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ABSTRACT

A study examined differences in writing self-efficacy beliefs among high- and low-apprehensive writers. The Daly-Miller (1975a) Writing Apprehension Test was administered to 43 developmental writers in 3 freshman composition classes. Students scoring plus or minus one standard deviation from the mean for that population were selected for further study. Content analysis of writing samples identified categories students perceived as influencing their writing confidence. Finally, interviews were conducted among five high- and five low-apprehensive writers to compare writing self-efficacy beliefs and previous experiences of the two groups. Results indicated clear differences in prior writing experiences between these two groups. Findings revealed support for social cognitive theory which suggests a relationship between self-efficacy and performance. It is suggested that teachers combat students' negative self-efficacy beliefs about writing by demonstrating through words and actions the belief that students are capable of being successful writers. For example, teachers should set attainable goals and allow experimentation without evaluation. Teachers should try to create an instructional classroom climate in which students' development as writers can occur. (Contains 1 table of data and 27 references.) (Author/CR)

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# Speaking for Themselves: Writing Self-Efficacy Beliefs of High- and Low-Apprehensive Writers

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## Writing Self-Efficacy 2

### Abstract

This study investigated differences in writing self-efficacy beliefs among high- and low-apprehensive writers. The Daly-Miller (1975a) Writing Apprehension Test was administered to 43 developmental writers in three freshman composition classes. Students scoring  $\pm 1$  SD from the mean for that population were selected for further study. Content analysis of writing samples identified categories students perceived as influencing their writing confidence. Finally, interviews were conducted among five high- and five low-apprehensive writers to compare writing self-efficacy beliefs and previous experiences of the two groups. The results demonstrate clear differences in prior writing experiences between high- and low-apprehensive writers. Further, the findings support social cognitive theory which suggests a relationship between self-efficacy and performance. The researchers offer suggestions to aid teachers in combatting negative self-efficacy beliefs about writing among students. The suggestions are intended to assist teachers in creating an instructional classroom climate in which students' development as writers can occur.

### Writing Self-Efficacy 3

#### Speaking for Themselves: Writing Self-efficacy Beliefs of High- and Low-Apprehensive Writers

Writing process investigations indicate that composing is a tremendously complicated task. No one writes without effort. Composition byways are littered with crumpled papers, evidencing moments of confusion and hesitation. Some of these moments are natural and necessary, marking decisive junctures in the writing process. For many writers, however, the moments of decision result in impasse, and writing is troublesome, uncomfortable, and unrewarding. These individuals claim to have nothing to write about, nothing to say.

In June 1990, *Learning to Write in our Nation's Schools*, an installment of the Nation's Report Card, detailed a fairly troublesome picture in terms of writing achievement (Nelms, 1990). Like its predecessors since 1969-70, this Nation's Report Card addresses performance. Before performance, however, exist attitudes that affect performance (King, 1979). These attitudes, nonetheless, are rarely measured and analyzed. Consequently, educators often understand little of students' beliefs regarding their competence as writers. Nor do they recognize the factors that contributed to those beliefs or ways those beliefs may affect performance.

Although few researchers have explored the effect of self-efficacy beliefs on writing performance, those who have generally agree that there is a relationship between the two (Pajares & Johnson, 1993). McCarthy, Meier, and Rinderer (1985) determined that both self-efficacy and writing anxiety were related to writing performance. Similarly, Bandura (1986) suggested that self-efficacy beliefs may be strong predictors of related performance: The confidence people bring to specific tasks plays an important role in their success or failure to complete those tasks. Arguing that affective components strongly influence all phases of the writing

## Writing Self-Efficacy 4

process, McLeod (1987) urged researchers to explore writing apprehension and other affective measures in order to help students understand how their affective processes inform their writing.

To date, some of the most significant research dealing with reluctant writers is that of Daly and Miller (1975a) who coined the term "writing apprehension" while examining the interrelation between writing attitudes and various other outcomes. Their results included the conclusion that students' apprehensiveness of writing may result not only in their being less fluent writers; it may also be reflected in their career choices and other decisions of consequence. Research dealing with writing apprehension, however, is insufficient to answer all the questions that surround the effect of this construct on the composing processes of students. While the symptoms are familiar, the causes are unidentified and the cures are undetermined.

The purpose of this study was to identify how inexperienced writing students perceive their own writing competence and what students themselves define as sources of those perceptions. The study also examined the effects of writing self-efficacy beliefs on the writing behaviors of high- and low-apprehensive writers. It provides empirical evidence of how students perceive themselves as writers and the reasons for the confidence they have in their writing skills.

*Writing self-efficacy beliefs* are defined as individuals' judgments of their competence in writing, specifically their judgments of their ability to write different writing tasks and of their possession of various writing skills (Pajares & Johnson, 1993). *Writing apprehension* describes "a person's tendencies to approach or avoid situations perceived to potentially require writing accompanied by some amount of perceived evaluation" (Daly & Wilson, 1983, p. 327).

### Method

To document students' perceptions of their competence at writing, descriptive data were gathered over a 10-week period. The investigation involved the following tasks: (a) collecting writing samples and test data to determine levels of writing apprehension, (b) identifying students within the larger group whose writing apprehension test scores identified them as being high- or low-apprehensive writers, (c) gathering students' responses to a writing prompt eliciting their feelings about their writing skills and perceived sources of these attitudes, (d) analyzing writing samples to identify categories which students perceived as influencing their writing self-efficacy, and (e) conducting interviews to clarify self-efficacy beliefs and previous experiences of high- and low-apprehensive writers.

### Subjects

Subjects for this study are 43 second-semester developing freshman writers from two mid-South junior colleges. School A ( $N=19$ ) is an extension campus situated in a rural area; School B ( $N=24$ ) is located in a community of approximately 55,000. However, many students in School B's population live in the surrounding rural area and attended small rural high schools. Two subjects were eliminated due to incomplete data sets.

### Data Collection

The study consisted of three phases. First, data were obtained by administering the Daly and Miller (1975a) Writing Apprehension Test (WAT), a 26-item test designed to measure levels of writing apprehension. The WAT is a Likert-type instrument with items dealing with writing apprehension in general, as well as writing apprehension generated by evaluation of writing by teachers, peers, and professionals (e.g., magazine editors or publishers). In addition, items concerning

## Writing Self-Efficacy 6

verbal aptitude, writing value, writing self-efficacy (perceived likelihood of success in writing), and reported success in previous writing courses are included.

Students were asked to respond, on a scale from "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree" to such items as "I expect to do poorly in writing classes even before I begin them"; "When I hand in a composition, I know I'm going to do poorly"; "I don't think I write as well as other people in my class"; and "I feel confident in my ability to clearly express my ideas in writing." Instrument reliability of .940 was obtained using a split-half technique. Test-retest reliability, based upon two administrations 1 week apart, was .923.

WAT mean scores were calculated to determine the level of writing apprehension for this student sample. Students whose WAT scores were more than one standard deviation above or below the mean were selected for further study.

In Phase 2, students were asked to conceptualize their perceptions by describing, in writing, what they felt were the specific characteristics of a "good writer." In addition, they composed a writing profile, describing what they were like as writers; how confident they felt in their writing skills; and what previous experiences, in school or otherwise, had contributed to their attitudes.

In Phase 3 the differences in writing self-efficacy beliefs and previous experiences of high- and low-apprehensive writers were examined. During this phase, 30-minute interviews were conducted with five high- and five low-apprehensive writers. The interviews were taped and transcribed, and the content of the interviews was subjected to analysis in order to identify response patterns for the two groups.

## Results

### Sources of Student Attitudes

Although little correspondence has been found between students' writing apprehension and their actual performance, apprehension has been negatively related to self-efficacy beliefs (Pajares & Johnson, 1993). This study describes experience and explores conceptions, beliefs, and behaviors instead of merely testing for certain affective variables and assigning labels. The writing profiles provided a valid means of collecting specific information from individual students about their perceived sources of writing self-efficacy beliefs. The sources most frequently mentioned included (a) previous success or failure in writing; (b) previous preparation, that is, previous opportunities for writing; (c) prior writing assessment experiences; (d) current level of writing skills. (See Table 1).

**Table 1**  
**Students' Perceived Sources of Writing Self-Efficacy Beliefs**

Source of influence	Frequency in student response
Previous success or failure, including personal satisfaction with performance	16
Previous writing opportunities	9
Prior writing assessment	6
Current level of writing skills	4

**Previous success or failure.** Low-apprehensive (LA) writers in this study mentioned previous success in writing, whereas high-apprehensive (HA) writers



## Writing Self-Efficacy 8

most often mentioned writing failure as a source of self-efficacy beliefs. The following comments illustrate their view:

1. LA: I like to write. I've always been good at it and enjoy doing it. I have won in various writing contests. These awards have helped me to feel better about my writing and helps me to do better. (ABJ)
2. HA: In English I, I had an F on my first essay, and I then knew my college career was doomed. (MVJ)

Since high-apprehensive students perceive their own past writing experiences as less successful than do their low-apprehensive peers, they feel that their writing will be criticized and negatively rated (Daly & Miller, 1975a, 1975b). Research confirms their fears. Such students tend to be evaluated less positively by instructors than are students who exhibit a confidence and value in their writing. In an early study, Silver (cited in Minot & Gamble, 1991) noted no difference in motivation between remedial and nonremedial students even though faculty rated better students as more motivated. Teachers tended to equate achievement and motivation. High-apprehensive writers are seen by teachers as less successful and less likely to succeed in the future. These students are also less likely to receive positive recommendations from them to other teachers (Daly, 1979).

Students in this study mentioned teacher response to writing as confirmation of their writing success or failure, with high-apprehensive writers citing negative teacher feedback as a cause of their lack of confidence and low-apprehensive writers citing teacher support of their efforts as a reason for their competence:

1. HA: I'm unsure about my writing skills. In all my English classes I've done poorly. My teachers always made the class feel dumb. (SCJ)
2. LA: Due to my past experiences in English classes, I have developed a

certain affinity for writing. During my senior year English class is when I probably first began to feel this way, since I had a good teacher who encouraged me. My teacher and I had a good relationship and he was supportive as well as appreciative of my work. (JWD)

**Previous writing opportunities.** Applebee (1981) identified inadequacies in traditional school practice including preparation time for writing and writing context. He found that the average preparation time in school amounts to approximately three minutes, that most writing in schools consists of one word to one sentence responses to questions, and that one of the most frequent contexts for in-class writing is the essay exam for which students must write, at most, paragraphs of approximately 150-200 words. In addition, high-apprehensive writers in Selfe's (1984) case study attributed at least part of their apprehension to limited opportunities to practice writing during past instruction. Likewise, in this study, insufficient preparation was also cited

by high-apprehensive writers as having influenced writing self-efficacy beliefs:

1. HA: I have a strong dislike for writing. The experience was not enough writing. During high school, [teacher's name] didn't put a lot of emphasis on writing. (AMJ)
2. HA: I try to avoid writing as much as possible. I think the thought of it scares me a little. I didn't have to do very much writing until I entered college. To tell the truth, I only had written one paper before college and that was my senior research paper. I am still trying to learn how to express my thoughts and feelings on paper. (CCD)
3. HA: We did the same thing every year--just the same thing about grammar. I only wrote one paper, or I think I wrote two papers, the whole

time I was in high school. That's all I ever wrote. And that's messed up. We read most of the time, and we really didn't write any papers. (CCJ)

In contrast, low-apprehensive writers describe a different experience,

1. LA: I love to write. I was in a journalism class my 11th grade year which allowed me to write short articles for the (local newspaper). (KSD)
2. LA: During high school we wrote weekly, making up humorous stories. These stories allowed us to brainstorm and create our own images. (CHD)
3. LA: I enjoy writing and I also enjoy reading things other people wrote. In Composition, I wrote 10 essays, which helped me with my writing skills. I also kept a journal which I write in every day. (TAD)

**Assessment.** In his review of approximately 2,000 studies, Hillocks (1986) suggests that teachers' scrupulous citing of errors has little effect on enhancing the quality of student writing, yet traditions in the teaching of English hold that compositions be so marked, with more comments better than fewer. Moreover, Zemelman & Daniels (1988) assert that over emphasis by teachers on the fundamentals of composition may be harmful to good writing development, or, at the least, leave writers "feeling frustrated, impotent, and unappreciated" (p. 212).

Both high- and low-apprehensive writers in this study expressed uneasiness with writing for a grade, but discomfort was far more pronounced among high-apprehensives. One student reported a desire to try creative ideas from time to time but was apprehensive of venturing away from already tested techniques for fear of failure.

1. HA: They [teachers] should encourage them [students] and tell them it's ok--you're gonna make mistakes--and not just elaborate on the grade. Grades have a lot to do with the mistakes. A lot of people, like me, would like to try

## Writing Self-Efficacy 11

a lot of times, but I be like--well, if I try on this, I might fail. You can't go back with a lot of teachers and do it over; they won't allow you to bring your grade up. (AMJ)

2. HA: I don't feel that I'm very good at writing. It worries me alot [sic] when I am graded on what I write. My English teacher really red inked my papers alot. I had no confidence in myself after that. (DSJ)

**Writing skills.** Low-apprehensive writers in this study spoke of academic writing tasks with a great deal more confidence in their instructional background and their writing skills than did their more highly apprehensive peers. While they do not always claim to enjoy the writing process, LA writers expect to write competent, successful papers when they approach an academic writing task.

1. LA: I would say that I have a good writing ability but I am not great at mechanics. I am very creative and I have very good ideas. I do make good grades in my writing but I am not fond of writing something specifically assigned. I would rather pick my own subject. I think if I could pick anything I wanted to write about my writings would even be better than they are. (BGJ)

High-apprehensive students spoke with frustration about their own writing skills.

1. HA: I am a very nervous writer. I do not enjoy writing because I am a bad and unskilled writer. I would enjoy writing more if I was a more skilled writer. (CCJ)

2. HA: I don't like the way I write. I have a couple of problems writing papers. The basic mechincs [sic] of the way I write are wierd [sic] to say the least, and when I try to proof read my work, I read right over the mistakes. (THJ)

### The "Good" Writer

Asked what makes students write badly, Eudora Welty observed, "The trouble with bad student writing is the trouble with all bad writing. It is not serious and it does not tell the truth" (cited in Macrorie, 1968, p. 5). Ms. Welty's statement provokes the question, what is good writing?

Students' perceptions of what constitutes a "good" writer varied, according to their apprehension level. Low-apprehensives described the good writer as someone who has a good imagination, who writes with clarity and variety, and who develops ideas skillfully. In contrast, high-apprehensive writers referred to innate ability or to surface elements such as grammar, spelling, and neatness:

HA: Some are naturally born with the instinct of how to write and what way to put it together. (SBJ)

Furthermore, low-apprehensive writers tended more often to perceive themselves as good writers. High-apprehensive writers, on the other hand, most often claimed to be poor writers or at least to have talents in areas other than writing. In addition, HA writers often expressed a sense of isolation in their low self-efficacy beliefs, as shown in the following remarks:

1. A good writer is someone who expresses his or her feelings well. Some people are born with a knack for writing. They have no problems expressing how they feel. Then there are people like me, who can not express their thoughts clearly. (CCD)

2. [How does someone become a good writer?] More interesting things to write about would have helped me, because I have no idea where to start--now, this is just me--I don't know if anybody else is ever like this. (CLJ)

When Bloom (1980) examined composing processes of high apprehensives, she

found that HA writers tend to rely on rules too rigidly and too strictly, and she adds that HA writers also have misconceptions about writers and writing and suffer from low writing-related self-esteem. In a similar way, high apprehensive writers in this study tended to give unrealistic qualities to their less apprehensive peers and to the written products produced by those peers, as characterized by the following comments:

1. Someone becomes a good writer when they do proper English language, puts out only quality work when asked to write an essay. (KCD)
2. 'Good' writing has no errors. (SCJ)

#### **Perceptions Influencing Products**

Investigators report a significant relationship between self-efficacy and related performance. Specifically, students' confidence in their writing skills accounts for the correspondence between writing beliefs and writing performance (Pajares & Johnson, 1993). Furthermore, although no research to date has established all the causes of writing apprehension, it is well recognized that writing apprehension interferes with the development of writing skills. Notably, high-apprehensive writers seldom freely engage in writing (Daly & Miller, 1975a), take fewer chances in their writing (Smith, 1984), and are more likely to procrastinate (Bloom, 1980).

High-apprehensive writers in this study report avoidance behaviors not only in electing not to take writing classes but procrastinating as long as possible before undertaking writing tasks that were assigned in their classes. Moreover, high-apprehensive writers' perceptions of their role in the writing-learning process may adversely affect their ability to produce satisfactory written products.

Moxley's (1987) case study of five students examined students' perceptions of their role and that of the teacher. His findings suggested that students with negative attitudes toward writing become teacher-dependent. They perceive their role as one of "following orders" (p. 18) and tend to hold the teacher responsible for the organization, selection, and quality of their completed work. Without teacher demands, these students would not write.

High-apprehensive writers in this study showed a similar lack of commitment to writing. Their comments suggest that teacher-dependency may, in fact, be a characteristic of high-apprehensive writers. These writers did not feel responsible for the quality of their work, which they viewed as a responsibility of the teacher and sometimes even expressed resentment toward teachers for their perceived lack of writing abilities, as illustrated by the following comment:

HA: English is my worst subject. Maybe just because I never had a teacher that was worth a mess--they was all 'ding-y' and dumb. (CCJ)

At the least, high apprehensive writers in this study do not seem to view writing as a learning process. They do not achieve a sense of power through their writing and do not mention being independent as a goal. Nor do they speak of writing plans beyond the classroom. Interviews suggest that the distinctions here between high- and low-apprehensive writers could not be greater. When asked what purpose writing would serve for them in the future, high- and low-apprehensive writers had two distinctly different views, as demonstrated by the following remarks:

1. LA: I'm going in to be an RN, and I know before I get out, I'm going to have a lot of papers to turn in. I knew that [writing classes] would help me on my papers and grades. I do a lot of writing--I'm a room mother for the

kids at school--I write a lot of letters out for things like that. I figured the more [writing classes] I take, the better off I am. (CHD)

2. HA: Maybe if I go get a Master's degree or something, I may have to write some, but other than that--I'm gonna be a math teacher--I'm gonna try to stay away from English. (CCJ)

### **Study Summary**

In summary, this investigation revealed important differences between high- and low-apprehensive writers' self-efficacy beliefs. Although the sources students perceived as having influenced their beliefs were similar in nature, their experience with these sources differed. Low-apprehensive writers reported more positive and successful experiences with the categories of influence, while high-apprehensive writers reported more failure and negative experiences. In addition, there was a distinct difference in the perceptions of high- and low-apprehensive writers regarding the nature of writing and writers. High-apprehensive writers seem to have a misconception about the nature of writing; specifically, they believe that the ability to produce good writing is an innate quality rather than a process requiring a great deal of effort to realize the writer's intentions. Furthermore, they do not understand that writers sometimes must settle for less than perfect papers. Finally, high-apprehensive writers appear to be teacher-dependent, with a sense of isolation regarding their writing self-efficacy beliefs, lacking involvement and commitment.

### **Implications for Education**

This investigation provides insight into the sources of students' writing self-efficacy beliefs and how these beliefs can affect written products. These data suggest that the poor writing self-confidence on the part of high-apprehensive writers, combined with their lack of previous positive writing experiences, interferes with



learning. Previous success or failure in writing was the most often cited source of students' self-efficacy beliefs. The experiences of being graded and judged, for many students, are not pleasant ones. Even though they expect to make mistakes, they have difficulty distinguishing corrections on their papers from personal assault. Nisbett and Ross (1980) argue that such individuals fuse these beliefs of academic incompetence with their own identity, making it difficult to separate self from belief. For this reason, it may be that students' beliefs about academic capabilities affect more general beliefs about themselves as individuals. In response to personal assault, the composition strategy of such students becomes avoidance.

Language avoidance, however, has not always been a way of life for students such as these. Childhood enthusiasm for writing is witnessed early. Calkins (1983) found that "90% of all children come to school believing that they can write" (p. 11). Children are fascinated by their own marks, confirmed by messages left on walls, windows, furniture, and even paper. Preschoolers produce volumes of written messages. Their writing is a game in which they experience pleasure. They face neither demand for performance nor penalty for failure. Their scribbles are not graded, nor are their errors marked. Childhood enthusiasm for writing, however, is replaced by concerns over form, margins, and mechanics. As writing instruction is directed toward error avoidance, too many students become convinced that they cannot write and have nothing to say (Graves, 1978).

Although the lack of joy expressed by high-apprehensive writers is disturbing, it is not altogether surprising. Shaughnessy (1977) graphically describes how inexperienced writers perceive writing to be a painful ordeal. For the basic writer, contends Shaughnessy, academic writing is a "trap . . . a line that moves halting

across the page exposing as it goes all that the writer doesn't know, then passing into the hands of a stranger who reads it with a lawyer's eyes, searching for its flaws" (p.7).

The writing process, however, is multidimensional and attitudes are an integral part of the process (King, 1979). Teachers of writing regularly encounter students, similar to the high apprehensives in this study, who struggle painfully through academic writing situations because their writing is fashioned in response to purely external demands or because they believe they cannot write.-

Research on efficacy perceptions (Bandura, 1989; Bandura & Schunk, 1981) links effort and persistence with perceptions of capability in task performance. That is, students who perceive themselves to be capable in an area, like writing, will work harder to achieve in the area. Further, effort and persistence are greater among individuals who attribute their performance to internal and controllable causes rather than to external or uncontrollable causes (Weiner, 1984, 1992). This information leads us to conclude that teachers of writing should discourage student perceptions of their own inability to write. The question becomes, how can teachers reverse or prevent negative self-efficacy beliefs about writing?

Teachers can accomplish this by consistently demonstrating through words and actions the belief that students are capable of being successful writers. The following strategies are helpful toward this end:

- \* Help students identify their writing competence or success areas. This allows them to see that they are capable in some areas of writing.
- \* Help students identify past improvements in writing. This helps them to focus on what they can do rather than on what they cannot and negates expressions of inability.

## Writing Self-Efficacy 18

- \* Help students to see how their competencies, successes, or improvements are related to their own specific efforts. This helps reduce students' reliance on the teacher and encourages beliefs in their own writing competence.
- \* Suggest specific strategies for continued writing improvement. This encourages problem solving.
- \* Set attainable writing goals. This provides repeated success experiences which build student confidence, self-efficacy, and independence.

These suggestions help to create an instructional classroom climate in which students' development as writers can occur. Concurrently the following additional suggestions for teachers of developing writers can be used:

1. Be positive about students' efforts. Resist the tendency to focus on errors of spelling, punctuation, and other mechanical parts of writing. Remember that for every error students make there are other things they do correctly.

2. Mark surface structure errors in student writing sparingly. It is best to choose patterns of recurring errors and work on them one at a time. Mechanics are best learned in context. Mastery of mechanics develops slowly, so teachers should exercise patience.

3. Make certain that students get writing practice on a regular basis. Daily writing is ideal; once a week is not enough.

4. Provide the opportunity for students to write in a variety of forms for a variety of purposes and for a variety of audiences.

5. Allow students to choose their own topics frequently. Students write best when they write about their own concerns.

6. Allow experimentation without evaluation. Freedom from assessment allows students to grow.

7. Allow time for peer and teacher conferencing. It is important for students to receive response to their work while the work is in progress.

8. Make certain that evaluative responses are as helpful and undamaging as possible. Students should understand the criteria upon which their grade will be based. Students should also have the opportunity to revise and be evaluated on their best work. When students are allowed occasionally to choose what is graded, they become more involved in the evaluation of their work, and so more self-evaluative.

9. Teachers should let students see them write. A most productive activity is student revision of an early draft of a paper written by the instructor. The class discusses the paper and makes suggestions for revision. After evaluating the revision suggestions, the instructor revises the paper. The class next compares the revisions to the original, and discusses why certain advice was accepted or ignored. This kind of experience is a good lesson in revising and demonstrates that experienced writers as well as novices must revise their papers, sometimes extensively.

10. Applaud and appreciate the good things students do. The willingness to write is fragile. The teacher's optimistic attitude toward students' efforts is important in creating conditions where real progress in their development as writers can take place.

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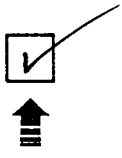
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