

Reflections on My Writing Concerns

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Although I may sheepishly claim that writing has always been a strong suit of mine academically, I have also faced countless struggles with it over the past few years of my life.

Now, most of these struggles are not ones necessarily of the direct academic type per se—meaning struggles dealing with grammar or syntax—but rather with internal struggles. In addition to these internal struggles, I have also found difficulties in writing for languages other than my own. Ultimately both experiences have refined my understanding of what it means both to be a tutor, and to be a student.

Without delving too deeply into my personal life, I will note that I have struggled with anxiety for as long as I can remember. Having fallen into an extensive episode of anxiety that ceased to quit, the last few months of high school for me were ridden with dread-lined thoughts when essays or writing homework were assigned: *Another one? How am I supposed to complete this? I'm already so behind, I just can't do it.* And so I didn't. For me, an anxious thought would snowball into an anxious action. An anxious action would then gain more potential and become an avalanche of patterned anxious behaviors surrounding writing that was, and still is, difficult for me to navigate. Admitting to these thoughts was, for a very long time, something I never challenged myself to voice to someone who could aid the anxious writer in me. As a result, I stood stagnant; waiting in my shell until an adult in my school (whether teacher or counselor) noticed the signs of anxiety I was exhibiting—such as constant absences and late assignments despite my long-standing and normally intelligent and determined academic disposition—to finally receive the help and attention I so desperately needed. As already mentioned, in high school I was known by teachers to put my everything into my work: I always wrote far more than required, was detailed in my work, used countless sources, and tried to be as thought-provoking as I could be. I was in all AP and honors courses and had been on the high honor roll since I was in seventh grade—and that is what got me. The need for academic perfection led me to obsess over my grades and, although writing came easy to me, it became increasingly more

difficult knowing that each assignment was another roll of the dice to see if my GPA would fall. Therefore, I stopped the gamble before it started and my assignments started to stop being turned in. Even once someone pointed out my behaviors and swooped in to offer help, getting out of this anxious writer-type was, and still is, an arduous process. Most times I would go into a counselor's classroom and have them watch me work, just so that I was immersed in an environment where I had to complete at least *something*. Sometimes that "something" was small, but I began to be taught that it was still better than nothing. I was also taught in this environment that my fears of failure were supported by no concrete evidence and even further that grades were not life or death. Having my personal work read out loud felt like someone pulling my teeth out—I have never been confident in my work so hearing my own words made me feel small and stupid. Once again though, when put in the right hands, having my work read aloud still felt painful, but less so than before. The criticisms no longer hurt with the same intensity, and I could handle being perceived. All of these lessons combined, taught by individuals superior to me who still were gentle and understanding, was the main reason I was able to get through my senior year of high school. Good support is everything. In the same breath, it was important for those supporting me to let me know that, although their help was important, *I* was the one who was overcoming my fears, not them. Shifting power to those who feel powerless is a beautiful thing. It is a beautiful thing to feel capable of yourself.

Clearly, the role of an "anxious writer" is one I know all too well—one who is not consumed by parental pressures (although I am well acquainted with plenty of those), but by her own internal pressures. Having these experiences as an anxious writer burdened by a psychological block is something that, although felt negative at the time, aids me in being immensely empathetic to those who struggle with writing. As a potential tutor, I know what it is

like to be a student who feels less than. First-hand experience can be tough, but it is a powerful tool. In my time as an anxious writer, I have been awarded both academic and emotional strategies to help dig myself out of the hole of insecure and avoidant writing. Since in a tutoring session I will be the authority figure so to speak, it is infinitely important to me that I put myself on a similar level to the writers I will be working with so they understand that no matter their level of writing skills, I am always in their corner cheering them on, ready to help with whatever they need. Tutoring is far more than correcting grammar and organization—it is also about fostering a positive and safe academic space for students to go when they need help on assignments they do not know how to start, want to avoid, or feel insecure about for whatever reason. I had to learn the hard way that I am more than the words I write on a paper, and it is imperative that those struggling with writing know that, too. To know I have the academic and emotional tools to guide someone to both internal and external success is something I truly am confident in. Although psychological blocks are a massive part of understanding that will aid me in pursuing becoming a tutor, I also have experienced instances of difficulty in multilingual learning.

From sixth grade to halfway through my senior year of high school, I studied and learned Mandarin Chinese. Now, Mandarin is a language completely separate from English; the grammar is different, characters are used instead of letters, and not to mention, the culture is very different than Western ones. My situation was quite different than those who grew up speaking different languages other than English, but my experience learning Mandarin still has taught me a variety of lessons that I strongly believe would aid me as a tutor potentially working with multilingual students. For one, I must note that, despite my almost seven years of studying this language in school, even when I stopped my education in the subject I was nowhere near fluent. My Chinese

was still relatively basic, holding a conversation for long periods of time was tough, and I was still working on minimizing my obvious American accent. Over the years, my classmates and I would still mix up grammar rules on papers and in speaking, accidentally swapping American grammar in as a substitute for Mandarin grammar, not because we meant to, but because we simply were not masters at it yet. My native-Chinese teacher never once looked at us as though we were “broken”, but rather that we were learning and trying our best. Up until now, I do not think I ever realized the patience and kindness she extended to her students. She knew we lacked the skills of fluency, but encouraged us no matter what. Author Amy Tan expressed in a short story she wrote about her experience being the child of a Chinese immigrant how “...when [she] was growing up, [her] mother's "limited" English limited [her] perception of her. [She] was ashamed of her [mother's] English. [She] believed that her English reflected the quality of what she had to say that is, because she expressed them imperfectly her thoughts were imperfect” (Tan, 1990). This issue is true for a myriad of people who meet those whose first language is not shared. Many make the mistake of equating “broken” speech with broken thought and therefore assume that the individual's work is no good. However, this simply is not the case. As I have realized, when you pay attention to someone's strengths instead of their weaknesses, you will realize that flowers grow in everyone's minds—sometimes it just takes the right person to water them. My Mandarin teacher watered mine and my classmates, and never judged the differing colors and shapes of our petals. Whether we were still germinating or budding, she gave the same attention to us all and never judged, and to that, we extended the favor back towards her. Our thoughts were not broken and neither was hers—we just simply needed a safe space and aid to learn and grow. People who are still learning to master English are just as bright and capable as those who grew up speaking it. So then, it is important to remember not to assume capabilities

based on what we may *think* we perceive to be levels of skills, experience, and expertise in writing. As a tutor, I will have the knowledge to be informative and knowledgeable, but also patient, gentle, and encouraging.

All-in-all, my experiences with both psychological blocks in writing as well as learning another language has proven useful in my ability to help those around me who are struggling with writing. Reading body language and facial expressions are important as are guiding the writer through the writing process and opening up room for safe and positive discussion. Writing is such a personal experience and with my own obstacles I have faced with it, I know as best I can how to aid those who are in similar situations I have been in before to help convey the importance of writing and the importance of self-confidence in it. Even for the situations I have not experienced firsthand that lead to writing difficulties, I can take and apply lessons I have learned to those as well to help guide a student the best I can. Everyone deserves a safe space.

Works Cited:

Tan, Amy. "Mother Tongue." [Threepenny Review 1990; 1989.] The McGraw-Hill Reader: Issues across the Disciplines. Ed. Gilbert H. Muller. 11th ed. Boston: McGraw-Hill , 2011. 76-81. Print.