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Overcoming Writing Apprehension

Taming the Writing Demons: Overcoming Writing Apprehension

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Many individuals, especially those who lack writing experience, may face anxiety when confronted by a writing task. Writers may experience a variety of thoughts when beginning to write such as: “What should I write about?” or “How do I start this paper?” However, some writers move beyond these basic questions and begin to doubt their writing. They may have thoughts such as, “I am having a writer’s block, just like I’ve had when writing in the past.” “What if my paper is not right and the reviewers dislike my work?” “I am just not a good writer,” or “I don’t feel good about my writing because I don’t have anything important to say.” This internal battle or writing struggle may go on for days or weeks before a breakthrough in writing occurs or the writer simply gives up.

WRITING APPREHENSION

Writing apprehension is an overwhelming sense of anxiety associated with a feeling of dread when facing a writing activity. The feeling of writing apprehension may develop for numerous reasons including evaluation fear, lack of experience and confidence, or poor writing outcomes in the past (Vanhille, Gregory, & Corser, 2017). Other causes of writing apprehension may stem from a disinterest in writing or having one's work available for public review (Autman & Kelly, 2017). Common factors in all these descriptions include the avoidance of writing.

Writing apprehension may be linked to Albert Bandura's theory on self-efficacy. Bandura theorized that individuals assess and judge their own capabilities to accomplish a task (Bandura, 1977; 1986). When applied to writing, those who believe they possess the abilities to write well will write effectively, and those who believe they lack the abilities to write well will struggle. Bandura also later theorized that an individual's self-efficacy comes from four major areas: mastery experiences, where an individual experiences success; vicarious experiences, where a person witnesses someone else's success; verbal persuasion, where an individual is confident in one's own capabilities; and physiological and affective states, where an individual's mindset and outlook focus on confidence (Bandura, 1997; Vanhille et al., 2017). In linking Bandura's theory to writing apprehension, writers with a low self-efficacy would question their ability to write, would lack experience, lack mentors in writing, and view writing as a stressor, ultimately generating obstacles in writing success.

The ability to effectively express ideas clearly and appropriately is a critical communication skill needed by all nurses. Nursing students, nurse educators, staff nurses, and nurse administrators must write at some point in their careers. Therefore, raising awareness about writing apprehension and offering strategies to overcome this writing problem can be an effective way to advance nursing.

STRATEGIES FOR THE WRITER

Various strategies can be used to help writers overcome their apprehension. The following strategies can serve as a guide for writers and those working with writers helping them to overcome writing apprehension.

Begin by reflecting upon previous and current writing experiences. Consider what went wrong in past writing activities. Can you identify a specific problem or issue? By identifying what went wrong in past submissions, you may be able to avoid those same mistakes again thereby making changes in your writing and increasing your success and confidence. Another strategy involves the development of a writing log. This log can be used to record common problems or errors you make. For example, if you struggle with the appropriate use of words such as “which/that,” then write down the problem and include the rule for use in the future. This log will provide you with a guide for your next writing experience.

You might also consider journaling about the feelings you have about writing. Journaling thoughts and feelings may also help separate the actual task of writing from the feelings towards writing. A journal may provide insight into those negative feelings and emotions that emerge when writing. As suggested above, Bandura’s theories indicate that emotions and mindset can positively or negatively affect writing. By identifying negative thoughts or feelings about writing from the start, you can begin work to transform those thoughts into a more positive approach towards writing. Reframe that negative self-talk from “I am a poor writer” into positive affirmations such as “I can do this.” Rather than thinking or saying, “I can’t write well,” shift the thinking to statements such as, “I am learning to write better.” Self-affirmation and a positive mood can assist in creative development. Studies have shown that people expressing positive self-affirmation are more inclined to generate creative ideas rather than avoid them (de Buissonjé, Ritter, de Bruin, ter Horst, & Meeldijk, 2017). Envision the final product and your writing success. If

writers envision themselves as writers and see their final product, then their visions may likely become a reality.

Realize that not everyone will love your writing and so you may need to remove your ego from writing. Remember that harsh or negative reviews are not a reflection of who you are as a person. Do not take these bad reviews personally and don't let them damage your confidence. Use the feedback provided by others to improve your work. If you do receive an unflattering review of your writing, keep in mind that at times even famous writers have struggled with writing and have probably received negative evaluations of their writing. For example, twelve publishers rejected J.K. Rowling's famous *Harry Potter* series before it finally was accepted and published (Randee, 2017).

Other strategies for overcoming writing apprehension involve completing prewriting activities to develop ideas. Brainstorming, free writing, concept mapping, or outlining your work can assist you to produce ideas and facilitate your writing. See Mapping Your Way to Successful Writing in *Nurse Author & Editor* (<http://naepub.com/collaboration/2018-28-4-3/>) for additional suggestions. Prewriting activities will decrease writing apprehension by creating a more structured plan to guide the writer in developing an assignment or manuscript.

Lastly, dismiss myths about writing. One writing myth involves a person's natural affinity or skill with writing. Writing is not innate; it does not come naturally for some people. It is hard work, but like most skills can be developed. To become an expert writer, practice is required. All writers must spend time drafting and editing before final products are polished quality products.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FACULTY AND EDITORS

Some writing apprehension develops because of past negative experiences with writing activities. There are approaches that faculty and editors can use to decrease this writing apprehension. In academia, strategies such as writing across the curriculum or writing in the discipline, have been used to try to help students develop their writing through structured approaches. Integrated writing practices throughout education may be helpful. Others may approach writing challenges with educational interventions like peer reviews or the use of writing centers and editors. Faculty and editors assist writers by providing writing support and offer information about writing resources and centers that are available. Encourage students and other writers to acquire help for basic writing difficulties. If they struggle with writing basics, provide resources to assist them in overcoming these concerns. For example, books such as *The Elements of Style* by Strunk and White (2000) could assist students with the basic writing structure and mechanics of writing that they may be lacking. Websites such as Grammar Girl's Quick and Dirty Tips (<https://www.quickanddirtytips.com/grammar-girl/>) can provide useful writing resources.

Another important consideration is to build writing confidence. When reviewing writing, do not direct all energy on errors and focus solely on mistakes. Make sure to identify some writing strengths and provide positive feedback which will strengthen writing confidence. If writers only see negative feedback, they will begin to dislike writing, lack confidence in writing, and ultimately continue to have writing apprehension.

Educators can also offer a variety of writing practice or opportunities for students to develop their writing skills. Ungraded writing exercises with feedback could help identify problems early on and allow students to revise their work. Ultimately this could save faculty time on grading and writing apprehension may decrease for students. Ungraded assignments would allow for a more relaxed environment in

which to make mistakes, provide feedback that would not negatively impact grades, and enhance writing abilities so students perform better on the final submission of their work, which in turn boosts their writing confidence.

Another key aspect needed to decrease writing apprehension is to read other's writing. Reading early drafts of work by others can provide insight and reinforce the fact that everything starts as a draft. By reading others work, students will be able to assess their progress, and this may help propel them to ensure their writing skills are at the expected level. Through peer review, students may be able to gather new writing ideas and will be able to identify good writing habits. Conversely, students may also be able to identify poor writing habits, which will enable them to identify areas to avoid.

Another approach for faculty to use is to be clear about writing expectations. Evaluating writing involves some subjectivity, so try to remove this by providing clear directions and guidelines. Students often fear that they will not perform at the expected level of individual instructors. Providing specific rubrics and instructions will help students know what is expected and may assist in decreasing fear and promote successful writing. Editors can also help by making sure author guidelines are clear.

Lastly, discuss writing apprehension and raise awareness of the problem. Talk about it. Mentoring emerging authors also helps guide them through the writing process. As they begin to experience writing success they will gain more confidence and their writing apprehension will decrease.

CONCLUSION

Many novice writers feel writing apprehension, which is fear and anxiety related to writing. Ultimately this creates barriers to producing quality writing. Faculty and

editors can play an integral role in decreasing writing apprehension and help writers develop the mindset that will promote success. By adopting the suggested strategies to overcome writing apprehension, writers may start to become more confident in their writing abilities and overcome the anxiety and fear associated with writing.

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