

An Apprehensive Writer Composes

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CYNTHIA L. SELFE

The term “writing apprehension,” originally coined in 1975 by Miller and Daly, refers to a generalized tendency to experience “some form of anxiety” when faced with a writing task (Miller & Daly, 1975, p. 2). To most teachers of composition, this construct is an intuitively credible one. They know that a class seldom goes by, either at the elementary, secondary, or college level, without yielding one or more students who seem to allow their dread of composing to come between them and effective written expression. And yet our progress in learning how to cope with highly apprehensive writers in the composition classroom has been limited by the absence of research on this concept since Miller and Daly introduced the term a decade ago.

Although Daly has continued to refine the theoretical construct of writing apprehension and to explore the statistical correlations and predictive functions of the construct with regard to personality measures and measures of group performance, only in-depth, single-subject studies can begin to tell us exactly how writing apprehension affects the composing process. Few studies of this kind have been completed. This chapter describes a case study of one highly apprehensive writer named Bev and takes a detailed look at how her apprehension affected her composing activities.

Procedures

The investigation reported here took place at The University of Texas in the fall semester of 1979. Bev, after scoring 93 out of 130 possible

points on the Daly Miller Writing-Apprehension Scale (Miller & Daly, 1975), was selected as a case study subject and scheduled for three different observation sessions within a period of two weeks. During the first of these sessions, Bev described her regular composing processes, making a detailed report of how she would go about writing a theme for a freshman English class. During the second session, Bev was asked to think aloud while composing in response to the following freshman theme assignment.

Pretend that you have been asked to come back to your old high school to give an assembly for college-bound seniors on "Those Things I Wish I had Known before I Went to College." . . . When you sit down to write this speech, you realize that the most effective way to get your point across to these skeptical seniors would be to tell them a story about something that has happened to you in college.¹

Bev was encouraged to respond as she would normally to a composition assignment and to take as much time as she needed to complete the task. During the third and final session, Bev was asked to review a videotape of her composing-aloud session and to discuss the differences between those processes she felt she used normally and those she felt she exhibited only in the investigative setting. All of Bev's comments during these sessions were audiotaped and later transcribed for analysis.

Background: Bev's Composing Attitudes

Bev, an 18-year-old freshman music major with a Scholastic Aptitude Test score of 480 and a 2.54 grade point average, called her fear of writing "realistic." She maintained that she had never been taught "how to really write" and remembered doing very little writing during her elementary school years. Even in high school, Bev recalled, she wrote "very few papers . . . a book report or something in a science class . . . on an experiment." Bev linked what she saw as her limited writing practice and instruction in elementary and high school to the writing problems she was experiencing in her classes at The University of Texas. She blamed her status as a "straight C student" in part on her past English teachers.

Because Bev lacked confidence in her past writing instruction, she had become increasingly apprehensive about having to write in an

academic setting and had come to have little faith in her own composing skills: "I will never understand . . . writing. It just doesn't . . . I could sit there all day, but I just don't grasp it. You know every year I get, 'Write it this way; write it this way,' or 'This time do it this way.'" But you know I just don't know how." Feeling that she lacked the skills necessary to produce a successful composition, Bev found the process of academic writing far more punishing than rewarding and repeatedly used the words "hate" and "fear" in connection with her writing. Much of Bev's fear of writing stemmed from her belief that teachers expected "letter-perfect" papers from their students—papers she felt she could not deliver.

One result of this uncertainty and apprehension was that Bev had ritualized procrastination to the point where it had become a necessary part of her composing process: "I have this procrastination problem about writing papers because I'm so scared about having them graded . . . pressure is definitely a big factor in my writing. I get an assignment, stick it away, and mark the [due] date on my calendar." It was only on the day before an assignment was to be collected that the pressure of a due-date would begin to outweigh her apprehension about writing. Only then could Bev force herself to retreat to her favorite library cubicle to "write furiously" until she had an acceptable draft. To Bev as a highly apprehensive writer, this avoidance behavior had its own strange logic. If no part of a paper had been written, nothing could be criticized. And when compositions *had* to be done, if they were written and typed at the last possible moment, then Bev could always attribute failure to the harried circumstances under which the paper was composed.

Bev's apprehension about her past writing instruction, her limited repertoire of writing skills, and her inability to attack academic writing problems successfully affected her composing activities during the composing-aloud session of the investigation.

Bev's Composing Session

BEV'S ESSAY

College begins a totally different lifestyle within a time period of just a few short months. College is perhaps the biggest step one takes in life. It seems as though a student is expected to mature drastically from a giggly, immature high school student to a mature responsible adult in three

months when it took them eighteen years to become a giggly, immature senior. College is a time to accept responsibility for oneself and one's activities. But along with this adjustment in one's personality, one must also concentrate on studying—the main reason for making the grade in college. College has always been a symbol of freedom. All at once there is nobody making suggestions as to how you spend your time.

When I began to college, I had decided to make college the most worthwhile thing that I could do. I decided that my purpose was to study and practise music from early morning until late at night. There was no use wasting money on college if I was going to spend time partying. After about two weeks, my sister finally confronted me with the fact that I had turned into one of the biggest bores on campus. She explained that by studying constantly I was losing opportunities to learn other things than just facts from books. I had also discouraged friendships with people because I was always on my way to the library.

After my sister's talk, I began to see how I had shut myself off from the real object behind college. After my realization; classes, tests, and early morning practise sessions became more bearable because I could always count on a friend to cheer me up or just listen to a few moments of heavy self-pity. And I could help my friends in the same way.

Granted, you must regulate and restrict your extra curricular activities but without them college is merely facts on a page and has no relationship to real life. College is a time to learn from books but it is also a time to learn about human behavior through friendships and dealings with other people. If you only practise one aspect of college, you will be wasting more than just money, you will be wasting several informative years of your life.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE SESSION

When Bev began to compose in response to the assignment, her initial apprehension encouraged her to abbreviate her composing efforts, to write quickly and "get it over with" as soon as possible. Thus Bev allowed herself only 40 seconds of prewriting "panic" before she began to compose a broad statement she called the "topic sentence" of her composition. Beyond this 40-second period, she engaged in no other prewriting activities. Using this statement as a starting point and a general stimulus, Bev began to free write—exploring one idea in connection with her topic sentence, pausing briefly when she came to a dead end or when she lost her tenuous train of thought, and then making off in a new direction: "I just started writing and that led to something else. And then, every now and again . . . I'd stop and start on something else." After 21 minutes of composing in this fashion, Bev had explored five or six very different ideas in connection with her

topic sentence and was no closer to identifying a focus for her theme than she had been when she began her draft. Although Bev admitted that she had often had to search for a topic through half of a paper before deciding "exactly where . . . to go with it for sure," she was nonetheless frustrated by her lack of direction in this theme: "I think I'm off the track here, I really do. I know what I'm trying to get at, but it's just not coming out that way." At this point Bev's composing was hurried and yet, because she had no concept of where her essay was leading her, often hesitant: "It seems as though a student is expected to—expected to *what* for Pete's sake?"

Bev did not find a focus for her essay until 23 minutes into the composing-aloud session, when she remembered a story involving her older sister that she could use to illustrate one of the ideas she had touched on in her free writing. At this point it became clear that the writing Bev had done in the first half of the session had served primarily as a method of generating ideas and searching out a topic on which she could expand. But Bev's problems with her paper were far from over. Although she no longer had to worry about where her paper was going, she became concerned that the rather rambling introduction "didn't flow" into the more focused narrative that followed and that the entire effect was one of a "disorganized" composition.

As she continued to write the second half of her essay, Bev translated this apprehension that she was not writing a more structured theme into a concern for correctness at the sentence and word level; she began attending to mechanical correctness rather than to organizational and logical soundness. As a result of this concern, Bev devoted a full quarter of the time she spent on the initial draft of her paper to revising what she had just written.

By the time Bev reached the end of her first draft, she was able to conclude her paper with a fairly focused statement of her topic in the last sentence. She remained dissatisfied, however, with the structure and the coherence of her theme: "I think that's my problem. I don't think I do organize my writing, or I'd have a better idea of where I was going to go with this paper." The thrust of Bev's revision, which did not involve a major rewriting of the initial draft, was to tie the rambling introduction to the more focused narrative that followed. This process seemed a familiar one to Bev who explained that she often had to "go back . . . and fill in the gaps" in the papers she wrote. She eschewed major revisions that might have necessitated prolonged involvement in the writing process and instead primarily reworked phrases and single

sentences, "adding something or exchanging something," with the aim of making the various parts of the paper adhere.

During the final moments of the session, Bev reread the entire paper ("Let's see how bad it is"), hoping to find that her later modifications had "done some good." She found, however, only a loosely connected pastiche of ideas that she evaluated negatively, rereading her own words in a mocking tone or making comments on her lack of verbal facility: "Jeez, that sounds so corny! I can't believe I wrote some of this stuff."

To a great extent, Bev's composing activities during this session were determined by her fear of academic writing. The speed at which she hurried through the composing process, her choice of writing strategies, her concern with mechanical correctness rather than with underlying structural soundness, and her truncated revising efforts resulted from her paucity of composing skills, her lack of confidence in the skills she did have, and her anxiety about engaging in a task for which she felt unprepared.

RACING THROUGH THE COMPOSING PROCESS

One of Bev's primary methods of reducing her apprehension about academic tasks in this session involved completing a first draft in what she described as a "mad, frantic, get-everything-you-can-down-on-paper rush." At this rapid pace, Bev wrote approximately 3 pages of material, 457 words, and 24 sentences in a session lasting 51 minutes and 15 seconds. Bev used this technique of writing "furiously until you run out of ideas" to produce a draft of a paper in a minimal amount of time and with a minimal amount of prewriting or revising.

From previous experience, Bev knew that this initial headlong rush would ensure her a quick, if not high quality, draft of her composition. This method was acceptable and even desirable to Bev as an apprehensive writer because she was less concerned with *what* she wrote than she was with "getting something down" and "finishing" the writing task in which she had been forced to engage.

COMPROMISING BETWEEN STRUCTURED AND UNSTRUCTURED WRITING

Before Bev even began to compose her essay about adapting to life in college, it became evident that her apprehension was heightened by the disparity she perceived between the processes she felt or suspected

she should use to compose and those she actually did habitually use. On one hand, Bev believed in the efficacy of her normal free writing technique; it made a quick job of what was for her a very unpleasant task. On the other, she realized that writing successful compositions required "something else"—a "topic sentence," paragraphs that "relate to one specific thing . . . in the topic sentence," and a "conclusion" that reiterated the points made in the body of the essay. Because she suspected that such a structured essay required more careful and deliberate composing methods than those she generally employed and a set of writing skills that she suspected she lacked, the prospect of writing such a theme only made the task seem more formidable to the anxious freshman. Of course, Bev could have combined these two methods quite successfully by free writing a first draft and more carefully focusing and structuring subsequent drafts. However, she saw her free writing technique not as an exploratory tool that could lead to further drafts, but rather as a method that allowed her to abbreviate the writing process into "one, mad, frantic . . . rush."

To reconcile two conflicting approaches—one arising from her desire to complete the theme in one rapid burst of free writing and the other from her belief that a successful theme had to be carefully constructed according to a specific format—Bev settled on a compromise, taking a minute and a half to formulate a general topic sentence and then proceeding to "write furiously" in search of a real focus for her essay.

As she herself suspected, the extent to which Bev was able to employ a more structured approach during this writing session was limited not only by her apprehension, which encouraged her to rush through the draft, but also by her limited repertoire of composing skills and strategies, a limitation that made her so anxious about writing in the first place. Bev commanded, for example, very few invention heuristics, outlining skills, or diagramming strategies that could help her give a coherent, global structure to her essay at the prewriting stage; and she knew few rewriting, reorganizing, or rethinking skills that could help her create a more structured essay during the drafting and postdrafting movements. Bev was in fact caught in an all too familiar bind. Her apprehension about writing had been sparked by an accurate perception of her limited composing skills, and yet that very apprehension kept her from involving herself in composing activities and thus exercising, perhaps improving, the skills she did have.

MISTAKING MECHANICAL CORRECTNESS FOR STRUCTURAL SOUNDNESS

During the remainder of her first draft, Bev translated her apprehension that she was not writing a more structured theme into a concern for accuracy at the sentence and word level, mistaking mechanical correctness for organizational and logical soundness. As a result of this concern, she spent 24.6 percent of her total drafting time editing or revising what she had just written.

This continual editing had several effects on Bev's composing processes. First, it forced her to establish a hesitant composing rhythm, at least once every sentence distracting her attention from matters of content and focusing it on matters of style and mechanics. For example, she began one sentence in her fourth paragraph with enthusiasm, trying to recall the lesson she learned from her sister: "After my sister's talk, I began to see for myself how I had shut myself off from the real meanen . . ." Realizing that "meanen" was a misspelling, Bev stopped writing, crossed out the first version, and substituted "meaning." She acknowledged, however, that she had forgotten what she was trying to say and went back to reread the sentence. As she did, she noted the repetition of "myself" and reread the sentence again before deciding to delete the first occurrence of that word. After effecting the deletion, Bev read the edited sentence again only to come to the conclusion that "meaning" should be changed to another word. In searching for a word to replace "meaning," Bev had to read the sentence two more times before she could retrieve and substitute the alternative word, "object." She then had to read the entire passage one last time before she could finish with the phrase "behind going to college." This particular sentence, which consisted of 23 words in its final version, took Bev 5 minutes and 51 seconds to compose.

This attention to matters of mechanical correctness at an early stage of her composition not only caused Bev to lose her train of thought but also served to distract her attention from larger, more important concerns such as how best to relate the ideas she had generated and which details to choose that would be most effective in presenting her narrative to the target audience. When her essay required carefully considered rhetorical changes, Bev was too busy effecting minor surface repairs.

Moreover, even the surface repairs that Bev made in her draft were ineffective because she found her limited editing skills unequal to the complex problems she encountered. Bev spent much of her editing

time writing *around* problems—avoiding words she suspected she misspelled by using alternatives she was more "sure of," and resolving difficulties with lengthy clauses that did not "sound right" by constructing two separate sentences. Because she often could not identify specific problems, Bev's edited passages frequently turned out to be as troublesome as the originals. At one point during the session, for example, Bev stopped writing to change "Students must regulate they're own activities" to "A student must regulate their own time," thus exchanging one surface error for another. Bev also relied heavily on the aural appeal of her sentences to alert her to needed editing and revision. Unfortunately, the sound of a passage, which was helpful in revealing information about syntax and grammar, told Bev nothing about logic, content, or even spelling and proved to be a less than adequate technique of evaluation, an inadequacy demonstrated by the first sentence of her draft: "College begins a totally different lifestyle within the period of just a few short months."

SUBSTITUTING EDITING FOR REVISING

After she concluded the first draft of her paper 45 minutes into the composing session, Bev became highly anxious about the remainder of the writing process. Convinced that her essay was not successful and worried that she did not have the skills necessary to make it so, Bev flipped distractedly through the pages of her initial draft, shaking her head and remarking with weary disgust that it needed "tons of work." Faced with what seemed to be a Herculean task of rewriting, Bev chose to concentrate her efforts only on the most obvious of the essay's flaws by bringing the first part of the composition in line with the narrative that followed. "It all went back to the opening . . . and having to talk about everything I was going to talk about in the paper . . . I had to get it all in there." Unwilling, however, to commit herself to rewriting major portions of the text and uncertain about what she could do to improve them if she did, Bev again chose to ignore major rhetorical considerations, making only minor sentence level changes in the introduction in an effort to connect it more closely with the narrative. It is important to note here that Bev's efforts to produce her ideal essay through revision were plagued by the same problems that had sabotaged her initial draft: the limited repertoire of skills and strategies she had available for successful revision and the ever present apprehension that encouraged her to rush toward the conclusion of a writing task as

quickly as possible. "I really don't like that introduction, but I'll go ahead with it."

Discussion

To date, our study of apprehensive writers is embryonic. Even the close examination of Bev's composing processes provides only a superficial understanding of how apprehension functions in connection with writing. To expand our knowledge of writing apprehension we may find it helpful to turn to other disciplines. One fertile area for future research is the striking similarity that exists between the phenomenon of "apprehension" we have observed in writers like Bev and the phenomenon of "anxiety" that is so widely discussed in the literature of psychology. It seems reasonable to assume, for example, that when Bev must write for school she is experiencing what Freud describes as "the sensation of displeasure" (1926/1961, p. 25) or what Rollo May calls "painful" feelings of "uncertainty and helplessness" (1950, p. 190) and that she is, moreover, quite consciously aware of these feelings (Basowitz, Persky, Korchin, & Grinker, 1955). Further connections between what psychologists have discovered about anxiety and what we as composition specialists have observed about writing apprehension may help us better understand students like Bev.

Psychological studies may, for example, offer credible explanations for the specific composing behaviors we observe in apprehensive writers. We may learn that when Bev procrastinates she is doing two things: avoiding a task she is very anxious about (Lazarus & Averill, 1972) and, perhaps paradoxically, waiting until her anxiety is strong enough to act as a "special kind" of motivating device (Cattell, 1972, pp. 176-177). When Bev gets anxious enough about the prospect of getting a paper done, she may compose if only to reduce her anxiety. We may also learn more about the distinctive composing behaviors of highly apprehensive writers—for instance, Bev's refusal to spend time engaged in prewriting activities, her fondness for "speedwriting," and her insistence on minimal revision—if we study them as "coping behaviors," activities that individuals employ to reduce their anxiety to acceptable levels (Lazarus & Averill, 1972).

In the last analysis, however, it is Bev's actions and comments that speak most eloquently and that inspire us to ask the clearest questions about the effects of writing apprehension. We are forced to wonder

how individuals develop such intense apprehension. Do they, as some psychologists suggest, have a general tendency toward anxiety that, in turn, intensifies their reaction to specific situations? Or does their apprehension arise from a successive series of failures that initiates a spiraling cycle of anxiety (see Spielberger, 1972)?

We may also wonder what role education plays in the development of writing apprehension. What specifically, for example, do we as English teachers do to encourage or dampen anxiety in the students who attend our composition classes? Do we, as the teachers in Daly's study (1978b) suggest, encourage high writing apprehension by evaluating highly apprehensive students less positively than we do less apprehensive students, by "overemphasizing mechanical issues," by "responding less than favorably to disagreeable content regardless of the quality of writing," or by generally "leading students to associate writing attempts with punishment" (p. 23)?

Closely connected to questions about possible causes of high writing apprehension is the question of how closely such apprehension is related to writing skill. Bev's profile, for example, matches in many ways the profiles of "basic" or "unskilled" writers that have been reported in recent studies of composing processes. "Unskilled" writers (as opposed to "skilled" writers) have been reported to avoid situations in which they are forced to write (Warters, 1980), to deal less effectively with rhetorical considerations such as audience (Atlas, 1979), to be less effective in producing "reader-based prose" (Flower, 1979), to spend less time involved in prewriting activities (Pianko, 1979), and to be more worried about mechanics and less concerned with content (Bechtel, 1980). These comparisons suggest an interesting possibility: High writing apprehension and lack of writing skills may be related, and the investigations mentioned above may well be exploring different manifestations of the same complex problem. Certainly Daly's findings (1977, 1978a), which link lower scores on tests of "writing competency" and lower evaluations of "writing quality" with high writing apprehension, suggest that possibility.

It seems logical to assume that subjects who lack a repertoire of skills or strategies for successfully completing composing tasks will be apprehensive about writing. What we do not know is how, when, and why these conditions develop; whether their development is sequentially and/or causally related to each other; and under what circumstances development of apprehension might be reversible.

Finally, Bev's example inspires us to define more precisely the

effects apprehension has on the composing processes of all our students. We have not, for example, thought about what beneficial effects moderate levels of apprehension may have on learning how to write and how to approach a writing problem, and we have done little work to compare the composing processes of high- and low-apprehension writers.

The term "writing apprehension" touches a tender chord in those of us who are forced to produce relatively large quantities of written material as a part of our daily routines. Many of us admit to being mildly anxious about a piece of writing we have committed ourselves to completing, an article we have neglected to produce, or a report we have failed to work up. However, as teachers of writing we can also recognize a much more intense, more pronounced writing apprehension in certain of our students whose loathing of the composing process is exceeded only by their fear of failing grades. What this case study of Bev has shown us is that apprehension can be tied to a whole array of composing-process problems. But much work remains to be done if we hope to identify and explain the difficulties these students experience as they struggle through academic writing situations in our classes.

NOTE

1. The theme assignment was adapted from Hairston (1974).

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