



WRITING ANXIETY

The strain of putting what you might think of as "yourself" on paper is probably always there to some degree when you write. The anxiety produced by having to think up a viable idea, work it out, and then have it judged can be tremendous and can constitute a real obstacle to writing. And at Princeton, your paper will not just be read and evaluated; it may be judged by a leading scholar in the field in which you are working. This is one of the blessings and also one of the curses of being a student here. Having a leading scholar as a reader can be intimidating and is apt to make you feel that there's nothing you can say that will be new or interesting, or that whatever you try to say will be wrong.

Anxiety about writing has a number of effects. It can make writing a difficult and miserable activity. Every writer has had the experience of avoiding the blank page. There can be days or weeks when the TV, the gym, the student center—almost anything—will be a magnet that pulls you away from your writing. And every writer knows the frustration of sitting down with a tablet of paper and pen, or at the computer, and feeling incapable of producing any words at all. A degree of procrastination and writer's block are a common part of writing.

Write Early and Often

One way to keep anxiety, writer's block, and procrastination under control is to get started early and write something every day. Once a paper has been assigned, even if the due date is weeks away and the paper is only five pages long, make a habit of writing down questions, reflections, and source titles often. It is typically most difficult to write at the very beginning of a paper, when you are struggling to understand your ideas and still trying to figure out what it is you want to say. In these early stages, keep in mind that no one will read your writing until you're ready. That's a much easier way to write than when you feel as if your paper is being read by your professor as soon as it appears on the page.

If you know that you tend to get anxious about your writing, it is especially important for you to practice writing. Like any skill, writing improves with practice, and if you start to write early, you will be able to act as your own coach, figuring out where you are having trouble and discovering where you have strengths. Think of writing as a perennial part of working on a paper and *not* as a kind of packaging. If you need to loosen up your writing and your ideas, and get yourself writing more often, you might want to try an exercise called "freewriting," which is often useful in breaking writer's block or just shaking writers from the habit of feeling as if every word they put down has to be perfect. To freewrite, give yourself a short, fixed amount of time—say two or five minutes—and then sit down and write without stopping. For a fuller description of freewriting, see the Writing Center handout on "Getting Started."

Picturing a Sympathetic Audience

One of the biggest obstacles to writing successful papers that Princeton students describe is the crippling worry about whether a paper is “good enough.” Remember, although your professors and preceptors may be “experts,” that doesn’t mean they know the way *you* think about your subject. Nor does it mean they know all there is to know about a subject area. One of the *disadvantages* of being an expert is that it becomes increasingly difficult to see one’s subject in novel ways. But since you are new to the material you are studying, you may well see something that a scholar who has been working on the subject for a while has not.

Perhaps the most practical strategy to combat the worry about writing to an audience of experts is to keep a clear picture in your mind of a reader who is not your professor. Probably the best sort of reader to imagine is an intelligent person—a classmate or friend, or even another professor—who is unfamiliar with your topic. Try also to imagine a reader who is *interested* in your work and looking for the best in it rather than someone whose sole purpose in reading your work is to find fault with it. Having this sort of person as an imaginary audience will prevent you from being distracted by worries about what a more experienced scholar might think. Imagining such an audience will help you to develop your ideas more effectively because it will enable you to avoid the temptation of not writing clearly about something on the assumption that your professor or preceptor is familiar with your material and can fill in gaps in your analysis for herself. Perhaps most important, writing to an intelligent, enthusiastic, but non-expert reader may make you more confident and therefore help you to write more confidently.

The Writing Center and Other Campus Resources

If you are having trouble getting started, talk to a classmate, an upper class student whose writing you admire, or a tutor at the Writing Center. Cultivating a group of fellow students with whom you can discuss writing issues and papers can be a tremendous asset in your academic work. If you feel completely overwhelmed about writing papers at Princeton—including JPs and senior theses—don’t be shy about asking for further help. First-year students and sophomores can talk to their RAs or Directors of Studies. Juniors should contact Dean Nancy Kanach (8-5524), and seniors should call Dean Richard Williams (8-5520). The Counseling Center can also provide valuable support; to make an appointment there, call 8-3285.

Related Writing Center Handouts

Getting Started

Finding a Topic

Developing a Central Idea or “Thesis”

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