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## Writing Anxiety: The Case of Law Students

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### ABSTRACT

Writing has been acknowledged as a key skill to law students and lawyers. In English as a Second Language (ESL) learning, law students form part of ESL learners. Multiple studies shed light on the unsatisfactory writing performance among ESL learners and link such poor writing performance to an affective construct, writing anxiety. Nevertheless, research on writing anxiety among law students, whose writing ability is requisite, is scarce. With the objectives of determining anxiety level and identifying anxiety types experienced by law students at a Malaysian private university, this study offers insights into their writing experience as ESL learners. A mixed methods approach, consisting of Cheng's (2004) Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI) and the semi-structured interview, is applied to achieve the research objectives. The key findings reveal that the highest percentage of the law students studied in this research encounter a high level of writing anxiety. While cognitive anxiety is the most predominant form of writing anxiety, avoidance behaviour is the least obvious form. Based on these findings and the conclusions drawn, this study draws attention to the necessity of addressing writing anxiety among law students in tandem with building strong basic writing skills.

**Keywords:** English as a Second Language (ESL), ESL writing, writing anxiety, writing performance, law students

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### Introduction

Self-expression is an integral part of learning. Metaphorically, writing is a vessel to reach the destination of effective expression of one's thoughts. Writing is a language skill vital for university and college students to express and articulate their views and ideas. In some cases, demonstrating their knowledge and understanding of an area or topic in writing becomes part of an assessment, and successful writing is associated with self-expression (Basturkmen & Lewis, 2002). In legal practice, writing is often executed to not only inform, but also persuade and advocate. Effectual articulation of opinions, ideas and knowledge is crucial to law graduates and lawyers. From an adverse perspective, ineffective writing is tantamount to the lack of ability to express their thoughts and explain their knowledge effectively; this could be a matter of losing or winning for their clients in legal battles. It follows that a strong ability of self-expression through writing is even more compelling in the legal realm.

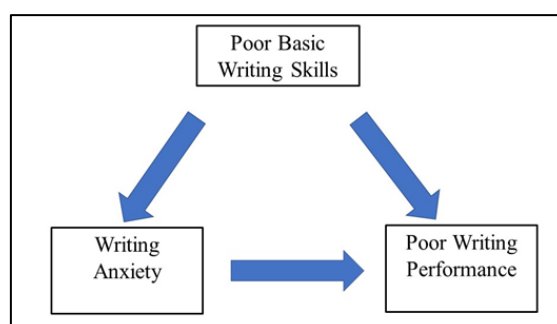
Arnold (1995) elucidates the idea of “law is writing” and underscores the necessity for law students or lawyers to fully acquire rudimentary writing skills before attempting to write legal analyses in legal writing, a notion which is also embraced in the current study. To illustrate clearly, “legal writing” refers to writing that is unique to the legal profession, involving the use of legal language and discussion of legal matters whereas basic writing pertains to general academic writing in English language taught in virtually all universities and colleges, which includes developing or expanding ideas, organising ideas, developing coherent paragraphs, writing effective introduction and conclusion, revising and proofreading and employing the various aspects of good language such as good vocabulary and grammatical structures. In legal practice, all these writing skills are imperative. From composing a cogent legal opinion to writing a settlement deal, none of these professional duties can be potentially executed successfully and productively with a subpar writing ability.

Studies in the past revealed the inability to command fundamental or basic writing skills among law undergraduates or law graduates (Campbell, 2014; Drennan & Keyser, 2022; Kosse & ButleRitchie, 2003). The shortage of basic writing skills not only has a bearing on writing performance, it also breeds other writing difficulties which can have far-reaching effects, and these effects linger into students’ future career and professional life. One of such problems is the development of a negative feeling, which is writing anxiety, as a result of weak writing basic skills (Holladay, 1981; Kakandee, 2017; Rabadi & Rabadi, 2020; Rezaei & Jafari, 2014). In various ways, the development of writing anxiety among students is undesirable and has been consistently proved to be crippling and detrimental, adversely affecting writing performance (Güvendir & Uzun, 2023) and swaying future career choice (Cheng, 2002).

Drawing on the requisite nature of writing ability in the legal profession and past discoveries of law students’ problematic writing by experts in the legal realm (Campbell, 2014; Drennan & Keyser, 2022; Kakandee, 2017; Kosse & ButleRitchie, 2003), the present study regards the inquiry into writing anxiety among law undergraduates as compelling. Grounded on past findings on poor basic writing skills that result in both poor writing performance and the development of writing anxiety, as well as findings on writing anxiety resulting in poor writing performance, this study conceptualises a close connectedness of poor basic writing skills, poor writing performance and writing anxiety. The connections can be best illustrated in a visual form in Figure 1.

**Figure 1**

*Connections of Poor Basic Writing Skills, Poor Writing Performance and Writing Anxiety*



In the repertoire of literature on writing anxiety among EFL (English as a Foreign Language) and ESL (English as a Second Language) students, there is noticeable scarce literature related to writing anxiety facing law students, the future advocates and solicitors. This study attempts to add to the existing scarce literature.

Guided by the above research background, the current research aims to achieve two objectives:

1. To examine the level of writing anxiety among law students
2. To identify the types of writing anxiety among law students

## **Literature Review**

### ***Writing and Law Students***

Past studies have unearthed the significance of writing to law students as well as the lack of ability among law students to master writing as the tool of the trade. “Writing is so essential to legal practice that lawyers have a legal professional responsibility to write appropriately” (Winek, 2019, p. 17). Lawyers can also be professionally held responsible by an aggrieved client for malpractices caused by poor writing, including incomprehensible writing and grammatical problems (Bast & Harrell, 2004, as cited in Winek, 2019). According to a survey to examine the employment preferences by legal employers, consisting of large and small legal firms, county attorney offices and legal aid offices, each of these employers emphasised on oral and written communication skills when employing lawyers (Hamilton, 2014).

The lack of strong writing skills among law students is not a new or recent development. Legal employers have long observed the struggle with legal writing among junior lawyers (Winek, 2019). Based on legal employers’ evaluation of fresh law graduates’ writing ability for over more than two decades, fresh law graduates have undoubtedly struggled with writing in legal practice, and they seem to continue to demonstrate this deficiency (Winek, 2019). In a survey by Kosse and ButleRitchie (2003) involving judges, attorneys and legal writing academics as the respondents, the results suggested an unsatisfactory assessment of writing skills among fresh law graduates in the United States. More than 90% of each of these respondent groups regarded the students’ writing as problematic; this indicated an obvious and strong consensus among the respondents on the deficiency of writing ability among fresh lawyers. In the survey, the majority of all groups of respondents had had a required writing component in their first-year curriculum, and 71.4% of them attended at least one upper-level writing course (Kosse & ButleRitchie, 2003), signifying that they occupied a good position to deliver an accurate evaluation.

A study by LexisNexis (2015) also unveiled that 66% of the surveyed litigation attorneys considered writing and drafting skills very important in new attorneys, but they lacked these skills in drafting and writing litigation documents (LexisNexis, 2015). In another research investigating employers’ evaluation on the legal writing skills of law students at a Malaysian university, 44.2% of the 43 respondents evaluated the students’ legal writing ability as just moderate, 34.9% regarded it as good, and only 18.6% assessed it as very good (Hussain et al., 2020). Therefore, even though the legal profession thrives on writing ability to a significant extent, there is a common agreement on law graduates’ meagre and inadequate writing skills (Campbell, 2014; Drennan & Keyser, 2022; Louw & Broodryk, 2016).

In legal practice, clarity, conciseness, appropriate language, form and style are integral (Clarence et al., 2014). Additionally, “lawyers make their living through the effective use of words” (Vinson, 2005, p. 507-508). Nevertheless, in one study, first-year law students at the University of Kwazulu-Natal exemplified the lack of the motivation to learn general English writing skills (Crocker, 2018). A study by Campbell (2014) indicated that many matriculants in South Africa lacked language and literacy skills to embark on legal study, and the incompetency in these basic skills resulted in the low completion rate of Bachelor of Laws. Similarly, Louw and Broodryk (2016) expressed concerns about the paucity of writing skills required for law graduates in South Africa to commence their legal career, and this inadequacy led to the consequential failure to fulfil the expectations of their employers.

The weaknesses in writing as identified in these past studies all boil down to the lack of basic writing skills among law students. Kosse and ButleRitchie (2003) discovered a lack of basic writing principles, clarity and overall organisation as part of law students’ weaknesses. Kakandee (2017) identified “insufficient grammar knowledge, insufficient academic vocabulary, inability to generate well-organised ideas, inability to write effective conclusions, lack of awareness of the planning process of

writing and inability to think creatively” (p. 87) as the main shortcomings among 60 first-year law students from a selected public university in Thailand. These shortcomings are associated with basic writing skills which are paramount for law students or law graduates to acquire before venturing into the more formidable legal writing tasks.

### ***Writing Anxiety***

The understanding of writing anxiety or writing apprehension, which is used interchangeably in the literature, centres around the definition of “anxiety” as a more general term and “writing anxiety” as a distinctive form of anxiety related to writing (Cheng et al., 1999). Writing anxiety is perceived as a “situation-specific anxiety that occurs only in specific situations” (Zhang, 2019, p. 2), for instance, the anxiety experienced when a writing task is imminent. Additionally, writing anxiety can be associated with fear. It is seen as an overpowering sense of anxiety associated with fear when facing a writing activity (Cobourne & Shellenbarger, 2019). It has also been defined as “individuals’ deliberate or conscious avoidance of the act of writing in situations, courses as well as jobs that necessitate writing” (Anthoney & Wilang, 2023, p. 1727). This anxiety is a result of the “fear of negative and judgmental evaluations and remarks stemming from their writing” (Anthoney & Wilang, 2023, p. 1727).

In the more specific writing experience of EFL, Horwitz et al. (1986) depict foreign language anxiety (FLA) as “a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings and behaviours related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process” (p. 128). In the ESL context, Cheng (2004) conceptualises writing anxiety in three independent components which are cognitive (cognitive anxiety), physiological (somatic anxiety) and behavioural (avoidance behaviour). It is also viewed as a “fundamental affective construct that affects L2 writing” (Jagabalan et al., 2016, p. 54).

In the Malaysian setting, some learners have “feeble” writing abilities (Akhtar, 2020, p. 5406), and they experience writing anxiety in their academic writing. In a study that examined social science students with low proficiency at a Malaysian public university, 73.07% of the 26 participants were found to have a high level of writing anxiety with a high level of cognitive anxiety (David et al., 2018). Nordin et al. (2019) also found that 68 social sciences undergraduates experienced writing anxiety as they found writing to be intimidating. Writing anxiety was also experienced by the majority of 346 diploma students who viewed writing as a talent only for the skilled (Hasni et al., 2021). Another research by Jasman et al. (2023) studying 172 engineering students arrived at the finding that the students had a high level of writing anxiety with somatic anxiety being the main type. These multiple studies establish that different dimensions of writing anxiety could be experienced by learners from different majors, levels of studies and geographical, social and cultural backgrounds (Iksan & Abdul Halim, 2018; Jagabalan et al., 2016; Quvanch & Kew, 2022). Nevertheless, the literature is still evidently devoid of writing anxiety encountered by law students, whose writing ability is highly solicited in accomplishing their law degree programme and in the practice of law.

### ***Causes of Writing Anxiety***

In multiple studies, inadequacy of writing basics was known to be one of the key causes of writing anxiety (Rezaei & Jafari, 2014; Zhang, 2011). Potential causes of writing anxiety include unsatisfactory writing basics and insufficient understanding of the writing process (Kakandee, 2017). Further reinforcing the finding of weak writing basics as a cause of writing anxiety is the research by Rabadi and Rabadi (2020) who identified linguistic difficulties as the main cause of writing anxiety among first-year EFL medical students; the students also exemplified a high level of EFL writing anxiety. Language difficulties, such as shortcomings in vocabulary and grammar, were identified by students themselves as their main problems with English writing, leading to inability to express ideas in appropriate and correct English (Hyland, 2019). In Hasni et al.’s (2021) study, writing anxiety was mainly attributed to linguistic difficulties such as a lack of grammar knowledge, inadequate vocabulary as well as the inability to express and organise ideas in English.

In an inventory created by Zhang (2011) to research causes of ESL writing anxiety among Chinese English majors, linguistic difficulties and insufficient writing techniques, among others, were listed as

the causes that develop writing anxiety. Similarly, in another inventory, Causes of Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (CSLWAI), proposed by Rezaei and Jafari (2014), lack of good mastery of techniques in English writing, linguistic problems such as inadequate vocabulary, sentence construction and grammatical errors were also incorporated as causes that are responsible for the development of writing anxiety.

### ***The Complex Interplay between Writing Anxiety and Writing Performance***

The connection between writing anxiety and writing performance has been a subject of examination in studies that primarily focus on the implications of writing anxiety on writing performance. From MacIntyre and Gardner's (1989) finding, anxious students were discovered to learn vocabulary more slowly than less anxious students and experienced more difficulty in remembering words learnt previously. In addition, it has implications on students' self-esteem and quality of writing; students inflicted by high writing anxiety have lower self-esteem and produce writing of low quality (Hassan, 2001). Hassan's (2001) assertion on the negative relationship between writing anxiety level and writing quality was confirmed in more contemporary studies. Investigating EFL undergraduate students' perspectives on their academic writing practices in the face of writing anxiety, Rohmah and Muslim (2021) discovered that the less anxious learners showed better writing performance than those who experienced higher levels of anxiety. Güvendir and Uzun's (2023) research outcomes also suggested the disadvantage caused by second language writing anxiety in cognitive activities, and high writing anxiety level plays a prominent part in reducing syntactic complexity in written texts produced, hence resulting in writing of lower quality.

In the setting of teaching ESL, academicians have long been concerned about the presence of writing anxiety among second language (L2) learners, and anxiety is known to be a major impediment to L2 learning and acquisition, leading to poor assessment (Horwitz et al., 1986). The vast majority of investigations have demonstrated that writing anxiety is negatively associated with the quality of the message created (Cheng et al., 1999). Studies using the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) developed by Horwitz et al. (1986) and other measures to evaluate second language anxiety have consistently established a negative correlation between language anxiety and language achievement (Zhang, 2011). Cheng (2004) also noted that L2 learning specific measures of anxiety by MacIntyre and Gardner's (1989) French Class Anxiety Scale and French Use Anxiety Scale, and Horwitz et al.'s (1986) FLCAS have formed a clearer idea of a consistent negative connection of second language anxiety with students' learning attitudes, language processing and academic achievement. In more recent studies, the finding has remained aligned to the previous findings. The findings by both Fitrinada et al. (2018) and Sabti, Md Rashid, Nimehchisalem, and Darmi (2019) affirmed the negative correlation between writing anxiety and writing performance in the Indonesian and Iraqi EFL contexts respectively. Another recent study on designing learning materials that can ease writing anxiety testifies the real concern about the destructive implications of writing anxiety on students' writing performance or ability (Zhang, 2019).

Nevertheless, the interplay between writing anxiety and writing performance is far from being simplistic. In the Writing Apprehension Test (WAT) by Daly and Miller (1975) and the Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI) by Cheng (2004), anxiety about evaluation and worry about poor writing performance are among the items listed to measure writing anxiety, suggesting that writing evaluation and performance are vital indicators of writing anxiety. Writing anxiety is therefore partly composed of worries about poor writing performance, and writing anxiety also results in poor writing performance. This complexity underscores the problematic nature of writing anxiety.

### ***Theoretical Framework***

#### ***Tripartite Anxiety Model and Second Language Writing Anxiety***

Lang's (1971) tripartite anxiety model suggests three types of anxiety responses: cognitive responses, behavioural avoidance and physiological responses. While the cognitive aspect refers to worry or unpleasant thoughts, the physiological reactions are related to bodily changes such as muscle tension, and the behavioural responses refer to the behaviours of avoiding writing tasks. When constructing a

multidimensional scale to measure ESL writing anxiety, Cheng (2004) employed two exploratory factor analyses to extract three factors or subscales, and these subscales aligned themselves to the three anxiety dimensions proposed by Lang (1971).

Based on Lang's (1971) tripartite model of anxiety, Cheng (2004) developed the framework of three dimensions of writing anxiety, namely cognitive anxiety, cognitive anxiety and avoidance behaviour. Cognitive anxiety involves the mental aspect of anxiety such as "negative expectations, preoccupation with performance, and concern about others' perceptions" (Cheng, 2004, p. 316) whereas somatic anxiety is "the physiological effects of anxiety, such as nervousness and tension" (Cheng, 2004, p. 316) and avoidance behaviour refers to "behavioural aspect of avoidance tendency" (Cheng, 2004, p. 326). As reported by Cheng (2004), anxiety should be studied by examining the multidimensions of responses.

## **Methods**

### ***Participants***

This research applied mixed methods with the adoption of the SLWAI created by Cheng (2004) as a quantitative approach and a semi-structured interview as a qualitative method. Seeking to answer the two research questions revolving around writing anxiety among law students at the Multimedia University, Melaka, this study implemented purposive sampling by selecting two groups of Foundation-in-Law students from the Academic Year 2022/2023 to provide responses through the SLWAI. Each group consisted of 40 students, and from the 80 target respondents, 67 provided feedback to all the 22 statements in the questionnaire. The sample was composed of 53 females and 14 males.

As a preparatory programme, Foundation in Law is a one-year programme that lays the foundation for a full-fledged four-year undergraduate law degree at the Multimedia University. Students receive fundamental knowledge of law and develop crucial skills such as English oral and written communication. With the enhanced oral and written skills in English, students are anticipated to apply them in their legal research during their undergraduate law degree programme and when they begin their legal practice. Foundation year is therefore deemed a critical time period for students to develop and bolster their language skills, with writing as one of the major focused skills. This forms the basis for the selection of foundation law students as the respondents in this research.

To add a more profound and comprehensive perspective to the findings from the SLWAI, specifically pertaining to the second research question on the types of writing anxiety, 10 participants were selected at random for a semi-structured interview. The random selection was based on the list of respondents who had responded to the SLWAI.

### ***Instrument***

#### ***Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI)***

The first instrument in the current research was the SLWAI with 22 writing anxiety statements created by Cheng (2004). The SLWAI was employed to answer both research questions. The scale measuring the level of anxiety and the subscales measuring the three perspectives of anxiety in the SLWAI had been proved to have satisfactory validity, good reliability and test-retest reliability (Cheng, 2004).

Three essential points for consideration were raised by Cheng (2004) on the application of the SLWAI. Firstly, it was created involving a sample of college EFL majors. The rationale behind sampling only English majors was that the respondents had adequate English writing experiences to provide sufficient information about their writing anxiety. Secondly, the sample comprised principally female students (79.81%). Thirdly, the mean age of the sample was 19.5 years. In the current research, the sample of Foundation-in-Law students satisfies the three major considerations for adopting the SLWAI. First, the respondents studied English as a core subject every trimester, and writing was a vital assessment in all the three English subjects in their foundation studies. Prior to their entry into the foundation studies, they commanded adequate L2 writing experience from their secondary school years. Hence, all respondents had sufficient writing experience to administer the SLWAI. Second, female participants

constituted 79.1% of the sample. Third, the mean age of respondents was 19.7 years. The dominance of female respondents and the proximity of the sample's mean age in this study to that in Cheng's (2004) study justify the adoption of the SLWAI.

This instrument measures level of anxiety and three different types of anxiety: cognitive anxiety through 8 statements (1,3,7,9,14,17,20,21), somatic anxiety through 7 statements (2,6,8,11,13,15,19) and avoidance behaviour via 7 statements (4,5,10,12,16,18,22). The response options of this questionnaire are in a 5-point Likert scoring scale: 1 (Strongly disagree), 2 (Disagree), 3 (Neutral), 4 (Agree) and 5 (Strongly agree). Hence, the total score for each respondent ranges from the minimum of 22 to the maximum of 110.

The internal consistency of the SLWAI was tested with a Cronbach's coefficient of .91 in both administrations of the instrument while the test-retest reliability estimate was .85 in correlation tests (Cheng, 2004). The reliability of the three subscales was also established with the calculation of Cronbach's coefficient. In two administrations by Cheng (2004), Cronbach's coefficient obtained was more than .80, ranging from .82 to .88, suggesting that both the scale and all the subscales of the SLWAI have strong reliability or internal consistency. In addition to reliability, the validity of the SLWAI was established through two factor analyses to help select items to form the three subscales. For both analyses, three factors corresponded to the three dimensions of Lang's (1971) theoretical model of anxiety: cognitive, physiological, and behavioural responses, and these results prove the validity of the internal structure of the SLWAI (Cheng, 2004).

### ***Semi-structured Interview***

To validate the existence of the three types of writing anxiety among the participants and provide a qualitative analysis of greater depth to the statistical findings, semi-structured interviews were administered. Semi-structured interviews are "sufficiently structured to address specific topics related to the phenomenon of study, while leaving space for participants to offer new meanings to the study focus" (Galletta, 2013, p. 24). This fits the context of the current study. In this study, while some questions were well-structured to elicit expressions of writing experience and anxiety, some follow-up questions were asked to unveil a more profound understanding of participants' writing anxiety, including explanations which are unique in every participant's narration. Galletta (2013) also suggested that there is a rich versatility in the semi-structured interview, and questions can be structured to derive abundant and "multidimensional streams of data" (p. 24). This research instrument is therefore apt for this research to solicit information of multi-dimensional perspectives, which are the multifaceted writing anxiety.

### ***Data Collection***

The quantitative data were collected through an online questionnaire which was created by incorporating all the 22 items in the SLWAI. The questionnaire was executed in two English lecture sessions involving two groups of students from Foundation in Law, with each group consisting of 40 students. The responses collected were complete with responses given to all 22 statements, and all 67 responses were accepted for analysis.

Ten participants who were randomly chosen were interviewed individually by the researcher via Google Meet. While open-ended questions aligned with research question 2 were put forward to the participants to describe their anxiety associated with writing, leeway was given to them to explain and describe their feelings and experiences associated with writing. Each interview lasted for an average of 15 minutes, and all interviews were recorded for transcription and analysis.

### ***Data Analysis***

#### ***Questionnaire***

The dataset collected from the questionnaire was analysed using IBM SPSS version 28. To answer research question 1 on the level of anxiety, the mean score of 67 respondents was generated. In determining the levels of anxiety, this study applies the following anxiety level scale: the total scoring

of 65 points and above as a high level, 50 to 64 points as a moderate level, and below 50 points as a low level (Rabadi & Rabadi, 2020; Rezaei & Jafari, 2014; Zhang, 2011). In 7 negatively-worded statements, a reverse scoring was completed before the total score or the mean score was derived. In order to answer question 2 on the types of writing anxiety, the mean score of every type of anxiety was computed. The mean value of 8 statements (1,3,7,9,14,17,20,21), 7 statements (2,6,8,11,13,15,19) and another 7 statements (4,5,10,12,16,18,22) of all respondents were computed to analyse cognitive anxiety, somatic anxiety, and avoidance behaviour respectively. A higher mean value indicates a more dominant type of writing anxiety and vice versa.

### ***Semi-structured Interview***

Data in the semi-structured interviews were analysed through thematic analysis, a method which systematically identifies, organises and provides insightful perspectives of themes or meanings across a collection of data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). With this data analysis method, the researcher is able to see and interpret meanings and experiences, and in the process of interpretation, the researcher can report both the explicit and the implicit meanings (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In the current research, a deductive approach to data coding and analysis was applied. In this approach, the researcher codes and interprets the data based on certain concepts or topics of the research (Braun & Clarke, 2012). In this study, coding and interpreting data were founded on the concept of three-dimensional anxiety model referred to as the theoretical framework of this research.

Deductive coding was implemented according to the anxiety phenomena or reactions affiliated to each of the three anxiety dimensions. Coding was performed to identify the key phenomena or reactions of cognitive anxiety which are concern about others' perceptions, negative expectations and preoccupation with performance. Somatic anxiety is characterised by the physiological aspects of the anxiety, which include increased autonomic arousal and unpleasant feelings such as nervousness and tension whereas avoidance behaviour is marked by avoidance tendency. The different codes of phenomena or reactions were interpreted and mapped to the three dimensions of anxiety.

## **Results**

### ***Research Question 1***

For the purpose of analysing the level of anxiety of the respondents, the mean and standard deviation of the scores for the 67 respondents were generated through descriptive statistics. Table 1 below shows a mean value of 61.64, a moderate level of anxiety.

**Table 1**

#### *Anxiety Level*

N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
67	25.00	109.00	61.6418	14.95519

From Table 1, the high standard deviation (SD=14.96) indicates the broad spread of writing anxiety scores among the respondents, ranging from the minimum 25 to the maximum 109. From the list of 5 highest scorers and 5 lowest scorers, 3 respondents' total scores are identified as extreme values (see Table 2). At the highest end, respondents No. 30 and No. 50 scored 100 points and 109 points; at the lowest end, respondent No. 36 scored 25 points.

While the scorer of 25 points was almost free of writing anxiety, scorers of more than 100 points or more were extremely anxious about writing. All these scores, albeit extreme, are valid and legitimate scores. Since anxiety is "the subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with an arousal of the autonomic nervous system" (Spielberger, 1983, p. 1, cited in Horwitz, 2001), it is a highly individual experience, and subjective feelings could be vastly varied and are, by no means, expected to fit into any typical level.



Writing anxiety is also “a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings and behaviours related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process” (Horwitz et al., 1986, p. 128). In this classroom learning process, there is ample space for the development of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings and behaviours; thus, this kind of development is also subjective and grounded on individual experience. Furthermore, the feeling of writing anxiety could be the product of poor past writing achievement (Vanhille et al., 2017). Therefore, when the vast room for subjectivity and individuals’ history of writing achievement are taken into consideration, the extreme cases are genuine.

**Table 2**

*Highest and Lowest Scores and Extreme Values*

		Case Number		Value
<b>Individual total score</b>	Highest	1	50	109.00
		2	30	100.00
		3	25	82.00
		4	43	82.00
		5	42	80.00
	Lowest	1	36	25.00
		2	58	31.00
		3	5	31.00
		4	35	35.00
		5	18	38.00

In the presence of extreme values and for a more comprehensive evaluation of the anxiety level, the value of mean (M=61.64) should be assessed together with the statistical findings in Table 3. Although the mean score (M=61.64) marks a moderate level of writing anxiety, this should not be viewed as satisfactory, especially when the statistical data from Table 3 are assessed simultaneously. The highest percentage, 46.3% (N=31), of the respondents were highly anxious about writing (M=73.77,  $\geq 65$ ), and a cumulative of 82.1% (N=55) of the respondents experienced high or moderate levels of anxiety. Only 17.9% (N=12) of them had a low level of writing anxiety (M=39.50,  $<50$ ).

**Table 3**

*High, Moderate and Low Levels of Anxiety*

Level of Anxiety	Mean	N	%	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
High ( $\geq 65$ )	73.7742	31	46.3%	9.67371	65.00	109.00
Moderate (50-64)	57.0417	24	35.8%	4.18568	50.00	64.00
Low ( $<50$ )	39.5000	12	17.9%	7.36700	25.00	48.00
<b>Total</b>	<b>61.6418</b>	<b>67</b>	<b>100 %</b>	<b>14.95519</b>	<b>25.00</b>	<b>109.00</b>

## **Research Question 2**

In answering research question 2 on the types of anxiety among the respondents, the findings, as tabulated in Table 4, manifest the existence of all the three types of writing anxiety: cognitive anxiety, somatic anxiety and avoidance behaviour. Nevertheless, the dominant type was cognitive anxiety with a mean of 26.33 points. This finding, cognitive anxiety being the primary type of writing anxiety among the respondents, is in line with the discovery in a number of past studies (Cheng, 2004; Jebreil et al., 2015; Rabadi & Rabadi, 2020; Zhang, 2011; Zhang & Zhang, 2022). Cheng (2004) also emphasised that the negative relationship between test anxiety and L2 writing performance is mainly attributed to the cognitive reactions instead of somatic responses or avoidance behaviour.

**Table 4**

### *Types of Anxiety*

Type of Anxiety	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Cognitive Anxiety	67	9.00	40.00	26.3284	6.00855
Somatic Anxiety	67	7.00	35.00	19.1642	5.83510
Avoidance Behaviour	67	7.00	35.00	16.1493	5.66289

Table 5 below tabulates the mean score of each individual statement measuring cognitive anxiety. From the 8 statements in the questionnaire, the 5 statements which score the highest mean values are S9 (M=3.55), S7 (M=3.49), S21 (M=3.46), S3 (M=3.42) and S20 (M=3.33). The top 3 scorers manifest the respondents' cognitive anxiety about a poor grade or poor performance. A noteworthy finding is S3, with a high mean score of 3.42, manifesting that the need for evaluation itself was sufficient to trigger writing anxiety among the respondents. If the fact of mere evaluation triggered anxiety, this justifies why all the 3 statements with the highest mean scores, S9, S7 and S21, which signify obvious cognitive anxiety, are associated with poor writing grade or performance. Respondents also exhibited anxiety when their essays were discussed as samples in class (S20), suggesting their worry about how others might perceive their writing ability.

**Table 5**

### *Cognitive Anxiety*

Statement No.	Question	N	Sum	Mean	Std. Deviation
S1	"While writing in English, I'm not nervous at all."	67	190	2.84	.994
S3	"While writing English compositions, I feel worried and uneasy if I know they will be evaluated."	67	229	3.42	.956
S7	"I don't worry that my English compositions are a lot worse than others'."	67	234	3.49	1.092
S9	"If my English composition is to be evaluated, I would worry about getting a very poor grade."	67	238	3.55	1.091
S14	"I'm afraid that the other students would deride my English composition if they read it."	67	203	3.03	1.193
S17	"I don't worry at all about what other people would think of my English compositions."	67	215	3.21	1.108

Table 6 shows the mean score of each statement measuring the second type of anxiety, somatic anxiety. The four statements with the highest mean scores are S2 (M=3.09), S11 (M=2.97), S13 (M=2.87) and S8 (M=2.73). The somatic responses reflected in all these statements bear a striking similarity: All the reactions were a result of writing under time constraint and pressure.

The four highest means scores, therefore, can be attributed to writing under time constraint and pressure, which is a common scene in examinations. These high mean values also explain that when writing had to be accomplished within a limited time duration, the more common somatic reactions experienced by the respondents were rapid heart pounding, jumbled thoughts, panic and trembling or perspiring. Additionally, the findings in this respect suggest that writing within a limited time was capable of provoking an enormous amount of pressure which was translated into physiological reactions among the respondents.

**Table 6**

*Somatic Anxiety*

Statement No.	Question	N	Sum	Mean	Std. Deviation
S2	"I feel my heart pounding when I write English compositions under time constraint."	67	207	3.09	1.138
S6	"My mind often goes blank when I start to work on an English composition."	67	176	2.63	1.085
S8	"I tremble or perspire when I write English compositions under time pressure."	67	183	2.73	1.053
S11	"My thoughts become jumbled when I write English compositions under time constraint."	67	199	2.97	1.015
S13	"I often feel panic when I write English compositions under time constraint."	67	192	2.87	1.113
S15	"I freeze up when unexpectedly asked to write English compositions."	67	174	2.60	1.142
S19	"I usually feel my whole body rigid and tense when I write English compositions."	67	153	2.28	.982

In Table 7, the mean scores for all the statements measuring avoidance behaviour are displayed. Although avoidance behaviour (M=16.15) is the least dominant type of anxiety (see Table 4), the existence itself must be acknowledged.

The two highest mean scores, S18 (M=2.81) and S4 (M=2.40) highlight avoidance behaviour in the form of lack of self-initiative among the respondents to write in English for their own betterment. The highest mean value for S18 marks a clear avoidance of writing English essays outside of class, when the writing task was not required as an assessment or classroom activity. Similarly, S4 suggests a lack of self-initiated effort to express ideas in English.

Other statements, with lower mean scores ranging from 2.00 to 2.31, mark less obvious avoidance of writing among respondents.

**Table 7**

*Avoidance Behaviour*

Statement No.	Question	N	Sum	Mean	Std. Deviation
S4	"I often choose to write down my thoughts in English."	67	161	2.40	1.244
S5	"I usually do my best to avoid writing English compositions."	67	152	2.27	.978
S10	"I do my best to avoid situations in which I have to write in English."	67	134	2.00	.937
S12	"Unless I have no choice, I would not use English to write compositions."	67	143	2.13	1.043
S16	"I would do my best to excuse myself if asked to write English compositions."	67	149	2.22	.951
S18	"I usually seek every possible chance to write English compositions outside of class."	67	188	2.81	.941
S22	"Whenever possible, I would use English to write compositions."	67	155	2.31	.908

***Findings from the Interviews***

The qualitative data derived from the semi-structured interviews validate the existence of all three types of anxiety among the respondents.

***Cognitive Anxiety***

The interviews brought in-depth data about cognitive anxiety and its key phenomena to the surface. One phenomenon of cognitive anxiety is negative expectations related to writing (Cheng, 2004). The respondents in the current investigation held various negative expectations, reflecting their cognitive writing anxiety.

Detailed descriptions about their negative expectations emerged during the interviews. For instance, they held pessimistic expectations of their writing being capable of adversely impacting other group members' scores in a group assignment and also negative expectations stemming from their inadequate writing. Examples are listed in Table 8.

**Table 8**

*Cognitive Anxiety: Negative Expectation*

Exemplary Statement	
Negative Expectation on the Bad Impact of Poor Writing on Group Performance	<p>Respondent 1: When it comes to group project like we need to write group essay and sometimes I will feel like what if I affect the other people marks like my part will affect other people marks something like that.</p> <p>Respondent 3: So if other people can attain the right amount of word but I cannot then the paragraph will look very weird, like one is very short and then another paragraph is very long.</p> <p>Respondent 4: I would affect my group members because let's say I write the first paragraph and then my group members write the second paragraph and then maybe one is too long and one is too short and then I will kind of like downgrade the whole quality of the essay.</p>
Negative Expectations Caused by Inadequate Writing Ability	<p>Respondent 3: I don't think I can write a complete and good essay in such a short time.</p> <p>Respondent 3: I cannot put my ideas in words, and then this affects my whole essay like the quality of the whole essay.</p> <p>Respondent 5: So another one of the worries that I have is like I'm afraid that I might use the wrong words in my essays. Like for example, some adjectives we can actually like misuse them and it can create another scenario from what we actually want to illustrate, yeah.</p> <p>Respondent 5: Because I'm not able to like convey what I actually think and what I actually feel. So I think that it's quite like it's quite misleading for the for the viewers who actually like read like my my essay or my paragraphs or something like this.</p> <p>Respondent 8: I think I will afraid that my friends don't want to be in one group with me because I mentioned earlier that like my friend need to always amend my essay content, structure, vocab, all the things.</p>

Another prominent feature of cognitive anxiety is preoccupation with writing performance (Cheng, 2004). Respondents' statements about writing being imperfect, losing marks, unsatisfactory examination results, effect on CGPA and better grades are all indicators of anxiety concerned with writing performance. This is manifested through their statements in Table 9.

**Table 9**

***Cognitive Anxiety: Preoccupation with Writing Performance***

<b>Exemplary Statement</b>	
Respondent 2	The thing I'm really concerned about is that if...what if my essay is not perfect for the examiner to mark it.
Respondent 2	I feel like sometimes if my marks is not what I expected.
Respondent 2	I'm not getting to the point. So, I will lose marks there also.
Respondent 4	The examination result is not my expectation since my vocab in English is not enough
Respondent 5	I'll be losing marks when I go off topic because I'm not answering the question at all. So, marks would be one of like one of the concerns.
Respondent 8	Because all the essay and the writing exercise all will be given marks and this will affect in my grades, CGPA.
Respondent 10	So when I'm writing my English, it also really kind of put some pressure on me so that I can really like excel and do well in my English, so I can get better grades.

The existence of cognitive anxiety in the form of concern about others' perceptions (Cheng, 2004), particularly the negative ones, was also validated. Respondent 1, who answered the question on the writing anxieties he experienced when writing in English, expressed his concerns about how others would regard him when his English and writing were not as good as them. He was also anxious that his writing, especially grammar and language, would be made fun of. On the other hand, Respondent 9 was anxious about how the lecturer would perceive him through his writing. The following statements reveal these worries in Table 10.

**Table 10**

***Cognitive Anxiety: Concern about Others' Perceptions***

<b>Exemplary Statement</b>	
Respondent 1:	When the moment I get into university, I saw like everyone is so fluently in English, and I'm not that good in it.
Respondent 1:	I was worried about my grammatical error. It's like... maybe the language is not beautiful enough. Maybe I just afraid like people will like make fun of me.
Respondent 9:	I will be worried. From the time that I hand in my papers and I can imagine how the lecturers feels.

## **Somatic Anxiety**

Through the interviews, somatic anxiety surfaced as another type of anxiety that respondents had to deal with. Somatic anxiety was prompted by time constraint or pressure which was such an overwhelming or feared factor that triggered reactions such as disorganised thoughts, loss of focus, panic, stress and trembling. In Table 11 below, Respondents 2, 6, 7 and 10 described their reactions which were related to somatic anxiety, either explicitly or implicitly.

**Table 11**

### *Somatic Anxiety*

<b>Exemplary Statement</b>	
Respondent 2	I'm writing, due to the time pressure, I feel like all my thoughts are atttered here and there.
Respondent 2	When I saw the title, I couldn't generate the idea to write, I panicked a bit.
Respondent 6	I don't...like...hate it, but sometimes when writing and when you need to complete an essay in a specific time, I would be stressed because like I need to think very, very hard for that specific word.
Respondent 7	Like every time I take exam writing exam I feel like this anxiety attack me... I kind of lost my words, if this anxiety attacks me...every time I feel anxiety, my legs are shaking actually.
Respondent 10	When I'm given a topic, usually on the spot and I can't really think of any ideas, so I usually feel stressed.

### ***Avoidance Behaviour***

Avoidance behaviour was latent in the case of Respondent 4 who described herself as relying on the Internet or online tools to complete writing tasks. In this particular case, the avoidance behaviour was not a total avoidance of the task itself; instead, the avoidance lay in the reluctance to go through the brainstorming and writing processes, which are the appropriate writing processes a student should go through.

The statement by Respondent 4, "English is not actually my mother tongue", also provided a reason for avoidance behaviour. Her statement implied an avoidance tendency in consequence of having to write in a language which was not her first language.

In the case of Respondent 9, avoidance behaviour was also noticeable through his dislike of writing which can develop into avoidance of writing. Further endorsing his avoidance behaviour, he stated that he had extreme fear or phobia of writing.

The relevant statements hinting avoidance behaviour are shown in Table 12.

**Table 12**

*Avoidance Behaviour*

<b>Exemplary Statement</b>	
Respondent 4	Respondent 4: I will choose to depend on more on Internet or like ChatGPT because I cannot write a full essay in my own words.
Respondent 4	Respondent 4: My worries is specifically about the vocabulary and grammar because English is not actually my mother tongue, so I think my vocab is still very limited... This make my writing face problem because I cannot write it using my own words.
Respondent 4	Respondent 9: I am not really in that for writing. You know what I mean? I mean like, not really like writing at all.
Respondent 9	Respondent 9: And also I have...I would say...like...it's a phobia already.
Respondent 4	Respondent 4: I will choose to depend on more on Internet or like ChatGPT because I cannot write a full essay in my own words.

**Discussion**

***Research Question 1***

The descriptive statistics which display a broad spread of anxiety scores from an extremely low score of 25 points to an extremely high value of 109 points and a high standard deviation ( $SD=14.96$ ) suggest a vast variability in respondents' writing experience and anxiety. With these exceptionally low and extraordinarily high values, a writing task can potentially give rise to responses that are enormously different. The responses can vary from receiving the task with no or little anxiety among students with a very low writing anxiety level to receiving the task as an intimidation coupled with a tremendous amount of anxiety among students with a very high writing anxiety level. In this manner, these extreme cases are remarkably significant in envisaging students' hugely disparate reactions in the form of largely different levels of anxiety.

A notable finding in the current research was that a massive majority (82.1%) had to deal with at least a moderate level of writing anxiety. Although this may be regarded as an acceptable anxiety level and does not warrant as much concern as a high writing anxiety level, it is actually not a comfortable position for law students, considering the demanding need for a strong writing ability to work through their law degree programme and also undertake their future legal tasks.

Another concerning discovery in the current research was the high writing anxiety level involving 46.3% of the respondents. Bloom (1985) suggested that negative emotions or feelings are capable of inhibiting a writer from completing a writing assignment although the writer possesses intellectual competency to accomplish the task. Individuals' belief about writing has a powerful influence on writing performance regardless of how capable they are in writing, and their belief about their writing ability, rather than their writing skills, plays a significant role in motivating or demotivating them to write well (Holladay, 1981). Hence, even students who are competent in writing can be defeated by negative beliefs or feelings, causing them to be incapable of writing well. With this understanding, it is concerning to note the high percentage of respondents who exhibited a high writing anxiety level, which is marked by negative feelings, beliefs and perceptions attached to their writing ability or experience. This finding raises concerns for the stronger reason that the respondents are expected to be able to skilfully and agilely employ their writing skills to their clients' advantage in their future law practice.



## **Research Question 2**

The mental form of anxiety, cognitive anxiety, was found to be the most dominant dimension of anxiety. Unless writing anxiety is manifested in physiological form or in avoidance behaviour, it could be otherwise simply a mental anxiety that is invisible, and cognitive anxiety tends to be inconspicuous. Hence, in this research, cognitive anxiety was a predominant yet hidden dimension of anxiety, with worry about poor writing performance being the strongest indicator (see Table 5). Based on the negative correlation between writing anxiety and writing performance found in multiple studies referred to in this study, along with the present finding on worry about poor writing performance being the strongest phenomenon of writing anxiety, this study affirms the complex interplay between writing anxiety and writing performance.

Compared with cognitive anxiety and somatic anxiety, avoidance behaviour was the least obvious form of writing anxiety; therefore, this study determines that despite a moderate or high level of anxiety, the respondents did not exhibit prominent behaviour of avoiding writing tasks. Predictively, developing mechanisms to help them cope with writing anxiety will be a more optimistic effort.

The multidimensions of writing anxiety were also brought to light through semi-structured interviews. The data positively affirm the primary phenomena of cognitive anxiety in the questionnaire. As the respondents outlined their worries about writing, a more profound understanding of their negative expectations was obtained, including the bad impact of their poor writing on others' writing performance and their various gloomy expectations caused by their inadequate writing. The data also confirm the statistical findings from the questionnaire which established a clear and strong connection between somatic anxiety and writing under time pressure. With respect to avoidance behaviour, the qualitative data produced a new perspective of avoidance tendency when writing in English was completed with reliance on online tools or the Internet, negating an active participation in the writing process.

## **Conclusion**

Essentially, the Malaysian law students face two primary challenges in their endeavour to master the feat of writing. The first challenge is writing as ESL learners; the second is learning to write to satisfy the higher expectation held for law students' writing ability. With a large section of law students being afflicted by writing apprehension, as discovered in this study, the higher expectation held for their writing ability and performance will remain an expectation, if the first challenge of ESL writing and ESL writing anxiety is left unaddressed. From language educators playing the role as facilitators instead of authoritative figures (Guvendir & Uzun, 2023; Jagabalan et al., 2016; Jebreil et al., 2015; Young, 1991) to reducing learners' writing anxiety through effective writing instructions (Guvendir & Uzun, 2023), some form of intervention is proposed.

Previous studies also offered a potentially supportive approach on coping with writing anxiety, which is through the development of positive self-perceptions of students' writing ability. These studies established that students with good writing self-efficacy have lower writing anxiety (Ho, 2015; McCarthy et al., 1985; Pajares & Valiante, 2006), and according to Pajares et al. (2006), self-efficacy is "students' self-perceptions of their own writing competence" (p. 141). Reminding language teachers about the importance of students' perceptions of competence, Cheng (2002) stated, "First of all, language teachers should recognise that student writers' perceptions of competence play a much more important role in their experience of L2 writing anxiety than their actual writing competence" (p. 652). If even students who are highly competent in writing might still be beset with self-doubt and succumb to writing anxiety (Cheng, 2002), this explains why positive self-perceptions of writing ability potentially play a critical role in tackling writing anxiety.

Despite the high bar of writing ability law students are expected to achieve to play their future role as legal professionals, this high bar begins from the base: law students being ESL learners. Addressing ESL writing, Hyland (2019) said, "ESL writers often carry the burden of learning to write and learning English at the same time" (p. 31). Emphasising on the critical nature of writing in the legal profession, Arnold (1995) opined that in the void of basic writing skills, a more advanced attempt of legal writing

resembles “building a brick house upon a straw foundation” (p. 227). Both Hyland’s and Arnold’s words reverberate resoundingly, reminding language academics that ESL learners’ burden of “learning to write and learning English at the same time” is an optimal condition for the development of poor writing basics and writing anxiety, both of which play a pivotal part in determining ESL law students’ writing performance and the attainment of the writing high bar.

### ***Implications of Study***

This study proves that despite the importance of writing to law students, the majority of law students in this research, like other ESL learners, equally grapple with ESL writing anxiety at least at a moderate level. The findings further reveal that the law students in this study are highly concerned about their writing performance. It is well accepted that law is an academic field where higher English proficiency is much sought after, and one of the major entry requirements into a law degree programme at Malaysian universities is a good grade in English from their secondary school academic results. Additionally, law students are generally required to fulfil a higher band in MUET (Malaysian University English Test), and some successfully pass MUET with the required higher band before commencing their first year of the Bachelor of Laws. Nevertheless, this good past achievement in English does not exempt them from writing anxiety. Considering that worry about writing performance, as a form of cognitive anxiety, is the most controlling anxiety, as proved in the current study, a good past performance in English does not play a vital role in allaying their writing anxiety.

Recapulating Figure 1 on how this research conceptualises the complex connections of poor basic writing skills, poor writing performance and writing anxiety, this study proposes a two-pronged strategy to end the malady of inadequate writing ability among law students, as reflected in several significant past studies. This strategy is addressing weak basic writing skills which is one of the root causes of both writing anxiety and poor writing performance alongside coping with writing anxiety, which is itself capable of diminishing students’ motivation to write, irrespective of their writing competency. While developing strong basic writing techniques is supplying the real tools of writing, coping with writing anxiety is boosting their motivation to apply the tools confidently. More importantly, this study draws attention to this encompassing strategy, ensuring that the negative outcomes, particularly poor writing performance among law students, which stem from writing anxiety are not dismissed or misdiagnosed as being caused by poor basic writing skills per se.

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The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

### **Author Contribution Statement**

All authors contributed to the conception, design, writing, and revision of the manuscript.

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