Supporting Anxious Writers Throughout the Writing Process

Office of Faculty Development, Feb. 2019, Tracy McCabe, Director of Writing Programs (x5234)

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **WHEN** | **WHAT** | **HOW** |
| Early in course (esp. FIYS)  When you distribute assignment | Normalize writing anxiety (writer’s block, procrastination) | * Solicit their experience and strategies * Describe yours * Invite upperclass peers to describe theirs (contact Dawn Abt-Perkins x5232) |
| When you design assignment | Build in steps, such as   * Proposal * Periodic progress reports * Working thesis statement(s) * Developing outlines: “The Three-Stage Outline” (3) * Partial drafts * Complete drafts   See Writing Center webpage for resources aimed at students, faculty, and FIYS faculty | With some of these items, you could:   * Collect and grade * Collect and not grade (follow up by email if you see problems) * Collect with final paper, with a reflection on writing process (5) * Don’t collect; use as basis of in-class writing and workshops towards paper * Discuss in conference |
| When you distribute assignment | Alert students to resources | * Write Right Now! (on hiatus until Fall 2020) * “Overcoming Writing Anxiety” hand-out (6) |
| When you distribute assignment | Start brainstorming in class | See prompts (8) |
| In a class soon after you distribute assignment | Have them bring in a piece of evidence they plan to use | Do evidence chart (9) |
| Periodically until paper is due | Do in-class writing (not for collection/grading) | * Progress reports to self: what have I done so far? What will I do next? What will I do if I feel stuck? * Share ideas in small group |
| In conferences | Allow time for student to write | * Encourage students to write their ideas, in their words * Have students leave with a plan in writing, incl. a plan for if they feel stuck |

The Three-Stage Outline: How to Develop an Argument Plan

This handout shows how outlines can flex and bend for your purposes. Change your outlines as your research develops and your ideas improve.

**STAGE 1 – Bullet point outline to guide research**

Consider the main questions, topics, and issues implied in the assignment design. This outline is designed to guide your “pre‐writing,” or idea-generating, stage of the writing process.

Preliminary focal question: What role do Facebook friends play in people’s lives?

A bullet-­‐point outline of subquestions might look something like this:

1. How many friendships can a person maintain?
2. Are “Facebook friends” truly friends?
3. Why do people maintain fewer FB friendships as they age?

**STAGE 2 – Outlining main claims to organize research material**

Here, the goal is INTEGRATION of source material, to show the “conversation” that is taking place about the broader issue. In this stage, you may be able to develop answers to the questions in your bullet-point outline. Consider numbering your sources to more easily organize your sources according to the topic/claim they address.

1. People can only maintain about 150 friendships

#1: “The Dunbar Number, From the Guru of Social Networks”

#4: “Why We Live – Counting The People Your Life Impacts”

#3: “Centrality in Children’s Best Friend Networks: The Role of Social Behaviour”

1. Not all of someone’s Facebook “friends” truly qualify as actual friends to that person

#4: “The Quagmire of Social Media Friendships”

#5: “6 New Facts about Facebook”

1. People maintain fewer social media friendships as they age

#5: “6 New Facts about Facebook”

**STAGE 3 – Outline to guide drafting process**

In this stage, add evidence and citations.

Working thesis:

Although social media has encouraged the proliferation of digital “friendships,” humans can only maintain a fixed number of meaningful relationships.

* 1. Humans can only maintain roughly 150 friendships at a time.

#1 “For Dunbar, there’s a simple explanation for this: In the same way that human beings can’t breathe underwater or run

the 100-­‐meter dash in 2.5 seconds or see microwaves with the naked eye, most cannot maintain many more than 150 meaningful relationships. Cognitively, we’re just not built for it” (Bennett).

#4 “’…the number of people you would not feel embarrassed about joining uninvited for a drink if you happened to bump into them in a bar’” (Vital).

#3 “Social confidence, social desirability, and friendship quality predicted changes in the indicators of centrality in best friend networks over time” (Betts and Stiller).

* 1. A person’s number of “friends” on Facebook or other social media generally far outstrips how many true friendships they actually maintain.

#4 “…a friend is someone who cares about you. Not just the fact that you exist, but the fact they contribute to your existence and the quality of your existence” (Silver 446).

#5 “Among adult Facebook users, the average (mean) number of friends is 338” (Smith).

* 1. As people age, the number of social media friendships they boast more accurately reflect how many true friendships they maintain in their everyday life.

#5 “Younger users tend to have significantly larger friend networks

than older users: 27% of 18-­‐29 year old Facebook users have more than 500 friends in their network, while 72% of users age 65+ have 100 friends or fewer” (Smith).

Conclusion: What are the larger implications of your argument? Why does it matter? What insights can you now offer?

* + - To appreciate the bond between friends, it’s important to draw a distinction between Facebook friendships and actual friendships
    - It takes more to foster a true friendship than just clicking a button on a social media website
    - Humans are unable to maintain more than 150 friendships so those relationships are more valuable and unique

Assign a reflection on the writing process to be submitted with the final paper

Prompts:

* How did you approach this assignment? What steps did you take?
* Which steps were most helpful? Which were less so? What might you try differently next time?
* How did you apply my feedback on the previous assignment to this one?

# Overcoming Writing Anxiety

Writing is a challenging and rewarding craft, but many people—including professional writers like your professors—experience occasional trepidation about writing. During your college career, you might experience writing anxiety or “writer’s block.” The following strategies can help you prevent such anxiety from crippling your academic performance and, we hope, help you learn to appreciate—and even enjoy!--the writing process.

# Get support.

Isolation can contribute to writing anxiety. On a supportive campus like Lake Forest’s, you can seek support in a variety of places. Your professors and the Writing Center are great resources. Visit your professors with specific questions about writing assignments and course content. Many professors encourage students to bring outlines or drafts to discuss.

The Writing Center can help if you feel stuck after you have some ideas on the page. This writing can be a rough or partial draft, a working thesis, an outline, or just some analysis of evidence. (If you don’t understand the assignment, check with your professor.) The Write Right Now! gatherings at the Writing Center can also help you feel part of a community of writers. You’re not alone!

# After each class, write down the most interesting piece of content discussed.

Try to identify something integral to the course’s content. If you keep a log about what interests you about the course (even if you find the class itself lackluster), you will be more excited to write about its content and have more ideas when papers are assigned.

# Get words on the page.

Use strategies like assessing the assignment, freewriting, and making flow charts and cloud diagrams to get words on the page. Do not censor yourself. Do not self-edit. The physical act of writing can jumpstart ideas and connections between ideas.

**3. Modify your writing calendar to allow for more revision and editing time.** Schedule a Writing Center appointment for at least two days before the paper due date and plan to take a complete draft. Then you will have built in extra time to revise your argument and edit your paper for sentence-level errors. Creating an artificial time crunch can both motivate you to begin working and assure you that you will have ample time to revise.

# 5. Identify your strengths.

If you are an anxious writer, be sure to identify positive feedback from your professors or classmates. Perhaps your professor praised your ideas or one of your classmates complimented your use of evidence. Keep a “success journal,” to track your positive feedback. Do not ignore the constructive criticism but, rather, think of those comments as opportunities for growth. Think of yourself as an apprentice, building upon past successes and improving your skills with each new paper your write.

# What causes writing anxiety?

**Expectations for yourself**

Sometimes it feels as though your writing is a reflection of yourself, of who you are as a person. Writing anxiety often stems from perfectionism, from a desire to get a good grade or impress your professor.

# Expectations of your professors/peers

You may feel as though your professor will not think you are intelligent enough for the course. You may feel that your professor or your peers will judge you as a person based on your writing abilities. In truth, your professors don’t expect you to be an expert.

# Sound familiar? Follow the tactics above to facilitate a more relaxed writing process.

Adapted from UNC Chapel Hill’s Writing Center webpage: <http://writingcenter.unc.edu/handouts/writing-> anxiety/ and the University of Southern Mississippi Gulf Coast: <http://www.usm.edu/gulfcoast/sites/usm.edu.gulfcoast/files/groups/speaking-and-writing-> center/pdf/writing\_anxiety\_web.pdf

Prompts for in-class writing on day you distribute assignments

* Annotate the assignment sheet (without instructor talking)
* What is the purpose of the assigned writing? Why does it occur at this point in the semester? How does it connect to previous assigned writing?
* What are first ideas/thoughts that come to mind connected to the assignment?
* Do other lectures, discussions, texts come to mind?
* What questions will you need to explore as part of writing this assignment?
* What will you do next? Write in planner.

Sample Evidence Chart

Paper prompt: “What was a turning point in 19-century *beliefs* regarding the connection between a *clean water supply and public health* in Chicago?”

Source: an ordinance. Title: “An Ordinance, to prevent filth from entering into the Works of the Chicago Hydraulic Company from Lake Michigan,” 1848. Author: James H. Woodworth, Mayor of Chicago.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Quote** | **Paraphrase: “In other words, . . .”** | **What does quote show?** | **What does source reveal about 19th century *beliefs* regarding the connection between a *clean water supply and public health*?** |
| “no person or persons shall hereafter drive lead or swim any horse, or horses, or other animal into Lake Michigan . . . for the purpose of washing or cleaning said horse or horses or other animal.—Nor shall any person or persons wash or clean any carriage or vehicle whatever, within said limits” (23) | In other words, from now on, nobody is allowed to wash animals or vehicles in the lake. | This quote shows that the mayor believed that dirty animals and vehicles polluted the water. | This quote does not reveal any *belief*that a *clean water supply* was necessary to ensure *public health*.    [Note how the italicized words repeat key words in the prompt] |