

# Reducing Writing Anxiety by Improving Self-Efficacy Beliefs

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**Abstract:** Writing anxiety is an issue that affects students in all classes, but especially in writing-intensive courses like English language arts classes. However, students with writing anxiety exhibit a wide range of behaviors, which can make it difficult for teachers to diagnose and prevent that anxiety. Research has highlighted several possible solutions; in particular, studies most consistently suggest improving students' writing self-efficacy as a means of reducing writing anxiety. Several research-based strategies, such as the use of peer reviews and the process writing approach, have proven successful in improving self-efficacy beliefs. Teachers should research the best strategies to reduce anxiety in their students, but should ultimately encourage students to believe that they can succeed.

## Introduction

Imagine that you are a high school English teacher with over one hundred students, all of whom have varying opinions about the importance of writing and about their writing abilities. It is no surprise that some students do not enjoy writing. Some of your students may audibly moan when you assign writing tasks, so you pay close attention to these students' work. If they perform poorly, do you believe this is a result of lack of effort? What about the students who do not show physical reactions, but instead internalize their dislike of writing? And what if this feeling is not really a general dislike, but rather a fear of inability? This disposition is known as writing anxiety, and it affects students both academically and emotionally.

To further illustrate, imagine that these students are in your classroom:

*Student A is a quiet, well-behaved student who excels in most of his classes, including English. When asked to complete group tasks, he often chooses to work alone. You notice that on tests he erases and rewrites his answers before moving onto the next question. He takes nearly twice as long as most students to complete writing tasks and sometimes takes his class work home with him. Despite this, he usually earns A's and B's on assignments, though on the days that major writing assignments are due, Student A is visibly exhausted.*

*Student B is outgoing and social, but it is difficult to engage her in independent tasks. She is able to articulate ideas during group work and she often raises her hand during whole-class discussions. When working silently on independent writing tasks, however, Student B regularly distracts those around her by starting off-task conversations. When she does engage in independent writing work, it is clear that she rushes through the questions. You can tell by her answers that she is usually on the right track, but often her answers are so brief or unclear that she only receives partial credit.*

*Student C is barely passing any of his classes. You have noticed that his writing skills are below grade level. You differentiate instruction and work with Student C individu-*

*ally when possible, but he frequently skips your class, sometimes more than once per week. During independent work, he sometimes complains that he is ill and asks to use the restroom. When you assign writing tasks worth a large portion of the grade, Student C is usually absent on the due date. Sometimes he does not submit any work at all.*

All three of these students are affected by writing anxiety, which exhibits itself in very different but equally problematic ways. Student A submits good-quality writing, but his anxiety causes him to procrastinate and to doubt himself. His good behavior may make it less likely for teachers to notice that he is struggling. Student B makes poor behavioral choices, a defense mechanism that might redirect teachers' attention from her writing anxiety to her attitude. Student C struggles in many other areas, both in academics and attendance, so it may be difficult to identify writing anxiety as part of his problem.

How can teachers change these negative dispositions that seem so deeply ingrained in students? Research suggests several strategies, and most of them involve addressing students' self-efficacy beliefs. Because writing is such a personal task and draws on both cognitive and affective processes, students' emotions are often intertwined with their ability or perceived ability to perform on written assignments (Pajares, Johnson & Usher 2007). Imagine if the above students all believed they were capable of succeeding. Student A would not second guess his answers and could come to school well-rested. Student B would not feel insecure when working individually and would be able to focus on her assignments. Student C would not become nauseated at the thought of submitting writing assignments and would likely have fewer absences.

Writing anxiety is a complex issue with more than one possible remedy. However, improving students' self-efficacy beliefs has been shown to reduce writing anxiety for whole classes of students. In order to do so, teachers must first deepen their understanding of writing anxiety, self-efficacy beliefs, and the research-based strategies used to improve students' dispositions.

## Trends in Writing Anxiety

Writing apprehension, a term synonymous with writing anxiety, was first defined by Daly (1978) as "a situation and subject-specific individual difference concerned with people's general tendencies to approach or avoid writing" (p. 10). Their research found that students with writing anxiety exhibit avoidance tendencies as depicted in the hypothetical examples above. According to Daly and Miller (1975), students with writing anxiety may have a record of not completing written work or of being frequently absent for in-class writing activities. These students may seldom complete complex written homework assignments or avoid participating in extracurricular activities that require writing. Additionally, students who exhibit writing anxiety tend to choose professions they believe require less writing (Pajares Johnson, & Usher, 2007). Clearly, writing anxiety affects students well beyond high school.

Research also indicates that writing anxiety is influenced by age and gender. Pajares et al. (2007) found that female students experience less writing anxiety than male students. Female students also reported higher self-efficacy beliefs and mastery experiences than male students, which supports the notion that self-efficacy beliefs

and writing anxiety are negatively correlated. Additionally, female students reported receiving better grades in writing than male students, which may help explain why they experience less writing anxiety.

Pajares et al. (2007) found that students of both genders generally have higher self-efficacy beliefs and lower levels of writing anxiety in elementary school. Between elementary and middle school, students' self-efficacy beliefs greatly decrease and generally remain at this lower level throughout high school. This may be due to the increased demand of academic tasks and feelings of inadequacy when approaching them.

Students are not the only ones affected by writing anxiety in the classroom. According to Applebee and Langer (2006), teachers generally feel they are not adequately prepared to address writing anxiety. Furthermore, in a study of college composition professors, Apawu and Anani (2017) found that many teachers are completely unaware of the existence of writing anxiety. Of those teachers who are aware, some do not believe that writing anxiety impacts students' performance at all. This indicates that further professional development is needed to bring awareness to the topic of writing anxiety and to prepare teachers to combat it.

## **Self-Efficacy Beliefs and Writing Anxiety**

Self-efficacy is a person's perception of his or her ability to achieve a goal or master a skill. It is a learned trait that can be influenced by a number of factors including motivation, interest, perceived value of task, and disposition (Troia, Harbaugh, Shankland, Wolbers, and Lawrence 2012). Several studies have found a correlation between self-efficacy and writing anxiety. For example, Berk and Ünal (2013) found that writing disposition is a significant predictor of anxiety: if a student's self-efficacy about writing improves, that student's anxiety about writing decreases.

### ***Motivation and Performance***

Improving students' self-efficacy is also helpful in improving writing ability and motivation, both of which influence writing anxiety. Troia et al. (2012) found that students with higher writing self-efficacy approach writing tasks differently than those with lower self-efficacy beliefs. A greater sense of self-efficacy leads students to aim at both mastery and performance goals. Mastery means that students are trying to master a particular task (such as writing a strong thesis statement) while performance means that they are trying to accomplish a particular performance benchmark (such as earning an A). Both goals were associated with greater writing motivation and higher writing scores. In contrast, a lower sense of self-efficacy leads students to avoid writing, and is associated with moderate-to-low writing motivation and lower writing scores.

The study also found a correlation between self-efficacy and writing performance: students who believed themselves capable of completing a task were more successful at doing so. Students who perceived a writing task to be meaningful also had higher motivation in completing the task and earned higher scores (Troia et al. 2012). Naturally, students who perceive writing tasks in a positive light experience less anxiety when asked to complete them.

## ***Evaluation and Writing Anxiety***

Bayat (2014) found that students' writing anxiety often stems from their fear of being evaluated. According to Bayat's study, students with lower writing self-efficacy are apprehensive about engaging in writing tasks because they worry that the grades or feedback they receive will mirror their self-perceived ability. However, it is important to note that the manner in which students receive feedback can influence anxiety. The study showed that students with anxiety who received feedback at the end of the writing process had no change in anxiety levels. However, students who received feedback throughout the writing process had less writing anxiety at the end of the study, even though these students still feared evaluations. This suggests that teachers should use feedback as a tool for improvement rather than solely for assessment. Doing so encourages students to see writing as an area in which they can improve, which promotes healthy self-efficacy and reduces anxiety.

### **Strategies for Reducing Writing Anxiety by Improving Self-Efficacy Beliefs**

#### ***Purposeful Feedback***

As mentioned above, one of the simplest ways teachers can improve students' self-efficacy beliefs is to give thoughtful feedback during the writing process. The aim of such feedback is to promote cognitive growth through affective means – by making students feel better about writing, teachers can help them become stronger writers. Such feedback links directly to self-efficacy because feedback influences how a student perceives his or her ability to successfully complete a task.

Di Loreto and McDonough (2014) studied the types of feedback students found most helpful. Students in the study found instructor feedback particularly helpful in indicating whether their writing was on track while they were working on assignments. Feedback on the organization of their written work was particularly linked to an increase in confidence; the researchers believed that this was because students perceive organization to be within their control. In contrast, feedback on language and word usage caused the most anxiety in students, perhaps because word choice is a difficult and sometimes daunting aspect of writing. Overall, the majority of students reported that instructor feedback was helpful for improving their writing ability. Furthermore, students reported lower anxiety levels on subsequent writing tasks in the study.

The manner in which students receive feedback is also important. Pajares et al. (2007) found that female students generally receive better grades and more positive feedback than male students do, so it is important for teachers to consider how the feedback they offer their male students can be used to promote self-efficacy. Pajares et al. (2007) also note the importance of how feedback is framed: “it pays dividends for a teacher to provide students with feedback focusing on how far they have come rather than how far they have yet to travel” (p. 116). In other words, teachers should make students aware of what they do well while offering suggestions on how to continue growing.

### ***Peer Reviews***

Peer reviewing is another method of providing students with feedback on their writing during the writing process. It involves students working collaboratively to workshop one another's writing. Fox (1980) analyzed the effectiveness of peer reviews in comparison to traditional instructor-based feedback in relation to writing anxiety and performance and found that such workshops help decrease writing anxiety and increase self-efficacy. Students in the control group worked independently and received feedback solely from the instructor at the end of the writing process. Students in the experimental group worked collaboratively to workshop one another's writing at several points throughout the writing process; additionally, the instructor held writing conferences at the end of the process in lieu of assigning grades. The study found that students in the experimental group had significantly lower writing anxiety at the end of the study while students in the control group had no significant change in anxiety. This research suggests that group work and frequent feedback help reduce writing anxiety. The study also implies that teachers can reduce writing anxiety by providing opportunities for students to engage in low-stakes, ungraded writing activities.

### ***Writing Practice***

Fischer, Meyers, and Dobelbower (2017) found that a lack of writing practice results in higher anxiety levels and lower self-efficacy beliefs. They studied college students with writing anxiety in a writing-intensive course; many students believed that they had not received enough writing practice in previous courses. Interestingly, despite the complexity of the writing tasks in the course, the students reported a decrease in anxiety levels throughout the semester as a result of having more opportunities to practice writing through assignments and activities.

This unfortunate trend in lack of writing practice is not specific to college. Applebee and Langer (2006) found that over half of the population of eighth grade students they surveyed indicated that 40% or less of ELA class time was devoted to writing instruction per year. The researchers argued that the reason for lack of writing practice in the classroom stems from the increased focus on high-stakes standardized tests, which push teachers to focus more heavily on reading skills. Yet as Graham and Hebert (2010) note, even given the focus on standardized tests, this distinction between reading and writing instruction is not necessary. Their study reported that 93% of students showed improved reading scores when asked to create written responses after reading. Therefore, additional writing practice can improve students' writing self-efficacy and writing scores as well as their reading scores.

### ***Process vs. Product***

Studies have shown that product-based writing evaluations, which focus solely on the end goal of an assignment, do not improve students' writing skills (Bayat, 2014). On the other hand, a process-writing approach encourages students to see writing as a process rather than focusing solely on a final product. That is, students should understand that writing involves a series of small steps, including prewriting and revising, and not just the rapid production of a final result. In his study on the pro-

cess approach, Bayat (2014) found that a process-writing strategy not only reduced anxiety, but also improved students' writing quality in terms of grammar, rhetorical structure, content, and creativity. Additionally, Applebee and Langer (2006) argued that this approach to writing instruction offers a new perspective to students who may believe writing skills are inherited traits.

## Conclusion

Writing anxiety is multi-faceted with numerous causes and effects. Overall, though, research has shown that it is a learned trait. Because of this, teachers have the ability to implement strategies and create learning environments to reduce writing anxiety. Working to improve students' self-efficacy beliefs is a good starting point to do so.

Because students' writing self-efficacy beliefs generally decreases between elementary and middle school, teachers should seek ways to encourage students in these transitional years and build their confidence throughout high school. To do so, teachers should focus on engagement, collaboration, and feedback. Feedback should be purposeful, specific, be couched in praise, and should be linked to the writing process; it should also be given frequently and should be equally positive for both male and female students. Additionally, teachers should provide students with ample writing practice in formal and informal tasks. This practice should include breaking the writing process down into smaller, manageable parts.

Reducing students' writing anxiety may seem daunting, but it is a worthy cause. Encouraging students to believe that they can succeed in writing tasks will promote students' academic and emotional success. Teachers should start by understanding the issue, its causes and effects, and the available research-based strategies to reduce anxiety. The above strategies are just a sample of successful approaches. Ultimately, it is up to teachers to consider which strategies will be most beneficial for their students.

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### About the Author

Katie McGee received her B.A. in English Creative Writing and her M.Ed from the University of Toledo. She looks forward to teaching in her own classroom in the fall. She is interested in improving motivation and engagement in writing in the ELA classroom.