

# Minimizing Writing Apprehension in the Learner-Centered Classroom

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I am an apprehensive writer because I was born poor, rural, and female. We had no running water, no bathroom, no heat upstairs. We burned coal when we had money and corn cobs when we didn't. I went to a one-room school with my big sister and little brother. When I was nine, I defeated a seventh grader who couldn't spell *conscientious* and won the all-school spelling bee.

For me, fear and apprehension were never associated with school until one day when Miss Ball told me not to answer so many questions because the other children would begin to dislike me. What she didn't understand was my feeling of inferiority because of my poverty. The only way I could get positive attention, I thought, was to be as smart as possible. I had been ashamed of my hand-me-down clothes and broken-down shoes, but never of my ability to do well in school.

But I decided I could be smart without letting anybody know or hurting anybody's feelings. The first chance I got I chose a seat in the back of the room, where I twisted my braids and sat on my hands when I knew the answer to an eighth-grade science question. I became apprehensive in everything. My confidence faded little by little, though my grades remained high. I had lost what Annie Rogers, Harvard psychologist, calls "ordinary courage" (1993, 265).

In *Soul on Ice*, Eldridge Cleaver wrote, "That is why I started to write. To save myself. . . . I had to seek out truth and unravel the snarled web of my motivations. I had to find out who I am and what I want to be" (1968, 15). For Cleaver, writing was discovering. It meant that his time in prison passed more quickly as he read Baldwin, Malcolm X, Kennedy, King, and others. As he read the anger on Baldwin's pages, Cleaver began to understand his own rage which he had unleashed in the form of rape, landing him in

prison, where he started to write. In New York City ghettos, where I taught for nine years, I found students who refused to write—to save themselves from self-exposure, criticism, ridicule, failure.

Our young writers are often so caught up in learning to write that they may never experience writing to learn, not just to learn about a particular project but to learn about themselves, their values, their experiences, their environment. As teachers of composition, at some point in our careers we have undoubtedly experienced writing apprehension. We can relate, therefore, to our students' malaise (Boice 1994). We can understand why some develop an aversion to writing and would do almost anything to avoid it.

## WRITING APPREHENSION DEFINED

In an effort to identify levels of apprehension in writers, in 1975 John Daly and Michael D. Miller devised an instrument to measure writing apprehension in which students rate 26 attitudinal statements on a Likert-type scale (5—strongly agree, 4—agree, 3—uncertain, 2—disagree, 1—strongly disagree). In a 1981 article, which appeared in the *Journal of Educational Research*, Lester Faigley, John A. Daly, and Stephen Witte define the term as the tendency to experience high degrees of anxiety when asked to write, resulting in an approach-avoidance conflictive state which manifests itself in one's behaviors, attitudes, and written products. The following is a summary of Daly and colleagues' findings through 1981:

### Behaviors

1. They tend to select careers which they perceive to require little or no writing.
2. They tend to avoid courses and majors which require writing on a daily basis.
3. They write very little out of class.
4. They lack role models for writing at home, in school, and in the society at large.

Writing apprehension is a reality for many students—what can teachers do?

5. They score lower on tests of verbal ability (SAT), reading comprehension, and standardized tests of writing ability used for college placement.
6. They do not necessarily lack motivation.

### Attitudes

1. Their self-concept is often lower, and they may lack self-confidence.
2. They report low success in prior experiences with school-related writing.
3. They have received negative teacher responses to prior writing attempts.
4. They are more apprehensive when writing personal narratives in which they must express personal feelings, beliefs, and experiences.
5. They exhibit less apprehension when writing argumentative persuasive essays in which they are told not to inject personal feeling and not to use the first-person point of view.

### Written Products

1. They have more difficulty with invention—getting ideas of what to write.
2. They produce shorter pieces of writing; i.e., fewer total words per piece.
3. Their ideas are not as well developed.
4. Their writing is judged to be lower quality when holistic scoring is employed, especially males' writing.
5. They score lower on scales of syntactic maturity: T-units are shorter, and there is less right branching (placing of participles to the right of the main clause).
6. They include less information in each clause or T-unit.
7. They have more difficulty with usage and mechanics.
8. They use less variety in sentence patterns.

## SUGGESTIONS FOR COMBATTING WRITING APPREHENSION

I once saw this poster in a Bedford Stuyvesent classroom:

I hear and forget;  
I see and remember;  
I do and understand.  
—Chinese Proverb

I have always remembered the proverb. It's my constant reminder that much of what we say may be forgotten, while what we encourage students to do will foster understanding and growth, especially if we do it with them!

And what we really need to have students do is write at all levels of schooling, starting in first grade or sooner.

### Write More

As apprehensive writers have generally done very little writing and that has been judged unsatisfactory by prior teachers, a good way to begin is with writing in class every day, creating a non-threatening, practice-like atmosphere where traditional lecturing and grading take a back seat. De-emphasizing grades initially, while emphasizing that writing is a process which requires practice, frees students to express themselves, both in speaking and in writing. The daily writing activity need not be long—say, five to seven minutes—and can take the form of journals, lists, memos, poems, and letters.

### Discourage Appropriation of Voice

We are asking students to take ownership of their writing, to personalize knowledge (Kirsch and Ritchie 1995), to write about their experiences, to be more expressive. We are asking them to be more reflective, to look within themselves to find meaning. We are discouraging appropriation of authority (Sherman 1992) and asking students to reclaim their own authority and voice. We want to know what they think, not just what the accepted authorities think. In itself, the novelty of writing with authority puts students on shaky ground at first because so many of our students have been taught never to use “I” in the perennial “research paper.” Linda Miller Cleary, author of *From the Other Side of the Desk: Students Speak Out about Writing* (1991), interviewed some 40 eleventh graders and found that problems with voice seem to appear sometime in secondary school. We know that they continue well into college, but we are still uncertain why.

### Listen to Fearful Writers

Granted, at first sight English teachers have no idea which of their students have experienced writing apprehension, if any, and Daly's research indicates that high apprehensives do not perform as well when asked to write about their feelings. However, talking about feelings and past experiences in a small group often works well and can

serve as a pre-writing activity which will make the actual writing less of an obstacle.

One day early in the course might be reserved for this purpose. Students may work in small groups or may interview one another trying to determine one or several of the following: what it is that they like and dislike most about writing, what makes a good writer, why people write, what kinds of writing different professions require, what kinds of writing their parents and friends do, how they go about writing something, what types of writing they most enjoy and/or hate, and finally what they hope to learn in the class.

### **Talk About Past Writing Experiences**

It goes without saying that students often report negative past writing experiences, which does not necessarily mean that they have high levels of writing apprehension. Daly and his colleagues are very quick to point out that the behaviors, attitudes, and products may have no causal relationship with writing apprehension, but that they often go hand-in-hand with one another. Often the problems involved in past negative writing experiences as reported by students are perceived as insurmountable, when, in fact, they are only surface errors such as spelling and grammar. Somehow less experienced writers tend to view writing as merely the print code itself which may be due to the fact that teachers often emphasize surface features in their evaluations (Zamel 1985). However, this may reflect students' perceptions of their own difficulty based on the mere number of red marks per paper that pointed out errors in spelling, punctuation, and so on.

### **Find Patterns in Students' Errors**

While it is important to remind students that making errors is natural, everyone makes them, and they are just part of the learning process, it is equally important to help students isolate and try to understand certain recurring errors in their writing. This concept was a basic premise of Mina Shaughnessy's 1977 landmark book, *Errors and Expectations*, in which she examined some 4,000 pieces of students' writing in an attempt to understand and categorize individual students' errors. Likewise, in the same decade, Barry Kroll and John Schafer (1978) urged writing teachers to examine the "path" which students went down to arrive at cer-

tain persistent errors in their writing, help them see the logic and possible cause of those errors, and develop strategies for error detection and correction.

Emphasizing systematic logic enhances self-esteem in apprehensive writers and gives them confidence in their editing skills. Further, in a study conducted by Elley (cited in Hartwell 1985) both students who received instruction in transformational grammar and traditional grammar outside the rhetorical context reported strong negative feelings toward their English classes. If high apprehensives already have very negative feelings about former English classes, the teaching of grammar on a lecture basis may only serve to perpetuate and augment negative feelings.

### **Contextualize and Customize**

Grammar should not be taught in isolation. If the district requires grammar instruction, it should be within the context of a whole piece of student writing. I have found that some students desire direct grammar instruction. In this case, I analyze a set of essays, copy the common errors directly from their work (providing the entire paragraph or essay in which errors occur), and give Nancie Atwell's (1987) mini-lessons in grammar which are custom-made for them, teaching to these errors only or having the students work in small groups to proofread the essays themselves. Individualized and group error analysis often helps students to do self-correction and may also improve high apprehensives' confidence in their ability to edit their own work.

### **Conference During Drafting Stages**

Beverly Lyon Clark and Sonja Weidenhaupt (1992) report success in reducing writers' block in their students by seeing them privately in conferences between drafts, giving them the opportunity to talk about their anxiety about starting or completing a particular work. Even their gifted writers experienced blocks which they overcame through conferences which focused students' attention on higher or lower order concerns, while establishing trust.

Encouraging students to do several drafts and giving them direction between drafts reinforce the principle that good writing takes time, effort and patience. We demonstrate that writing is not a mystical ex-

perience beyond their reach by showing them our own drafts. Further, we accept that in a multiple-draft process students experience less difficulty with invention or getting ideas of what to write because they need not be committed to their words, plans, focal points, or sentence structure in the first draft. They are more willing to change and discover their meaning as they go when they know that they will have another chance to rewrite. They do not feel compelled to produce a perfect product immediately. This frees them to explore and try several different directions before deciding on the final form.

### **Collaborate with Students for Evaluation Criteria**

My students tell me that they feel less anxious about their writing being evaluated if they know exactly what they will be graded on and how much each part counts. There are no secrets about how and when writing is graded. Here at Eastern Washington University, faculty across the curriculum use four shared criteria: focus, development, organization, and mechanics. However, I encourage writers to discuss other ways to evaluate a particular piece of writing based on what their objectives are. “Guided by the requirements of a fully contextualized assignment, the class develops a scoring guide or a rubric . . . [which] makes clear and public the criteria . . . used to assess students’ responses” (Lindemann 1995, 298–299) in a learner-centered writing class.

Through problem-posing and dialogue, students often see communicative effectiveness, voice, and sensitivity to a particular audience as “higher order concerns” and sentence structure, punctuation, spelling, and usage as “lower order concerns.” Students find feedback on content to be the most valuable (Olson and Raffeld 1987) between drafts. To alleviate some fear of error, teachers and peers must focus on only higher order concerns in early drafts (Hacker 1996) and address lower order concerns in final drafts. The rationale here is that apprehensive writers are generally able to attend to only a few problems at once and that marking every error in early drafts will overwhelm them. Just getting the ideas down is the most critical in the early stages. The final drafts can be identified by the student number only, and peers can “practice scoring actual responses . . . until they become cali-

brated to the rubric. Then they can read and score their unidentified classmates’ work” (Lindemann 1995, 299). I have also found that “with proper training, students can be as capable and conscientious as teachers in evaluating student writing responsibly” (299), even ESL students.

### **Coach Peers for Effective Response**

By videotaping peer response sessions for two years, Margaret Tipper and Martin Malone (1995) found that peers “straddle” the roles of evaluator and collaborator with greater ease when they are shown the benefits of positive “straddling”: peers can aid in clarifying the assignment and “the conventions of good writing, and such intervention will be seen as aiding the writer rather than representing the teacher” (80). “Negative straddling” often takes the form of “empty praise, tinkering with superficial aspects of the text, or using vague language” (79). It means falling into the “teacher surrogate trap” (79). Positive straddlers do not make critical statements, such as “You gotta prove your point” (79). Instead, they display “role fluidity” in which they ask questions such as “Like do you agree with Sayers or not?” (80). In short, we need to take ourselves out of the role of judging our students’ work unilaterally and “create spaces” in our classrooms, as my mentor at Columbia, Maxine Greene, always urged us to do.

### **Validate Intrapersonal Communication: Self-Talk**

While high apprehensives have experienced considerable negative feedback in prior courses and this is irreversible, apprehensive writers do considerable negative self-talk, but this is reversible. We need to encourage positive self-talk, something Daly and Miller do not consider as ways of dealing with apprehension. The self-concept is ever-changing and is tied not only to interpersonal but also intrapersonal communication (Lederman 1993, 41): it’s not just what others are telling us about our writing; it’s also about what we are telling ourselves.

In conference, the writer should take the lead while the instructor writes, paraphrases, and mirrors ideas back for the student: “So you are saying that you are concerned that by taking such a strong stand from the outset, you may offend some of your readers. You are considering other ways

*It takes courage to write.*

*Just as the students need feedback from the teacher, the teacher needs feedback from the students.*

to start your paper, such as telling a story about crime in your own country.” The lack of self-confidence often surfaces when students are unable to find anything good about their writing, perhaps because of reported negative past experiences with writing. They may even delete their best sections without realizing it. Here it behooves the teacher to point out key areas of interest in early drafts to help the students see the positive.

For example, I recall saying to my Vietnamese American student, “‘Shedding the fishy scales of the Vietnamese culture’” speaks to me. The sensory images are powerful. Are there other images like this one which are conjured up when you think of your culture of origin?” With time, this positive feedback lessens writing apprehension and increases students’ ability to make judgments about their own writing. I agree with William Glasser’s philosophy in *The Quality School* (1992): students can become the best judges of their own work if they are trained to recognize quality writing and are given ample feedback, editing practice, models, and opportunity to write for real audiences.

#### **Be Aware of Possible Gender Differences**

Several recent reports suggest that there may be significant gender differences in writing apprehension. Barbara Kamler (1993), in a case study of two young children writing, discovered that even early elementary school children conformed to gender stereotypes. The female student took a passive, other-centered approach while the male student was the center of all the action in his writing and seldom wrote about feelings. Mary Kupiec Clayton (1990) in “What Happens When Things Go Wrong: Women and Writing Blocks,” found that women experience longer and more distressing blocks. They have trouble with voice (Ferganchick-Neufang 1993) and secondary sources (Sherman 1992). A recent National Council of Academic Women’s report states that American girls lose considerable self-confidence with the onset of puberty, and this continues on through women’s lives, as so well depicted in Tillie Olsen’s *Silences* (1978), in which she describes long periods of silence in female writers’ lives. While the investigators are uncertain what triggers this, they assert that the form it takes is self-silencing, which I suspect may manifest itself in various degrees of writ-

ing apprehension and blocking. As mentioned earlier, it may also take the form of appropriation in which the writer relinquishes her authority and loses her own voice by simply citing the accepted “authorities” in the field. While this appropriation may actually act as a mask and a heuristic for some female writers, it may block others. Noteworthy is the fact that many of us, regardless of gender, were taught to suppress the “authorial I” and at least “aim for the appearance of objectivity” (Raymond 1993, 478).

#### **Vary Writing Modes**

Writing process pioneer Janet Emig, in her 1971 dissertation, found that female twelfth graders preferred expressive writing and males informative. Apprehensive writers, on the other hand, in Daly’s early study performed better on persuasive or argumentative writing. Though they had more difficulty with personal narrative, about midway through the course, if not sooner, they should be confident enough to write some autobiographical essays. Often I introduce these in conjunction with the reading of biographies. In Eleanor Roosevelt’s biography, we learn of a 1939 meeting of the Southern Conference for Human Welfare in Birmingham, Alabama, where she arrived with a black educator, Mary McLeod Bethune, and was told that blacks and whites were not allowed to sit together. When the police told her of her violation, she placed her chair “in the center aisle and sat there” (Freedman 1993, 110). As a follow-up writing activity, students write about a time they had to stand up (or sit down) for something they believed in.

As they read of others’ fear and apprehension, students report feeling less vulnerable sharing their own with peers. However, if there still seems to be an obstacle, students can write in the conference setting, or they can talk about a particular event while the teacher takes notes for them. Another option is to allow apprehensive writers to tell the story on a cassette and transcribe it. In these instances, the students will have a draft with which to work when they leave the conference.

#### **Monitor Attitudes**

Just as the students need feedback from the teacher, the teacher needs feedback from the students and should seek it periodically,

both formally and informally. An attitude scale may be given as a pre-test and the same one given as a post-test to measure how the attitudes have changed. Daly's scale for measuring writer's apprehension could be used or a less formal attitude scale could be devised by individual teachers. But whatever measure is used, the teacher needs to know which students are still experiencing difficulty, at least midway through the term.

At the end of the first, fourth, eighth, and tenth weeks of the quarter, I write on the board: *Something I want you to know is \_\_\_\_\_*. This open-ended sentence has given me valuable information such as "I feel that everyone writes better than I do, so I don't like to work in groups." Another wrote, "I would like to read and respond to a draft without the writer knowing who I am because I feel that I cannot be honest in my response otherwise." I have found that through journal writing, "workshopping," and linking reading to writing, students' writing apprehension decreased and changed their attitudes, perceptions, and writing processes over time. Peer response sessions serve as catalysts for growth and change when peers cite lines from the paper, respond with candor and care, and offer specific ways to expand or clarify areas (Farnan and Fearn 1993). Tim Hacker (1996) also points out that in short conferences teachers can train peers to respond to writers and can receive valuable feedback about writers' progress.

### **Introduce Discourse Communities**

One important lesson students may learn as they share writing is that they may be participants in many different discourse communities which may or may not overlap with academic discourse. It's valuable for them to discuss and write about how they approach a school writing assignment, tapping into their metacognitive awareness—discussing how they go about learning to learn. Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater (1991) found that her students approached assignments quite differently in her chapters, "Anna's Literacy: The Academic Dance," and "Nick's Literacy: Role Playing." Both students began to discover ways of overcoming academic obstacles in their paths, but they defined and addressed them quite differently and yet effectively. Both required dramatic changes in the writer's persona for school writing.

### **Talk About Writers You Like**

I talk with my students about what I'm reading and writing. One snowy morning, I heard an interview with Rita Dove on National Public Radio. She had been named the National Poet Laureate, yet I had never read even one of her books, couldn't remember even one of her poems. That morning I asked my class of English majors if they knew anything about her, and they all said they didn't. After school, I bought her *Selected Poems* (1993), where I found her "Day Star," which I had taught about three years earlier and suddenly remembered. I immediately read the introduction and fell upon these words: "At that time (third or fourth grade), I didn't think of writing as an activity people admitted doing. I had no living role models—a 'real' writer was a long-dead white male, usually with a white beard to match" (xxi). Later, in the eleventh grade, Dove was taken to John Ciardi's reading, and it was there, with her English teacher by her side, that she "realized that writers were real people" (xxi). Rita Dove soon began to think of herself as a writer, though she is still uncertain of the full impact of the book-signing and reading.

Few of us will nurture poet laureates like Rita Dove, but all of us can give that word of encouragement, that occasion for sharing, the feeling of excitement about our students' writing. Rita Dove remembers the moment she heard Ciardi's voice and realized "it was possible to write down a poem or a story in the intimate sphere of one's own room and then share it with the world" (xxi). But sharing with the world is hard to do. It means we leave ourselves vulnerable. We subject ourselves to being misunderstood, criticized, scorned, even hated.

### **Give and Attend Public Readings**

As a public school teacher, I took my students to hear May Swenson, Margaret Atwood, and, yes, James Baldwin. In preparation for Baldwin's visit to a local university, over ten years ago now, my students and I read and discussed "Stranger in the Village." Having read most of his works, I somehow knew that Baldwin would be an angry man, but I had no idea he would rage on and on at his audience. My students were surprised and disappointed the following day when we talked about his reading. Still, I believe it was an important experience for all of us. He

had reason to be angry, and it was good for us to be reminded that we can write about anger, get it out there—not just for catharsis—but to let others know how we feel. Writing can help us to know one another better, I believe. Self-disclosure is essential, though painful, for most of us. We need to sponsor public readings to provide a forum for our students' voices and for our own.

### Share Writing

How do we begin to share our writing? We can publish (Brickman 1993) and display student writing (Sprinkle 1996), and we can read our own to them. For Japan Week, I was invited to give a reading on Japan at a local museum, so I reluctantly accepted. To keep the spotlight off me, I decided I would prepare slides and music to go along with my poetry. The day of the reading, a student blurted out, "I heard on the radio that you are doing a reading on Japan at the museum." Needless to say, I had not heard this ad but had to invite everyone or never live it down. And they came! They not only came, but also stayed to ask questions. Alan Frager reminds us that by examining "teachers' perceptions of themselves as writers, we may understand more about how teachers' writing ability affects their work" (275). In his 1994 study, he found that only six of 26 teachers in a writers' workshop believed that writing was an integral part of their identities and lives. It may be difficult for us to see ourselves as writers, but we can be better writing teachers when we struggle with our own writing and let our students know a little about our struggles to put words down on paper.

### CONCLUSION

As I wrote earlier, somewhere along my way to becoming educated, I lost my ordinary courage, and it has taken a long time to get it back. It takes courage to write. I believe that inside apprehensive writers like myself, there is self doubt. There is a small voice saying, "What I have to say isn't very important. Besides, if I sound too good or wise or smart, people won't like me, so it's better to say nothing at all." Without knowing or intending it, my elementary teacher planted the seeds of apprehension within me. Rousseau, in his famous treatise on educating Emil, suggested that to educate girls, the teacher needs only to tell them that peo-

ple will not like them if they do such and such. I hope he is wrong, but fear he may be right for some of us. Despite advanced degrees and publications, I remain an apprehensive writer, not just in English but also in French and Japanese. Why? I imagine it has something to do with growing up poor, rural, and female. It has to do with marginality, with being different—something Daly and Miller did not analyze decades earlier, and I continue to explore the connections among socio-economic status, location, gender, and writing apprehension. We now know that both high-achieving and low-achieving writers can be apprehensive. Even teachers are apprehensive. Even professional writers are apprehensive. The best way to get over it is to sit down and write something; anything will do just to get started.

I want to close by encouraging English teachers to write with their students, if for no other reason than to take a few moments for themselves in their busy teaching schedules. In Japan, I wrote with my students, and this poem came to me:

*I want to disappear  
into the cobblestone under my feet,  
to go with the breeze to the mountaintop,  
through bamboo groves, and down to the  
river,  
to become a vapor, a cloud, a moonbeam.  
People would not see me  
as blue-eyed, "foreign" "ghost,"  
but as part of them  
like a maple leaf at Minoh Falls,  
changing with the seasons:  
salmon to horse blood,  
horse blood to gold . . . (Reeves 1993,  
76–77)*

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#### EJ SEVENTY-FIVE YEARS AGO

##### Theme Correcting Is a Waste

"The almost universal practice of teaching composition by pointing out to the writer the errors in his themes seems not likely soon to be superseded. Whatever crimes may be committed in its name, it keeps its place by virtue of two incontestable facts: first, it has been the prevailing method for 2000 years and more, and second, no other method has been as yet invented that will in practice take its place.

"Nevertheless I have always held the view, and have frequently expressed it, that a large part of the theme-correcting of which we hear so much complaint, is probably wasted. Not that it fails to secure an immediate reduction of the percentage of error, but that it fails to reach the inward disease of which the errors are merely the outlying and obvious symptoms. If the source of this disorder could be discovered, if even a fraction of the arduous (and not very remunerative) labor of theme-reading could be spent in eradicating it, the symptoms would soon disappear of themselves and the readers of themes could doff their prison garb and become as other men."

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