

Students' attitudes, interests and liking for a subject have a strong bearing on their achievement. The writing survey sought information from students about their curriculum preferences and perceptions of their achievement, using the same questions for both year 4 and year 8 students. It was administered to the students in a session that included both team and independent tasks (four students working together or individually on tasks, supported by a teacher). When it was introduced, all students were invited to ask for help with reading or writing.

The survey included five items which asked students to select options from a list, two items which invited students to write comments, and fifteen items which asked students to record a rating response by circling their choice.



Students were asked what writing activities they liked most at school, choosing up to three responses from a list of six. The percentages of students choosing each option are summarized below, with comparative figures from 1998 in parentheses.

PREFERRED WRITING AT SCHOOL	% responses	
	2002 ('98) year 4	2002 ('98) year 8
writing stories	60 (72)	60 (70)
writing letters	46 (51)	31 (41)
writing poems	52 (49)	42 (46)
keeping a diary	33 (42)	25 (25)
writing in science, social studies and other subjects	33 (27)	40 (29)
other (write what it is)	16 (14)	16 (14)

Writing stories was clearly the most popular writing activity at both levels, in 1998 and 2002. In 2002, writing letters, writing poems, and keeping a diary were less popular among year 8 students than among year 4 students. Between 1998 and 2002, the popularity of story writing dropped somewhat for students at both

levels, along with keeping a diary for year 4 students and letter writing for year 8 students. Writing in other school subjects became more popular at both levels, but especially year 8.

Students were then asked what writing activities they liked to do in their own time, choosing their favourite activity from a list of six options. Writing stories was most popular at both year levels, but declined in popularity between 1998 and 2002, especially for year 8 students.

PREFERRED WRITING IN OWN TIME	% responses	
	2002 ('98) year 4	2002 ('98) year 8
writing stories	33 (36)	27 (37)
writing poems	14 (16)	15 (16)
writing letters	16 (12)	14 (14)
keeping a diary	14 (15)	17 (12)
writing about hobbies or sports	10 (10)	15 (8)
writing about science, social studies and other subjects	3 (5)	3 (3)

Asked what "people need to do to be good writers", students could choose up to three things from a list of ten. There was considerable stability between 1998 and 2002. Compared to year 4 students, year 8 students placed more emphasis on liking writing and less emphasis on writing neatly and being willing to experiment.

THINGS NEEDED BY GOOD WRITERS	% responses	
	2002 ('98) year 4	2002 ('98) year 8
use their imagination	51 (56)	66 (68)
be willing to try things out	40 (36)	29 (27)
learn how to use punctuation	26 (33)	31 (35)
go back and check their work	24 (25)	20 (20)
write neatly	24 (25)	8 (10)
know how to spell words	20 (23)	15 (12)
like writing	19 (17)	35 (38)
read a lot	19 (22)	12 (13)
write lots	14 (21)	12 (15)
talk about their work with others	15 (13)	8 (8)

Students were asked to write down what they needed to do to “get better in writing”. For each student, up to three distinct responses were coded and tallied under eight headings. Between 1998 and 2002, the emphasis on neatness increased, especially among year 4 students. Differences between year 4 and year 8 students were slight, except for somewhat greater emphasis on punctuation by the year 8 students.

NEED TO DO TO GET BETTER	% responses	
	2002 ('98) year 4	2002 ('98) year 8
spelling	17 (24)	27 (27)
punctuation	12 (11)	20 (21)
editing/checking	9 (6)	7 (6)
neatness	29 (17)	21 (17)
write more often	14 (19)	15 (18)
enjoyment	2 (0)	3 (1)
understanding mechanics/grammar	8 (2)	8 (4)
increase ideas/resources	18 (16)	20 (20)

In a more narrowly focused question, students were asked to indicate what they usually did when they couldn't spell a word they needed for writing. They could choose up to two things from a list of eight. The most popular strategy was to use a dictionary. Year 4 students were more inclined than year 8 students to try sounding out the word. Between 1998 and 2002, the option of asking the teacher declined noticeably in popularity at both year levels.

SPELLING STRATEGY	% responses	
	2002 ('98) year 4	2002 ('98) year 8
use a dictionary	56 (62)	54 (60)
sound out the word	33 (33)	22 (18)
ask the teacher	25 (34)	18 (30)
ask a friend	16 (19)	23 (27)
try, then check out later	14 (16)	15 (17)
guess	12 (15)	16 (16)
use another word	6 (4)	9 (9)
use computer spell checker [2002 only]	2 (-)	5 (-)

In the last question of this type, students were asked what they wrote on a computer. They could choose as many options as they liked from a list of seven. The percentages of students choosing each option in 2002 are shown below



[this question was not asked in 1998]. Stories, email and letters were most popular, with stories more prominent at year 4 level and emails much more prominent among year 8 students. Perhaps predictably, writing in other school subjects was also more prominent for year 8 students.





WRITING ACTIVITY ON COMPUTER	% responses	
	y4	y8
stories	59	46
emails	48	69
letters	41	43
poems	32	25
writing about hobbies or sports	16	18
a diary	16	10
writing in science, social studies, and other subjects	11	21



Responses to the fifteen rating items are presented in separate tables for Year 4 and year 8 students. There were no large changes between 1998 and 2002, although in 2002 the year 4 students seemed a little less enthusiastic about writing at school than they were four years earlier. The interpretation of responses to questions 2, 3 and 4 is complicated by the accidental omission of the “Don’t Know” category in 2002, but as might be expected it appears that those who would have chosen “Don’t Know” have opted for one of the middle responses on the rating scale (there is very little change between 1998 and 2002 at the top and bottom of each of the scales).

Only about 10 percent of students at both levels reported using a computer for writing at school “heaps”, but at home this rose to 26 percent of year 4 students and 33 percent of year 8 students.

Compared to year 4 students, fewer year 8 students were highly positive about doing writing at school, about how good they believed themselves to be at writing, and about how they felt their teachers and parents viewed their writing abilities. Year 8 students also reported fewer opportunities in school to write “things like stories, poems or letters,” and lower

YEAR 4 WRITING SURVEY RESPONSES 2002 (1998)					
	 <i>heaps</i>	 <i>quite a lot</i>	 <i>a little</i>	 <i>not at all</i>	
1. How much do you like writing at school?	36 (45)	32 (27)	25 (20)	7 (8)	
2. How good do you think you are at writing?	38 (39)	46 (37)	12 (11)	4 (4)	NA (9)
3. How good does your teacher think you are at writing?	40 (40)	48 (29)	10 (6)	2 (3)	NA (22)
4. How good does your Mum or Dad think you are at writing?	72 (69)	20 (16)	6 (4)	2 (2)	NA (9)
5. How much do you like writing in your own time (not at school)?	29 (34)	27 (26)	25 (23)	19 (17)	
6. How good do you think you are at spelling?	31 (30)	48 (48)	16 (16)	5 (6)	
7. How often do you write things like stories, poems or letters at school?	41 (44)	24 (23)	20 (16)	15 (17)	
8. How often do you read to others what you write?	17 (18)	17 (20)	58 (54)	8 (8)	
Who else reads what you write?					
9. teacher	45 (52)	29 (26)	23 (20)	3 (2)	
10. parent	25 (28)	23 (27)	41 (37)	11 (8)	
11. brother/sister	8 (11)	9 (8)	24 (29)	59 (52)	
12. friend	10 (14)	19 (21)	47 (44)	24 (21)	
13. other	19 (19)	16 (16)	36 (34)	29 (31)	
14. How often do you write using a computer at school?	12	16	56	16	
15. How often do you write using a computer at home?	26	20	27	27	

enthusiasm for writing in their own time. These differences may, at least in part, reflect the well-known tendency of students to get more jaded about schoolwork as they get older. Such patterns have been found repeatedly in our other national monitoring surveys. Another influential factor may be that the emphasis on various types of writing tasks shifts between year 4 and year 8, with more creative opportunities at year 4 and substantial volumes of more formal writing required by year 8.



YEAR 8 WRITING SURVEY RESPONSES 2002 (1998)				
	😊 <i>heaps</i>	😐 <i>quite a lot</i>	😞 <i>a little</i>	😡 <i>not at all</i>
1. How much do you like writing at school?	13 (15)	40 (45)	40 (36)	7 (4)
	😊	😐	😞	😡 <i>don't know</i>
2. How good do you think you are at writing?	14 (13)	56 (51)	25 (21)	5 (4)
3. How good does your teacher think you are at writing?	19 (14)	58 (33)	20 (14)	3 (5)
4. How good does your Mum or Dad think you are at writing?	36 (29)	46 (30)	16 (11)	2 (5)
	😊	😐	😞	😡
5. How much do you like writing in your own time (not at school)?	16 (14)	22 (26)	36 (35)	26 (25)
6. How good do you think you are at spelling?	25 (18)	43 (43)	22 (29)	10 (10)
	<i>most days</i>	<i>2-3 times a week</i>	<i>about once a week</i>	<i>hardly ever</i>
7. How often do you write things like stories, poems or letters at school?	21 (19)	26 (31)	35 (30)	18 (20)
	<i>heaps</i>	<i>quite a lot</i>	<i>sometimes</i>	<i>never</i>
8. How often do you read to others what you write?	7 (8)	16 (19)	67 (62)	10 (11)
Who else reads what you write?				
9. teacher	34 (33)	39 (45)	24 (20)	3 (2)
10. parent	13 (13)	30 (25)	47 (53)	10 (9)
11. brother/sister	5 (5)	7 (6)	32 (34)	56 (55)
12. friend	13 (13)	23 (27)	52 (47)	12 (13)
13. other	9 (14)	13 (15)	43 (37)	35 (35)
14. How often do you write using a computer at school?	11	24	56	9
15. How often do you write using a computer at home?	33	28	24	15