

Writing Apprehension: An Unwritten Page for the Book of Anxiety

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Educators and writers have long been aware that the composing process affects individuals in different ways and to different degrees (Daly & Wilson, 1983). During the considerable amount of interpersonal communication research conducted in the 1970s, a negative effect of this process began to distinguish itself as a form of anxiety that was specific to written communication (Cheng, Horwitz, & Schallert, 1999). In 1975, Daly and Miller termed this writing anxiety 'writing apprehension'. In the past 30 years it has gained further notoriety, largely via the Writing Across the Curriculum movement and its interest in enhancing university students' writing performance (Martinez, Kock, & Cass, 2011). However, despite the interest this writing impediment has attracted, it is a long way from being the subject of thorough research, and thus a long way from being effectively addressed by mental health practitioners. This paper will examine writing apprehension in terms of its conceptualization, prognosis, diagnosis, and treatment, in order to draw attention to the seriousness of this condition and gaps in the literature regarding it.

A Closer Look at the Conceptualization of Writing Apprehension

According to Daly and Wilson (1983), writing apprehension "refers to a situation and subject specific individual difference associated with a person's tendencies to approach or avoid situations perceived to potentially require writing accompanied by some amount of perceived evaluation" (p. 327). As noted earlier, this specificity necessarily distinguishes writing apprehension from other anxiety disorders, such as generalized anxiety disorder (non-specific) or communication apprehension (specific to interpersonal communication) (Cheng et al., 1999). While the initial research on writing apprehension was sparked by discoveries related to communication apprehension, further research indicated that communication anxieties are specific to mode of communication (Burgoon & Hale, 1983). Therefore, writing apprehension should be considered as occupying a distinctive category.

Originally, writing apprehension was conceptualized as a single continuous person dimension; individuals with high apprehension towards writing would find the practice punishing rather than rewarding (triggering avoidance) whereas low apprehension individuals would be confident in their writing abilities (Daly & Miller, 1975). More recently, however, writing apprehension has been argued to be a multidimensional construct, which includes both dispositional and situational attitudes (Martinez et al., 2011). Further, it has been suggested that high apprehension individuals may evidence their anxiety towards the

composing process via physiological, cognitive, and behavioural effects (Martinez et al., 2011). These effects could include anxious somatic reactions, preoccupation with the potential evaluation of others, preoccupation with one's own perceived ability, procrastination, or even avoidance and withdrawal (Cheng, 2004). Additionally, it is worth noting (in order to understand the breadth of writing apprehension) that the psychodynamic perspective identifies three categories of writing apprehensive individuals. Houp (as cited in Martinez et al., 2011) identifies these as nonstarters, noncompleters, and nonexhibitors, and suggests these distinct categories stem from one's early experiences.

Correlates of Writing Apprehension

While a direct causation of writing apprehension has yet to materialize in the literature, several strong correlates have been empirically demonstrated (Daly & Wilson, 1983). These correlates are posited to produce bidirectional effects and thus are essential to understanding the nature and breadth of writing apprehension.

Self-esteem, writing specific self-esteem, and writing self-efficacy

Daly and Wilson (1983) have shown that self-esteem, which is derived from others' social responses to one's presentation of self, has been shown to have an inverse relationship with writing apprehension. Unsurprisingly, their research revealed that writing specific self-esteem has an even stronger inverse relationship with writing apprehension—though this relationship is not present with all facets of writing specific self-esteem. For example, the accuracy or honesty a person perceives in his/her own writing has an insignificant relationship with writing apprehension. Contrarily, the degree to which a person considers his/her writing 'good' or 'bad', organized, meaningful, interesting, forceful, or graceful, is strongly associated. Other studies have shown that writing self-efficacy, a similar construct which refers to a person's belief in his/her ability to write, also has a negative relationship with writing apprehension (Martinez et al., 2011). This belief is influenced by one's own experiential history, including physiological and emotional reactions, past events, and verbal feedback from others.

Writing competency and writing performance

Writing apprehension has also been shown to possess an inverse relationship with writing competency and performance. In their 1981 study, Faigley et al. found that individuals with high writing apprehension (apprehensives) scored below non-apprehensives on all but two measures of test writing-related skills. With regards to writing performance on essays, they found that the essays produced by apprehensives tended to be significantly shorter than the essays

produced by non-apprehensives, and furthermore, evidenced less syntactically 'mature' or 'fluent' content. Additionally, apprehensives were less able than their non-apprehensive counterparts when it came to developing their ideas. In addition to this study, more recent research (contrasting with earlier studies) suggests that students suffering from higher levels of anxiety score lower on essays, written exams, and standardized tests (Martinez et al., 2011). Overall, the body of research done in this area seems to suggest moderate associations (Daly & Wilson, 1983), which are potentially related to the tendency of apprehensives to avert writing activities—precisely the practice that is needful for the development and maintenance of writing competencies (Faigley et al., 1981).

Other correlates

In addition to the correlates already mentioned, Daly and Wilson (1983) further add to the list. They write:

The findings suggest that apprehension is, to a limited degree, positively related to oral communication apprehension, reading attitudes, and receiver anxiety; inversely related to tolerance for ambiguity, math anxiety, and alienation; and unrelated to trait anxiety, locus of control, dogmatism, machiavellianism, science attitudes, anomie, and social approval seeking. (p. 338)

Many of these correlates adhere well with the origins of the conceptualization of writing apprehension and seem to suggest good convergent and discriminant validity for the construct.

Significance of Prognosis

Writing apprehension is posited to have a significant impact on the success and direction of an individual's life. According to Daly and Miller (1975), this should come as no surprise:

Our age demands competence in writing. Naming an occupation where writing is not a requirement is difficult. Although it may not be a composition or essay that is required, most individuals must daily face the demand for writing competency. (p. 244)

Studies have shown that writing apprehension can influence academic decisions such as major selection, teacher rated likelihood of success, attitudes, GPA scores, and even occupational decisions (Daly & Shamo, 1976, 1978; Daly & Wilson, 1983; Faigley et al., 1981; Martinez et al., 2011). With regards to the influence on decision-making, apprehensives follow a simple formula: they avoid educational paths or occupations that they perceive to require higher writing competency. Essentially, they tend to a life-style of writing avoidance (Daly &

Shamo, 1976; Daly & Wilson, 1983). This pattern makes apprehensives extremely unlikely to improve on their own, as avoidance makes them unlikely to take steps toward developing writing competency and results in increased anxiety over time (Faigley et al., 1981; Martinez et al., 2011). It is important to note how pervasive and potent these effects are; writing apprehension demands a concerted approach and effective solution.

Mark: Introducing an Apprehensive

In her dissertation, Bell (1984) presents the picture of an apprehensive named Mark. Her description provides a greater depth of insight on how the tendencies and correlates discussed above take shape in an actual individual. Mark was a tall, bearded freshman at the University of Miami. He attended The Principles of Prose 1 course (which landed him in Bell's study), which was mandatory for him because of the score on his SAT exam. He fell just two points shy of being exempt from the class.

On the first day of class, Bell (1984) observed that Mark had resigned himself to the back corner in the last row. Overall, he presented a very negative, avoidant demeanor. He reported being nonplused by the classroom and assumed that his fellow students must have been forced to attend this class as he was.

When probed for his opinion on writing, Mark reported that he was never comfortable with composing, and felt that he had no control over the process (Bell, 1984). Though he admitted he understood writing to be necessary and valuable in society, he felt that writing really had no place in his life aside from short notes or letters to friends or family. Additionally, he revealed that he had negative past experiences with writing. A specific example included his being rushed into 'cursive writing' early, only to feel judged and criticized for his messiness. With these past experiences in mind, Mark identified the elements of writing that caused him the greatest anxiety as being teacher evaluation, and negative self-efficacy for the neatness of his handwriting. Furthermore, he demonstrated 'resigned acceptance' for the punishing feelings afforded to him by the writing process, and rushed his assignments in order to cope with those feelings. Summing up her initial observations, Bell characterized Mark as a probable high apprehensive writer.

Assessment

Prior to the development of a formal assessment method or tool, recognition of persons with writing anxiety was primarily made via the observations of educators (Daly & Miller, 1975). Feeling that the potential for incorrect impressions and misinterpretations of behaviour made this vehicle of assessment unsatisfactory, Daly and Miller produced a self-report inventory to measure the

construct they had newly termed in 1975. Today, this instrument is commonly known as the Writing Apprehension Scale (WAS).

Initial Instrument Construction

Daly and Miller (1975) began development of the WAS by generating 63 seven step Likert-type items. The items were based on then-present-day communication apprehension measurement items, and adapted to writing-specific situations. In the spring of 1974, after it was completed, a sample of 164 undergraduate students at the West Virginia University completed the 63 item test voluntarily. The subjects were drawn from basic composition and interpersonal communication courses and reported diverse social, economic, and family backgrounds. None refused testing. After collecting the results, an examination of the factor loadings suggested the feasibility of only one factor. Therefore, Dally and Miller dropped all items below a loading of .60, and the WAS was left with 26 items accounting for 46% of the total variance. Additionally, it was determined that in the event that the instrument should see usage outside of the classroom, classroom-specific items would be omitted. The mean score was 55.27, with a standard deviation of 15.37. Split-half reliability for the refined test was .940, test-retest reliability after a week was .923, and the reliability coefficient was .921. The final 26 items included statements such as "I avoid writing" (p. 246), "I am afraid of writing essays when I know they will be evaluated", and "My mind seems to go blank when I start to work on a composition". It also included statement reversals such as "I feel confident in my ability to clearly express my ideas in writing" (p. 246) and "I like seeing my thoughts on paper".

Towards a Multi-Dimensional Theory

Since its inauguration, the WAS has played a formative role in the definition of writing apprehension and appeared pervasively in its investigation (Bline et al., 2001). Rather than being discarded in favour of newer measures, the WAS has been retrofitted numerous times to address newer theories and more specific needs. For example, targeted versions of the WAS have been generated for business majors, communication majors, and English as a second or foreign language speakers (Cheng et al., 1999; Rechten & Dizinno, 1997). Additionally, the reformatted tests appeal to the more recent multi-dimensional theory of writing apprehension. Unfortunately the appropriate dimensionality has yet to be determined; between the original and revised tests, one, two, three, six, and seven factors have been argued as appropriate for the measurement (Bline et al., 2001; Rechten & Dizinno, 1997). Nonetheless, the WAS is still the most commonly used instrument to measure writing anxiety and the literature seems to support this by evidencing Daly and Miller's (1975) WAS as a measure for a robust construct comprised of multiple factors (Bline et al., 2001).

Interventions

Many researchers have recommended the application of well-researched treatment techniques to writing apprehension, but little action has been taken on these recommendations (Salovey & Haar, 1990). The majority of the treatment research in this area has sprung from an educational perspective, which is primarily focused on correcting the writing process in learning environments as a means of alleviating writing apprehension, rather than approaching it as a situation specific anxiety (Pfeifer, 1981; Salovey & Haar, 1990). There is a fair amount of literature that endorses the use of alternative methods of classroom instruction in the place of more traditional ones (Pfeifer, 1981). Such methods are aimed at countering debilitating anxiety in the students and contributing towards the development of skills associated with more effective written product. Other studies however suggest both traditional and alternative approaches are effective in treating writing apprehension (Fox, 1980).

Writing Process Treatment

The most common method of treating writing apprehension is based on a hypothesis purported by teachers of writing (Salovey & Haar, 1990). They contend that writing apprehension is the result of inefficient composing methods, and therefore, treatment should focus on helping apprehensives develop a strategic and heuristic approach to writing. They argue that this approach will allow apprehensives to better 'juggle' the complex cognitive skills and resources that writing demands. An example of this style of treatment might include teaching individuals to break writing tasks down into more manageable subtasks, to spend time brainstorming and draft writing without self-criticism, and to practice freewriting daily. There are, however, disconcerting questions regarding the effectiveness of this treatment.

In one study examining the effects of prewriting strategies on writing anxiety, Schweiker-Marra and Marra (2000) produced data potentially disconfirming to the writing process hypothesis. They compared two fifth-grade language-art classes, a control group class that operated as normal, and an experimental group class that focused on developing prewriting skills such as topic choice, purposive focus, audience identification, and idea organization. Writing was also included in each learning activity throughout the day. Supporters of writing process treatment would argue that developing such a strategic approach should lessen anxiety for students, however, the qualitative data suggested that neither group evidenced significant change in writing anxiety over time. Schweiker-Marra and Marra cited the possible need for longer treatment periods, or potential for students misunderstanding the writing apprehension

test questions as reasons for the lack of significant difference in results. Their data does align, however, with a previous study by Salovey and Haar (1990). The research done by Salovey and Haar demonstrated that while writing process treatment reduces reports of debilitating feelings, thoughts, and attributions, it seemed to fail in another way, as it did not enhance writing performance or increase reports of coping feelings, thoughts, and attributions. Thus it seems that, issued as an intervention for writing apprehension, writing process treatment is suspect of generating false mastery instead of the fully desired results.

It is worth noting that other techniques focusing on the writing process have shown to be equally controversial in their claims to being able to treat writing apprehension. Peer evaluation techniques, for example, have been shown to be both effective and non-effective at reducing writing apprehension in the literature (Fox, 1980; Pfeifer, 1981). This may suggest the need for a more multi-faceted approach.

Mark: Treating an Apprehensive

Much like the treatment described above, Mark's freshman English class was designed to provide a process approach to writing (Bell, 1984). It was directed at helping students increase their awareness of their own composition processes by learning how to prewrite in order to generate ideas, plan their use, and revise based on audience and purpose. In order to meet this goal, the class featured freewriting exercises, pre-writing exercises, student-centered instruction, self-initiated topics, and peer evaluation workshops.

At first, this approach proved to be beneficial for Mark, who quickly identified two categories of anxiety that he experienced as a result of the composing process: destructive and productive (Bell, 1984). While he was well aware of the destructive anxiety that was mentally and physically taxing him to the point of distraction, he also came to recognize a productive anxiety that motivated him towards becoming, in his words, "an acute thinker and expert strategist" (p. 132). He also moved towards setting a goal for himself: eliminating the unreasonable anxiety he felt when entertaining the thought of the professor evaluating his work. Setting goals, developing writing competencies, and addressing negative cognitions allowed Mark to take more control over the writing process, and as a result he developed a more positive impression of writing and became more personally committed. These initial improvements seem to speak to the potential value of writing process treatment for writing apprehensives.

Mark: When Apprehension Rebounds

After completing the Principles of Prose 1, Mark took English 107 'Scientific and Technical Writing' (Bell, 1984). He reasoned that this particular course would be beneficial to his major in Musical Engineering. Unfortunately, Mark complained

that the course was more interested in form than it was in content. This reality bothered him immensely, and rekindled an old feud between him and the writing process. Mark reported spending less time on assignments and writing that semester. Instead he filled his time with playing the saxophone and partying, effectively returning to his pattern of writing avoidance. In response to this outcome, Bell (1984) points to the lack of process approach in the English 107 course. Of Mark, she writes that, in response to his desire for a challenge, he receives only a judgment. The result is his movement towards a new form of expression—music.

Put more precisely, however, Mark did not develop the coping mechanisms needful for addressing his writing apprehension in the Principles of Prose 1 course. Though he initially reported efficacious results such as a more positive attitude towards writing, Mark's improvements effectively did not last. Rather than simply resulting from a flaw in this form of writing process treatment, as Bell (1984) seems to suggest, this outcome may support the call for a more multi-faceted approach.

Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy as Treatment

Surprisingly little research has been done with regards to the treatment of writing apprehension via cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT)—'surprisingly' because of the well-documented, successful application of CBT to other situation-specific anxieties such as test, speech, mathematics, and social anxieties (Salovey & Haar, 1990). Also 'surprisingly' because systematic desensitization was already widely considered a successful intervention for communication anxiety when 'writing apprehension' (which has its roots in communication anxiety) was first termed by Daly and Miller in 1975. In light of these strong indicators that CBT could be largely successful in treating writing apprehension, the amount of research directed towards confirming or disconfirming the idea is incredibly unsatisfactory.

Salovey & Haar partially addressed this lack of research by conducting a study in 1990. They compared a control group and an experimental group that was administered writing process instruction only (such as the process described earlier) with an experimental 'combination' group that was administered both writing process instruction (identical to the instruction given to the writing process only group) and CBT. The specific CBT used in this study was stress inoculation training, which consisted of an educational phase, rehearsal phase, and application phase. In the educational phase, individuals develop appropriate rationale for interpreting and understanding their anxiety. In the rehearsal phase, the individuals voice negative self-statements and respond to them by actively producing positive, coping self-statements. Lastly, the application phase consists of individuals utilizing their new coping mechanism in a variety of their familiar environments.

The results of Salovey & Haar's (1990) study revealed that while both the writing process alone and the combination groups reduced self-reported negative feelings towards writing, only the combination group had developed an effective coping orientation. Additionally, the combination treatment significantly improved writing performance, whereas both the control and writing process alone groups showed no improvement in writing performance. These results seem to be in line with Bell's (1984) case study of Mark. While this one study cannot fill the empty void of research regarding the effectiveness of CBT as a treatment for writing apprehension alone, it adds to the choir of indicators vehemently demanding further research.

Potential Preventative Action

While even less (effectively no) attention has been paid to potential preventative action against writing apprehension, Davis, Eshelman, and McKay (as cited in Martinez et al., 2011) provide reasonable suggestions that could be taken on by education institutions. They suggest the use of a five-step method of developing coping skills. It involves (1) developing relaxation skills (e.g. breathing or guided imagery techniques), (2) creating a hierarchy of stressful events, (3) making a list of positive thoughts to respond to negative ones with, (4) practice recalling stressful events to simulate the stress-response and applying the relaxation techniques and positive thoughts, and (5) applying the coping skills to real life situations. Such techniques could prove effective preventative interventions as they would hamper the bi-directional effects of writing apprehension and its close correlates (low writing performance, low writing self-efficacy). For example, preventing a somatic anxiety reaction to a writing assignment could prevent low performance on that assignment. This could in turn prevent the development of low writing self-efficacy, which could prevent the reinforcement of writing apprehension. While there is, of course, little research regarding this technique as a preventative intervention for writing apprehension, it seems entirely reasonable given the present theory.

Local Resources

Local resources in Edmonton, specific to writing apprehension are virtually non-existent. There are, however, writing centres available to students in major post-secondary institutions such as the University of Alberta, Grant MacEwan University, and Concordia University College (according to the websites of these institutions). There are also a variety of adult literacy programs that can be found via the Edmonton Public Library website for non-students. These resources might offer some hope for peripheral alleviation of writing anxiety, though it is unlikely that any will be specifically directed towards this goal.

Many of these institutions are unfamiliar with the terms writing anxiety or writing apprehension, including the Edmonton 211 Support Network. One experience may be having 'writing apprehension' interpreted as meaning 'a writing problem' by the service worker, and subsequently being directed to the writing support programs. On the University of Alberta website for example, there is a page dedicated to helpful tips:

<http://www.mentalhealth.ualberta.ca/Psychological%20Services/Help%20Yourself%20-%20Handouts.aspx>.

Though stress, test anxiety, panic anxiety, social anxiety, depression, and even surviving a relationship break-up appear on this page, writing anxiety or apprehension is nowhere to be found.

Another possible resource might be the Assessment Centre, a clinical service offered at the University of Alberta. Caution should be taken when suggesting that counseling services should be sought however, given that (a) writing apprehension is not generalized anxiety, and should not be treated as such and (b) local mental health practitioners and support workers seem to be unfamiliar with writing apprehension, increasing the likelihood of misdiagnosis.

Discussion

Writing apprehension, while possessing all the trimmings of an impediment that ought to be addressed by the psychological community, has hardly received the attention it deserves. It is an anxious condition that has the potential to detract from the quality of life for many individuals, and an effective solution has yet to be presented or championed via a sufficient body of empirical research.

An Alternative Opinion

An alternative way of viewing writing apprehension that is worth considering briefly is presented by Daly and Shamo (1978):

Most discussions of writing apprehension end on a negative note. Clearly there is a bias towards viewing writing apprehension as a disabling characteristic. Yet a number of majors (and professions) are available in which the apprehensive might be happy. Many are, as well, quite important for society. (p. 125)

Indeed, it should be clarified that the purpose of treating writing apprehension is not to force all individuals to become writers, or to all take on occupations that force them to write. Writing apprehension, however, does not open more lifestyle options to individuals, rather it restricts them. Many individuals could live happy lifestyles and fulfill valuable societal roles with the use of only their

dominant hand; yet given the option, they would certainly opt for the use of both.

Blurring Concepts

After reviewing the literature, it becomes apparent that within the conceptualization of writing apprehension there appears to be three main misconceptions that contribute to a lack of clarity, or directionality. The first area of concern is regarding the terminology of writing apprehension. Writing apprehension and writing anxiety are rightfully used interchangeably, but occasionally 'writer's block' is tossed in as well. Writer's block is decidedly different than writing apprehension or anxiety. For example, writer's block (as commonly conceived) differs in severity and duration from writing apprehension. Writer's block, like writing apprehension, suggests an impediment to writing, true, but writer's block is something that people frequently claim to overcome well enough on their own in the vernacular. It is common to hear, 'I had a difficult time on that project; I got writer's block, so I took a break and then got an idea.' While this may well be an example of writer's block, it is not an accurate representation of writing apprehension. Writing apprehension, as previously discussed, will tend to longitudinal duration: the anxiety produces avoidant behaviour, which prevents the development of writing competency, and eventually feeds back into the anxiety. Apprehensives will likely tend to a lifestyle of writing avoidance, making academic and occupational choices in tandem with their apprehension and ensuring the perpetuation of that apprehension.

This first error feeds into another. Much of the current research on writing apprehension has been done on samples that include both high apprehensive and low apprehensive individuals. This may be due in part to the foggy conceptualization of writing apprehension described above. Unfortunately, efficacious treatment for individuals who suffer from writing block from time to time is likely to look significantly different than efficacious treatment for individuals who routinely have anxious somatic responses and intense negative cognitions in response to contemplating writing. For example, people who experience writing blockages from time to time may resolve their impediments relatively completely with the help of writing process instruction. Contrarily, individuals conditioned to respond to writing with anxiety may require an intervention that includes reconditioning. In light of this, combining low and high apprehensives in research for writing anxiety definitely has potential to confound the results. For high writing apprehensive individuals like Mark, this kind of research error can result in the delivery of an insufficient treatment, though it has been lauded to aid the greater majority of the population (though they of course are not apprehensive in the same sense, or to the same degree). Subsequently, the failure of the only aid he is aware of may result in the

reinforcement of his apprehension, and ultimately a silent fading back into his lifestyle of writing avoidance.

Lastly, in studies on the treatment of writing apprehension, change in writing competency is often reported side-by-side change in anxiety. This style of research/reporting can also be misleading. While writing competence has a strong bi-directional relationship with writing apprehension, it is not necessarily a function of writing apprehension. Such comparisons may suggest to the reader that successful treatments will characteristically enhance writing competence and lower anxiety simultaneously. This may not be the case. For example, a high apprehensive that has a long history of avoiding developing writing competence practices may have a long road to developing writing competency even after dealing with their anxiety. It might also suggest that writing competency has causal relationship with writing anxiety, a claim that currently does not have nearly enough empirical support.

Limited Research

A key problem in addressing writing apprehension is the lack of research, particularly with regards to CBT. Perhaps cognitive-behavioural therapists are under the impression that they have sufficiently demonstrated the efficacy of CBT treatments for situation specific anxiety disorders. Or perhaps the dominance of this subject by educational groups has dissuaded psychologists from becoming involved (as though it were 'taken care of'). Regardless of the reasons, a lack of research on a subject detracts from its validity and notoriety. In Edmonton, Alberta for example, there appear to be very few resources specific for writing anxiety, and very little awareness. Many concerns regarding writing apprehension will likely be irresolvable without further research on writing anxiety, and demonstrably effective methods of treatment.

Owing to the prolific nature of the written word, writing apprehension is a serious condition that can inhibit one's ability to interact with the everyday world. The dearth of research and resources committed to understanding this situation and subject specific anxiety only adds to its gravity. Psychological practitioners and especially institutions of learning (given the emphasis on writing in this setting) need to address this gap and begin to make effective help available. It is time this page is finally written in the practitioner's book of anxieties.

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