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PERSPECTIVES ON ANXIETY AND THE BASIC WRITER: RESEARCH, EVALUATION, INSTRUCTION

Professional writers, amateur writers, and unskilled or basic writers all share what Donald M. Murray refers to as the "terror of the blank page."[1] The kind of writing anxiety that professional writers struggle with—a reluctance or inability to compose which is usually overcome by various rituals—can stimulate very good writing just by the pressure of its presence. The counterproductive, debilitating writing anxiety most often felt by basic writers, on the other hand, can prevent the flow of any writing.

Various causes have been cited for this crippling anxiety that interferes with the performance of basic writers. Mina Shaughnessy believed that basic writers allow their fear of committing errors to overwhelm them:

> For the basic writer, academic writing is a trap.... By the time he reaches college, the basic writer both resents and resists his vulnerability as a writer.... Some writers, inhibited by their fear of error, produce but a few lines an hour or keep trying to begin, crossing out one try after another until the sentence is hopelessly tangled.[2]

Sondra Perl corroborates Shaughnessy's assessment in her study of the composing processes of five basic writers, for whom editing often plays an intrusive role that "breaks down the rhythms generated by thinking and writing."[3] Murray suggests that basic writers are highly anxious because of their unfamiliarity with the craft of writing. He feels that students will become less terrified of writing once they are encouraged to think of it as a process, as a series of stages, draft upon uncorrected draft, through which they eventually discover their subject.[4] And Richard Todd believes that the blank page intimidates students because they "lack a voice adequate" to express the complexity of their social experiences.[5]

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[1] Donald M. Murray, *A Writer Teaches Writing: A Practical Method of Teaching Composition* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1968), p. 70.

[2] Mina Shaughnessy, *Errors and Expectations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 7.

[3] Sondra Perl, "The Composing Processes of Unskilled College Writers," *Research in the Teaching of English*, 13 (1979), 333.

[4] Murray, p. 72.

[5] Richard Todd, "Back-to-School Reading: Why Yalies Can't Write," *Atlantic Monthly*, (September, 1976), 96-97.

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Fear of errors, unfamiliarity with the composing process, and a lack of voice all may explain why the highly anxious basic writer fails when attempting to communicate via the written word. Basic writing teachers might be better equipped to turn failure into competence by applying current knowledge about writing anxiety to their teaching practices and evaluative measures. My purpose in this paper is to share some findings about writing apprehension and to describe some related work done in the basic writing program at the State University of New York (SUNY) at Buffalo.

There is a growing body of research on writing anxiety. Most of the studies propose measures of writing anxiety, demonstrate its relationship to writing performance, or relate it to the teaching of composition. Since there seems to be no qualitative way to define a pyschological construct such as anxiety, it is usually assessed in terms of self-reports, physiological signs, or general behavior. The most common measurement of general anxiety is the self-report.[6] In response to the anxiety that they observed to be prevalent among college basic writers, John A. Daly and Michael D. Miller developed a standarized self-report instrument to isolate apprehensive basic writers from those who are not.[7] Their Writing Apprehension Test (WAT) was constructed with the assumptions that basic writers: (1) fear evaluation of their writing; (2) avoid writing; (3) expect to fail in their few writing attempts; (4) consistently fail to submit compositions in class; (5) do not attend class when writing is required; and (6) seldom enroll voluntarily in courses requiring writing. The twenty-six statements which comprise the WAT elicit responses in these six areas in a sliding scale format, with five possible responses per item, "strongly agree" through "strongly disagree."

Despite the existence of other measures of writing apprehension,[8] most studies of the relationship between writing anxiety and writing performance have compared results on writing tests to WAT scores. These studies have found that highly apprehensive students write differently and with lower quality than low apprehensives, that highly apprehensive writers fail to demonstrate as strong a working knowledge of writing skills as low

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[6] For descriptions of various general anxiety questionnaires such as the Manifest Anxiety Scale and the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory, see Eric Gaudry and Charles D. Spielberger, *Anxiety and Educational Achievement* (Sydney: John Wiley and Sons, 1971), pp. 7-42.

[7] John A. Daly and Michael D. Miller, "The Empirical Development of an Instrument to Measure Writing Apprehension," *Research in the Teaching of English*, 9 (1975), 242-249.

[8] See, for example, Barbara King, "Measuring Attitudes Toward Writing: The King Construct Scale," paper presented at the Conference on College Composition and Communication, Minneapolis, April 1979; Barry M. Kroll, "Assessing Students' Attitudes Toward Writing," *The English Record*, 20 (Winter 1979), 6-9; Merle O'Rourke Thompson, "Classroom Techniques for Reducing Writing Anxiety: A Study of Several Cases," paper presented at the Conference on College Composition and Communication, Washington, DC, March 1980.

apprehensives, that highly apprehensive writers use more words to say less, and that low apprehensives reveal syntactical features of mature writers more consistently than do high apprehensives.[9]

Two studies done by University of Texas at Austin researchers examined the link between apprehension and writing performance in terms of the writer's composing processes and essay writing skills. Cynthia L. Selfe compared the composing habits of two groups of writers—those who scored on the WAT as high apprehensives and as low apprehensives. Selfe found that at the planning or prewriting stage, high apprehensives had less awareness of audience or organization, used fewer essay planning strategies, and did less written note-taking than did low apprehensives. During the writing stage, high apprehensives spent less time on individual sentences than did low apprehensives. And in the postdraft stage, high apprehensives again spent less time proofreading, editing, and revising than did low apprehensives.[10] Lester Faigley, John A. Daly, and Stephen P. Witte focused their attention on the finished product and found that high apprehensives wrote significantly shorter essays that were also less syntactically mature (e.g., final nonrestrictive modifiers appear less frequently in the prose of high apprehensives). Faigley, et al. also found that for personal narrative/descriptive essays, high apprehensives wrote communication units with significantly fewer words than low apprehensives, whereas there was no such significant difference in apprehension for argumentative essay types.[11] In other words, high apprehensives are, in general, less skillful than their low apprehensive counterparts both in handling the process and in achieving successful products. They react to their perceived lack of skill with a lack of confidence. Argumentative essays produce heightened apprehension and shorter communication units in all students.

Several other studies have administered the WAT as a pre/post questionnaire and have compared the writer's increase or decrease in apprehension to measures of writing growth in order to determine how writing anxiety relates to change (decline or improvement) in writing skills over a period of time. R.H. Weiss and S.A. Walters at West Chester State College in Pennsylvania discovered that decreases in apprehension toward writing

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[9] See these studies: John A. Daly, "Writing Apprehension and Writing Competency," paper presented at the Convention of the Southeast Educational Research Association, Austin, 1978; Virginia Bock, "Some Effects of Apprehension on Writing Performance," paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Business Communication Association, San Diego, December 1976; Robert J. Garcia, "An Investigation of Relationships: Writing Apprehension, Syntactic Performance, and Writing Quality," diss., Arizona State University 1977.

[10] Cynthia Leigh Selfe, "The Composing Processes of Four High and Four Low Writing Apprehensives: A Modified Case Study," diss., University of Texas at Austin 1981.

[11] Lester Faigley, John A. Daly, and Stephen P. Witte, "The Role of Writing Apprehension in Writing Performance and Competence," *Journal of Educational Research*, 75 (1981), 16-21.

were directly related to having students complete intensive writing tasks in content courses across the curriculum: history, biology, psychology.[12] Two other studies examined WAT pre/post scores, student writing performance, and teaching methods. William Powers, John A. Cook, and Russell Meyer found that compulsory writing (i.e., required essays on assigned topics accompanied by rigid due dates) increases the anxiety of basic writers. These researchers at a large midwestern university suggested that since forcing basic writers to write increases their anxiety, alternative teaching methods that rely less on negativism must be developed.[13] In a study at the University of Missouri which compared traditional teacher-centered classes and student-centered composition classes, and which matched writing by both groups to their WAT pre/post scores, Roy F. Fox reported that the sequential, student-centered exercises, often in a peer workshop context, reduced writing anxiety at a significantly faster rate than did conventional, lecture-type instruction.[14]

Most strategies for lessening writing anxiety have a common aim: to build the writer's confidence. These strategies range from "writing anxiety workshops" for WAT-diagnosed students[15] to small group work involving low-risk, affirmative experience.[16] A program developed by Teresa Ferster Glazier attempts to improve student self-image and reduce anxiety in these ways: (1) to help students work out a thesis statement for each paper; (2) to get students to write immediately; (3) to provide supportive statements; and (4) to let students taste success.[17] Merle O'Rourke Thompson also outlines a "language study approach" designed to reduce writing apprehension, in which students read about language, talk in small groups about language, write about language, and then respond to each other's writing. Thompson's instructional scheme includes units on the writing process, the professional writer, and the language situation, while allowing time for teacher-student conferences. Using his own thirty-item attitude survey which emphasizes statements describing the writer's feelings about the writing process and its consequences, Thompson reports significant

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[12] R.H. Weiss and S.A. Walters, "Writing Apprehension: Implications for Teaching, Writing, and Concept Clarity," paper presented at the Conference on College Composition and Communication, Washington, DC, March 1980.

[13] William Powers, John A. Cook, and Russell Meyer, "The Effect of Compulsory Writing on Writing Apprehension," *Research in the Teaching of English*, 13 (1979), 225-230.

[14] Roy F. Fox, "Treatment of Writing Apprehension and Its Effects on Composition," *Research in the Teaching of English*, 14 (1980), 39-49.

[15] Lynn Z. Bloom, "Identifying and Reducing Writing Anxiety: Part II, Writing Anxiety Workshops," paper presented at the Conference on College Composition and Communication, Denver, March 1978.

[16] Mary E. Denman, "The Measure of Success in Writing, *CCC*, 29 (February, 1978), 42-46.

[17] Teresa Ferster Glazier, "Improving the Poor Self Image of the Remedial Student," paper presented at the Conference on College Composition and Communication, Denver, 1978.

declines in student anxiety (via decreases in posttest survey scores) and improvement in writing (by comparing pre- and posttest writing samples) at semester's end.[18]

Colleges and universities which must deal with increasing numbers of inexperienced, unskilled writers should incorporate these findings about and approaches to anxious writers in their basic writing programs. The basic writing program at SUNY at Buffalo diagnoses highly apprehensive writers, maps out individual instructional plans, measures changes in apprehension, and monitors the impact of the composition program on student apprehension. The SUNY at Buffalo Learning Center, a skills division separate from the English Department, offers a two-semester sequence of credit-bearing writing courses. Although the program was established more than ten years ago to help Educational Opportunity Program students overcome academic deficiencies, increasing numbers of regularly admitted students—many of them upperclassmen who have already taken English Department composition courses—have also enrolled in these writing courses in recent years. The first course in the sequence, College Writing, concentrates on work at the sentence and expository essay levels. The second course, Advanced College Writing, seeks to expand the command of discourse by having students write extensively in a wide variety of modes, with an emphasis on persuasive writing. Under the directorship of Charles R. Cooper, the Center first began using the WAT as one of several measures to evaluate student growth in various aspects of writing. In recent years, the Center has broadened its concern for writing apprehension to include diagnosis, instruction, and program development.

During the first week of classes each semester, the WAT is administered to all sections of College Writing and Advanced College Writing. It takes fifteen to twenty minutes of class time for students to enter their responses to the WAT onto an answer sheet designed for quick hand-scoring by the instructor.[19] After computing and recording their own class set of WAT scores, instructors submit the results to the evaluation coordinator who establishes cutoff points for high and low apprehensive writers. Scores one standard deviation below the group mean indicate high apprehension; scores one standard deviation above the group mean indicate low apprehension. Instructors are informed of these cutoff points so that they can identify particularly apprehensive writers at the outset of the semester. The WAT scores derived as cutoff points (the Fall 1979 cutoffs are typical: for high apprehensives, scores below 73; for low apprehensives, scores above 101) help instructors to isolate highly apprehensive writers and to make individualized instructional plans for them.[20]

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[18] Thompson, "Classroom Techniques for Reducing Writing Anxiety: A Study of Several Cases," 2-4.

[19] A reproduction of the WAT answer sheet devised by the SUNY/Buffalo staff can be found in Appendix B of Elizabeth Metzger's, "A Scheme for Measuring Growth in College Writing," *Journal of Basic Writing*, 1 (Spring/Summer, 1978), 71-81.

[20] I am indebted to my SUNY/Buffalo writing component colleagues Roger Cherry, John Staley, and Michael Williamson, for their help in collecting and analyzing WAT data from 1977 to 1980.

Basic writing instructors at SUNY at Buffalo have five strategies for helping highly apprehensive writers. They arrange immediate individual student-teacher conferences, encourage students to analyze their own composing processes, avoid formal evaluation of student work early in the semester, refer selected students to additional resources such as the campus tutorial center, and channel writers into appropriate beginning levels of sentence-combining exercises.

Their first step, once the highly apprehensive basic writers in their classes have been identified, is immediately to schedule one-to-one tutorial sessions with those students. Generally, the first conferences focus conversation on the writer's history (previous high school and college writing, writing done in nonacademic settings, etc.) and on ideas for essay topics. Since students must generate their own subjects for the eight to ten required essays in Learning Center courses, it helps anxious writers to compile a long list of possible topics from which they can draw throughout the semester. Subsequent regularly scheduled conferences are centered on works-in-progress. By posing questions about purpose, audience, and organization, instructors help students see trouble spots and solutions, and develop confidence in their ability to solve problems and make decisions. Also at an early point in each semester, whether in conference or in a class meeting, instructors ask students to describe their own composing habits, rituals, and processes by writing a short piece titled, "How I Write." By reflecting upon their own composing process, apprehensive writers often pinpoint their failings and see how to remedy them. For example, a frequent self-appraisal is "putting off an assigned task until the last minute," which writers can overcome by disciplining themselves to plan, rehearse, draft, and share rough versions of a piece with instructors or other readers ahead of time.

Two other tactics help highly apprehensive writers. We avoid the formal evaluations of early essays. Instead, instructors respond, orally and in writing, to the first few writing tasks but refrain from attaching a grade to essays until well into the semester. One common practice is to allow students at midterm to select the best two of their first four or five essays to be graded. Another is for instructors to identify two or three major problems that recur in the first few essays and to agree to base the final course grade largely on improvement in these key areas. In addition, we refer students to the campus tutorial center, the Writing Place, for further help in overcoming these problems. Although this writing center is available to all students and staff, its tutors work closely with the Learning Center and are especially sensitive to the needs of basic writers. On the average, twenty percent of the student visits are by students enrolled in our Learning Center courses. The Writing Place tutors are prepared to respond to drafts, to suggest exercises in workbooks and programmed texts, and to hammer out alternative sentence patterns with students. However, most of the work at the sentence level is accomplished through interaction between the instructor and writer.

Sentence-combining drill is an integral part of the Buffalo basic writing program, and particularly valuable to the most anxious writers. Much of

the first level course and some of the second course are devoted to intensive sentence-combining practice. In an effort to use material best suited to anxious writers who fear failure, instructors have on hand three sentence-combining texts and usually have highly apprehensive writers work, initially, through exercises from Frank O'Hare's *Sentencecraft*.[21] A quick readability check by a member of the Learning Center's reading staff found that *Sentencecraft* has an estimated eleventh grade readability, whereas *Sentence Combining*, by William Strong, has an estimated readability level of twelfth grade, and *The Writer's Options*, by Donald A. Daiker, et al., has a readability level between twelfth grade and college.[22] Given the relatively lower readability level of *Sentencecraft*, the lack of reading proficiency by most Learning Center students, and the fact that O'Hare's sentence-combining exercises are signaled (i.e., specific instructions for the combining operations are given to the writer), instructors frequently start highly apprehensive writers with exercises from that text before moving on to the others. This instructional plan not only helps bolster students' confidence in their ability to manipulate sentences, but also moves them toward handling more difficult college-level tasks.

After the fifteen weeks of instruction, instructors again administer the WAT to each student. A cumulative "change score" (or mean difference) for all students in the program is then computed. Although the WAT pre-score is used primarily for diagnosing individual students, and the WAT pre/post scores are added to other test data (holistic rating, error and t-unit counts of pre- and post- essays) to form profiles of each student's performance, some overall conclusions can be drawn about changes in student attitude by looking at whole group change scores. The results over a three-year period indicate that most students are significantly less anxious about writing by the end of the semester. The results for 1978-1979, for example (see Table 1), demonstrate that most students in College Writing decreased significantly in apprehension while many Advanced College Writing students decreased slightly by the end of the semester.[23] The most likely explanations for less dramatic overall decreases in anxiety shown by advanced writers are that their WAT pre- scores were rather high to begin with (that is, at the outset of the semester, they were not all that anxious) and that the course demand for a higher level of abstract and argumentative thinking tends to increase anxiety in some writers.

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[21] Frank O'Hare, *Sentencecraft* (Lexington, MA: Ginn & Company, 1975).

[22] William Strong, *Sentence Combining* (New York: Random House, 1973); Donald A. Daiker, Andrew Kerek, and Max Morenberg, *The Writer's Options* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979).

[23] "The University Learning Center Evaluation for the Spring 1978, Fall 1978, and Spring 1979 Semesters" (SUNY at Buffalo: unpublished report, 1979).

TABLE 1

WRITING APPREHENSION TEST
DISTRIBUTION OF PRE AND POST PERCENTILE SCORES* FOR
FALL 1978, SPRING 1979

College Writing

	Fall 1978		Spring 1979	
	PRE	POST	PRE	POST
90%ile	87	81	89	77
75%ile	78	71	78	69
50%ile	69	64	72	60
25%ile	57	56	62	53
range=	PRE 31-101		34-92	
	POST 35-106		34-101	
classes=	6		3	
students=	109		57	

Advanced College Writing

	Fall 1978		Spring 1979	
	PRE	POST	PRE	POST
90%ile	83	82	77	80
75%ile	75	74	72	72
50%ile	63	62	66	64
25%ile	54	52	58	54
range=	PRE 30-104		34-101	
	POST 38-96		38-92	
classes=	3		4	
students=	58		74	

*Due to scoring method, high scores represent high apprehension and low scores represent low apprehension.

In addition to incorporating writing apprehension measurement in program evaluation, the Learning Center attempts continually to monitor the impact of the writing program on apprehension. For example, when evaluating course attrition rates, the evaluation coordinator discovered that there is a greater proportion of highly apprehensive writers among those who drop writing courses than among those students who complete the courses.[24] During the 1977-1978 academic year, the Center conducted a

[24] John Staley, "Role of Writing Anxiety in the Evaluation of a Basic Skills Writing Program," paper presented at the Developmental/Remedial Education Symposium, Rochester, April 1979.

study to determine whether or not there is a significant relationship between a student's decrease in writing apprehension by the end of a semester and his or her success in course performance. The study was based on data collected during the Fall 1977 semester. One hundred and fifty undergraduates—mostly freshmen—in the two levels of writing courses completed the WAT at the beginning and end of the semester. In order to study the correlation between WAT and writing performance changes, we established the WAT pre/post score as the dependent variable. Two sets of independent variables were set up: one containing final grade, attendance (number of times present and number of times absent), class section, and sex; the other consisting of error count differences (spelling, pronoun case and reference, verb tense and agreement, fragments, run-ons, and comma splices) and holistic ratings for pre/post writing samples.

TABLE 2

STEPWISE REGRESSIONS FOR TWO PREDICTOR SETS
(INSTRUCTIONAL VARIABLES)

SET 1	INCREMENT OF R^2
Sex	.4070
Class section	7.2651
Final grade	1.7031
Number times absent	36.6732
Number times present	.7218
$R = .6791$	
$R^2 = .4611$	
SET 2	**INCREMENT OF R^2**
Error counts	.3742
Holistic evaluation of essays	.0287
$R = .0635$	
$R^2 = .0040$	

Next, a multivariate multiple regression of the WAT pre/post change score was done with the instructional variables. The results showed that the most significant correlations with change in writing anxiety were the number of times absent from class and the particular class section a student enrolled in. Even though Daly and Miller found that males were significantly more anxious about writing than females, the Learning Center study yielded no significant correlation between sex and change in anxiety. Furthermore, when a stepwise regression was conducted (see Table 2)[25] in

[25] Tom Reigstad and Gay Church, "The Relationship Between Writing Anxiety and Performance in College Basic Writing Courses," SUNY at Buffalo, unpublished manuscript, 1978.

order to analyze the contribution of each individual instructional variable to the WAT change score, it was found that set one (number of absences, number of times present, class section, final grade, and student's sex) accounted for 46% of the variance in WAT change, and that set two (holistic rating and error counts of essay samples) were not significant predictors of change in WAT score.

The SUNY at Buffalo study demonstrates that for the 150 cases examined, decreases in writing anxiety could not be predicted by improvement in writing (by decreasing errors or by writing a better posttest essay), but rather by a low rate of absenteeism and by the section the student enrolled in. The most significant predictors of a decrease in writing apprehension were absences and class section. In other words, an increase in writing apprehension is related to a high number of absences and to the class a student is in.

At least two implications for the classroom are implicit in these findings: (1) writing instructors need to look closely at the WAT pre- scores early in the semester, to isolate the highly apprehensive writers and, via personalized attention, to encourage these writers to attend class meetings; (2) since decreases and increases in writing apprehension are so highly correlated with specific class sections, basic writing instructors must be sensitive to the causes of apprehension such as fear of failure and reluctance to take risks and adjust their teaching style and grading procedures for these individual writers until their confidence is built.

Writing programs can reflect current literature on writing apprehension by tailoring instruction and evaluation to help reduce the high apprehension which some basic writers experience. John Mellon's taxonomy of compositional competencies suggests that writing instructors need to teach, among other things, "the ability to prevent, control, or overcome writing apprehension, and to forestall or master 'blank page' aphasia."[26] It seems particularly crucial to identify highly anxious writers early, to provide them with differential treatment, and to experiment with individualized teaching techniques that reduce student apprehensions. Writing programs need to develop instructional approaches to apprehension and to test their effectiveness. They need to discover relationships between the WAT and actual samples of writing, rather than objective skills tests and to examine the effect of teaching style, programmed writing textbooks, and workbooks on high apprehension. Whatever specific "cures" that research might reveal, though, the basic writing instructor's duty will certainly be to encourage the student to forget about past failures, to take risks in writing, and to adapt to the rules which govern academic writing.

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[26] John C. Mellon, "A Taxonomy of Compositional Competencies," *Perspectives on Literacy*, ed. Richard Beach and P. David Pearson (Minneapolis: College of Education, University of Minnesota, 1978), pp. 247-272.