Reducing Writing Anxiety

TI 038 - Thematic

By

Jo Ann Cope

The Clearinghouse for Structured/Thematic Groups & Innovative Programs
Counseling & Mental Health Center
The University of Texas at Austin
100 East 26th Street
Austin, Texas 78712 • 512-471-3515
http://www.utexas.edu/student/cmhc
Reducing Writing Anxiety:
A Structured Group

The purposes of this group are two-fold: to reduce in the participants feelings of anxiety related to writing papers, and to enable task-relevant productive work on writing assignments.

The methods employed to achieve these ends are the following:
1) Group sharing and support.
2) Cognitive restructuring. Group activities enable members to become aware of their specific behaviors, feelings and thoughts related to writing. They are taught that negative self-talk serves to engender and maintain anxiety. They are shown how to replace negative self-talk with task-relevant self-directions and realistic self-encouragement.
3) Behavioral contracting. Members are encouraged to contract each week to accomplish specific tasks related to completing writing assignments. However, it is made clear that the primary task is, through attempting to meet these contracts, to become more aware of one's behaviors, thoughts and feelings about writing. Actually succeeding in completing the contracts is of secondary importance.
4) Journals. Members are assigned homework each week to keep personal journals in which to record their feelings, thoughts and behaviors as they approach their writing tasks.
5) Writing process skills. Members are offered guidelines in how to write a paper, the steps to complete. They are guided in defining discrete small tasks which are not overwhelming and which allow simple, realistic, accomplishable steps. They are encouraged to plan their time for completing these.
6) Free writing. This technique is used in the group to help members become more aware of their feelings, thoughts and behaviors about writing. It is recommended to them as a means of generating ideas, getting unblocked, etc.
7) Relaxation training. A general stress management technique to be used as the members need it.

The group meets for four two-hour sessions over four weeks.

First meeting:
1. Pre-test: Writing Apprehension Test (10 minutes)
2. Members of group get to know each other by sharing why they have come, what their experiences are with writing and anxiety about it. While they do this, the leader lists their comments on the board in three lists—feelings, thoughts, behaviors—but does not yet label these lists. (15 minutes?)
3) Leader's overview of group's goals and methods. At this point the three lists are labeled, as a way of explaining cognitive restructuring as a method. Group discussion re: mutual expectations, etc. (10 minutes?)
4) Relaxation training (25 minutes)
5) Break (5 minutes)
6) Free writing: Brief explanation and instructions: "Write whatever comes into your head for five minutes without stopping." Group reactions. (15 minutes)
7) Hand-out: "Hung Up on Writing." Brief discussion of the "how-to's" of "making" a paper. Feedback from group on their knowledge of process, where they are in their current assignments. (15 minutes)
8) Contracts: Members are asked to define small, manageable, specific, attainable tasks which they will attempt to accomplish during the week and which will enable them to progress on their current writing assignments. Much sympathy and support must be provided here by the leader: permission to fail, guidance away from grandiose self-demands, referrals for help during the week, etc. (20 minutes)

9) Homework: instruct members to keep a journal: "As you work in writing during the week, keep a diary of what you do, how you feel and what you think about yourself and the task of writing." (5 minutes)

Session Two:
1) Reports from group members on what they wrote in their journals: what they have learned about themselves by becoming more aware of their actions, thoughts, feelings about writing. Leader again lists these on the blackboard. (30 minutes)

2) Free writing: "Imagine yourself in the writing process. Write for five (ten?) minutes without stopping about how you view yourself, how you think about yourself, what you say to yourself." Use this as a way of enabling members to tap their negative self-talk about themselves as writers. Have them reread and underline negative self-talk. (25 minutes)

3) Break.

4) Talk about self-talk as a point of entry through which to bring about change in attitudes and feelings about writing. Point out that negative self-talk engenders and maintains negative feelings and unproductive behaviors. Replace it with two kinds: productive self-directions and realistic self-encouragement. Encourage the group to invent some positive self-talk to replace their negative self-statements. Remind them that this will be very difficult at first, takes much practice, etc. (30 minutes)

5) Renegotiate contracts for the week. If people tried to do too much, sabotaged themselves, etc., help them plan how to avoid this next time. (25 minutes)

6) Homework: journal topic, "As you work on writing during the week, keep a record of your negative self-talk. For each entry, think up an encouraging or self-directing statement, one which you can believe, to tell yourself." (5 minutes)

Session Three:
1) Reports on journals. Primary task of leader here is to give feedback on members' efforts to generate positive self-talk; model it, shape it. (55 minutes)

2) Break (5 minutes)

3) Free writing: "Think about the paper you are currently working on. Decide where you are in the writing process. Write for five (ten?) minutes without stopping about how you plan to proceed from this point, both with specific writing tasks and with managing your anxiety." Use this exercise to enable members to begin to take responsibility for integrating skills they've learned so far. (30 minutes)

4) Renegotiate contracts. (20 minutes)

5) Homework: journal topic, "As you work on your writing during the week, keep a record of your negative self-talk. For each entry, think up an encouraging or self-directing statement, one which you can believe, to tell yourself." (5 minutes)

Session Four:
1) Reports on journals: problems? successes? Since this is the last meeting, this is a general feedback and assessment experience for both members and leader. (55 minutes)

2) Break (5 minutes)

3) Free writing: "Write for ten minutes without stopping about how you feel
you have changed in your attitudes and behaviors about yourself and writing during the last few weeks." Process results with group members. Make referrals for on-going work if necessary...i.e., class in writing process, Writing Workshop for skills help, Counseling Center for other problems, etc. (30 minutes.)

4) Post-test and evaluation. (20 minutes)
APPENDIX

"Reducing Writing Anxiety: A Structured Group"

The following hand-outs are used in the structured group on reducing writing anxiety:

1) "To: Faculty and staff" -- an advertising letter to notify faculty and staff who teach writing of the nature of writing anxiety and the existence of means to alleviate it.

2) "Writing Apprehension" -- a scale to measure writing anxiety; used as a pre-post evaluation device, administered at the first and last sessions.

3) "Hung Up on Writing Papers?" -- directions in how to write a paper, to assist those whose anxiety is based on lack of experience in writing college-type papers. Used in the first session.

4) "The Experience of the Writing Process" and "The Experience of Writing Anxiety" -- can be used during the first session to stimulate discussion, and during the second session to illustrate negative self-talk and correct misconceptions about how one "should" write.

5) "Class Evaluation - Writing Anxiety Reduction" -- an end-of-group assessment and evaluation.
The University of Texas at Austin
RASSL/Learning Services
(Reading and Study Skills Lab)
A332 Jester 78734 (512) 471-3614

TO: Faculty and staff

Date: February 12, 1979

After a couple of years of working individually with U.T. students who are anxious about writing, RASSL is now offering a class to help such students. If you have students who you feel could benefit from such a group, we invite you to refer them to us.

People who are anxious about writing might...

...turn in papers late
...not turn in papers at all
...take incompletes
...turn in papers which are not well thought out
...turn in papers which are not carefully edited
...turn in papers the style of which are vague, general, dull.

Of course, all these symptoms may be caused by other circumstances besides anxiety about writing; but if you have students who are performing in these ways, I encourage you to refer them to RASSL. We may be able to help them.

The group will be small and will address the following:

...exploring causes and effects of anxiety on the writing process
...general anxiety reduction techniques
...changing attitudes about oneself as a writer
...skills involved in the writing process
...ways of overcoming writing blocks

The group will meet Tuesday afternoons from 1 to 3 p.m. for four weeks beginning February 27.

Please refer students to:

JoAnn Cope or Mark Gregg
Jester A332
471-3614
Monday through Friday, 9-5.
**Directions:** Below are a series of statements about writing. There are no right or wrong answers to these statements. Please indicate the degree to which each statement applies to you by checking whether you (1) strongly agree, (2) agree, (3) are uncertain, (4) disagree, or (5) strongly disagree with the statement. While some of these statements may seem repetitious, take your time and try to be as honest as possible. Thank you for your cooperation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Uncertain</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I avoid writing.</td>
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<td>2. I have no fear of my writing being evaluated.</td>
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<td>3. I look forward to writing down my ideas.</td>
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<td>4. I am afraid of writing essays when I know they will be evaluated.</td>
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<td>5. Taking a composition course is a very frightening experience.</td>
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<td>6. Handing in a composition makes me feel good.</td>
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<td>7. My mind seems to go blank when I start to work on a composition.</td>
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<td>8. Expressing ideas through writing seems to be a waste of time.</td>
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<td>9. I would enjoy submitting my writing to magazines for evaluation and publication.</td>
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<td>10. I like to write my ideas down.</td>
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<td>11. I feel confident in my ability to express clearly my ideas in writing.</td>
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<td>12. I like to have my friends read what I have written.</td>
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<td>13. I'm nervous about writing.</td>
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<td>14. People seem to enjoy what I write.</td>
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<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>Uncertain</td>
<td>Disagree</td>
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- 15. I enjoy writing.
+ 16. I never seem to be able to write down my ideas clearly.
- 17. Writing is a lot of fun.
+ 18. I expect to do poorly in composition classes even before I enter.
- 19. I like seeing my thoughts on paper.
- 20. Discussing my writing with others is an enjoyable experience.
+ 21. I have a terrible time organizing ideas in a composition course.
+ 22. When I hand in a composition I know I'm going to do poorly.
- 23. It's easy for me to write good compositions.
+ 24. I don't think I write as well as most other people.
+ 25. I don't like my compositions to be evaluated.
+ 26. I'm no good at writing.

To calculate your score:
1. Add up all the scores with a + before them. Give yourself 5 for "strongly agree," 4 for "agree," and so on. Enter your score in the line for + scores to the right.

2. Add up all the scores with a - before them, weighting each answer as above. Enter your score on the line for - scores.

3. Complete the calculations as directed.

4. The lowest possible score is 26 and indicates an absence of anxiety about writing. The highest possible score is 130 and indicates extremely high anxiety about writing. Please discuss this score with your instructor who can give you more information about its meaning for you.

(Daly and Miller, 1975)
Set a target date. When is your paper due?

Break your effort into steps. Look at your calendar and divide up the remaining days for completing each step.

Determine how many days you have left. Then:

1. ENERGY: Set a target date:

   - Choose a topic that interests you.
   - If you're not completely sure, get clarification from your instructor.
   - If you're not interested in the topic, find a good personal reason for doing the assignment.

   Narrow your topic. Write about something limited enough in scope that you can detail it within the space you have. For example, from "history of art from 1865 to 1900", narrow your topic to "comparison of Impressionism and Symbolism in French art from 1895 to 1900".

2. CRITICALLY: Narrow your topic. Target date:

   - Write a topic, narrow your topic, and think about your interests and resources.
   - Find ideas, check with the available resources, and narrow your topic by discovering the scope.
   - Write a topic, narrow your topic, and think about your interests and resources.

   Narrow your topic. Write about something limited enough in scope that you can detail it within the space you have. For example, from "history of art from 1865 to 1900", narrow your topic to "comparison of Impressionism and Symbolism in French art from 1895 to 1900".

3. CREATIVELY: Collect your ideas. Target date: To collect ideas from reading, ask a librarian for help in locating materials. Collect ideas about your reading, and make a separate card for each source. To generate more ideas, think about the relationships among your sources, or follow your thoughts. Look for support for ideas that seem promising.

   - Brainstorm: Write down as many ideas as you can about your topic. List your ideas in order of importance, or even jot down ideas that seem interesting and save these ideas for later.
   - Collect ideas from reading, ask a librarian for help in locating materials. Collect ideas about your reading, and make a separate card for each source. To generate more ideas, think about the relationships among your sources, or follow your thoughts. Look for support for ideas that seem promising.

   - Collect ideas from reading, ask a librarian for help in locating materials. Collect ideas about your reading, and make a separate card for each source. To generate more ideas, think about the relationships among your sources, or follow your thoughts. Look for support for ideas that seem promising.
There is no better way. There is no better way. Browse through your collected notes until you detect a pattern in them. How many ways can you see to relate these ideas? Arrange these groups of notes to reflect how they are related. If no suitable pattern occurs, go away for a while; then try again. (Or ask someone for a few minutes.)

If you freeze...talk your ideas to someone real or imagined or to a tape recorder. Explain as simply and clearly as you can. Then transcribe onto paper what you've said. Or, very quickly, write out your ideas and then scrap them. Do this several times until you feel easier about putting words on paper.

If you are fearful that your paper won't be long enough, repeat some of the suggestions under "Choose a topic" above. Or ask yourself what you can do to guarantee that your ideas have been accurately and thoroughly explained. Carefully, give an example...
The Experience of Writing Anxiety

It is easier not to write than to write. Writing is an intense activity that requires us to look inside ourselves, to concentrate, and to make a commitment of what we think and feel. To what extent do you find yourself reflected in statements like these? All of these statements reveal some reluctance or resistance, some fear or frustration, some insecurity or self-delusion. Most of these writers also feel that their egos are at stake.

Blank-paper paralysis. "When I look at a blank piece of paper, all I can think about is that I can't write what I think in a way that will do me or the reader any good. It's a defense mechanism."

Anxiety. "I spend time fidgeting and twitching nervously before actually struggling with a rough draft. I get anxious because my main desire is to think of a good opening statement that will inspire me and help me go on with the piece."

Procrastination. "I got up this morning thinking that I would write after breakfast. Then I noticed how dirty the kitchen floor looked. I couldn't stand that, so I got out the bucket and mop. Then I decided it was time to clean out my closet. After a whole day of puttering, I'm now sitting at my desk waiting for the pressure to build."

Defeatism. "When I have to write a paper, I receive the first signal of distress, a physical reaction in my neck right under the jawline. First I feel hopeless, then I feel inadequate, and, finally, I get to a stage of catatonic resignation. When I'm in the third of these mental states, I decide that nothing will be lost if I try to begin because I am already defeated."

Perfectionism. "In everything I've undertaken, I've tried to be the best, number 1, not some clod who gets trapped in the average. I've always tried to put forth the effort it takes to be an example for others. I strive for utter perfection in writing."

Gamesmanship. "I use a method of looking at the clock and saying, 'I'll start in five minutes' or 'At a quarter after, no more fooling around.' The trick is that when I check the time, if it is past the designated mark, say 16 minutes after instead of 15, I figure that section of time is blown and wait for the next half-hour. The game can be played almost endlessly until guilt finally takes over."

Ritualism. "To write, I have to have a quiet room with no distractions such as music. It has to have enough lighting to keep me from squinting at anything in the corners of the room - I have to have at least two or three lights on around me. The chair must be fairly straight-backed but have a soft seat - an armchair puts me to sleep and a hard seat makes me squirm. I clear the table of all encumbrances except the paper. My best time for writing is between dinner and midnight."

Struggling. "My writing is a long struggling process. It does not come naturally. I know the only way I'm going to improve my writing is to make myself write."
Every writer can seek consolation in the experiences of others. What can we conclude from statements that many people have made about writing and their attitudes toward it? Here's a composite of what numerous students have said:

1. Writing is painful and agonizing and joyful and passionate, sometimes all at once - a paradox.

2. Writing depends on both strategy and intuition; that is, some things can be learned, while others have to be invented.

3. A genuine part of the process is the mulling, the fermenting, the mental fooling around, the planning - however one wants to explain what takes place before the first word ever appears on paper.

4. Procrastinating almost always precedes writing. Readiness is all. Getting started is a major problem.

5. Writing usually gets easier as the writer continues. It picks up momentum.

6. Editing or revising varies with the individual. Some of us are revise-as-you-write writers; some are revise-after-you-write writers. A few produce finished products with little or no editing.

7. Seeing the final product brings relief. It also brings a sense of accomplishment because we have for a time climbed out of the boxes that we are in as isolated individuals.

SELF-CONTRACTING

Within the sequence of steps in the writing process, I am at this moment....

My goals this week are...

I intend to accomplish these goals by...
FREE WRITING 1:

Write whatever comes into your head for five minutes without stopping.
JOURNAL 1:

As you work on writing during the week, keep a diary of what you do, how you feel and what you think about writing and yourself.
FREE WRITING 2:

Imagine yourself in the writing process. Write for five minutes without stopping about how you view yourself, how you think about yourself, what you say to yourself.
JOURNAL 2:

As you work on writing during the week, keep a record of your negative self-talk. For each entry, think up a reassuring, effectively self-directing statement to tell yourself.
FREE WRITING 3:

Think about the paper you are currently working on. Decide where you are in the writing process. Write for five minutes without stopping about how you plan to proceed from this point.
JOURNAL 3:

As you work on your writing during the week, keep a diary of your effectiveness and successes, your problems and how you cope with them.
FREE WRITING 4:

Write for five minutes without stopping about how you feel you have changed as a writer in the last few weeks.
Class Evaluation - Writing Anxiety Reduction

1. What did you originally hope to get from this class?

2. Were those original expectations met?  
   definitely no  definitely yes  
   1  2  3  4  5

3. The major objective of this course is to provide techniques and practice in reducing anxiety related to writing.  
   Was this objective met?  
   definitely no  definitely yes  
   1  2  3  4  5

4. Below is a list of some of the major components of this course. How helpful are these in enabling you to reduce writing anxiety?
   definitely not helpful  definitely helpful
   "Hung Up On Writing" mimeo  1  2  3  4  5
   Physical relaxation  1  2  3  4  5
   Free writing  1  2  3  4  5
   Keeping a journal  1  2  3  4  5
   Recognizing and changing self-talk  1  2  3  4  5

5. Were you satisfied with the overall quality of instruction you received?  
   definitely no  definitely yes  
   1  2  3  4  5

6. Please use this remaining space (and back of this page) for whatever comments you wish about the class and its instruction - e.g., format, content, length, instruction, environment, materials, your general feelings about the course, etc.