



What Lies Beneath Writer's Block? Exploring the Dimensions of Writing Anxiety

Jusak Patty

Pattimura University, Indonesia

Corresponding Email: jusak.patty@gmail.com

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Abstract

This study examines the three types of writing anxiety—somatic, cognitive, and avoidance—through library research methodology. Writing anxiety represents a significant barrier to effective written communication in educational and professional contexts. The research addresses three main questions: the characteristics and manifestations of each anxiety type, the factors that contribute to their development, and effective coping strategies. Through literature review and analysis of relevant literature published between 2018 and 2024, the study identifies distinct manifestations of each anxiety type: physical symptoms for somatic anxiety, negative thought patterns for cognitive anxiety, and task-avoidant behaviors for avoidance anxiety. Contributing factors include previous negative experiences, problematic educational practices, personal characteristics, situational elements, and social influences. Effective coping strategies include cognitive approaches that challenge negative beliefs, behavioral techniques like establishing writing routines, educational supports such as writing workshops, physical management strategies including relaxation exercises, and environmental modifications. The findings provide valuable insights for educators, writing support professionals, and individuals struggling with writing anxiety, highlighting the importance of comprehensive, multi-dimensional approaches to address this complex phenomenon.

Keywords: writing anxiety, somatic anxiety, cognitive anxiety, avoidance anxiety, coping strategies

Introduction

Writing anxiety is a common problem that makes it difficult for people to write effectively in school, work, and personal situations. This anxiety shows up as both physical and mental responses that can reduce writing quality and productivity (McGee, 2019; Yan, 2024). Writing anxiety affects people in many fields, including the humanities, sciences, and professional areas. Since writing is an important skill in today's knowledge-based society, understanding writing anxiety is necessary for developing better teaching methods.

Research identifies three main types of writing anxiety: somatic, cognitive, and avoidance anxiety. Somatic anxiety includes physical reactions like increased heart rate, sweating, shaking, and discomfort when facing writing tasks (Jasman et al., 2023). Cognitive anxiety involves negative thoughts, self-criticism, fear of evaluation, and beliefs that one cannot write well (Kusumaningputri et al., 2018). Avoidance anxiety shows up as procrastination, reluctance to write, and strategies to avoid writing situations (Pravita & Kuswando, 2022). These three types provide a framework for studying writing anxiety.

Studies show that writing anxiety affects between 11% and 72% of students across all educational levels (Liestyana et al., 2020; Mulyono et al., 2020). The effects are stronger among second language learners, graduate students, and people with limited writing experience (Yu, 2020). The negative effects of writing anxiety go beyond immediate discomfort and can lead to lower academic performance, reduced confidence, limited career growth, and negative attitudes toward writing (Rohmah & Muslim, 2021). Because writing anxiety is so common, researchers have worked to identify its causes, develop ways to measure it, and create strategies to reduce its negative effects.

The study of writing anxiety has grown significantly since Daly & Miller (1975) developed the Writing Apprehension Test (WAT) to measure anxiety levels related to writing tasks. Later research has studied writing anxiety through different approaches, including cognitive-behavioral (Cobourne & Shellenbarger, 2019; Khalil, 2022), socio-cultural (Shurovi et al., 2022; Waked et al., 2024), and neurobiological perspectives (Comstock, 2023; Schroder et al., 2018). Current research recognizes that many factors influence writing anxiety, highlighting the need to understand how different anxiety types interact with personal, educational, and environmental factors that affect writing performance.

This library research aims to review and analyze existing literature on writing anxiety to provide a better understanding of its types, effects, and implications for teaching. The study addresses three main research questions: (1) What are the distinct characteristics and manifestations of somatic, cognitive, and avoidance anxiety in writing? (2) What factors contribute to these different forms of writing anxiety? (3) How do individuals cope with and manage these various types of writing anxiety? Through a literature review of existing research, this study seeks to understand better the relationship between different anxiety types and writing processes, which can help improve writing instruction and support.

Literature Review

Writing anxiety research draws from several established psychological theories that explain how fear and stress affect human performance. The most influential framework comes from Spielberger's State-Trait Anxiety Theory, which separates anxiety into two types: state anxiety (temporary feelings in specific situations) and trait anxiety (a general tendency to feel anxious) (Saviola et al., 2020). This distinction helps researchers understand why some people feel anxious only during certain writing tasks, while others experience anxiety across many writing situations. Lang's Three-System Model of Fear provides another important foundation by explaining that anxiety appears in three ways: physical reactions (like sweating or fast

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heartbeat), thoughts and feelings (such as worry or fear), and behaviors (like avoiding or escaping) (Torrano et al., 2020). This model directly connects to the three types of writing anxiety examined in current research: somatic, cognitive, and avoidance anxiety.

Cognitive load theory offers a useful lens for understanding why writing tasks can trigger anxiety responses. According to this theory, our minds have limited space for processing information, and when writing demands exceed this capacity, stress and anxiety naturally follow (Kennedy & Romig, 2024; Oliveira et al., 2020). This explains why complex writing assignments, unfamiliar topics, or multiple requirements often increase anxiety levels. The theory suggests that reducing unnecessary mental burdens through better instruction and support can help manage writing anxiety. Social Cognitive Theory, developed by Bandura, emphasizes how our beliefs about our abilities (called self-efficacy) strongly influence our emotions and behaviors (Pajares, 2022). In writing contexts, students who believe they cannot write well are more likely to experience anxiety and avoid writing tasks, creating a cycle where limited practice leads to continued low confidence.

Self-determination theory provides insight into how motivation and anxiety interact in writing situations. This theory identifies three basic psychological needs: autonomy (feeling in control), competence (feeling capable), and relatedness (feeling connected to others) (Ryan & Deci, 2020). When writing environments fail to support these needs, anxiety often increases. For example, overly controlling teaching methods may reduce autonomy, unclear expectations can threaten competence, and competitive classroom atmospheres may harm relatedness. Flow Theory, introduced by Csikszentmihalyi, describes optimal performance states where individuals become fully absorbed in their activities. This theory suggests that writing anxiety occurs when there is a mismatch between the challenge level of writing tasks and the writer's skill level (P. Liu et al., 2022). Too much challenge creates anxiety, while too little creates boredom, but the right balance promotes engagement and reduces anxiety. These theoretical frameworks collectively provide a comprehensive foundation for understanding writing anxiety as a complex interaction between individual psychology, cognitive processes, social factors, and environmental conditions.

Research Method

This study utilized a library research design to investigate the three types of writing anxiety: somatic, cognitive, and avoidance anxiety. According to Anderson & Allen (2017), library research is a systematic process of gathering, evaluating, and synthesizing information from existing sources, such as books, academic journals, and digital databases, to support scholarly inquiry. The research procedure in this study involved a comprehensive search of relevant literature across multiple academic databases, including ERIC, PsycINFO, JSTOR, ProQuest, and Google Scholar. Key search terms employed in various combinations included "writing anxiety," "writing apprehension," "somatic anxiety," "cognitive anxiety," "avoidance behavior in writing," "writing fear," and "writing stress." Additional sources were identified through a reference list examination of seminal articles, a technique known as ancestry

searching. The search process focuses primarily on peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, and academic dissertations.

The selection of sources followed specific inclusion criteria: (1) materials published between 2018 and 2024; (2) studies addressing at least one of the three types of writing anxiety; (3) empirical, theoretical, or review papers written in English; and (4) research conducted in various educational contexts including K-12, higher education, and professional settings. The collected literature was organized thematically according to the three research questions, with particular attention to distinguishing between the characteristics, contributing factors, and coping strategies for each anxiety type. Data analysis involved content analysis techniques, where relevant information was extracted, categorized, synthesized, and critically evaluated to identify patterns, contradictions, and gaps in the existing knowledge about writing anxiety. This approach allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon while maintaining a focused examination of the specific research questions.

Result and Discussion

Characteristics and Manifestations of Writing Anxiety Types

Somatic anxiety in writing contexts appears through physical symptoms when individuals face writing tasks. Common symptoms include increased heart rate, sweating, trembling hands, muscle tension, headaches, and stomach discomfort (Jasman et al., 2023; Saputra & Elfi, 2023). The severity of these reactions varies among individuals, with some experiencing mild discomfort while others report reactions that significantly impair their writing ability. Research shows that these physical symptoms often worsen during high-stakes writing situations like timed exams, thesis writing, or professional documents, suggesting a connection between perceived importance and physical anxiety reactions (Ariartha et al., 2023; Arisman, 2023; Kurniawati & Anam, 2023).

Cognitive anxiety presents as negative thought patterns about writing abilities and outcomes. Key manifestations include worry about evaluation, fear of judgment, perfectionism, catastrophic thinking, and self-doubt (Khezerlou, 2023; Kusumaningputri et al., 2018; Quvanch & Na, 2022). These patterns often appear as internal dialogue, such as "My writing is not good enough" or "My writing would be rated as very poor" (Afdalia et al., 2023). Studies by Wern & Rahmat (2021) and Peng et al. (2023) show that these negative thoughts often occur before writing begins, creating mental barriers that affect motivation. Unlike somatic symptoms that may decrease once the writing starts, cognitive anxiety tends to persist throughout the writing process.

Avoidance anxiety manifests through behaviors designed to postpone or escape writing tasks. The most common form is procrastination, where individuals delay writing until the last possible moment (Pravita & Kuswandono, 2022; Sulfiana et al., 2022). Other patterns include excessive preparation without actual writing, frequent breaks, creating distractions, claiming a lack of time, or choosing other activities instead of writing. Rahmat & Haron (2021) found that these avoidance behaviors often become habits that significantly reduce writing productivity.

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Studies also indicate that people with high avoidance anxiety tend to make educational and career choices specifically to minimize writing requirements (Daker et al., 2023; Mulyono et al., 2020).

Research highlights the interconnected relationship between these three anxiety types. Physical symptoms can trigger negative thoughts, which then lead to avoidance behaviors, creating a cycle that intensifies writing anxiety over time (Rahmat et al., 2019; Yan, 2024). Most individuals experience a combination of all three types, with one form often being stronger. This suggests that effective interventions should address all three dimensions rather than focusing on just one aspect of writing anxiety.

Individual differences significantly influence how writing anxiety manifests. Factors such as writing experience, language proficiency, academic level, and field of study affect anxiety patterns (Alfarwan, 2022; Rohmah & Muslim, 2021; Sari et al., 2024). For example, beginners and second language writers often report higher cognitive anxiety about grammar and vocabulary, while experienced writers tend to worry more about content and originality. These variations emphasize the importance of considering context when addressing writing anxiety in different populations.

Contributing Factors to Different Forms of Writing Anxiety

Previous negative writing experiences strongly contribute to all types of writing anxiety. Experiences of criticism, failure, or embarrassment, especially during early education, consistently predict later writing anxiety (Cobourne & Shellenbarger, 2019; Holmes et al., 2018). These negative experiences create patterns where writing becomes associated with discomfort and failure. Studies by Forster (2020) and Har-Zvi et al. (2021) indicate that the emotional impact can persist for years, shaping attitudes toward writing throughout educational and professional life. Negative feedback during early writing development appears to have particularly strong and lasting effects on anxiety formation.

Educational practices significantly influence writing anxiety development. Problematic teaching approaches include overemphasis on grammar correctness, harsh feedback, unclear expectations, and limited practice opportunities (Rohmah & Muslim, 2021; Xie & Yuan, 2020). Turner (2023) found that teaching environments focusing mainly on the final product rather than the writing process tend to increase anxiety, particularly fears about evaluation. Educational contexts that present writing as a natural talent rather than a learnable skill contribute to fixed beliefs about writing ability, increasing vulnerability to anxiety when challenges arise (Graham, 2019).

Personal characteristics play important roles in writing anxiety development. Key personal factors include perfectionism, low writing confidence, fear of evaluation, discomfort with uncertainty, and general anxiety tendencies (Khabooshan & Saeedirad, 2022; Khezerlou, 2023). Kafryawan et al. (2021) found significant connections between general anxiety traits and writing-specific anxiety, suggesting that broader anxiety tendencies may appear in writing situations. Differences in thinking styles, memory capacity, and attention abilities also influence vulnerability to cognitive anxiety during writing tasks (Güvendir & Uzun, 2023; Thuy et al., 2024).

Situational factors significantly impact writing anxiety levels. Important situational elements include high-stakes writing tasks, time limits, audience characteristics, unfamiliar writing formats, and technology challenges (Syarifudin, 2020; Yan, 2024). Huang (2024) shows that even confident writers may experience temporary anxiety when writing in new situations or for unfamiliar audiences. Cultural and language factors are also important, with second-language writers reporting higher anxiety due to additional language demands and different cultural expectations about writing (Kusumaningputri et al., 2018; Waked et al., 2024).

Social influences contribute significantly to writing anxiety. Key social factors include perceived judgment from others, comparison with peers, writing identity development, and adjustment to academic or professional writing communities (Deane, 2018; Yan, 2024). Hong et al. (2022) demonstrate that comparing oneself unfavorably to peers can trigger cognitive anxiety and avoidance behaviors. The perceived social consequences of writing failure, including potential damage to academic or professional reputation, are powerful anxiety triggers, particularly in high-status environments.

Coping Strategies for Various Types of Writing Anxiety

Cognitive approaches effectively manage writing anxiety, particularly negative thought patterns. Helpful cognitive techniques include challenging negative beliefs about writing abilities, using positive self-talk, setting realistic expectations, practicing mindfulness, and restructuring beliefs about writing (Khalil, 2022; McGee, 2019; Patty, 2024; Yan, 2024). Kurniasih et al. (2024) found that teaching students to identify and reframe catastrophic thinking about writing outcomes significantly reduced anxiety and improved performance. Developing the belief that writing is a learnable skill rather than a fixed talent helps reduce perfectionism and fear of failure.

Behavioral strategies offer practical approaches to managing writing anxiety, especially avoidance patterns. Effective behavioral techniques include establishing regular writing routines, breaking tasks into smaller steps, setting specific achievable goals, using freewriting to overcome initial blocks, and gradually increasing writing time (Evdash & Zhuravleva, 2020; Shah, 2024). Liu (2020) shows that consistent writing practice in low-pressure situations helps reduce sensitivity to writing anxiety over time. Process-focused approaches that separate drafting from editing reduce perfectionism during the initial writing stages, addressing both cognitive and avoidance anxiety.

Educational supports provide frameworks for addressing all types of writing anxiety. Effective educational approaches include writing workshops focused on anxiety management, peer support groups, individual writing consultations, and courses specifically addressing writing anxiety (Ajmal et al., 2023; Buckley et al., 2021; Nurkamto et al., 2024). Kadmiry (2022) and Lee (2024) found that educational environments emphasizing process over product, encouraging balanced feedback, and creating supportive writing communities significantly reduced anxiety. Explicit instruction in writing strategies increases confidence and reduces uncertainty that contributes to anxiety (Canada Jr. & Miralles, 2022).

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Physical and emotional management techniques effectively address bodily anxiety symptoms. Beneficial approaches include relaxation techniques, deep breathing, muscle relaxation, and stress management (Britt et al., 2018; Wahyuni et al., 2019). Drewery et al. (2022) show that brief relaxation exercises before and during writing reduce physical tension and help maintain focus. Emotional regulation strategies such as acknowledging anxiety without judgment, practicing self-compassion, and developing tolerance for discomfort help writers continue despite anxious feelings.

Environmental modifications provide practical support for managing writing anxiety. Helpful approaches include selecting appropriate writing spaces, using writing technologies that reduce mental effort, utilizing supportive writing apps, and creating personalized writing environments (Bataineh & Bataineh, 2024; Gero et al., 2022; Göldi et al., 2024; Strobl et al., 2019). Santri et al. (2022) found that creating spaces with minimal distractions and positive associations can decrease anxiety triggers. Technology tools that assist with organization, grammar checking, or citations can reduce specific anxiety sources for writers concerned about technical aspects.

Conclusion

This study explored the three types of writing anxiety—somatic, cognitive, and avoidance—through a comprehensive review of existing literature. The findings reveal that writing anxiety manifests through distinct yet interconnected characteristics: physical symptoms such as increased heart rate and trembling (somatic); negative thoughts and self-doubt about writing abilities (cognitive); and procrastination or task-avoidant behaviors (avoidance). Multiple factors contribute to writing anxiety, including previous negative experiences, problematic educational practices, personal characteristics like perfectionism, situational elements such as time constraints, and social influences, including peer comparison. The study also identified various effective coping strategies across five categories: cognitive approaches that challenge negative beliefs; behavioral techniques like establishing writing routines; educational supports such as writing workshops; physical management strategies including relaxation exercises; and environmental modifications that create supportive writing spaces. These findings provide a foundation for understanding writing anxiety as a complex phenomenon influenced by multiple factors and requiring multi-dimensional approaches for effective management.

The implications of this research extend to various educational and professional contexts where writing is a central activity. For educators, understanding the different manifestations and contributing factors of writing anxiety can inform the development of more supportive instructional practices that reduce rather than intensify anxiety. For individuals struggling with writing anxiety, awareness of specific anxiety types and corresponding management strategies offers practical pathways to improvement. Future research should focus on developing specific interventions targeted at each anxiety type, examining the effectiveness of combined approaches, and investigating writing anxiety in diverse professional contexts beyond educational settings. Additionally, longitudinal studies would be valuable to

understand how writing anxiety evolves over time and in response to different interventions. Ultimately, addressing writing anxiety effectively requires recognizing its complexity while implementing practical, evidence-based strategies tailored to individual needs and specific contexts.

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