



Managing Academic Anxiety Through an Antecedent Writing Activity

Description. Students may become anxious when faced with academic tasks such as test-taking—to the point at which the anxiety seriously interferes with their work performance. Being barraged with anxious thoughts while trying to complete academic tasks is a negative form of multi-tasking and taxes working memory (Beilock & Willingham, 2014). Anxious thoughts divert attention and thus degrade student performance.

One strategy that can help students to minimize the intrusion of anxious thoughts during a stressful test or assignment is to have them first complete a brief (7- to 10-minute) writing exercise in which they write about their anxiety (Park, Ramirez, & Beilock, 2014). This activity can lower anxiety levels and thus allow the student to complete the academic task without interference.

We term this strategy an ‘antecedent writing exercise’ because the writing assignment precedes—and therefore reduces or eliminates—the academic anxiety.

Procedure. Just before an individual student or larger group begins a high-stakes academic task that is likely to trigger anxiety, the teacher hands out a worksheet with these (or similar) instructions (adapted from Beilock & Willingham, 2014):

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I would like you to write honestly about what you are thinking and feeling as you prepare to take this exam/start this assignment.

Because everyone is unique, there is no ‘correct response’ to this writing task. You should just describe as fully as you can your thoughts and feelings about the exam/assignment. You can also write about how your current thoughts and feelings might be the same as—or different from—those you experienced in similar past situations.

You will have __ minutes to write. Please keep writing until you are told to stop. I will not collect this assignment.

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The instructor gives students 7-10 minutes to complete the writing assignment. Students are then instructed to put their compositions away (they are not collected). The class then begins the high-stakes academic task.

Tips for Use. Here are suggestions for using this antecedent writing exercise:

- *Administer to the entire class.* Certain academic tasks, such as important tests, will trigger anxiety in many, if not most, students in a classroom. Teachers can use this writing exercise with the entire group as an efficient way to ‘take the edge off’ this anxiety for all students and potentially improve their test performance.
- *Teach students to use independently.* Some students experience significant levels of anxiety even during independent work – such as math homework. This writing exercise can be a good warm-up activity that students can use to allay anxiety and increase their academic focus.

References

Beilock, S. L., & Willingham, D. T. (2014). Math anxiety: Can teachers help students reduce it? *American Educator*, 38(2), 28-32, 43.

Park, D., Ramirez, G., & Beilock, S. L. (2014). The role of expressive writing in math anxiety. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Applied*, 20(2), 103-111.