

Lyrics in focus

The power of lyrics to engage reluctant readers and writers

Aimee Cole and Elena Chamberlain, January 2024

In 2023, we found that only 2 in 5 (43.4%) children and young people aged 8 to 18 enjoyed reading in their free time ([Clark, Picton & Galway, 2023](#)), and only 1 in 3 (34.6%) enjoyed writing in their free time ([Clark, Bonafede, Picton & Cole, 2023](#)). These insights, gathered from our Annual Literacy Survey, indicate a decrease in reading and writing enjoyment among children and young people in the United Kingdom.

Children and young people are frequently exposed to song lyrics, from the music they listen to, the songs sung in school assemblies or places of worship, to streaming platforms. Indeed, song lyrics may be a valuable tool for learning a range of literacy skills, from listening to reading and writing (e.g., [Miguez, 2017](#)). For example, studies have shown that engaging with lyrics supports comprehension and memory skills (e.g., [Boothe & West, 2015](#)). Lyrics have also been explored as a tool in teaching a variety of different concepts, from simple vocabulary to political theory, demonstrating the versatility of song lyrics as a tool for literacy and learning ([Itani, 2012](#); [Rozinski, 2015](#); [Stygles, 2014](#)).

Between January and mid-March 2023, we surveyed 64,066 children and young people aged 8 to 18 across the UK about their reading, writing, speaking and listening habits. This report highlights insight from these children and young people about their reading and writing of song lyrics. The report also reviews evaluation findings from eight participants of a lyric-writing workshop, as part of New Chapters, delivered in Young Offender Institutions.

Key findings

- 3 in 4 (73.6%) 8- to 18-year-olds told us in 2023 that they read lyrics on paper and/or on screen at least once a month. Reading song lyrics was very popular among children and young people regardless of their demographic group.
 - 64.8% read lyrics on a screen (e.g., on a tablet, a computer or phone), while 4.3% read lyrics on paper, and 4.5% read lyrics on both paper and screen.
- 3 in 10 (31.8%) children and young people aged 8 to 18 told us in 2023 that they wrote song lyrics on paper and/or on screen at least once a month.
 - 20.3% wrote lyrics on a screen, while 7.9% wrote lyrics on paper, and 3.6% wrote lyrics on both paper and screen.
- While there were few demographic differences in lyric reading, there were marked differences in lyric writing.
 - A higher percentage of girls (36.3%) told us that they wrote lyrics in their spare time than boys (26.6%).
 - Half (48.6%) of 8- to 11-year-olds told us that they wrote lyrics, the largest percentage across age groups, compared with just 13.7% of 16- to 18-year-olds.
 - Nearly 2 in 5 (38.3%) of those who received FSMs told us that they wrote lyrics at least once a month, compared with only 3 in 10 (29.1%) of those who didn't receive FSMs.

Engaging reluctant readers and writers with lyrics

- Despite telling us they didn't enjoy reading, almost 3 in 4 (72.5%) 8- to 18-year-old reluctant readers told us they read lyrics at least once a month.
- Song lyrics were the only reading format that was enjoyed similarly by those who did (75.0%) and did not (72.5%) enjoy reading.
 - There were much larger differences when looking at other reading formats. For example, 52.2% of those who didn't enjoy reading told us that they read fiction, compared with 86.1% of those who enjoyed reading.

Supporting project participants with lyrics

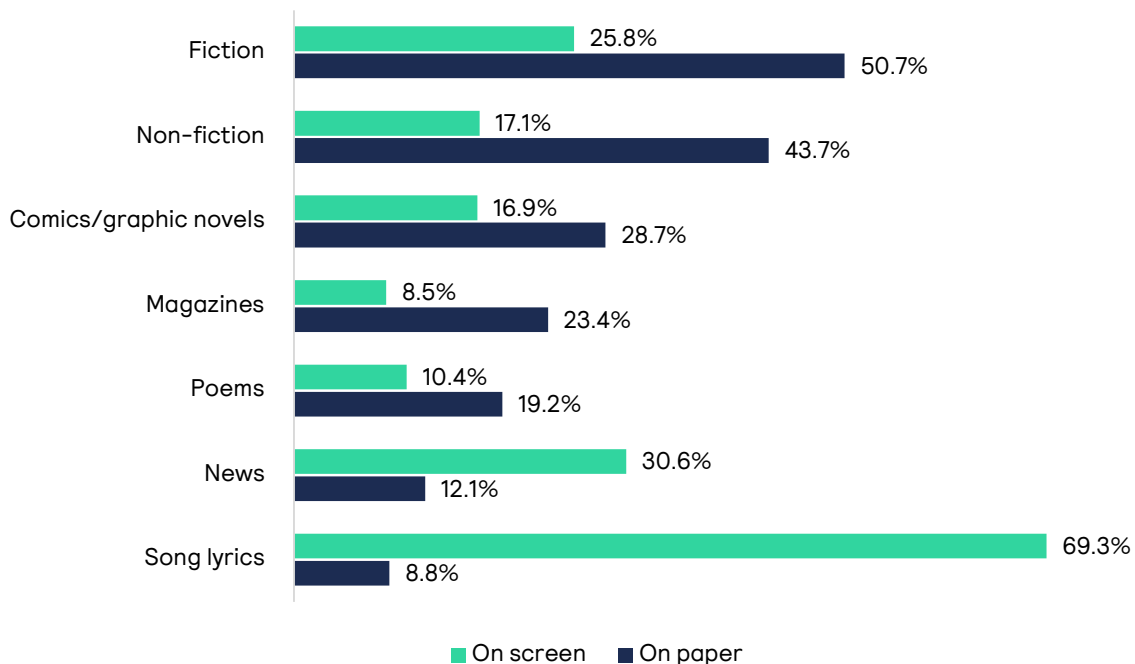
- Feedback from participants of our New Chapters lyric-writing workshop suggested that song lyrics could be used to increase confidence and self-belief:
 - Seven out of eight participants told us that taking part in a creative-writing workshop tailored towards writing lyrics made them feel better in general and inspired them to think about their future more.

- All eight participants told us that they were inspired to tell their own stories and left with an improved understanding of songwriting and the music industry.

Reading and writing song lyrics

In 2023, almost 3 in 4 (73.6%) 8- to 18-year-olds told us that they read lyrics on paper (8.8%) and/or on screen (69.3%) at least once a month. Interestingly, as shown in Figure 1, this positioned song lyrics as the most popular on-screen reading format, with more than twice as many children and young people telling us that they read lyrics on screen (69.3%) than the second-most-popular on-screen format, the news (30.6%).

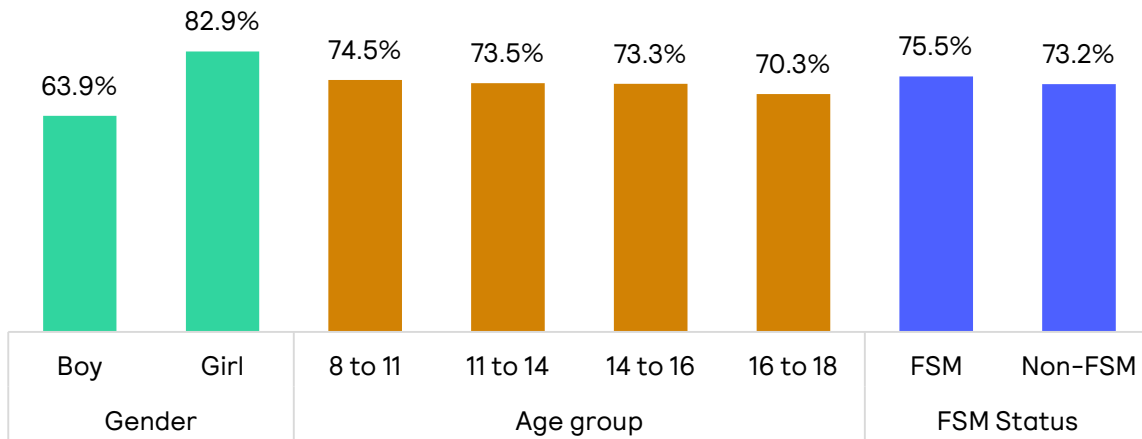
Figure 1: Materials read either on screen and/or on paper in their spare time by children and young people aged 8 to 18



As shown in Figure 2, reading lyrics was a popular habit across genders, age groups and free-school-meal (FSM) status. While slightly more girls (82.9%) than boys (63.9%) read song lyrics, there were no differences by age group or socio-economic background. Together, this suggests whether a child or young person

reads song lyrics is influenced very little, if at all, by their age or socio-economic background.

Figure 2: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 who read lyrics in their free time at least once a month, by demographic group



The percentage of those who said they wrote lyrics was much lower than we saw for reading lyrics. Indeed, only 3 in 10 (31.8%) children and young people who responded to the survey told us they had written song lyrics in the past month. Of those who wrote lyrics, 1 in 5 (20.3%) told us they had written lyrics on a screen, 7.9% told us that they had written lyrics on paper and 3.6% told us they had written lyrics on both paper and screen.

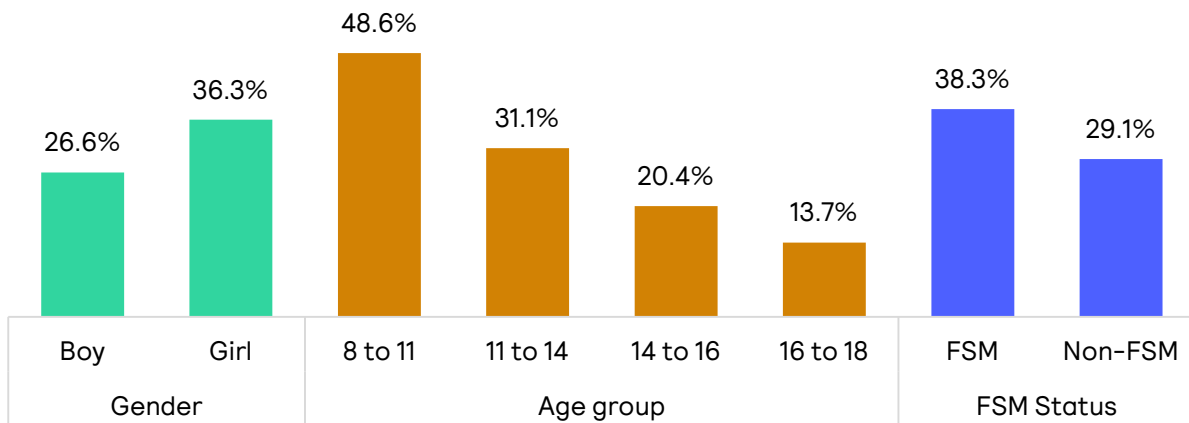
While there were few demographic differences in lyric reading, there were marked differences in lyric writing, suggesting that writing song lyrics was less universal for children and young people.

As shown in Figure 3, 1 in 3 (36.3%) girls told us they wrote lyrics in their free time, compared with 1 in 4 (26.6%) boys. Interestingly, we also saw large differences in writing lyrics by age group. For example, while half (48.6%) of 8- to 11-year-olds told us that they wrote lyrics, this reduced to 3 in 10 (31.1%) 11- to 14-year-olds, 1 in 5 (20.4%) 14- to 16-year-olds, and just 13.7% 16- to 18-year-olds.

Finally, while nearly 2 in 5 (38.3%) of those who received FSMs told us that they wrote lyrics at least once a month, only 3 in 10 (29.1%) of those who didn't receive FSMs said the same, suggesting that writing lyrics was more popular for children and young people who received free school meals. These trends reflect those seen in our overall writing report, where more girls than boys, younger readers, and

children and young people receiving FSMs wrote something daily. ([Clark, Bonafede & Cole, 2023](#)).

Figure 3: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 who write lyrics at least once a month, by demographic group



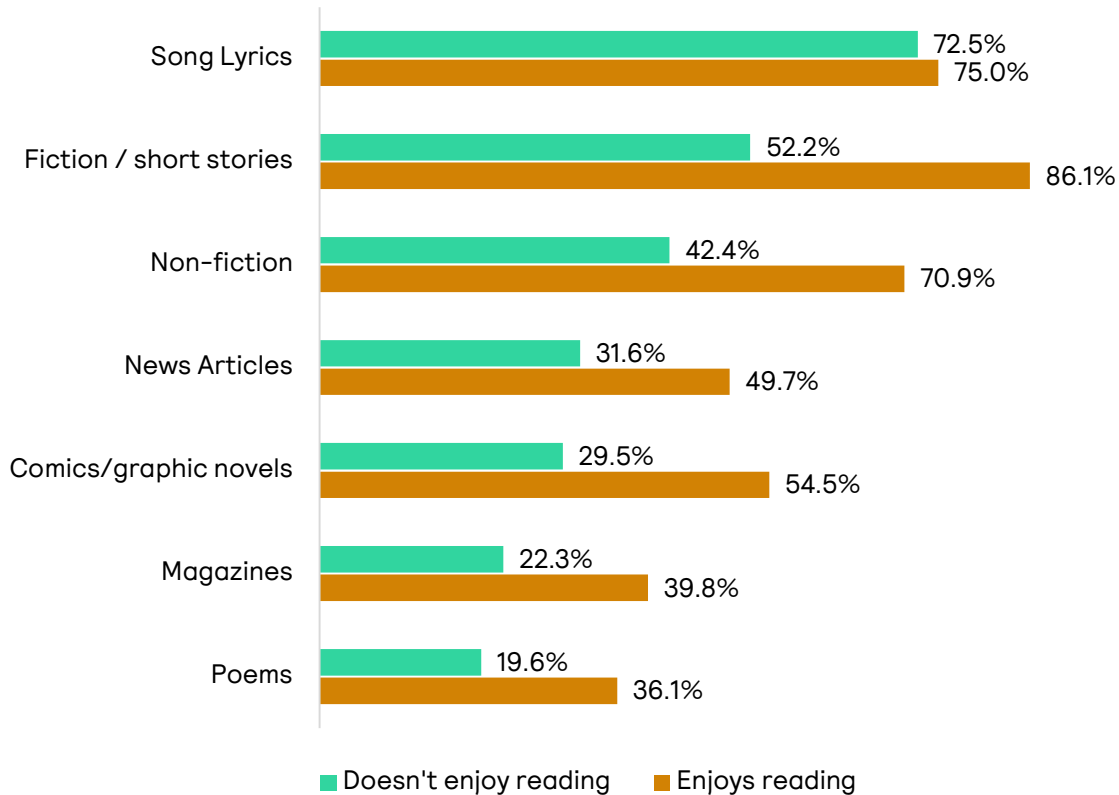
Engaging reluctant readers and writers with lyrics

In 2021 ([Picton et al. 2021](#)), more girls who were reluctant readers told us they read song lyrics compared with other reading formats, such as fiction, poetry and newspapers. In particular, 3 in 4 (74.0%) girls who did not enjoy reading told us they read song lyrics at least once a month on a screen ([Picton et al. 2021](#)), slightly more than the 7 in 10 (70.1%) girls who told us they did enjoy reading and read song lyrics at least once a month. Importantly, the report showed that more girls across the board told us they read song lyrics at least once a month than other reading formats.

Updating this in 2023, as Figure 4 shows, almost 3 in 4 (72.5%) 8- to 18-year-olds who told us they didn't enjoy reading also told us they read lyrics at least once a month. Song lyrics was the only format that was enjoyed similarly by those who

enjoyed and did not enjoy reading, in stark contrast to the other reading formats we asked about.

Figure 4: Engagement with various reading formats, by reading enjoyment



Some children and young people told us in their own words that while they struggled to engage with other forms of literacy, they enjoyed reading lyrics:

“I only read when I have to, although I do read song lyrics a lot because I like music, but other than that, I don’t read by my own free will.” (Girl, Y8)

“[Other types of reading are] boring and I’d rather read song lyrics.” (Girl, Y7)

“Reading gives me a headache. If anything makes me want to read, it’s the song lyrics.” (Girl, Y8)

“It’s just an opinion, there is probably something you don’t like, and I just don’t like reading unless I’m reading songs.” (Boy, Y8)

Interestingly, it wasn’t only reluctant readers who found lyrics engaging. Indeed, some children and young people told us that while they didn’t normally enjoy writing, they did enjoy writing song lyrics:

“I don’t really write besides schoolwork and texting my friends and family on my phone, but if I was to write in my spare time, I would journal for my mental health or maybe [write] song lyrics.” (Girl, Y12)

“I don’t like writing and try not to as much as I can, but I’ll write lyrics to songs on paper.” (Boy, Y10)

“The only time I would write is when I note down things I want to say like feelings and thoughts, because I have trouble telling them to other people. Or even when I just want to write some song lyrics. Other than that, I don’t like writing.” (Girl, Y8)

“I just think [writing is] boring unless I’m writing song lyrics” (Boy, Y8)

This insight suggests that song lyrics may be a format for engaging reluctant readers and writers, and that further research might be beneficial in building a bigger picture.

72.5% of 8- to 18-year-olds who told us they didn’t like reading also told us they read lyrics at least once a month.

Supporting participants in Young Offender Institutions to find their voice through song lyrics

Literacy levels in prisons are significantly lower than in the general adult population ([Prison Reform Trust, 2021](#)). Indeed, only 8.6% of those later receiving custodial sentences achieved five GCSEs at A* to C, including English and Maths, which is much lower than the national average ([Office for National Statistics, 2022](#)). The National Literacy Trust's [New Chapters programme](#) supports young people in prisons, young offender institutions (YOIs), and other secure settings to tell their stories through creative writing. The programme connects authors with lived experiences with participants in these secure settings, delivering creative-writing workshops, showcasing the work of participants, and even collating anthologies¹. The settings receive book donations and resources to form mini libraries on each wing, and participants are encouraged to engage with National Prison Radio, with some even performing on the radio. Additionally, in an alternative provision setting, the programme works to build connections between the young people and their local community by showcasing their work in local libraries and literacy festivals.

One element of New Chapters involved a lyric-writing workshop where participants worked with a professional songwriter to discuss, reflect upon and analyse song lyrics. Additionally, they were given the opportunity to write their own song lyrics. Eight participants responded to a feedback survey after taking part in the workshop. Overall, the workshop was rated highly, with seven of the eight participants rating the workshop as either 'very good' (n = 6) or 'good' (n = 1).

We asked participants whether they agreed with several statements about the project. All participants agreed that New Chapters lyric workshops made them feel more confident in discussions and in expressing themselves in words. All participants (n = 8) told us that they were inspired to tell their own stories and left with improved understanding of songwriting and the music industry. Almost all participants (n = 7) told us that they felt better in general and felt inspired to think about their future more. Seven of the eight also told us that they felt encouraged to write more and enjoyed writing and/or performing more.

Although collected from a small sample, these findings suggest that lyric writing successfully enabled participants to engage with speaking, writing and performing. Lyrics may therefore help increase confidence and self-belief in individuals and could act as a valuable tool for future programmes.

Conclusion

In sum, song lyrics may provide a valuable gateway into literacy for many children and young people. Lyrics were a particularly popular reading format, especially on screen; even for those who did not enjoy reading, many told us that they read lyrics. Reading song lyrics could therefore play a role in engaging reluctant readers with literacy.

As we look to encourage a new generation of readers, writers and listeners, song lyrics should not be discounted as a legitimate and engaging format. Meeting children and young people where they are, with the habits and behaviours they enjoy and relate to, may lead to success in creating a world where every person is empowered to succeed in life.

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.

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