

Perfectionism

Perfectionism is the *uncompromising* pursuit of excellence. It allows no room for flexibility, mistakes (which allow learning and growth), or strategic choices that reflect a person's values, goals and priorities. With perfectionism, the stakes—and often the stress levels—are always high. “Good enough” is never actually good enough in a perfectionist's mindset, regardless of circumstances or context. Only “perfect” is good enough—but it is unrealistic and can even be self-sabotaging to expect it.

“Good enough,” however, is a **personal standard that may shift** depending on circumstances such as the work's importance, the internal and external resources currently available, or the costs of doing “even better.”

When is perfectionism a problem?

Perfectionism may be a problem for you if it leads you to:

- feel self-conscious about your academic processes or efforts
- feel dissatisfied with the quality of your work
- feel judged about your work
- feel distressed
- have difficulty *starting or finishing* a task
- work at the last minute, perhaps missing sleep or other obligations
- avoid submitting writing for grading or review.

Shift your mindset

Recognize your strengths

Stop for a moment and reflect on what you currently do well as a student. Ask a trusted friend to help you brainstorm on this question, if it helps. Some strengths you may have:

- creativity
- communication
- seeing connections among ideas
- developing an argument
- enthusiasm for ideas or learning

Work doesn't *need* to be stressful

Consider the reason(s) behind your difficulty with academic tasks. Do you understand what you are expected to do? What the steps are? How to start? Do you believe you have the skills, time and resources necessary to complete the task?

You can choose to reduce the stress of academic perfectionism if you:

- understand what you need to do, and how to do it
- use good time management and positive self-talk habits
- get help when you need it.

You are not your work

As a student, your work will be discussed, graded or judged on its merit. However, your work does not equal, or even reflect, your worth as a person. Every person is inherently and equally valuable, regardless of what we do, produce, or know. Of course, your work may reflect the time and effort you've put into it, or your skill or talent in that subject area...but it does not reflect your value as a human being. **We are all much more than our work.**

Develop regular work habits

Perfectionism can paralyze you when you need to work, but creating **routines and habits** can help you get to work even when perfectionist thoughts crop up.

Have a regular work schedule; our [time management tools](#) may help you set one, or you can [book an appointment](#) with an academic skills specialist to get some help.

- Try working for 90 minutes, then take a break or do an unrelated task for an hour; or work for a 3-hour block (three 50-minute blocks of work separated by two 10-minute breaks); or work for 25 minutes and then take a 5-minute break, or use any pattern that works for you.

Before you start work, set a clear, concrete goal (e.g., complete three math problems, create a diagram, write to a certain word count, locate five good research sources, etc.). Give yourself a realistic amount of time to reach this goal.

Break a large project into smaller, more manageable pieces. For example, think of a long essay as being a series of paragraphs that you can write one at a time.

- Try the [SASS assignment planner](#) or the [thesis manager](#) to set mini-deadlines for each stage of a big project.
- See our writing process resource for advice on writing in stages.
- There is no “correct” order for writing a draft. If you feel reluctant to start, begin by writing the section you're most ready to write, or the part that will be easiest/most interesting/most fun.

If you are stuck with something after putting in reasonable effort on it, note down why you think you are stuck, and make a note to come back to it later or get help with it—then move on.

Start a thinking / writing journal, to track your thought development and encourage positive reflection:

- Finish each work session by posing a question to yourself based on this day's work: something you didn't quite understand, or something you want to think more about.
- Start each work session by recording any thoughts you may have had since yesterday's session.



- If you lose track of the development of your line of reasoning or direction, review your journal for clues.

Listen to your inner coach and ignore your inner critic

We all have an inner dialogue that has developed over our lifetimes, which reflects the experiences we have had. Those voices can inspire us and help us make good choices, but they can also feed our insecurities and feelings of inadequacy. Are your inner voices helpful to you or holding you back?

Think of your inner dialogue or self-talk as coming from a “coach” or a “critic.”

Your **coach** helps you grow and face new challenges. Your coach might tell you,

- “You are creative / hardworking!”
- “You come up with good ideas.”
- “You can correct your work before you submit it.”
- “It’s ok to be messy while you explore ideas.”
- “Mistakes help you learn. Keep trying!”

Your **critic** keeps you fixed, scared and dissatisfied with your efforts and results. Your critic might say things like,

- “You’ll never be good enough / get it right.”
- “Your ideas / work are below standard.”
- “The prof thinks you’re dumb / you’re going to fail.”
- “They made a mistake letting you into this program.”

To help yourself hear your coach and ignore your critic:

- Picture your coach and your critic sitting on each of your shoulders
- Create a visual image that makes sense for you, to capture the words or feelings that each evokes.
- Feed the one you want—you have a choice.
- Practice calling on your supportive coach when you sit down to work, or face a challenging academic task
- Refute your critic
- Ask yourself:
 - What’s the *worst* that can happen?
 - How *likely* is this to happen?
 - Is there any *evidence* that contradicts this negative view?
 - Am I looking at the *whole* picture?
 - I am being *realistically* objective?
- As you become more aware of your critic’s attacks, imagine putting your critic in a sealed box, or simply walking away from them.

Get back to work! You do not need to be held hostage by your own negative thoughts.

Academic processes are inconsistent

Most academic writers experience periods of intense visible work, and also periods of no observable work. Thinking is a quiet but necessary component in writing, and many academics need to discuss their ideas with others to clarify the task or their thinking.

The process of thinking-talking-writing is also “messy” work. Your writing will change as you clarify your ideas or incorporate new research.

Similarly, other academic tasks can seem invisible, messy, or counterproductive; scientists, for example, often endure many hours of running the same time-consuming experiment over and over with discouraging results before they achieve a breakthrough.

Decide how to make it work for you

Indulge the perfectionist in you for tasks that require an uncompromising standard of excellence: checking citations in a research paper, for example. Apply the “good enough” standard to other tasks.



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