



The SPEAKING & WRITING Center

Writing Anxiety

Most people, at some time or another, become nervous about writing. Whether it is only a few paragraphs long, or a twenty page research essay, a writing assignment can seem overwhelming. Here are some tips for figuring out if you have writing anxiety and ways you can deal with that anxiety.

How do I know if I have writing anxiety?

Many people have writing anxiety and do not realize it. Here is a list of signs that indicate you have writing anxiety:

- **Procrastinating:** While most people will occasionally wait until the last minute to do an assignment, a person with writing anxiety will almost always put off completing the assignment. This is usually caused by a fear of not getting a good grade or not creating a “good enough” essay.
- **Thinking about the assignment makes you nervous:** It’s one thing to get nervous about an essay the night before it’s due, and you haven’t started on it yet. It’s quite another to be worried about an assignment weeks before it’s due.
- **You can’t write about the assignment when you try:** Your high levels of anxiety may be preventing you from even starting your work. This is known as “writer’s block.” While it does happen to everyone every now and then, if you experience writer’s block whenever you try to write, you may have writing anxiety.
- **You dwell on the assignment for too long:** It can be useful to take a long time to think about your assignment; it gives you time to organize your thoughts and come up with new ideas. However, if you spend a lot of time thinking about your subject without developing any ideas (or worse, thinking of all your ideas as “stupid”) you may have writing anxiety.

What causes writing anxiety?

Writing anxiety can be detrimental to your writing abilities. It can make you put off completing your work, which can lead to you not writing as well as you could. It’s important to know what’s causing your anxiety so that you can learn how to deal with it.

Causes of Writing Anxiety

- **Expectations for yourself:** You may put off writing your paper because you want to create the “perfect” paper. The truth is, there is no such thing as a perfect paper; a paper can always be improved upon. Everyone wants to get a good grade. You want to do the best that you possibly can, but you may feel that even your best efforts will not be good enough. You may be afraid that if you receive a bad grade on this assignment, it will affect your entire grade for the class.
- **Expectations of your professor/peers:** You may feel that your professor won’t like your paper, or won’t think it’s advanced enough or intelligent enough for the class. If you have to orally present your paper to the class, or hand out copies for the class to read, you may feel that they will judge you as a person based on your writing abilities.

How can I deal with writing anxiety?

Thankfully, there are lots of ways to deal with writing anxiety. The two most important tips to deal with writing anxiety are to prepare for your assignment in advance and to not become overwhelmed by the task at hand. Here are more specific tips for dealing with writing anxiety.

Begin productively thinking about the assignment:

- Once you know the assignment is due, you should begin working on it. Start by determining exactly what the assignment is asking for. Do you need to do any of the following?: research a topic, come up with your own ideas/interpretation, analyze a work, summarize a chapter, etc.
- Often people will delay writing because they are not sure exactly what their professor expects them to do. If you are not sure, you should ask your professor, classmates, or come to the Speaking and Writing Center where one of our tutors can help you interpret the assignment.
- Come up with a few ideas about what you can write about. There are often different ways of completing the same assignment. If you're stuck, you can always ask your classmates what they're doing to help you get ideas for your own essay (just be sure not to use their ideas!).
- Break down your assignment into parts. Oftentimes when you think about an essay, particularly a long one, you can become overwhelmed. Breaking down your assignment into manageable parts (introduction, main points, conclusion, etc.) will help you to overcome this.

Brainstorming

- Once you have an idea about what you want to write about you should begin brainstorming.
- Brainstorming helps you to come up with new ideas and gives you a way to organize your thoughts to see which of your ideas may work best for your assignment.
- Brainstorming can take many forms. See our handout on Brainstorming if you need help coming up with ideas.

Make an outline

- Creating an outline will help you to further organize your thoughts and give your essay structure. Some professors even require you to have an outline (see our Basic Outline handout).

Begin writing a first draft

- It's always important to have a first draft so that you can go back and edit anything you may not be satisfied with. Remember that a first draft does not have to be perfect.
- For a first draft, it's more important to get your ideas out than it is to have your essay perfectly written. If you come up with an idea along the way, even if it doesn't necessarily fit in right away, go ahead and write it out anyway. You may find that your new idea will work somewhere else or help to develop one of your other points.

Write your second/final draft

- Improve upon the ideas of your first draft and work on the overall organization. Does your essay still follow your outline?
- Once your paper is organized, work on sentence structure and grammar issues that you may have.
- Go over your work several times before you turn it in. Keep editing your paper until you are happy with it. It's useful to spend some time away from your completed paper, and then come back to it with a clear mind; you may catch mistakes you missed earlier.
- It's also useful to read your paper aloud to yourself. Most people will fill in missing words (especially short words like "the," "a," "then," etc.) when they are reading their work to themselves. You are more likely to catch errors or missing words this way.
- Some people may only need to do one or two drafts besides their first draft to finish their paper. Others may need to write more in order to feel satisfied with their overall work. While it can help to rewrite and edit your paper several times, it's important not to dwell on your essay. At some point, you will have to be satisfied with your work even if it's not "perfect" to you.