Writing Anxiety & Writer’s Block: Identifying Causes and Exploring Strategies

Presenter: Beth Taylor-Schott
Before we get started, you should know...

Help is Out There

Writing Center Tutors
Writing Center tutors work one-on-one with students in all stages of the writing process and with any type of assignment for any course, except exam papers.

http://www.sbcc.edu/clrc/writing_center/index.php

Counseling Services
The college provides many counseling services to assist students in their educational endeavors. Quality guidance and counseling are provided by trained counselors, faculty advisors, staff, state-of-the-art information and on-line systems and up-to-date publications. All counseling services are confidential.

http://www.sbcc.edu/counselingservices/index.php
Student Learning Outcomes

After attending this workshop, students should be able to do the following:

• Identify causes for writing anxiety
• Match particular strategies to different causes for writing anxiety
• Apply strategies to their own writing process
What Are Writing Anxiety And Writer's Block?

- "Writing anxiety" and "writer's block" describe a variety of fearful and negative feelings around writing.

- These feelings may not occur every time you write. For example, you might feel perfectly fine writing an email to a friend but apprehensive about writing a paper about an article for school.

- In other words, writing anxiety and writers' block occur in some situations, but not all situations.
What Writing Anxiety and Writer's Block are Not

• A sign that someone is a “bad writer.”
  \textit{Research shows that there is no correlation between writing anxiety and writing skill.}

• Part of someone’s personality.
  \textit{People aren't born anxious or blocked writers; rather, they become anxious or blocked through negative or difficult experiences with writing.}
What Writing Anxiety and Writer's Block are Not

SOMETHING ONLY YOU SUFFER FROM

80 percent of UCLA students surveyed said that they had avoided courses, major fields of study, or even careers that require writing.
Thankfully, identifying the reasons you feel anxious or blocked can help you adjust your approach to writing.

Once you’ve identified the cause, you can explore strategies that will help you confront both the personal and practical causes of your anxiety.
Identify the cause

Why do I feel anxious or blocked?

Activity I:

– Group 1: Freewrite—Write for 3 minutes without stopping. Write every thought that comes to mind on the topic. Keep your pen moving the whole time.

– Group 2: Brainstorm—Make a list of as many different answers to the question as possible. Try to jot down just key phrases; don’t use complete sentences.
Although there is a great deal of variation among individuals, there are some common experiences that writers in general find stressful.

- Unrealistic expectations about the writing process
- Feeling like you have nothing to say
- Adjusting to a new form of writing
- Writing for a reader or readers who have been overly critical (or who you imagine will be)
- Time – too much or too little
- Responding to an assignment that seems difficult or unrelated
- Dealing with troubling events or feelings outside of school
Unrealistic Expectations about the Writing Process

what people think it looks like

what it really looks like
Strategy: Engage the Process

Prewrite, Draft, & Revise

• There is no “correct” way to prewrite, draft, or revise.

• The writing process is cyclical and variable. For different writers, the process may include reading, brainstorming, outlining, 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.

• Experiment with different methods to determine what works for you.
1. Analyse the topic
   What is it asking?
   What is the purpose of the task?

2. Brainstorming
   What can you write about?
   What are your ideas?
   What are the possible ideas?
   What questions do you need to research?
   What are your ideas on this topic?
   Which ideas will you choose to develop?

3. Read and research
   Read about your topic
   Research

4. Prewriting
   Ideas
   Past Experience
   Current Topics
   Brainstorming
   Reading
   Individual Interest
   Classroom or Group Discussions/Activities

5. Coming up with an idea

6. Writing a first draft

7. Showing your writing to others

8. Revising your writing

9. Editing & Proofreading

10. Research

11. Final draft

12. Submitting the final product

13. Reflect on the process

14. Learn from the experience

Most importantly, don’t try to do everything at once.

"If a teacher told me to revise, I thought that meant my writing was a broken-down car that needed to go to the repair shop. I felt insulted. I didn't realize the teacher was saying, ‘Make it shine. It's worth it.’ Now I see revision as a beautiful word of hope. It's a new vision of something. **It means you don't have to be perfect the first time.** What a relief!"

Naomi Shihab Nye
Feeling like you have nothing to say

Unrealistic expectations about the writing process can lead to all sorts of problems, including the feeling of having nothing to say.
Strategy: Brainstorming and Freewriting

• Brainstorming, freewriting, listing, outlining, and clustering are strategies that you can use throughout the writing process. Although many writers use these strategies as a type of “prewriting,” they can also be useful any time you begin to feel stuck.

• Experiment with templates and graphic organizers.
  • https://bubbl.us/
  • Google Image results for “graphic organizers writing”
How do freewriting and brainstorming work?

• You see your thoughts on the page
• You turn your inner-critic off—there are no bad ideas
• You generate new insights through making yourself put thoughts into words
• You discover where you still have questions
• You gain confidence about the assignment as you realize you do have something to say
Strategy: Talk about it

Writing, like talking, is a social act.

For many writers, talking is part of the writing process.

Get a writing buddy. Talk to a friend or family member. Visit a tutor.
Confronting the Critic

Often, writers who are experiencing block or anxiety have a worse opinion of their own writing than anyone else!
Strategy: Remind Yourself that not all of the voices in your head are yours.

- Just because you can hear the thoughts doesn’t mean that they are true—or worth listening to.
- You get to decide when they’re useful, and when they’re not.

- Notice when your critic is talking
- Decide whether or not it’s helping you
- Let it know that you’re doing something else
- Let it know you’d rather not hear from it at that moment—or in that way
Time

A writer may feel anxious when they are working with limited time or working with a lot of unstructured time.
Strategies for time management

• Set aside times for writing when you are most relaxed or alert.

• Break the task into steps.

• Make a writing schedule and/or set goals.

• Use a calendar or draw an outline to visualize the writing process.

• Experiment with different tools for time management.
  • Assignment Calculator (http://library.rit.edu/researchguides/calculator/)
  • Timers
  • Web-blocking software
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.
Strategy: Think of Doing Something New as Practice

Think of new writing situations as practice.

• Recognize that learning (like writing) is a process.
• Remember that writing is a skill, and that skills require practice.
• Allow yourself to make mistakes.

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.
If an Assignment seems Difficult or Unrelated

Sometimes an assignment can seem overly difficult or unrelated to the course. This can trigger feelings of anxiety and frustration.
Strategies for dealing with difficult assignments

• Read the assignment with care and purpose: underline, highlight, and make notes when you have questions.
• Ask Questions
• Look at Examples
• Connect with resources
  • Instructor
  • Tutors
  • Course materials (course texts, syllabus)
  • Use our Assignment Analysis handout.

( http://www.sbcc.edu/clrc/writing_center/wc_files/AssignmentAnalysis2010.pdf )
• Don’t try to do everything at once
Dealing with troubling events or feelings that are not related to school can contribute to writing anxiety or feeling blocked.

Life Gets Tough
Strategy: Seek Help

Reach out to someone who seems like they would be a good listener or supportive – a friend, a family member, a mentor.
Counseling Services

The college provides many counseling services to assist students in their educational endeavors. Quality guidance and counseling are provided by trained counselors, faculty advisors, staff, state-of-the-art information and on-line systems and up-to-date publications. All counseling services are confidential.

http://www.sbcc.edu/counselingservices/index.php
Strategy: Write about it

Writing can be a great way to work through your feelings and reduce stress.
When nothing seems to work

Strategy: Get Creative

• Draw a picture of your critic
• Change your perspective
  • For example, try getting a “bird’s eye view” of your work: spread your pages out on the floor, stand up, and look down.
• Cut your paper into pieces and tape them to the wall
• Experiment with using highlighters, crayons, markers, big pieces of paper...
• Read your paper in the voice of your favorite movie star
• Read your paper to your pet hamster
Next Steps: Explore Strategies

Activity 2:

Reflect on the writing that you did for Activity 1. What causes for Writing Anxiety did you identify? What strategies and resources might you use to address your anxiety?
Additional Resources

- Explore these additional resources, available in the Writing Center or on our website at: http://sbcc.edu/clrc/writing_center.
  - Assignment Analysis
  - The Writing Process
  - Prewriting Strategies
  - Self-Editing Strategies
  - Glossing Paragraphs
  - Structure of a General Expository Essay
Upcoming CLRC Workshops Wednesdays & Thursdays, 1 – 2 PM

- **Writing Skills Workshops**
  - YOUR Writing Process—Thursday, October 2\(^{nd}\)
  - Revising Strategies—Thursday, October 16\(^{th}\)
  - Exploring Fiction—Wednesday, October 22\(^{nd}\)
  - Essentials of Research—Wednesday, October 29\(^{th}\)
  - Introduction to Citation—Thursday, October 30\(^{th}\)
  - MLA Citation—Wednesday, November 12\(^{th}\)
  - APA Citation—Thursday, November 13\(^{th}\)

- **Learning Skills Workshops**

  [http://www.sbcc.edu/clrc/workshops.php](http://www.sbcc.edu/clrc/workshops.php)
Thank you

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Works Consulted

• “Writing Anxiety” (http://writingcenter.unc.edu/resources/handouts-demos/writing-the-paper/writing-anxiety), The Writing Center, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
• “Confronting Writing Anxiety” (http://writing2.richmond.edu/writing/wweb/writinganxiety.html), Writing Center, University of Richmond

Image Sources

• Slide 4: “Clever Thoughts” http://thegeekinvasion.com/humor/having-clever-thoughts
• Slide 8: “Hope” by Tim Etchells http://www.timetchells.com/
• Slide 11: “Success” by Demetri Martin, This is a Book http://demetrimartin.com/
• Slide 13: Writing Process Images
  Yellow bubbles with red arrows: http://ncowie.wordpress.com/2009/02/15/creative-writing-process/
  Pie chart process visual http://www.sasked.gov.sk.ca/docs/xla/ela15c1.html
  Essay writing process (spiral) http://dlibrary.acu.edu.au/Faculties/LearnDrama/essays.htm
  Flow chart http://www.eed.state.ak.us/tls/Frameworks/la/30contnt.htm
  Flow chart (circles) http://www.webster.edu/writingcenter/tips/process.shtml
  Flow chart (back and forth arrows) http://stevendkrause.com/tprw/introduction.html
• Slide 15: “Cow’s Writer’s Block” by Stik http://www.stik.biz/
• Slide 18: “Snoopy at his typewriter” by Charles Schultz http://www.peanuts.com/
• Slide 21: “Due dates are closer than they appear” by Argus Posters http://www.argus.com/

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