

Writing for Enjoyment and its Link to Wider Writing

Findings from our Annual Literacy Survey 2016

Christina Clark and Anne Teravainen
June 2017

Numerous national and international studies have explored reading for enjoyment in connection to reading skill as well as to other reading variables, such as reading motivation and reading frequency. These studies tend to show that reading for enjoyment is an important predictor of reading skill, and is linked with how often children and young people read and how they feel about reading. Yet, despite its recognised importance in the world of reading, a similar focus on writing for enjoyment, both in terms of research activities and policy, is scarce.

Using data from 39,411 pupils aged 8 to 18 who took part in our annual literacy survey in November/December 2016 and who answered questions about writing, this report aims to address some of the current gaps in knowledge. It aims to establish how many children and young people enjoy writing, how writing enjoyment has changed over the years and who the children and young people are who enjoy writing. The report also investigates the link between writing enjoyment and writing behaviour, confidence, motivation and attainment.

Key findings

How many children and young people in the UK enjoy writing?

- 1 child in 5 (19.7%) in 2016 said that they enjoy writing very much, while another 3 in 10 (31.1%) said that they enjoy writing quite a lot. Overall, over half the children and young people (50.7%) said that they enjoy writing either very much or quite a lot.
- More children and young people in 2016 said that they enjoy writing compared with the previous year, increasing from 44.8% in 2015 to 50.7% in 2016. Indeed, writing enjoyment levels are at their highest level since we first started surveying children and young people in 2010.

Who enjoys writing?

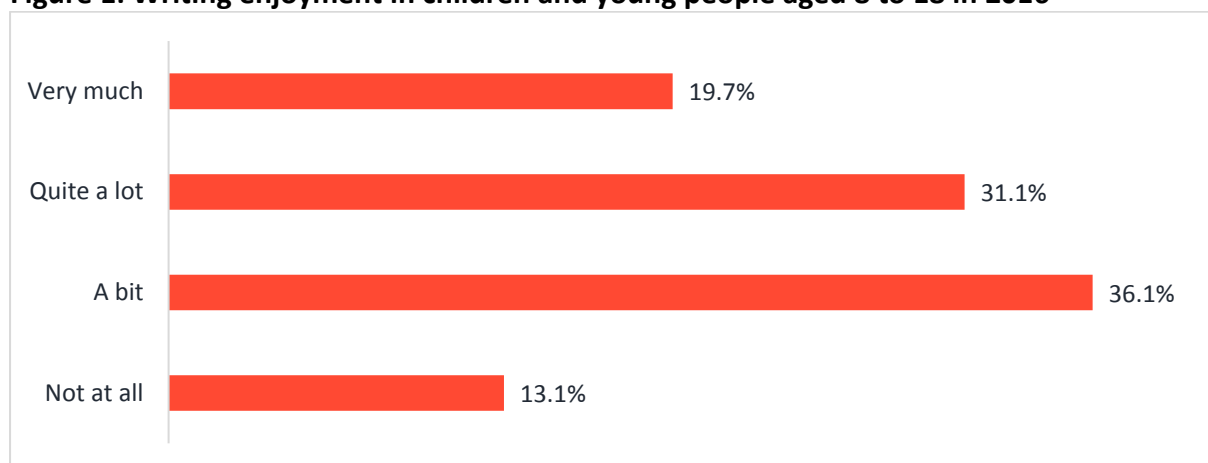
- In 2016, more girls than boys enjoyed writing, with 57.9% of girls enjoying writing either very much or quite a lot compared with 42.1% of boys
- Three times as many children aged 8 to 11 said that they enjoy writing very much compared with their peers aged 14 to 16 (36.5% vs. 11.1%). Overall, nearly twice as many children aged 8 to 11 as those aged 14 to 16 said that they enjoy writing either very much or quite a lot (69.6% vs. 36.9%)
- The gap between boys and girls remains largely the same across different age groups.
- In 2016, more pupils who receive free school meals (FSMs) said that they enjoy writing compared with their peers who don't (54.1% vs. 50.0%)
- There is also a relationship between gender and free school meal uptake, with more boys on FSMs saying that they enjoy writing than boys not on FSMs (48.9% vs. 41.4%), while no such difference exists for girls.
- Fewer pupils from White ethnic backgrounds (48.9%) enjoyed writing in 2016 compared with pupils from Mixed (52.3%), Asian (55.3%) and Black (55.5%) ethnic backgrounds.

Why does writing enjoyment matter?

- Our own data show that compared with children who don't enjoy writing, children who enjoy writing:
 - Are more likely to write something that isn't for school in their free time and on a daily basis (26.3% vs. 11.1%)
 - Are more likely, on average, to rate themselves as better writers (mean 7.69/10 vs. 6.11/10)
 - Write a greater range of different formats in their free time at least once a month, on average (Mean 5.5 vs. 4)
 - Are more likely to write a range of materials, including fiction/short stories, a diary, letters, poems, posters and PowerPoints; technology-based formats dominate children and young people's writing in their free time, regardless of whether or not they enjoy writing
 - Are more motivated to write by intrinsic reasons (such as believing that writing is cool) and achievement (for example believing that writing will help them learn more) and are less likely to write for approval (for example writing because they have to or because they will get into trouble if they don't write)
- There is also a clear relationship with writing attainment. While most children and young people write at the expected level for their age regardless of whether or not they enjoy writing, seven times as many children and young people who enjoy writing write above the expected level for their age compared with those who don't enjoy writing (23.2% vs. 3.2%).
- Similarly, while most children aged 8 to 11 write at the expected level regardless of whether or not they write something creative in their free time, twice as many children and young people who write creatively outside school write above the expected level for their age compared with those who don't (19.3% vs 7.9%).

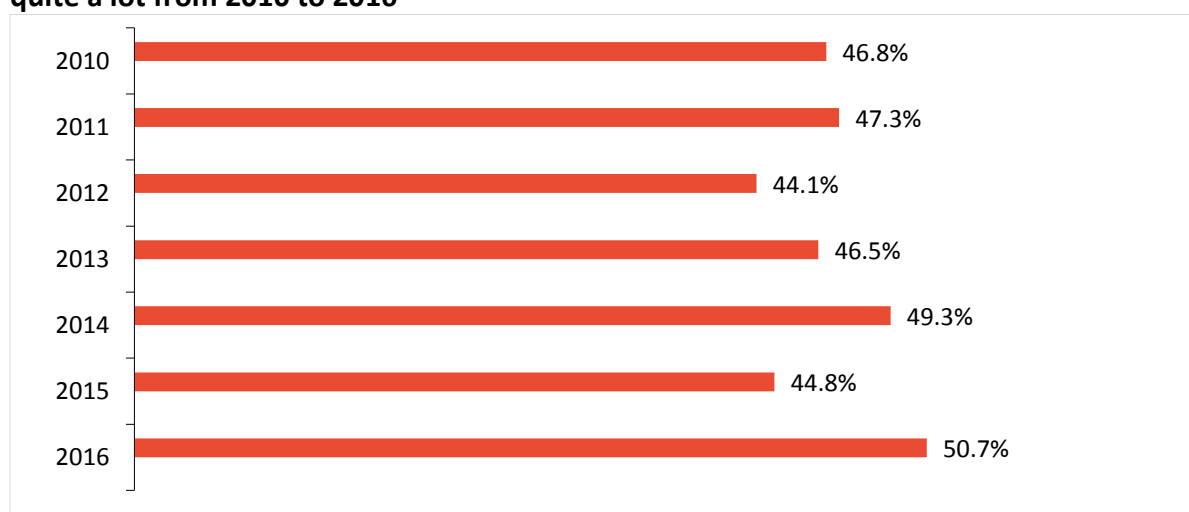
How many children and young people enjoy writing? Our data from 2016¹ show that 1 child in 5 enjoys writing very much, while another 3 in 10 enjoy writing quite a lot (see Figure 1). Overall, half of all children and young people (50.7%) in 2016 said that they enjoy writing either very much or quite a lot. However, that leaves the other half who only enjoy writing a bit or not at all.

Figure 1: Writing enjoyment in children and young people aged 8 to 18 in 2016



More children and young people in 2016 said that they enjoy writing compared with the previous year². Figure 2 shows that the percentage of children and young people who enjoy writing either very much or quite a lot has increased by 5.9 percentage points since 2015, bringing levels back to slightly above those found in 2014. Indeed, writing enjoyment levels are now at their highest since we first started surveying children and young people in 2010.

Figure 2: Percentage of children and young people who enjoy writing either very much or quite a lot from 2010 to 2016

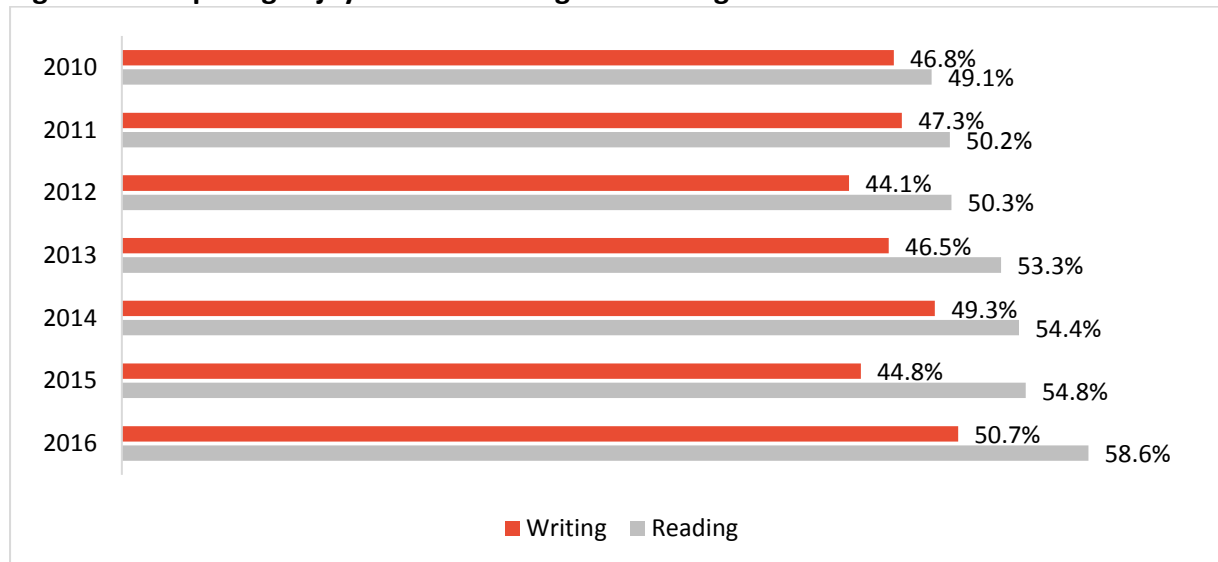


¹ We had writing information from 39,411 children and young people aged 8 to 18 from over 200 schools who participated in our online annual literacy survey, which we conducted in November/December 2016.

² This is despite the fact that our 2015 (N = 34,143) and 2016 (N = 39,411) samples are comparable in terms of gender (boys 47.9% vs. 50%); free school meal uptake (14.3% vs. 12.8%); age (8 to 11: 21.7% vs. 23.5%; 11 to 14: 65.1% vs. 60.5%; 14 to 16: 13.2% vs. 15.9%); and ethnic background (White: 76.4% vs. 73.1%; Mixed: 6.1% vs. 6.3%; Asian: 13.2% vs. 14.3%; Black: 4.4% vs. 6.3%). The difference over time is significant even when those demographic variables are controlled for.

As can be seen in Figure 3, levels of both writing and reading enjoyment have increased in the last year. Last year, the gap between reading and writing levels was at its widest since 2010, at 10 percentage points. As writing enjoyment levels increased more than reading enjoyment levels in 2016, the gap has now narrowed to a 7.9 percentage point difference.

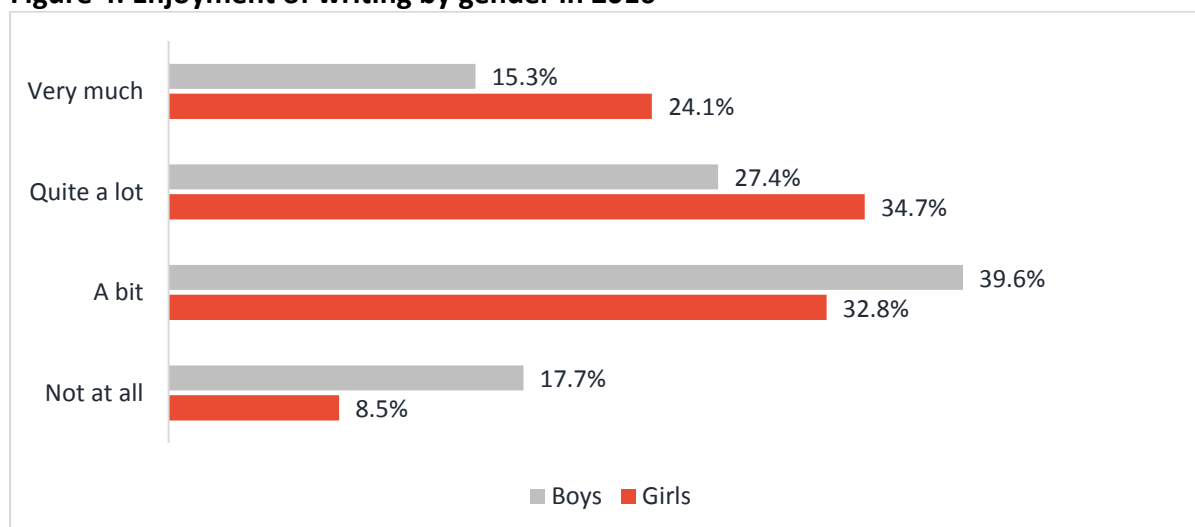
Figure 3: Comparing enjoyment of reading and writing from 2010 to 2016



It might also be interesting to note that there is a moderate³ positive relationship between the forms of enjoyment, suggesting that children and young people who enjoy writing are also more likely to enjoy reading.

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 2016 also show us that girls are more likely than boys to **enjoy writing**⁴ (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: Enjoyment of writing by gender in 2016



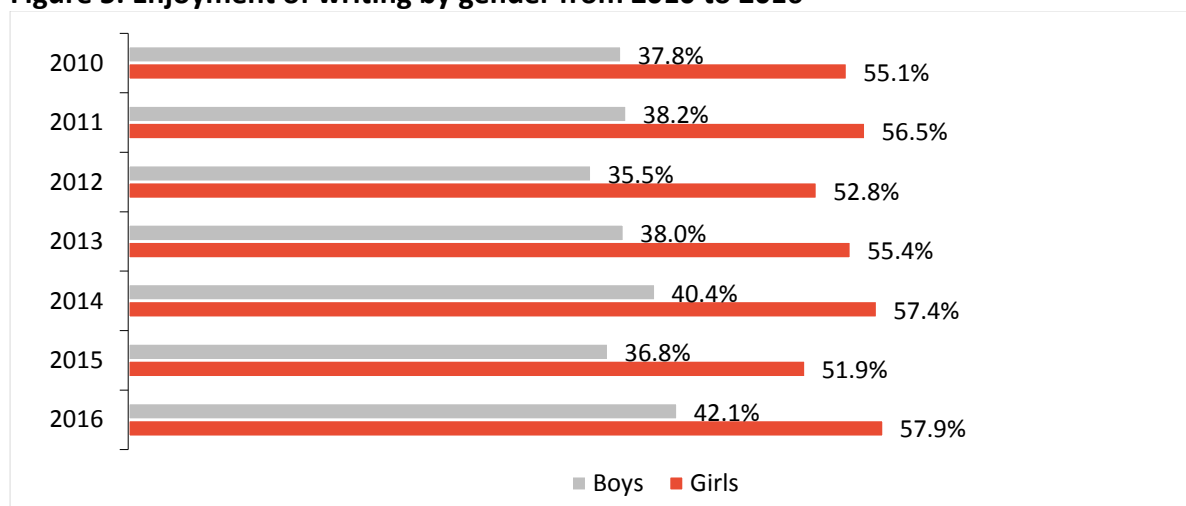
³ $r_s = 0.416$, $p < .001$, $N = 39,411$

⁴ There was a perfect gender split in our sample in 2016, with 19,706 (50.0%) of boys participating vs. 19,705 (50.0%) of girls.

Overall, 57.9% of girls vs. 42.1% of boys say that they enjoy writing either very much or quite a lot. On the other hand, boys are twice as likely as girls to say that they don't enjoy writing at all.

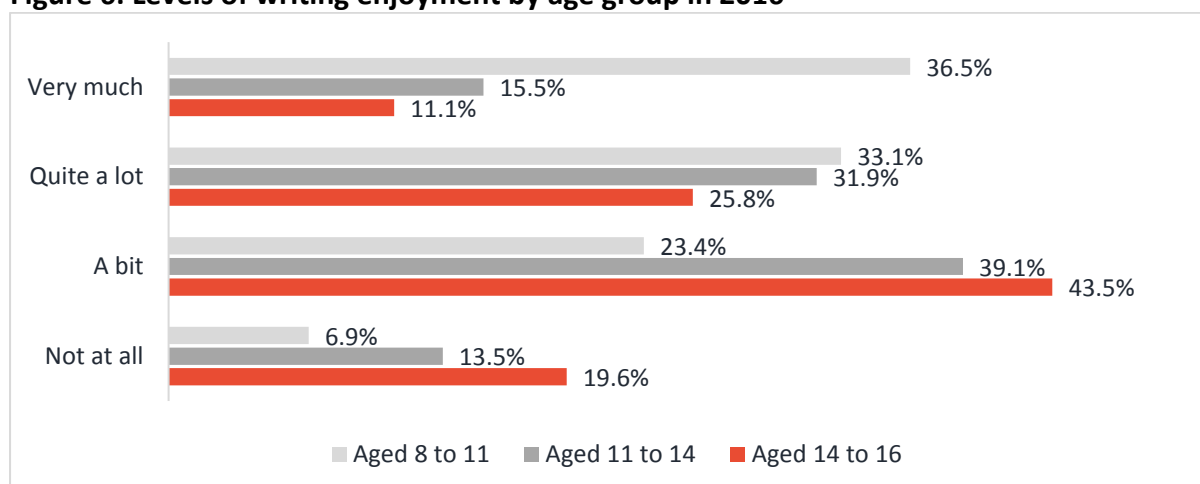
As can be seen in Figure 5, enjoyment levels increased for both boys and girls in 2016, with levels rising slightly more for girls than for boys (6 percentage points vs. 5.3 percentage points). Overall, the gender gap in 2016 is slightly wider (15.8 percentage points) than it was in 2015 (15.1 percentage points). In 2016, the gender gap in writing enjoyment remains wider than the equivalent gap in reading enjoyment (12.5 percentage points).

Figure 5: Enjoyment of writing by gender from 2010 to 2016



Age also affects how much children and young people enjoy writing, with **young children being much more enthusiastic about writing than older ones**⁵. As Figure 6 shows, in 2016 three times as many pupils aged 8 to 11 as pupils aged 14 to 16 say that they enjoy writing very much. In contrast, three times as many pupils aged 14 to 16 as those aged 8 to 11 say that they don't enjoy writing at all.

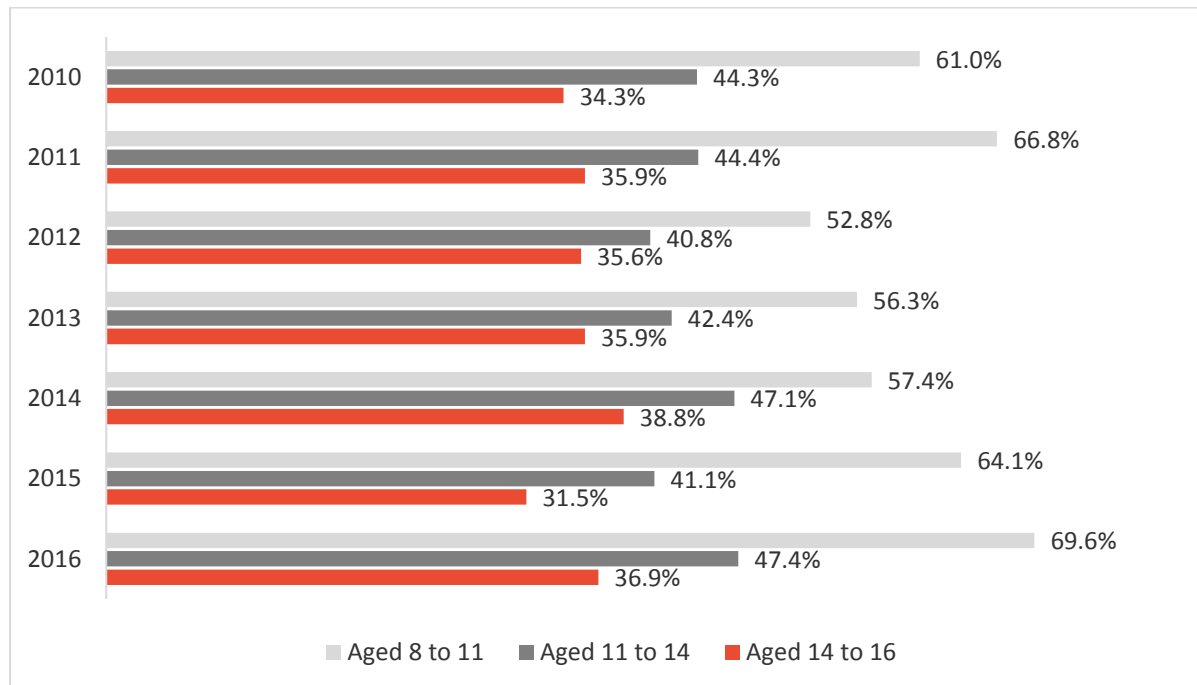
Figure 6: Levels of writing enjoyment by age group in 2016



⁵ 9,041 pupils were in Key Stage 2 (aged 8 to 11; 22.9%), 23,266 pupils were in Key Stage 3 (aged 11 to 14; 59.0%), 6,126 pupils were in Key Stage 4 (aged 14 to 16; 15.5%) and 978 pupils were in Key Stage 5 (aged 16 to 18; 2.5%). Pupils aged 16 to 18 were excluded from this analysis due to low numbers.

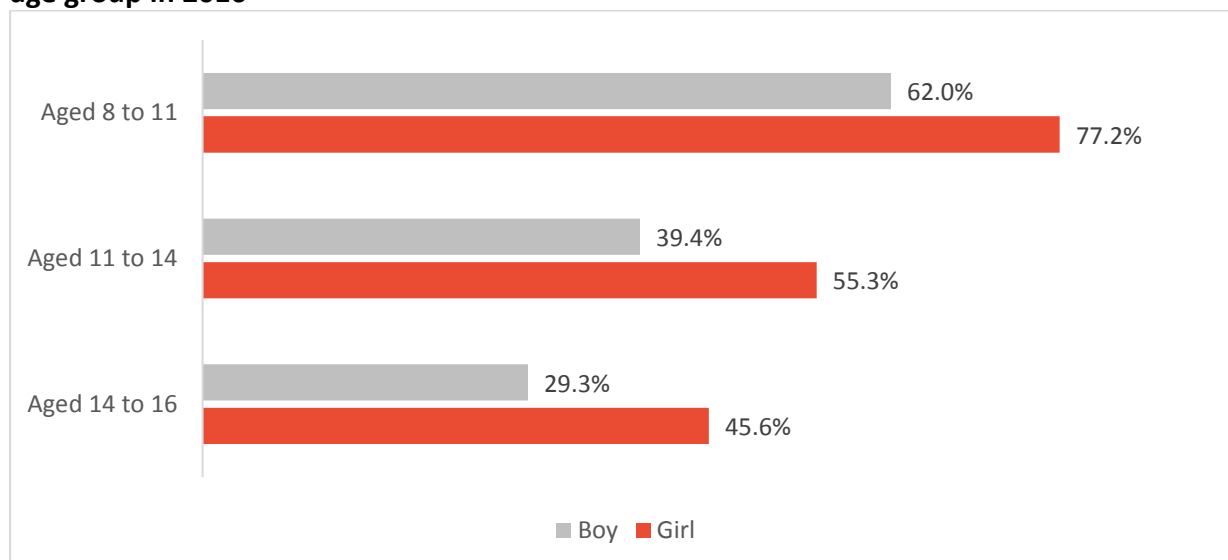
Figure 7 compares writing enjoyment levels by age group over time and shows that differences between the age groups have remained largely stable.

Figure 7: Percentage of pupils by age group who enjoy writing either very much or quite a lot in 2010 to 2016



So, more girls enjoy writing than boys and more younger pupils enjoy writing than older pupils. Is there a difference between boys and girls depending on how old they are? Figure 8 outlines levels of writing enjoyment for boys and girls across the three age groups and shows that twice as many boys aged 8 to 11 enjoy writing compared with boys aged 14 to 16. This gap is also present for girls, but the difference is less dramatic.

Figure 8: Percentage of boys and girls who enjoy writing either very much or quite a lot by age group in 2016



Overall, the **gap between boys and girls is largely the same** across the three age groups, only rising marginally from a 15.2 percentage point difference at age 8 to 11, to a 15.9 percentage point difference at age 11 to 14 and a 16.3 percentage point difference at age 14 to 16. It also shows that the drop in writing enjoyment is greatest between ages 8 to 11 and ages 11 to 14 for both boys (22.6 percentage points) and girls (21.9 percentage points).

A pupil's **socioeconomic background**⁶, using free school meal (FSM) uptake as a proxy, was associated with enjoyment of writing in 2016. As Figure 9 shows, more pupils who receive FSMs say that they enjoy writing very much compared with pupils who don't receive FSMs.

Overall, 54.1% of FSM pupils say that they enjoy writing either very much or quite a lot compared with 50.0% of non-FSM pupils.

Figure 9: Writing enjoyment by FSM uptake in 2016

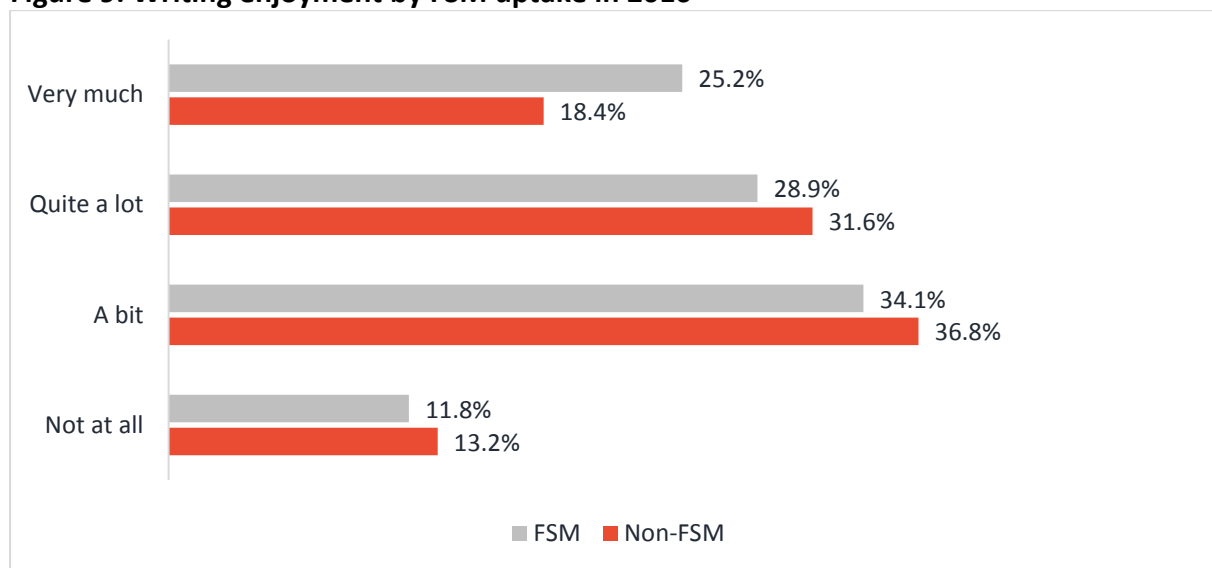
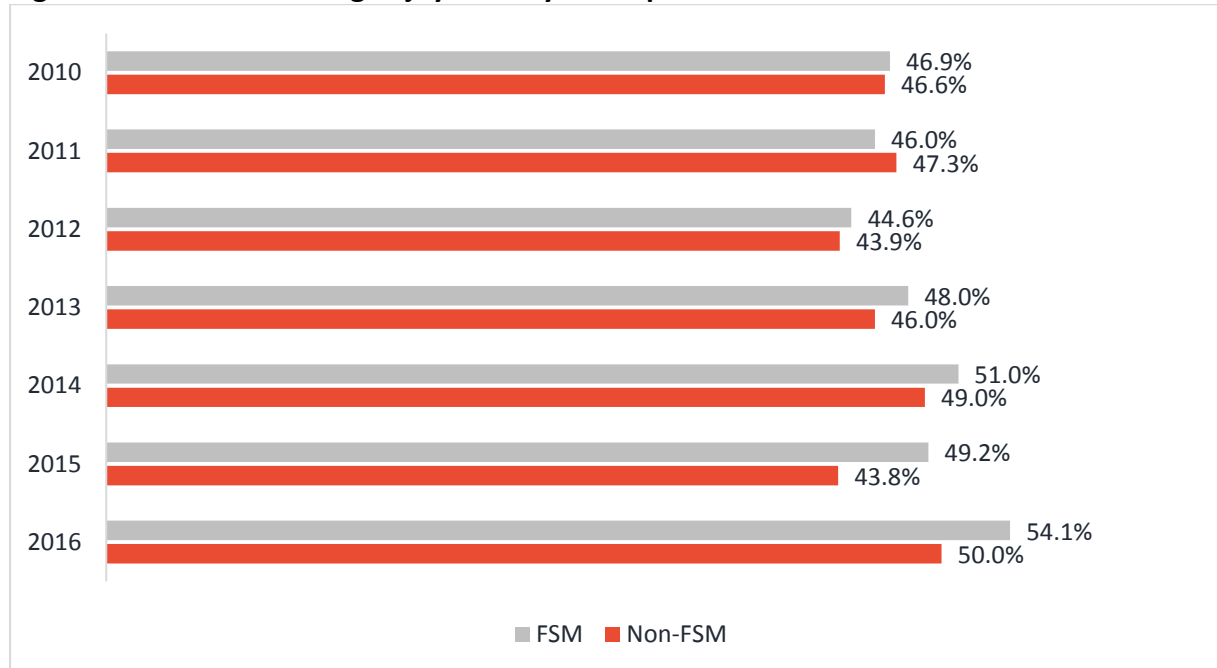


Figure 10 shows that levels of writing enjoyment have increased for both FSM and non-FSM pupils over the past year and that the rise in writing enjoyment was bigger for non-FSM pupils (6.2 percentage points) than for FSM pupils (4.9 percentage points). As a result, the gap in writing enjoyment has narrowed between 2015 and 2016, decreasing from a 5.4 percentage point difference in 2015 to a difference of 4.1 percentage points in 2016.

It should be noted, however, that the socioeconomic gap has been wider in 2015 and 2016 than in previous years. For example, in 2010 the gap was only 0.3 percentage points, which might suggest that a socioeconomic gap in writing enjoyment is developing where previously there had been none, with children who receive FSMs scoring higher in terms of writing enjoyment than their more privileged peers. It is also interesting that this development is at odds with the socioeconomic gap in reading enjoyment, which has narrowed in recent years. In fact, in 2016 there was a no significant difference between FSM and non-FSM pupils with respect to their reading enjoyment.

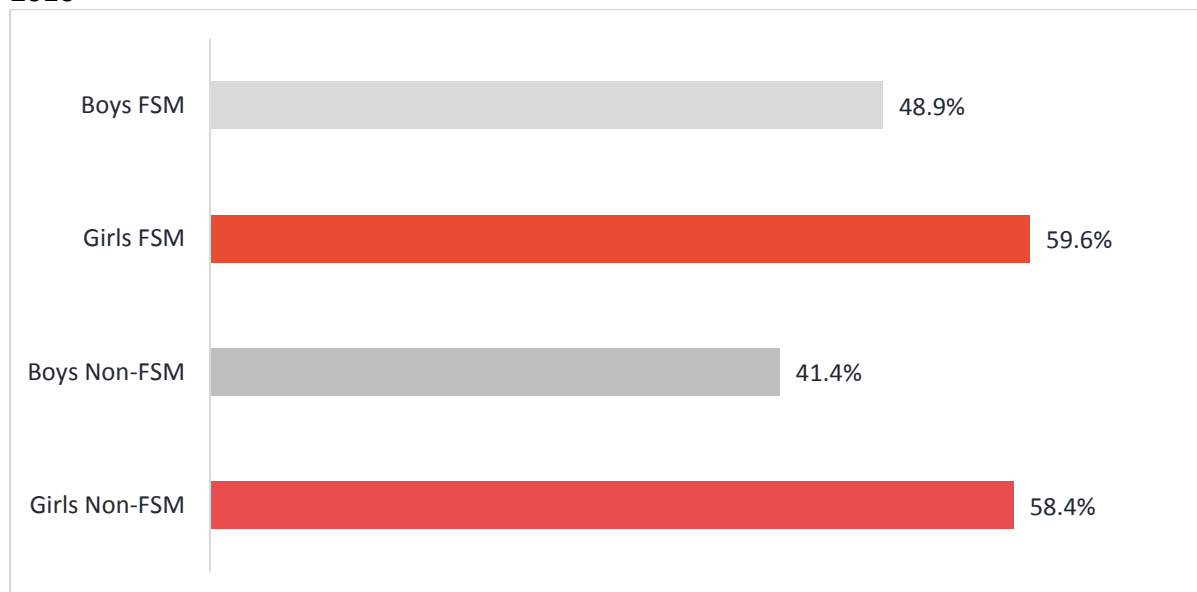
⁶ Our sample in 2016 contained 4,432 (12.8%) FSM pupils vs. 30,090 (87.2%) who said that they don't receive free school meals

Figure 10: Levels of writing enjoyment by FSM uptake from 2010 to 2016



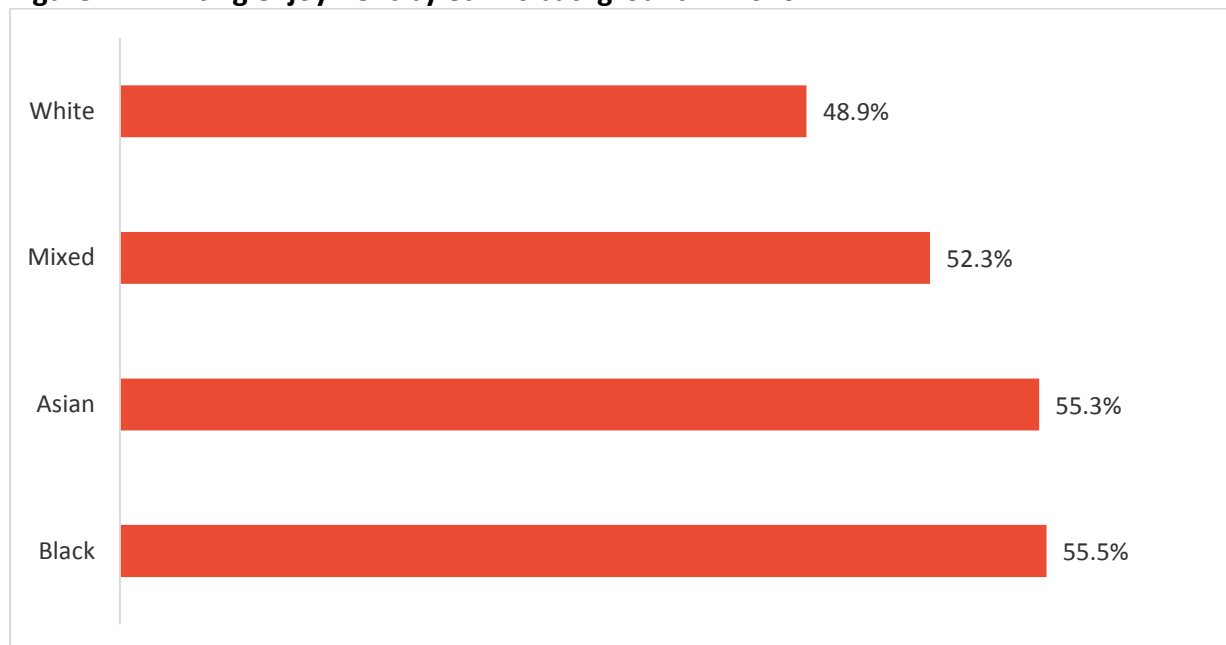
Next, we wanted to know whether girls on FSMs differ from boys on FSMs as well as their peers who don't receive FSMs in terms of their enjoyment of writing. And our data suggest that there is a difference. As can be seen in Figure 11, **more boys on FSMs than boys not on FSMs say that they enjoy writing**, while roughly the same percentage of girls enjoy writing regardless of whether or not they receive FSMs.

Figure 11: Enjoying writing either very much or quite a lot by gender and FSM uptake in 2016



Finally, there were also differences by ethnic background⁷, with **fewer pupils from White ethnic backgrounds** enjoying writing in 2016 compared with pupils from Mixed, Asian or Black ethnic backgrounds (see Figure 12). Pupils from Asian and Black backgrounds were most likely to say that they enjoy writing.

Figure 12: Writing enjoyment by ethnic background in 2016



We now have a better idea about how prevalent writing enjoyment is in children and young people in the UK and we also know which demographic groups are associated most with writing enjoyment. Next, **we explore how writing enjoyment relates to wider writing engagement**, i.e. we will outline the relationships between enjoyment, behaviour, motivation and skill.

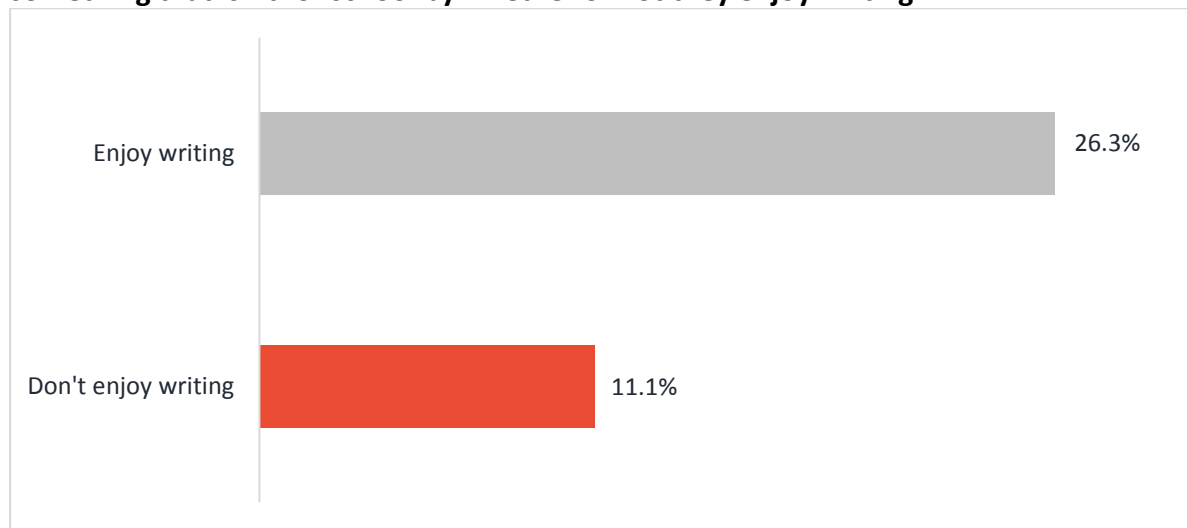
Several variables are associated with children and young people enjoying writing⁸. To illustrate the differences, we split the sample into children who enjoy writing (either very much or quite a lot, N = 19,997 or 50.7%) and those who don't enjoy writing (enjoy a bit or not at all, N = 19,414 or 49.3%).

Exploring the link between writing enjoyment and how often children and young people write in their free time, we find that over twice as many **children who enjoy writing write something daily** outside class that isn't for school compared with those who don't enjoy writing (see Figure 13).

⁷ Writing enjoyment data by ethnic background were available for 33,969 children and young people: White = 24,830, Mixed = 2,139, Asian = 4,870, Black = 2,130

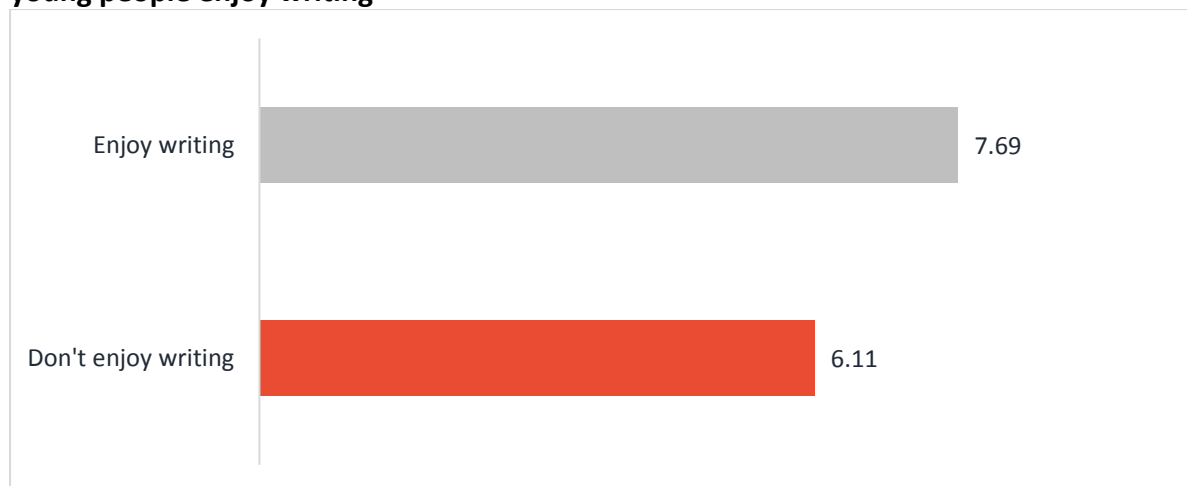
⁸ Analyses controlling for background variables

Figure 13: Percentage of children and young people writing daily in their free time something that isn't for school by whether or not they enjoy writing



Children and young people who enjoy writing, on average, also rate themselves as better writers (see Figure 14), measured on a scale of 1 to 10, compared with children and young people who do not enjoy writing.

Figure 14: Average ratings of writing skill (self-report) by whether or not children and young people enjoy writing



10-point scale from 1 = not very good to 10 = very good

Overall, children who enjoy writing also write a greater number of formats at least once a month⁹ than children who don't enjoy writing. As can be seen in Figure 15, children who enjoy writing on average write 5.5 different types of formats in a typical month compared with 4 different materials written by children who don't enjoy writing over the same time period.

⁹ To measure how widely children write in their free time, we summed responses to our questions that ask pupils to tick whether they wrote any of 18 materials provided (maximum score 18) in their free time at least once a month. The range of materials provided includes poems, fiction, PowerPoints, reviews, instant messages, text messages, song lyrics, code and many more.

Figure 15: Average number of different materials written in free time in a typical month by whether or not children and young people enjoy writing

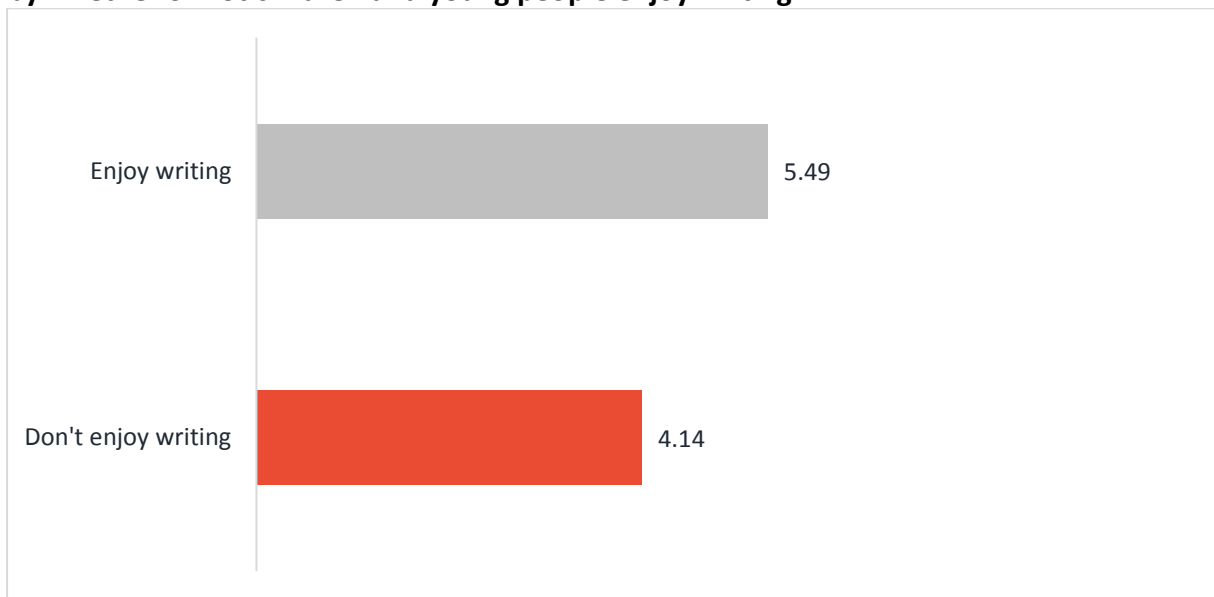
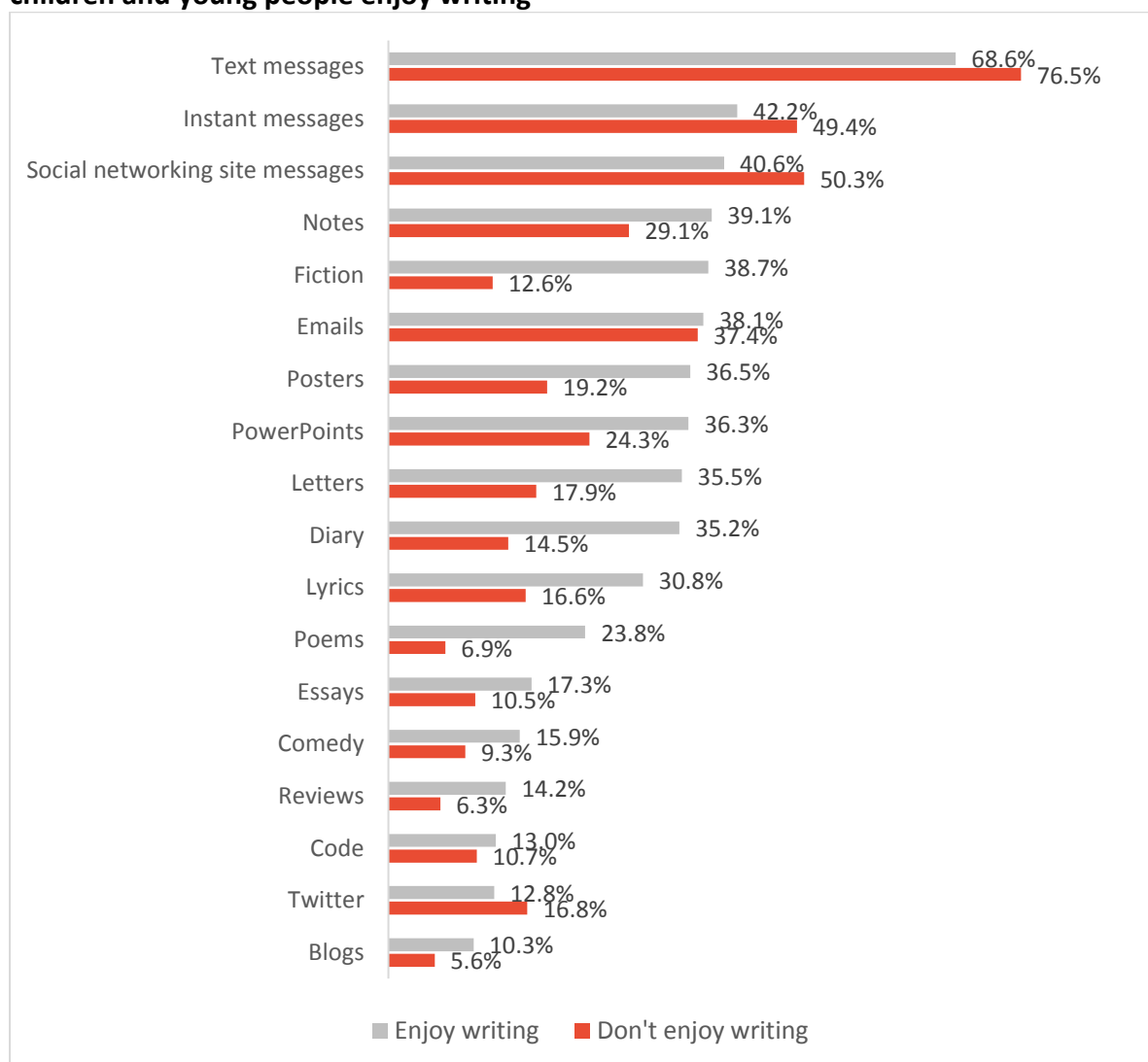


Figure 16 outlines the specific formats that children and young people say they write outside class at least once a month by whether or not they enjoy writing. On a general level it shows that regardless of whether or not children enjoy writing, most say that they write technology-based formats, such as text messages, instant messages and messages on social networking sites.

The figure also shows that children and young people who say that they don't enjoy writing are more likely to engage in these technology-based formats than their peers who say that they enjoy writing. By contrast, children who enjoy writing are more likely to write a range of other materials, such as fiction/short stories, letters, poems, a diary, song lyrics as well as posters, PowerPoints, essays, reviews and blogs.

Loosely defining creative writing as writing at least one of the following formats once a month: fiction, poetry, letters, a diary, song lyrics, reviews or essays, we also find that more children who enjoy writing engage in creative writing than their peers who don't enjoy writing (81.1% vs 57.2%).

Figure 16: Types of formats written in free time at least once a month by whether or not children and young people enjoy writing



Children who enjoy writing are also more likely to be motivated by intrinsic reasons, such as liking to write in their spare time and believing that writing is cool, and by reasons linking with achievement, such as writing will help them learn more, compared with children who don't enjoy writing, who are more likely to be motivated by approval. To illustrate these differences in greater detail, Figure 17 outlines the percentage agreement for each motivational statement by whether or not children enjoy writing.

It shows that children who enjoy writing are more likely than children who don't enjoy writing to agree that writing is fun, that they like writing in their spare time and at school, and that writing is cool. Conversely, they are less likely to agree that writing is boring. Additionally, they are more likely to agree that if they are a good writer they will get a better job when they grow up, that writing helps them understand about the world and that writing is important. By contrast, children and young people who don't enjoy writing are more likely to agree that they write only when they have to and are supposed to and that they will get into trouble if they don't write.

Figure 17: Percentage agreement with motivational statements by whether or not children enjoy writing



Finally, we also had writing attainment data for 527 pupils aged 8 to 11¹⁰. Of these, 91.8% wrote at either the expected level for their age (75.5%, N = 398) or above the expected level for their age (16.3%, N = 86). 8.2% of pupils (N = 43) wrote below the expected level for their age. Overall, writing attainment in this sample is in line with the national average for this age group¹¹.

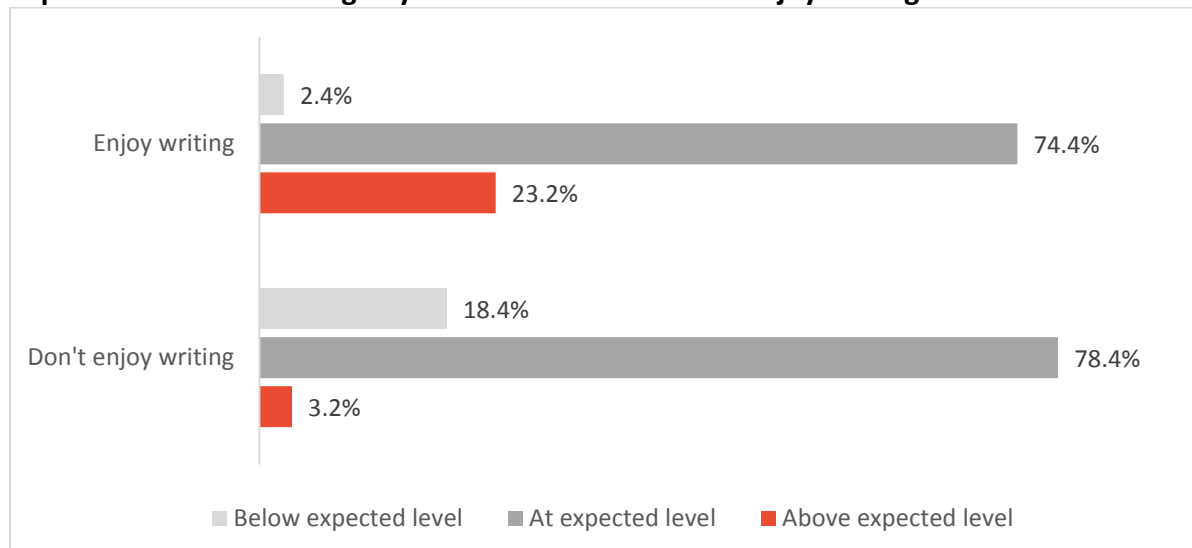
As can be seen in Figure 18, there is a clear relationship between writing enjoyment and writing attainment. While the majority of children aged 8 to 11 write at the expected level regardless of whether or not they enjoy writing, seven times as many children and young people who enjoy writing write above the level expected for their age compared with children and young people who do not enjoy writing (23.2% vs. 3.2%). In contrast, nearly

¹⁰ The attainment data contained a varied set of levels so we re-categorised the data to form three crude categories: below expected level for their age, at expected level for their age and above expected level for their age.

¹¹ https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/456343/SFR30_2015_text.pdf

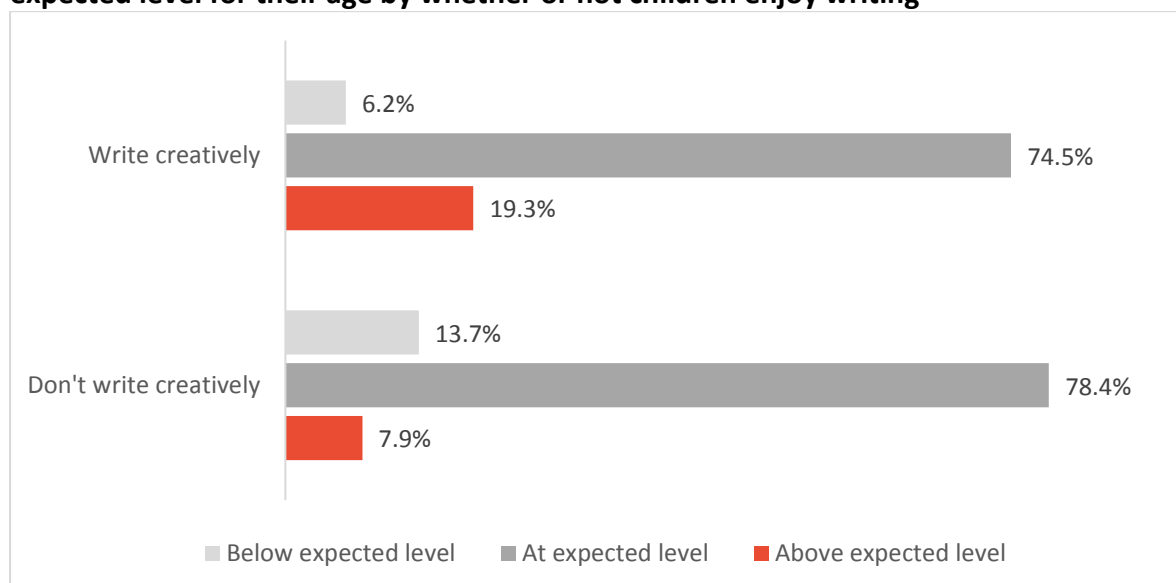
eight times as many children and young people who do not enjoy writing write below the expected level compared with those who enjoy writing.

Figure 18: Percentage of children and young people writing below, at or above the expected level for their age by whether or not children enjoy writing



Similarly, while most children aged 8 to 11 write at the expected level regardless of whether or not they write something creative¹² in their free time (see Figure 19), twice as many children and young people who write creatively outside school write above the expected level for their age compared with children who don't write creatively outside school (19.3% vs 7.9%).

Figure 19: Percentage of children and young people writing below, at or above the expected level for their age by whether or not children enjoy writing



¹² We loosely define creative writing as writing at least one of the following formats once a month: fiction, poetry, letters, diary, song lyrics, reviews or essays

To sum up, the level of writing enjoyment in 2016 is higher than the year before, with nearly half of children and young people enjoying writing. Indeed, this is the highest level of writing enjoyment recorded since we started surveying children and young people in 2010.

More girls than boys enjoy writing regardless of their age and in general younger pupils are more likely to enjoy writing than their older peers. More pupils who receive FSMs say that they enjoy writing compared with their non-FSM peers, with more boys on FSMs enjoying writing than boys who don't receive FSMs; there is no such difference apparent for girls. Pupils from White ethnic backgrounds were found to be the least likely to enjoy writing compared with their peers from other ethnic backgrounds.

Writing enjoyment is also connected to writing behaviour, confidence, motivation and attainment. More pupils who enjoy writing write daily outside class and write a wider range of formats compared with those who don't enjoy writing. They also rate themselves higher, on average, as writers and are more motivated by intrinsic reasons and achievement than by approval.

The data also show that eight times as many children and young people who enjoy writing write above the expected level for their age compared with those who don't enjoy writing. Overall, the findings highlight the importance of writing enjoyment for children's outcomes and warrant a call for more attention on writing enjoyment in schools, research and policy.

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.

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 2017. You may report on findings or statistics included in this report if you accredit them to the National Literacy Trust.

Suggested reference for this report is: Clark, C. and Teravainen, A. (2017). *Enjoyment of Writing and its Link to Wider Writing: Findings from our Annual Literacy Survey 2016*. 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.