

“More time on my hands”: Children and young people’s writing during the COVID-19 lockdown in 2020

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Children and young people’s enjoyment of writing is at almost its lowest level in a decade. Although there has been some improvement since 2019, and a significant jump in the number of children writing daily outside school, there is still work to be done. Since the onset of the global pandemic and lockdown, there has been a blurring of the boundaries between home and school. As we will show, for a significant number of the children and young people surveyed, this has had an impact on their writing. In many cases children and young people are developing new and positive writing habits, while others see the time they might once have spent writing for themselves at home absorbed by schoolwork.

Writing encompasses everything from the first, physical act of mark making to the process of articulating knowledge, concepts or imaginative ideas via the written word. This broad definition can sometimes present a challenge as when we ask children and young people about their ‘writing’, this term is open to interpretation. How children perceive composition processes is of greatest interest to us – we want to know whether children and young people are able to express themselves through writing, whatever the purpose, genre or tools they are using. We know that when asked what makes “a good writer”, children and young people are most likely to describe the attribute of “using their imagination”, an integral part of the composition process for creative writing. However, it should be noted that this is at odds with the majority of writing children and young people are likely to do in school and at home.

As this report will show, the two key themes that emerged when we asked children and young people about their lockdown writing were creativity and wellbeing. It is encouraging that so many of them felt equipped to turn to writing as an outlet for self-expression during this difficult period. It also raises questions about how we can continue to support these aspects of writing that are clearly important to them when they return to school. Looking forward, we must ensure all children are able to use writing as a means of navigating difficult circumstances that might arise in the future.

We conducted our latest Annual Literacy Survey between January and mid-March 2020. Indeed, the survey closed the week before the UK went into lockdown as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, which meant that schools closed for all but children of key workers and those deemed most vulnerable. This year's Annual Literacy Survey was our most popular to date, with 58,346 children and young people aged 9 to 18 from 315 UK schools participating between January and March 2020.

However, given the suddenly changed environment we found ourselves in, we were also keen to capture any possible changes to children and young people's literacy practices as a result of lockdown. We therefore re-approached the schools that had previously taken part in our research to see whether they would be interested in surveying their pupils while they were largely staying home. 4,141 pupils aged 8 to 18 from 51 schools took part in an online survey between May and early June 2020¹.

This report outlines our findings on children and young people's writing before and during lockdown. Given concerns about the literacy outcomes of disadvantaged children as a result of the lockdown, we will also produce a separate report exploring this, and we will publish reports focusing on children and young people's reading practices and engagement with audio before and during lockdown.

To better capture the experiences and opinions of children and young people during lockdown, the online survey also contained numerous open-text questions, which have been themed and analysed to help contextualise findings in this report.

Key findings include:

- 2 in 5 (39.8%) children and young people said at the beginning of 2020 that they enjoy writing. This is an increase on the number of children and young people from the year before (35.8%). Also, **1 in 6 children and young people say that they enjoyed writing more during lockdown** than they had before.
- After recording the lowest daily writing rate in 2019 since we started asking the question in 2010, the percentage of children and young people who say that they write outside class on a daily basis has recovered over the past year, increasing from 16.5% in 2019 to 21.5% in 2020. Additionally, **1 in 5 (21.4%) said that they had been writing more in their free time during lockdown** compared with before.
- **Writing in lockdown has given children an outlet for their creativity, imagination and wellbeing.**
- **More children and young people are expressing themselves through creative writing during lockdown:**
 - 2 in 5 have written more short stories or fiction (39.7%) and letters (39.3%)
 - 1 in 4 (27.1%) have written more in a diary or journal
 - 1 in 5 (20.8%) have written more poetry
- **Lockdown has given many children the inspiration and conditions to write more creatively.** Children and young people told us that lockdown has:

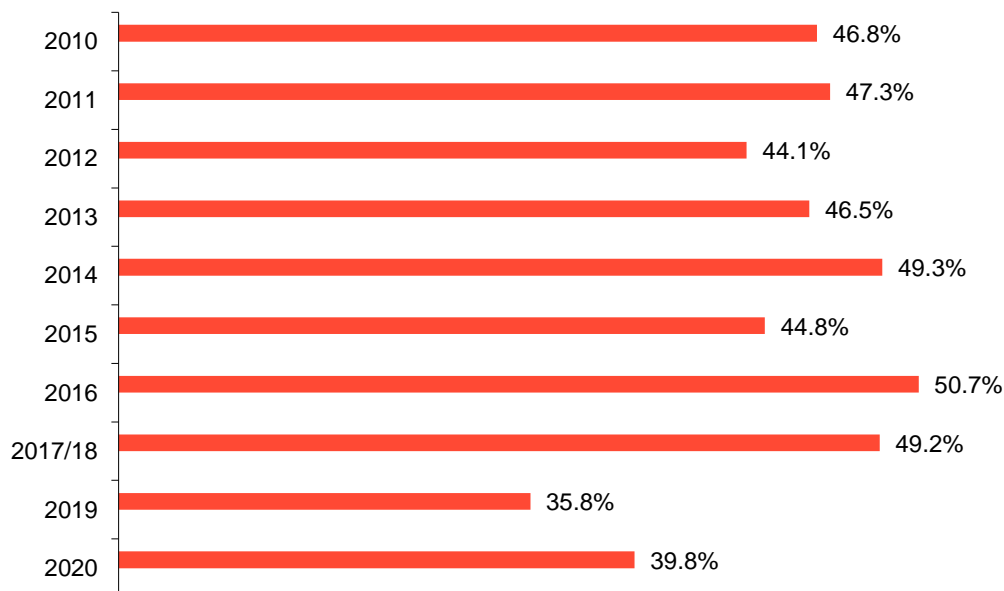
¹ The two survey samples, though very different in terms of sample size, were comparable in terms of gender, age group and free school meal splits.

- Given them more time and space to think and generate ideas
- Inspired their writing
- Made more digital writing formats available to them
- **Writing creatively during lockdown has helped to support children's mental wellbeing:**
 - 2 in 5 (41.3%) children said writing makes them feel better and 1 in 4 (24.8%) said writing helps when they feel sad that they can't see friends and family
 - Children who said that writing makes them feel better were much more likely than their peers to engage in more creative writing during lockdown:
 - 5 times more likely to write poems (66.5% vs. 13.4%)
 - 4 times more likely to write in a diary or journal (61.9% vs. 14.8%) or to write a short story or fiction (61.1% vs. 15.1%)

Enjoyment of writing before and during lockdown

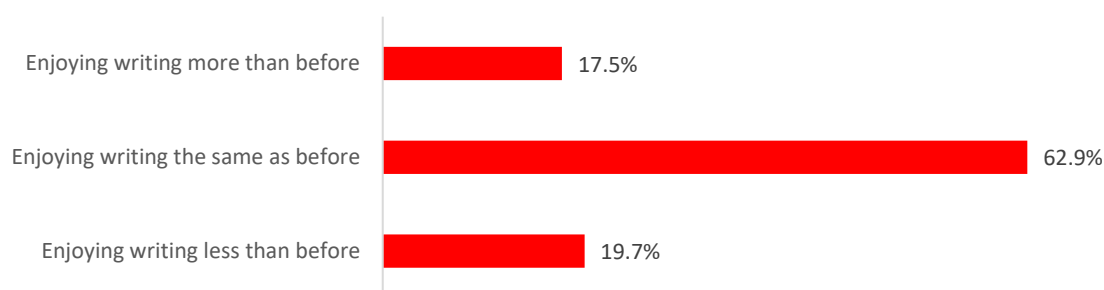
In early 2020, we saw an uplift in the number of children and young people who said that they enjoy writing either very much (13.5%) or quite a lot (26.4%), compared with the year before when we recorded the lowest level since 2010 (see Figure 1). However, this figure from the beginning of 2020 still tells us that only a minority of children and young people enjoy writing, with just 2 in 5 children and young people agreeing that they enjoy writing.

Figure 1: Percentage of children and young people aged 9 to 18 who enjoyed writing either very much or quite a lot from 2010 to early 2020



During lockdown, we asked children and young people whether they now enjoy writing more, the same or less than before lockdown. As can be seen in Figure 2, 1 in 6 said that they enjoy writing more, however this is balanced out by the 1 in 5 who said they enjoy writing less. For the majority of children and young people the lockdown made no difference to their enjoyment of writing, with over 3 in 5 saying that they enjoy it just as much.

Figure 2: Children and young people's perception of their writing enjoyment during lockdown compared with before

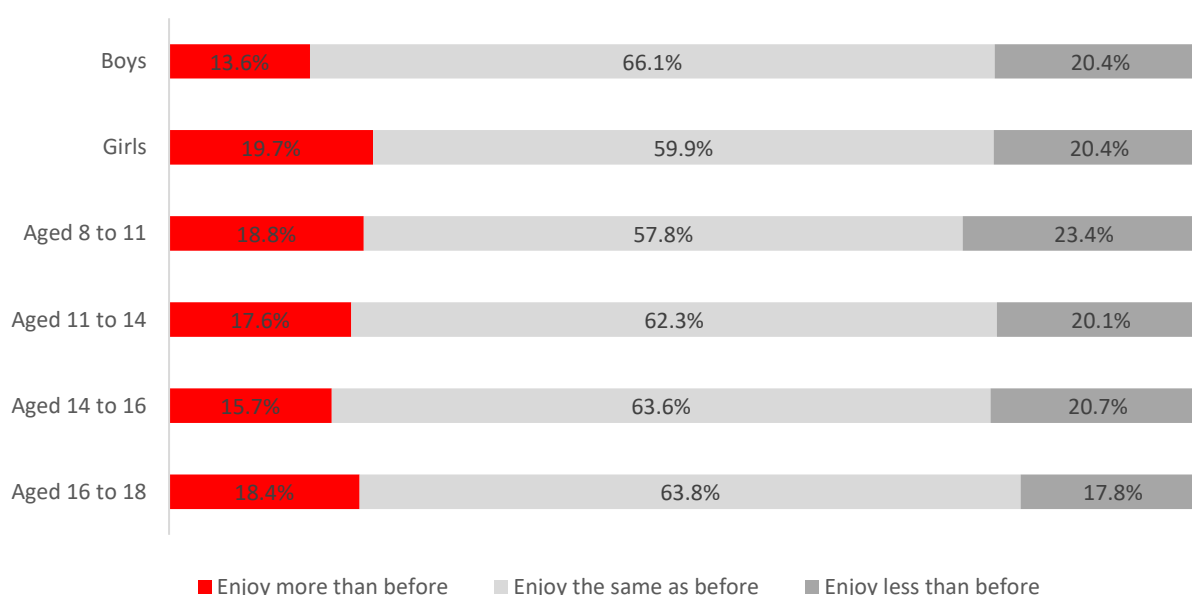


Who enjoys writing more than before?

As can be seen in Figure 3, more girls than boys say that they enjoy writing more during lockdown than before, a dynamic that is in line with previous findings that more girls than boys say that they enjoy writing².

However, what is interesting is that there is no difference by age group, in that very similar numbers of children across the ages say that they enjoy writing more now than before. This is despite the fact that traditionally writing enjoyment declines with age³, so it is encouraging to see that during lockdown a sizeable percentage of children and young people turned to writing regardless of their age.

Figure 3: Children and young people's perception of their writing enjoyment during lockdown compared with before by gender and age group



² <https://literacytrust.org.uk/research-services/research-reports/children-and-young-peoples-writing-201718/>

³ *ibid*

For those children and young people who say they enjoy writing more during lockdown, the reason for increased writing enjoyment was most often having extra time to write, and to think about what they were writing (see Figure 4).

[illegible]

"I am enjoying it more because when I am writing I have had more time to think about what I am going to write."

“I like writing more because I had more time to do it and realised I like it.”

However, many children and young people associate writing with schoolwork, especially when they feel they have a lot to get thorough when learning at home during school closures. They therefore judge writing, in particular, to be something they are less likely to choose to do “for fun”:

“I enjoy writing less than before because before I could write my own poems and stuff that I like, but now I don't get time to write my own stuff.”

Conversely, when children considered writing for enjoyment rather than for school, several feel more able to explore themselves as independent writers:

“I have had more time to explore my writing style during the coronavirus break.”

“I decided to write a short story and got into the hang of writing techniques and vocabulary. I'm starting to write a lot more.”

“I literally wrote an entire game review for fun.”

The digital aspects of writing during lockdown were considered a benefit by some, but not all, children:

“I enjoy writing a lot more because I can now type on screens and send it to my teachers.”

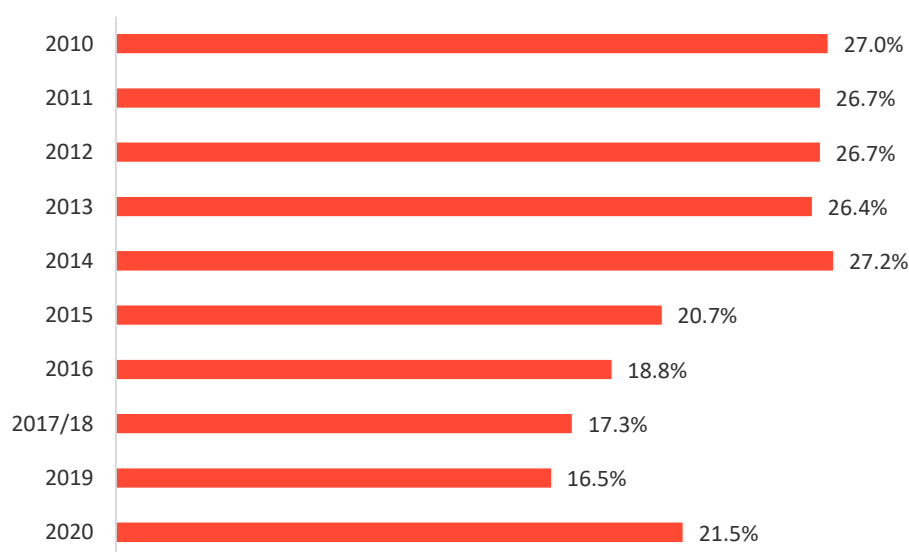
“I enjoy writing more because you do it on a laptop.”

“I've had less things to be physically writing and more online, which personally I feel just aren't the same, using a pen and a keyboard, so even though I'm probably writing a similar amount of words, I feel I'm getting less out of it.”

Levels of daily writing in free time before and during lockdown in 2020

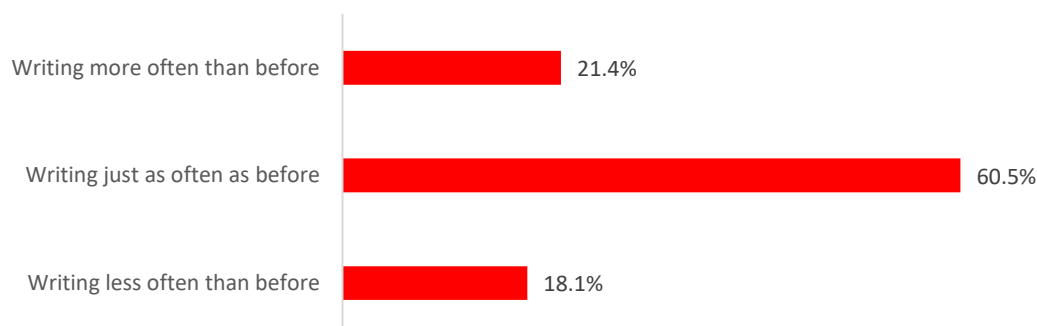
After recording the lowest daily writing rate in 2019 since we started asking the question in 2010, the percentage of children and young people who say that they write outside class on a daily basis has recovered over the past year (Figure 5), increasing by 5 percentage points from 16.5% in 2019 to 21.5% in 2020.

Figure 5: Percentage of children and young people who write daily outside class from 2010 to 2020



As can be seen in Figure 6, 1 in 5 children and young people told us that they had been writing more during lockdown than before. However, most (3 in 5) had been writing the same amount during lockdown as before, with 18% saying that they had actually been writing less than before.

Figure 6: Children and young people's perception of their writing frequency during lockdown compared with before



We also wanted to see whether children and young people who say that they now enjoy writing more than before are also the ones who say that they now write more often. As can be seen in Table 1, nearly 3 in 4 of those who say that they now enjoy writing more than before also say that they write more often, whereas most of those who enjoy writing just as much say that they write just as much as before, and the majority of those who say that they enjoy writing less are also writing less often than before.

Table 1: Writing enjoyment by writing frequency during lockdown

	Write more often	Write just as much	Write less often
Enjoy writing more	74.1%	21.4%	4.5%
Enjoy writing just as much	10.5%	81.5%	8.0%
Enjoy writing less	9.2%	28.9%	61.8%

Who writes more often now than they had done before?

Figure 7 shows that more girls than boys say that they now write more often in their free time than they had done before lockdown, reflecting previous findings about gender differences in writing frequency⁴. Similarly, while more children and young people said that they enjoy writing more during lockdown regardless of age, more children aged 8 to 11 than children and young people from other age groups said that they now write more often in their free time than before lockdown. This reflects general age differences in writing frequency previously reported⁵.

⁴https://cdn.literacytrust.org.uk/media/documents/National_Literacy_Trust_report_-_Children_and_young_peoples_writing_in_2017-18.pdf

⁵ ibid

Group	Write more often than before	Write as often as before	Write less often than before
Boys	16.3%	63.3%	20.4%
Girls	24.2%	58.8%	17.0%
Aged 8 to 11	25.2%	56.7%	18.1%
Aged 11 to 14	22.1%	60.2%	17.7%
Aged 14 to 16	17.9%	62.3%	19.8%
Aged 16 to 18	15.3%	62.0%	22.7%

As with writing enjoyment, having more time was the most frequently cited reason for increased time spent writing during lockdown (see Figure 8).

[illegible]

As noted earlier, for many children and young people, having more time to think and fewer distractions are associated with greater writing enjoyment and therefore increased writing frequency, although some were writing less without some of the directions and routines of the school setting:

“I write more often than before as I have more time to do it. And more time to think about what to write.”

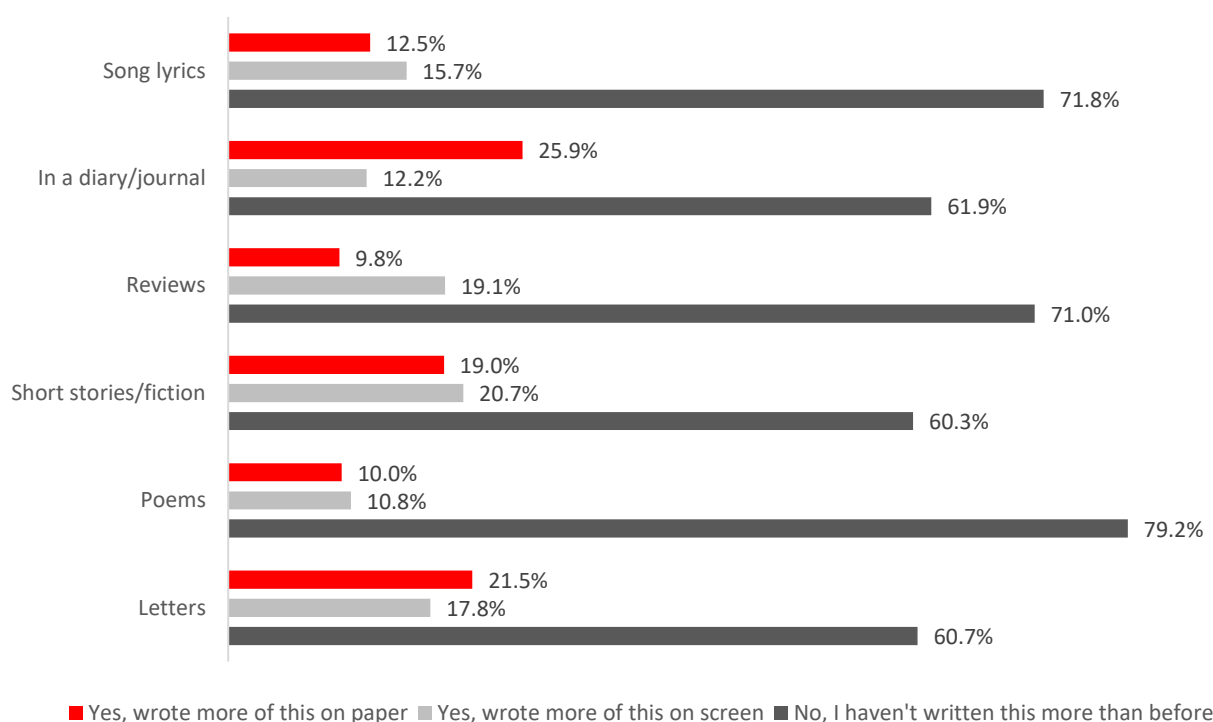
“You can be relaxed and focus on your writing and editing and because ...no one is there to disturb you.”

“I don't write as much as in school we used to do lots of stories.”

A rise of creative writing during lockdown

While a majority of children and young people didn't change their writing behaviour during lockdown, quite a few engaged in more creative writing than before. As can be seen in Figure 9, 2 in 5 (39.7%) said that they were writing more fiction/short stories either on paper or on screen during lockdown, while another 2 in 5 said that they had been writing more letters (39.2%) and more in a diary (38.1%) either on paper or onscreen.

Figure 9: Children and young people's writing of six formats during lockdown in 2020



Children and young people's comments suggested that, for many, having additional time and space to think, and being inspired by this new situation, has had a positive impact on their creativity:

“I’m writing more because I have more time thinking, and so my creative writing is impacted by thoughts and feelings.”

“I enjoy writing more than before because it gives me a chance to be in my own personal space to work, which can really help with concentration and getting creative things flowing.”

“I like writing a lot more because ...quarantine ...has ...inspired me to write a lot of things, from stories to songs. Normally I don’t get to do this ...now I’m enjoying this time to be creative.”

Several children and young people mentioned engaging in long-form writing, including working on their own books:

“I like writing more because now we have more time to do it in our own time and think about what we are writing especially since I am now writing a novel.”

“I have now had more chance to write outside of school time so I’ve started writing a book which I enjoy.”

Another influence on children choosing to write was the range of writing formats available, from diaries and letters to more digitally and socially-inspired writing:

“Because in free time we can’t go outside so ...I do writing on a screen and on paper in a diary as well.”

“I write more because I write letters to my relatives.”

“I’m writing a lot more because I just got my own laptop and I want to make a story on it as well as write scripts for some characters I made up.”

“I write stories with my friends for fun.”

“I prefer writing more now, because I can do it with my friends; we help each other out.”

Writing as an outlet for mental wellbeing

2 in 5 (41.3%) of children and young people said that writing makes them feel better and 1 in 4 (24.8%) say that writing helps them when they feel sad because they cannot see family and friends as a result of lockdown.

The connection between writing and emotional states came through in many comments. Some children and young people find creative writing provides an escape from difficult feelings, while others find that recording their feelings can improve their mental wellbeing:

“When I’m writing my own story I can block out any worries I have.”

“Write more because it helps me through difficult times and anxiety.”

“I now write more often in my free time as the lockdown has given me a chance to write down my feelings when I want to.”

“I have started writing journals and it helps me reflect on the positives.”

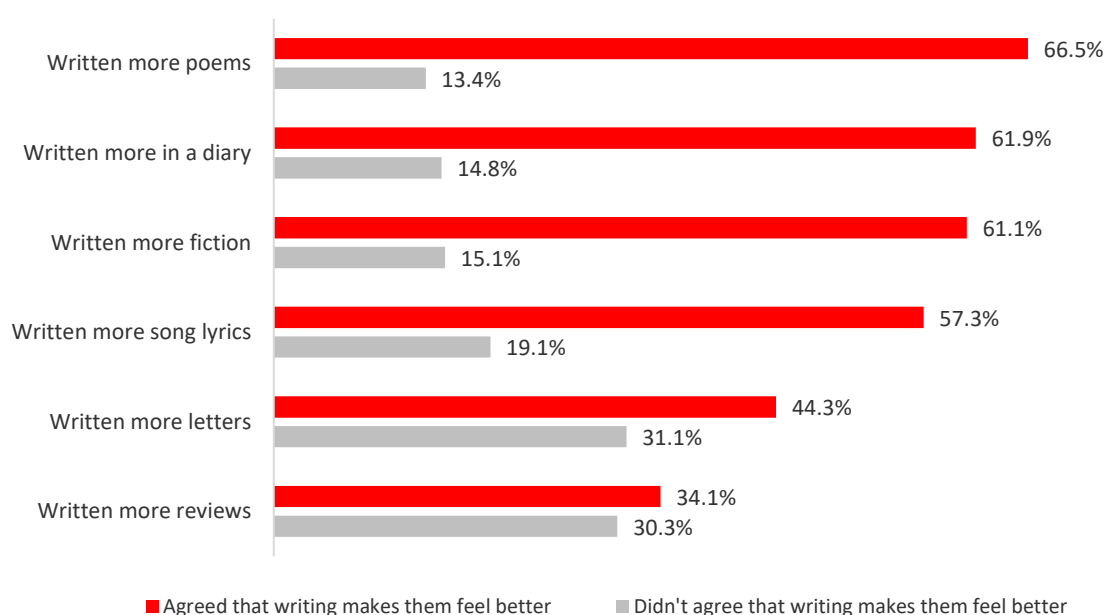
“I write more because I think it’s a positive way to get a greater mind-set. You can talk about a lot of things and express your feelings. I write stories and poems.”

Comments also suggest, however, that some children are feeling less able to engage with writing during the lockdown:

“I haven’t been able to think properly to be able to write, due to current circumstances with the COVID-19 pandemic.”

Overall, more children who agreed with the statement that writing makes them feel better chose to write creatively across different formats compared with their peers who disagreed with the statement (see Figure 10). For example, five times as many children who agreed that writing makes them feel better said that they now write more poems compared with their peers who didn’t agree with the statement. Also, four times as many said that they now write more in a diary or more fiction than their peers, which reflects some of the comments from children and young people above.

Figure 10: Whether children and young people agreed that writing makes them feel better or not by types of formats written more during lockdown



The role of inspiration

Compared with books, which some children and young people were less able to access due to library closures, writing is less affected by more limited access to resources during lockdown. However, there is a clear divide between children and young people for whom the situation has provided a source of writing inspiration, and those who feel the opposite:

“Writing is a bit more fun because having inspirational things around helps a lot in making my writing better.”

“I enjoy writing more than before because I’ve been writing a sort of diary of the events that have been happening and it has made me enjoy writing a lot more.”

“I enjoy writing less because there is nothing to write about as everyone is stuck at home.”

To sum up

The lockdown period has been challenging and unsettling so it is heartening to see that children and young people are turning to writing as an expressive outlet during this time. The top three formats children and young people are choosing to write: fiction, letters and diaries are particularly insightful as they give us a clear indication of the reasons children are choosing to write. Fiction provides them with a creative outlet, and perhaps a way to create a different world; letters enable them to connect with family and friends; and in diaries they can record this extraordinary time and explore the emotions they are experiencing.

Listening to children’s experiences of writing during lockdown, it is clear that for many, it has been a time of increased creativity, with children writing everything from songs, stories and scripts to even beginning their own novels. This creative response to lockdown should be valued and supported, as it is likely to help sustain writing skills during school closures. Further, we need to find ways to support these good writing habits to continue at home once schools reopen.

One particularly clear message from the children’s comments was that having more time to write freely has contributed to their increased enjoyment of writing. Looking ahead, it seems that providing time for free writing once back in the classroom could help to sustain this positive outcome. While there may well be a need for a fast pace of learning, balancing this with time for writing that is not prescriptive or exams-focused could be enormously valuable to boost writing enjoyment overall.

Importantly, many children also describe how writing has offered a refuge, helping them to express their feelings in this difficult time. In times of continued uncertainty, the essential role of writing as a tool for supporting mental wellbeing should therefore also be recognised and valued. The popularity of diaries linked with this finding might have been expected but there was also a strong link between writing for wellbeing and creative formats such as fiction, poems and lyrics which deserves further investigation.

As we look ahead to a period of processing and recovery, these findings indicate that creative writing will play an important role. Our programmes, campaigns and policy work on enjoyment and positive behaviours around writing are more crucial than ever.

Our sincere thanks to Slaughter and May for their generous financial contribution that enabled us to conduct our Annual Literacy Survey between January and March 2020.

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