Writers' Block for Writers: How Far is it True?

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ABSTRACT

Writer's block may be temporary or permanent for writers; depending on how they (writers) respond to the block. Some take measures to overcome while some chose to "rest " from writing. Among some of the causes of writers' block are the writer's attitude towards writing-related activities and writers' lack of content and rhetorical knowledge. The objective of this study is to investigate the possible causes of writers' block. Specifically, this study looked into how writing process influenced writers' block. This study also explored how writing fear influenced writer's block. 29 academicians participated in this mixed mode research. Participants responded to a survey and data was quantitatively and qualitatively analysed. Findings revealed that writers suffer from writers' block because they crave for perfection when they write. In addition to that, writers sometimes block themselves from writing because of their won perception of themselves and what writing entails. These findings have interesting implications towards managing writers' block among academicians.

Keywords: Writers' block, Academicians, Perfectionism, Perception, Fear of writing.

Highlights of this paper

- The objective of this study is to investigate the possible causes of writers' block.
- This study looked into how writing process influenced writers' block.
- Findings revealed that writers suffer from writers' block because they crave for perfection when they write.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background of Study

Academic writing is sometimes not liked not only by students but also by academicians. When it comes to academic writing, some claim "writers' paralysis"- they cannot write, or if they have begun writing, they stop the activity. Whether we call it "writing paralysis' or "writers' block", what is important is, as writers we reach a dead end to our writing activity. While some say writers' block is a term for writers to excuse themselves from the writing activity, many studies have shown writers' block is real and should be taken seriously. An academician in a higher institution of learning is expected to (a) teach, and (b) publish. According to Rahmat (2020) often academicians complained as either (a) not having any time to write, or (b) not having anything to write about. There are some who attempted to embark on the journey of academic writing. Unfortunately, they may end up feeling lost with writer's block. Is writer's block real? Are academicians using writer's block as an excuse for the fact that they could not find time to write amidst their busy teaching schedule. Interestingly, there are many academicians who began writing but ended up going blank. Figure 1 shows the writing process of writers by Flower and Hayes (1980). Writers beginning the task go through the "task environment".

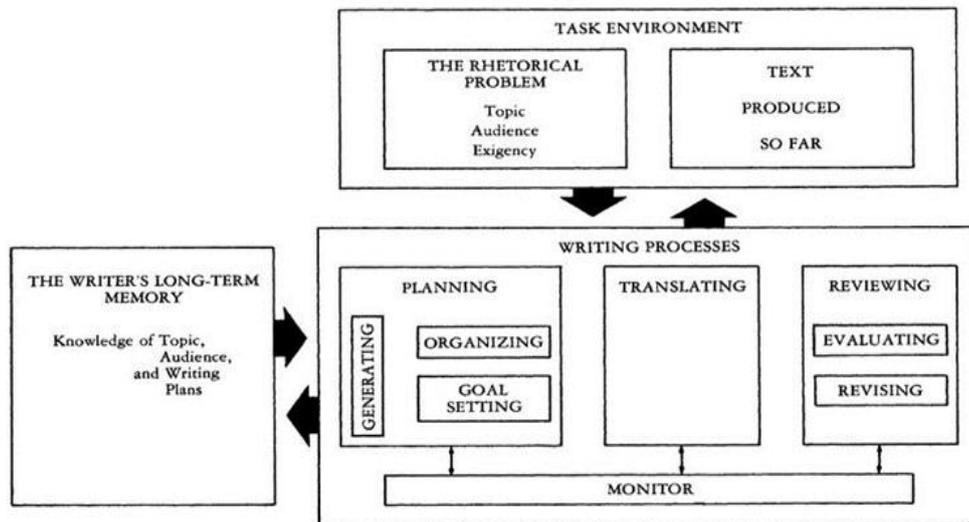**Figure-1.** Wring process of writer.

Source: Flower and Hayes (1980).

1.2. Statement of Problem

Writing block is real. Writers face this condition; some temporarily, and some permanent. Some writers continued writing after the temporary block. They take measures to improve their writing and ended completing what they left. Rice (2018) and Cayley (2018) reported that writers who suffer from writers' block are actually capable writers who have produced good writing. However, due to their uncontrolled fear of writing, they become "paralysed" from writing. This paralysis may be either temporary or permanent. According to Rahmat, Arepin, Mohd Yunos, and Syed Abdul Rahman (2017) writing fear began with what the writer perceived as difficult. This

perception of writing difficulty may cause temporary writing block. If the perception is not eradicated, writers may end up not writing again.

1.3. Objective of Study and Research Question

The objective of this study is to investigate the possible causes of writers' block. Specifically, this study zooms into how writing process influence writers' block. This study also looks at how writing fear influence writer's block. This research is done to answer the following question:

(a)   In what ways do the writing process influence writers' block?

(b)   How does fear of writing influence writers' block?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Introduction

This section presents issues about writers' block, and problems in writing. This section also discusses past studies on writers' block and writing difficulties as well as the theoretical framework of the study.

2.2. Writing Process

Writing is a series of process; from the planning process right until the final stages of writing. Generally, academic essays are comprised of introductions, review of related literature, methodology, findings and conclusion. Writers may or may not have problems with the chapters. However, they may face difficulties with the stages of writing; such as planning, writing and evaluating. According to Rahmat (2019) writers undergo the three stages of writing when writing all the processes. Writers focus on different stages for different processes.

Tompkins (2004) reports five main stages that writers go through in order to publish their writing. The stages are prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, finally publishing.

2.2.1. Prewriting

Prewriting is a planning stage for writing. Planning is an important step of the writing process; it allows the writers to organize their writing before they even begun writing. At this initial stage, writers use various strategies such as, graphical editing, free writing, and associative writing to begin their writing plan. This could even be the stage where writers decide to take a step back and sign up for writing courses to prepare themselves for actual write-up.

2.2.2. Drafting

In the draft stage, writers are expected to put the arrangement they did in the planning stage on to paper. For many writers, this is the "spring-board" to actual writing. This is the stage where the writers begin their first few sentences into the whole write-up. The "spring-board" stage to writing is a very important stage for it determines whether the writer will proceed into actual writing stage-the first draft. This stage is where the writer decides to assume full responsibility as a writer and move forward. Unfortunately, some writers take a step back and gave themselves preparing -staying at the pre-writing stage. This is the "assume" or "abort" stage.

2.2.3. Revising

This stage consists of the writers' reviewing the written draft. For some writers, this happens at the initial stage after drafting. The writer may make decisions to re-align the focus of the write-up. The writer may also, at

this stage, add or delete sections of the paper. This stage is used for the writer to make decisions to either continue the content as planned or make changes.

2.2.4. Editing

Up until this stage, the writer's stage is usually content-adding or deleting it. This editing stage is when the writers begin to look at mechanical aspects of the writing such as; spelling rules and punctuation. Writers may also improve on grammatical and sentencing skills for this write-up.

2.2.5. Publishing

This is the last stage of the writing process. In this stage, the writers share the text they have written with the audience. For academicians, this is the stage where they send the paper to the publisher to be published in the journal. The writer whose paper is accepted with no changes will complete cycle on Figure 1. However, the writer whose paper was rejected, would have to go through the cycle all over again or chose to "abort" the writing process totally. The writer who was asked to make change to the paper for acceptance, would enter the cycle again but begins this time at the drafting stage.
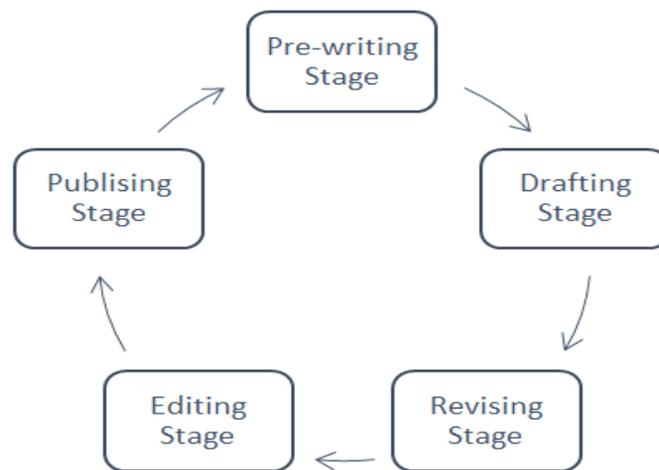
Figure-2. The cycle of writing process.
Source: Tompkins (2004).

2.3. Writers' Block

Is writing block real? Writers' block is defined differently by different people. According to Duchene (2008) writer's block is defined as a temporary inability to begin or continue a writing project due to fear, anxiety or lack of inspiration-strikes professional and non-professional writers alike. Traynor (2019) and Mike (1984) on the other hand, defines it as the condition of writers when they are not able to create or continue a piece of written work because something in their mind prevents them from doing it. This in ability does not come from basic skills or commitment towards the writing activity.

Rice (2018) identified four types of writer's block. The first type is called "apathy". These people struggled to daydream or feel any creative spark. They often felt that their writing had to fit a stifling set of rules and regulations. The second type is labelled as "anger". They often had narcissistic tendencies. They were actively upset during their bouts of writer's block. They didn't want to publish (or, perhaps, create) anything unless it would get them attention, money, or some other reward. The third type is "anxiety". These people were paralyzingly worried that their writing would not be good enough. The fourth type has issues with other people. These people lashed

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out at the people around them during their stretches of writer's block. They didn't want their writing compared — negatively or favourably — with that of others.

People who claim they have writers' block are said to suffer from some conditions. Lachs (2018) listed these conditions as fear, perfectionism, self-criticism, and external pressure. Firstly, writers who suffer from fear are afraid of putting themselves and their ideas out there. They fear others judging them or criticising their work. They fear being rejected by publishers or their readers. Fear is possibly the biggest reason that some writers don't make it. Secondly, some writers suffer from perfectionism. One of the most common blocks for writers and creatives of all walks is perfectionism. Most people use perfectionism as a protection mechanism, to protect themselves from harsh critique or failure. Unfortunately, trying to write the perfect sentence, paragraph, or novel will lead most writers to never write a single word. Thirdly, some writers self-criticise themselves. Excessive self-criticism is often what holds writers back from actually writing. Most writers compare their work with that of other, more successful writers or even to their own earlier work. Finally, some writers are blocked by external pressure. This person who experience writer's block does not actually want to write, but they are being pressured into writing by others, often parents or teachers.

What causes writers' block? Woodard (2018) suggested four causes of writers' block. These causes may lead to temporary block among writers. Firstly, writers who experience burn out from their duties and activities may experience writers' block. This block may be temporary. Next, some writers may suffer from medical conditions that stops them from writing. Next, some writers may be distracted by too many things around them that they end up getting writers' block. Finally, the writer may be given or may have unrealistic expectations and these expectations may end up blocking their ability to write.

Postgraduate students are among the most susceptible group to suffer from writers' block. The main vehicle of displaying their knowledge is through writing. According to Cayley (2018) most graduate writers who are struggling with their writing are actually struggling with their thinking. This is not a psychological block, but rather the intellectual confusions endemic to the process of communicating sophisticated research. For postgraduate students, writing is being hampered primarily by the challenge of sorting out what they think *(or* what they think they should think *or* what others think *or* what their supervisor thinks about what they think). In other words, they may not have a psychological block; they may have the intellectual confusions endemic to the process of communicating sophisticated research. Those intellectual confusions are real, and they can have negative consequences for writing.

2.4. Problems in Writing

Rahmat (2019) reported that the problems that make writing difficult can be divided into three. The first is Linguistic Difficulty. Writers often face problems in the linguistics aspect such as like grammar, vocabulary, language use and choice of sentence. The second problem is Physiology Difficulty. This difficulty focuses on the writer's thinking because there are no direct interaction and feedback from the reader. The third is cognitive difficulty. This involves writing through formal instruction like spelling, punctuation, capitalization and paragraphing.

Next, in order to understand the problems faced by writer, Flower and Hayes (1980) used the term rhetorical problem Figure 3. Rhetorical problem can be categorised into two; (a) the rhetorical situation and (b) the writer's goal. The rhetorical situation faced by the writer are their (the writers') perception in the assignment, and also how they felt about the audience. Next, the writer is also concerned with the writer's goals. The write's goals refer to

how the writer plan to communicate with the reader, how they create a personal or voice, how they build meaning and also how they plan to produce a formal text.
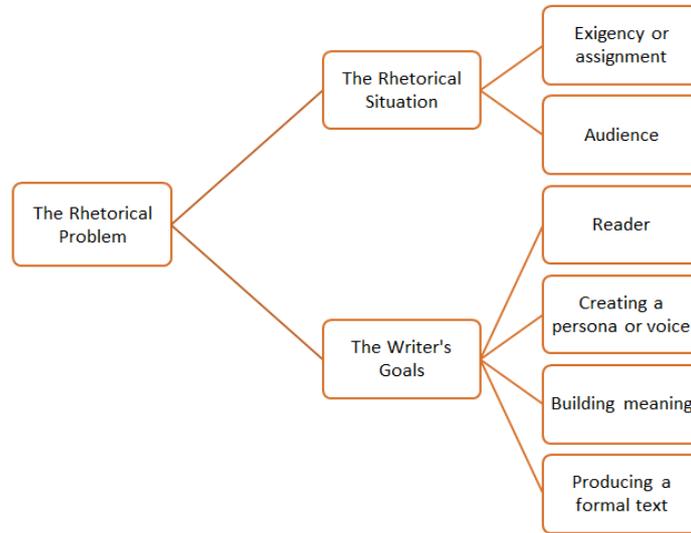

Figure-3. The rhetorical problem.
Source: Flower and Hayes (1980).

Many have found that academic difficulties stem from the writers attitude. Singh (2016) found that writers have difficulties with academic writing techniques, English proficiency, influence of prior academic culture and also. feedback from lectures. This is also supported by Al-Mukdad (2019) who claimed that writers face difficulties because they could not revise their own work as they could not cannot see their own mistakes. They also have problems with grammatical features. Some even paid more attention to language than content. Some also needed special encouragements to do writing as they felt that writing research is a slow process. Similarly, Fadda (2012) also reported difficulties in academic writing. Among some of the reported difficulties are they wished they knew what words and phrases they should avoid. They also had problems in reviewing grammar in their writing. They may also experience difficulty in using pronouns and maintain pronoun-antecedent agreement. Some made mistakes with subject-verb agreement. They also made sentence fragments in their writing. They also experience difficulty when combining sentences in their writing.

2.5. Past Studies

One possible reason why writers see writing as difficult is their perception. The study by Al-Mukdad (2019) investigated academic writing problems encountered by students at Arab International University (AIU) who are taking the Academic Writing module (AWR). The purpose of the study is to investigate this problem from the perspective of students in order to suggest possible treatments to deal with it. The data was collected through distributing a questionnaire to 50 students from different majors at AIU. Findings reveal that students tend to perceive all aspects of academic writing to be difficult. One reason is that they poorly recognize the difference between academic and general English writing due to the lack of background knowledge about writing academically. Another prime reason is attributed to having problems in different linguistic elements even at this supposedly high proficiency level. A similar study was done by Rahmat et al. (2017). 373 students from seven faculties participated in the study. The participants responded to 25 items on 5 Likert-scale (always, very often, sometimes, rarely and never). The questionnaires were analyzed to determine the students' perceived difficulties on ESL academic writing. Findings revealed students found writing to be difficult

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because of what they perceive writing as. Writers also found writing to be difficult because they lacked skills pertaining to writing style. Fadda (2012) conducted a study to determine what difficulties King Saud University students faced when learning to write academic English. The sample consisted of 50 postgraduate students enrolled in King Saud University during the academic year 2009-2010. Analysis of the data showed that English as a second language (ESL) students face many difficulties and stresses in their academic writing, such as difficulty distinguishing between spoken and written English, making an outline before writing a draft, identifying the skills needed for successful writing, and avoiding plague words and phrases.

Many writers face difficulty because of their past experiences with the composing process. The study by Zorbaz (2017) examined the writer's block levels of the freshman students in a university based on the relevant variables about socio-economic features and reading-writing frequency. The subjects of the research consisted of 428 students studying at the Mustafa Kemal University, Faculty of Education. In this study, the items in the blocking and lateness sub-scales of the 'Questionnaire for Identifying Writer's Block' were used. The scale was adapted to Turkish with all items in order to determine the functionality of blocking and lateness factors. Findings revealed that the students having writer's block vary in accordance to their reading-writing frequencies rather than their socioeconomic features. The students who had writing difficulties started having difficulties in secondary and high school. Similarly, the study by Singh (2016) used focus groups to analyse how students negotiate academic writing from an emic perspective. 70 international graduate students from taught Master programs participated in this study. Findings indicated that non-native English speaking international graduate students faced difficulties coping with academic writing especially in English as a medium of instruction setting. crucial literacy skill that contributes to academic success at graduate level. Finally, the qualitative study by Rahmat (2019) looked into the problems that writers face in their composing process. Three writers comprising of one undergraduate, one postgraduate (masters) and one postgraduate (doctorate) were asked about what their writing problems were. Data will be coded into specific categories to reveal different categories of difficulty faced by these writers.

2.6. Theoretical Framework of the Study

The theoretical framework of the study Figure 4 if rooted from characteristics presented by Lachs (2018); Flower and Hayes (1980); Fadda (2012); Rahmat et al. (2017) and Cheng (2004). Lachs (2018) found that there are several reasons for writer's block. Among some of the reasons are perfectionist and fear. People who are perfectionist would over-emphasize what they do during the writing process and stages. According to Flower and Hayes (1980) writers go through three main stages when they write; planning, writing and evaluation. Writers would go through these three stages while they write the introduction, review of related literature, methodology, findings and also conclusion. Next, writers may get writer's block because of their fear. Fadda (2012) reported learners faced difficulties in their writing skills. However, these difficulties may stem from the learners' perception of writing (Rahmat et al., 2017). These perception of difficulties then leads to the learners' writing anxiety (Cheng, 2004).
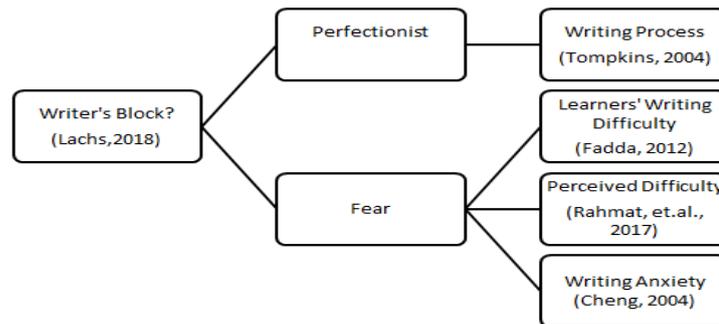
Figure-4. theoretical framework of the study.
Source: Lachs (2018); Flower and Hayes (1980); Fadda (2012); Rahmat et al. (2017) and Cheng (2004).

3. METHODOLOGY

This mixed mode research is done to investigate possible reasons for writers' block among academicians. 29 academicians were asked to respond to a survey on their perception of academic writing. The survey has three sections; the first section(Section A) requires the respondents to inform how they perceive writing of Introduction, Review of Related Literature, Methodology, Findings and Conclusion by responding to "manageable/Easy" or "Difficult" . The second section (Section B) requires the respondents to write how they feel about the write-up of Introduction, Review of Related Literature, Methodology, Findings and Conclusion. The third section (Section C), asks for the respondents to write about their fear in academic writing. Data from Section A is analysed by their frequency of responses and presented in percentages. Data in Section B and C is analysed using assigned themes and presented in the form of summary of responses according to the assigned themes.

4. FINDINGS

4.1. Introduction

This section reports the findings by answering the research questions presented.

1. In what ways do writing process influence writers' block?
2. How does fear of writing influence writers' block?

4.2. Writing Process

RQ1: In what ways do writing process influence writers' block?

The first research question is answered in two parts-the first part reports quantitative findings while the second part reports qualitative findings. Data is taken from (a) responses on how writers felt about Prewriting, Drafting, Revising, Editing, and Publishing. This section reports quantitative data to reveal the frequency of responses presented in percentages. Respondents answered either "Manageable/Easy" or "Difficult" . Fiure 5 reveals the frequency of the responses presented in the form of percentage. Respondents reported that Prewriting (62%) and Publishing(62%) were "Manageable". On the other hand, Revising(66%) and Drafting (79%) are reported to be difficult. The bar chart reveals that the writers felt that drafting was the most difficult part. Unfortunately, drafting stage is like the "spring-board" stage in writing. This stage begins all the other stages. If this stage is delayed (or abandoned) , then no "real " writing has really begun on the part of the writer. A person cannot make claims he/she has written in at the "pre-writing" stage. For many writers, pre-writing stage is the reading of materials followed by note-taking , perhaps plans for synthesizing. So, writing has not really started at the pre-writing stage.

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Figure-5. Percentage for writing process.

Source: Tompkins (2004).

The second section reports findings of qualitative data. Respondents wrote their responses on the open-ended questions given in Section B of the survey. Excerpts of the responses from the respondents are presented below.

(a) Prewriting

Respondents reported that the prewriting stage did not pose as much problems as the drafting stage. This initials stage was perceived as manageable" as they spent time reading and searching. This is also the stage where they performed "thorough thinking", and "searching" and "thinking".

(b) Drafting

Respondents reported some difficulties when it comes to the drafting stage. Writer's block may begin here. Some writers may choose to extend their "thorough thinking" at the rewriting stage and could not quite "take off" into the drafting stage. Some blamed they could not "find suitable materials" and therefore could not begin the drafting stage.

(c) Revising

Writers in this study commented revising is a stage many skipped. Some said they "lacked time to read", some commented they "lacked knowledge" in revising their own work. Some writers also said that revising was "time consuming".

(d) Editing

Writers found it less difficult to edit than revise because editing involves the " technical" aspects of writing compared to the global "content" in revising. It was easier to make surface changes to the writing than to revise the ideas in the content.

(e) Publishing

Finally, many writers reported that publishing was "manageable" . This was because publishing is seen as the last stage of writing. This is the "sharing" stage of writing. It is considered "manageable" because not many can reach this final stage. Many were stunted by writers' block. The few who have reached this far would find publishing manageable.

4.3. Writing Fear

This section answers the second research question;

RQ 2: How does fear of writing influence writers' block?

This study defined writing fear as having three levels. The first is (a) the leaners actual writing difficulty. This difficulty refers to the technical aspects of writing such as writing style. The second level is (b) the leaners perceived difficulty. What learners perceived may or may not be as difficult as they had anticipated. The third level is (c) writing fear. This section focuses on what causes the writing fear in the respondents.

(a) Learners Writing Difficulty

The respondents were asked to provide the answer to the question; "Do you feel you are not a good academic writer? Why?" Writers gave several reasons for their difficulty. Some said their "writing style and vocabulary is not bombastic", some mentioned that they had "limited knowledge of research", while others said they did not "have good vocabulary, lack proper method, nor good in technology, prefer informal writing".

(b) Perceived Difficulty

According to Rahmat et al. (2017) there are time when writers feared writing because of what they perceived. Their perceived difficulty may or may not be true for all writers. The perceived difficulties are in the aspects of punctuation, language use and process.

(c) Punctuation

Respondents were asked "Do you have problems using punctuation in academic writing? Describe the problem." Many of the respondents agreed they had difficulty with punctuation. Among some of the responses were; "there were no fixed rules" for punctuation in writing. Some also said that the use of punctuation was very "technical".

(d) Language Use

When asked the question "Do you have problems with language in academic writing? Describe the problem, " respondents mentioned they had problem using "technical language", and they "tend to use their usual, familiar phrases only', and also they faced problems "with vocabulary".

(e) Process

Respondents were then asked the question, "Do you have problem with the writing process; like planning, drafting and editing?". The writers perceived that their problems in writing was due to the fact that they did not "use brainstorming", they did not do "good planning". Some even reported that they perceived writing as difficult because they "had problem with planning" and they "were not given time to edit".

(f) Writing Anxiety

According to Cheng (2004) there are three types of writing anxiety-somatic, cognitive and avoidance behaviour. Somatic Anxiety refers to one's perception of the physiological effects of the anxiety experience. This is shown in the increase in state of unpleasant feelings, such as nervousness and tension. Next cognitive anxiety refers to the cognitive aspect of anxiety experience. This includes negative expectations,

preoccupation with performance and concern about others' perception. Finally, avoidance behaviour refers to the behavioural aspect of the anxiety experience, avoidance of writing.

4.4. Somatic Anxiety

Participants were asked the question, "Describe a time when you were nervous writing an essay. Why were you nervous? What did you do to lessen the nervousness?" The respondents admitted they were "nervous" and that they felt they did not "sound wise enough". In addition to that, the respondents said that they were nervous when had no idea. They were also anxious because of "time constraint" when writing papers.

4.5. Cognitive Anxiety

Respondents were asked "Describe a time when you were very concerned about getting good marks (good comments/review) for your academic essay? What did you do to overcome it?" They said that they "asked friends to comment, asked friends for help". They also "asked peers, and read samples". Some even said they " asked colleague".

4.5. Avoidance Behaviour

Finally, writers were asked "Describe a time where you did things to avoid writing? How has it helped in your writing worry?" Interestingly, they said they would "focus on teaching, did petty work, and procrastinate". Some also, turned to "innovation". Unfortunately, the act of avoidance behaviour is actually a behvaiour "away" from writing for the academicians. This would eventually not be a good publication record for the academicians in the long run.

5. CONCLUSION

5.1. Summary of Findings

To sum up, writers' block and fear of writing is like a cycle- one condition affecting the other. Figure 6 summarises the findings of the study. Writers may fear writing because of some perception of themselves as writers. They may fear writing because of what they thought the demands of the writing was. This perceived fear then caused them (the writers) to fear writing-related activities. This fear may cause them to have writers' block. This "paralysis" for writing would lead them to fear future writing-related activities and the cycle continues.
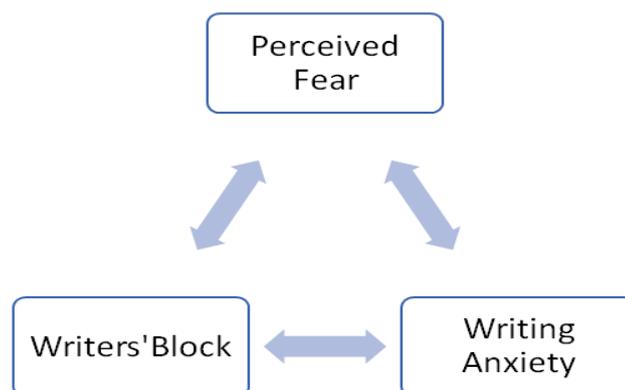
Figure-6. Cycle of writers' block.
Source: Lachs (2018); Tompkins (2004); Fadda (2012); Rahmat et al. (2017) and Cheng (2004).

5.2. Discussion

The findings in this study is in accordance with the study by Zorbaz (2017).

who said that writers' block occurs because of reading-writing frequency. The respondents in this study admitted they lacked reading in order to write good literature review. This becomes a "back-and-forth" reading-writing relationship and further "blocks" the writer. In addition to that, the findings of this also revealed that writers' fear of writing began with their perception and then heightened to real writing anxiety. This finding is in accordance with the studies by Rahmat (2019) and Fadda (2012) who found that writing fear stems from past writing-related experiences. The negative writing-related experiences may then lead to future writing fear.

5.3. Implications

One way to stop writing block is by breaking the cycle. Perceived fear of writing may not lead to real fear if writers take measures to improve on their difficulties. They can attend courses on academic writing, participate in writing workshops to build their confidence in future writing. It is suggested that future research explore deeper into the causes of writers' block through interviews and even surveys.

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