



BREAKING FLA (FOREIGN LANGUAGE ANXIETY) BARRIERS: EXPLORING ACADEMIC WRITING ANXIETY AMONG CSS ASPIRANTS IN PAKISTAN

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Abstract

This study explores the pervasive anxiety issues faced by candidates appearing for the Central Superior Services (CSS) English Essay Writing Exam in Pakistan. Despite being a critical component of the CSS examination, many aspirants struggle with high levels of anxiety that significantly affect their performance. Contributing factors that this study finds include inadequate preparation, language barriers, fear of judgment, and the perceived unpredictability of essay topics. The competitive nature of the exam, coupled with societal expectations, further amplifies stress levels, often leading to cognitive blocks and reduced clarity in writing. This paper analyzes anxiety-related issues, considering the psychological aspects and the socio-educational implications for CSS candidates, drawing attention to the necessity of preparing specific initiatives such as anxiety-reducing programs, language proficiency, and mental health trainings in order to improve outcomes. It is argued that the positive resolution of these concerns will improve the candidates' individual performances and provide a more equitable measure of the actual potential demonstrated by the candidates.

Keywords: *CSS Exam, English Essay Writing, Anxiety, Pakistan, Academic Performance Writing, Language Barriers, Psychological Stress, Preparatory Programs.*

Introduction

Academic writing is a formal style of expression in which arguments are supported by data and evidence and are emphasized by precision and clarity. A structured and credible method of presenting the findings, analyses and insights of researchers and students to communicate complex ideas as a result of research conducted to find out the solution to a problem. On the other hand, most informal writing does not follow certain conventions like correct citation, logical flow, and objective tone, unlike academic writing. Academic writing skills make a student a better analyst and academically sound writer; it also becomes an essential piece of professional communication in various subjects (Cutri et al, 2021).

Anxiety during Pakistan's CSS English Essay Writing Exam is a complex phenomenon with several psychological, educational, and social factors involved. The primary factor is the vast amount of pressure linked to the competitive nature of the exam. The CSS examination is universally accepted as one of the most coveted and toughest examinations in Pakistan, and success is obtained only by a handful of candidates. A great deal of anxiety is evoked by the high stakes of this context. The most prominent example is the English Essay Writing section of the exam, where candidates need to demonstrate language ability, logical reasoning, and cohesive



argumentation. The exam candidates' ability to perform is hampered by the anxiety exacerbated by the combination of failure fears, social pressure, and personal goals.

The most prominent source of anxiety is the language barrier that most candidates face. The CSS examinations use English as the language of instructions as well as the medium of the questions. This is a barrier to those who have not studied in English medium institutions with a higher education diploma. Most aspirants are educated in the rural countryside or have been through the Urdu medium education where the didactic exposure to the English language has been slight. The candidates' writing an essay is likely to be poor due to the overwhelming feeling of inferiority and anxiety that the situation evokes. Despite the knowledge that many candidates have regarding the subject, their ability to express that knowledge is, as you say, due to the the language barrier. Most exam candidates' writing anxiety has a palpable negative correlation with their exam performance. (Iqbal et al., 2022).

There is uncertainty about passing the English essay writing in the CSS exam about the topic and context. There is not only a need for a grip on language but also a strong critical thinking and analytical presentation to compete in the competitive examination. There is a need for vocabulary and strong skills for presenting the data in an organized manner. The candidates of the CSS examination also need to know about the history and the most recent events to present in the essay writing exam (Yusoff & Khan, 2013).

Essay structuring, topic analysis, and stress management techniques workshops can go a long way in reducing anxiety. In addition, the integration of mental health counselling as a component of exam preparation would assist candidates in better coping with exam stress, thus improving their performance in the English Essay Writing component (Achmad et al, 2023).

As per the findings of Lama & Suhodolli (2024), academic writing, in essence, is the expression in the written form that needs to be clear, logical and understandable to the reader. A central role exists for it in higher education and professional settings, in representing knowledge, constructing arguments and having scholarly discourse. Academic writing, in contrast to informal writing, requires that the writing be organized according to strict conventions, have specific evidence required as supporting reasoning, and have a formal tone.

Sa'adah et al.'s (2022) research findings are that, though academic writing is a crucial skill, some candidates still struggle. Among the common problems with academic writing are a lack of clarity, poor organization, grammatical errors, poor argumentation, limited vocabulary, and inadequate referencing. Because candidates joining the CSS exam have an insufficient foundation in academic writing, candidates from diverse academic backgrounds may not be able to effectively develop and communicate their ideas. The shortcomings not only impact the quality of the writing itself but also have a negative impact on candidates' confidence, thus intensifying performance difficulties when put under pressure.

CSS Reports on Essay Writing Paper

This section of the study presents data from CSS annual reports, focusing on the performance of appearing candidates and the failure rates in the English Essay exam from 2012 to 2024.



CSS English Essay Paper Results from Start to Date- Facts and Figures

CSS Reports 1977-2011

CSS Report: 2012

TABLE NO. 11
Performance of Candidates in
Compulsory Subjects (% AGE)

Subject	Marks	Qualified Candidates	Marks obtained		
			Below 40%	40%-59%	60% & Above
English Essay	100	786	--	764(97)	22(3)

Source: <https://www.fpsc.gov.pk/assets/media/2024-06-25-10-45-11-Annual-Report-2012.pdf>

CSS Report: 2013

Table 25 .Candidates' Performance in Compulsory Subjects

Subject	Marks	Qualified Candidates	Marks obtained					
			Below 40%	%age	40%-59%	%age	60% & Above	%age
English Essay	100	788	--	--	770	98	18	02

Source: <https://www.fpsc.gov.pk/category/annual-reports-325195046-2024-06-25>

CSS Report: 2014

Table 27 .Candidates' Performance in Compulsory Subjects

Subject	Marks	Qualified Candidates	Marks obtained					
			Below 40%	%	40%-59%	%	60% & Above	%
English Essay	100	220	--	--	215	98	5	2

Source: <https://www.fpsc.gov.pk/assets/media/2024-06-25-10-45-04-Annual-Report-2014.pdf>

CSS Report: 2015

Table 28: Candidates' Performance in Compulsory Subjects

Subject	Marks	Qualified Candidates	Marks obtained					
			Below 40%	%age	40-59%	%age	60% & Above	%age
English Essay	100	377	0	0	373	99	4	01

Source: <https://www.fpsc.gov.pk/assets/media/2024-06-25-10-45-01-Annual-Report-2015.pdf>

CSS Report: 2016



Table 26: Candidates' Performance in Compulsory Subjects-CSS CE 2015

Subject	Marks	Qualified Candidates	Marks obtained					
			Below 40%	%age	40-59%	%age	60% & Above	%age
			English Essay	100	368	0	0	368

Source:

<https://www.fpsc.gov.pk/assets/media/2024-09-16-05-36-39-FPSC-Annual-Report-2016.pdf>

CSS Report: 2017

Table 24: Candidates' Performance in Compulsory Subjects-CSS CE 2016

Subject	Marks	Qualified Candidates	Marks obtained					
			Below 40%	%age	40-59%	%age	60% & Above	%age
			English Essay	100	199	-	-	199

Source: <https://www.fpsc.gov.pk/assets/media/2024-06-25-10-44-56-Annual-Report-2017.pdf>

CSS Report: 2018

Table 30: Candidates' Performance in Compulsory Subjects-CSS CE 2017

Subject	Marks	Qualified Candidates	Marks obtained					
			Below 40%	%age	40-59%	%age	60% & Above	%age
			English Essay	100	310	0	0	297

Source:

<https://www.fpsc.gov.pk/assets/media/2024-09-16-05-37-13-FPSC-Annual-Report-2018.pdf>

CSS Report: 2019

Table 32: Candidates' Performance in Compulsory Subjects CSS CE-2018

Subject	Marks	Qualified Candidates	Marks obtained					
			Below 40%	%age	40-59%	%age	60% & Above	%age
			English Essay	100	567	0	0	510

Source:

<https://www.fpsc.gov.pk/assets/media/2024-09-16-08-24-31-FPSC-Annual-Report-2019.pdf>

CSS Report: 2020



Table 38: Compulsory Subjects CSS CE-2019

Subject	Marks	Qualified Candidates	Marks obtained					
			Below 40%	%age	40-59%	%age	60% & Above	%age
English Essay	100	365	00	00	361	99	04	1

Source:

<https://www.fpsc.gov.pk/assets/media/2024-09-16-08-24-57-FPSC-Annual-Report-2020.pdf>

CSS Report: 2021

III : Table 36: Qualified candidates in CSS (Compulsory Subjects)

Compulsory Subjects in the year-2017	Finally Qualified	Below 40%	40-59%	60% & Above
English Essay	310	0	297	13

Source:

<https://www.fpsc.gov.pk/assets/media/2024-09-16-08-25-35-FPSC-Annual-Report-2021.pdf>

CSS Report: 2022



Compulsory Subjects in the year-2022						
English Essay	=	19440	19220	99	220	1

Source: <https://www.fpsc.gov.pk/assets/media/2024-09-16-08-21-21-Annual-Report-2022.pdf>

Anwar et al. (2023) explain that there is a growing body of research that shows writing anxiety is responsible for academic failure, especially in time-pressured, high-stakes environments such as the CSS English essay exam. Writing anxiety is the general term for fear or anxiety about writing, including fear of negative evaluation, fear of past failures, or fear of linguistic incompetence. With thousands vying for a few slots in the CSS context and the essay paper historically having sky-high failure rates, anxiety could become crippling. All manner of writing blocks, disorganized thoughts, or overly self-monitoring dooms candidates. To understand the relationship between barriers to academic writing and the associated anxiety and stress, negative writing environments, and the need to build confidence and resilience in writing, in the first place, is focused on the stress and anxiety that academic writing barriers cause.

To many students and professionals, particularly those who do not speak English as their first language, these are difficult to master. For example, in high-stakes tests, such as the Central Superior Services (CSS) exam in Pakistan, students need to efficiently master academic writing, particularly the English essay paper, otherwise success is unattainable.

Literature Review

French (2019), through the article "Academic Writing as Identity-Work in Higher Education", Amanda French demonstrates how academic writing creates a fundamental basis for academic identity that goes beyond formal writing techniques to root in professional abilities and personal values. The analysis seeks to create new perspectives on academic writing by incorporating



Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and containing social, cultural, emotional, and institutional frameworks. This article incorporates a theoretical analysis of these elements to understand how they develop 'professional writing habitus' within college education. Academic writing emerges as identity work, which enables academics to understand their writing better and ensures confident reflective development that includes everyone.

Badley (2018) explains that new approaches in academic document creation are explored along with underlying motivators in this research on "Why and How Academics Write: Qualitative Inquiry." Within "Why and How Academics Write: Qualitative Inquiry", readers explore how and why researchers engage in academic literature production, especially in qualitative research settings. The authors open their discussion by challenging academic writing's standard distant approach while advocating for content that aligns with the author's unique perspective. Academic writing needs to be determined by institutions and individual needs.

Abdulkareem (2013) conducted "An Investigation Study of Academic Writing Problems Faced by Arab Postgraduate Students at University Teknologi Malaysia (UTM)" to examine writing challenges Arab students experience while studying at UTM. A research study measured the academic writing difficulties of 85 Arab-speaking postgraduate students. According to the study, enrolled students faced difficulties in the three mentioned areas: sentence formation, word choice, and idea clarity. The students' difficulties as a result of the Arabic native language caused challenges in logical structure organization and English language.

AlMarwani (2020), In the article "Academic Writing: The Work" analyzes the intricacies of writing in diverse cultural contexts. The author analyses the difficulties students and scholars encounter editing academic texts in a second language. The author outlines the globalization of higher education and the need to appreciate the cultural variables that shape the different ways of writing academically. This research analyzes the academic writings of people from diverse backgrounds and the roles of rhetoric and citation in their arguments. The research examines the traditions of cultural writing and its variations. The research outlines the variations in cultural writing traditions. The conventions of academic writing cause confusions because the different cultures have different ways of writing.

Ariyanti (2017), in the research article on Foreign Language Anxiety in Academic Writing, constitutes the title of Ariyanti's (2017) research, which studies writing anxiety levels and identification factors for fourth-semester English Department students at Widya Gama Mahakam University in Samarinda, Indonesia. The research investigator conducted passive classroom observations in addition to close-ended questionnaires to determine student anxiety levels while collecting data to explain these findings relative to the educational setting. Survey questionnaire results processed through Likert scale analysis demonstrated that substantial numbers of students reached high anxiety levels because of limited timeframes, plus social judgment apprehension and absent confidence in their English abilities. The responses showed high levels of student anxiety, which were balanced by moderate anxiety ratings and rare low anxiety scores across sixteen survey items. Students mainly reported anxiety related to organizing their thoughts and following English structural rules. Students' academic writing results from both linguistic barriers and psychological elements, according to research, so educators must develop teaching methods that help students navigate their writing anxieties.



Abdus Samad et al. (2023) conducted research to find out the link between academic writing and students' anxiety levels and examined different elements causing writing anxiety among undergraduate English majors at Kohat University of Science and Technology (KUST), Pakistan. A mixed-methods design included both quantitative responses from questionnaires filled out by 101 students, together with qualitative data obtained through semi-structured interviews with 12 participants. The study highlighted factors contributing to writing anxiety, such as fear of criticism from teachers and peers, along with criticism, anxiety, and an apprehensive need to improve writing skills, and practice less, and spend more time researching the subject. The analysis of the impact of the audience and the competitive expectations, and the excessive reliance on writing information technology provided an answer to the problem. The study illustrates the need for teachers to formulate innovative strategies for instruction that foster productive writing environments and enhance the writing skills of students.

Bayat (2014), in the research, examines how introducing process writing techniques affects students' writing abilities along with their levels of writing-related anxiety. This introduction shows how students struggle with writing applications because the existing methodology focuses on finished products instead of helping students understand the writing process. First-year preschool teaching students from Akdeniz University participated in this research, where pretest-posttest control groups formed the basis for the quasi-experimental design. The experimental subjects received process writing instruction across a 10-week timetable, but the control participants received traditional writing instruction. Academic writing assessments, together with the Writing Apprehension Test, served as data collection methods. Students from the experimental group achieved measurable improvements in writing accomplishment while demonstrating significant writing anxiety reduction when compared to students in the control group. This research demonstrates that process writing strategies deliver both writing skill development and anxiety reduction and merit adoption as a writing instruction framework.

Kiran et al. (2024) conducted research that looks at the persistent problems Pakistan's Central Superior Services (CSS) candidates face in regard to the English Essay, Precis and Composition subsections. In the mixed methods approach, quantitative data were collected through surveys of unsuccessful candidates and qualitative insights through semi-structured interviews with successful CSS officers, including Deputy Commissioners and Assistant Superintendents of Police. The study attributes the various reasons for the failures to prompt misunderstanding, lack of essay questions, grammar issues, structural issues, vocabulary, practice deficiency, exam stress, and others.

Achmad et al. (2023), "Exploratory Study on Students Anxiety in the Process of composing an English Essay," analyzes students' English essay writing anxiety and its causes. This study uses the qualitative method and was conducted on 34 fifth semester students of the Department of English Education, Universitas Syrah Kuala, using a combination of questionnaires and interviews. The questionnaires are designed to distinguish among the various types of anxiety that students experience, while the interviews are used to explore the specific causes of anxiety in essay writing. The findings of this study indicate that cognitive anxiety is the most common, impacting 43.5% of the respondents. This study emphasizes the necessity of creating tailored strategies for students to mitigate the cognitive barriers to writing anxiety in order to enhance their writing skills.

Significance of Research



Research on *what academic writing* is, its associated issues, and the anxiety it induces particularly in the context of the CSS English essay writing exam is significant because it highlights critical barriers to academic and professional success for aspiring civil servants. Understanding academic writing as a structured, formal, and evidence-based form of communication is essential for candidates, yet many struggle due to a lack of training, unfamiliarity with conventions, and psychological factors such as anxiety. Such a common exam like the CSS has essays in it and because of the difficulties candidate's face, it could lead to underperformance. All of the above helps formulate the necessary educational and preparatory deficits and aids in the formulation of more focused interventions, such as curriculum adjustments, writing assistance programs, and anxiety management techniques for improving candidate outcomes and fairness in access to civil service positions.

Research Objectives:

1. To explore the concept of academic writing and identify common challenges and forms of anxiety associated with it among CSS exam candidates.
2. To examine specific issues candidates face in the CSS English essay writing exam related to academic writing skills and psychological barriers.

Research Questions:

1. What are the key components of academic writing, and how do they relate to the challenges experienced by CSS exam candidates?
2. What role does academic writing anxiety play in the performance of candidates in the CSS English essay writing exam?

Discussion

In Pakistan, there are many issues related to CSS English essay writing exams. Many factors provide the foundation for the anxiety in the CSS English Essay Writing Exam, including personal, domestic, societal, educational and psychological. One of the basic reasons is the pressure of appearing in the examination, as students know they have to go through a tough competition, and competitors may be well-prepared and competent. The CSS exam in Pakistan is considered the most prestigious test, as a very small number of candidates appear in the exam, and a smaller percentage of them achieve success. In English essay writing, there is a need to master the English language, appropriate vocabulary, as well as critical thinking and coherent argumentation. As there are many expectations of society with the candidates, there is a stress of fear of failure. Candidate's ambitions and societal expectations are major contributing factors to anxiety.

Language barriers exist in many students and candidates as English is not their primary language or mother tongue. There is also a gap between students who are educated at good institutions and those who have not attended quality institutions for advanced education. English is not just a language in CSS exams; it is a source of communication for the students. The majority of students belong to an educational background where there are foundational classes taught in the national language, and English is added as a subject in primary school classes. There remains a linguistic gap that needs extensive effort to be filled to reach a competency level. There is a need for continuous efforts.

Anxiety is a phenomenon that reveals a complex interplay of psychological, educational, and social dimensions, as is the case with the CSS English Essay Writing Exam in Pakistan. The competitive nature of the exam, as well as the overwhelming pressure associated with it, constitutes the main



stressors. The CSS examination is viewed by most as one of the most esteemed and demanding exams in Pakistan, with hardly more than a small percentage of examinees succeeding. This examination atmosphere is high-stakes and creates huge anxiety, especially under the English Essay Writing part, whereby candidates are asked to prove not just linguistic competence but also logical thinking and sound argument. Anxiety levels are usually augmented by the fear of failing, coupled with societal demands and individual aspirations, hence lessening candidates' ability to function effectively.

There is a huge language gap between candidates for the CSS examination. There is a hesitation to appear in CSS exams and attempt the essay writing paper as candidates do not have a strong foundational study in English-medium schools, colleges and universities where English is not only a subject to learn but also a means of communication. Candidates also suffer superior and inferior complexes due to different levels of command over the English language. Candidates who have knowledge about all the subjects and topics of CSS and do not have a grip on the English language face difficulty in appearing in exams and attempting essay writing papers. This shortcoming in their writing ability mostly pushes them to fear and anxiety.

More so, the vagueness of the exam panels' choice of essay topics contributes to the nervousness of the test takers. As a rule, the topics picked by the exam committee involve testing candidates on their understanding of local and global matters and their ability to critically analyze and present ideas in an organized manner. Because of this unpredictability, aspirants have to study a wide range of topics, which increases not only the stress level of aspirants but also makes them anxious that they might face unknown questions in the examination. As candidates rush to write a well-arranged, persuasive essay on an unknown subject, pressure builds up and may lead to writer's block during an exam.

Effective specific interventions to address these anxiety concerns are needed, for example, effective preparatory programs, additional language training, and the availability of mechanisms to obtain psychological assistance. Taking a quote, candidates can greatly profit from workshop-based learning on essay structure, subject analysis, and stress management. More so, the provision of mental health management during the exam preparation can prepare the candidates in better ways to deal with exam anxiety, which may further help in enhancing the performance of English essay writing.

Conclusion

As a barrier, candidates remain anxious in Pakistan while preparing for the CSS English Essay or Academic Writing Exam. Extremely high levels of anxiety can emerge due to extreme competition, struggles with English language abilities, and uncertainty with essay themes. A concerted effort focused on linguistic education and guided practice in essay writing and psychological resources should be initiated to create candidate self-confidence and reduce examination-induced stress.

The effective solutions to these problems require lawmakers and educational institutions to determine the critical relevance of intervention. Over the course of language-based programs, specialized exam workshops, and stress management education, a candidate can become much more prepared. By including mental health awareness lectures in the curriculum of the CSS preparatory courses, candidates would get instruments for coping with anxiety, which will improve their performance during threatening test conditions.



Therefore, the anxiety of candidates while attempting the essay writing in the CSS examination is not only for the performance of the individuals but also for the system. There is a need to establish high-quality institutions to enhance the analytical skills of students, as well as provide essay writing and content presentation skills. There is a need to deal with personal, environmental and psychological barriers and a need to involve society so stress levels may be reduced. These basic barriers, when reduced, may become opportunities to promote academic writing and reduce anxiety in students to gain command over academic writing. Through giving the correct resources and environment for dealing with linguistic and psychological challenges, equal opportunity may be achieved for all players in this extremely selective exam.

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