

## Sorry You Have to Read This: The Five Stages of Writing with Anxiety

Allison Hauser

In this article, Hauser examines her process in writing essays for her classes. She reflects on how her anxiety and Imposter Syndrome impact her in many different ways and play a major role in forming her writing research identity.

I'm sorry you have to read this article that I wrote. I can guarantee you that there is a much better one out there than this one. I just had an idea, tricked someone into thinking it was good, and then threw some words together. This is a mess! Why don't you just keep flipping pages until you hit the next article? That's good, just move along, nothing to see here! Wait, wait, wait, hold on! Don't go! That was just my anxiety talking! OK, let me explain myself.

When it comes to writing, I am a self-diagnosed sufferer of "Imposter Syndrome." Imposter Syndrome was first named by Pauline Rose Clance and Suzanne Imes and is "the idea that you have only succeeded due to luck, and not because of your talent or qualifications" (Abrams, *TIME Magazine*). Imposter Syndrome draws on feelings of insecurity, inadequacy, and the fear of being seen as a "fraud," or someone who doesn't belong. In a recent study, approximately 70% of people have experienced these feelings in their lives, including, to varying degrees, both men and women. It can occur in any aspect of life where "success" is involved (Abrams). When it comes to school, there is often a seemingly concrete and determined gauge of what it means

to “succeed.” This can be daunting, overwhelming, and lead to massive amounts of stress and anxiety in students, including myself.

What is so surprising to me about my (unofficial) diagnosis is that I am, in my very humble opinion, a confident person. I have no trouble meeting new people. I can talk about television or music or movies for days. I love to share my opinion about pretty much anything. I can even solve a pretty difficult math problem without breaking a sweat. For me, I only tend to feel the Imposter Syndrome symptoms kick in when I am writing. That is because Imposter Syndrome plays a major role in forming my **writing research identity**. Your writing research identity is made up of all the knowledge you have (and don't have) about writing, the practices you do (and don't do) when writing, and how you personally feel and adapt your skills and understanding to any situation involving writing. I feel anxiety very often when I write for school, no matter what genre or form I am writing in, but, because I am an English major and the most common genre I write in is “essay,” this is where my anxiety is the worst. My Imposter Syndrome is not just having a bad feeling about one essay; it is something that comes into play nearly any time I write, making it a huge component of my writing identity.

It is important for me to distinguish between “writing with anxiety” and “writer's block.” In my world, writer's block means that I don't know *what* to write. I rarely suffer from a lack of ideas. The idea will come easy to me, even if I don't feel entirely confident in it. I can express these ideas verbally to my peers. The trouble arises in *how* to write. Here, we can use Illinois State University's version of a well-known theory called **CHAT, or cultural-historical activity theory**. Though CHAT can be used to make sense of all kinds of things in the world, at ISU, we break it into seven terms that help us better understand our literate activities. If we think about writing in terms of ISU CHAT, this question of “how” gets at matters of **representation**. Representation gets at how we conceptualize, think, talk about, and plan a text in our heads. How do I bring myself to put pen to paper (I guess, in this modern age, it's more like fingers to keys) and start writing something that will even look like an essay? How do I take this idea and turn it into something that someone else will read and judge?

In order to write this article, I've been tracking my behavior, my **uptake**, when writing an essay for a course I am in this semester. I've delved more into my writing process than I ever have in my academic career and interestingly enough, I've learned some things about who I am as a writer. To me, my writing process is so much more than those basic steps that they teach when you first learn to write essays. You know what I'm talking about: prewrite, research, draft, revise, edit, done (KU Writing Center). While, I still follow

this basic process to some extent, things start to get a little wonky when I factor in my own writing research identity. This one-process-fits-all approach to writing doesn't really work for me. My process goes a little something like this . . .

## Five Stages of Writing with Anxiety

### *Stage One: Major Procrastination*

I think it's safe to say that when it comes to writing, I'm not alone in procrastinating. It's common to hear students lament about how much they've been putting off getting work done. My friends and I will do anything to avoid starting to work on our assignments, which usually ends up with my peers pulling all-nighters like it's their job. I am not such a student. I love sleep, so the idea of staying up writing all night sounds like the WORST. For the most part, my procrastination does not stem from disinterest or laziness; it's a direct product of my anxiety. I procrastinate because I am too busy worrying about what my finished essay will look like. If I don't write, the negative judgement from my professor about how bad my essay is can just be avoided, right? Wrong. If I just watch one more episode of television, I'll feel more relaxed and be more excited to write, right? Wrong. Tomorrow, I'll be in a better mood and will definitely get more done, right? Nope. Will I get an adrenaline rush from waiting until the last minute and then write better? Definitely not. As counterintuitive as it may sound, I procrastinate because I care too much. I am afraid and worried about writing something that matters to me only to have it negatively received. Even though I know procrastinating won't stop the feedback on my essay from happening, I still use it as a means to distance myself from writing. I am only attempting to delay the inevitable.

Everyone loves to tell me what the proper way to avoid procrastination is. I've tried to use timers that have me write for a few minutes then take a break, then repeat until the essay is finished. I've tried scheduling rewards for writing certain amounts, giving myself pep talks, or breaking my writing down into smaller, "more manageable" chunks (whatever that means). None of it seems to help, though, because it doesn't address the real root of my procrastination. The tools I've been told to use to fix my procrastination seem like they have forgotten to remember that I'm a human being with a bunch of anxiety about writing. Knowing my writing identity helps me take a step back and recognize, if only for a moment, that this first stage of my writing process, which often leads to so much more stress, stems from a place of anxiety.

### ***Stage Two: Let's Talk About It***

Because a majority of my friends are also in my same major and in similar classes, we tend to be writing essays at the same time. Naturally, conversations about what essays we are working on come up often. Even though it may seem like casual chit-chat to an outsider, I'm using these conversations to quietly compare myself and my writing process to my peers. I'll make note of how far along other students are in their writing ("What do you mean you've already started?!"; "Oh good, you haven't even looked at the prompt!"). Comparing my own process to my peers can be both helpful and dangerous. Sometimes a conversation about essays can leave me feeling relieved, appeasing my anxiety by letting me know that I am not alone in my stress and concern. More often though, it leaves me feeling more panicked. This relates directly to my Imposter Syndrome. If I'm not procrastinating enough in comparison to others, I worry that my friends will realize how much harder I have to work to keep up with them (even though I don't have to race to keep up) and won't see me as skilled or smart (they won't). If I'm procrastinating too much, I worry that I won't be seen as scholarly enough. I also worry that I have underestimated the assignment and won't be able to dedicate enough time to get it done, which will also lead to me being uncovered as a fraud.

These conversations typically involve some very specific language. My anxiety tells me to talk about my writing as much as I can, but also as *casually* as possible, even though on the inside I'm panicking. I might be desperate to bring up my ideas, but I always introduce it in a hedging way. I bookend my ideas with "this is what I'm kind of thinking" and "I'm not sure if that's right, it's just an idea." I downplay how much I care about my idea or my interest so that, if I'm wrong, it's fine because I don't *really* know what I'm doing anyways. In an article from Inc.com, "9 Telltale Signs You Have Imposter Syndrome," they call this behavior "minimizing." This involves using the words "maybe" or "just." This language tells the listener that I am not at all attempting to brag about my writing or ideas and, to certain listeners, can show my lack of confidence. I use minimizing and hedging in multiple contexts outside of essay writing. During any activity that causes me anxiety and fear of failure, I will use language to distance myself from the task and appear more casual and laid-back. More so than most of my actions, I find that my language here most clearly shows my imposter syndrome and fear of failure. If I express myself by recognizing that I am afraid and doubtful in my ideas, others will not be surprised when I turn in a "bad" essay and "fail." In this step, even when I'm just having everyday conversations with my friends, I am still expressing my writing research identity, so much so that it affects the language I use.

What is most telling about these casual conversations is how much I keep all of this internalized. I am playing it cool, only stressed enough to match the emotions of my peers without giving away how much anxiety I am actually feeling. Why do I do this? Why do we deny these emotions? In the moments where I have felt comfortable enough to share my stress, I've found that others are actually in the same boat as me. We are posturing so others don't know how stressed and anxious and worried we actually are. Who is this helping? Looking back to ISU's version of cultural-historical activity theory, the **socialization** around writing that happens in academia often isn't great. Within CHAT, socialization asks us to consider how people interact with each other as they produce and use different texts. For me, when the text I am producing is an essay for class, my interactions with my peers, when fueled by my anxiety, don't always leave me feeling so wonderful after. I'm willing to admit that denial of my anxiety hasn't helped me much so far in life, so maybe it's time we start thinking about changing the conversation.

### *Step Three: Time to Be Productive (Sort Of)*

It's time to start doing some work! It took me two steps to get here (and honestly probably a couple weeks in real time), but I'm at the point in my writing process where I am ready to start writing! I start first by opening Google Docs and making a page of just quotes from various articles or books that might connect to my topic in some way. I choose long quotes that seem relevant to my topic and try to list as many as I can. If they are online sources, I *never* just copy and paste them. I always type them out, even if I am just moving them over from one web page tab to another. This is a slow way of making me feel like I am being productive and "researching" when, in reality, I'm delaying putting my OWN ideas together. I know what you are thinking now: "but Allison, I dunno, this sounds pretty productive to me." The problem is that I rarely use all of the quotes that I find, sometimes even going as far as not even looking at the document when the time finally comes to write the paper. By writing out quotes, I am focusing on how others have said it better than me already. I undercut my own ideas by thinking that the scholars I'm drawing from already have it together in a better way that I ever could.

After I finish finding all my quotes, I take a long, "well-deserved" break from writing and thinking about my essay. I mean, I just did all that research! I worked so hard typing out those quotes. I spent hours on it! I'm way ahead of everyone else and now it will be soooo easy to write the final paper because of my quotes! Wow! This feeling of euphoria and pride in my minimal effort

lasts for a few days (to weeks, depending on the due date) until the anxiety and stress starts to creep back in. Now, I'm feeling panicked again.

At this point I start to write outlines. For any major essay, I will write probably at least six outlines before I start writing. Rather than writing them on my computer, they are always handwritten on lined notebook paper and usually involve a lot of different colors. Like with finding quotes, my outlining can be seen as a productive tool and good use of my time on the surface, but I am still using outlines to put off actually writing the essay. The real evidence of the unproductiveness of this stage comes when I find myself rewriting the same outline again and again and again with only minor, *minor* changes. It is the idea that if I can make my outline perfect then that will mean my essay is going to be perfect, too. The outlines, despite usually being a major time suck, are the one place in my entire writing process where I feel most confident. For a fleeting moment, I realize that maybe I *do* know something about the topic I've chosen. Maybe I *could* actually write this essay. Maybe, just maybe, things will be OK.

This is the part of my writing process that most clearly matches up with the "traditional" version of the writing process. It's the one that makes me feel most productive and most like a Writer (with a capital W, ya know, the Real Deal). Even though my **trajectory**, or movement, in writing looks like everyone else's, it doesn't necessarily feel like it. This stage is perhaps my most productive, but it also is deeply influenced by my anxiety and Imposter Syndrome. Just as our writing research identity is unique to each of us, so is our uptake of the writing process itself.

#### ***Step Four: The Cycle of Hying and Hating***

After rewriting my outlines and changing things around for the millionth time, I start to realize that maybe it's time to start writing this essay. This moment usually comes days (sometimes hours if I've been particularly worried) before the official due date of my essay. Having this due date shifts my anxiety into overdrive and I start to finally write. Though it feels like some magical force that compels me to write, it is actually just my anxiety finally manifesting into something productive. While I am writing, I enter into a cycle of hyping myself up then tearing myself down. I hype myself up by saying "I just gotta do this, just gotta get it done." I try to emphasize that once it is done, I'll have so much free time and things will have to be better. This works only for a moment, and as I get started "I gotta do this" changes to "I hate this so much" and "I don't even care about this paper." These two statements, though they are said in earnest in the moment, are actually both complete lies. Despite what my anxiety says, I identify as someone who likes

to write. I like to have a final product that expresses my ideas and putting my thoughts into something concrete, even though it causes me stress, is a pretty cool thing. I feel so much anxiety because I *do* care, and I care way too much. As with my hedging, by saying that I don't care, I have given myself an out to my failure. If this writing is bad, that's OK! I didn't even care enough to make it good in the first place. Interesting enough, these moments of saying "I hate this" and "I don't care" feel cathartic. I know that I truly do care, and I don't hate, but allowing myself the space and moment to deny that and feel frustrated helps me push past my anxiety.

### ***Step Five: Defeat, or Time to Turn In Garbage***

By some miracle, I always manage to get my essays in on time. I write and I write and I worry but then I write some more. This moment of feeling done is the only time I let myself feel any pride or relief. But the moment that I submit my paper, the language of anxiety creeps back in and I start to talk about how "garbage" what I wrote was. I'm not sure how this word entered my vocabulary, but it's the main adjective I use to describe my writing. I tell myself that what I have written, my final product, the fruits of my days of labor and worry, is just garbage. "Bad" doesn't feel fitting because it's too subjective and common. "Shitty" is too extreme and intense. But garbage paints the perfect picture in my mind: a bunch of scraps of words jammed together in an essay that might smell a little bit, doesn't exactly all fit together, and definitely anyone who reads this will immediately know they are dealing with some real garbage.

### **So, What's the Point?**

After tracing my whole process, I was, at first, so baffled by how much anxiety I have when writing and how much it impacts me as a writer. I have always done well with writing. Even the most garbage-y garbage of essays that I have turned in to my instructors has received mainly positive feedback. Perhaps this only contributes to my Imposter Syndrome; I just keep fooling everyone that my writing is better than it seems. It is only with the passing of time that I start to recognize my writing and essays are more than just garbage. When I go back and read things I've written (waaay later, of course), I'm proud of my ideas and my writing ability, even though my anxiety tells me not to be.

My intention in writing this article was never to teach you how to overcome your anxiety. This isn't "10 Quick Tips to Beat Writing Anxiety." In fact, *please* don't do any of the things I do. These are *my* stages of writing with anxiety and I guarantee your anxiety with writing will manifest in

different ways and at different points during your writing process. The goal of this article is to recognize, both for my benefit and maybe yours, how this anxiety that is a part of my life influences me as a writer, in a negative way, but perhaps also a positive way. I know my writing habits. I know what essays will cause me the most stress, what I really mean when I say “I hate this essay,” and why I am hedging my ideas in conversation. I also know that when I do these self-critical things, I am doing it to push myself to be the best writer that I can because I love writing, I care about writing, and I see its importance. I also firmly believe that I am not alone in my writing anxiety and feeling like an imposter when writing.

I hope that you can look at your own processes and see how they are influenced (or not) by anxiety, worry, fear, and lack of confidence. This is me telling you it’s OK if writing anxiety is a part of your writing identity! Turns out, a lot of us are feeling pretty stressed and worried about the projects, essays, and writing we are assigned, so why not share that? Maybe that essay you turned in is garbage, but ya know what? You did it! You wrote it! You took an idea and you put it into words and you wrote it down! That’s awesome! And hey, what if what you wrote down wasn’t garbage at all? What if it is great? Examine your own writing process by pausing, stepping back, and listening to yourself. How do you talk about writing? Is your process anything like mine? Maybe you suffer from Imposter Syndrome, too! Welcome to the club! Let’s just keep writing!

## Work Cited

- Abrams, Abigail. “Yes, Imposter Syndrome Is Real: Here’s How to Deal With It.” *Time Magazine*. 20 June 2018. <http://time.com/5312483/how-to-deal-with-impostor-syndrome/>.
- The University of Kansas Writing Center. “The Writing Process.” *KU Writing Center*. July 2018. <https://writing.ku.edu/writing-process>.
- Wilding, Melody. “9 Telltale Signs You Have Imposter Syndrome.” *Inc.com*. 8 Feb 2017. <https://www.inc.com/melody-wilding/9-telltale-signs-you-have-impostor-syndrome.html>.



**Allison Hauser** is a PhD student at Illinois State University focusing on gendered language. She loves to talk about TV shows, Harry Styles, and the patriarchy, and is obsessed with her little Chihuahua named Maggie Gyllenhaal.



