What do children think it means to be a good writer?

Understanding children's perceptions of writing competence

Based on the following research: Young, R., Ramdarshan Bold, M., Clark, C., & McGeown, S. (2026). Children's perspectives on writing competency: academic, personal and social influences. Educational Research, 1-16. [**LINK**]

Children are rarely asked what they think about writing. Yet when we do ask them, they have a great deal to tell us and it can transform how we teach. This article shares findings from a recent study of 24 primary children aged 9–11 and what their voices reveal about their writing motivation at school.

Why this matters right now

We are living through a moment of real urgency in writing education. Research from the National Literacy Trust (2025) paints a striking picture of a generation of children becoming increasingly disconnected from one of the most powerful tools they have for learning, making meaning, telling stories and understanding themselves.

1 in 4 children enjoy writing in their free time (lowest in 15 years)	**33.5%** enjoy writing in school	**1 in 10** write something daily for pleasure

We know that motivation and competency are deeply entwined. When children feel competent as writers, when they genuinely believe they can write well, they write more, try harder and take more creative risks. When that sense of competency is fragile or absent, writing becomes something to endure rather than something to love.

So what shapes how children perceive themselves as writers? And what can we, as teachers, do about it? Our recent study set out to ask the people best placed to answer these questions: children themselves.

Listening to children: The research

Twenty-four children aged 9–11 from three primary schools in England were interviewed individually and in depth. The study included children from a range of backgrounds and socioeconomic circumstances. They had differing levels of writing motivation and writing proficiency.

From all of these conversations, three interconnected themes emerged. There were three ways in which children understood and experienced writing competency. All three mattered and all three deserve our attention.

The theory behind the research: Self-determination theory

Self-Determination Theory suggests that all human beings have three core motivational needs that, when met, unlock genuine, lasting motivation. In writing, these are:

Autonomy	Competency	Relatedness
The need to feel ownership and control over one's writing	The need to feel effective, skilled and successful as a writer	The need to feel connected - to one's writing, readers and fellow writers.

The three criteria for 'good writing' according to children

Criteria	What children described	Key influences
Academic Competency	Technical accuracy, correct punctuation, polished editing, meeting teacher expectations, outperforming peers.	Teacher feedback on finished work, curriculum expectations, knowledge of the topic, writing success criteria.
Personal Competency	Enjoyment, creative immersion, personal satisfaction, self-expression, recognising own growth, pride and perseverance.	Topic interest and familiarity, writing for personal meaning, self-appraisal, effort and persistence over time.
Social Competency	Recognition from peers, family or audiences; collaborative idea generation; winning competitions; sharing writing; publishing or performing.	Peer response, collaborative writing, comparisons with published authors, tone and quality of feedback received.

Criteria 1: Academic competency

"The teachers decide what good writing is"

For most children, the classroom sent a clear and consistent message: good writing is accurate writing. The absence of errors, neat presentation, correct punctuation and edited manuscripts were understood as the primary markers of *successful* writing. Many children saw their teachers (and the government) as the ultimate authorities on what makes writing 'good'.

> **"I think whatever my teacher says is right."**

Crucially, not one of the children interviewed mentioned receiving feedback on the quality of their ideas, their planning, their compositional choices or their revisions. Feedback centred on the finished product rather than throughout the writing process. For children already feeling uncertain about their writing, this created a painful loop: write -> make mistakes -> receive correction -> feel worse.

> **"There are so many high expectations that I forget things like capital letters."**

Yet there were also moments of real joy. When children were writing about topics they knew and loved (drawing on their own funds-of-knowledge) everything seemed to change. The academic dimension of competency was not the enemy. Children genuinely wanted to improve and to feel proud of producing something that was accomplished.

> **"If it's something that I like, and I have lots of ideas, and things that can help me, then I really like it and enjoy it"**

Criteria 2: Personal competency

"If you think the writing is good... then it's a good piece"

Running quietly through many of the interviews was the occasional experience of being genuinely absorbed in writing, of caring about it, of feeling it was theirs. Some children described a state of immersion where their ideas were flowing, the words were coming easily, and writing felt less like a task and more like a pastime.

Others spoke about personal satisfaction and self-appraisal being the truest measure of competency. These children had developed an 'inner compass' as writers. They had a secure enough sense of themselves as writers to evaluate their own compositions and to took pride in their own progress.

> **"Yourself. I think that no matter what anyone says it's what you can do and what you can do only."**

Enjoyment was especially powerful here. When children were engaged with a writing topic, when it genuinely interesting them, when they cared about it doing well, they were more likely to judge their writing as good and invest effort in making it even better. Writing also offered some children a profound sense for self-expression.

> **"I love writing... because I got to really express my emotions."**

Several children spoke about noticing their own growth over time. This mastery-over-time perspective (writing being understood not as a series of pass-or-fail performances, but as a long, living practice of developing and becoming) was certainly one of most hopeful things the research found.

> **"If I didn't do all of that writing then I wouldn't really know how to write."**

Criteria 3: Social competency

"When other people like what I write — it makes me happy"

Children are social people and their writing lives should be too. Peer response, family interest, wider audiences' reactions and collaborative writing all shape how children feel about themselves as writers. Positive social experiences could be transformative.

> **"He was like: 'bro, yours is like brilliant!'... that just made me smile."**

Collaborative writing also emerged as a powerful source of confidence, especially for children who found independent idea generation difficult. Writing together (the joint generation of ideas, the shared excitement of crafting something together) gave some children a way into writing that writing alone simply didn't provide.

But the social dimension had its difficult side too. Several children described the deflating experience of comparing their writing to commercial adult authors. This is a reminder that how we invite children to read as writers (noticing craft and finding inspiration rather than inadequacy) can make an enormous difference. And feedback, delivered harshly, left real marks.

> **"I read all these good books and when I read mine — it's not even a quarter as good as that."**

What we can do: practical classroom reflections

This research was pretty clear that children's sense of writing competency is not one thing. It is three interwoven things: academic, personal, and social. They each feed and influence one another. Classrooms need to nurture all three of dimensions, simultaneously and holistically. Here are some starting points:

Academic Competency	Personal Competency	Social Competency
• Involve children in creating success criteria for class writing projects. • Give sympathetic and useful feedback throughout the writing process (on ideas, plans and drafts) not only on the finished manuscript. • Set daily process and product goals. • Broaden what counts as competent writing beyond *just* accuracy and proofreading.	• Support children to write about what they know and love - their interests, passions and funds-of-knowledge. • Frame writing as a life-long pursuit, not just a series of performances. Use children's writing portfolios to celebrate growth over time. • Make space for writing that matters personally - not everything needs to be assessed. • Attribute success to effort and strategy, not so-called natural 'ability'.	• Use *Author's Chair* - invite children to share their developing compositions with the group and receive genuine, warm peer responses. • Create opportunities for collaborative writing, not just as a scaffold but as a practice in its own right. • Teach children to read as writers: noticing craft and finding inspiration. • Make feedback feel like a gift from one writer to another. Teach children to give specific, kind, genuine responses to each other's writing too. • Make sure children's writing is published beyond the classroom walls and the school gates. Make sure it enters to local community and beyond.

Questions for reflection and discussion

Use these questions individually, with colleagues, or in a staff meeting to deepen your thinking about writing competency in your school.

1. What messages does your classroom currently send about what makes a 'good writer'? Are these messages primarily academic, or do they also encompass personal and social dimensions?

2. When (and from whom) do children in your class receive feedback on their writing? Also, is it mainly on finished their products, or throughout the writing process?

3. How often do you support children in your class to write about topics they genuinely know and care about?

4. What opportunities exist in your classroom for children to share their writing with real audiences and receive genuine social responses from a whole variety of readers?

5. Which children in your class are most at risk of developing a deficit-based views of themselves as writers? What small changes could you make to shift this?

A final word

The children in this study were not passive recipients of writing instruction. They were thoughtful. They were people with strong views about what made them feel competent and what made them feel like giving up. They noticed everything: whose writing got put on the 'wow wall', whether their ideas were ever asked for, and whether anyone actually wanted to read what they wrote. They weren't asking for easier writing tasks or less rigorous teaching. They were asking to feel capable, connected and seen as genuine apprentice writers. They were asking us to notice not just whether their writing was correct but if it *moved* you - whether that be intellectually, emotionally or creatively. That is something we should be able to offer all children.

About this research

This article is based on: Young, R., Ramdarshan Bold, M., Clark, C., & McGeown, S. (2026). Children's perspectives on writing competency: academic, personal and social influences. Educational Research, 1-16. [**LINK**]

The study involved 24 children (aged 9–11) from three primary schools in England, interviewed individually about their experiences of competence and motivation in school writing.

For further reading, visit: **blogs.ed.ac.uk/literacylab/**

With thanks to the Economic and Social Research Council (managed by SGSSS) and National Literacy Trust for funding this research. Grant number: ES/P000681/1