

# Writing Anxiety

## What this handout is about

This handout discusses the situational nature of writer's block and other writing anxiety and suggests things you can try to feel more confident and optimistic about yourself as a writer.

## What are writing anxiety and writer's block?

"Writing anxiety" and "writer's block" are informal terms for a wide variety of apprehensive and pessimistic feelings about writing. These feelings may not be pervasive in a person's writing life. For example, you might feel perfectly fine writing a biology lab report but apprehensive about writing a paper on a novel. You may confidently tackle a paper about the sociology of gender but delete and start over twenty times when composing an email to a cute classmate suggesting coffee. In other words, writing anxiety and writers' block are *situational* (Hjortshoj 7). These terms do NOT describe psychological attributes. People aren't born anxious writers; rather, they become anxious or blocked through negative or difficult experiences with writing.

## When do these negative feelings arise?

Although there is a great deal of variation among individuals, there are also some common experiences that writers in general find stressful.

For example, you may struggle when you are:

- adjusting to a new form of writing—for example, first year college writing, papers in a new field of study, or longer forms than you are used to (a long research paper, a senior thesis, a master's thesis, a dissertation) (Hjortshoj 56-76).

- writing for a reader or readers who have been overly critical or demanding in the past.

- remembering negative criticism received in the past—even if the reader who criticized your work won't be reading your writing this time.

- working with limited time *or* with a lot of unstructured time.

- responding to an assignment that seems unrelated to academic or life goals.

- dealing with troubling events outside of school.

## What are some strategies for handling these feelings?

### Get support

Choose a writing buddy, someone you trust to encourage you in your writing life. Your writing buddy might be a friend or family member, a classmate, a teacher, a colleague, or a Writing Center tutor. Talk to your writing buddy about your ideas, your writing process, your worries, and your successes. Share pieces of your writing. Make checking in with your writing buddy a regular part of your schedule.

In his book *Understanding Writing Blocks*, Keith Hjortshoj describes how isolation can harm writers, particularly students who are working on long projects not connected with coursework (134–135). He suggests that in addition to connecting with supportive individuals, such students can benefit from forming or joining a writing group, which functions in much the same way as a writing buddy. A group can provide readers, deadlines, support, praise, and constructive criticism.

### **Identify your strengths**

Often, writers who are experiencing block or anxiety have a worse opinion of their own writing than anyone else! Make a list of the things you do well. You might ask a friend or colleague to help you generate such a list. Here are some possibilities to get you started:

- I explain things well to people.
- I get people's interest.
- I have strong opinions.
- I listen well.
- I am critical of what I read.
- I see connections.

Choose at least one strength as your starting point. Instead of saying “I can't write,” say “I am a writer who can ...”

### **Recognize that writing is a complex process**

Writing is an attempt to fix meaning on the page, but you know, and your reader knows, that there is always more to be said on a topic. The best writers can do is to contribute what they know and feel about a topic at a particular point in time.

Writers often seek “flow,” which usually entails some sort of breakthrough followed by a beautifully coherent outpouring of knowledge. Flow is both a possibility—most people experience it at some point in their writing lives—and a myth. Inevitably, if you write over a long period of time and for many different situations, you will encounter obstacles. As Hjortshoj explains, obstacles are particularly common during times of transition—transitions to new writing roles or to new kinds of writing.

### **Think of yourself as an apprentice.**

If block or apprehension is new for you, take time to understand the situations you are writing in. In particular, try to figure out what has changed in your writing life. Here are some possibilities:

- You are writing in a new format.
- You are writing longer papers than before.
- You are writing for new audiences.
- You are writing about new subject matter.
- You are turning in writing from different stages of the writing process—for example, planning stages

or early drafts.

It makes sense to have trouble when dealing with a situation for the first time. It's also likely that when you confront these new situations, you will learn and grow. Writing in new situations can be rewarding. Not every format or audience will be right for you, but you won't know which ones might be right until you try them. Think of new writing situations as apprenticeships. When you're doing a new kind of writing, learn as much as you can about it, gain as many skills in that area as you can, and when you finish the apprenticeship, decide which of the skills you learned will serve you well later on. You might be surprised.

Below are some suggestions for how to learn about new kinds of writing:

Ask a lot of questions of people who are more experienced with this kind of writing. Here are some of the questions you might ask: What's the purpose of this kind of writing? Who's the audience? What are the most important elements to include? What's not as important? How do you get started? How do you know when what you've written is good enough? How did you learn to write this way?

Ask a lot of questions of the person who assigned you a piece of writing. If you have a paper, the best place to start is with the written assignment itself. For help with this, see the handout on [understanding assignments](#).

Look for examples of this kind of writing. (You can ask your instructor if he/she could recommend an example). Look, especially, for variation. There are often many different ways to write within a particular form. Look for ways that feel familiar to you, approaches that you like. You might want to look for published models or, if this seems too intimidating, look at your classmates' writing. In either case, ask yourself questions about what these writers are doing, and take notes. How does the writer begin and end? In what order does the writer tell things? How and when does the writer convey her or his main point? How does the writer bring in other people's ideas? What is the writer's purpose? How does she or he achieve that purpose?

Listen critically to your readers. Before you dismiss or wholeheartedly accept what they say, try to understand them. If a reader has given you written comments, ask yourself questions to figure out the reader's experience of your paper: What is this reader looking for? What am I doing that satisfies this reader? In what ways is this reader still unsatisfied? If you can't answer these questions from the reader's comments, then talk to the reader, or ask someone else to help you interpret the comments.

Most importantly, don't try to do everything at once. Start with reasonable expectations. You can't write like an expert your first time out. Nobody does! Use the criticism you get.

Once you understand what readers want, you are in a better position to decide what to do with their criticisms. There are two extreme possibilities—dismissing the criticisms and accepting them all—but there is also a lot of middle ground. Figure out which criticisms are consistent with your own purposes, and do the hard work of engaging with them. Again, don't expect an overnight turn-around; recognize that changing writing habits is a process and that papers are steps in the process.

Chances are that at some point in your writing life you will encounter readers who seem to dislike, disagree with, or miss the point of your work. Figuring out what to do with criticism from such readers is an important part of a writer's growth.

**Try new tactics when you get stuck**

Often, writing blocks occur at particular stages of the writing process. The writing process is cyclical and variable. For different writers, the process may include reading, brainstorming, drafting, getting feedback, revising, and editing. These stages do not always happen in this order, and once a writer has been through a particular stage, chances are she or he hasn't seen the last of that stage. For example, brainstorming may occur all along the way.

Figure out what your writing process looks like and whether there's a particular stage where you tend to get stuck. Perhaps you love researching and taking notes on what you read, and you have a hard time moving from that work to getting started on your own first draft. Or once you have a draft, it seems set in stone and even though readers are asking you questions and making suggestions, you don't know how to go back in and change it. Or just the opposite may be true; you revise and revise and don't want to let the paper go.

Wherever you have trouble, take a longer look at what you do and what you might try. Sometimes what you do is working for you; it's just a slow and difficult process. Other times, what you do may not be working; these are the times when you can look around for other approaches to try:

- Talk to your writing buddy and to other colleagues about what they do at the particular stage that gets you stuck.

- Read about possible new approaches in the handouts on [brainstorming](#) and [revising](#).

- Try thinking of yourself as an apprentice to a stage of the writing process and give different strategies a shot.

- Cut your paper into pieces and tape them to the wall, use eight different colors of highlighters, draw a comic strip version of your paper, read your paper out loud in the voice of your favorite movie star....

Okay, we're kind of kidding with some of those last few suggestions, but the sky is the limit. When it comes to conquering a block, give yourself permission to fall flat on your face. Trying and failing will help you arrive at the thing that works for you.

### **Celebrate your successes**

Start storing up positive experiences with writing. Whatever obstacles you've faced, celebrate the occasions when you overcome them. This could be something as simple as getting started, sharing your work with someone besides a teacher, revising a paper for the first time, trying out a new brainstorming strategy, or turning in a paper that has been particularly challenging for you. You define what a success is for you. Keep a log or journal of your writing successes and breakthroughs, how you did it, how you felt. This log can serve as a boost later in your writing life when you face new challenges.

### **Get support**

Wait a minute, didn't we already say that? Yes. It's worth repeating. Most people find relief for various kinds of anxieties by getting support from others. Sometimes the best person to help you through a spell of worry is someone who's done that for you before—a family member, a friend, a mentor. Maybe you don't even need to talk with this person about writing; maybe you just need to be reminded to believe in yourself, that you can do it.

If you don't know anyone on campus yet whom you have this kind of relationship with, reach out to someone who seems like they could be a good listener and supportive. There are a number of profes-

sional resources for you on campus, people you can talk through your ideas or your worries with. A great place to start is the ECU Writing Center. If you know you have a problem with writing anxiety, make an appointment well before the paper is due. You can come to the Business Communication Center with a draft or even before you've started writing. You can also approach your instructor with questions about your writing assignment. If you're an undergraduate, your academic advisor and your residence hall advisor are other possible resources.

## Conclusion

Apprehension about writing is a common condition on college campuses. Because writing is the most common means of sharing our knowledge, we put a lot of pressure on ourselves when we write. This handout has given some suggestions for how to relieve that pressure. Talk with others; realize we're all learning; take an occasional risk; turn to the people who believe in you. Counter negative experiences by actively creating positive ones.

Even after you have tried all of these strategies and read every Writing Center handout, invariably you will still have negative experiences in your writing life. When you get a paper back with a bad grade on it or when you get a rejection letter from a journal, fend off the negative aspects of that experience. Try not to let them sink in; try not to let your disappointment fester. Instead, jump right back in to some area of the writing process: choose one suggestion the evaluator has made and work on it, or read and discuss the paper with a friend or colleague, or do some writing or revising—on this or any paper—as quickly as possible.

Failures of various kinds are an inevitable part of the writing process. Without them, it would be difficult if not impossible to grow as a writer. Learning often occurs in the wake of a startling event, something that stirs you up, something that makes you wonder. Use your failures to keep moving.

## Works consulted

Hjortshoj, Keith. 2001. Understanding Writing Blocks. Oxford: Oxford UP.

This is a particularly excellent resource for advanced undergraduates and graduate students. Hjortshoj writes about his experiences working with university students experiencing block. He explains the transitional nature of most writing blocks and the importance of finding support from others when working on long projects.

Rose, Mike, ed. 1985. When a Writer Can't Write: Studies in Writer's Block and Other Composing-Process Problems. New York and London: The Guilford Press.

This collection of empirical studies is written primarily for writing teachers, researchers and tutors. Studies focus on writers of various ages, including young children, high school students, and college students.