2017/18 we recorded the lowest levels of daily writing since we began asking this question in 2010.

**Figure 6: Percentage of children and young people who write something that isn't for school daily from 2010 to 2017/18**

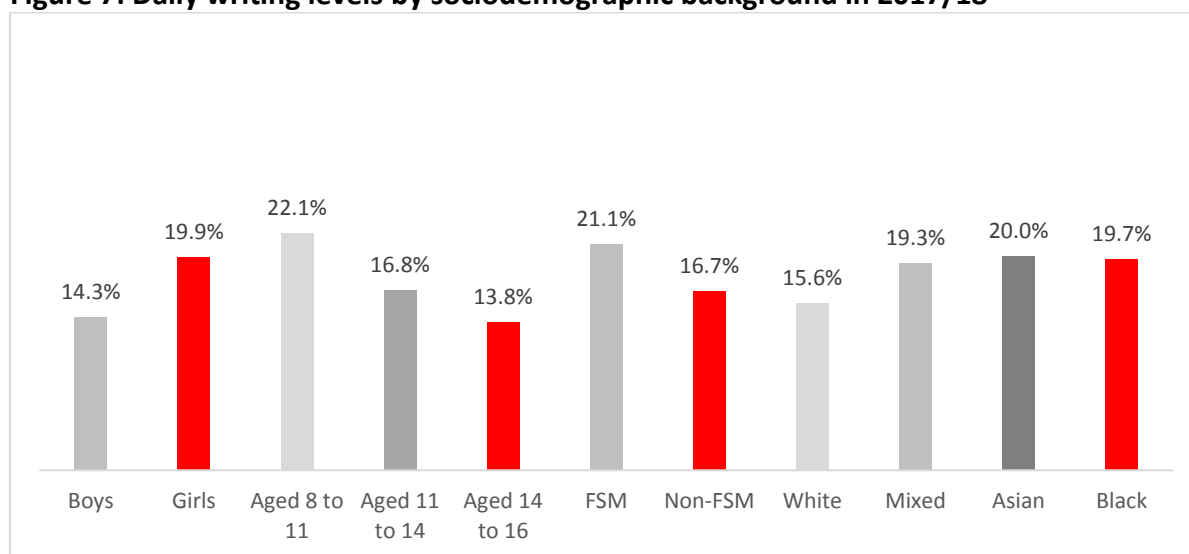


As we saw above, less than a fifth of children and young people write something that isn't for school on a daily basis. So, **who are the children who engage in writing in their free time on a daily basis?** Our data from 2017/18 show us that just like writing enjoyment, daily writing levels differ by gender, age group, FSM uptake and ethnic background (see Figure 7).

Overall, **more girls than boys** say that they write something that isn't for school on a daily basis, with nearly 1 girl in 5 saying this compared with 1 boy in 7. **Younger children are also more likely to write something outside class daily than their older peers**, with over 1 child aged 8 to 11 in 5 saying that they do this compared with less 1 young person aged 14 to 16. **More FSM pupils than their peers who don't receive FSMs** also write something daily in

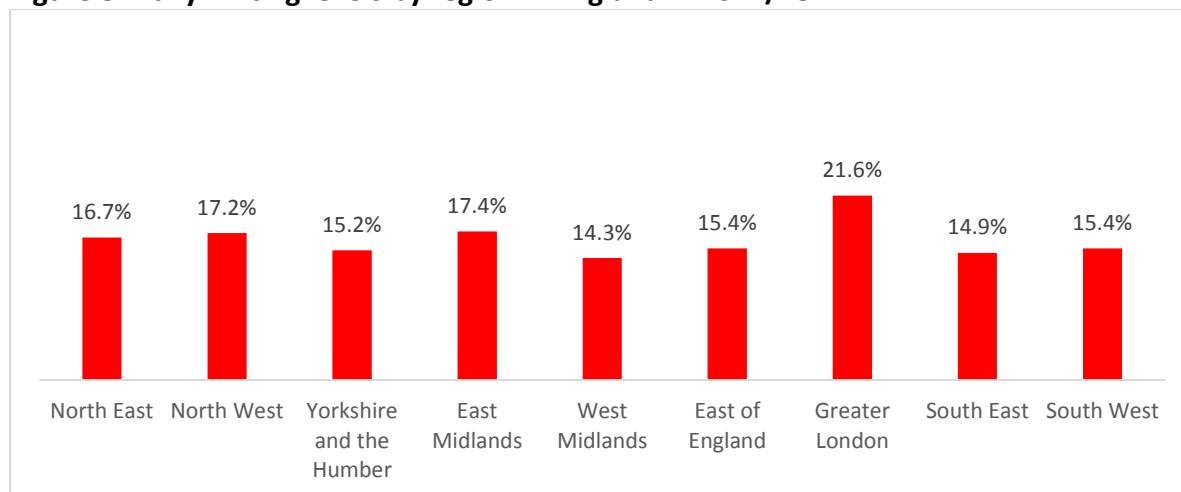
their free time, while children and young people from **white backgrounds** are least likely to do this compared to pupils from the other three ethnic backgrounds.

**Figure 7: Daily writing levels by sociodemographic background in 2017/18**



There were also differences in daily writing levels across the different regions in England (see Figure 8), with children and young people in Greater London reporting the highest daily writing levels and their peers in West Midlands reporting the lowest levels.

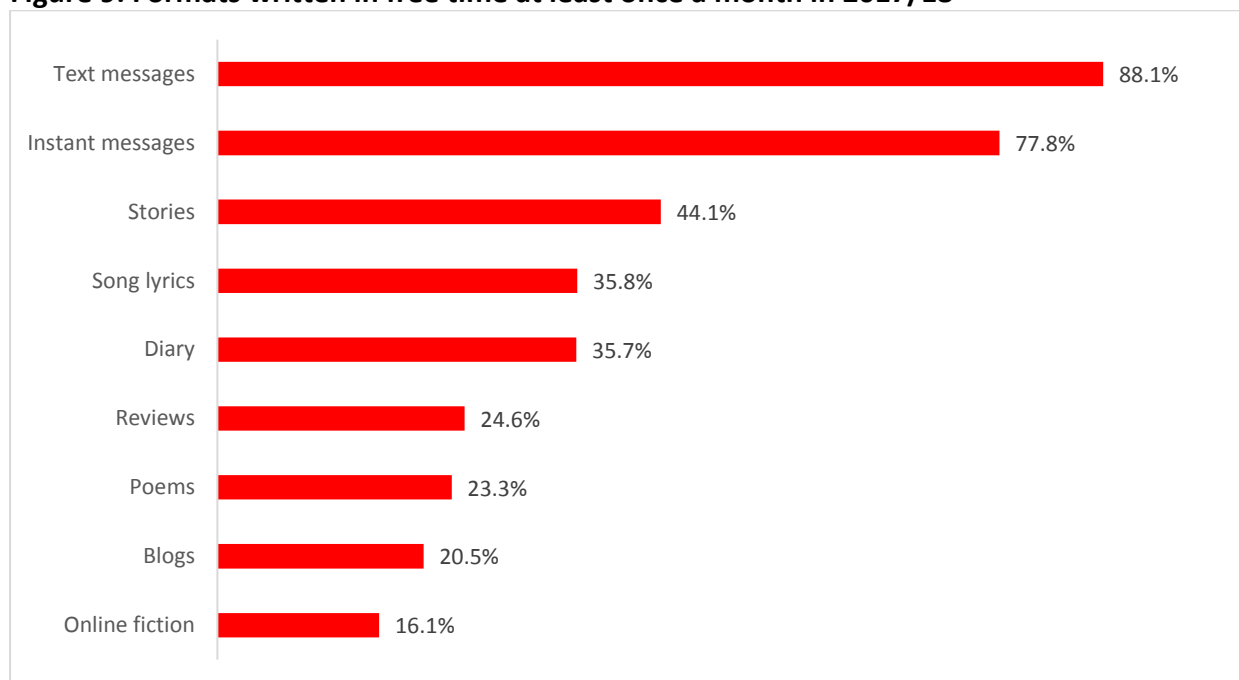
**Figure 8: Daily writing levels by region in England in 2017/18**



**What types of formats do children and young people write in their free time?** As Figure 9 shows, most children and young people said that they write text messages and instant messages in their free time at least once a month, followed by short stories/fiction and song lyrics. 1 child in 6 also engages in online fiction writing (such as Movellas, Wattpad) at least once a month, while 1 in 5 write in a blog/on a forum. As can be seen in Appendix 1, most of the writing children and young people do across five of these formats (stories, song lyrics, diary, reviews and poems) is done predominantly on paper<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>7</sup> As we changed the way we ask the question in 2017, we cannot compare our findings from this year to those of previous years.

**Figure 9: Formats written in free time at least once a month in 2017/18**



There were also differences depending on their **sociodemographic background**. As can be seen in Table 1, the online writing behaviour of **boys and girls** is very similar but they diverge when it comes to writing some of the formats on paper, which more girls than boys tend to do at least once a month. For example, nearly twice as many girls than boys say that they write song lyrics, poems or in a diary in their free time (please see Appendix 1 for a gender breakdown of these formats by paper and onscreen).

There were some staggering differences in formats being written outside class depending on the **age group** of pupils. As can be seen in Table 1, more children aged 8 to 11 tend to write song lyrics, diaries, reviews, stories and poems at least once a month compared with their older peers, regardless of whether that is on screen or on paper (see Appendix 1 for this additional information). However, pupils aged 11 to 14 and, in particular, those aged 14 to 16 were much more likely to say that they write text messages and instant messages in their free time at least once a month compared with those aged 8 to 11. There was no age difference in writing online fiction but slightly more pupils aged 8 to 11 said that they write blogs/forum posts in their spare time at least once a month.

In terms of **free school meal uptake**, pupils who receive FSMs are more likely to write song lyrics, in a diary, reviews, stories and poems in their free time at least once a month compared with their peers who don't receive FSMs. This is true regardless of the format they are written in (see Appendix 1 for this information). This relationship with FSM uptake remains in terms of online fiction writing and writing on blogs/forums. However, it reverses when we asked about text and instant messages, where more pupils who don't receive FSMs than their FSM-receiving peers say that they write these in their spare time at least one a month.

In terms of ethnic background, fewer children and young people from white ethnic backgrounds tend to say that they write song lyrics, in a diary, reviews, fiction stories and poems in their free time at least once a month compared with children and young people from other ethnic backgrounds. As can be seen in Appendix 1, this is regardless of the format that they are written in. Fewer children and young people from white ethnic backgrounds also say that they write online fiction (e.g. using Movellas or Wattpad) or blogs/forum posts in their free time at least once a month. However, they are most likely to say that they write text messages and instant messages in their spare time at least once a month compared with children and young people from the other ethnic backgrounds.

There were also **regional differences** in the types of formats written outside class at least once a month (see Table 2), with more pupils from Greater London saying that they write any of these formats compared with pupils from other regions in England. This is true regardless of the format they are written in (see Appendix 1).



**Table 1: Formats written in free time at least once a month in 2017/18 by sociodemographic background**

	Boys	Girls	Aged 8 to 11	Aged 11 to 14	Aged 14 to 16	FSM	Non-FSM	White	Mixed	Asian	Black
<b>Text messages</b>	85.8%	90.4%	63.1%	71.2%	95.7%	83.7%	90.0%	91.0%	89.5%	82.8%	86.5%
<b>Instant messages</b>	74.7%	80.9%	41.0%	84.7%	92.3%	74.6%	80.2%	80.9%	80.9%	72.7%	80.8%
<b>Online fiction</b>	14.1%	16.9%	17.7%	15.7%	16.1%	19.6%	15.5%	13.7%	19.5%	18.7%	22.6%
<b>Blogs</b>	21.3%	19.0%	23.7%	20.2%	17.7%	23.6%	19.8%	19.4%	23.6%	20.5%	22.5%
<b>Song lyrics</b>	26.9%	43.3%	49.3%	35.1%	23.2%	44.5%	33.9%	33.3%	41.8%	34.2%	44.3%
<b>Diary</b>	21.5%	48.6%	57.6%	32.5%	21.9%	41.8%	33.9%	31.9%	40.1%	43.0%	41.1%
<b>Reviews</b>	25.3%	25.9%	39.4%	23.7%	18.4%	31.1%	24.5%	21.2%	29.1%	34.1%	34.6%
<b>Stories</b>	38.2%	49.4%	64.7%	42.5%	27.2%	49.5%	42.5%	40.4%	47.0%	51.2%	49.0%
<b>Poems</b>	17.5%	28.3%	43.7%	20.0%	13.3%	29.9%	21.5%	18.9%	28.8%	30.7%	31.4%

**Table 2: Formats written in free time at least once a month in 2017/18 by region in England**

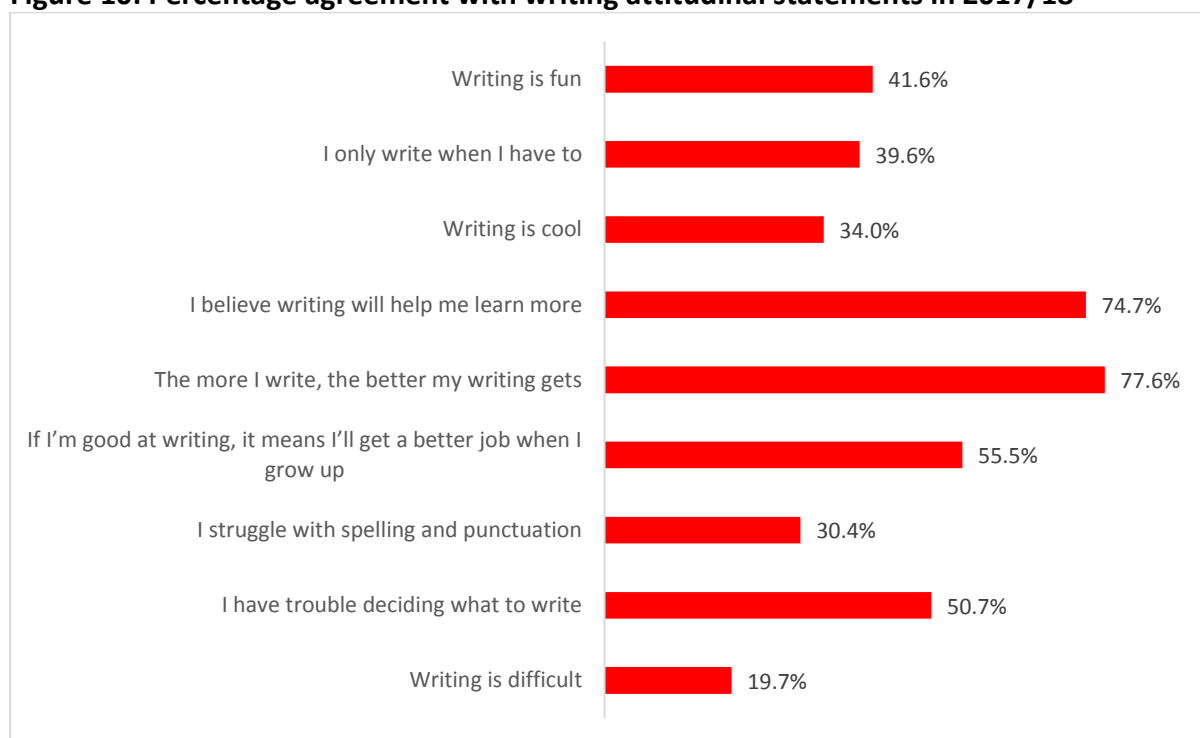
	North East	North West	Yorkshire and the Humber	East Midlands	West Midlands	East of England	Greater London	South East	South West
<b>Text messages</b>	88.7%	90.3%	91.7%	89.8%	86.2%	89.7%	91.4%	91.3%	91.3%
<b>Instant messages</b>	77.9%	81.7%	80.8%	79.2%	74.0%	77.5%	80.7%	82.3%	79.6%
<b>Online fiction</b>	15.4%	16.3%	14.5%	15.2%	15.7%	14.3%	20.0%	14.7%	12.8%
<b>Blogs</b>	19.4%	20.3%	19.0%	20.5%	21.3%	19.9%	22.7%	20.6%	18.4%
<b>Song lyrics</b>	35.5%	32.9%	35.3%	33.6%	34.3%	35.4%	42.4%	33.9%	32.3%
<b>Diary</b>	33.4%	33.2%	30.4%	32.9%	35.3%	32.2%	36.5%	32.4%	34.1%
<b>Reviews</b>	23.1%	22.8%	19.9%	23.7%	29.0%	21.9%	29.0%	23.7%	21.7%
<b>Stories</b>	44.1%	39.3%	39.3%	43.6%	45.7%	42.6%	47.4%	40.9%	41.1%
<b>Poems</b>	21.4%	21.2%	18.5%	20.5%	25.6%	20.7%	29.2%	18.6%	20.9%

**How do children and young people feel about writing?** As can be seen in Figure 10, most children and young people in 2017/18 agreed with statements that highlight the functional aspect of writing, with two-thirds of children and young people agreeing that writing will help them learn more and that the more they write, the better their writing becomes. Over half of them also agree that they will get a better job if they are good at writing.

Fewer children and young people agreed with statements that highlight a fun aspect of writing, with only 2 in 5 agreeing that writing is fun, and only 1 in 3 agreeing that writing is cool. On the flip side, 2 in 5 agree that they only write when they have to.

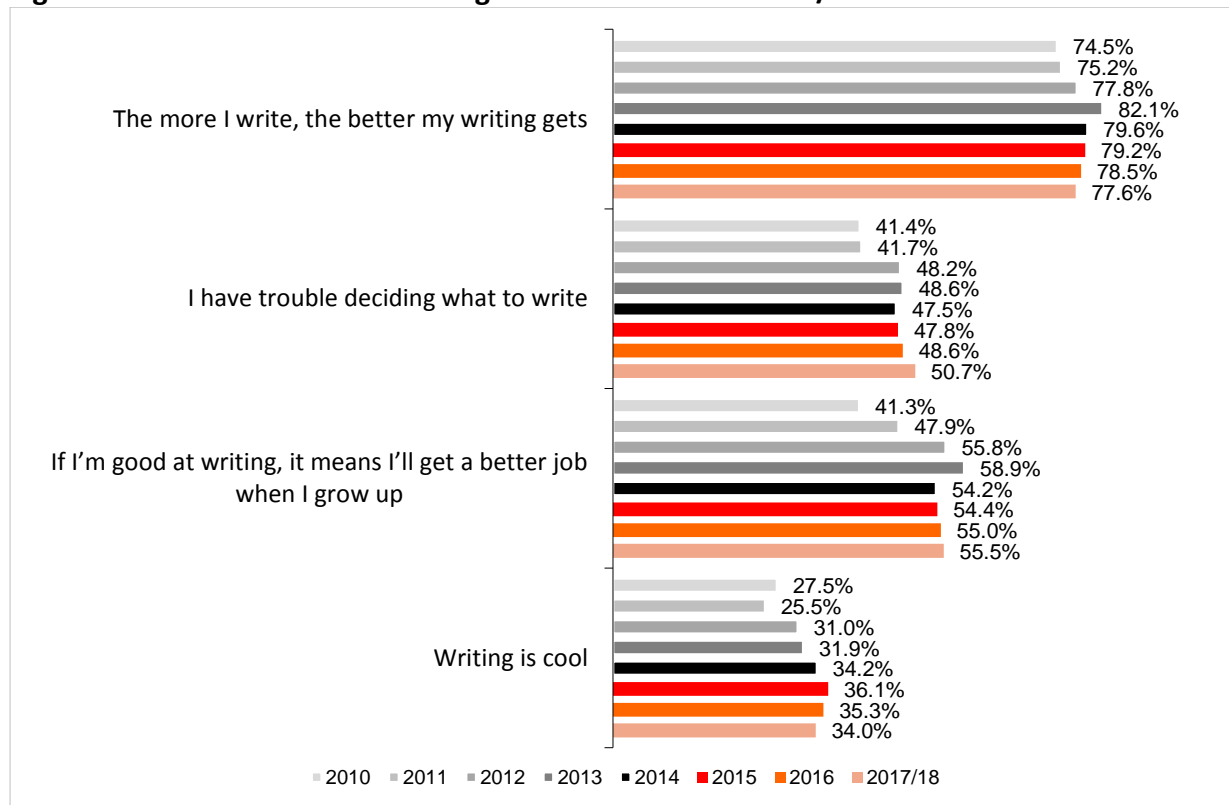
Finally, half of children also agreed that they have trouble deciding what to write, while 3 in 10 agreed that they struggle with spelling and punctuation. Overall, 1 child in 5 agreed that writing is difficult.

**Figure 10: Percentage agreement with writing attitudinal statements in 2017/18**



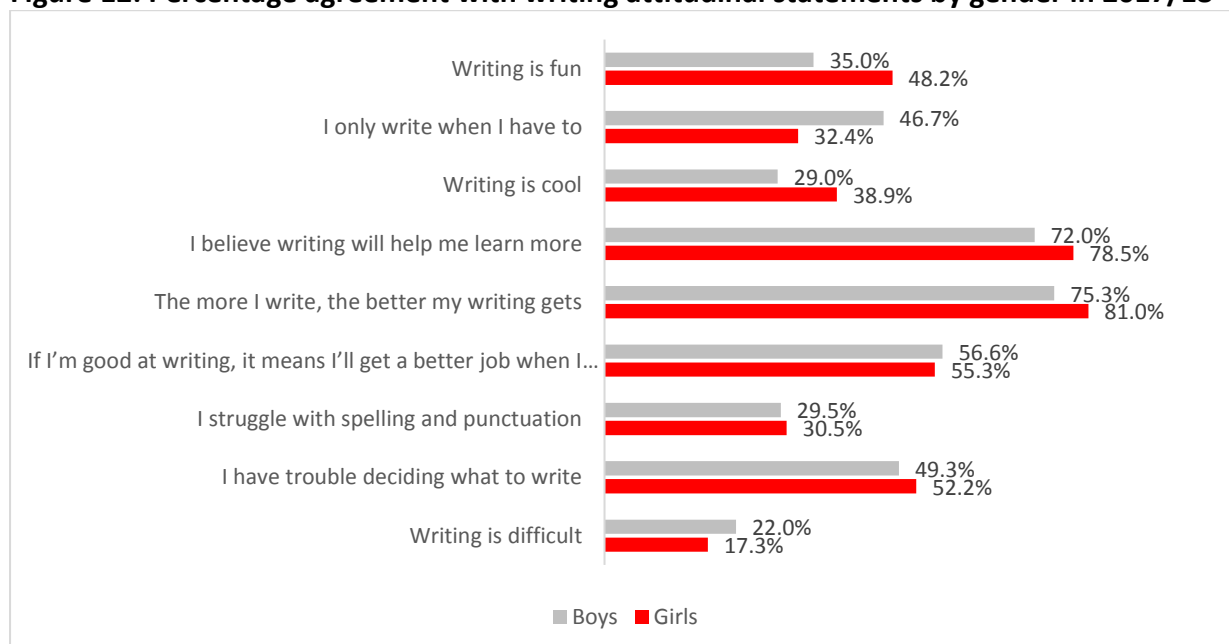
Our attitudinal statements have changed over the years but there are four statements that have been the same since 2010. These are shown in Figure 11, which highlights that attitudes towards writing in 2017/2018 are more positive than they had been in 2010 and 2011. However, it also shows that generally attitudes towards writing peaked in 2014 and have since been declining.

**Figure 11: Attitudes towards writing between 2010 and 2017/18**



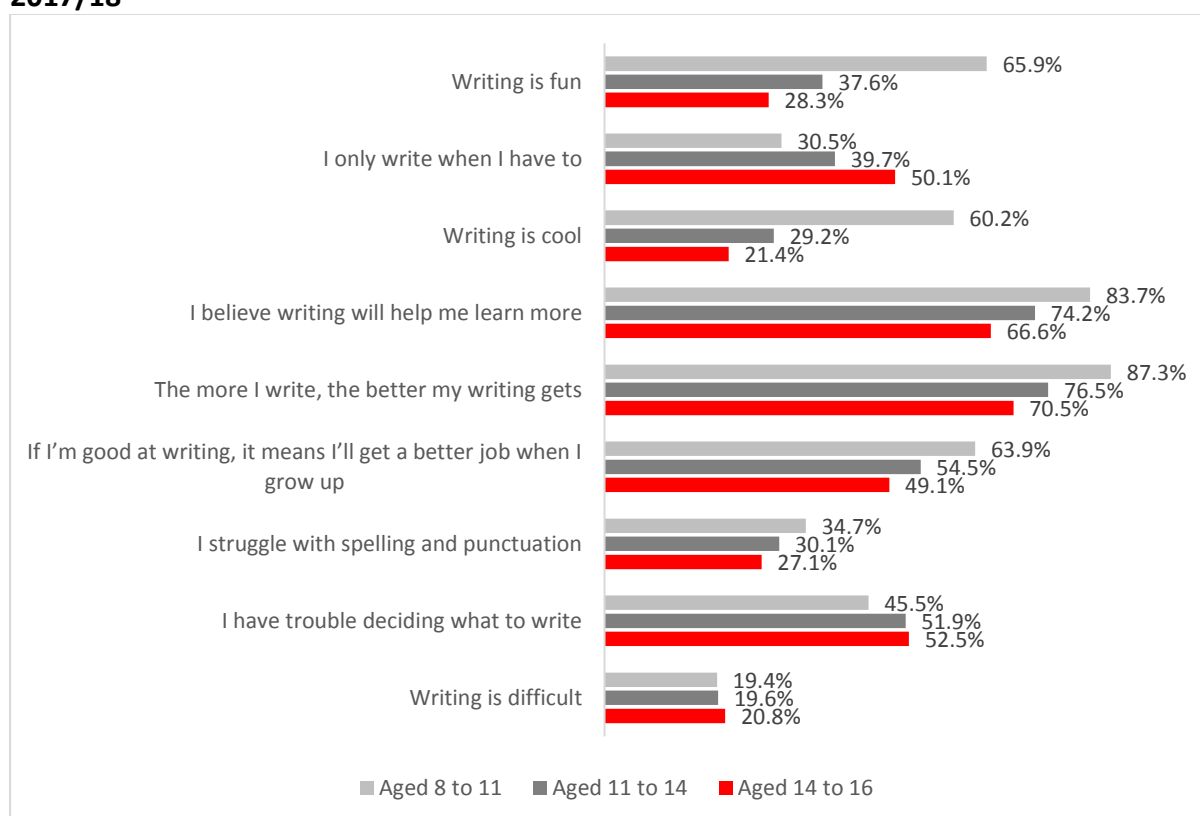
So, **what type of pupil is more likely to think positively about writing?** As can be seen in Figure 12, while boys and girls think very similarly about the functional benefits of writing and similar percentages agree about struggling with spelling/punctuation and finding a topic to write about, there are some differences in how boys and girls think about the emotional aspect of writing. For example, more girls than boys agree that writing is fun and cool, while more boys than girls agree that they write only when they have to.

**Figure 12: Percentage agreement with writing attitudinal statements by gender in 2017/18**



Exploring attitudes towards writing by age groups highlights some of the most pronounced differences, particularly regarding statements that relate to an emotional response to writing. As Figure 13 shows, pupils aged 8 to 11 are twice as likely to agree that writing is fun compared with their peers aged 11 to 14 and those aged 14 to 16. Similarly, they are nearly three times more likely to agree that writing is cool than are pupils aged 14 to 16. However, pupils aged 8 to 11 are also more likely to agree that they struggle with spelling and punctuation compared with their older peers.

**Figure 13: Percentage agreement with writing attitudinal statements by age group in 2017/18**

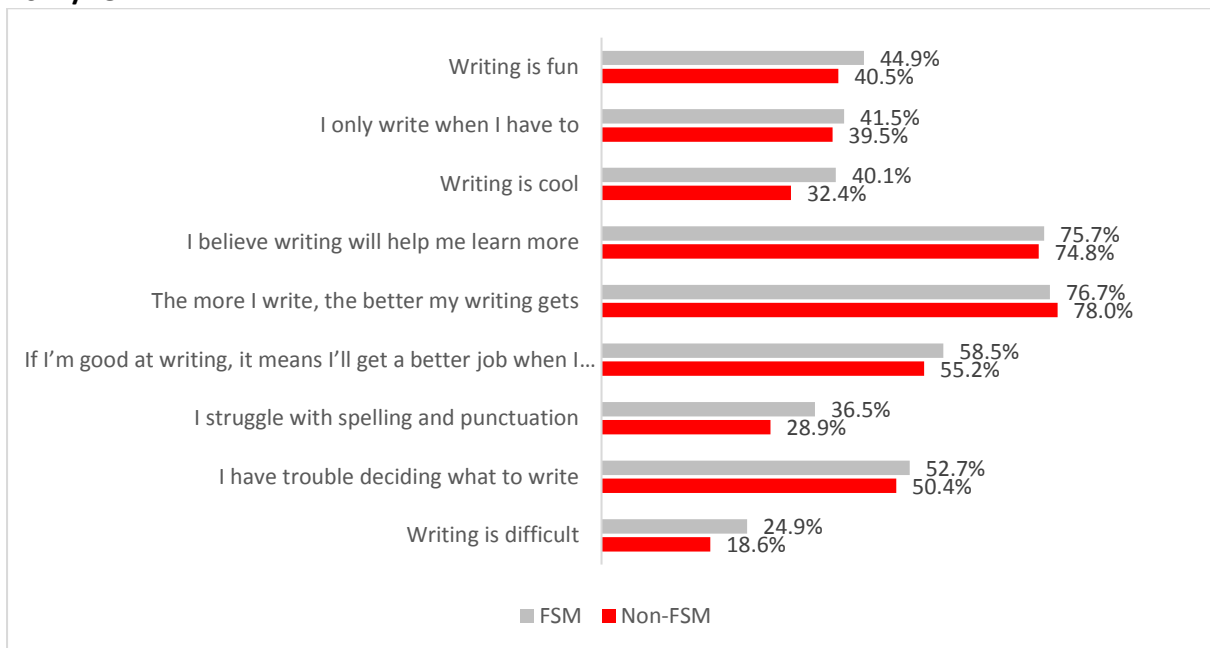


Pupils who receive FSMs and those who don't, think very similarly about writing (see Figure 14). There were only three instances where their opinions diverged. For example, more FSM pupils agreed that writing is cool compared with their peers who don't receive free meals. However, more FSM pupils also agreed that they struggle with spelling/punctuation and that writing is difficult.

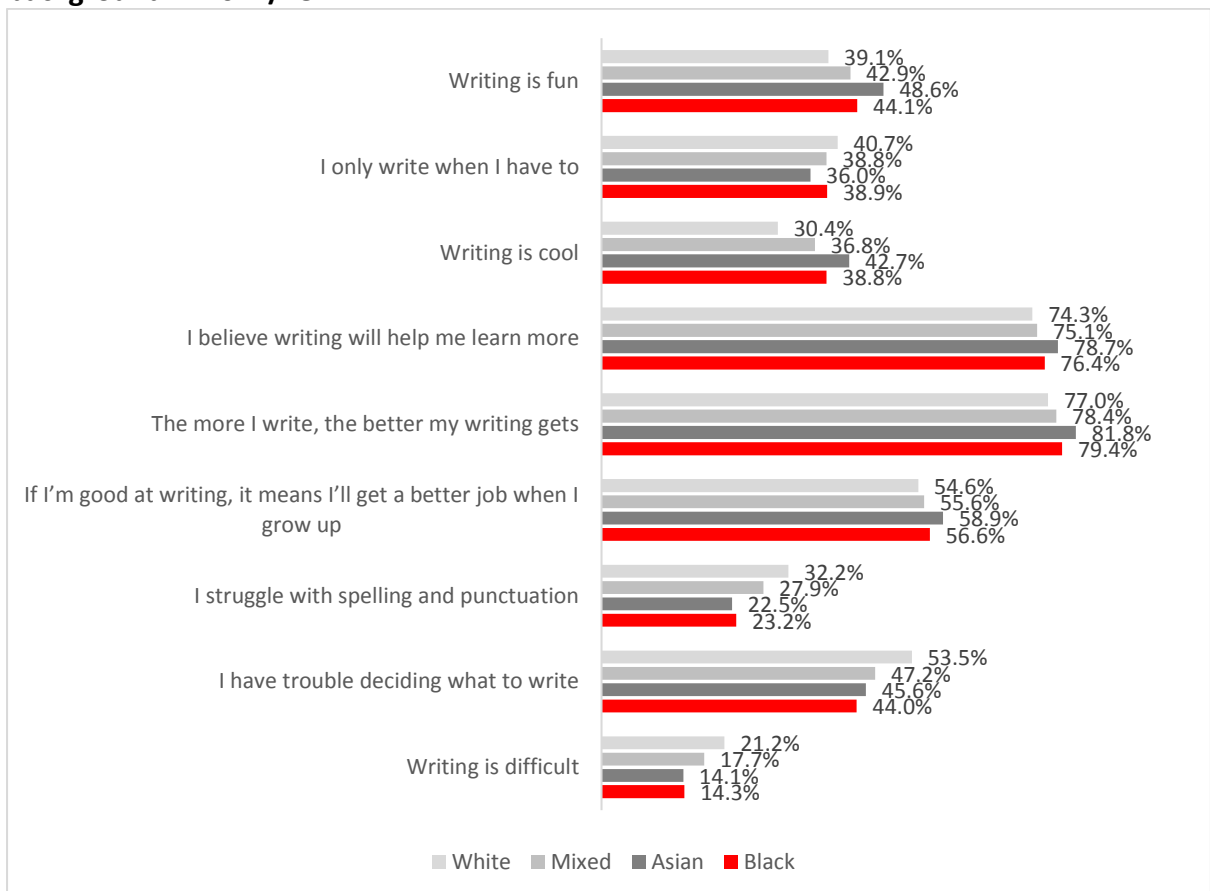
As can be seen in Figure 15, children and young people from hite ethnic backgrounds are least likely to hold positive attitudes towards writing, while children and young people from Asian ethnic backgrounds are most likely to think positively about writing.

Table 3 outlines the percentage agreement with each of the attitudinal statements by geographical region in England and shows that children and young people in Greater London hold the most positive attitudes towards writing, while children and young people in Yorkshire and the Humber are least likely to think positively about writing.

**Figure 14: Percentage agreement with writing attitudinal statements by FSM uptake in 2017/18**



**Figure 15: Percentage agreement with writing attitudinal statements by ethnic background in 2017/18**



**Table 3: Percentage agreement with writing attitudinal statements by region in 2017/18**

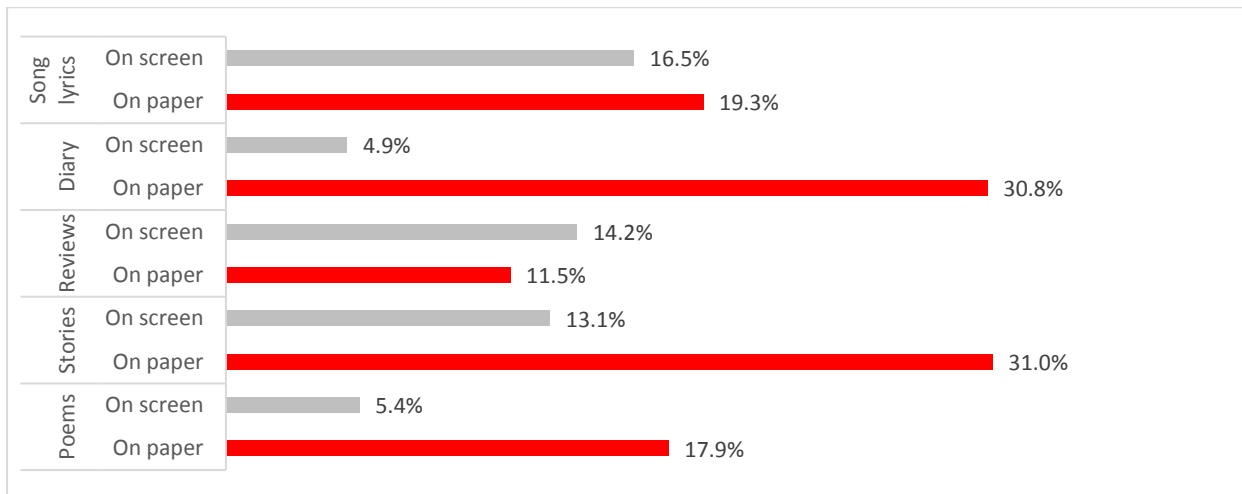
	North East	North West	Yorkshire and the Humber	East Midlands	West Midlands	East of England	Greater London	South East	South West
<b>Writing is fun</b>	43.3%	37.2%	35.2%	38.9%	43.8%	40.3%	50.4%	37.1%	38.7%
<b>I only write when I have to</b>	40.0%	42.9%	44.5%	39.2%	39.6%	38.9%	35.1%	39.0%	39.6%
<b>Writing is cool</b>	35.1%	30.3%	26.8%	31.4%	35.3%	31.2%	44.5%	28.8%	30.7%
<b>I believe writing will help me learn more</b>	75.7%	73.3%	70.4%	74.0%	76.5%	73.9%	79.0%	73.1%	73.0%
<b>The more I write, the better my writing gets</b>	78.2%	75.9%	69.1%	75.9%	78.0%	78.2%	82.5%	75.4%	75.4%
<b>If I'm good at writing, it means I'll get a better job when I grow up</b>	57.1%	55.0%	50.8%	55.3%	59.4%	52.9%	59.2%	52.3%	54.7%
<b>I struggle with spelling and punctuation</b>	32.0%	29.7%	36.0%	30.4%	35.5%	31.7%	26.3%	32.5%	32.4%
<b>I have trouble deciding what to write</b>	51.2%	51.4%	55.1%	50.8%	53.8%	53.4%	44.9%	52.8%	53.8%
<b>Writing is difficult</b>	19.6%	20.3%	23.9%	20.0%	22.1%	22.8%	15.6%	21.5%	23.9%

## Concluding comments

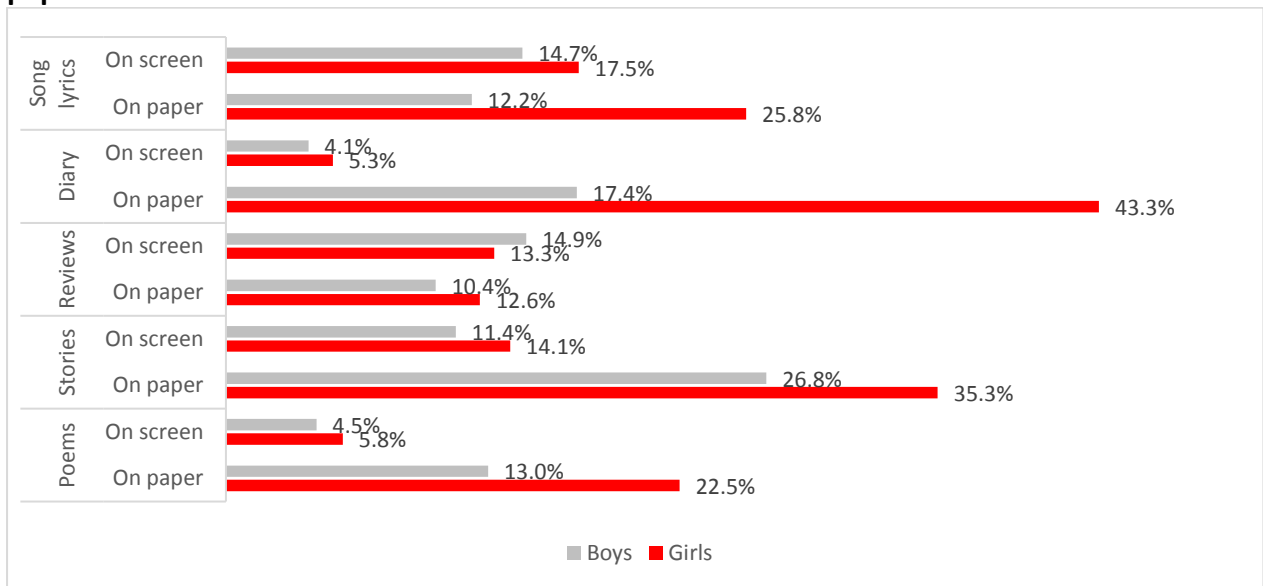
Fewer children and young people said in 2017/2018 that they enjoy writing and that they write something in their free time on a daily basis. Children and young people also think less positively about writing than they used to. In an effort to stem this decline and inspire children's writing both inside and outside the classroom, we have launched a series of programmes that combine writing activities with other events, such as sports and memorable experiences.

## Appendix 1

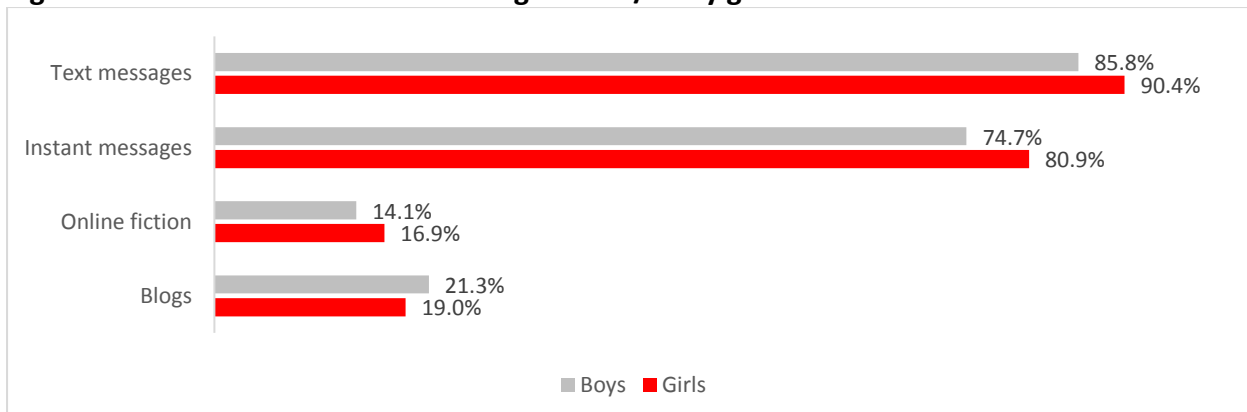
**Figure A1: Formats of writing in 2017/18 by whether they are written on paper or on screen**



**Figure A2: Formats of writing in 2017/18 by gender and whether they are written on paper or on screen**

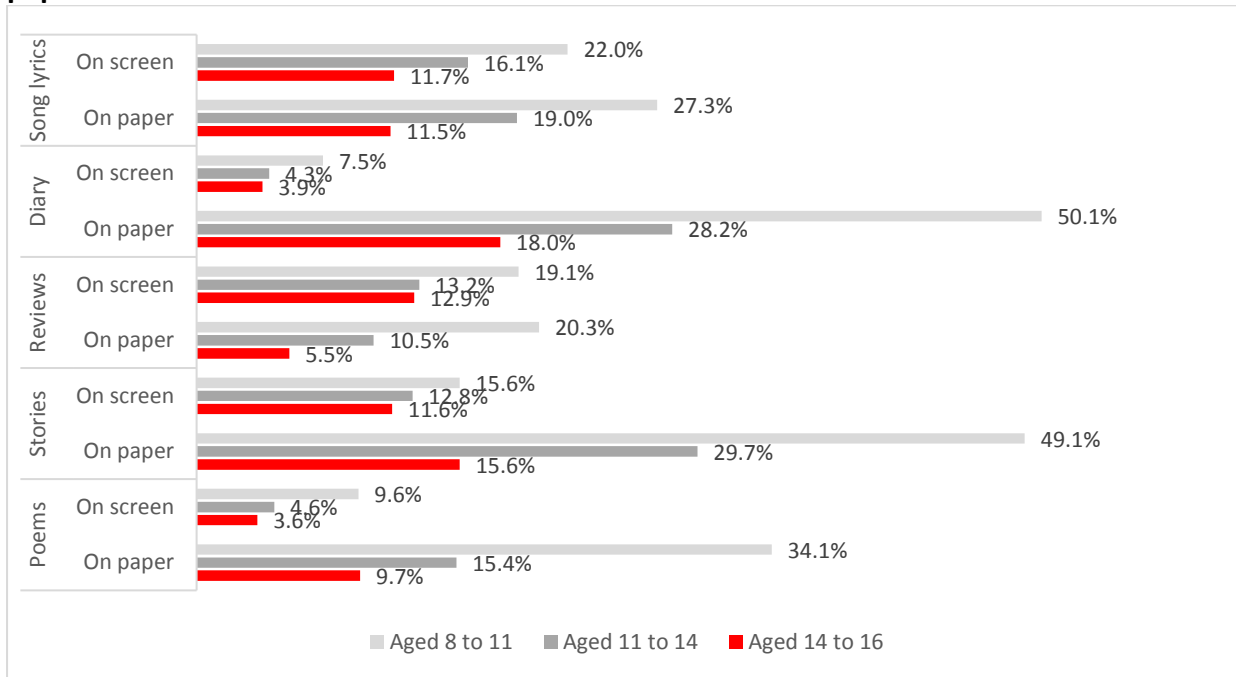


**Figure A3: Formats of on screen writing in 2017/18 by gender**

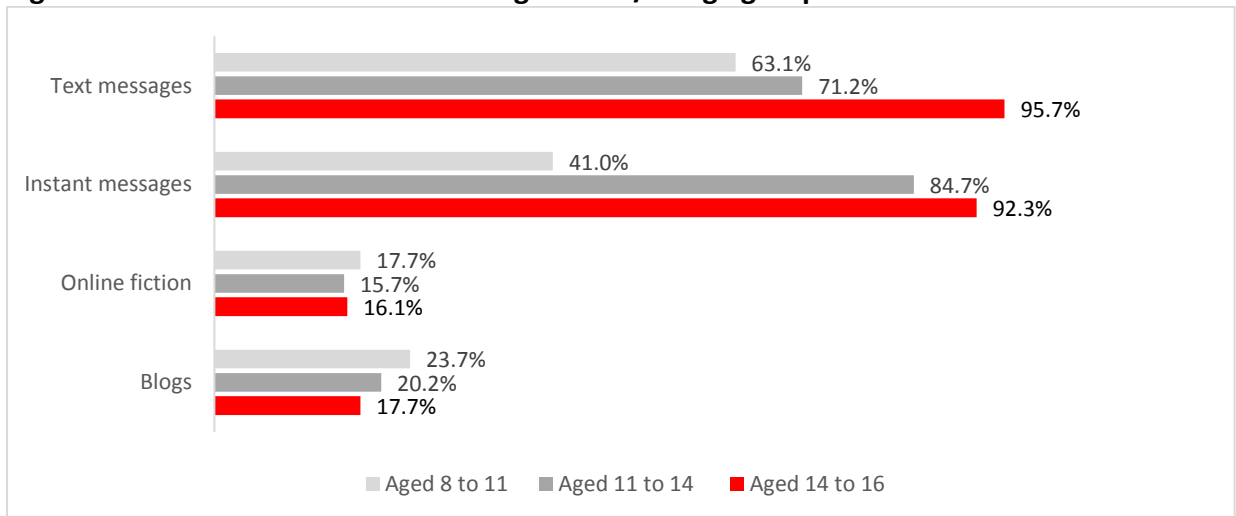




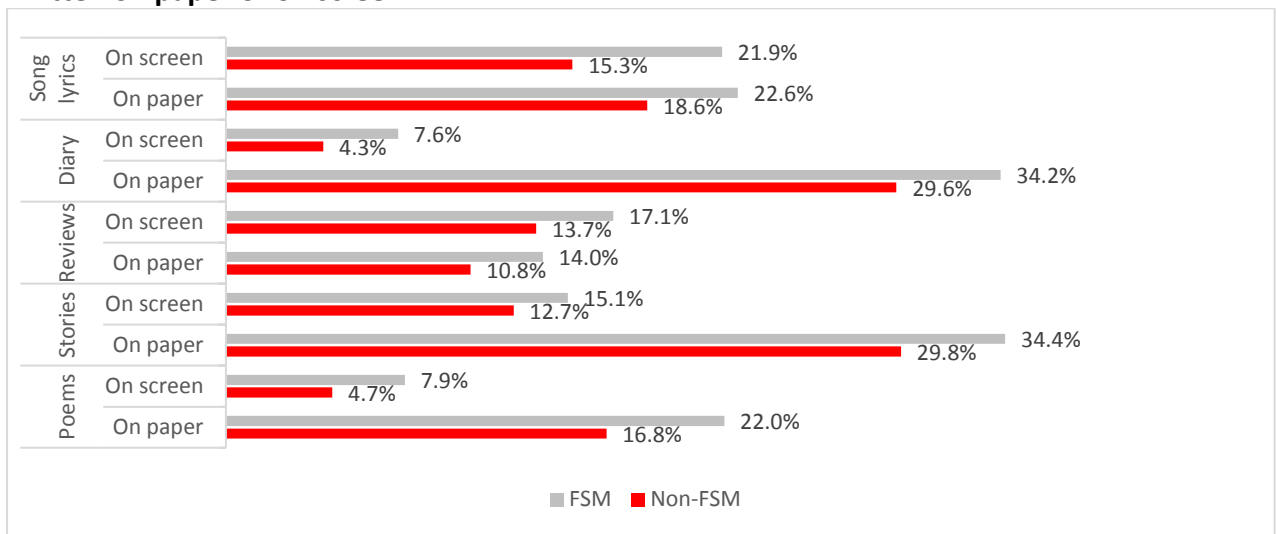
**Figure A4: Formats of writing in 2017/18 by age group and whether they are written on paper or on screen**



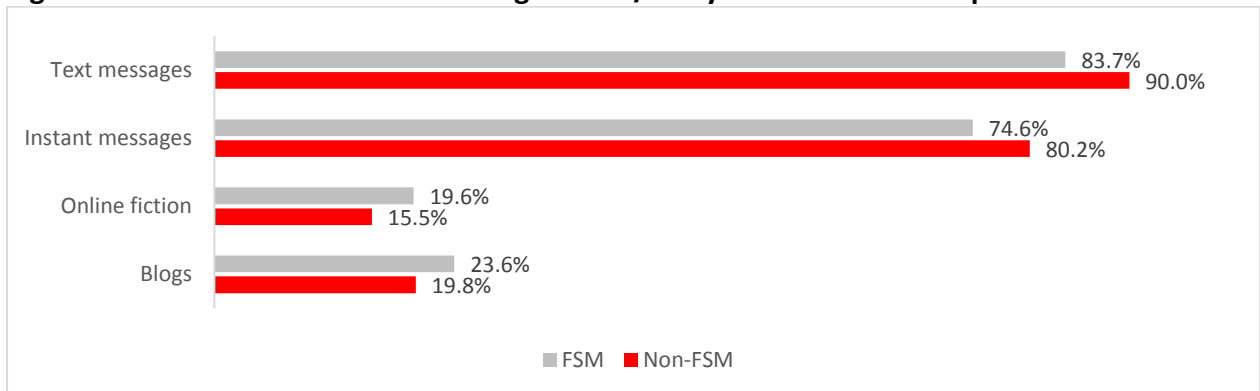
**Figure A5: Formats of on screen writing in 2017/18 age group**



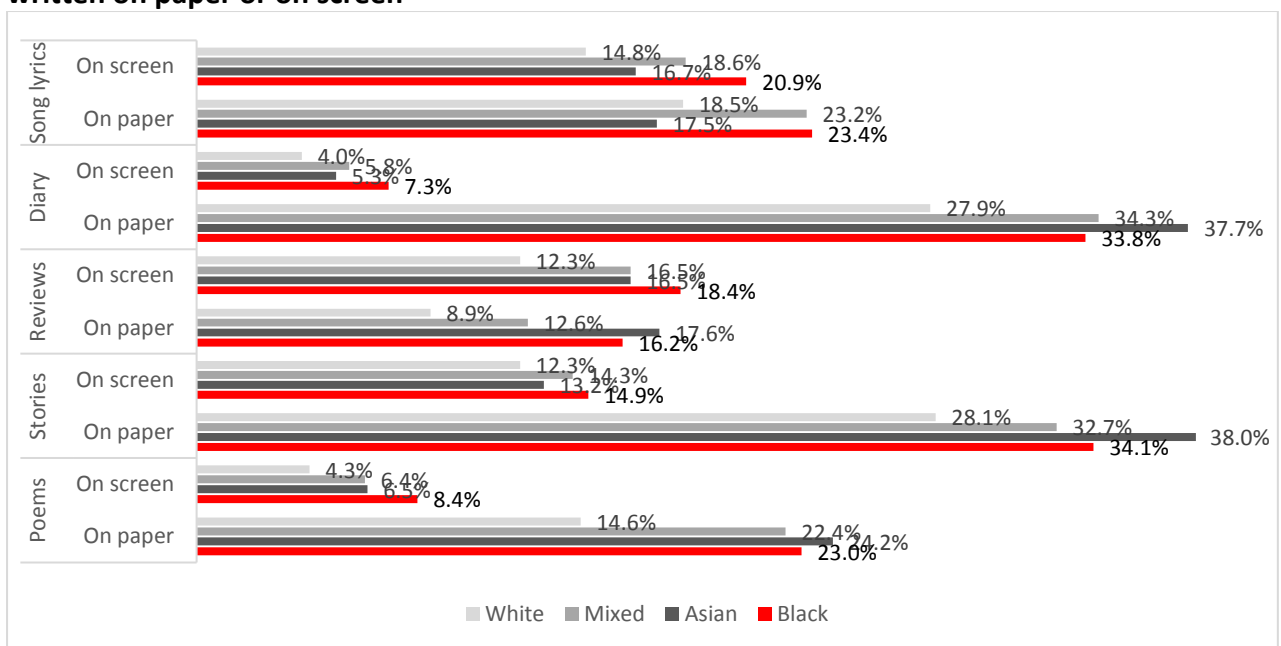
**Figure A6: Formats of writing in 2017/18 by free school meal uptake and whether they are written on paper or on screen**



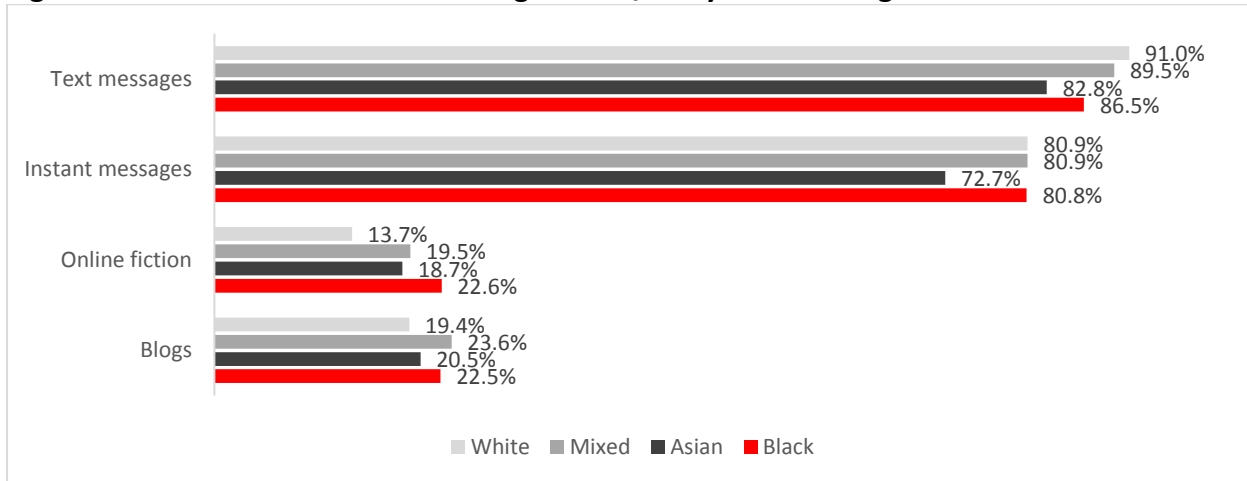
**Figure A7: Formats of on screen writing in 2017/18 by free school meal uptake**



**Figure A8: Formats of writing in 2017/18 by ethnic background and whether they are written on paper or on screen**



**Figure A9: Formats of on screen writing in 2017/18 by ethnic background**



**Table A10: Formats of writing in 2017/18 by region in England and whether they are written on paper or on screen**

		North East	North West	Yorkshire and the Humber	East Midlands	West Midlands	East of England	Greater London	South East	South West
<b>Song lyrics</b>	On screen	17.4%	15.3%	15.6%	15.6%	16.9%	15.2%	19.3%	15.3%	12.9%
	On paper	18.1%	17.6%	19.7%	18.0%	17.4%	20.2%	23.1%	18.6%	19.4%
<b>Diary</b>	On screen	4.7%	4.3%	3.8%	5.1%	5.0%	3.9%	6.6%	4.3%	4.3%
	On paper	28.7%	28.9%	26.6%	27.8%	30.3%	28.3%	29.9%	28.1%	29.8%
<b>Reviews</b>	On screen	13.3%	12.9%	12.3%	12.8%	15.4%	13.1%	18.0%	14.3%	12.9%
	On paper	9.8%	9.9%	7.6%	10.9%	13.6%	8.8%	11.0%	9.4%	8.8%
<b>Stories</b>	On screen	13.8%	12.3%	12.2%	12.6%	13.4%	12.2%	14.7%	13.7%	11.4%
	On paper	30.3%	27.0%	27.1%	31.0%	32.3%	30.4%	32.7%	27.2%	29.7%
<b>Poems</b>	On screen	5.9%	4.8%	4.5%	5.0%	5.3%	4.8%	7.7%	4.4%	3.9%
	On paper	15.5%	16.4%	14.0%	15.5%	20.3%	15.9%	21.5%	14.2%	17.0%

**Table A11: Formats of on screen writing in 2017/18 by region in England**

	North East	North West	Yorkshire and the Humber	East Midlands	West Midlands	East of England	Greater London	South East	South West
<b>Text messages</b>	88.7%	90.3%	91.7%	89.8%	86.2%	89.7%	91.4%	91.3%	91.3%
<b>Instant messages</b>	77.9%	81.7%	80.8%	79.2%	74.0%	77.5%	80.7%	82.3%	79.6%
<b>Online fiction</b>	15.4%	16.3%	14.5%	15.2%	15.7%	14.3%	20.0%	14.7%	12.8%
<b>Blogs</b>	19.4%	20.3%	19.0%	20.5%	21.3%	19.9%	22.7%	20.6%	18.4%

Our sincere thanks to Slaughter and May for their generous financial contribution that enabled us to conduct this annual survey.

### About the National Literacy Trust

We are a national charity dedicated to raising literacy levels in the UK. Our research and analysis make us the leading authority on literacy. We run projects in the poorest communities, campaign to make literacy a priority for politicians and parents, and support schools.

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