

Anthony Jalen Belocura

Catherine Niu

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## The Impact of Mindfulness Practice on Attitudes Toward Academic Writing

### **Introduction**

Why does it seem that the field of academic writing is always lacking in a “hack” or “fix” for getting inexperienced writers into writing itself? Whether it be making a synthesis paper about differences in social-clocks across cultures or attempting to integrate the meaning of J. D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* into a study about “teen-angst”, there never appears to be a straightforward, one-size-fits-all solution for getting students to not only feel less reluctant about writing essays, but to also build some confidence in their own abilities to make those essays. But maybe the truth of the matter is that there is no cookie-cutter way to solve this issue. English composition is already quite far removed from STEM subjects as a more “artistic” sect of academia, so why should we be treating it so formulaically? And as an “artistic” subject, perhaps the solution resides in the womb of creativity: the mind.

General literacy rates around the world are drastically higher than they had been centuries ago- even most underdeveloped countries have vastly improved in ensuring that the majority of the population has the basic ability to read and write. An article regarding literacy from ourworldindata.org estimates that two centuries ago only about 12% of the world was able to read and write, but also highlights the vast increases to this number throughout the 19th and 20th centuries with more individuals on average being able to demonstrate those basic skills (Roser &

Ortiz-Ospina). So why aren't all students confident in their ability to carry out something that's become so natural over time? To be fair, they have some decent reasons as some find writing a more complex and laborious task than others- and the many parts that go into making a composition can prove to be overwhelming at times (Richards). Commonly, you'll hear of "writer's block," the phenomenon of blankly staring at your screen or paper for minutes, hours, or even days trying to come up with a cohesive and "smart-sounding" way to communicate your thoughts in your writing. Some might tell you about how much of a stickler they are when it comes to their own work- they refuse to accept the idea that their work may actually be generally perceived as a quality piece, and their perfectionist approach ends up being more destructive than constructive to their writing process. And as with anything that's got a time limit or deadline: making essays can induce anxiety in these inexperienced writers, which ultimately propagates the slew of issues that cause students to be apprehensive about writing and have a low self-efficacy in their ability to carry out these projects. But if you take a moment to observe these problems alongside each other, you might notice that they're all rooted in some form of stress/anxiety. Writer's block is often accompanied by a sense of being overwhelmed by a prompt and the ground one needs to cover in their paper, sticklers worry too much about the littlest, possibly insignificant details in their work instead of viewing it from a "big-picture" perspective, and students who don't do well with time-limits/deadlines simply fear that they won't be able to complete their project on time while having to deal with all of the other coursework on their plate. Nadia Zamim from the Indiana University of Pennsylvania noticed how these issues remain the typical obstacles for even experienced writers, and stated in a dissertation that "[educators] have little to no knowledge concerning how graduate students manage their writing anxiety or practice of self-compassion," (Zamin, 5). So if the solution to

helping students with their attitudes toward academic writing is generally more internalized than with other fields, could mental destressing via mindfulness be a key factor?

But what exactly constitutes mindfulness? In an investigation carried out by Megan Britt from Brunswick Community College in Bolivia, NC, Buddhist nun Pema Chödrön advocated the 2000 year old practice as “training for facing the difficult, unsettling, or scary situations in life rather than retreating or escaping [stressful events],” (Britt, 4). To the students worrying about the idea of composing, having to write essays for an important, subjectively evaluated grade definitely falls under the category of “stressful events.” Therefore, considering the highlighted purpose of mindfulness, it’s reasonable to hypothesize that these activities are potentially conducive to the mental state, and subsequently confidence/performance of students when it comes to academic writing. In the same study, Britt’s team produced statistically significant results that suggested that mindfulness, particularly focused breathing sessions, actually has a notable impact on writing apprehension and writing performance (Daly-Miller Writing Apprehension Test & a timed, narrative essay prompt respectively), and revealed that the experimental group that participated in the sessions exhibited greater confidence in their abilities as well as a noticeable reduction in errors within the timed essay prompt than the non-participating control group (Britt, 11). Although a decrease in small grammatical, spelling, and punctuation errors always serves to make an essay “cleaner” or “aesthetically pleasing,” a writer’s self-efficacy can go miles further in contributing to a polished, authentic, and informative text- even more than the use of fancy vocabulary and unique proverbs. The confidence factor is so great, in fact, that students could potentially nullify the previously mentioned anxiety-rooted obstacles if they simply believed in their capabilities as a writer. This idea of confidence/self-efficacy was also investigated on another occasion under a similar lens to

that of Britt's study. David W. Drewery from the University of Waterloo and his colleagues used similar methods, but the differences manifested in the forms of mindfulness applied (both focus breathing and progressive muscle relaxation were used) and the dependent variable (only self-efficacy was measured). Additionally, there wasn't a traditional control group- both groups were exposed to a form of mindfulness training, and the differences in measures of self-efficacy were instead observed in a before-and-after manner that could also be compared across the activities utilized. Drewery's study also produced results that implicated a greater measure of self-efficacy due to mindfulness practices, but interestingly also had no distinct difference in the boost depending on the specific activity as "participants in the breathing exercise condition had [only] marginally greater writing self-efficacy at T2 compared to the participants in [the progressive muscle relaxation condition]," (Drewery, 5). Overall, it's been concluded on several occasions that there is a positive correlative relationship between the practice of mindfulness and reduced writing anxiety/increase writing self-efficacy, but is this the reality for the majority of individuals partaking in college-level composition?

## **Methods**

In order to make a basic, generalized measure of how students feel about writing and the use/nonuse of mindfulness, I conducted a 9 question survey via google forms and had a participant base made up of college undergraduate students. I aimed for between 15-20 responses and received 13 (n=13) as of the date 11/12/2022. A disclosure was made at the start of the survey saying that responses may be referenced within this research paper, but that all contact/identifying information would be kept confidential. The questionnaire had three sections. First, a demographic confirmation where I asked if they were a UC Davis undergraduate (a no would indicate that they were an undergrad at a different university/college), and whether or not

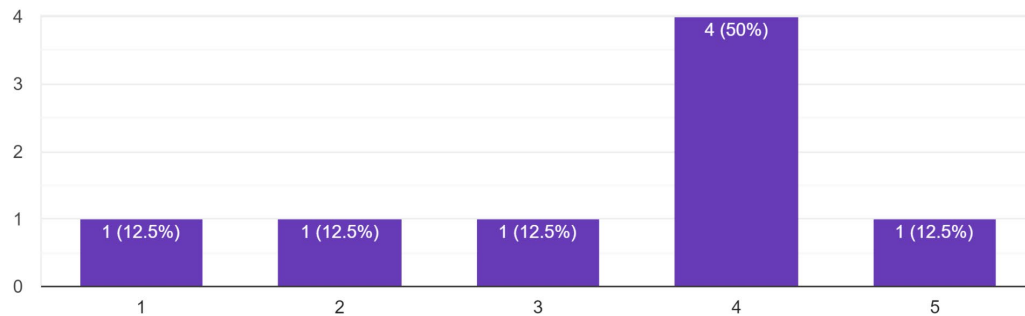
they were taking, or had previously taken, a college-level English composition course (for this survey, I allowed AP Lang & AP Lit). Second, a section on mindfulness where I asked if they practiced mindfulness (Y/N), in what ways they practiced mindfulness/why they did not practice mindfulness (long answer), and if they did practice mindfulness, how much did they personally believe it contributed to their overall mental health (likert scale). Finally, a section on attitudes toward academic writing where I asked about their apprehensiveness to write essays along with an elaboration (likert + long answer), and their personal opinion on their self-efficacy when it came to writing along with an elaboration (likert + long answer).

## **Results**

After collecting 13 responses as of the date 11/12/22, the following data was produced. (Q1) For the demographic confirmation question, 8 individuals reported that they were a UC Davis undergraduate while 5 individuals reported that they were not (indicating that they were undergrads at a different institution). (Q2) In the inquiry about whether or not one was taking, or had taken, a college-level English composition course, all respondents reported with “yes.” (Q3) When asked if one practiced mindfulness, 7 individuals reported “no,” while 6 individuals reported “yes.” (Q4) When asked to elaborate on the response to Q3, mindfulness users reported a variety of practices such as surrounding oneself with nature and listening to relaxing music, and mindfulness non-users reported that they did not have the time, patience, or interest to participate in such activities.

If you practice mindfulness, please rate its impact on your general mental health.

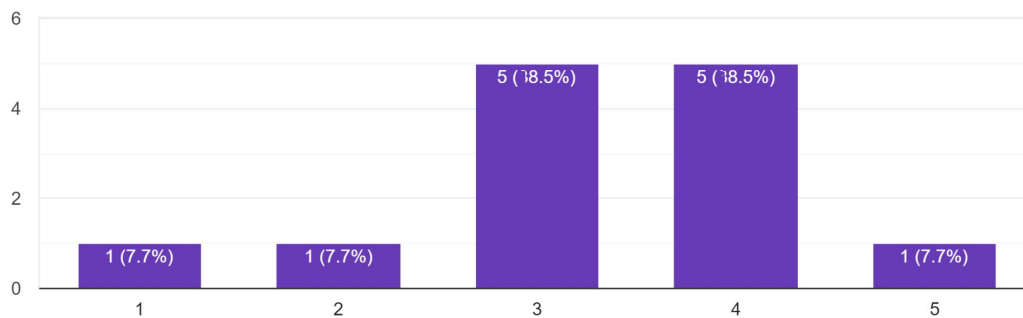
8 responses



(Q5) When mindfulness users were asked to rate the impact of their activities on one's general mental health, 8 individuals reported over the entire likert scale, but the majority of responses were a rating of 4/beneficial.

Please rate your apprehension toward writing academic texts (essays, research papers, etc.)

13 responses



(Q6) When asked to rate one's apprehension toward writing academic texts, all individuals reported over the entire likert scale, but the majority of responses were either a rating of 3/neutral or 4/non-apprehensive. (Q7) When asked to elaborate on the response to Q6, apprehensive respondents claimed that they simply didn't like to write and/or disliked the way in which writing was assigned to them, neutral respondents generally reported an indifference to writing

essays which was disconnected from their ability to write, and non-apprehensive respondents reported both ease and enjoyment with writing. (Q8) When asked to rate one's ability to write academic texts (measuring self-efficacy), the majority of individuals reported with a rating of 4/good. (Q9) When asked to elaborate on the response to Q8, many individuals indicated that they believed they had adequate writing skills despite their levels of apprehension towards composition.

## **Discussion**

After collecting responses from my survey, several insights emerge regarding the impact of varying mindfulness practice on attitudes toward academic writing. Firstly, the general trends taken from the data are not restricted to UC Davis undergraduates- the local source of participants which made up about two-thirds of the respondent sample- and answers from Davis students were quite similar to answers from students in other institutions (e.g. Arizona State University, San Diego State University, UC Berkeley). Opinions on academic writing also come from a shared source/background, as all participants stated that they have some form of experience in a college-level writing class. The frequency of mindfulness practice itself was, to my surprise, decently split with about half of participants saying they partake in it and about half of participants saying they do not. Mindfulness users share a similar purpose in their activities: "clearing their head" and destressing- which is synonymous with the widely accepted point of mindfulness- but these individuals reported a wide variety of unique activities that most wouldn't think to categorize as a form of mindfulness. One participant actually stated that they used meditation alongside deep breathing, but others had more casual methods that were as simple as going for a scenic walk or listening to their favorite music alone in their room. Ultimately, the different activities all served a purpose in helping the respondents take their minds off of

troubling events and responsibilities for a brief period of time- and they all believe in the benefit that mindfulness provided them (all individuals who reported “yes” to Q4 reported with a rating of 3 or above on the Q5 likert scale). It’s also notable that mindfulness users reported both non-apprehensiveness to writing (Q6) and generally self-efficacy (Q8). Mindfulness non-users demonstrate trends of their own as well. When asked to elaborate on why they did not practice mindfulness, respondents claimed that they didn’t believe that it was effective, that they did not have enough time, and that they hadn’t learned how to properly carry out mindfulness activities. Overall, it’s a mix of disbelief in the effectiveness of mindfulness and a degree of inaccessibility as these respondents don’t seem to think that attempting it is worth their time, and that they could be doing something productive, or at least a more straightforward method of destressing. Despite being instructed not to do so, a mindfulness non-user even reported in Q5 with a 2, indicating that they didn’t even believe that it could be beneficial to their general mental well being. Interestingly, non-users generally reported a greater apprehension to writing (or a lower score on Q5’s likert scale) than that of the users. They reported a mix of low and high self-efficacy ratings in Q7, but analysis of their elaborations to that response in Q8 indicated that some individuals only believed in their ability to an extent- that they could only write well if it was about a topic they were passionate about or if the assignment was something that could be approached using years of familiarity in lower-level academic writing.

After comparing these two subgroups within the survey, it does seem plausible that there could be some sort of correlation between mindfulness practice and how students feel about academic writing- something that’s already been established in the aforementioned studies. This correlation will only become stronger and more apparent upon further surveying/interviewing on larger scales and in different demographics, but a causation relationship won’t be established



until several experiments are also carried out on sizable populations. For now, however, we can at least acknowledge the fact that users believe in the beneficial impact that mindfulness has on their mental health, as well as the fact that these individuals are generally not opposed to academic writing and are even decently confident in their ability to compose. The way in which one tackles their stress and anxiety isn't meant to be formulaic, and the effect of those methods isn't meant to be objective- a concept consistent with the idea that the solution for dispelling writing apprehension and increasing writing self-efficacy is fluid. Mindfulness can be a gateway to finding that solution for each individual, so why aren't we seeing widespread use of it in order to combat writing obstacles? Looking back on our non-user's responses from the survey, it seems that we need to expose more of our student writers to mindfulness as a dual mental health and academic tool, and convince them of the potential positives that partaking in the activities can bring them.

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