



Young People's Writing Attitudes, behaviour and the role of technology

Christina Clark and George Dugdale
In collaboration with Booktrust
November 2008

Executive summary

Writing is an important issue in the UK today. While children's and young people's writing standards steadily improved until 2006, levels have not increased in recent years. Writing is much more than just an educational issue – it is an essential skill that allows people to participate fully in today's society and to contribute to the economy.

Previous research into the teaching of writing and effective writing strategies has mainly focused on the formal types of writing taught in schools. However, today's society writing takes many forms, including texting, instant messaging, blogging and emailing. The research evidence about these new forms of writing in the UK is fragmented and inconclusive. In particular, there is a lack of research looking at how much young people write, the different forms of writing that they engage in and their confidence in using these different forms of writing.

Since relatively little is known about young people's views about writing in the UK, the key objectives of this survey were: *to explore how much young people enjoy writing, what type of writing they engage in, how good at writing they think they are and what they think about writing.*

3001 pupils aged 8-16 from England and Scotland completed an online survey in May 2009. There was an almost equal gender split, with 48.6% of boys and 51.4% of girls taking part. The percentage of pupils who receive free school meals (20.2%), which is frequently used in educational research as a crude indicator of socio-economic background, was higher in this survey compared to the national average for primary and secondary pupils.

Some of the key findings of this survey are:

- 75% of young people said that they write **regularly**. **Technology-based formats** were most frequently written. For example, 82% of young people wrote text messages at least once a month, 73% wrote instant messages (such as messages on AIM or MSN), and 63% wrote on a social networking site. Of non-technology based writing, 77% wrote notes or answers in class or for homework at least once a month followed by 52% writing notes to other people.
- 56% of young people said they had a profile on a **social networking site**, such as Bebo or Facebook. 24% said that they have their own **blog**. While frequently vilified in the media as 'dumbing down' young people's literacy, this research shows that technology offers different writing opportunities for young people, which is seen in a link between

blogging and (self-reported) writing ability and enjoyment of writing. For example, young people who write on a blog were much more likely than young people who do not write on a blog to enjoy writing in general (57% vs. 40%) and to enjoy writing for family/friends in particular (79% vs. 55%). Young people with a blog (61%) as well as young people with a profile on a social networking site (56%) also displayed greater confidence, believing themselves to be good writers. Blog owners and young people with a social networking profile were also more prolific writers than their counterparts. They held more positive attitudes towards writing and computer use, and viewed writers more favourably.

- Owning a **mobile phone** does not appear to alter young people's enjoyment of writing, their writing behaviour or their attitudes towards writing.
- Most young people said they **used computers** regularly and believed that computers are **beneficial** to their writing, agreeing that a computer makes it easier for them to correct mistakes (89%) and allows them to present ideas clearly (76%). Overall, nearly 60% of young people also believe that computers allow them to be more creative, concentrate more and encourage them to write more often.
- Young people are ambivalent about their **enjoyment of writing**. 45% of young people surveyed said that they enjoy writing. However, enjoyment of writing is related to the type of writing being done. When young people were asked to rate their enjoyment of writing for family/friends and their enjoyment of writing for school separately, some differences emerged. Young people enjoyed writing for family/friends more than they enjoyed writing for school, with over two-thirds of young people enjoying writing for family/friends and only half enjoying writing for schoolwork. Most young people agree that they enjoy writing more when they can choose the topic (79%).
- Echoing US research (Pew Internet, 2008), just under 9 in 10 young people see writing as an **important skill** to succeed in life, but this means that a sizeable minority (12%) do not consider it an important life skill.
- When asked how **good they think they are at writing**, we found that there was an almost equal split between those who said that they are either very good or good (52%) and those who felt that they could be better or were not very good (45%). Those who responded that they are a 'very good' or 'good' writer were then asked to select from a list the **reasons** why they think that they are good at writing. Most young people felt that they were a good writer because they use their imagination (39%), know how to type (36%) and spell (33%). By contrast, young people who didn't believe that they were good writers were more likely to emphasise the transcriptional aspects of writing. For example, the most common reason why young people think that they are not good writers is that they are not very good at writing neatly (23%), followed by them not enjoying writing very much (22%), not being very good at spelling (21%) or at checking their work (20%).
- In line with governmental figures, which show that girls outperform boys in writing, there were consistent **gender differences** throughout this survey. Boys lagged behind girls in more than just their writing skills. Boys did not enjoy writing as much as girls (38% vs. 52%), either for family/friends or for schoolwork. Boys were also more likely to rate themselves as 'not very good writers' than girls (48% vs. 42%) and to emphasise the lack of technical skills when explaining their self-perceived ability. Boys also held more negative attitudes towards writing. For example, boys were more likely than girls to agree with statements that writing is boring (57% vs. 41%) and that writing is more for girls than for boys (60% vs. 43%). However, boys held more positive attitudes towards computers, being more likely than girls to believe that computers are beneficial to writing. However, girls are nearly twice as likely as boys to have a blog (33% vs. 18%).

- There were also consistent **age differences** in this survey, with a dip in enjoyment of writing, writing behaviour and attitudes towards writing at ages 11-14 (Key Stage 3). Generally, pupils aged 8 -11 (Key Stage 2) enjoyed writing, both for family/friends and for schoolwork. They wrote mostly traditional forms, such as short stories, poems and letters. They held positive attitudes towards writing and viewed writers in a favourable light. At ages 11-14 (Key Stage 3) these behaviours and attitudes plummet and turn negative, recovering again in pupils aged 14-16 (Key Stage 4).
- The relationship between enjoyment of writing, writing behaviour, attitudes towards writing and socio-economic status, assessed by proxy using **free school meal (FSM) uptake** as an indicator, is complex. Pupils who receive FSM in the present study were not more or less likely than their more privileged counterparts to enjoy writing or to write regularly. There was also no relationship between socio-economic background and enjoyment of writing, writing behaviour, linking writing to success, views of writers, computer use, or attitudes towards computers. However, pupils who do not receive FSMs rated themselves as better writers than pupils who receive FSMs. The lack of confidence in writing of FSM pupils is also reflected in their attitudes towards writing, with more FSM pupils than non-FSM pupils agreeing with the statement that they have trouble deciding what to write.

In summary, this research provides us with an up-to-date insight into young people's attitudes towards writing. Most young people write regularly and young people write technology-based materials, such as text and instant messages, most frequently. While owning a mobile phone does not appear to alter young people's writing behaviour, having a profile on a social networking site or having a blog is connected to enjoyment of writing and confidence in writing. Young people today use computers regularly and believe that computers are beneficial to their writing.

We believe it is paramount that the school curriculum reflects and utilises writing forms that young people enjoy and engage with, in order to demonstrate that writing is more than a compulsory task: it is an essential life skill.

Registered address:
National Literacy Trust
68 South Lambeth Road
London SW8 1RL

 020 7587 1842
 020 7587 1411
 contact@literacytrust.org.uk
www.literacytrust.org.uk

National Literacy Trust is a registered charity, no. 1116260, and a company limited by guarantee, no. 5836486. Registered in England and Wales. VAT reg no. 919 3158 11.