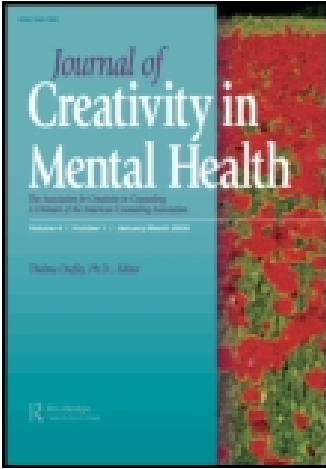


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Writing Anxiety Groups: A Creative Approach for Graduate Students

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This article discusses a creative project designed by the first author to help graduate students in the dissertation-writing process cope with writing anxiety. Writing anxiety is a condition that affects writers and causes heightened stress and anxiety during the writing process. Graduate students often take on multiple responsibilities in their lives and academic studies. These tasks increase students' perceived stress and prevent them from completing their writing projects on time. Although writing a dissertation is a stressful process that generates high anxiety, writing itself can be used to release internalized stress and reduce writing anxiety. This article presents a writing anxiety group that is designed to utilize the therapeutic power of writing and the group dynamics of a support group to assist graduate students in coping with writing anxiety.

KEYWORDS *writing anxiety, group counseling, freewriting, creativity in counseling*

According to Onwuegbuzie (2001), “50% percent of doctoral candidates from graduate programs in education never complete their degrees, with as many as 20% of students giving up at the dissertation” (p. 560). There are many reasons for this problem, one of which is the writing anxiety many graduate students exhibit when faced with the task of writing a dissertation. This article does the following:

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1. provides a definition of writing anxiety;
2. discusses situational characteristics of writing anxiety;
3. examines the problem as it exists among graduate students;
4. argues for the use of therapeutic writing as a solution to the problem of writing anxiety among graduate students; and
5. offers a plan for a group designed to help graduate students alleviate their writing anxiety.

WRITING ANXIETY DEFINED

Although much scholarship has conflated the terms, it is important to distinguish between *writing anxiety*, *writing apprehension*, and *writer's block*. Rose (1984) distinguishes writer's block from writing anxiety in that he describes writer's block as being broader. He states that while anxious writers often exhibit "avoidance of courses and majors involving writing" (Rose, 1984, p. 4), blocked writers might have more confidence in their writing abilities. However, blocked writers might be prone to following a rigid set of rules based on their schematic knowledge about writing, such as always writing the introduction first, having a certain number of points in an essay, or having a perfect outline before beginning the writing itself (Rose, 1980). Such rules prevent writers from exploring ideas that may enter their minds at a given time because entrance of such ideas may conflict with the self-imposed constraints under which the writer is operating, thus contributing to writer's block. Hjortshoj (2001), director of writing in the majors at Cornell University, problematizes the conflation of the terms by critiquing how psychologists and writing professionals often conflate the terms by assuming that fear is always the cause of a writing block. He also states "blocked writers are not always anxious" and that in many instances, "anxiety appears likely to be the effect of a block, not the cause" (Hjortshoj, 2001, p. 2). Additionally, Hjortshoj agrees with Rose that blocking can cause anxiety, but he diverges from Rose's view in that he does not believe it can also work in a reverse fashion. These findings are important in that they help to distinguish between the two seemingly related terms for the purposes of this article.

A more difficult distinction to make is between writing anxiety and writing apprehension. Indeed, much scholarship has conflated the two terms. For example, in his article, "Writing Apprehension and Writing Competency," Daly (1978) wrote, "in the most recent research on writing apprehension, the normal procedure has been to analyze differences between individuals classified as high and low in the anxiety" (p. 12). In this statement, the terms "apprehension" and "anxiety" are used synonymously. Clark (2005) criticized the use of the term "writing apprehension" because she felt it did not fully measure the implications of writing anxiety. In her dissertation, she presented writing apprehension as being part of a larger spectrum of

writing anxiety (Clark, 2005). However, she did not make explicitly clear the difference between the two terms.

The term “writing apprehension” was coined by Daly and Miller (1975a). They designed an empirical instrument to measure what they termed *writing apprehension*, which they defined as when students are “unduly apprehensive about writing” (Daly & Miller, 1975b, p. 242). They mention “individuals with high apprehension of writing would fear evaluation of their writing . . . feeling that they will be rated negatively on it” (Daly & Miller, 1975b, p. 244). One of the key arguments that informed the creation of the instrument was that “most teachers of composition have recognized in their classes students who seem to be unduly apprehensive about writing” (Daly & Miller, 1975b, p. 242), but their belief was that “simple observation” was not enough to truly measure writing apprehension. Daly and Miller (1975b) wanted “. . . a more effective and efficient means of isolating apprehensive student writers . . . through an empirically based, standardized instrument” (p. 242) in order to pinpoint an apprehensive writer more aptly than the method of simple observation was able to do.

Daly and Miller (1975b) conducted an empirical study in which they tested their instrument among 164 undergraduate students in interpersonal communication and basic composition courses at West Virginia University. In crafting their instrument, they formulated the Daly-Miller Writing Apprehension Scale (WAT), a survey consisting of 26 items, which were modeled after questions designed to measure communication apprehension. Through this instrument, they found there needed to be proper treatments designed to alleviate writing apprehension, such as counseling programs where apprehensive writers could develop confidence in their writing. Daly and Miller (1975b) concluded that further research needed to deal explicitly with treating anxious students, as well as the effects of writing apprehension, to help our understanding of student attitudes toward writing. Such a claim would create room for scholarship that would build on this idea and examine it from multiple perspectives.

Bloom (1985) defined writing anxiety as “a label for one or a combination of feelings, beliefs, or behaviors that interfere with a person’s ability to start, work on, or finish a given writing task that he or she is intellectually capable of doing” (p. 121). She argued that one must consider the writer’s surroundings to understand anxious writers, and she noted that anxious writers may not necessarily exhibit anxiety in other scenarios and proposed that “context must . . . be part of the guiding conceptual framework we use to define, study, and resolve writing anxiety” (Bloom, 1985, p. 121). This definition is more developed than how Daly and Miller define apprehension: While Daly and Miller (1975b) describe “apprehensive writers” as being “unduly apprehensive about writing” (p. 242), Bloom argues that we must look into context to discover the reasons for anxiety, which proposes a deeper examination into the issue. Yet, when we look at the “Writing Apprehension and

Writing Competency” piece, written 3 years after the Daly-Miller WAT was designed, we see Daly define apprehension as “a person’s general tendencies to approach or avoid situations perceived to demand writing accompanied by some amount of evaluation” (Daly, 1978, p. 10). The last portion of this statement, which describes evaluation, indicates Daly’s idea that like Bloom’s definition of writing anxiety, writing apprehension is also context-specific, with the evaluation providing the context. However, by contrasting Daly’s work with that of Bloom, Daly (1978) appears to simplify “writing apprehension” as the “tendencies to either approach or avoid situations” (p. 10) into a false binary, which has a person either approaching or avoiding writing situations. Bloom’s (1985) definition accounts for feelings and behaviors as they occur throughout the writing process, as she mentions starting, working on, and finishing.

Other scholars have also conflated the terms “anxiety” and “apprehension.” For example, Onwuegbuzie (1998) cited Daly’s (1978) definition of “writing anxiety” as “a situation- and subject-specific individual difference concerned with people’s general tendencies to approach or avoid writing” (p. 589), which was exactly how Daly defined apprehension. He also cited the finding of Faigley, Daly, and Witte (1981) in that anxious writers avoid all writing situations, including instruction in writing, which impedes their ability to improve their skills. Yet, in the original citation, Daly mentions apprehension as “the tendency of people to approach or avoid writing” (1978, p. 10), and Faigley et al. discuss “anxiety” as being “reflected in the behaviors they display as they write, in the attitudes they express about their writing, and in their written products” (p. 16). The authors propose applying Clark’s (2005) definition of apprehension as a subset of a larger anxiety, which will be extracted from the definitions put forth by Bloom (1985) and by Faigley et al. as a complex array of negative and potentially destructive behaviors, thoughts, and feelings about writing. This is the key difference between writing anxiety and writing apprehension. Because the proposed group aims to alleviate full ranges of behaviors related to writing, the authors will use the term *writing anxiety* throughout this article.

Constructs of Writing Anxiety

With respect to the aforementioned definition, Daly and Hailey (1984) defined “situational anxiety” as being dependent on “particular characteristics of a writing situation” (p. 260). They examined a group of 399 undergraduate students and presented them with an instrument that required them to imagine themselves in a particular writing situation. Perceived evaluation, perceived novelty, perceived ambiguity, perceived conspicuousness, and previous experience were used to measure the increase in writing anxiety. Their conclusion indicates there is a dispositional anxiety related to personal characteristics and a situational anxiety that is directly linked to

the increase in writing anxiety. Reed, Burton, and Vandett (1988) argue that personality plays into the validity of measurement because students tend to mark certain numbers when uncertain about their choices. Such an argument brings forth a need to develop a contextually valid measure for writing anxiety.

Fox (1980) conducted a study involving contextual variables in writing pedagogies. Conventional methods of instruction, such as writing exercises, lecture, discussion, and question/answer sessions were used against a different method that involved progressive teaching methods, such as small- and large-group interaction, freewriting, peer review, and instructor–student conferences (Fox, 1980). The new intervention was designed to provide a nonthreatening environment for the apprehensive writer to develop trust in the process, and the safe environment was designed to counteract the negativism surfacing in a traditional learning environment.

Daly and Miller (1975a) discussed a similar aspect in writing anxiety. They showed the understanding of mental health needs could be used as an intervention to cope with writing anxiety, and they examined the aspect of writing-specific self-esteem and concluded lower writing self-esteem correlated with higher writing anxiety. Boice (2000) presented a study in which a student started Dissertations Anonymous, a self-help group designed to help graduate students overcome writing anxiety. These studies all provide a similar answer in resolving writing anxiety, and this answer could lie in an intervention from the field of counseling.

Writing Anxiety Among Graduate Students

Most of the available research on anxiety has examined undergraduates, with some research having been conducted on graduate students. Bloom (1985) conducted a case study in which she examined the lives of two doctoral candidates, Sarah and Ellen, who were struggling to complete their dissertations for different reasons. They had attended Bloom's workshop on overcoming writing anxiety, and Bloom found that life circumstances had caused them to become "bogged down" in their dissertations (p. 126). Through her case study, she found that while Sarah's family situation was conducive to her finishing the dissertation, Ellen's was not, as she spent much of her time taking care of her family. Bloom's findings indicated that "when contexts not conducive to writing interfere with those that are, the conflict may produce little writing—and little desire to do any" (p. 131). A gap in the research exists as to whether, on a larger scale, the workshops conducted by Bloom can contribute to the reduction in writing anxiety. Although Bloom states that writing therapists claim that their clients feel substantially more comfortable with writing after several months, there are no available data that support whether clients are actually completing their writing projects. In attempting

to answer Bloom's claim, this study also seeks to explore the question of whether participants have made progress with their dissertations after having left the group for a substantial period of time.

In a separate study, Onwuegbuzie (1999) discovered that writing anxiety is a major factor that inhibits graduate students' writing of research proposals. He conducted a study in which he administered the Daly-Miller WAT, as well as a Self-Perception Profile for College Students to 97 graduate students. On the latter, six items were measured: perceived creativity, perceived intellectual ability, perceived scholastic competence, perceived job competence, perceived social acceptance, and perceived self-worth. Onwuegbuzie's (1999) findings intimate that high levels of writing apprehension correlated with low levels of perceived scholastic competence and perceived creativity.

Onwuegbuzie (2001) also found that procrastination was a major issue that resulted from writing anxiety, which, he thought, explained why 50% of doctoral candidates in education do not complete their degrees. He conducted a study in which he gave 135 graduate students the WAT along with a test known as the Procrastination Assessment Scale, and he found a significant correlation between the WAT and the scores on the Fear of Failure, Task Aversiveness, and Procrastination Assessment Scales, which led him to conclude that graduate student anxiety about writing is related to procrastination, which stems from fear of failure and task aversiveness (Onwuegbuzie, 2001). Such a finding builds on the research of Boice (1985), who found that blocked writers were prone to writing apprehension, which he described as "self-talk about the aversiveness of writing perceived as difficult, demanding, or complicated," and "procrastination," discussed as "self-talk that justifies avoiding or delaying writing" (p. 97). This research, in combination with the first author's tutoring experiences with writing-anxious graduate students, indicates the need for graduate students to understand writing anxiety so they may take the steps to overcome it.

FROM DISSERTATION WRITING TO THERAPEUTIC WRITING

Therapeutic writing has existed in counseling practices for various treatment purposes (Davidson & Birmingham, 2001; France, Cadieax, & Allen, 1995; Hagedorn, 2011; Riordan, 1996; Tubman, Montgomery, & Wagner, 2001; White & Murray, 2002). The origin of therapeutic letter writing could be traced to the establishment of narrative therapy (Hagedorn, 2011). Therapeutic use of writing in various forms, such as journaling, has been adopted in counseling practices. Writing exercises have been used to help clients articulate their painful experiences to themselves and others (Riordan, 1996; Tubman et al., 2001), and writing could become a primary communication channel between counselors and clients (France et al., 1995).

However, current literature shows most studies concentrate on individual counseling, and there is a need to examine the benefits of writing in group counseling (Hagedorn, 2011).

Freewriting has been introduced as a tool to impose no feedback and increase confidence (Elbow, 1968, 1973, 1981). This writing format aims to “let the childlike part of you channel whatever voices and visions come through and onto the page” (Lamott, 1994, p. 23). This technique has been found to be beneficial to students taught and tutored by the first author. Brand (2000) further called for the attention on students’ emotions in the writing process. She described the channeling of emotion as an essential tool in helping students understand the experiences about which they write (Brand, 2000).

The connection between writing and the awareness of emotion echoes the definition of emotional literacy, which is defined as “a requirement of personal growth, healthy relationships, and effective teaching so basic that it cannot be regulated to psychotherapy” (Bump, 2000, p. 316). Bump’s (2000) teaching in emotional literacy indicates writing skills to communicate emotions and thoughts to ourselves, as well as to others. Such a notion states that the use of the emotions can be channeled by the writing process and can contribute to learning. The discoveries of emotional components among writing scholars amazingly coincide with the practices of counseling and the theoretical framework in counseling (e.g., Rogers, 1961).

PLAN FOR THE WRITING ANXIETY GROUP

Writing itself can be an intervention for writing anxiety (Pajares & Johnson, 1996; Tausczik & Pennebaker, 2010). A writing anxiety group aims to meet weekly to help participants meet their writing goals by monitoring their progress and encouraging each other (Bloom, 1985). Pauley (2004) pointed out that the group could alleviate anxiety related to “perfectionistic thinking,” “self-blame,” and “isolation,” which could help them reflect more accurately on their self-worth and learn to question their perceptions of advisors and other mentors. Pauley considered such a group would strengthen students’ ability to cope with writing anxiety, and his study confirmed the progress graduate students could achieve in a group setting.

The group proposed by the first author is a self-help group designed to provide assistance to graduate students dealing with writing anxiety in their dissertation process. The group aims to alleviate the stress and anxiety that overwhelm graduate students, and it hopes to build mutual support among group members. It also aims to help graduate students successfully cope with writing anxiety and to enable them to complete their dissertations by applying what they learn in this group. The first author will lead the group. A coleader will be recruited from the Counseling Center. This coleader

can be a fully licensed or certified counselor or a counseling student in the advanced status (e.g., a student intern). The leader will implement the writing tasks and guide members to discuss their assignments and reactions to dissertation writing. The coleader will facilitate the emotional relief and monitor the group dynamics. If a counseling student fills the role, he/she can learn about the benefits of connecting therapeutic writing and group counseling, which can also be of benefit to graduate programs in counseling. The success of such a group will enhance counselors' abilities to work with this specific form of anxiety and to expand future research endeavors on therapeutic factors of group therapy on writing anxiety.

Format of the Writing Anxiety Group

The group is designed to be a closed group (Corey, 2012; Gladding, 2012), which will retain its group members in the course of group sessions. There will be no additional members allowed to enter the group after the first meeting. The group members will be graduate students in dissertation writing. There is no restriction on gender, ethnicity, or unrelated personality characteristics for participating in this group. The group will take in 8 to 10 students and meet during the course of two sessions, which will last 2 hr each.

Group Leaders

For the current group, a mindfulness-based approach to writing will be introduced. Kabat-Zinn (1990), the innovator behind this practice, defines mindfulness as an "introduction to ways that people can use to listen to their own bodies and minds and to begin trusting their own experience more" (p. 19). One of the goals of mindfulness is to help people become observers of the activities of their mind. Boice (2000) described seven ways in which mindfulness applies to writing: "(a) being awake, (b) clear-seeing, (c) calm efficiency, (d) freedom from excessive emotions and busyness, (e) connected and compassionate, (f) letting go of ego, and (g) self-discipline" (pp. 109–110). The ultimate goal for this group is to achieve what Carl Rogers described as "the ability of the client to let himself examine his experiences as they actually feel them without distorting them to fit his existing self-concept" (Rogers, 1961, p. 76).

DESIGN OF THE WRITING ANXIETY GROUP

The Major Task of the Writing Anxiety Group

The group builds on the freewriting (Elbow, 1968, 1973, 1981) intervention to allow members to express themselves through a writing task. This writing task will encourage members to write freely in order to express themselves.

The group members will receive this assignment after the initial stage of group development. Members will be told to keep a weekly journal that documents their daily thoughts and emotions in a week, and they will share their journals in the weekly group sessions. This process will allow members to have a therapeutic writing exercise outside of group sessions. Members will use this writing to review their daily functioning and record their cognitive and emotional responses toward their days. The group will request members to bring in their weekly journals and read these journals to the rest of the group. This process aims to produce the therapeutic effects of group counseling by disclosing and sharing personal issues. The disclosure of thoughts and emotions and the group discussion will be facilitated by the leader and coleader to help members build trust and cohesion (Corey, 2012; Gladding, 2012). Such a program will contribute to counselor education in that counselors will develop the ability to utilize a structured approach to conducting writing anxiety groups.

Expected Results of the Writing Anxiety Group

The plan for the group blossoms from the understanding of certain therapeutic principles in writing and the potentials of the therapeutic process in group therapy. The marriage of the writing and therapeutic principles indicates the focus on bringing to students healing processes they can take advantage of in both fields. The therapeutic influences in writing will be further enhanced through group dynamics, and students will be able to help themselves by examining their own issues and receiving feedback from other members. It is also important that this process be safeguarded by the leader and coleader, who will have knowledge in professional writing and mental health counseling, respectively. Thus, this group expects to make significant progress in stress relief and anxiety reduction. Furthermore, this group hopes to assist students by helping them become aware of their own difficulties and form a therapeutic relationship with other group members. The overall goal of the writing anxiety group is to fine-tune the group plan and verify its therapeutic effectiveness so the group can become an essential tool for educators and counselors to assist their students and clients. Furthermore, this group can become a training tool in counseling programs where counseling students will be able to practice group counseling skills by working with college students with writing anxiety.

Assumptions

This writing anxiety group is based on the following assumptions:

1. Participants are graduate students who are undergoing writing anxiety with respect to theses and dissertations.

2. A trusted relationship will develop between the participants and leaders of the group.
3. Participants are comfortable writing about their anxieties and sharing their feelings with the group.

Objectives

The objectives of this group are to:

1. increase participant awareness of their own writing processes and habits;
2. introduce new techniques of approaching the writing process;
3. help participants recognize sources of their anxiety and how it pertains to their writing;
4. help students overcome writing anxiety and writer's block and develop positive "self-talk" with respect to their writing; and
5. introduce students to readings related to affective components of the writing process.

Process

The group will take place during the course of two 2-hr sessions a week apart. During the first session:

1. Participants will fill out the Daly-Miller and Daly-Hailey questionnaires so the facilitators may obtain a sense of their anxiety levels. They will also be asked about their perceptions of what they think a good writer does.
2. Participants will read about the causes of writing anxiety and be asked to identify any causes that may resonate with them.
3. Students will draw a picture of what they perceive their writing process to be.
4. Students will write a contract in which they define three small, manageable tasks related to their project they wish to accomplish during the week.

During the second session:

1. Students will complete a short reading on self-talk.
2. Following the reading, students will complete an exercise in which they spend 30 min writing their project and recording any instances of negative self-talk.
3. Participants will discuss what they learned and will share how they may replace those instances of negative self-talk with positive self-talk.

4. Participants will be introduced to mindfulness meditation. They will meditate to a 10- min track from Jon Kabat-Zinn's "In This Moment, a Guided Mindfulness Meditation Practice."
5. Participants will write about the thoughts they experienced during the meditation track.
6. Participants will fill out feedback forms on the session.

A follow-up will also take place approximately 1 month after the conclusion of the sessions. The leaders will e-mail group members a short survey to ask them how their progress is going. Questions will include:

1. Have you applied any of the strategies from the session to your writing practices? If so, which ones?
2. What have your feelings been about writing since the sessions? Are they different from your feelings before the session?

DISCUSSION

Almond (2012) wrote an essay in the *New York Times* entitled "Why Talk Therapy is on the Wane and Writing Workshops Are on the Rise." He stated that participants in fiction writing workshops that he facilitated often wrote stories as a way of expressing their own issues. The writing anxiety group proposed in this article pushes further on the advantages that writing could produce for any person who writes. This group adopts the group counseling framework described in the books written by Corey (2012) and Gladding (2012) to establish a true therapeutic group. This creative strategy merges practical methods in the writing profession with therapeutic elements in the counseling profession. This group does not merely provide a platform for stress relief and emotional catharsis through writing. It aims to harness the therapeutic power of writing through a support group and the therapeutic process generated in group counseling. The benefits of such a marriage between the two professional fields are in need of research. This group will be able to deliver a research platform for researchers to examine the effectiveness of therapeutic writing and its use in a group setting, and it will benefit the education of future counselors in that counseling programs will be able to provide instruction on a different technique to use in group counseling. It can also be of benefit to counseling researchers as they will be able to conduct further studies on treating writing anxiety in group therapy and examining the aversive effects of writing anxiety among college students. It is the authors' hope that this creative group therapy will expand the horizon of the counseling profession and find a new therapeutic method to facilitate professional writing.

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