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What Makes a Writer? How Do Early Influences Shape, and Working Habits Develop, Those Who Write?

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Abstract
This paper, the first of several, reports on a research survey of more than 900 authors to investigate the early influences on writers and their current practices, motivations and benefits, and the barriers they face. It demonstrates that writers of all ages and health profiles derive immense satisfaction from their craft despite often despite often having to employ elaborate time-management strategies to make space for their writing. A particular feature of the survey was the outstanding quality and quantity of the answers to the open-ended questions; these provide great insight into the author voice. The survey, which aimed to fill a research gap into writer motivation and which is thought to be one of the largest of its kind could be of interest to writers themselves, the creative economy, the education sector, the health sector and to those connected with the happiness agenda.

Keywords Author · Writer · Publishing · Writing motivations · Writing processes

Background

The life-long value and benefits of involvement in reading have been explored in a number of research projects. An understanding of the benefits of involvement in writing is however much less established. What studies do exist have often focussed on individual writers reflecting, not always accurately, on their path to publication, and studies by scholars of individual writers, with necessary concentration on the central figure being studied rather than wider trends.

It was decided therefore to address this research gap by undertaking a research project on a large group of writers and to contact them by setting up a consortium of

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writing organisations who would be willing to share a questionnaire with their membership/client/subscriber lists.

Since it is a rare opportunity to be able to contact large groups of writers we decided to use the opportunity to combine research into writer motivation with other significant issues relating to writers and writing. Specifically we sought to develop a greater understanding of:

1. The childhood influences on people who went on to write.

There are many instances of writers reflecting on the impact their childhood and/or adolescence had on their path to becoming a writer and the work they subsequently produced. It would therefore be beneficial to formalise this by seeking feedback from writers and analysing their responses collectively. This would be valuable information for those seeking to encourage or develop subsequent generations of writers.

2. The processes, motivation, barriers and benefits of writing.

Apart from the inherent interest of such study, it is valuable to the publishing industry and to groups seeking to represent or work with authors. The publishing industry is going through a period of transition, with tight margins and alternative means to market leading to authors having to do more of the marketing and other information gathering. Hence understanding of writers' processes and trigger points for stress could be very helpful. Such information could also provide a greater appreciation of writers' beliefs and processes which could be of great interest to the health and education sectors, particularly policy makers. It was also thought to be of particular value to health practitioners (especially those dealing with the management of an increasingly elderly population), the education system (particularly relevant to early years education, and civic engagement programmes within universities that seek to widen participation) and the creative economy (especially the media, and the publishing industry in all its current manifestations).

3. The psychological profile of writers and a comparison with other sectors of society.

Again apart from inherent interest, this could be relevant to the groups mentioned in point 2.

Literature Review

The life-long value and benefits of involvement in reading have been explored in a number of research projects including those sponsored by The National Literacy Trust[1] and The Reading Agency,[2] with particular involvement from Sheffield Hallam,[3] Loughborough[4] and Roehampton[5] Universities (e.g. [15, 20, 21, 33, 41, 44, 47, 48]). There are clear links between involvement in reading for pleasure and much longer term health, well-being, personal and professional success in a range of areas, from effectiveness in the workplace to the ability to sustain personal relationships [2, 3, 9–11, 13, 18, 19, 25, 38, 49].

Coming up with a satisfactory rationale for why some people write (or don't) has been a much longer term interest; a preoccupation of rhetorician, literary critics and literary theorists, from Aristotle onwards. Much associated research has concentrated on detailed studies of individual writers, or writers reflecting on their own experiences—not always accurately. The voice of the writer is often mediated, with others interpreting and explaining the writing process on their behalf [50]. Similarly, scholars exploring the particular path to publication of significant writers have produced work of immense value, but which necessarily concentrates on the route of one individual, within their genre, time and writing community.

Literature relating to the motivations for and practices of writing is widely scattered across disciplines. Why people write is sometimes covered in the academic press relating to publishing and writing (e.g. [43, 52]) but larger studies of larger scale anonymous populations are much less available. The work of Josie Billington of the Centre for Research into Reading at Liverpool University is a useful starting point for considering larger populations, in particular her 2011 study of the impact of increased involvement in literacy on prisoners. More recently, a large scale study of publishing within Australia included an early investigation of writers [51] in order to explore 'the experience of Australia authors in the contemporary international book industry' although background and motivations for writing were not explored. The entry point for the survey was authors who had published one or more book, and through circulating the questionnaire via 28 writing organisations a wide range of authors was reached; although it was impossible to estimate the overall size of the population, over 1000 replied. This was the first stage of a wider survey into the publishing industry as a whole within the Australian subcontinent.

Within the discipline of Education there are some explorations of diary keeping and the associated motivations (e.g. [1]) and how narrative construction impacts on the creative writer's identity [24]. Harris et al. [32] have looked at the impact of mentors on those taking part and Hains-Wesson [31] has considered the interplay between the creative writer and the reflective teacher; the wider motivations for writing have been explored by Stowell [46].

[1] https://literacytrust.org.uk.
[2] www.readingagency.org.uk.
[3] ditto.
[4] ditto.
[5] National Centre for Research in Children's Literature. https://www.roehampton.ac.uk/research-centres/national-centre-for-research-in-childrens-literature/.

There is some relevant literature within Psychology. Crocker et al. [23] have considered the extent to which writing about important issues can help reduce defensiveness and Dowrick et al. [26] and Longden et al. [36] have looked at literacy as an intervention in common mental health problems, with Pachankis and Goldfried [40] concentrating on the relevance of the age at which significant involvement in literacy takes place. Martin and Alexander [37] and Gregory Thomas [30] have considered the particular outcomes of involvement in writing within the context of autobiographical writing. Sherman et al. [45] looked at involvement in literacy and how it impacts on academic performance and associated motivation; this is particularly interesting in the context of studying the potential impact and applicability of outcomes within a university context.

There is also interesting research relating to the development of literacy and the impact it can have on health of participants, again making the point that the outcomes of the proposed study would have a wide potential relevance. For example, Billington et al. [14] looked at the impact of involvement in related activities on older people living with dementia and Dowrick et al. [26] have considered involvement in literacy as a catalyst for change in common mental health problems. Goikoetxea and Martinez [28] have looked at the health benefits that correlate with involvement in literacy.

Other supporting literature can be found scattered across various disciplines, including Management (e.g. [35]), indicating overall the area is in general under-researched, and that the outcomes could have relevance for a wide range of scholars.

Writerly motivation has been a long-term research interest of the authors of this paper. Building on *Becoming a writer* [16], *The Artist's Way* [17] and research into the writing process from the University of East Anglia (e.g. [12]) in *Is there a book in you?* [4] Baverstock began to explore and analyse the various characteristics and aptitudes of writers, and the research was revisited in *The Naked Author* [5] which analysed the motivation and practice of those who decide to self-publish. This was developed further in research projects with Jackie Steinitz [6, 7]. It emerged that authors who self-published were likely to be very satisfied by the process; that they were of a high educational level and often juggling writing with their professional commitments. It was concluded that new methods of sharing work were inviting a wide range of new participants into writing, and that this was delivering strong satisfaction. Further investigations with Blackburn and Iskandarova showed that far from 'going it alone' self-publishing was supported by a growing variety of publishing services for which authors involved were willing to pay [6, 8].

While no single answer to what makes a writer has been produced, the voice of writers themselves has tended to be recorded largely through the study of individuals rather than considering larger groups. This research project offered the interesting prospect of hearing from authors in the collective, in the process identifying the main influences on their development as writers and making comparisons across a large cohort.

The Survey into What Makes a Writer

Research Questions

For reasons outlined in the background the research questions for the survey were therefore:

1. What are the significant early influences on those who later write?
2. What are the practices, motivations, benefits of and barriers to writing?
3. What are the personality characteristics associated with writing?

The Sampling Frame

The most efficient and cost-effective way of contacting and surveying a large group of writers was felt to be through organisations who work with writers. Six organisations were therefore approached: two were membership-based organisations offering representation and collective bargaining (The Society of Authors, The Alliance of Independent Authors); two were agencies offering paid support (The Literary Consultancy and Silverwood Books) and two were paid for/subscription publications aimed at the writing community offering publications and wider community support (*Myslexia* and *Writer's Forum*). It was anticipated that there would be some overlap in the circulation lists, and this was borne out in the results (which showed that around 19% of respondents were members/subscribers/clients of at least two of the organisations). While the circulation lists of these organisations do not represent all writers in the UK they are nonetheless likely to represent a broad swathe of writers who are proactive in seeking to develop their craft.

Reasons for Involvement by the Various Writing Groups

Although ostensibly in competition with each other, it is significant that these six key organisations agreed to collaborate in making the survey available to their members/readers/clients. In each case the research had to be considered by their board of management and approved. The motivations of the various participating organisations were mixed but overlapping. The process would involve a sharing of knowledge within the sector and an exchange of understanding between the organisations and research partners. It was thought that research into the various influences on the writer would enhance an understanding of the complex series of interests, interactions and behaviours involved in writing, arguably promoting a wider understanding of the writer's craft and encouraging a revisiting of popular notions of writing as 'easy'. It would also demonstrate sector leadership for the organisations involved within a fast-changing area; identifying themes of strong interest within contemporary society and of wider relevance to many.

Research Methodology

An online survey was considered the best approach both for cost reasons and as this would give flexibility to the respondents and the time to write considered answers.

In consultation with the collaborating organisations and academics from Psychology and Creative Writing, a questionnaire was devised, using SurveyMonkey software covering a broad range of issues relating to writers. Topics covered included:

1. Childhood influences that shaped you as a writer
2. How you write now (equipment, sounds, company, disruptions, attitudes, creation process, keeping up to date, feelings at end of work etc.)
3. Use of writing/publishing support services
4. Motivations, benefits and barriers
5. Writing Genres
6. Personality characteristics (standard questions)
7. Process of submitting work for evaluation/publication
8. Knowledge of rejection
9. Knowledge of the economics of writing and publishing
10. Demographics (Gender, age, ethnicity, education, book ownership/reading, courses attended, membership of a writing group?)
11. Anything else to add? An opportunity for writers to comment on the questionnaire and other pertinent issues that had arisen while completing it

A variety of standard question types were used including multiple choice, numeric response, rating scales and open-ended questions. Examples are shown below (Fig. 1).

There was an awareness that the draft questionnaire was long—the 46 main questions comprised 180 sub-questions—but it was felt that this was a one-off opportunity to access such a large sample of writers and that it was worth piloting the long questionnaire. The various sections within the questionnaire were ordered such that the least important questions were towards the end in case of drop off.

Feedback on the draft questionnaire from the partner organisations plus results from the pilot survey conducted on Creative Writing students at Kingston University resulted in minor revisions but indicated that the long questionnaire would be acceptable to the target population.

After seeking ethical approval for the project from the University the link to the questionnaire was therefore circulated by the six partner organisations to their members/subscribers in October 2017. Follow-up reminders were sent where possible by the organisations and the survey was closed in early 2018. All respondents were assured at the beginning of the questionnaire that their responses are completely anonymous and that no questions were compulsory.

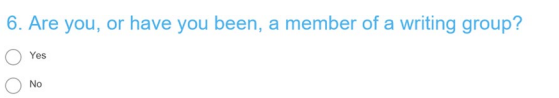
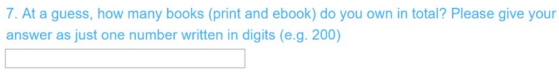
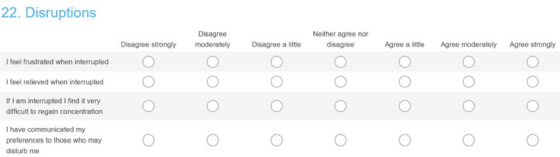
Multiple Choice	
Numeric Response	
Rating/Likert scale	
Open-ended	

Fig. 1 Examples of question types

In total 931 replies were received. The average time to complete the questionnaire was 25 min. It is not possible to provide a response rate as the circulation lists are confidential. There was some evidence of drop-off but less than might be expected for a questionnaire of this length. Indeed it was encouraging to discover that a number of respondents used the last question (Is there anything else you would like to add in response to this survey?) to convey their thanks, appreciation and interest in seeing the results:

> "I think this is a tremendous survey and one I hope that makes a difference … I think that it is crucial that people know how much joy writing can bring but also how much hard graft you need too."

> "This survey has been a 'teachable moment' for me, both interesting and enlightening"

> "This has been really enjoyable and made me think about my motivations. It strikes me that there is another reason I write. As a kid I had an acute stammer. They made you read out loud in class. I hated it … so I dropped English Lit…. I think writing is a revenge on my stammer… Thanks for the opportunity to contribute"

A few people however commented that it had been too long or somewhat tiring:

> "My brain is overtaxed I need a coffee, oh! and another Jaffa cake!"

A particular feature of this survey was the outstanding quality and quantity of the answers to the open-ended questions. The responses were insightful, funny

and heart-warming and we would like to use this opportunity to thank all the respondents.

The survey contains a wealth of information in view of the breadth of topics covered and the high quality of the responses so it is anticipated that several papers will be written. For now this first paper outlines the reasons for the study, the methodology, and nine key findings which are likely to be significant to the project as a whole.

It should be noted that, as with most surveys, there is the potential for various types of bias in the responses. These could include: courtesy bias, (as the survey was made available to respondents by the organisations to which they belonged or subscribed, and thus a positive response may be more likely), sampling bias (as the respondents were all members/subscribers to at least one of six organisations so may not be representative of the wider population of writers), response bias (the tendency of respondents either consciously or unconsciously to distort responses) and by non-response bias (which occurs when non-responders are systematically different from those who did reply). Nonetheless the survey was designed to seek to minimise these biases where possible, (for example by working with partners known to the respondent, by sending out reminders and by assuring respondents of confidentiality), so we believe that the findings will offer useful pointers to the influences, attitudes and processes of writers.

Profile of the Respondents

Figure 2 summarises the demographics of the respondents.

Compared to the UK population

- The respondents appear to have a fairly similar ethnic profile to the adult population as a whole—though note that the most recent census data is from 2011. Specifically 87% of the sample identified as white compared to 89% of British adults in 2011 while the proportions of respondents identifying as black, Asian and mixed in the study (2%, 4%, 3%) are broadly in the line with the 2011 adult population estimates of 2.7%, 5.5% and 2.9% respectively [29].
- By gender 70% of respondents were female (compared to 51% of the adult population of the UK) though amongst the 65+ age group the share of males was higher, accounting for 38% of the total. The issue of gender in writing is a major topic in itself. For now we just note that there is some evidence of a higher share of women who undertake writing in for example statistics about Higher Education in the UK which shows that of 9000 students who started a Creative Writing course in 2016/17 65% were female, as were 57% of the 11,000 students who started a course in journalism.
- The age profile of the respondents showed that the sample included representatives of every age group from Under 18s to 65+. The median age of our respondents was 55 compared to a national median age of 47 for adults. A striking feature of the sample was the size of the 65+ group (24% of our sample compared to 22% of the population) which provides evidence of the importance of writing to the over 65s and an indication that writers do not retire. Indeed one of

Demographics of Respondents
% of sample

Gender	Female	70
	Male	28
	Identify Other	1
Age	Under 45	27
	45-54	22
	55-64	26
	65+	24
Ethnicity	White	87
	Black	2
	Asian	4
	Mixed	3
Education	Secondary school	15
	Undergraduate degree	34
	Postgraduate degree	48

Figures may not add to 100 due to rounding and 'Prefer not to say'
Number of respondents (n) from 907 to 920

Fig. 2 Demographics of respondents

the respondents described writing as the "most excellent retirement career ever invented" [39].

- The education profile of the respondents was dramatic as it showed that a very high proportion of writers are particularly well educated with 48% of the sample having a postgraduate degree and 83% having at least an undergraduate degree. It was encouraging however to see there was still a sizeable minority—15% of the sample—who had finished education at school but not gone to University. One of these commented "I didn't start writing until 2015 when I finished a book and an idea for a fiction book series literally dropped into brain almost fully formed. Other than O-level English in 1979 and a lifetime of being asked to proofread other people's work/spellings I had no formal training. …. Now I'm loving [writing]"

The survey also revealed information about the writing behaviours of the sample. A summary is shown in Fig. 3.

Writing groups are important to our sample (a finding that was strongly corroborated in the responses to the open-ended questions); 64% are or have been in a writing group.

- 79% had taken at least one type of writing course from the eight options listed on the questionnaire (creative writing, screenwriting, travel writing, etc.). 44% had taken two or more types of courses

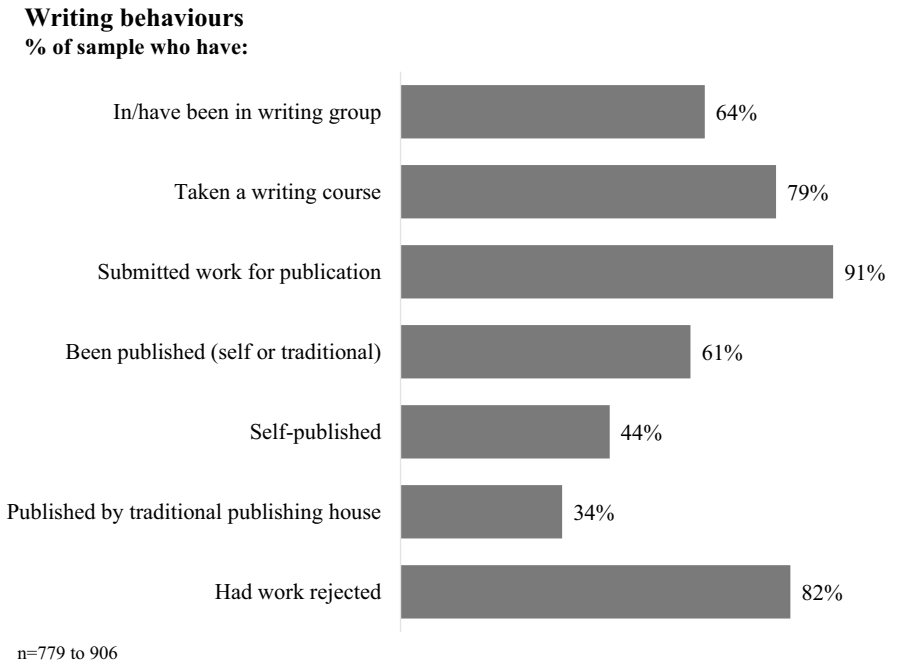


Fig. 3 Writing behaviours of the sample

- 91% had submitted work for publication and 90% of these had experienced rejection (i.e. 82% of the total sample).
- 61% of the sample had been published with 34% published by a traditional publishing house, 44% self-publishing and 18% having been published both traditionally and self-published.

Respondents were also asked to identify which genres they wrote (from a list of 14 types) and for each type whether they had been traditionally published, self-published or whether they wrote for pleasure. Most respondents wrote in more than one genre with novels the most popular, followed by short stories, magazine/newspaper articles and then poetry.

Ten Key Findings from the 'What Makes a Writer?' Research

1. Writers get immense satisfaction from their writing

When asked to rate a set of attitudinal statements on a 7 point scale (where 1 = strongly disagree, 4 = neither agree nor disagree and 7 = strongly agree) it was clear that respondents enjoy a very strong level of satisfaction from writing. 81%

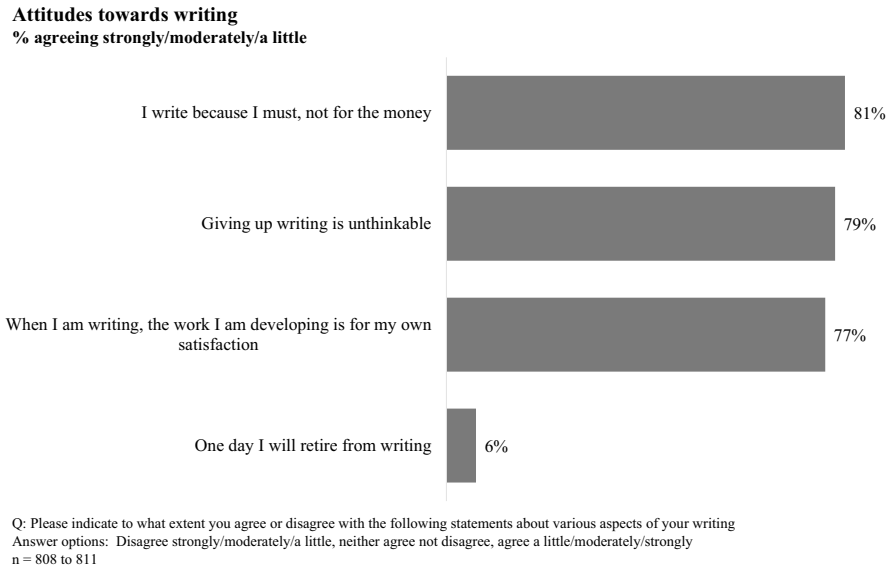


Fig. 4 Attitudes concerning the satisfactions of writing

picked the top three boxes for "I write because I must, not for the money" and only 6% thought they would ever retire from writing (Fig. 4).

These sentiments were reinforced in the open-ended answers:

"The pull to make something of a single thought, phrase, sight of experience is overwhelming…"

"I get grumpy if I don't have time to write"

"Motivation isn't a problem. The more I write, the more I want to write"

"Writing makes me feel fulfilled like nothing else …"

"I can't not write. It is such a central, pleasurable and fulfilling part of my life, even when it goes 'wrong'"

"Because I must [write]. If I do not write 'that' story – who will?"

"It is my escape and joy"

"it's a necessity, not a hobby"

"I have stories over-spilling in the filing cabinets of my brain. I have to get them out. They need telling."

2. They feel writing brings a myriad of benefits

When asked to outline the benefits of involvement in writing, there was a significant response (615 responses) and a very broad spread of benefits emerged including:

- Personal satisfaction in completion of a project
- Pride in their achievements/a strong sense of self-worth, identity and purpose
- Happiness when people like your work
- Increased awareness/insights into things around them
- The benefits of writing to mental discipline, brain training and intellectual engagement
- The knowledge acquired through research
- Joy of creativity/route to self-expression/innate love of writing
- Escapism ('from cycle of shitty job to shitty job')/being engrossed in the moment/fun
- Therapeutic/cathartic/uplifting/healing/transforming negative experiences/mental well-being/inner peace
- Desire to leave a legacy/make a difference
- Social satisfaction/collaboration with others etc.
- Money (mentioned by some, though not as a high priority)

Extracts from the verbatims give a real sense of the satisfactions experienced:

'I LOVE finding the right word or phrase'

'Every time I tell someone I am writer I feel proud and happy'

'Writing has become a way of leaving my thoughts for my children to read one day'

"I have no children (my choice: not sad about it). My books are my legacy."

'It's what brings me the greatest joy. It's what gives me the greatest sense of accomplishment'

'It keeps me sane …'

'Escapism. The joy of creating something, fashioning a rough idea into a finished product. Creating surprising characters. Creating imaginary friends!'

'I have leaped into the deep pool of self-publishing and after some months in the water have emerged, dripping and weary, but glad that I managed to swim those lengths and achieve something.'

3. Writing is particularly important to the elderly, those in poor health or with a disability

When asked to rate their health on a seven-point scale a significant minority (around 13% or 120 respondents) rated their health in the bottom 3 boxes. Some

of their comments revealed the extent to which writing is particularly important to them.

'Writing is a slap in the face to my illness'

'Unfortunately I am currently facing surgery for cancer, but I envisage that nothing other than my death would stop me from writing'

'I have ME … but that doesn't feel like a barrier even though I can only work/write part-time. Perhaps the enforced rest gives me lots of thinking, reflecting and awareness time.'

'If I don't write my mental health suffers … Writing feels like meditation.'

'As someone whose physical limitations give her very few options in life, writing is my saving grace. It gives me a place to put everything I have learned about life, including my illness (one of my characters is disabled). It is a creative outlet of huge proportions – some days having it is the one thing that keeps me sane… Allows me to share in a life I no longer get to have'

Comments by older people also showed that writing is important for them and their self-esteem

'At 57 years old finally working to realise my potential – rather than just daydreaming and talking about it.'

'Now I am retired I write to be part of the world, to share my stories with others and to give myself an excuse to attend conferences, book fairs and such.'

'[on the benefits of writing] Better mental health. Acknowledgement of writing by both praise and financial reward. Greater self esteem. Knowing I have used my talents well. Fulfilling an ambition I've had from my early teens (I'm coming up to 70). Giving me a purpose in my retirement-from-a-day-job years. Knowing my mum would have been proud of my publishing successes! Knowing I'm communicating ideas in fiction about things I consider important in the world.'

'I have the satisfaction of knowing that people are entertained, find comfort, and learn from what I write. I have made enough money been able to subsidise my daughter. I have made good friends from my contacts (mostly through cyberspace) with other writers that has made me feel part of a larger community. Since I am retired this has made my life much richer. Since I write both historical fiction and science fiction, this has forced me to continue to do research in both fields, which has kept my mind active.'

'Keeping me and brain active, as I am retired. Love attending courses and residential workshops, enjoy meeting new authors. Great support from being a member of SCBWI. Enjoy helping young people, and reluctant readers to learn to read. Self published my first ever YA collection of short stories, used in a prison workshop.'

> ‘Being of a certain age, I’m feeling mortal, and my chief worry, despite being in good health, is that I’ll die before I’ve written everything I want to write. Or that I’ll contract an illness that robs me of my word power. I’m not sure which of those would be worse.’

4. Reading is of fundamental importance to most writers; they read and own significantly more books than the wider population as a whole

The link between reading and writing is well established and it was evident that most, though not all, of the sample read voraciously.

Respondents were asked to estimate the number of books they owned. The answers ranged from 0 to 15,000 with a mean of 900 books and a median of 500. This is significantly more that the UK average of a mean of 200 books and a median of 50 according to a 2014 survey of 1500 adults by Booktrust [42].

Respondents were also asked to estimate the number of books they read each year. The range here was from 2 to 500 (and thus more than 1 per day) with the mean number being 44 books (slightly less than 1 a week) and the median 25 (one book every 2 weeks). Again this was significantly more than the UK average. A 2014 YouGov study of 2000 adults [22] identified that the mean number of books read per year as 12 while the median is 4.

While the majority of respondents were thus very driven to own and read books there were a number of comments by writers who are dyslexic

> ‘I have severe dyslexia and this is not an impediment but few authors talk about this. Because of the dyslexia I am not an avaricious reader but this does not stop me from being a published author. I am worried that young people with dyslexia will believe that they cannot produce published works because of the impression given that in order to write authors have to read extensively. People with dyslexia, it is true, have to write more carefully to hone their craft and to use tools such as grammar and spelling checkers. However if they have great ideas that will carry them far further than a wonderfully crafted writing style devoid of imagination and originality’

> ‘I feel that more needs to be done to encourage young writers with dyslexia. As it took and still takes me a lot to write knowing the cards and opinions of others are against me, especially when they find out I’m dyslexic.’

> ‘I couldn’t read until the age of 10 due to dyslexia. Although making up stories from an early age, I couldn’t write them down. My confidence and abilities have grown throughout my life……. I feel that I have overcome all the problems of the past that are connected to my dyslexia and have proved myself. I’m also glad to be using the skills acquired during my working life in mental health and counselling, as they now are used in creating 3 dimensional characters in my psychological thrillers.’

How often as a child did you?
% answering very frequently/often

	Read for Pleasure	Visit Public Library	Browse in bookshops	Have Stories Read to you	Number of respondents
TOTAL	91	78	61	50	(877)
Male	81	64	58	38	(251)
Female	95	83	62	54	(610)
Under 34	90	65	80	61	(88)
35-54	92	78	63	50	(329)
55-64	92	82	60	49	(229)
65+	91	78	50	45	(214)
BAME	87	71	54	39	(78)
White	91	78	61	51	(766)
Secondary School	86	71	61	33	(129)
Undergraduate degree	90	78	61	51	(304)
Postgraduate degree	93	80	60	55	(421)

Q: Please indicate how often as a child, you did the following activities?
Answer options: Never/Seldom/Sometimes/Often/Very Frequently
"Prefer not to say" excluded from demographic categories above due to small sample sizes but included in totals

Fig. 5 Selected childhood behaviours by demographic

5. Most writers had a bookish childhood

When asked 'How often did you …?' undertake various activities in childhood 91% of respondents said that they read for pleasure either very frequently or often. Analysis by demographic showed high levels of reading for pleasure among all categories and little variation by age, but women were even more likely to have read for pleasure (95%) than men (81%).

High proportions of the sample also visited libraries (78% very frequently/often) and browsed in bookshops (61%) (Fig. 5).

Respondents also noted that as a child personal ownership of books they knew were specifically theirs was considered to be important. 81% agreed that this was very/moderately/slightly important to them with 50% of respondents agreed very strongly that it was important. Again women were more likely than men to perceive book ownership as important.

6. Teachers provided stronger support to writers than their families or friends

When asked to think about the writing they did or wanted to do as a child 59% of respondents agreed that they had strong support from their teachers for their writing compared with just 40% being supported by their families and 30% by their friends. When analysed by demographic younger respondents felt that they received much more support than older ones; 67% of under 34 s agreed they had received strong

I had strong support from my:
% answering agree strongly/moderately/a little

	Teachers	Family	Friends	Number of respondents
TOTAL	59	40	30	(848)
Male	49	33	28	(240)
Female	64	42	30	(591)
Under 34	67	64	48	(87)
35-54	66	44	30	(319)
55-64	56	36	23	(223)
65+	48	27	27	(202)
BAME	67	37	29	(76)
White	59	41	30	(740)
Secondary School	47	37	34	(121)
Undergraduate degre	60	39	30	(298)
Postgraduate degree	62	41	28	(406)

Q: Thinking about any writing you did or wanted to do as a child to what extent do you agree or disagree with
Answer options: Disagree strongly/moderately/a little, neither agree nor disagree, agree a little/moderately/strongly
"Prefer not to say" excluded from demographic categories above due to small sample sizes but included in totals

Fig. 6 Influence of teachers, family and friends by demographic

support from their teachers compared with 48% of over 65 s. The improving trend in support from families is even more marked (64% of under 34 s compared with 27% of over 65s) (Fig. 6).

In the open-ended questions respondents were not asked directly about this aspect of their writing, but it is striking that the comments that did emerge on the topic through the survey were mostly in response to the question about barriers to their involvement in writing and reflected the discouragement they suffered as a child.

> 'A fear of being laughed at as this happened at school when a teacher read my prose in a silly voice and caused the whole class to laugh at me.'

> 'I had school teachers who never encouraged my writing - rather the opposite, although one did praise an aspect of my writing. I've always written short stories for myself, had a book or two to read, and have often wondered where my writing would be if I had had the encouragement and support of my school teachers.'

> 'When my parents were alive, one of them expressed such strong disapproval of my [writing] that I froze for years and slowed my own progress.'

'My parents were always very lukewarm about the idea of me being a writer when I was a kid (they saw it as 'a nice hobby') and I still, so many years on, find it hard to spend lots of time writing without feeling guilty.'

'I was very imaginative as a child and always reading, but I had no support for my writing from my parents. They neither encouraged or discouraged it, or saw it as anything special.'

'My parents were very discouraging and told me that I would be rejected.'

'I was seriously discouraged from writing by my mother as a child (she wanted me to study Medicine).'

'As a child, I wasn't 'supposed' to be writing so I kept it secret and felt shame. This inhibited me as an adult from 'coming out' as a writer for many years.'

Although this was not part of the research Carol Ann Duffy, the first female Poet Laureate in its 341-year history, is a prime example of the importance of teachers in encouraging writing. Duffy regularly speaks about a junior school teacher who was instrumental in encouraging her. When she was 15, wanting to be a poet and her parents were saying 'Yes but what's your real job going to be?' Her English teacher typed up her handwritten poems and sent them to a publisher and this made a significant difference to her sense of herself as a writer [27].

7. Writers are highly process-orientated

The survey included many detailed questions on the writing process in terms of the equipment used, the places writers chose to write, the sounds (or silence) they like to accompany their writing and questions about their routines.

The responses revealed that writers have many different approaches but that most were highly process-oriented and very aware of the triggers that most helped them to write. Details of the processes will be covered in another paper. For now just a few common, though not universal, themes are shown in Fig. 7.

Respondents were also asked in open-ended question to add any further information that would be interesting about their writing processes and any rituals they follow. The responses revealed a range of strong individual preferences:

'Scented candles help, but they have to be foodie-scented ones, with scents I recognise, like vanilla and honey - not Toilet Duck-inspired ones with weird names like Whispering Stones. I also use the brain.fm website through headphones for background music (… it seems to get me 'in the zone') and I have a colour-changing crystal on my desk …But at the same time I know I don't NEED these things to write; I can write perfectly well without them and often do. They're just a nice indulgence when I feel like I need a little boost to my mojo.'

'It sounds ridiculous but I have real trouble writing on paper that is either blank or lined. I use squared paper and find I can write much faster and more

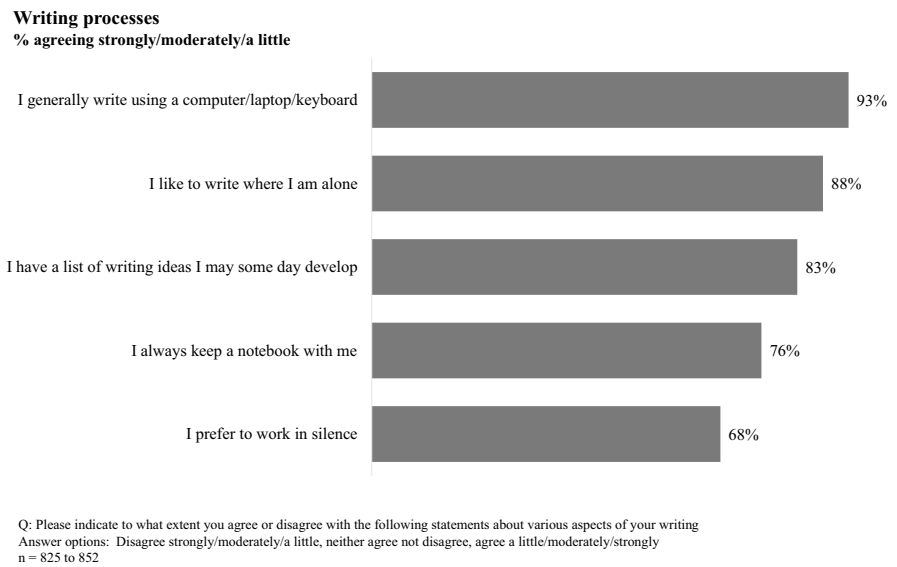


Fig. 7 Selected popular writing processes

effectively on that. If Lidl and Aldi ever stop selling their ring-bound squared paper notebooks, I think I'd have a panic attack!'

'Sometimes particular music helps to get me into the mood/period of what I'm writing. Generally I'm distracted by anything with vocals in English because I'm distracted by the words. I quite like to listen to people singing in Norwegian!'

'If I'm writing an emotionally difficult "scene", I try to make myself physically uncomfortable by sitting in a small chair, or on a rough floor to draw out the emotions' associated with being under duress or in pain.'

'Sometimes I take my little Notepad and go write in a cafe somewhere, usually when I need to be away from the distractions in the house (complete strangers I'm unlikely to talk to don't distract me like loved ones at home).'

'Interestingly, I am still able to write if my eleven-year-old son is sitting at his dad's computer three feet away from me, playing his computer games and hollering at the screen. However, if my husband is sitting there instead, browsing the internet or playing games much more quietly than my son ever does, I can't write at all. I don't know why this is - he just seems like more of a brooding presence, simply by the fact that he's quieter and seems less absorbed in what he's doing. Maybe it's because I know my son has zero interest in what I'm doing when I'm writing, while my husband has this kind of "Whatcha doin'?" vibe going on all the time he's less than three feet away from me.'

8. Writers want to get on with the task and resent interruption

88% of our respondents reported feeling frustrated when interrupted while just 6% said they actively welcomed them. 83% agreed that if you want to create work it is important to stick at it even if you don't feel like it (Fig. 8).

Respondents also referred to the annoyance of interruptions in the open-ended questions:

> 'Interruptions are loathed when I am writing fiction because it disrupts the world I am occupying to write. Non fiction is not a problem because I am working from research or a plan.'

> 'Living with a family who thinks I can just sit down and start writing. No matter how many times I explain to them that I need time, space, and minimal interruptions, they just don't get it. It's hard to keep a train of thought when someone is always asking me something.'

> 'I struggle with interruptions (people having a conversation etc.) so always wear earplugs to block ambient sound.'

Attitudes towards writing
% answering agree strongly/moderately/a little

	I feel frustrated when interrupted	If you are going to create work it is important to	I feel relieved when interrupted	Number of respondents
TOTAL	88	83	6	(840)
Male	84	83	5	(237)
Female	90	84	7	(587)
Under 34	92	80	13	(85)
35-54	91	88	6	(316)
55-64	89	81	3	(223)
65+	82	80	5	(200)
BAME	86	75	6	(77)
White	88	84	6	(733)
Secondary School	77	75	7	(120)
Undergraduate degree	86	81	6	(296)
Postgraduate degree	93	88	5	(404)

Q: Please indicate to what extent you agree ordisagree with the following statements about various aspects of your writing
Answer options: Disagree strongly/moderately/a little, neither agree nor disagree, agree a little/moderately/strongly
"Prefer not to say" excluded from demographic categories above due to small sample sizes but included in totals

Fig. 8 Attitudes towards interruptions by demographic

9. Writers are aware of their own barriers to writing

When asked about the barriers to their involvement in writing 666 respondents replied. Unsurprisingly by far the biggest barrier by was considered to be lack of time and the need to juggle writing with everything else and to deal with 'life in all its abundance'. Common themes included:

- Time: specifically family and caring responsibilities/day-jobs and the impact these both have on time and creativity. ('My day job requires logic, facts and bullet points')
- Writer's block ('Blasted characters refuse to speak to me')
- Self-doubt/lack of focus/shyness/self-sabotage/inner critic ('Man that guy is a loud soul-crushing bastard')
- Money: the need for it, costs of editing/cover art etc. ('Lucky buggers that can make a living out of writing')
- Distractions/lack of self-discipline/The mixed blessings of a routine ('Routine makes, routine breaks')
- Too many ideas ('I am like a grasshopper jumping from one to another')
- Working in a vacuum, lack of peers, loneliness ('As a lone writer you really have to dig deep')
- Lack of feedback when rejected ('Did I just miss by a little or by a mile?')
- Fear of rejection/fear of ridicule or negative comments/lack of confidence ('Why would anyone want to read what I have written?')
- Health, and its impact on time/ability to write ('the pernicious and persistent lack of energy from ME')
- Increased pressure following writing success/Perfectionism ('Since having poems published and winning prizes … I won't now 'release a poem into the world' unless I believe it to be technically perfect and worthy of a judge's/publisher's time. It's a shame I can't allow myself just to write, like I used to.')

Some respondents used the response space to say that they had no barriers

'There are no barriers to harnessing your imagination. One of the few free things left in life we can all enjoy'

'No [barriers]. I belong to two fantastic, supportive writing groups, we meet weekly and we WhatsApp everyday. I'm very lucky.'

Several noted how barriers change over time.

'Barriers come and go based on what is going on in life. I am always trying to balance the many commitments I have in my life– and still keep on track with writing. That is why scheduling is so important to me. Even with the best and most consistent scheduling, things sometimes happen in life that make it impossible for me to focus on the writing projects I had in progress. I call these "life rolls."'

10. Writers therefore have a wide range of strategies with which to motivate themselves

The open-ended question asking how you motivate yourself to keep writing also drew a strong and varied response with 655 comments. Strategies included:

- Just the pure joy of writing ('The pull to make something of a single thought, phrase, sight or experience is overwhelming.')
- Passion for the story and characters ('The story needs telling', 'My characters don't leave me alone' 'Wanting to know how the story ends' 'I have been motivated for the last fifty years by one story I always wanted to write about. Now after retiring it I am writing it' 'I fall in love with my characters')
- Thinking about the reactions of readers
- Writer's circles/asking others to read work/alpha readers/sharing work ('The excitement and terror in anticipation of others reading the work brings considerable energy to it')
- Attending writing courses/retreats
- Wordcounts ('Reaching a wordcount point where it would be immoral to stop')
- To do lists (and 'checking the done box for that particular task')
- Deadlines
- Setting goals/new challenges ('.. thematically, stylistically, technically; by constantly setting new goals and daring myself to attempt things I've never done before)
- Competitions
- Socialising/laughter ('Great therapy to tell a funny story. Afterwards writing seems to flow …')
- Reading - a good book, writing magazines, how-to books, quotes on Instagram ('Reading well crafted, intelligent and imaginative work really does inspire me')
- Writing a blog ('Blogs allow me to show-off my writing which in turn lends impetus when working on a manuscript. It builds an urgent desire to complete the project …") *
- Physical activity e.g. running or singing in a choir
- Self-publishing
- Rewards and bribes (such as coffee, a swim)
- Desire to be published
- Money
- Discipline/iron will/stubborness/tenacity
- Logistics – making sure writing space is comfortable/tidy, good filing system
- Writing at the best time of the day – the 'Magic Hour' of creativity'

Many respondents said that had no need for a strategy to motivate themselves:

'The more I write the more I want to write.'
'Writing makes me feel fulfilled like nothing else, so I need no other motivation'

'I enjoy it so much.. I can be motivated simply by the prospect of that enjoyment'
'I am so happy that I have another creative field that I enjoy so much'
'I don't need to motivate myself. I must be addicted.'

Conclusions

This research captured the honest voice of writers. By providing anonymity the writers shared personal details about their thinking and processes.

Writers across the board, (including the elderly and those who suffer ill health) emerge as very committed to their craft; determination to keep writing seems lifelong. Reading is very important to most writers, bearing in mind clear exceptions for writers suffering from the constraints of dyslexia—but then audio books were another way of accessing content. Most of our responders had had a bookish childhood, reading and writing as children or adolescents underlies the lives of most writers. The encouragement of teachers was important and one may speculate that this was due to the accompanying external validation of an authoritative figure.

When it comes to writerly processes and motivations, there is no one way that suits all. It is however clear that the process of knowing what works for getting a writer started, or keeping going, is very valuable personal information—with which the vast majority of our respondents were closely in tune. A range of barriers to writing emerged but they were less significant than writers' determination to keep going. Similarly they are aware of situations, influences and stimuli that improve their engagement and concentration, including support from others and the opportunity to enter competitions and festivals, which provided a deadline for submission or participation.

The image presented in satirical programmes of the writer hungry for distraction was hard to find. Writers emerge busy; effective managers of their time to make space for their writing (although this may reveal the effect of responder bias, with less effective time managers less inclined to respond).

Long-Term Benefits of the Project

The tangible impact of this research are an improved understanding of the writing process; the extent of the relationship between early influences on those who will later write. This promotes understanding and arguably the ability to advise and encourage on this path those with material to share. In particular, identifying common ground in the early life of the writer would arguably enable those with similar experience to feel empowered to write.

In addition to relevance to writers themselves, it is hoped that the findings from the survey are of interest to a wide range of individuals and organisations including:

- National and local government (the happiness agenda/economics; programmes of civic and personal development to widen contentment and reduce disaffection/disruptive behaviour)
- Health practitioners (especially those dealing with the management of an increasingly elderly population)
- The education system (particularly relevant to early years education)
- Higher education (e.g. civic engagement and mature student programmes within universities that seek to widen participation)
- The creative economy (especially the media, the publishing industry and the burgeoning self-publishing sector)
- The media.

In particular, the project and its outcomes offer the opportunity to build the relevance of arts and culture-related research to policy and practice, through seeking to fill gaps in understanding about the role, value and impact of involvement with writing within contemporary culture, to both individuals and society as a whole.

National and local governments may find the research relates to social inclusion and participation as well as 'the happiness agenda'. It relates directly to programmes of civic and personal development and initiatives to widen contentment, reduce disaffection and disruptive behaviour and ensure that values of civic commitment and mutual support within communities are passed on. These issues, and how to promote the active use of time amongst those without employment or other regular scheduled activity, are currently being extensively discussed in order to secure ongoing best value for agreed public spending at a time of budgetary stringency.

Health and wellbeing practitioners, especially those dealing with the management of an increasingly elderly population and those working with patients in institutions offering long-term and terminal care, such as mental health support, care establishments, the criminal justice system and hospices. Since a strong outcome from previous research into self-publishing was the personal enrichment experienced by those involved, further encouragement towards participation in writing within the community could be advantageous.

The research has relevance to early years' education where there is currently discussion about how to encourage children from primary years onwards to think about societal values and the contribution they make. For example, Professor Angie Hobbs has been prominent in calling for [34] for Philosophy to be added to the primary school curriculum to counter extremist thinking. Consideration of how writers were shaped in their early years can usefully add to this debate, particularly within programmes of teacher training and development. Within higher education too, the findings have a relevance to universities' development of civic engagement and mature student programmes that seek to widen participation and promote life-long learning.

Further papers by the authors of this chapter will explore a variety of issues in more detail such as the personality type of author and in particular the satisfactions associated with writing. Finally, as a treasure trove of data for further mining, the research has the potential to be built on by others, as part of wider investigations into an area of importance to cultural policy; by opening up and discussing the mysteries

of what makes a writer, and disseminating the findings through both specialist and general media.

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