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# We're All Basic Writers: Tutors Talking About Writing Apprehension

*Wendy Bishop*

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I seldom write out of a love for writing.

—Timothy

I know what a blood-sweating activity my writing can be so why not postpone the agony. The obvious response is that postponing won't make the agony disappear; it only postpones it to a later date. At that later date the deadline looms larger and the act of writing is begun. I should save myself the headache.

—Scott

During our class meeting I was really overwhelmed, and intimidated. I couldn't stand the thought of sharing my writing with my classmates, because I never share my writing with anybody.

—Regina

I really don't like writing very much. The only writing that I do is the writing that I am assigned to do for school. I usually get As on my writing, but I believe that more than anything else, I've learned how to write the things that my teachers expect. This kind of writing, I'm sure most would agree, is a real chore.

—Sally

Most of us would agree that writing for teachers as our primary audience is a real chore, and most of us would not be surprised to find statements like these in a freshman composition student's writing process journal. We might be surprised to find, however, that these statements appeared in the writing journals of writing tutors who were enrolled in a tutor training course. [The tutors' names have been changed.]

During the spring of 1987, I taught a 400 level tutor training class that enrolled six education students (juniors and seniors) and three graduate English students taking the course for independent study credit. The backgrounds and interests of the students varied enormously: some were teaching sections of freshman composition and working in the campus Writing Center, some were taking their elementary or secondary teaching practicum courses and teaching writing in local classrooms, and some were enrolled in the course to learn more about tutoring writing and reading and even to improve their own writing and reading. In addition, these students included rural Native Alaskan students, urban Alaskan students and students from outside, from the lower forty-eight. One student was working with ESL tutees, and two were working with writers in the local prison. Because the class was small, diversity led to insight. All the tutors suffered from writing apprehension to a certain extent and found the subject an important one as reflected in their class journals.

This paper will discuss writing apprehension from the tutors' point of view, drawing on observations recorded in journals. It will also suggest that research and discussion about writing apprehension can form an important focus for developing a tutoring course.

## **What We Need to Know About Writing Apprehension**

First, I need to review briefly the concept of writing apprehension. Using the Daly-Miller Writing Apprehension Survey or WAS, researchers Faigley, Daly, and Witte were able to show that writing apprehension plays an important role in writing performance. Studying low and high apprehensive students screened with the WAS, they found that students who are highly apprehensive have less control over usage and written conventions than students who are low in apprehension. Additionally, high apprehensive students write shorter, syntactically less complete pieces, especially in personal narratives. Sylvia Holladay, in her review of research into writing apprehension, profiles the writing apprehensive student as a person who is frightened by demands for writing competency, who fears evaluation because he expects to fail, who avoids writing, and who behaves destructively when forced to write.

Donald McAndrew, in his review of research on writing apprehension, offers a concise definition:

The term *writing apprehension* was coined by Daly and Miller (1975a) to refer to an individual difference associated with an increase in anxiety when one is faced with situations requiring writing. A certain amount of creative tension is present and necessary in all writers, but for some the situation brings on a destructive amount of tension. (43)

Most research focuses on the problems of writing apprehension; that is, the non-creative aspect of writing anxiety. For instance, in his study of blocked and unblocked college writers, Mike Rose found that blocked writers were often unable to enter into the composing process because they were being inflexible in their writing strategies, misapplying rules, using inappropriate rules, or applying precise, algorithmic rules. These writers carried basic writers' strategies—attention to lower order concerns—to the limit. The result was writing paralysis. Writers without a block were more flexible; they used general problem-solving strategies to help them continue with their writing, and they had developed methods for approaching teachers, peers, and tutors for help and feedback.

Additionally, research in writing apprehension has shown that apprehensive students seldom voluntarily enroll in courses which require writing and, if they do find themselves in such courses, may neglect to turn in their work or procrastinate excessively (Holladay). Such a student is quite likely to be referred to a writing center. Therefore, tutors need to learn about writing apprehension and writing blocks, for students who are apprehensive cannot value writing and writers. They must have their anxiety level lowered before they can become successful writers.

However, before tutors can help apprehensive students, they must understand their own writing processes and, I would argue, the creative aspects of writing apprehension. Recent research reported in *The Writing Center Journal* begins to draw connections between a tutor's own level of writing apprehension and his or her ability to tutor. Bizarro and Toler found that tutors with high apprehension

... tend to avoid mentioning strengths in their students' writings and do not sit beside their students during tutorials. . . . Tutors who lack confidence in their own abilities to write clearly and who do not like being evaluated, even by friends, not only fail to search for the causes of errors in their students' writings, but seldom wait for students to make discoveries about their own writing. (42)

Additionally, Bizarro and Toler found that tutors who don't write or who avoid writing tend to emphasize lower-order, sentence-level concerns and seldom write with their students. In other words, these tutors are much more product than process oriented and more tutor than tutee centered in their conferencing styles.

Although these findings help us to understand poor tutors or tutoring situations which don't seem to benefit the tutees, they do not let us understand how good tutors deal with and creatively use their own writing apprehension. I would argue that one important difference between the tutor and tutee is not a lack of writing apprehension on the tutor's part but a history of creative use of writing apprehension, leading to successful writing experiences. James Collins, arguing that writing development is flexible and

functional rather than linear and fixed, claims that “Writing development is negotiated every time written language is used” (11). Because of this constant negotiation, I would add, at some point we are all basic writers. We all have writing tasks that make us apprehensive, tentative, reluctant, and so on. Successful writers have learned how to conquer their writing apprehension, and less successful, often basic, writers have not. Our tutors know that they are participants in both camps: successful writers able to tutor writing, but also writers who encounter problems in their own writing lives.

Our tutoring courses should help to make tutors aware of the methods they have used to overcome their own writing apprehension, for they can share these methods with tutees. Thom Hawkins argues the efficacy of this role for most tutors: they are insiders and outsiders; therefore, they have more credibility with tutees. When a tutor says: I have trouble writing too, she will generally seem more believable than a teacher who tosses off a groan over writing difficulties while fluently discussing what is, for a student, a difficult text.

### **Attributes of Low Apprehensives**

There is little direct discussion in the research literature about the positive aspects of writing apprehension although Donald Murray suggests that writer’s block may represent a productive delay in the writing process, a time when waiting to write is as important as writing. In his review of types of writer’s block, David Wallace cites this type of “subject-specific” block as impermanent: “While this type of delay does inhibit production, it is not usually a permanent barrier to writing” (33). To discuss writing apprehension, Faigley, Daly, and Witte describe low apprehensives as those writers who “tend not to avoid situations that demand writing, are confident in their abilities to write, and frequently enjoy writing” (134).

To understand the more productive types of writing delay and how writers learn to overcome writing apprehension, it helps to review writing apprehension research to predict attributes of low writing apprehension. It is possible to predict that the attributes of low apprehensives will be the reverse of the attributes of high apprehensives. That is, if the high apprehensive has less syntactic control of the language, we might expect low apprehensives to have greater syntactic control, and so on. McAndrew’s review of research helped me develop the Figure: Probable Attributes of Low Apprehensives (studies which he cites are listed parenthetically).

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**Figure. Probable Attributes of Low Apprehensives**

**Low Apprehensives**

- Are not afraid of majors (jobs) which require writing. Know writing is not a matter of luck. Play with and appreciate the written language's artistry. Are aware that written language is useful in daily life. (Daly 1985)
  - Have flexible, heuristic procedures to help avoid writing blocks. Rose (1980)
  - Have fewer spelling errors, greater syntactic complexity and greater length than high apprehensives. (Book 1976)
  - Have an awareness of audience, purpose, and organizational writing strategies. (Selfe 1981, 1984)
  - Have planning methods and also delay writing to produce better, more well-thought-out pieces. Can compress writing time or postpone it to avoid anxiety. (Bannister 1982)
  - Take advantage of multiple drafts. (Hayes 1981)
  - Appear to be able to ignore negative response (teacher's red-ink), have had encouraging writing experiences, know how to ask for teacher guidance. (Harvley-Felder 1978)
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**Talking About Writing Apprehension**

In the tutor training classroom, three methods allow tutor/writers to learn that they have or could develop successful writing strategies and pass them on to tutees. First, tutors can be encouraged to write a literacy autobiography (Hartwell) in which they discuss their reading and writing past. Second, tutors can write and revise a "How I Write" essay (Reigstad and McAndrew) which allows them to develop a metacognitive awareness of their own writing process. Third, students can learn about writing processes and writing apprehension in course discussions in which they link the discoveries they are making about their own writing (literacy autobiography and "How I Write" essay) with the findings and advice of composition researchers and teacher.

**Literacy Autobiographies**

Here are some tutors talking in their own literacy autobiographies:

I remember almost crying when I would see red marks on my compositions that my grade school teachers were returning to me. Not that I was so upset with having made the mistakes. What bothered me was seeing my clean, neat page ruined by red ink. What I think makes more sense would be to dispense with the red ink for a while. Let students get comfortable with the idea that, yes, I AM WRITING! before you start making evaluative responses on their papers. . . .

—Scott

I've been tutored a lot since I've been to college. Especially in English, Math and Yupik. I've had good and bad tutors. The effective ones were the ones that made me think and do the work whereas the ineffective ones did the work for me.

—Regina

As someone who's met with success and hard times in my schooling and with my life, I look at all forms of teaching as a kind of counseling. I like the "affective" part of teaching; that's why I'm teaching writing. My weakest part of tutoring comes with the nature of the job. I have a hard time with the drop-in nature of the job. It's easy to get busy in a five or ten minute lull doing other work so when a new arrival comes in, my very first thoughts are not on them, but on the work I had just begun and wished to continue. However once the session begins I do fine. How can I correct this area? By refusing temptation and doing nothing but wait. I'll do that tomorrow.

—Jeff

These three writers are discussing common experiences. Scott remembers well the red-ink on his early writing. As a low-apprehensive writer, he learned to move beyond the red-ink and continue to enjoy his writing. By discussing his early feelings, however, and sharing them in class discussion, he learns to see how much he has in common with his own tutees and some strategies for sharing this information. Regina, while remembering her own experiences of being tutored, has a chance to evaluate effective versus ineffective tutors and to remember her own apprehensive moments as a tutee. Finally, Jeff's responses start out at a very general level and move to a specific current problem he is having in tutoring, developing patience and the willingness to place his own work *second*. He has clearly overcome apprehension and values his own time and writing. Perhaps he can begin to share his values with his tutees.

## "How I Write" Essays

When writing the "How I Write" essay, tutors are given few directions. They are asked to write a readable first draft and are given no definition of "essay." Then, other tutors take the essay home, read it, and return at another class period to "tutor" the student whose essay they have read. Near the end of the semester, tutors are asked to revise that essay into a final draft that can also reflect any of the discussions or readings on writing processes that occurred during class periods. Here is the first draft of Jeff's "How I Write" essay. Jeff is a graduate teaching assistant in English.

### How I Write

Every time I write, I am a new and different writer, so though I know what tactics usually work best when I begin a paper, I'm often surprised.

I find writing papers for my graduate literature seminars painful, so painful, in fact, that at times I hate writing them. And hate is not a word I use lightly. This

semester I have four such papers to write, three 4 page papers and one 15 page paper. I think that I will hate them all. I can afford to hate them, you see, because this is the last graduate literature seminar I have to take. After this seminar anyone who makes me write a critical essay about a book will have to pay me a great deal of money. A *great* deal of money. And even then I'll probably refuse them.

I hate writing those papers so much I took the most radical approach I could think of to avoid them. Instead of waiting until May 4 (all four papers are due May 4) and suffering worse than I ever suffered before, I decided to attack the papers and write them immediately. Last weekend I took fourteen books out of the library to use as research and I spent the weekend reading and writing, reading and writing. Saturday morning at 9:00 A.M. I started one of my short papers by jotting a short note comparing two of the books. Thirteen hours later not only had I finished that short paper, but I had also baked two loaves of bread. Although the actual writing was painful—I won't say how painful except I sure didn't enjoy myself while I was writing—I felt so good when I finished that I started reading more books to figure out a topic for another of my short papers. Not being able to figure out a topic I took a break and did the dishes. That did the trick. By the time I went to sleep Saturday night I had a paper topic all figured out.

Sunday turned out to be a replay of Saturday, except I knew what I wanted to say from the first. I began at 9:00 a.m. and went on until 10:30 p.m. I took breaks for a couple meals, but mostly I worked. It was not a fun day but it was satisfying. When I was finished with that short paper I just said to myself, Jeff, you did just fine, and now why don't you just start thinking about that big 15 page paper. If you can finish that by next weekend you won't have anything to worry about except a little-bitty 4 page paper that you *know* you can do in a single day. Finish that big paper and you won't be hating anything anymore and everything will feel better. That's what I said to myself. Or something like that.

On Monday I handed in the two papers to my professor and he looked at me like I was crazy. When I told him I was going to try to write my long research paper this next week, he wanted to know what kind of mischief I had gotten myself into over break. I told him can't a guy feel good for getting ahead of the game for once in his life. Then I went to the library and took out another fifteen books for the long paper I am going to do my best to finish this weekend. The books are on my kitchen table at home. The stack is an ugly, painful sight, but they do remind me to subconsciously think about that paper. I'll let you know next week whether I finish the paper.

One more thing. Please note there is no moral to this paper, except that never in my life have I ever considered getting so far ahead, and never have I finished research papers, even a short research paper, in so quick a time.

Jeff's paper, although admittedly a rough draft with a very teacher-directed sense of audience, clearly explores this writer's complex and flexible writing process. Jeff exhibits many of the characteristics listed in the Figure, Probable Attributes of Low Apprehensives. First, he is already in the English teaching/writing profession and not afraid of a major which requires large amounts of writing. He has flexible procedures for approaching an assignment that he clearly dislikes; he tries something he has never tried before and carefully monitors his process. That is, he has a

metacognitive awareness of himself as a writer, coaching himself as he goes: “I said to myself, Jeff, you did just fine.” Next, he has chosen a particular audience and geared his rough draft to the tenor of our class (moving from journal pieces to informal essay writing). Finally, he has developed the ability to compress writing time or to postpone it to avoid anxiety. He doesn’t like the assignment so he plunges in, yet even during intensive writing sessions, he pauses, bakes bread, does the dishes, solves problems.

Jeff and other tutors, as evidenced by their “How I Write” essays, which are unfortunately too many and too long to include here, learned to be creative with their own writing apprehension. Throughout the tutor training class, we tied these explorations and discussions to a developing understanding of the writing process as presented in class texts. These tutor/writers felt they learned and grew as writers. Kenneth Bruffee points out that a major contribution of a training course for tutors is their own improved writing. Tutor/writers learned that they couldn’t depend on any one strategy, that they had writing pasts that affected writing presents, and that writing strategies can be named, modified, and enlarged.

## Writing Process Journals

Finally, learning about their writing process and writing apprehension *and writing about this learning in a journal* can lead tutors to valuable insights (Fulwiler). Here are tutors talking about such learning:

I was troubled with the thought of showing a stumped student a diagram of the writing process. It isn’t a simple process—to be found in a diagram. There can be a trillion “diagrams” in operation now as a trillion + writers are writing. I’ve been shown diagrams before, and I took them as the correct way of composing. Students are taught to learn what they see & accept it as correct. A student learning to write must learn his way, his ways, or learn that he doesn’t even have anything close to a process that can describe how he writes. To do this takes time, a teacher (or tutor) & a willing student.

—Susan

My right foot is a half-size larger than my left foot. For a long time, I thought that this meant there was something very wrong with me. Then, one day, I learned that it is normal for one side of a person’s body to be larger than the other side—I felt so much better! This story is a little exaggerated, but it expresses the way I felt after our class discussion on the writing process. I have always felt that I didn’t like to write and that I wasn’t very good at it, because it is such a struggle for me—especially with getting started. I really never thought that other people got up and did their housework when they were trying to write something. It was a relief to hear that this happens even to Wendy. Maybe there is hope for me after all.

—Sally

Anyway, speaking of someone else who is apprehensive about writing [besides, Jeff, the author of this piece], I met someone last week at the writing center who, when he filled in a check sheet which asked what specific writing skills he needed help in, checked every category. Then he showed me a paper he had just had graded, the first graded paper of the semester. At the end of the sheet the instructor had written that the paper—its title was “Lost Love”—was full of hyperbole, was overemotional, and because it had failed to interest the audience, was guilty of the ultimate failure a writer can be guilty of. The instructor had written the words “ultimate failure” on this, the first graded paper by a student who had been out of school for a year and a half, had written on something that concerned him, and was not confident of his abilities to begin with. Whatever the flaws of the paper—and it was flawed—I took the first half hour of our conference just talking to the student. . . . We never did get to the computer room where the instructor had wanted him to go to get practice on comma splices.

—Jeff

I know for a fact that one of my weakest points as a tutor is having confidence in myself. I guess because I know I'm a poor writer, I can't really picture myself helping another student with their English or writing courses. Yes, I know I can improve and as a matter of fact I think I've done some improving since the 1st day of class. One way I can improve is by learning to believe in myself and focusing on how I know I can help my tutee instead of focusing on my weaknesses. I guess!!!!

—Regina

Here we see Susan and Sally struggling with writing process material. Susan is trying to see how she can offer what she has learned and valued to a student. Sally is still trying to understand and deal with her own writing apprehension. Jeff's experience shows him building a bridge from his own clear, but still very low, apprehension to a tutee's equally real and potentially devastating encounter with an insensitive teacher. And Regina's experience shows that a beginning tutor's writing apprehension can be aided dramatically in a tutor training class.

In this training course, students took pre- and post-writing apprehension tests (a modified Daly-Miller Likert-type scale as found in Reigstad and McAndrew). On a scale of 1 (low) to 80 (high) Regina moved from 47 to 34, a relatively dramatic drop which is echoed in her comments above. Sally dropped even more dramatically, from an early score of 30 to a lowered apprehension of 12.

These tutors knew that they were, at times, basic writers themselves. They already had great insights into “school” writing, realizing they were the victims of, but also the survivors of, lots of “red-ink.” They knew that writing development is in constant negotiation, and they sensed, as Jeff expressed it, that their writing was always changing, that they were often “new and different” writers, or, if that was not the case, that they were conservative writers who could fit themselves to teachers' demands and hence produce A-graded work even though they felt dissatisfied with their own writing.

For these writers/tutors, a tutor training class was a valuable time for self-exploration. Simultaneously, they were able to take the writings and research of others and put insights gained from these readings to use in a tutoring situation, building bridges from their own experiences, now made manifest in writing autobiographies, "How I Write" essays and class discussions, to the very similar but less successful experiences of their tutees. Let me close with the end-of-semester journal summaries of two tutors:

This course has been beneficial in the fact that it has allowed me to put theory into practice through a tutoring experience. In the beginning of the course I was quite apprehensive about my ability to be an effective tutor but as time went on I became more relaxed.

I've learned a great deal about the writing process and how the basic writer perceives writing. I've learned effective conferencing techniques and some great invention techniques. The information learned in this course has also strengthened my own writing and has given me insight into the writing process.

Maybe I would have felt a little more comfortable w/a stronger writing background. I know I'd like to take more writing courses. This course has taken a lot of the mystery out of writing.

—Lisa

Since then [the beginning of the course], I've learned that writing is a process that can be learned. I feel like I am, basically, learning to write all over again. I know now, that the most important thing to do about learning to write is to write. I've learned to trust myself—that if I start writing, I will produce something that I can work with. . . . I also think that improving my own writing has made me much more confident in my ability to help others with their writing. I feel like I now know some strategies that have worked for me; so I feel comfortable with offering them as ways to help other students with their writing.

—Regina

Clearly, tutors have as much to learn about themselves as writers as the student writers they serve. A course for tutors which develops tutors' understanding of creative and non-creative uses of writing apprehension may provide a good beginning.

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