

Understanding Writing Anxiety

What is Writing Anxiety?

“Writing anxiety” is an informal term often used to describe feelings of nervousness, tension, and hopelessness that people experience when presented with a writing task (Hjortshoj, 2001). These feelings often contribute to negative associations with writing, leading writers at all levels to procrastinate and in some cases, avoid writing tasks altogether.

Why Do These Feelings Develop?

A person’s relationship to writing is shaped by a variety of unique experiences, so sources of writing anxiety tend to be individually specific. However, as Boice (1993) notes, writing anxiety often stems from unfamiliarity with prewriting strategies, negative experiences with writing-related criticism, and maintaining unmanageably high standards.

As a student, you may also find yourself experiencing writing anxiety when:

- Adjusting to a new or unfamiliar type of writing
- Facing a deadline
- Approaching a particular step in the writing process
- Writing about a subject that doesn’t interest you
- Writing in a new or unfamiliar dialect, language, or cultural context
- Writing during periods of high stress in your personal and/or academic life

Strategies for Managing Writing Anxiety

Commit to developing your own prewriting process.

Prewriting processes allow writers to plan, organize, and think through ideas before beginning a writing task. Experiment with different prewriting strategies and see which combinations of activities help you write most effectively. As you do this, establish a few prewriting routines that you can apply when approaching different writing tasks. For example, you may find that one set of strategies is better suited for writing lab reports, while another set of strategies is better suited for writing essays. For tips on prewriting and drafting, check out our resources under the “Writing Process” tab on the [MU OWL](#).

When possible, write in a place that makes you feel comfortable and focused.

Where you write can positively or negatively impact your writing experience. When choosing a place to write, it’s important to find a location that makes you feel relaxed, but also allows you to concentrate on the task at hand.

Consider: Do you prefer to write in public or private spaces? How affected are you by factors like lighting and temperature? Do you like to snack while you write?

Integrate writing into your daily routine.

Writing a little every day can help make the act of writing seem less daunting. This can include responding to prompts, journaling, or freewriting. If a specific genre or type of writing makes you feel anxious, try searching for prompts or activities online to help guide your daily writing practice.

Create a writing schedule for major projects.

If you tend to procrastinate, creating a writing schedule for major projects can help ensure that you work at a consistent, manageable pace. Consider: how much time can you realistically spend writing per week? Approximately how long will each section of your project take? Everyone approaches scheduling differently, and it's important that you do what works best for you. However, ultimately, your writing schedule should help you break down writing tasks and make writing projects feel less overwhelming.

Seek out support.

Writing doesn't have to be a solitary activity and working with a writing partner or a writing group can make the writing process feel less isolating. Work to support one another by setting group goals, discussing ideas, sharing writing strategies, offering encouragement, and providing constructive feedback (Cui et al., 2022). You can also reach out to your instructor or schedule an appointment with a writing center tutor.

Recognize your strengths.

Writing anxiety is often linked to self-doubt and self-criticism. Instead, take a moment to reflect on your strengths. For inspiration, take a look at this list of writing-related skills compiled by the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill Writing Center:

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

Remember that writing is a process.

The process of writing requires thought, planning, drafting, and revision. You don't need to write a "perfect" paper in one session and making mistakes is an essential part of improving your writing skills. We all have to start somewhere, don't we?

Conclusion

Writing anxiety is a common experience on college campuses. However, the good news is that there are plenty of strategies to help you overcome it. Take advantage of the resources available to you and determine which approaches provide the most support. Remember that no one is perfect and **all** writers need time, practice, and feedback to improve.

References

- Boice, R. (1993). Writing Blocks and Tacit Knowledge. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 64(1), 19–54. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2959976>.
- Cui, W., Zhang, J., & Driscoll, D. L. (2022). Graduate Writing Groups: Evidence-Based Practices for Advanced Graduate Writing Support. *Writing Center Journal*, 40(2), 85–102. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27203767>.
- Hjortshoj, K. (2001). *Understanding Writing Blocks*. Oxford UP.
- University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill Writing Center. (2016). *Writing Anxiety*. Retrieved from writingcenter.unc.edu/.

Additional Reading Material:

[Writer's Anxiety](#)

[Conquering Writing Anxiety](#)

[Perfectionism: Overcoming All-or-Nothing Thinking](#)

[Shitty First Drafts](#)