

Trends in children and young people's reading in print and digital formats

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A large body of research shows that print reading matters. For example, children and young people who read print books in their free time tend to achieve higher scores in national and international assessments than those who read only digital texts (OECD, 2022). Over the past two decades, however, the ways in which many of us read have changed, shaped by the widespread use of connected devices in everyday life. Our research shows that many children and young people read regularly in digital formats, including both the keenest readers and those with the lowest levels of reading enjoyment, as well as those with limited access to printed materials (Clark & Picton, 2019).

A prominent concern in research relating to reading digitally is its impact on comprehension (Delgado et al., 2018; Støle et al., 2020). Some studies point to a ‘screen inferiority’ effect (see, e.g., Carr, 2011; Hakemulder & Mangen 2024; Jensen et al., 2024), while others find little or no difference in reading comprehension between print and digital reading (see, e.g., Alisaari et al., 2018; Li & Yan, 2024). Increasingly, evidence suggests that reading comprehension on screen is affected by factors such as age, print-reading experience, the device being used and the text being read (see, e.g., Clinton, 2019; Salmerón, 2024).

For example, while digital reading in leisure time is linked to lower comprehension among primary and middle school pupils, this relationship turns positive by the time young people reach secondary school and college age (Altamura et al., 2023). Relatedly, print comprehension skills are a strong predictor of digital comprehension, with highly skilled readers showing little or no evidence of a ‘screen inferiority’ effect when reading digitally (Grammatikopoulou et al., 2025; Salmeron, 2021; Stiegler-Balfour, 2023). This indicates that print-reading abilities and experiences provide an important foundation for reading comprehension across formats.

The debate over screen time is another significant topic in the digital landscape, with device bans in educational settings and age limits for social media attracting widespread attention. However, research shows that using digital devices for purposeful reading, such as reading ebooks, is linked to positive outcomes (see, e.g., Sanders et al., 2019) and, some argue, should not be conflated with issues in the wider discourse (Düwell, 2024). In addition, while the cognitive aspects of digital reading are much discussed (Hare et al., 2024), less is known about how children and young people’s reading choices across print and digital formats fit into their everyday lives.

Understanding these everyday reading experiences is essential if we are to support reading development in ways that reflect how literacy is currently enacted and experienced. To support reading in today’s world, we need a clearer picture of how

children and young people read now, whether in or out of school and across print and digital spaces ([Loh, 2024](#)). Regardless of reading format, readers must judge the quality of information, navigate different types of text, and decide what can be trusted, and these skills are increasingly important in relation to digital and AI literacy (see, e.g., [Schleicher, as cited in Mesure, 2025](#)).

What this report looks at

We have been gathering insights from children and young people about their access to technology, and their experiences of reading using technology, since our first survey of reading attitudes and behaviours in 2005 ([Clark & Foster, 2005](#)). Over this time, our research has explored digital reading from a range of perspectives.

In this report, reading is defined as engagement with written text, regardless of the format or purpose. This includes reading undertaken for enjoyment, learning, information or communication, and reflects how children and young people encounter text across print and digital environments.

Until now, however, we have not brought our findings together in a single report. This report does so by looking at patterns over the past two decades, with a particular focus on trends since 2017, which is when we began asking children and young people to report separately on their print and digital reading in their free time. Where relevant, we also draw on earlier data collected since 2005.

By bringing this evidence together, the report aims to build a clearer picture of how UK children and young people's reading engagement in print and digital formats has changed over time. As the National Year of Reading takes place in 2026, it also seeks to ensure that children and young people's digital reading practices are neither undervalued nor overlooked.

How this research was carried out

The Annual Literacy Survey, conducted each year since 2010, collects information about children and young people's reading, writing and listening, alongside their home learning environment and access to resources. Questions relating to technology and digital reading have been included in the survey since 2005.

Prior to 2017/18, how we asked about reading using technology varied. In some survey waves, children and young people were asked about access to digital devices such as computers, tablets, mobile phones and e-readers, alongside access to books, desks and quiet spaces. Questions about reading outside school also included some digital materials, such as text messages, websites and emails.

From 2017/18 onwards, the survey adopted a more consistent approach to capturing reading by format. Children and young people were asked whether they read a range of materials outside school, including fiction, non-fiction, comics and graphic novels, news, magazines, poetry and song lyrics, either in print or on a screen, or whether they didn't read them at all. Where materials could be read equally in print or digitally, this is referred to in the report as **reading digitally**.

The survey also asked separately about materials that are typically accessed only on screen, such as text messages, websites, emails, blogs and online forums. This is referred to as **digital reading**. These questions have been asked in the same way since 2017/18, enabling consistent analysis of reading engagement by format from this point.

Key findings

Reading in print and digital formats in 2025

Reading in print continues to dominate in 2025, but reading digitally is an important part of everyday life for many children and young people

- More children and young people reported reading fiction, non-fiction, comics, magazines and poetry in print than on screen in their free time. For example, 1 in 2 (49.3%) 8- to 18-year-olds reported reading fiction in print at least once a month, while more than 1 in 5 (22.2%) also read fiction on screen.
- Song lyrics, fan fiction and news were exceptions. News, in particular, showed a strong digital skew, with almost three times as many children and young people reading it online than in print (28.2% vs 10.3%).

Digital-only reading materials, such as personal or direct messages, websites and social media content, are part of everyday reading habits

- In 2025, the most-read digital content was personal or direct messages, read by 7 in 10 (69.3%) in their free time. Around 3 in 5 read in-game messages (61.6%) and social media content (61.2%), while just over half read content on websites (51.3%).

Who reads in print and on screen?

Reading habits in 2025 varied by gender, age and free-school-meal (FSM) status. Some gaps narrowed, and in some cases reversed, when reading digitally

- More girls than boys reported reading most materials regardless of format, but the gender gap was smaller in relation to reading digitally. For example, the gender gap in reading fiction fell from 12.0 percentage points in print (55.4% of girls vs 43.4% of boys) to 7.0 points on screen (25.6% vs 18.6% respectively). Comics or graphic novels and news were the only materials more commonly read by boys in both formats.
- Reading digitally in free time increased steadily with age. While around 1 in 5 (20.9%) children aged 8 to 11 read fiction on screen, this rose to almost 3 in 10 (29.4%) among those aged 16 to 18.
- Differences by FSM status were more modest, but patterns shifted when comparing print and digital formats. For example, fewer children and young people receiving FSMs read fiction in print (36.2% FSM vs 51.4% non-FSM), but slightly more read fiction on screen (24.3% FSM vs 21.7% non-FSM), narrowing the print gap. More of those receiving FSMs also said they read fiction exclusively on screen than their peers who didn't receive FSMs (26.8% vs 19.3%).

Patterns in digital-only reading also varied by gender and age

- More girls than boys read personal or direct messages (73.3% vs 65.9%) and social media content (65.4% vs 57.8%), while slightly more boys read in-game messages (63.3% vs 60.5%).
- Differences by age were more pronounced. While just under half (47.3%) of 8- to 11-year-olds read social media content, this rose to nearly two thirds (63.0%) of 11- to 14-year-olds. Reading personal or direct messages increased from 58.0% to 71.5% across the same age groups.

Reading digitally was more prevalent among children and young people with lower reading enjoyment

Digital formats were more popular than print among children and young people with the lowest levels of reading enjoyment. More of those with higher reading enjoyment reported reading either on paper, or across both print and digital formats, while those with lower enjoyment levels were more likely to say they read only in digital formats.

- Nearly twice as many 8- to 18-year-olds who enjoyed reading said they read fiction in print compared with those who did not enjoy reading (73.7% vs 37.5%, a 36.2-percentage-point gap). The gap was much smaller in relation

to digital reading though: 29.5% of keen readers read fiction on screen compared with 18.7% of those with lower reading enjoyment (a gap of 10.8 percentage points). Similar patterns were seen in relation to non-fiction, comics, magazines and news.

- Children and young people who enjoyed reading were also more likely to read across print and digital formats. For example, 19.4% of keen readers read fiction both in print and on screen, compared with 10.7% of those with low reading enjoyment.
- By contrast, children and young people with low reading enjoyment were more likely to read materials only on screen. Nearly twice as many read fiction exclusively on screen compared with those who enjoyed reading more (26.2% vs 14.7%).

Qualitative insights into children and young people's reading lives in 2025

Children and young people's comments highlighted the breadth of their reading lives and the ways in which print, digital and audio formats integrated into their everyday activities.

- Many described reading across multiple formats depending on their interests or circumstances. For example, one noted, *"I enjoy reading multiple books at a time, I listen to audibles, read ebooks and physical books, and also read The Week Junior magazine", while another shared, "I read comics on my iPad or phone on my way to school or in my free time - it helps me practise English."*
- Others mentioned specific motivations for digital reading, such as: *"I normally read news or articles about something on my phone and I like the new knowledge", "I use BookTok a lot and get a lot of recommendations and enjoy seeing what other people think of books I did or didn't enjoy."*
- For some, digital reading formats were a preference: *"I like reading online or listening to audio books but not reading a book"* or they offered access to materials they couldn't access in print: *"My dad doesn't buy me books, so I don't get the opportunity - or I read online."* For others, however, print reading offered a valued counterbalance to screen use: *"It calms me down and I enjoy it because I get headaches from looking at a screen too much, so a book is a nice change."*

What has changed over time?

Reading in print has declined, but reading digitally is more stable

Since 2017, the percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 reading most materials at least monthly has fallen across both formats. However, while the decline in print reading has been substantial, levels of reading digitally have remained resilient.

- For example, the percentage of children and young people reading fiction in print fell from 59.5% in 2017 to 49.3% in 2025, a decrease of 10.2 percentage points. Over the same period, the percentage reading fiction digitally increased slightly from 19.9% to 22.2%.

Digital reading habits are changing

While levels of reading materials such as fiction, comics and news digitally have remained relatively stable, the percentage of children and young people reporting reading exclusively digital materials such as texts and websites has declined sharply since 2023.

- For example, the percentage of 8- to 18-year-olds reading personal or direct messages decreased from 91.0% in 2023 to 69.3% in 2025. Reading websites dropped from 78.3% to 51.4%, and social media content from 81.6% to 61.2%.
- These shifts may reflect wider changes in the online environment, including the growth of AI (and subsequent appearance of AI summaries in search results), and an increased use of visual media, especially Video Sharing Platforms (VSPs) such as TikTok and YouTube, for both leisure and learning.

Taken together, findings from our surveys show that reading digitally plays a significant role in children and young people's everyday literacy practices. More engaged readers were most likely to read across both print and screen formats, suggesting that digital reading often complements print formats for this group. For less-engaged readers, digital formats appeared to offer greater appeal and, in some cases, an exclusive route into reading. Digital formats also supported accessibility and inclusivity, particularly for boys and children and young people from lower-income backgrounds.

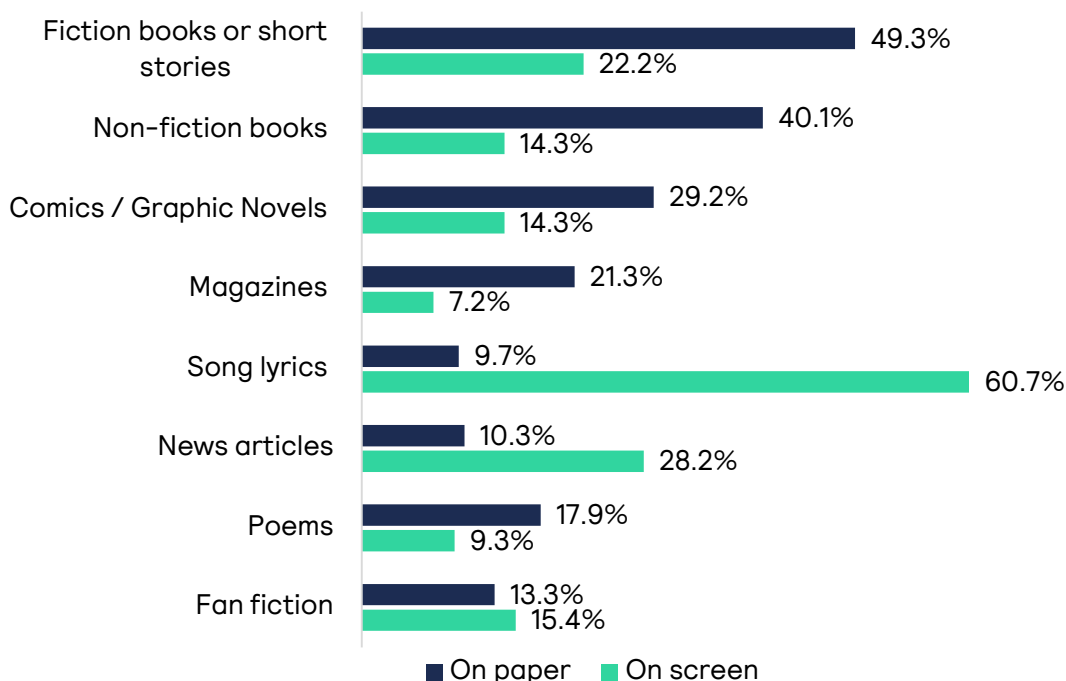
Reading engagement is shaped by a combination of affective, behavioural, cognitive and environmental factors. While much research has focused on the cognitive aspects of reading on screen, evidence from our surveys highlights the importance of recognising how print and digital reading interact in the everyday lives of children and young people. Reflecting this reality is essential for supporting reading in ways that align with how literacy is practised today.

Reading digitally in 2025

In 2025, print remained the dominant format – and fiction the dominant material – for leisure reading among children and young people aged 8 to 18, with 1 in 2 reading fiction or short stories in print at least monthly in their free time (see Figure 1). Other materials were also read widely in print, with 2 in 5 reading non-fiction, 3 in 10 comics or graphic novels, 1 in 5 magazines, and more than 1 in 6 reading poems on paper regularly.

While on-screen reading was less common overall, more than 1 in 5 children and young people reported reading fiction regularly on screen in 2025, and 1 in 7 read non-fiction and comics or graphic novels. Along with song lyrics, news was read by many more children and young people digitally than in print, perhaps as digital formats offer quicker ways to access reading materials that benefit from being regularly updated, while their typical format and length may also be more suited to screen reading. Fan fiction was read almost equally across print and screen formats.

Figure 1: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 reading various materials at least once a month in their free time by format in 2025



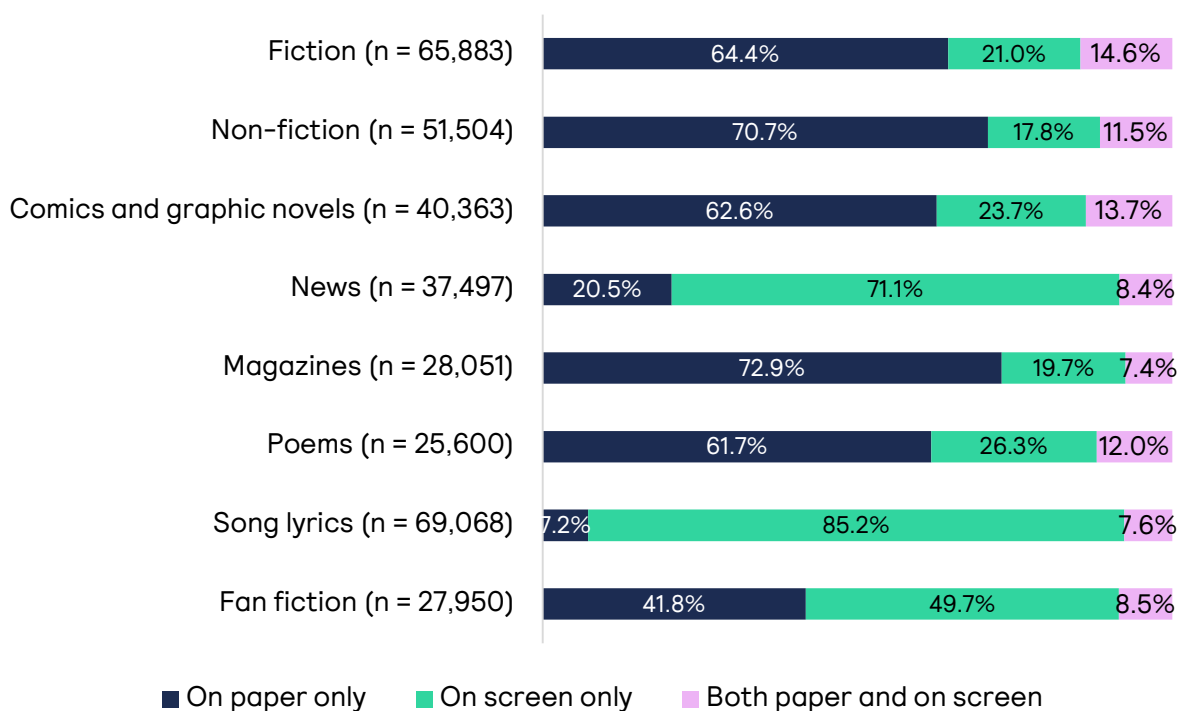
While the previous figure outlined children and young people’s general engagement with print and digital formats, Figure 2 shows how those patterns differ across the specific materials they read. It presents the percentage of children and young

people who access each material solely on paper, solely on screen, or through a mix of both.

For many materials, the largest share of readers is still found in the print-only group, particularly for fiction, non-fiction, comics, magazines and poems. The on-screen-only group, however, is substantial for certain materials, particularly news, song lyrics and fan fiction, where it forms the largest share of readers. The group engaging through a mix of print and digital remains the smallest across all categories, though its size varies by material. It is most evident for fiction, comics and poems, where a noticeable percentage use both formats, and least common for magazines, news and song lyrics.

These differences highlight that blended-format reading is present but limited across the materials children and young people engage with, mirroring findings from 2024 that most preferred reading on paper, with a minority preferring to read across both print and digital formats.

Figure 2: Materials read either on paper, on screen or on both formats in their free time by children and young people aged 8 to 18 in 2025

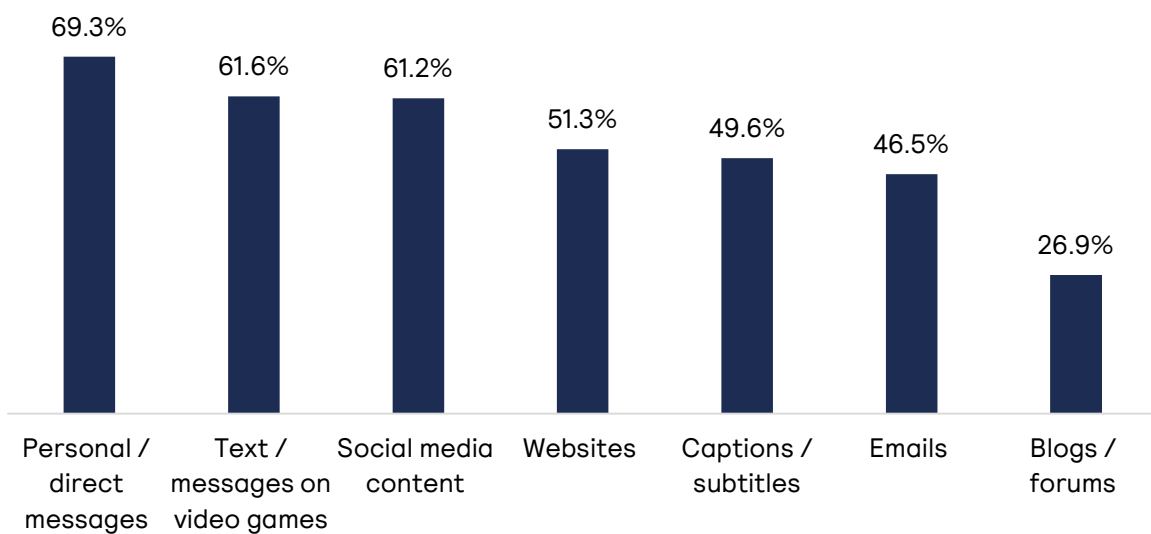


Digital-only reading materials

In addition to reading materials available in both print and digital formats, children and young people aged 8 to 18 engage with a range of reading that exists only on screen, including messages, social media content and websites.

As shown in Figure 7, in 2025, digital-only reading was a routine part of most children and young people’s lives. 7 in 10 read personal or direct messages in their free time, and more than 3 in 5 read in-game messages or social media posts. Around half read websites, captions or emails, and over a quarter read blogs or forums.

Figure 3: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 reading digital-only materials in their free time in 2025



Who read in print or digitally in 2025?

Across gender, age, FSM background and reading enjoyment, a consistent pattern emerges. Print remains the dominant format for most materials, particularly fiction. However, reading digitally narrows gaps between groups and is more prevalent among children and young people with lower reading enjoyment and among those by FSM background, while more of those who are most engaged with reading tend to read across both print and digital formats.

Reading in print and digitally by gender

In 2025, girls reported reading a wider range of most materials in print and on screens compared with boys, including fiction, poems, magazines and song lyrics (see Table 1). However, the gender gap in fiction reading was narrower in relation to digital reading than in print (7.0 percentage points vs 12.0 percentage points). Comics and graphic novels were the only materials read by more boys on paper and on screens, while there was little gender difference in relation to non-fiction and news.

Table 1: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 reading various formats (on paper or on screen) in their free time in 2025 by gender

	On paper		On screen	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Fiction or short stories	43.4%	55.4%	18.6%	25.6%
Non-fiction	39.4%	41.0%	14.0%	14.4%
Comics / graphic novels	32.0%	25.7%	15.6%	12.1%
Magazines	19.0%	23.8%	6.6%	7.7%
Song lyrics	7.4%	11.7%	49.7%	71.8%
News articles	10.7%	9.6%	28.6%	28.0%
Poems	13.2%	22.4%	6.2%	12.0%
Fan fiction	13.5%	13.0%	12.1%	17.6%

Reading in print and digitally by age group

As shown in Table 2, more of those aged 8 to 11 reported reading most materials in print format, with screen-based reading increasing with age. For example, while 1 in 5 children aged 8 to 11 read fiction on screen, this increased to 3 in 10 young people aged 16 to 18. This trend was even more pronounced for song lyrics and news. These trends suggest that print reading, especially fiction, is most prevalent in younger children, and that young people gravitate toward digital formats and diverse media-linked content with age.

Table 2: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 reading various formats (on paper or on screen) in their free time in 2025 by age group

	On paper				On screen			
	8-11	11-14	14-16	16-18	8-11	11-14	14-16	16-18
Fiction or short stories	56.4%	49.8%	40.5%	47.9%	20.9%	21.5%	23.5%	29.4%
Non-fiction	50.7%	39.7%	31.0%	41.1%	16.5%	13.3%	13.8%	20.2%
Comics / graphic novels	41.3%	30.5%	17.8%	14.3%	14.4%	13.4%	15.4%	20.8%
Magazines	26.8%	22.0%	15.9%	15.0%	7.4%	6.5%	8.4%	10.9%
Song lyrics	16.1%	9.4%	6.6%	4.9%	49.8%	61.1%	65.9%	69.7%
News articles	12.4%	9.9%	8.9%	12.1%	14.1%	25.5%	39.0%	63.3%
Poems	29.5%	15.5%	17.6%	14.8%	13.4%	8.3%	8.5%	12.1%
Fan fiction	24.9%	13.3%	5.7%	3.7%	14.7%	15.3%	16.0%	16.8%

As a note, our surveys show that digital reading is also a familiar part of reading for many 5- to 8-year-olds. Reading in print is very popular in this younger age group, with more than 7 in 10 reading fiction this way, 1 in 6 non-fiction, and 1 in 3 reading comics, poems and magazines on paper in 2025. However, a similar percentage of those aged 5 to 8 reported reading fiction (19.6%) and non-fiction (15.7%) digitally as in the 8 to 18 age group. These findings highlight that, while print is firmly established for this age group, digital reading is already embedded enough to mirror patterns seen in older children.

Reading in print and digitally by free-school-meal uptake

Returning to the 8 to 18 age group, there were fewer differences in reading format and materials between children and young people by receipt of free school meals (FSMs). More of those not receiving FSMs read fiction and non-fiction on paper, with the biggest gap seen in print fiction (see Table 3). However, gaps not only narrowed but reversed in relation to screen-based fiction reading. This suggests that opportunities to read in different formats may offer important shared entry points into reading for children from lower and higher-income backgrounds, highlighting the importance of accessibility and choice in supporting reading engagement for all children and young people.

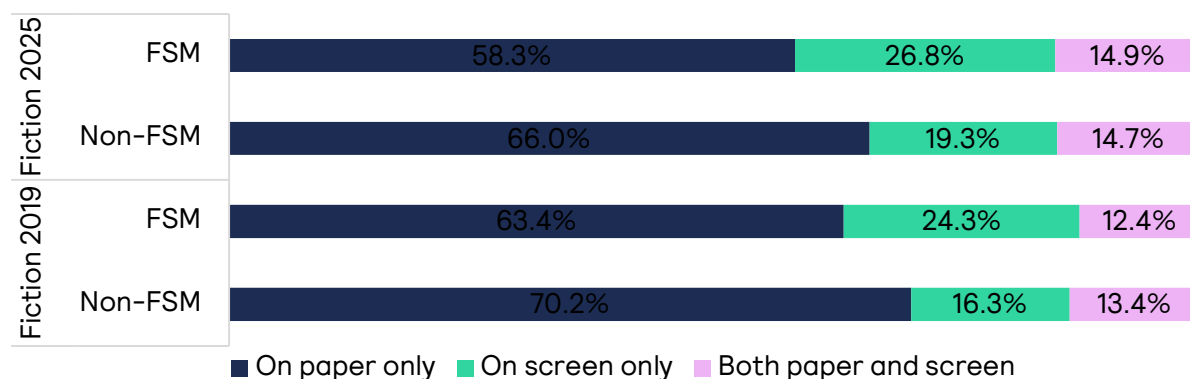
Table 3: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 reading various formats (on paper or on screen) in their free time in 2025 by FSM uptake

	On paper		On screen	
	FSM	Non-FSM	FSM	Non-FSM
Fiction or short stories	36.2%	51.4%	24.3%	21.7%
Non-fiction books	36.6%	41.0%	15.9%	13.7%
Comics / graphic novels	28.9%	28.8%	17.0%	13.4%
Magazines	18.2%	22.0%	7.5%	7.1%
Song lyrics	10.3%	9.3%	60.2%	61.5%
News articles	9.8%	10.4%	23.6%	30.4%
Poems	21.0%	16.6%	12.4%	8.3%
Fan fiction	14.7%	12.5%	17.4%	14.8%

Our previous research showed that more young people in older age groups and those who received FSMs read a variety of materials on screen compared with younger children and those who did not receive FSMs (Clark & Picton, 2019). For example, in 2019, we found that 1 in 4 (24.3%) pupils receiving FSMs reported reading fiction on screen only compared with 16.3% of their peers who did not receive FSMs.

In 2025, more children and young people who received FSMs again reported reading most materials – including fiction – on screen compared with their non-FSM peers. For example, as shown in Figure 5, while 1 in 5 (19.3%) of those who did not receive FSMs read fiction on screen only, this increased to more than 1 in 4 (26.8%) of those who did receive FSMs.

Figure 5: Reading format by receipt of free school meals in 2025 and 2019



Reading in print and digitally by enjoyment of reading

Finally, as shown in Table 4, more children and young people who enjoyed reading told us that they read all materials and across formats – both on paper and on screen – especially fiction, non-fiction, comics and poems, and particularly in print. However, while nearly twice as many of those who enjoyed reading as those who didn't said they read fiction on paper (73.7% vs 37.5%, a gap of 36.2 percentage points), the gap narrowed in relation to reading fiction on screen (29.5% vs 18.7%, a gap of 10.8 percentage points), with a similar pattern seen for non-fiction, comics, magazines and news.

This partly reflects that fewer children and young people who enjoyed reading read most materials digitally compared with in print. However, as those who did not enjoy reading had similar levels of engagement as their keener peers in relation to reading on screen, it also suggests that reading enjoyment may be less of a factor in choosing to read digitally, while ease of access or greater interest in the content of screen-based reading materials may also influence screen reading.

Table 4: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 reading various formats (on paper or on screen) in their free time in 2025 by reading enjoyment

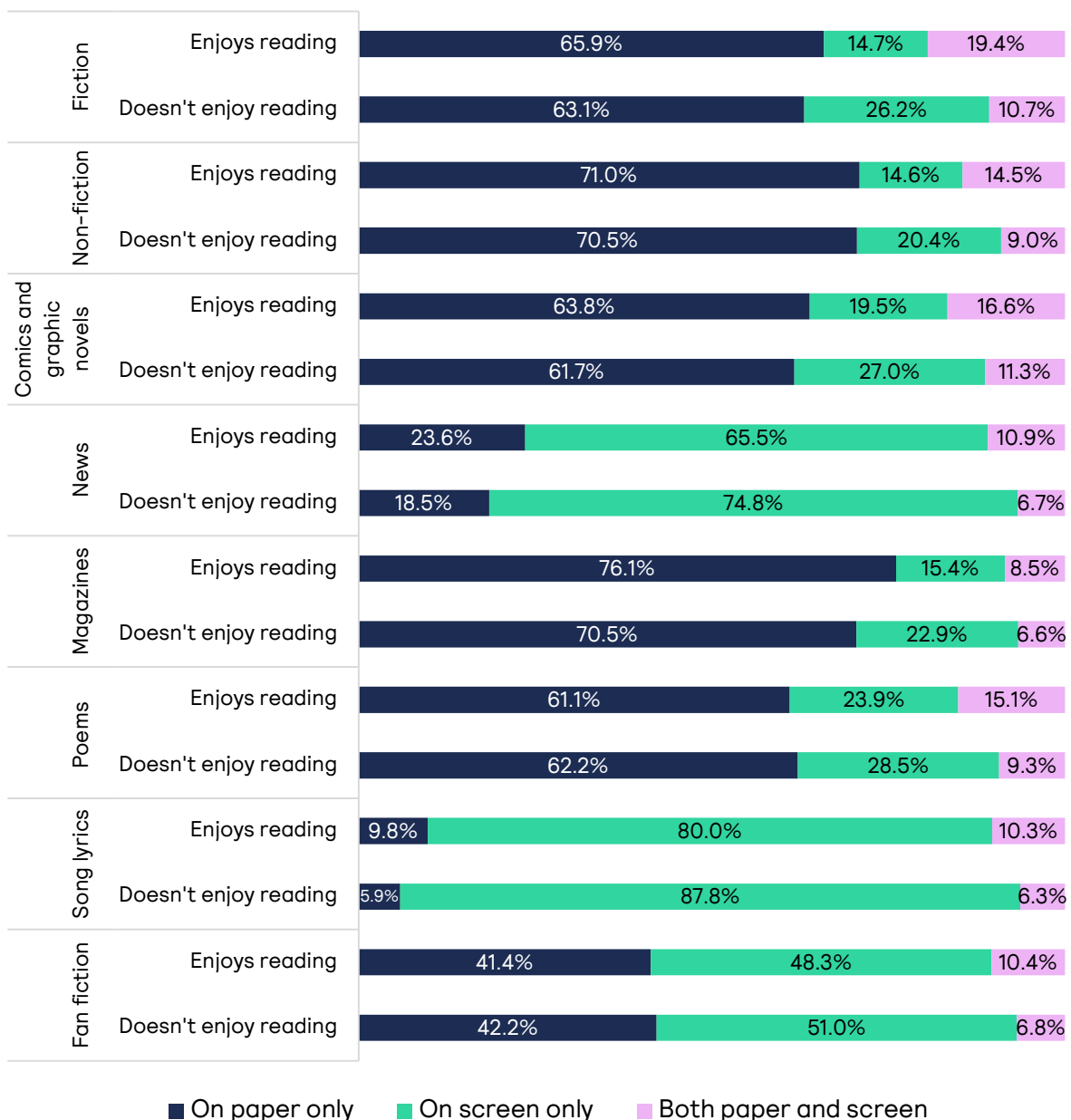
	On paper		On screen	
	Enjoys reading	Doesn't enjoy reading	Enjoys reading	Doesn't enjoy reading
Fiction or short stories	73.7%	37.5%	29.5%	18.7%
Non-fiction	57.4%	31.7%	19.5%	11.7%
Comics / graphic novels	42.0%	23.0%	18.9%	12.0%
Magazines	29.5%	17.4%	8.3%	6.7%
Song lyrics	13.4%	7.9%	60.6%	60.7%
News articles	15.1%	8.0%	33.4%	25.7%
Poems	26.4%	13.7%	13.5%	7.2%
Fan fiction	19.8%	10.1%	22.5%	12.0%

Looking in more detail at reading in print, on screen or across both formats, Figure 6 shows that more children and young people who enjoyed reading reported reading either on paper only, or on both paper and screen, compared with those with lower reading enjoyment. This was particularly evident in relation to fiction,

which almost twice as many of those with high reading enjoyment read both in print and on screen compared with those with low enjoyment (19.4% vs 10.7%).

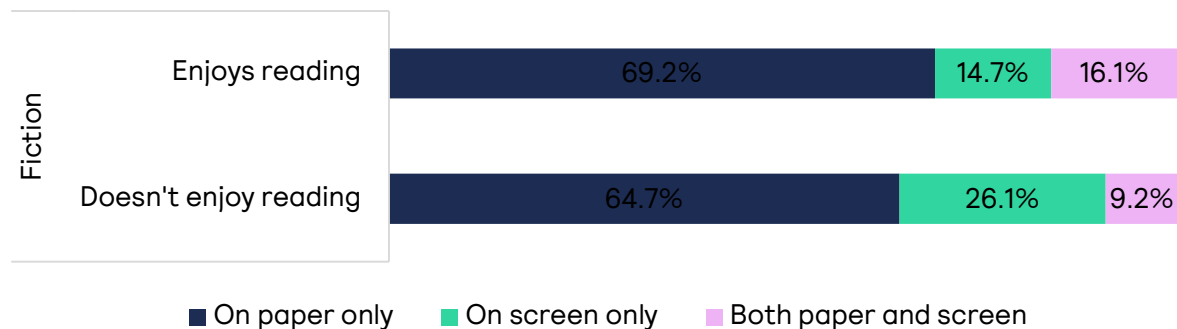
Conversely, more children and young people who did not enjoy reading reported reading many materials on screen only. For example, nearly twice as many reported reading fiction on screen only compared with those with the highest reading enjoyment (26.2% vs 14.7%).

Figure 6: Materials read either on paper, on screen or on both formats in their free time by children and young people aged 8 to 18 in 2025 by reading enjoyment level



Our previous research found that among boys, more of those with the lowest levels of reading engagement read various materials on screen compared with their more-engaged peers. For example, more than twice as many reported reading fiction on screen only (25.4% vs 9.8%; [Clark & Picton, 2019](#)). As shown in Figure 7, findings were similar in 2025, with almost twice as many boys with the lowest reading enjoyment levels reporting reading fiction on screen compared with their more-engaged peers (26.1% vs 14.7%). Indeed, the gap is only narrower in 2025 as a higher percentage of boys with higher reading enjoyment reported reading fiction in digital formats.

Figure 7: Boys' fiction reading formats by reading enjoyment levels



Overall, these findings show that patterns of reading by format are remarkably consistent across gender, age, FSM background and reading enjoyment. Print remains the dominant format for most materials, particularly fiction, while reading digitally is more evenly distributed across groups, and is reported more frequently among children and young people with lower reading enjoyment. Children and young people who are most engaged with reading are also those most likely to read across both print and digital formats, suggesting that format diversity reflects engagement rather than substitution.

Digital-only reading materials by gender, age group and FSM uptake

As shown in Table 5, patterns in digital-only reading varied by gender, age and FSM status. More girls than boys read personal or direct messages, social media posts and captions/subtitles, while slightly more boys read in-game messages. Age differences were more pronounced: sharp increases between the ages of 8 and 11 and 11 and 14 when children move from primary to secondary school (a common time to start using a smartphone, and many social media and messaging apps require users to be 13 years old) were seen for social media content, direct messages and emails. Finally, slightly fewer children and young people receiving FSMs read direct messages, websites or emails compared with their peers.

Table 5: Children and young people aged 8 to 18 reading exclusively on-screen formats in their free time in 2025 by gender, age and FSM

	Gender		Age				FSM status	
	Boys	Girls	8 to 11	11 to 14	14 to 16	16 to 18	FSM	Non-FSM
Personal/direct messages	65.9%	73.3%	58.0%	71.5%	69.1%	74.0%	64.7%	71.4%
Text/messages on video games	63.3%	60.5%	56.8%	63.9%	58.9%	56.0%	60.0%	62.4%
Social media content	57.8%	65.4%	47.3%	63.0%	64.1%	68.4%	58.7%	62.7%
Websites	50.1%	52.9%	46.2%	51.5%	52.0%	59.7%	48.2%	52.7%
Captions/subtitles	45.0%	54.5%	41.6%	50.4%	51.4%	56.2%	47.7%	50.7%
Emails	45.0%	48.6%	35.9%	46.3%	49.9%	65.0%	43.3%	48.0%
Blogs / forums	23.9%	30.1%	27.5%	27.3%	24.6%	27.1%	28.1%	26.5%

Qualitative insights into children and young people’s reading lives in 2025

Children and young people’s comments highlighted the breadth and variety of their reading lives in 2025, showing how print, digital and audio formats all play different roles in their everyday experiences. Many described reading across several formats, drawing on whichever best suited their interests or circumstances:

“I enjoy reading multiple books at a time; I listen to audibles, read ebooks and physical books, and also read *The Week Junior* magazine.”

“I like reading because I read on my Kindle and I find it fun and interesting.”

“I read comics on my iPad or phone on my way to school or in my free time — it helps me practise English.”

Digital reading featured strongly in many children and young people’s reading lives, supporting a wide range of activities and interests:

“I normally read news or articles about something on my phone and I like the new knowledge.”

“I enjoy reading up about my interests online.”

“I read text or on TikTok, read messages, read Instagram.”

“I like texting, so if that counts as reading then yes I do read a lot in my free time.”

For some, digital formats were a simple preference:

“I like reading online or listening to audio books but not reading a book.”

“Reading a book makes me bored but when I’m reading something on my phone it is OK.”

For others, they offered access to materials they couldn’t obtain in print, whether for reasons of cost, availability or format:

“My dad doesn’t buy me books, so I don’t get the opportunity — or I read online.”

“I read articles on the internet but not books because £15 for something you only use once is a bit of a waste.”

“I have dyslexia and not all books are compatible with my condition; I prefer to listen to audiobooks which I do every day.”

Children also described how digital spaces could shape what they chose to read, with social platforms acting as sources of inspiration or recommendation:

“I use BookTok a lot and get a lot of recommendations and enjoy seeing what other people think of books I did or didn’t enjoy.”

“I usually take 14 books from the Kent Library at a time and I read a lot of fanfictions and books on the internet.”

Alongside this, some young people spoke about the value of print reading as a counterbalance to screen use, describing books as a calming or restorative alternative:

“It calms me down and I enjoy it because I get headaches from looking at a screen too much, so a book is a nice change.”

Together, these comments reveal the diverse ways in which children and young people navigate reading today, moving fluidly between print, digital and audio; reading across platforms, formats and devices; and drawing on different sources of content and motivation to shape their reading lives.

Trends in reading in print and reading digitally from 2005 to 2025

A brief overview of 2005 to 2016

The first decade of the 2000s featured rapid developments in digital technology, from the launch of Facebook (2004) and YouTube (2005) to the first iPhone (2007) and the first (UK) Kindle and iPad (2010)¹. By 2005, when we conducted our first large-scale literacy survey, more than 9 in 10 (90.7%) young people aged 8 to 18 had access to a computer at home (Clark & Foster, 2005), and two thirds of those aged 8 to 15 owned a mobile phone².

Even at this early stage, digital reading was common: websites (63.6%) and text messages (61.0%) were among the most frequently read materials in free time, surpassed only by magazines (75.5%; Clark & Foster, 2005). By 2012, our surveys demonstrated the increasingly central role of technology in the lives of many children and young people. More than half (52.4%) said they would rather read digitally compared with a third (32.0%) who preferred print (Picton, 2014). Navigating this growing range of formats was influenced by various factors, with e-readers preferred by girls and avid readers while other devices (e.g. tablets and smartphones) held more appeal for boys and those receiving FSMs, groups traditionally reporting lower rates of reading in print³. At the same time, our 2015 evaluation of an ebooks platform found that providing opportunities to read digitally could boost reading skills, motivation and enjoyment, particularly for boys and less-engaged readers (Clark & Picton, 2015).

Between 2005 and 2015, this increasing prevalence of digital devices coincided with rising rates of reading enjoyment and stable or improving daily reading rates. Indeed, daily reading peaked in 2015 before falling sharply from 2016 onwards, beginning a decade-long downward trend that continued into 2025. This may suggest that while digital devices did not initially have a negative impact on reading

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2007/jul/25/media.newmedia>; <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/articles/ztq2g2p>; <https://www.britannica.com/money/Apple-Inc>; <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2010/aug/05/amazon-uk-kindle-ebook-store>

² Ofcom (2006) *Media Literacy Audit: Report on media literacy amongst children* reported that 64% of children aged 8 to 15 had access to the internet at home and 65% had their own mobile phone.

³ More girls than boys read fiction on paper (56.1% vs 47.1%) and e-readers (80.8% vs 50.8%), but boys and girls showed similar rates of reading fiction on tablets (34.7% vs 36.7%). More of those not receiving FSMs read fiction on e-readers (78.2% non-FSM vs 65.8% FSM), and more of those receiving FSMs used smartphones (27.4% vs 19.8%) and tablets (40.4% vs 30.9%). (To date) unpublished data from the Annual Literacy Survey 2014.

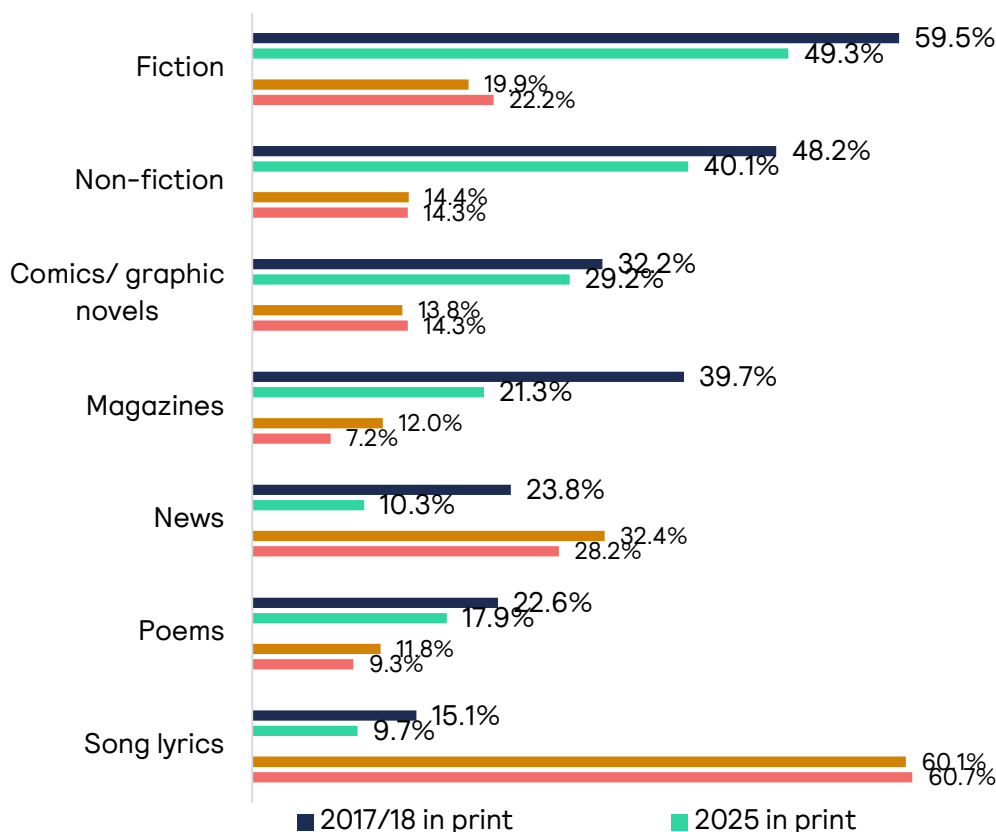
engagement, increasingly algorithmically driven highly engaging content may have had a growing influence over time.

Trends in reading in print and on screen from 2017 to 2025

In 2017/18, as most reading materials were available in both print and digital formats, we began asking children and young people whether they read seven specific materials in print, on screen, or not at all. At the same time, recognising that digital-only reading materials (websites, text messages, emails etc.) constituted a substantial portion of many children and young people’s leisure reading, we continued to ask about these separately.

Across 2017/18 to 2025, print remained the dominant format for most materials (see Figure 8). Fiction, non-fiction, comics, magazines and poems were all read mainly on paper throughout this period, with only news and song lyrics consistently read more on screens than in print. The most popular materials in each format changed very little over time: fiction, non-fiction and magazines (later comics) in print, and song lyrics, news and fiction on screens.

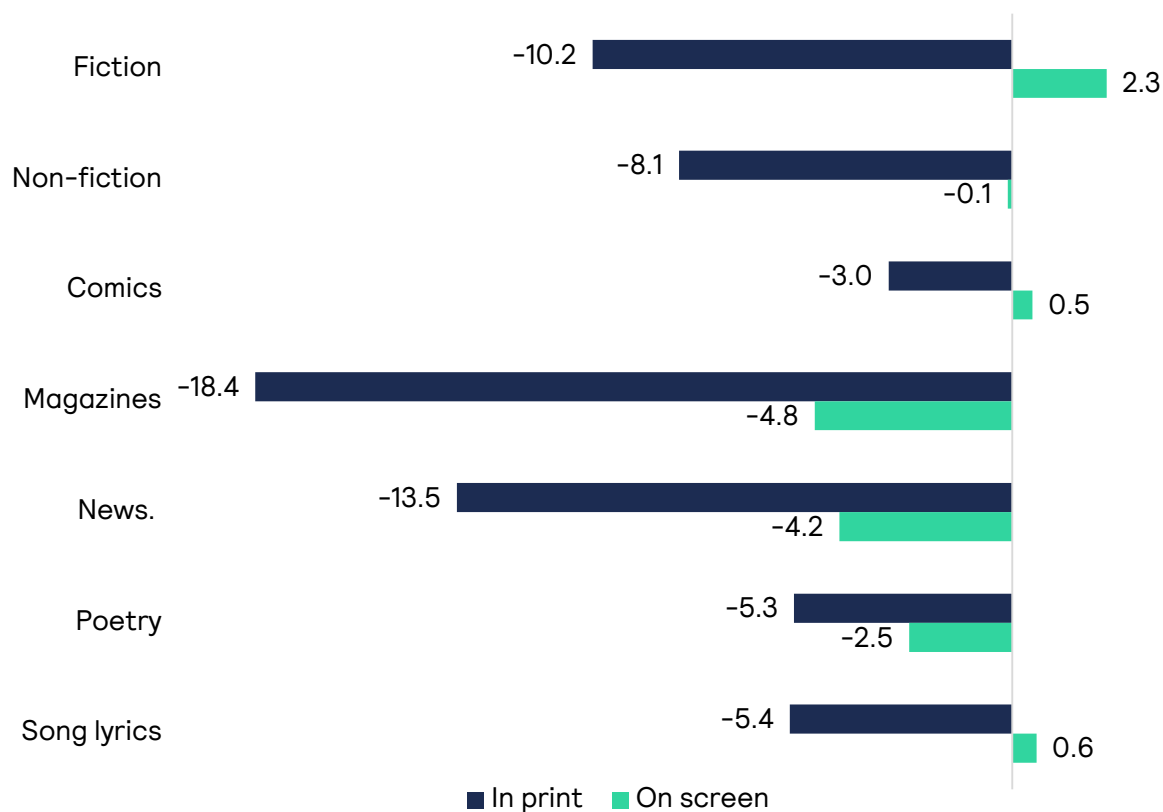
Figure 8: Materials read monthly in free time in print and on screen by children and young people aged 8 to 18 in 2017/18 and 2025



However, as shown in Figure 9, the biggest shifts between 2017/18 and 2025 were declines in print reading, with no corresponding increases in digital reading. Magazine reading showed the sharpest fall, followed by news, fiction and non-fiction. Comics, poems and song lyrics were more stable. Digital reading declined far less overall, with small drops for magazines, news and poetry and slight increases in comics and song lyrics. The only material showing notable growth was fiction read on screen, although the increase was modest (2.3 percentage points).

These patterns indicate that young people were not shifting from print to digital, but reading less of both over time, with print seeing the steepest decline.

Figure 9: Percentage-point difference in materials read in their free time by format by those aged 8 to 18 between 2017/18 and 2025



Trends in younger children’s reading in print and on screen between 2019 and 2025

We have asked children aged 5 to 8 about their literacy attitudes and behaviours since 2019, including whether they read five materials (stories, facts, magazines, poems and comics) on paper, on screen or neither. For children in this age group, print is again the dominant format, both in 2019 and 2025. For example, in 2025,

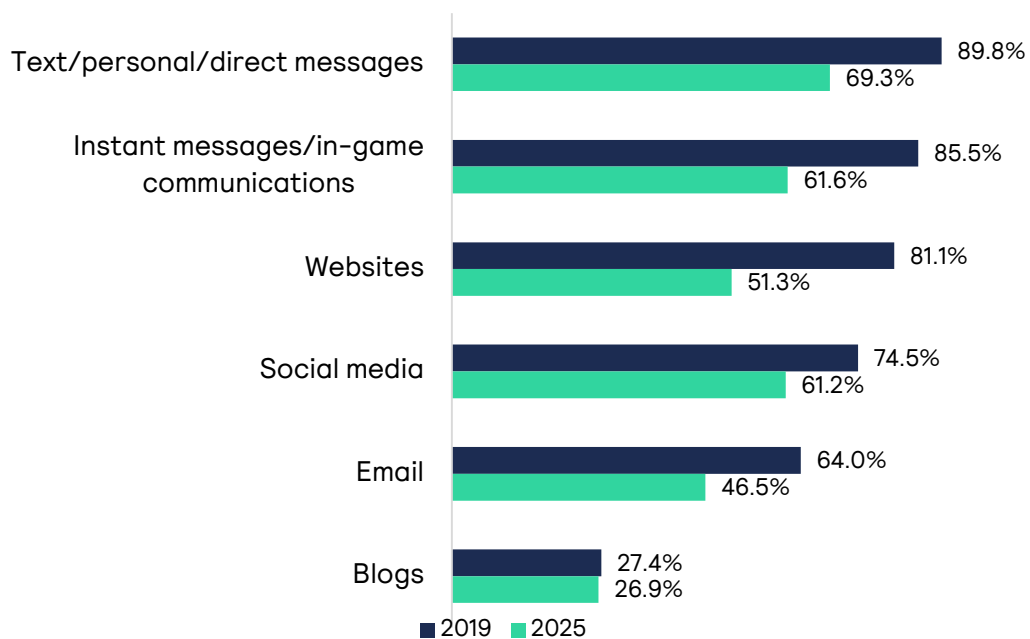
more than 7 in 10 (72.4%) 5 to 8s read stories in print, while 1 in 5 (19.6%) read stories on a screen. Similarly, 1 in 2 (52.3%) read facts in print compared with 1 in 6 (15.7%) in digital format.

However, while the percentage of 5 to 8s reading most materials in print format is much higher than seen in 8 to 18s (e.g. 72.4% of 5 to 8s read stories in print vs 49.3% of 8 to 18s), the percentage reading most materials on screen was very similar to that seen in 8 to 18s (e.g. 19.6% of 5 to 8s read stories on a screen vs 22.2% of 8 to 18s). In addition, compared with the older age group, there was very little difference in the percentage of 5 to 8s reading most materials, whether in print or digital format, between 2019 and 2025. For example, reading stories in print decreased only slightly in 5 to 8s between 2019 and 2025 (from 74.2% to 72.4%), and reading stories digitally increased marginally (from 18.1% to 19.6%).

Digital-only reading trends between 2019 and 2025

Turning to reading formats available exclusively on screen, in contrast to the relatively stable percentage of children and young people reading materials such as fiction, comics and news digitally over time, Figure 10 shows that levels of reading most digital-only materials has decreased dramatically in recent years⁴.

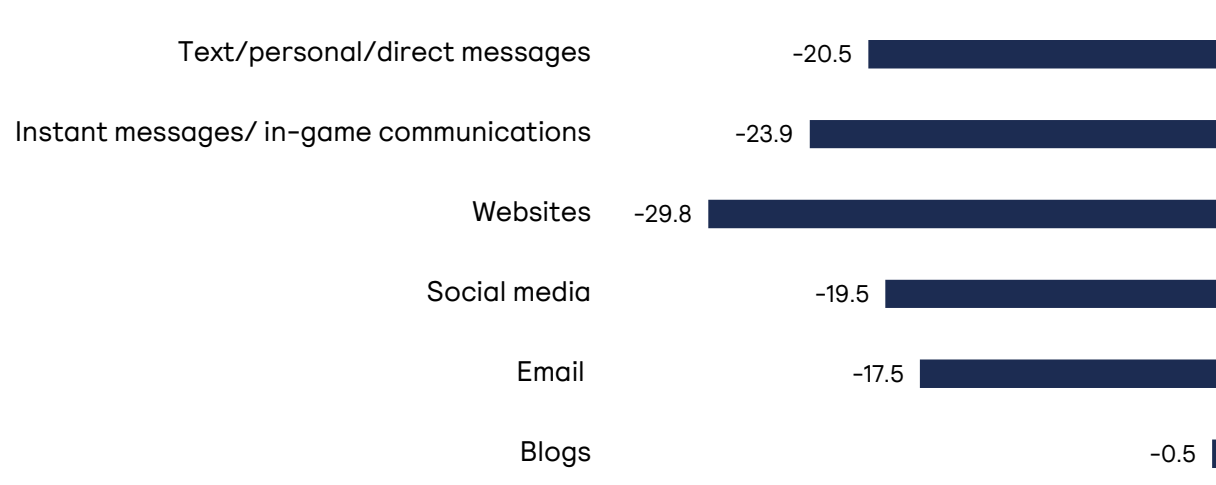
Figure 10: Digital reading materials read by those aged 8 to 18 between 2019 and 2025



⁴ We have focused on changes since 2019 – when all six digital reading materials were included – for consistency

The biggest drops between 2019 and 2025 related to websites, with a 29.8-percentage-point decrease, followed by instant messages/in-game communication (a 23.9-percentage-point drop) and text/personal/direct messages (20.5-percentage-point drop, see Figure 11). However, decreases in relation to social media and emails were also sharp.

Figure 11: Percentage-point difference in children and young people reading digital materials in their free time between 2019 and 2025



Notably, while levels of reading digital-only materials were relatively stable between 2019 and 2022, they have decreased most visibly since 2023. For example, the percentage of those aged 8 to 18 reading personal or direct text messages fell from 91.0% in 2023 to 69.3% in 2025, a drop of 21.7 percentage points. Similarly, the percentage of those reading websites dropped from 78.3% to 51.4% (a fall of 26.9 percentage points) and social media from 81.6% to 61.2% (20.4 percentage points).

In addition, drops were more pronounced in secondary-school-aged young people. For example, while the percentage of those aged 8 to 11 reading websites decreased from 66.6% to 46.2% between 2023 and 2025 (20.4 percentage points), it decreased from 80.5% to 52.2% (28.3 percentage points) for those aged 11 to 18. Similarly, personal/direct messages decreased by 10.5 percentage points for those aged 8 to 11 and by 23.9% for those aged 8 to 18 over this time, while reading social media content decreased by 9.6 and 22.9 percentage points respectively.

As this is a relatively recent development, it is difficult to be certain of potential causes. Wider research reports a gradual increase in social media use in UK children aged 3 to 17 between 2021 and 2024, and slight rises in the use of

messaging apps over the last year⁵. However, while overall popularity of Video Sharing Platforms (VSPs) such as YouTube and TikTok has been stable in recent years, more of those aged 13 to 17 reported using them for searching online, and 48% of young people aged 3 to 17 said they watched videos to help with schoolwork or to learn new things, which is up from 42% in 2023. In addition, half of those aged 8 to 17 reported using AI, a slight increase from 46% in 2023. This suggests that shifts in digital reading may reflect wider changes in online behaviour (including the prevalence of visual social media and increased use of AI summaries). We will continue to monitor this, alongside other variations in digital reading practices, as part of our ongoing research into children and young people's reading engagement.

Summary and discussion

Over the last two decades, our research has documented a consistent decline in reading enjoyment, with a 36% drop in the percentage of children and young people who say they enjoy reading since 2005 (Clark et al., 2025). This is contextualised by international studies such as PIRLS and PISA, which also show a long-term downward trend in reading enjoyment and engagement, especially in economically developed nations (Ingram et al., 2023). Digital devices are often positioned as a primary cause, viewed more as a distraction from reading than a meaningful part of contemporary reading lives. Yet the evidence across our Annual Literacy Surveys and wider international research paints a more complex picture in which print and digital reading co-exist, interact and, for some, mutually reinforce each other.

From the outset, it is important to be clear about what this evidence does and does not claim. This report does not suggest that either reading digitally or reading formats that are exclusively digital are equivalent to print for all purposes, nor does it argue for increased screen exposure. It also does not dismiss well-established concerns about attention, wellbeing or comprehension associated with some forms of screen use. Instead, it examines how children and young people currently engage with written text across formats, and what this means for supporting reading engagement in contemporary contexts.

A key finding is the relative stability of the percentage of children and young people reading digitally, especially fiction, over time. We last examined these patterns in detail in 2019, and the 2025 survey reveals notable consistency: children and young

⁵ <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/media-use-and-attitudes/media-habits-children/children-and-parents-media-use-and-attitudes-report-2025>

people who most enjoy reading tend to read in print, or across both print and digital formats, while more of those with lower reading enjoyment report engaging with reading in digital formats. International studies echo this pattern, finding that young people who mostly read digitally enjoy reading less than predominantly print readers but more than non-readers (OECD, 2021). This suggests that digital formats may act as an important entry point for disengaged readers.

This is reinforced by our own data: for example, children and young people with the lowest levels of reading enjoyment were almost twice as likely as their highly engaged peers to report reading fiction only on screen. Similarly, more children who received free school meals reported reading fiction digitally than their peers from higher-income backgrounds. For many, then, digital reading formats may not be simply a replacement for print, but a more accessible gateway into reading for pleasure, one that aligns with their interests, devices and daily media habits.

At the same time, print continues to dominate most reading experiences. Despite the expansion of digital devices and content, most children still read popular materials, including fiction, non-fiction and comics, in print format in their free time. However, the proportion of children reading *any* materials in print has fallen substantially in recent years, whereas reading digitally has stayed broadly stable, and even risen slightly for fiction (up 2.3 percentage points between 2017 and 2025). This suggests that declines in reading overall are not the result of digital formats crowding out print; instead, they point to a wider challenge to reading engagement that transcends format.

Trends in digital-only reading (e.g., personal messages, social media and web content) are somewhat more complex. These materials have long made up a substantial component of children's everyday reading habits, but levels of reading digital-only materials in free time have dropped sharply in recent years. As digital-only reading has declined without a corresponding increase in print reading, this suggests that children and young people are now reading less text of any kind. This may reflect, in part, a broader shift toward more visual, bite-sized and algorithmically driven content online, including media that require less sustained attention and offer more immediate rewards. As one participant in our 2025 research noted: *"I don't have the energy nor motivation to read when other options are more convenient and actively engaging."*

However, the participant above went on to say, *"When I find a book I love I demolish it within days though, 300 pages a day"*, demonstrating the continuing relevance of texts that match children and young people's personal interests. In addition, it is perhaps reductive to frame digital media as the sole 'enemy' of reading engagement as increasingly tailored forms of digital entertainment exist within a

wider ecosystem of performance-driven education, cuts to libraries and youth services, and broader socio-cultural shifts (McCrary & Chokhani, 2025). In addition, digital formats have broadened the scope of reading, enabling personalisation, accessibility and relevance in ways that are often complementary to print. Responding to this, many children and young people read a variety of materials including fiction, comics, news and lyrics digitally, alongside blogs, fan fiction and websites, offering diverse routes into reading for nearly a decade. The challenge, then, is to recognise the value of diverse routes into reading, including through digital devices.

At the same time, research highlights important differences in the cognitive processes involved in digital versus print reading. For example, some (not all) screen-based reading, particularly for information, involves scanning, skimming and navigating multiple sources. This may detract from deep comprehension in some readers, including younger or less-proficient readers. Promisingly, recent reviews suggest that strong print literacy can provide the foundation for more effective digital reading. In addition, learning and developing skills that more directly support literacy in digital environments is important (OECD, 2021). Interestingly, while Finland is emphasising the need for ‘multiliteracy’ (the ability to create and interpret texts across different modes and media⁶, nations such as Denmark and Sweden are moving back towards print-based textbooks in response to concerns about screen exposure, learning and wellbeing. Together, these developments underscore the need for balanced, evidence-informed approaches. Encouragingly,

Ultimately, our findings point towards the value of offering children and young people inclusive flexible reading ecosystems that embrace both print and digital formats. Reading in the digital age is a connected landscape in which different formats offer different affordances for different readers. Promoting reading engagement therefore means broadening, rather than narrowing, opportunities and connecting with young people in their current context, while also supporting them to develop the deeper, sustained focus needed for long-form reading.

This includes recognition of the broader cultural environment shaping young people’s reading choices. Digital media increasingly occupies leisure time, often favouring visual or interactive content over text. For reading to thrive as a leisure activity, children and young people must be supported to balance wider digital experiences with reading, whether in print or on screen. Encouragingly, countries with high digital connectivity such as Finland, Japan, Korea and Singapore show

⁶ Finnish National Agency for Education. (2025). [National Literacy Strategy 2030: Finland—The most multiliterate country in the world in 2030](#).

that it is possible to sustain or even improve reading engagement in such a context and, in the UK, the National Year of Reading 2026 is providing a vital space for promoting reading as a personally relevant and meaningful activity. In addition, the Curriculum and Assessment Review's final report signalled an intention for English to draw on a broader range of texts, including digital formats (Department for Education, 2025), reflecting the changing ways in which children and young people read, write and communicate and preparing them for contemporary literacy environments.

At the same time, promoting reading involves cultivating both skill and engagement, and educational and policy strategies can support more balanced literacy experiences by acknowledging the cognitive, affective, and behavioural aspects of reading. Further research into children's reading experiences across different formats should inform strategies that use both print and digital resources to support literacy development within a rapidly changing media environment.

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Appendix 1

Sample sizes 2017 – 2025

2017/18: 49,049 children and young people aged 8 to 18; **2019:** 3,748 children aged 5 to 8 and 56,906 aged 8 to 18; **2020:** 58,346 children and young people aged 8 to 18 from 315 schools; **2021:** 3,959 children aged 5 to 8 and 42,502 aged 8 to 18 from 117 schools; **2022:** 8,210 children aged 5 to 8 and 62,193 aged 8 to 18 from 327 schools; **2023:** 7,285 children aged 5 to 8 and 64,066 aged 8 to 18 from 285 schools; **2024:** 4,568 children aged 5 to 8 and 71,563 aged 8 to 18 from 405 schools; **2025:** 9,730 children aged 5 to 8 and 105,583 aged 8 to 18 from 515 schools.

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