Dear Alice,

I have terrible anxiety about writing papers. Because of this, I put them off, need to ask for extensions, and then have more anxiety about completing the assignment. In addition, when I start writing, I find it difficult to keep going, especially because I hit what may seem to others as small roadblocks, like uncertainty about citation format. I don’t experience nearly as much stress about other types of work (e.g., studying for and taking exams). What can I do to get over or at least cope reasonably with this fear?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Just thinking about writing anxiety made this answer more difficult to compose. You see, dear reader, writing anxiety? and writer’s block? are concerns for both students and professionals of all ages and academic levels. In fact, even the most seasoned writers experience anxiety or writer’s block now and then. The truth is, writing is a complex process that, with practice and patience, can be improved.

Fortunately, writing anxiety is typically a product of a writer’s habits, and habits can be changed! You’ve already made an important first step, though. You’ve identified a few things that don’t work for you: procrastination and obtaining deadline extensions provide you little or no relief. Now, the next step is to try out or adopt some new habits and drop the ones that aren’t working for you. Since you have already identified writing as a major source of anxiety, you may want to first visit your schools writing center. Anyone can visit the writing center and many do: undergraduates, graduates, and even faculty and staff! Consultants can help with a variety of things including helping you develop and structure ideas, find research, connect thoughts, strengthen your understanding of grammar, and much more.

To help relieve the anxiety and fear you feel about writing papers, consider implementing any of the following suggestions:

- Stay on top of your reading assignments and do your best to attend classes. You won’t have to cram or teach yourself course material before writing your papers.
- Adhere to the guidelines set forth by your professor. S/he should make her/his expectations clear through oral explication, a syllabus, or grading rubric. If you’re not sure about the guidelines, seek clarification early.
- Start writing even before you can envision your entire argument. Getting words down on
paper may help you come up with the rest of your writing assignment. Try free writing or diagramming to inspire ideas.

- Compose different parts of your paper in order of ease. You’re not required to write in sequential order, as long as the final product is well organized. Some find it helpful to start with the sections that come naturally and move toward the more challenging parts.
- Avoid stopping and editing each sentence as you write. This will slow you down. Instead, consider writing your paper in several whole drafts, and take breaks between editing. Your very first draft should be low-pressure and exploratory.
- Write your paper in several sittings rather than trying to crank it out in one marathon session. Attempting to write a paper in one sitting may overwhelm you, thereby distracting you from your task.
- Pose original questions, theories, and criticisms. What is currently known about this subject, and what new information do you have to offer?
- Don’t try to cover too much ground. Keep your argument specific and narrow in on what’s most important. Ambition is admirable, but attempting to cover too much material in too few pages may produce poor results.
- Get feedback from others. Many schools offer writing support services.
- Seek out additional support. Many colleges have an office of disability services that provides additional support to students.

Remember that writing anxiety is common and you’re certainly not alone. If you continue to experience anxiety and need additional support, consider reaching out to a counselor or therapist.

Alice!
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