

Coping with Writing Anxiety

Many of us become anxious or blocked because of negative or difficult experiences with writing, or because we place unmanageable expectations on ourselves. Here are some suggestions to help you cope with anxieties about writing.

Write something. This may sound like a silly suggestion to someone who is having trouble writing anything. But, if you get started early and write regularly (every day), the habit of writing may itself help you work through anxious moments. Be willing to try new tactics and to write without censoring yourself.

Talk about your paper. Brainstorm with your instructor, a friend, or a Writing Studio consultant, and write things down the way that you speak them. When you are trying to get words on the page, it's important not to worry about correct usage or about sounding smart. Be sure that talking about your paper is accompanied by writing (even just note-taking, or lists, maps, outlines, pictures...); talking shouldn't serve as a substitute for writing.

Break it down. When a writing project seems daunting, separate the larger project into parts and create manageable tasks for each part. Set small goals with specific deadlines, and focus your energy by reviewing each task in your head.

Picture a sympathetic audience. Imagine an interested reader, someone who is looking for the best in your work rather than looking to find fault with it. Many professors may tell you to envision a reader who is intelligent, enthusiastic, and unfamiliar (or only somewhat familiar) with your topic.

Identify your strengths. Often, we are harsher critics of our own writing than anyone else might be. To quiet your inner critic, make a list of the things you do well. Do you explain things well? Do you notice interesting things about the texts that you read? Do you often see connections between texts or among various authors' works? List your strengths. and then use them to counteract the efforts of your inner critic.

Think of yourself as an apprentice. Sometimes we experience anxiety because the situations in which we are writing have changed. Maybe you are writing in a novel format, or for a different audience, or about subject matter that is new to you. Try to learn as much, and gain as many skills in that area, as you can without expecting yourself to have mastered everything in a short while.

Remember that writing is a process. There is always more to be said on a topic, and a writer will always be able to imagine new and more interesting ways of saying it. At any point in time, a writer offers readers her or his current insight into a topic.

Get support. Choose a writing partner, someone you trust to help and encourage you. Share pieces of your writing for feedback, and talk to your writing partner about your ideas, your writing process, your worries, and the like. Ask your writing partner and other colleagues about what they do when they get stuck. Form or join a writing group to help keep deadlines and to get constructive and supportive criticism. You can find writing partners and form writing groups at the Writing Studio. You might also talk with your academic advisor or your residence hall advisor, or schedule an appointment at the Psychological and Counseling Center to talk about anxieties and concerns that extend beyond writing.

The following resources were consulted to make this handout: the Writing Center at the University of North Carolina, the Purdue OWL, and the Writing Resources of the Princeton Writing Center.