

# Reluctant Writers in Elementary School: A Problem with a Solution

by Ashley Feil

## ***Abstract***

*This paper examines reluctant young writers in the elementary school setting, investigating the causes of their apprehension toward writing and why it is a problem. Multiple and varying solutions to this problem, like creating a positive and non-threatening learning environment, making writing assignments fun and student-centered, building confidence, and utilizing certain teaching techniques, tools, and attitudes are then thoroughly analyzed. Incorporating some, or a combination, of these solutions proves to ultimately lessen student writing apprehension and reluctance.*

“Kids hate writing.” This, according to first grade teacher Ms. Junker, is one of the hard truths of teaching writing to children. There is a wide array of problems with teaching writing to students, but this apprehension, reluctance, and resistance to writing is one of the more predominant problems educators face in the teaching of writing. Students of all ages can be apprehensive of writing, and apparently, this reluctance and dislike of writing can start at the young age of six, when children are just beginning to learn to write. Sounds shocking. Or is it? There are verifiable reasons for students beginning to dread writing from the start of their school years. But there is hope for these students, too; they do not have to be destined to suffer through writing forever. With the creation of a non-threatening environment, positive and intentional teaching, and incorporating certain techniques, tools, and attitudes into writing instruction, writing teachers can help to transform their students’ beliefs about writing, turning it into a powerful and tolerable – maybe even enjoyable – subject and activity both in and out of school.

## **Problem**

When discussing the problem of teaching writing to apprehensive and reluctant writers, it is important to note the differences between these students and their peers who write more readily and proficiently. Apprehensive writers are characterized by a lack of self-confidence in their writing abilities, including both the ability to generate ideas for their writing and the ability to write well with correct mechanics, spelling, and organization. They often question themselves: “What if someone laughs? What if the idea is stupid?” (Bruner 444). They don’t believe that their ideas or finished writing are good enough to meet the approval of peers or teachers, and so they choose to avoid writing altogether instead. Apprehensive writers also often times fail to see the purpose or usefulness of writing.

These reluctant writers tend to dislike writing for a number of reasons. Often times, it is an issue of “error avoidance” (Auten 923) or a fear of making mistakes and feeling like writing has to be perfect the first time around (Junker). Reasons for students being so hesitant about making mistakes include receiving negative feedback on their writing in the past, making mistakes in spelling or not knowing how to spell, or even realizing that their writing and letters do not look like those in a printed text and may be hard for others to read (Tyler 4). Another cause for some students’ reluctance to write is simply a lack of ideas or a lack of being able and knowing how to get ideas

from inside their head coherently on to paper (McIntyre and Leroy 54). One case study by McIntyre and Leroy perfectly illustrates the typical reluctant writer's experience with writing through the story of a boy named Bobby. Bobby dreads writing and is in a reading clinic's remedial writing program. In the program, Bobby decides to write a letter to his brother, but he does not know what to write. He gets help brainstorming ideas from his mentor and mother, but even with a list of ideas in front of him, he cannot seem to put them into sentences or a letter form, as he is constantly seeking reassurance and approval of his work, believing everything he writes must be perfect the first time. In this one student, all contributing factors to creating an apprehensive writer are evident: a lack of confidence in skill and ability, a difficulty generating thoughts and ideas for writing, and a belief that all mechanics, spelling, and writing must initially be flawless.

Ultimately, all of these characteristics exhibited in an apprehensive writer culminate in having a negative effect on these students' writing. Any piece of writing that a reluctant writer is able to produce is usually done so at a slower pace and consists of a poorer quality with less development and less information conveyed. This is a problem because then the student not only dreads writing and learning about writing, but his writing is also of a lesser quality and will be hard to improve if his negative attitude toward writing persists.

### **Solution**

Despite the differences of apprehensive writers and the negative effect reflected in their writing, these writers can still grow, develop, and even flourish as writers with just a few teaching adjustments. Simple changes like producing a positive and fun classroom atmosphere to write in, building confidence and skills, allowing plenty of time for writing, and using special, new tools to write can help lessen reluctance and resistance to writing.

#### *Create a Positive Writing Environment*

The first, and one of the most important, adjustments to make is creating a positive, inviting, non-threatening environment for students to write in. First and foremost, the atmosphere that reluctant writers write in should involve low-pressure stakes and welcome risk-taking, since, according to Tyler, "as children take risks they begin to learn about writing" (3). Once students begin to learn about writing, they will be able to write better and with less apprehension. Students should be showered with positive reinforcement for any and all writing efforts, with a special emphasis on appreciating the ideas generated and expressed and not on the mechanics and spelling errors that may appear in an apprehensive writer's writing (McIntyre and Leroy 60). To help those resistant writers with their ideas, Tyler suggests having students first share and discuss ideas with either the teacher or other students to help validate the student and his ideas, making him feel like he has a good start for writing (2-3, 7). An alternative way to helping reluctant writers with ideas is to have them start with drawing a picture and then discuss it with others before writing, an activity that helps show students that they already have an idea and have communicated it in one way (verbally), so now all they have to do is put that discussion, or a part of it, down on paper with pencil (2-3). No matter what, it is critical for the teacher, and even peers, to be positive about all writing and brainstorming.

In addition to emphasizing and positively reinforcing the generation of ideas to create a positive, low-pressure writing environment, teachers should also place less of an emphasis on grades. This will help to "reduce anxiety by lessening the tyranny of grades and presenting enthusiasm for writing" (Auten 923). Grading and getting "a returned paper marked with red pencil and critical remarks" can cause a student to "likely view his attempt as a failure and refuse to try the next writing

assignment” (Tyler 6). When teachers only point out failures in a negative way, like with red pen, students can easily begin to feel demoralized and lose faith in their writing abilities, so it is important for teachers to keep it positive and focused on improvement. Grades can be intimidating for any student, so removing that pressure can help to eliminate the belief that writing must be perfect, thereby also lessening apprehension.

Presenting alternatives to typical grading, like free-writing, opportunity for revisions, and peer feedback, can help students feel less worried about being negatively evaluated and can instead help them begin to realize that writing in itself is a process and anything they write will be accepted as worthwhile and valuable (Auten 923). The process of freewriting and journal writing “can foster personal growth, reduce writing apprehension, strengthen prewriting in students’ composing process, and enhance the development of writing abilities” (Auten 923). Likewise, Bruner advocates the similar idea of stream of consciousness writing to help get ideas flowing within the writer’s own brain, “physically flushing those ideas out of [his] head and past [his] knuckles” onto paper (446). Being “forced” to write continuously, never picking up the pencil, may help to get struggling young writers to see that there are ideas somewhere in their brain—they just need help and encouragement getting out. Freewriting, then, is a good way to get students to write without the pressure of a grade, write to practice skills, and also as a means of generating ideas for other pieces of writing.

Part of lessening apprehension in reluctant writers involves getting students to see that writing has a purpose in their own lives, and not just in school. It is important for them to see that writing is multi-functional, from communicating thoughts and ideas with others to self-expression to explaining an idea, belief, or process. Showing students that writing is everywhere in the world, and that they will use it in everyday life is imperative. Tasks as simple as making a grocery list, writing a note to a friend, or posting on someone’s Facebook wall and more complicated tasks like drafting resumes or business proposals all require the ability to write. Seeing the greater purpose and use for writing makes writing more meaningful for the student, as well as helping them to see that their writing and ideas are more important than just a grade or little spelling mistake. Seeing this meaning and purpose behind writing can help students to view writing in a more positive light because they know it is a skill they will use for many purposes in real life.

### *Make Writing Fun*

Another crucial method to motivating apprehensive writers is to make writing fun and relatable for each student. Any experience students have with language, especially younger children, should “reflect students’ interests and experiences” (Tyler 8). If a student strongly dislikes or has no interest in an assigned topic, writing will become more of a pain and burden, and it will be much more difficult to generate ideas and feel motivated to write. Therefore, starting reluctant writers on writing topics of interest to them personally is largely beneficial. McIntyre and Leroy suggest letting students “write imaginatively about topics of interest” (60). The student Bobby, discussed above, also demonstrates the effectiveness of working on writing that is centered on topics and activities relevant to him. Bobby struggled with writing initially in the program and was extremely avoidant of any writing task; however, once writing activities involving *Captain Underpants*, a book and subject of great interest to him, were introduced, Bobby became more engaged and excited about writing. He even became willing to work on his writing at home, outside of the writing program (McIntyre and Leroy 56-58). As also demonstrated by Bobby, letting reluctant and apprehensive writers choose which writing activity they do can be helpful in encouraging writing. As noted by McIntyre and Leroy, “offering Bobby choices of activities that connected to writing but did not necessarily involve writing, enabled him to feel that he had control over his learning” (57). First grade teacher Ms.

Junker similarly explained how helpful it is to let resistant writers choose the topic they write about so that writing is driven by student interest, helping to motivate those students who are unwilling to write.

Making the writing be about the student-author is another way to make writing more fun and relatable. Most students love to talk about themselves, so having them channel that talk into writing is a simple way to get reluctant writers motivated to write. First grade teacher Ms. Junker has found journal writing to be one of the best ways to get young, apprehensive writers writing. Journal writing can be made low stakes, low pressure, and is all about the student who is writing. In journal writing, students can write about anything from friends and family to likes and dislikes to vacations they have taken or places they have been. For most young writers, even the most reluctant, this is a doable task because the ideas already exist in their minds, and they get to “talk” about themselves, their possessions, or things they have done. As Brown, Morrell, and Rowlands argue, “the way writing is taught in schools . . . not only denies young writers their identities as authors, it kills the pleasure of self-expression” (15). So, journal writing and the freedom for students to write about themselves helps to recreate the authenticity and joy of self-expression in writing for young and resistant writers.

To help place emphasis on the student-author, the opportunity to share finished writing with the rest of the class can be a motivator for getting apprehensive writers to write. Young students constantly want to share little bits and pieces about their personal lives with their teacher and peers, and often times, that translates into wanting to share schoolwork, like writing, that they have done as well. But, a student cannot share their writing if they have not actually written anything. For this reason, a special author’s chair or author’s pen for students can be an excellent motivator (Junker). Ms. Junker’s successful use of these tools confirms Tyler’s finding that “allowing children to read their work from an author’s chair demonstrates that their messages can be received and appreciated by others,” which also helps boost confidence levels (3). Sharing a finished piece of writing aloud with others also “provides a sense of ownership” for the student over his work (Tyler 6). An author’s chair clearly puts the focus on the student, particularly on the student as an author, and seeing his ideas and writing heard and positively received by the teacher and peers helps encourage the student to write so he can share again.

In addition to journal writing, having pen pals is another great activity for apprehensive writers to see that writing is fun and useful for something outside of the school setting. As explained by McIntyre and Leroy, writing to a pen pal can help an apprehensive writer see that there is a social purpose to writing too, and what kid does not like having friends to talk with, especially if they get to talk about themselves? (60). Talking to a friend, family member, or even a new acquaintance is something most children want to do, and writing to such a person is just another, different method of communicating with that person, therefore making the writing seem less dreadful. Ms. Junker, who also noted the effectiveness of pen pal writing, actually incorporates this kind of writing into her curriculum by pairing each of her students up with another student from another teacher’s class. Ms. Junker says her students, even those who claim to hate writing, “are always excited and motivated when it is time to write to their pen pals.” Consequently, writing to pen pals has become an activity students use to practice writing all year long in Ms. Junker’s classroom. The social context of pen pal writing gives students a fun way to work on writing while getting to “converse” with a friend.

### *Build Confidence*

In addition to creating a non-threatening and fun writing environment, building confidence

in apprehensive writers is also a key component in getting these students to write. A lack of self-confidence is part of the problem causing writing apprehension for some students. Simply put, “when students have confidence in their capability to write essays [or any other piece of writing], they will also feel less apprehensive about writing” (Pajares and Viliante 2). Pajares and Viliante also found that a student’s perceptions of confidence predict their motivation levels, so it is important for teachers to pay attention to each student’s confidence and self-efficacy as it pertains to writing (7). Without confidence, they will have no motivation to write and will remain apprehensive about the whole process of writing. Auten similarly notes that “instilling a more positive attitude and encouraging a healthier self-image increases the desire to write and thus the quality of composition” (922). Simply put, low levels of confidence translate into more apprehension and therefore less writing and unwillingness to write, so it is critical to build up confidence levels and positive attitudes.

The teacher plays a hugely important and central role in building the confidence of resistant young writers. First and foremost, teachers need to be positive about writing; if the teacher is negative, students will pick up on that attitude and reflect it in their own attitudes and behavior. Students benefit from receiving positive feedback, and a message of total approval with words, facial expressions, and body language is important in helping a student to feel encouraged in the act of writing (Tyler 6). Additionally, positive spoken comments and encouragement have been found to work better than written comments on a child’s work of writing; the physical act of talking and discussing is what helps a student to improve and feel cared about (Junker). In addition to being positive about writing, teachers should be sensitive to a child’s feelings about himself as a writer and take those feelings into consideration in instruction. Students who do not feel good about themselves as writers, as most apprehensive writers feel, will likely require more encouragement, guidance, and positive support from the teacher.

Teacher support for apprehensive writers should also include improving skills to help build confidence. One of the first and most effective steps in helping reluctant young writers is modeling. Having the teacher serve as a model, writing on the board, sharing ideas, and rewriting, gives students an example to follow and behavior to replicate (Tyler 4). Brown, Morrell, and Rowlands also discuss “the importance of modeling to increase motivation and engagement and to ensure student success” (16). These researchers host a Young Writer’s Camp and through their experiences with children there, they have found that getting students to work together in coming up with ideas and writing a story or poem together, with the teacher recording everything is one of the best ways to get any student who resists writing to slowly begin to change his opinion. These methods of skill building through modeling and working as a class first helps to increase confidence levels in young apprehensive writers by showing them the process of writing so they know how to do it – and that they can do it – on their own.

After modeling and writing a piece in a group setting, there are other techniques that help to get apprehensive writers writing on their own. Ms. Junker has found sentence frames to be beneficial in getting her resistant first graders to write a sentence on their own. For example, she will write, “My favorite animal is (blank) because (blank)” on a worksheet and have students fill in the blanks to get started. That way, the main sentence construction is there and students simply have to fill in the missing information with an opinion they likely already possess. As students improve and gain confidence, more of the sentence frame can be left blank and open for the student to fill in, so they can continue to progress in writing. If a student already has ideas he would like to write about, but is having trouble actually writing, the teacher, another adult, or even a more advanced peer can help the struggling student through scribing (McIntyre and Leroy 60). As the student sees someone else writing down his ideas, he will be able to see that it is possible to get his ideas expressed on

paper, and by following their example, he can learn that he also possesses the ability to write his ideas down on paper. Another approach to helping apprehensive writers gain confidence is to pair them with a more proficient writer in the class since “children learn about writing by observing more skilled others and by participating with them in literacy events” (Tyler 3). This is also part of the reason why teacher models and scribes can be so beneficial for those students who resist and struggle with writing. Through positive teacher feedback and involvement and working with more skilled adults and peers, students will be able to build their writing skills and confidence, lessening their apprehension for writing.

### *Time*

Part of the problem with students feeling apprehensive about writing can stem from not being given an adequate amount of time to write. Often times writing can get pushed aside due to lack of time or an increased focus on math, science, and reading instruction (Junker). However, for students to learn to write, they must be given the time and not rushed through the process since experience with writing, not necessarily teacher instruction, is the best way for a student to grow and develop in writing. This involves allowing students to have the time in class to discuss ideas, think about the writing, actually partake in the act of writing, and then reread and fix any part of their writing before sharing it with others as a means of reinforcement (Tyler 7). Students have a vital “need to experiment and explore the writing process, as opposed to focusing simply on the mechanics of writing” (McIntyre and Leroy 54). For those students who resist writing, this time for exploration, without regard to mechanics and spelling, is so important in making them feel more comfortable with writing. Undoubtedly, time for experimenting and exploring the writing process will take away from time spent teaching other subjects, but it is worth it in the end when students “succeed in constructing a more competent grammar, so that their joy in the process is both an end in itself and a means to further development” (Auten 923). The extra time is certainly worth it when students are able to obtain an increased level of confidence and improved ability and desire to write because of the opportunity to explore the subject of writing without any added time constraints or pressures.

### *Technology as a Tool*

Sometimes, getting an apprehensive writer to write is as simple as adding in a new tool for them to use, a new way for them to write, and in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, technology can be a huge resource for getting the most reluctant of writers to write, and even have fun with it. Many students see technology as more relevant and useful in today’s society than writing with traditional paper and pen, so any technological tool used for writing is especially suitable to those reluctant writers who struggle with seeing the purpose of writing (Tackvic 428-29). In Tackvic’s experience with “digital storytelling,” she has found that technology not only helps students with seeing the greater purpose and relevance of writing in the world but also with the creative process of generating ideas. She claims, “when students have access to digital images, it helps so much with the brainstorming process. Their creative process is jump-started in a different way than staring at blank piece of paper” (428). The images students are able to see on the screen help to inspire even the most resistant of writers with a wealth of ideas they can write a story about, and they can even include digital pictures in the finished product. In one such instance of Tackvic’s use of digital storytelling with a class, second grade students worked in groups to create a digital story together. Using a free Web resource called Little Bird Tales, second grade students were able to “work on the same book [in groups] from different computers,” “upload images,” “create their own artwork,” and “record their voices to

create talking books” (428). The whole process was interactive and continuously evolving, culminating in a social, technological, written, and fun project that students were always “eager to get back to” (428). Ultimately, Tackvic’s successful use of technology to get students excited about writing shows that incorporating new tools with writing, especially those tools relevant to and useful in students’ lives outside of school, work well for motivating even the most apprehensive of writers to write.

### *Evaluation to Ensure Growth*

Lastly, to ensure apprehensive writers are growing and developing in their writing, it is important to evaluate them over time. Like any student evaluation, keeping samples of each student’s writing is helpful to see how individuals have progressed: “Developmental and growth patterns are evident when samples are viewed over a period of time” (Tyler 10). Tyler also states that when holding conferences with reluctant writing students about their work, discussions about their ideas and thoughts are more beneficial than pointing out all mechanical errors and handing back papers marked with a bunch of red ink (10). Keeping discussions positive and focused on student growth and steps for continued future progress is significantly important in supporting apprehensive writers in their journey to writing more willingly and with more joy.

### **Conclusion**

Teaching and motivating apprehensive, resistant writers clearly presents a unique teaching challenge, but it is certainly not one that can not be overcome. By employing specific, targeted techniques in helping to get reluctant writers writing, these students can actually learn to tolerate and in some cases, even like writing. Creating a positive, low pressure, fun writing environment can help students see that writing does not have to be perfect and is multi-purposeful in their lives, even outside of school. Building confidence in apprehensive writers aids them in seeing past previously self-imposed limitations so that they can reach their ultimate potential. Allowing the time to explore language, the writing process, and ideas for writing helps resistant students relax, learn, grow, and therefore become less apprehensive about writing. The use of technology as a teaching tool for writing in the 21<sup>st</sup> century may help students see the relevance of writing, too, and motivate them to write by providing a new, innovative, exciting way to do it. In the end, young, apprehensive writers are not destined to be apprehensive forever; the plethora of intentional teaching techniques catered to this population of writers can indeed help them thrive in the world of writing.

### **References**

- Auten, Anne. "ERIC/RCS: Report: Help For Reluctant Writers." *Language Arts* 60.7 (1983): 921-26. *ERIC*. Web. 25 Sept. 2015. Retrieved from <http://www.ncte.org.libproxy.uccs.edu/library/NCTEFiles/Resources/Journals/LA/1983/0607-oct1983/la0607ERIC.pdf>
- Brown, Matthew, Jodene Morrell, and Kathleen Dudden Rowlands. "Transforming Young Writers' Attitudes Toward Writing And Becoming Writers." *California English* 17.2. (2011): 15-17. *ERIC*. Web. 24 Sept. 2015. Retrieved from <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED531021.pdf>
- Bruner, Mark. "Brief: Using Knuckles To Help Solve Writer's Block." *Language Arts* 64.4 (1987): 444-46. *ERIC*. Web. 25 Sept. 2015. Retrieved from <http://www.ncte.org.libproxy.uccs.edu/library/NCTEFiles/Resources/Journals/LA/1987/LA0644-apr1987/la0644Brief.pdf>

- Junker, Leah. Personal Interview. 19 September 2015.
- McIntyre, Lauren J., and Carol Leroy. "It's Not Boring, But It's Not Fun: Lessons Learned From A Reluctant Writer." *Reading Improvement* 40.2 (2003): 51-62. ERIC. Web. 26 Sept. 2015. Retrieved from <http://web.a.ebscohost.com.libproxy.uccs.edu/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=adf4d02f-3314-4293-b8d8-90665497fae2%40sessionmgr4002&vid=19&hid=4212>
- Pajares, Frank, and Gio Viliante. "Influence Of Self-Efficacy On Elementary Students' Writing." *Journal Of Educational Research* 90.6 (1997): 353-60. ERIC. Web. 24 Sept. 2015. Retrieved from <http://web.a.ebscohost.com.libproxy.uccs.edu/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=22&sid=adf4d02f-3314-4293-b8d8-90665497fae2%40sessionmgr4002&hid=4212>
- Tackvic, Charlene. "Digital Storytelling: Using Technology To Spark Creativity." *Educational Forum* 76.4 (2012): 426-429. ERIC. Web. 25 Sept. 2015. Retrieved from <http://www-tandfonline-com.libproxy.uccs.edu/doi/pdf/10.1080/00131725.2012.707562>
- Tyler, Barbara. *Encouraging Reluctant Writers In The Classroom*. n.p.: 1994. ERIC. Web. 26 Sept. 2015. Retrieved from <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED368705.pdf>