

12.

OVERCOMING WRITING ANXIETY AND WRITER'S BLOCK

Learning Objectives

- apply strategies for overcoming writer's block
- engage in a writing process

Getting Stuck

You may be thinking, “You could give me all the writing advice in the world, but sometimes I just get stuck! What I normally do just isn’t working!” That’s a familiar feeling for all writers. Sometimes the writing just seems to flow as if by magic, but then the flow stops cold. Your brain seems to have run out of things to say. If you just wait for the magic to come back, you might wait a long time. What professional writers know is that writing takes consistent effort. Writing comes out of a regular practice—a habit.

Professional writers also know that not everything they write ends up in the final draft. Sometimes we have to write what Anne Lamott calls a “shitty first draft.” Many successful writers will say that they are not great writers but are instead great at revising what they write. So, how do writers get going when they feel stuck or uninspired? They develop a set of habits and have more than one way to write to get the words flowing again.

You might associate the idea of writing anxiety or writer’s block with procrastination, and procrastination certainly can be either a cause or an effect of writing anxiety. But writing anxiety or writer’s block is more of a condition or state of being. We’ll start by defining the term—so that you can figure out if you have it—and then cover some ways to work through it.

What Is Writing Anxiety and How Do You Know If You

Have It?

Do you worry excessively about writing assignments? Do they make you feel uneasy or agitated? Do you have negative feelings about certain types of writing? If you answered yes to any of these questions, you might be dealing with writing anxiety. Writing anxiety simply means that a writer is experiencing negative feelings about a given writing task.

Writing anxiety is often more about the audience and/or purpose for a given writing task than it is about the mere act of writing itself. Say you just bought a new pair of headphones. You brought them home, removed all the packaging, and connected them to your phone, and they're amazing! So you decide to visit the company website, and you write a stellar review of the product, giving it a five-star rating and including descriptive details about the headphones' comfortable fit, excellent sound quality, ability to cancel outside noise, and reasonable price.

Now let's say that the next day in biology class, your instructor covers the topic of biomes, and you learn about animal habitats and biodiversity and the interrelation and interdependence of species within biomes. You find it fascinating and can't wait to learn more. But then something terrible happens. Your instructor assigns a term project on the subject. As your instructor begins to describe the length and other specifications for the report, complete with formatting guidelines, citation requirements, and a bibliography at the end, your palms start to sweat, your stomach feels uneasy, and you begin to have trouble focusing on anything else your instructor has to say. You're experiencing writing anxiety.

Writing anxiety is the condition of feeling uneasy about writing, and writer's block is what you experience when you can't manage to put words on the page. But these conditions aren't about the act of writing. Just yesterday, you wrote a great review for those cool new headphones. So why do you suddenly feel paralyzed by the thought of writing the biology essay? Let's consider some possible causes.

What Causes Writing Anxiety?

The causes of writing anxiety are many. Here are just a few:

- Inexperience with the type of writing task
- Previous negative experiences with writing (e.g., someone, maybe a teacher, has given you negative feedback or said negative things about your writing)
- Negative feelings about writing (e.g., "I'm not a good writer," "I hate writing")
- Immediate deadline
- Distant deadline
- Lack of interest in the topic
- Personal problems or life events

Your level of experience may explain why you felt comfortable writing the headphone review yet broke out in a sweat at the thought of the biology paper. If you've never written anything similar to a specific assignment, maybe you're unsure about whether you can meet the assignment requirements or the teacher's expectations. Or maybe the last time you turned in a written report for school you received negative feedback or a bad grade from the teacher. Maybe you procrastinated most of the term, and now the paper is due next week, and you feel overwhelmed. Or maybe it's the second week of the term and the deadline seems so far away that you're not motivated to write.

Knowing the cause of your writing anxiety can help you move beyond it and get writing, even if you can't completely eliminate the problem. If the topic doesn't interest you or if you're having problems at home, those probably aren't issues that will just disappear, but if you try some of the following strategies, I think you'll find that you can at least move forward with even the most anxiety inducing of writing assignments.

Strategies for Overcoming or Managing Writing Anxiety

There are a number of strategies that you can draw on to help you move past the feeling of being lost or stuck. Consider the following strategies to help you start writing again.

Just Start Writing

It might sound like it's oversimplifying the matter, but it's true. Half the battle is to just start writing. Try some strategies like freewriting or note-taking to get your writing muscles moving. Give yourself permission to write badly at this stage! Bruce Ballenger, a writer and professor of English at Boise State, explains why writing badly is an important part of the writing process: "Giving myself permission to write badly makes it much more likely that I will write what I don't expect to write, and from those surprises will come some of my best writing. Writing badly is also a convenient alternative to staring off into space and waiting for inspiration."

Sometimes the biggest problem writers have with getting started is that they feel like the writing needs to be good or well organized, or they feel like they need to start at the beginning. None of that is true. All you need to do is start.

Have you ever seen a potter make a clay pot? Before a potter can start shaping or throwing a pot, they have to bring the big wet blob of clay and slap it down on the table. It's heavy and wet and messy, but it's the essential raw material. No clay? No pot.

"Bad writing" is a lot like that. You have to dump all the words and ideas onto the table. Just get them out. Only then do you have the raw material you need to start shaping the words into something beautiful and lasting. You can wait until the revision stages to worry about shaping your writing to be its best. For now, just get the ideas on the table.

Create Smaller Tasks and Short-Term Goals

One of the biggest barriers to writing can be that the task just seems too large, and perhaps the due date is weeks away. Each of these conditions can contribute to feelings of being overwhelmed or to the tendency to procrastinate. But the remedy is simple and will help you keep writing something each week toward your deadline and toward the finished product: divide larger writing tasks into smaller, more manageable tasks, and set intermediate deadlines.

Imagine that you have a term paper that's assigned during Week 1 of an eleven-week term, and it's due during finals week. Make a list of all the tasks you can think of that need to be completed, from beginning to end, to accomplish all that the assignment requires. List the tasks, and assign yourself due dates for each task. Consider taking it a step further, and create a task table that allows you to include a column for additional notes.

Collaborate

Talk to your friends or family or to a tutor in your college writing center about your ideas for your essay. Sometimes talking about your ideas is the best way to flesh them out and get more ideas flowing. Write down notes during or just after your conversation.

Classmates are a great resource because they're studying the same subjects as you and working on the same assignments. Talk to them often, and form study groups. Ask people to look at your ideas or writing and to give you feedback. Set goals and hold each other accountable for meeting deadlines (a little friendly competition can be motivating!).

Talk to other potential readers. Ask them what they would expect from this type of writing. Meet with a tutor in your campus writing center. Be sure to come to the appointment prepared with a printed copy of the assignment and a short list of what you want to work on, along with a printed copy of your essay.

Embrace Reality

Don't imagine the situation of your writing assignment to be any better or worse than it really is. There are some important truths for you to recognize:

- Focus on what you do best rather than fretting about your perceived weaknesses.
- Acknowledge that writing can be difficult and that all you need to do is do your best.
- Recognize what might be new or unfamiliar about the type of writing that you're doing.
- Remember that you're a student and that you're supposed to be experiencing things that are new and unfamiliar (new formats, new audiences, new subject matter, new processes, new approaches, etc.).
- Repeat the mantra "It doesn't have to be perfect; it just has to be *done*."

Seek Out Experts

If you can, find more experienced writers (especially related to the type of writing that you're doing) and ask them questions. Sometimes, this might just mean a friend or family member who's already taken a couple of years of college courses. Maybe it's a fellow student who has already taken the class you're in now. Also, the tutors in your college writing center can be a big help at any stage in the writing process. Give them a call and make an appointment. And don't forget the expert you see all the time throughout any class that you take: your instructor. Ask your instructor for suggestions. That's what they're there for.

Another way to learn from the experience of others is to look at examples of other pieces of writing of the type that you're working on. How is this piece organized? Does it make use of source material? What sort of tone does it use? If you don't know where to find examples, ask your instructor. If they don't have them at the ready, they'll likely be able to give you some suggestions about where to find some.

Key Takeaways

- You're not alone if you experience writer's block or writing anxiety, something many people, including published writers, experience.
- Successful writing requires writing a lot and getting ideas on the page, without worrying about writing well.
- For long-term writing projects, make a schedule.
- For all writing assignments, get feedback from peers, your instructor, and/or the writing center at your college or university.