Perfectionism in Writing

Q. What is perfect?
A. Without flaw, faultless. Montaigne says “perfection is a walk with god”.

Q. What is writing?
A. the act of recording (verb); a literary piece (noun), i.e. writing is both a process and a product.

Q. What is “perfectionism”?
A. the uncompromising pursuit of excellence

Q. What is “good enough”?
A. a personal standard that may shift depending on circumstances, such as the importance of the work, the internal and external resources you can draw on at this moment, the various costs of doing “better”.

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1  **Self-Reflection: **Ask yourself these questions

1.1  **Does your “perfectionism’ under-mine you and lead to...**

- Feeling self-conscious about the writing process
- Feeling dissatisfied with the quality of the product (both incomplete and completed work)
- Feeling judged about the writing
- Feeling DISTRESSED
- Can’t start writing
- Can’t stop writing
- Working at the last minute: you may miss sleep or other obligations in order to complete writing, or you may not have time for proof reading and editing.
- Not submitting writing for grading or review

Some things that are often mislabeled as “perfectionism”

- Confusion about what is expected in the assignment
- Avoidance of academic work
- Lack of confidence
- Unfamiliarity with how to write
- Poor time allotment

1.2  **What are your strengths as a writer?**

- Creativity
- Word usage
- Clarity
- Making connections among ideas
- Developing an argument
- Writing to build or maintain enthusiasm for an idea
- Proof-reading
2 Strategies to Improve the Writing Experience

Are there any aspects of writing a report, paper or thesis that are potentially helped by an uncompromising desire for excellence?

**YES:** tasks that have defined, uncompromising standards.

- Spelling
- Grammar
- Citations and References

2.1 Strategies Regarding your Attitude and Expectations

2.1.1 Writers accept that the writing process is inconsistent

Most writers experience periods of intense work, and also periods of no observable work. Thinking is a quiet but necessary component in writing, and many scientists and 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. What is on the page or screen is modified as one’s thinking becomes clearer, or new results are incorporated.

2.1.2 Writers develop the HABIT of writing:

A place

A time of day
A duration: 90 minutes followed by a significant rest or other task, or a 3 hour block divided into 3 periods of ~ 50 minutes “on task” (thinking or writing), 10 minute break, or any pattern that works for you

A clear concrete goal: a specified task, an amount or “output”, a diagram, an argument, etc. If you choose to specify a duration of time-on-task, then also track the “output”.

2.1.3 Writers learn to detach (somewhat) from their product.
As a student, academic or scientist, it is expected that your work will be discussed, graded or judged on the merit of the written piece.

Your work ≠ your worth as a person

See Section 5 on Coping with Anxiety.

2.1.4 Writers understand that writing does not need to be stressful
The university may have a “culture of stress” around completing writing assignments, but students can choose not to engage with that expectation. You can reduce the stress – even for students trying to harness their uncompromising pursuit of excellence- if you

i) understand the assignment or task,
ii) understand the writing process
iii) use good time management habits
3 Strategies Regarding the Writing Process

3.1 Stages in the Process
The writing process consists of several private stages including: invention, research, outlining, drafting, initial proof-reading and editing. Refer to http://queensu.ca/writingcentre/handouts/handoutsindex.html for information on creating an outline, developing a thesis statement, and writing particular types of assignments. The punctuation handouts are also useful for editing.

Or see the www.owl.english.purdue.edu/owl website for additional writing information.

The public stage is final editing, and submitting to your professor or editor.

By following the steps in the writing process described below, students who seek perfection in their written work can reduce their anxiety. Students will feel more in control of issues such as confusion about what is expected, knowing how to create the piece, and determining what they want to say in the paper.

3.1.1 Invention: Starting the Process
- clarify the purpose and audience of finished product

- create a rough plan of tasks, due dates, and choose a dedicated research/writing time. See http://www.queensu.ca/qlc/calculator.html for
guidelines on planning the tasks and time frame for a research paper, and http://www.queensu.ca/qlc/Thesis.html for guidelines re. thesis writing.

-pre-write on what you already know and what you want to know more about. Capturing ideas: use mind maps or bullet points

- have a flexible, working sense of the focus before starting a literature search

- narrow the topic, form a working position statement or thesis

- start an Outline using a mind map, web or brain-storm format or more traditional linear format

3.1.2 Research
- in addition to data collection within your research lab or field work, the Research Librarians are extremely helpful in building a research plan and suggesting resource material http://www.queensu.ca/learn/library

3.1.3 Finish the Outline
- this step is critical for perfectionistic writers! Preparing an Outline requires you to organize your thinking, so you’ll know what you will say. Focus first on outlining the Big Picture Ideas, and agonize over the choice of words in later drafts.
### 3.1.4 Write the Paper

- **Draft 1**
  - Writer-centered draft: gather your thoughts
  - get everything down on paper, or the screen
  - write by hand if you tend to delete your work in frustration

- **Draft 2**
  - re-arrange it, add or delete material
  - identify areas needing more research, add new sub-topics

- **Draft 3**
  - Reader-centered focus: read as if you were the intended audience
  - Proof-read, revise for clarity, structure, flow
  - Edit for spelling, grammar, accurate references

*Perfectionists take note:*

*With Draft #3, exacting standards should be applied to the editing of spelling and grammar errors, and accuracy of citations. Go for it!!*

### 3.2 Submit the Paper...for external readers.

This stage marks the shift from writing “for your eyes only” to the final product which is submitted for evaluation.
Before you hand in the final version to your professor, tutor or reviewer, you may bring it to the Writing Centre (www.queensu.ca/writingcentre) for a collaborative discussion about your structure, flow and style, or have it read by a lab partner, or a naïve reader.

Remember – it is the paper that is graded, not your value as a person.

Is the act of “submitting for grading or feedback” challenging for you? Perhaps you need to think about the different meanings of the word “submit”, and what each means to you.
4 Strategies Regarding Managing your Time

4.1 Work Habits
Plan to write on a regular basis. Work 90 minutes followed by a significant rest or other unrelated task, or work a 3 hour block divided into 3 periods of ~ 50 minutes “on task” (thinking or writing), 10 minute break, or any pattern that works for you.

Break a large project into smaller more manageable pieces. Will your finished document be a collection of shorter chapters or critical essays? (Haven't you written smaller pieces previously, and this project just has more chunks?)

There is no perfect order in writing on the topics. Think of a section you’re comfortable with writing. e.g. 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, put it in point form, highlight it, make a note to come back later – but move on!

Work backwards from large target dates, and create due dates for the smaller pieces. See for example project scheduling software such as The Assignment Calculator for research papers [http://www.queensu.ca/qlc/calculator.html](http://www.queensu.ca/qlc/calculator.html) or the Thesis Manager [http://www.queensu.ca/qlc/Thesis.html](http://www.queensu.ca/qlc/Thesis.html) or the Gantt chart [http://www.pureviolet.net/ganttpv/](http://www.pureviolet.net/ganttpv/)

Start a writing journal, to track your thought development and to add some fun.

i) Finish each writing 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, or something you can’t see how to connect with another important idea.

ii) Start each writing session by recording any thoughts you may have had about yesterday’s question.

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

4.2 Decide How to use your Perfectionistic Habit
Consider what skill or attribute is required for the different tasks (creative thinking, picky data analysis, precise checking of citations…). Indulge the perfectionist in you for tasks
requiring an uncompromising standard of excellence. Apply the “good enough” standard to other tasks.
5 Strategies to Cope with the Anxiety of Writing

“Perfectionism is the voice of the oppressor, the enemy of the people. It will keep you cramped and insane your whole life, and it is the main obstacle between you and a sh*tty first draft…Perfectionism means you try desperately not to leave so much mess to clean up. But clutter is wonderfully fertile ground – you can still discover new treasures under all those piles, clean things up, edit things, fix things, get a grip. Tidiness suggests that something is as good as it’s going to get. Tidiness makes me think of holding breath, of suspended animation, while writing needs to breathe and move.” (Lamott, A., Bird by Bird, 1995)

Well-chosen strategies regarding your attitude, approach to the writing process and work habits may be necessary but not sufficient for some people to overcome their perfectionistic habits, actually engage in writing in a satisfying way, and produce the required product.

Do you experience uncompromisingly critical self-evaluation? A crippling desire to be thought of as extraordinarily exceptional?

IGNORE BOTH!!
5.1 Cognitive Strategies to Reduce Anxiety

5.1.1 Engaging with Writing
We all have an inner dialogue that has developed over our life-times, which reflect the experiences we have had. Those voices can inspire us and help us make good choices but 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 “critic”.

Your coach helps you grow and face new challenges.
Your **critic** keeps you fixed, scared and dissatisfied with your efforts and results.

You’ll never be good enough
Your ideas are below standard
You’ll never get it right!
They made a mistake admitting you
• Picture your coach and your critic sitting on each of your shoulders

• Create a visual image that make sense for you, to capture the words or feelings they evoke. Feed the one you want- you have a choice.

• Practice calling on your supportive coach when you sit down to write, or face another challenging task.

• Refute your critic. Ask yourself:
  o What’s the worst that can happen?
  o How likely is this to happen?
  o Is there any evidence that contradicts this negative view?
  o Am I looking at the whole picture?
  o I am being realistically objective?

• As you become more aware of your monstrous critic attacking you, imagine putting the demon in a sealed box, or putting a clothes pin on its nasty mouth!!

Get back to work😊 You do not need to be held hostage by your own negative thoughts.
5.1.2 Develop a Growth Mindset

Recent research by Carol Dweck describes how to become more aware of the dialogue in your mind and change it to become more helpful, as described below.

http://mindsetonline.com/changemyselfset/firststeps/index.html
How You Can Change From a “Fixed Mindset” to a “Growth Mindset” 
© 2006-2010 Carol Dweck. All Rights Reserved

Step1. Learn to hear your fixed mindset “voice.”

As you approach a challenge, that voice might say to you “Are you sure you can do it? Maybe you don’t have the talent.” “What if you fail—you’ll be a failure” “People will laugh at you for thinking you had talent.” “If you don’t try, you can protect yourself and keep your dignity.”

As you hit a setback, the voice might say, “This would have been a snap if you really had talent.” “You see, I told you it was a risk. Now you’ve gone and shown the world how limited you are.” “It’s not too late to back out, make excuses, and try to regain your dignity.”

As you face criticism, you might hear yourself say, “It’s not my fault. It was something or someone else’s fault.” You might feel yourself getting angry at the person who is giving you feedback. “Who do they think they are? I’ll put them in their place.” The other person might be giving you specific, constructive feedback, but you might be hearing them say “I’m really disappointed in you. I thought you were capable but now I see you’re not.”

Step 2. Recognize that you have a choice.

How you interpret challenges, setbacks, and criticism is your choice. You can interpret them in a fixed mindset as signs that your fixed talents or abilities are lacking. Or you can interpret them in a growth mindset as signs that you need to ramp up your strategies and effort, stretch yourself, and expand your abilities. It’s up to you.

So as you face challenges, setbacks, and criticism, listen to the fixed mindset voice and...

Step 3. Talk back to it with a growth mindset voice.

As you approach a challenge:

THE FIXED-MINDSET says “Are you sure you can do it? Maybe you don’t have the talent.”

THE GROWTH-MINDSET answers, “I’m not sure I can do it now, but I think I can learn to with time and effort.”

FIXED MINDSET: “What if you fail—you’ll be a failure”
GROWTH MINDSET: “Most successful people had failures along the way.”

FIXED MINDSET: “If you don’t try, you can protect yourself and keep your dignity.”

GROWTH MINDSET: “If I don’t try, I automatically fail. Where’s the dignity in that?”

As you hit a setback:

FIXED MINDSET: “This would have been a snap if you really had talent.”

GROWTH MINDSET: “That is so wrong. Basketball wasn’t easy for Michael Jordan and science wasn’t easy for Thomas Edison. They had a passion and put in tons of effort.

As you face criticism:

FIXED MINDSET: “It’s not my fault. It was something or someone else’s fault.”

GROWTH MINDSET: “If I don’t take responsibility, I can’t fix it. Let me listen—however painful it is—and learn whatever I can.”

Then...

Step 4. Take the growth mindset action.

Over time, which voice you heed becomes pretty much your choice. Whether you

- take on the challenge wholeheartedly,
- learn from your setbacks and try again
- hear the criticism and act on it is now in your hands.

Practice hearing both voices, and practice acting on the growth mindset. See how you can make it work for you.
5.1.3 Letting Go or Stopping Strategies

5.1.3.1 Trouble stopping the literature search phase?
When you start seeing the same material over and over…it’s time to stop researching.
Keep perspective: one article is very seldom so earth-shattering that it changes your argument, and it’s more likely just to end up as a single reference or a footnote.

When you are spending all your time researching a minor detail or remotely related topic…it’s time to stop.

If you don’t have an overall picture of how the current topic you are investigating relates to the purpose or thesis statement, stop and think. Try making a mind map of the topics you wish to discuss. Where does your current area of reading fit in? Is it a major area directly related to the thesis statement or core theme, or is it a sub-sub-sub-topic?? Decide the value of continuing to pursue the search vs setting boundaries on what you are able to discuss.

5.1.3.2 Trouble stopping the writing phase?
Consider “contracting” with yourself for your desired grade or end product before you begin writing. STOP when you achieve your goal.

Weigh your desired grade or quality of finished product against other factors such as the amount of available time, resources, other demands you must meet, or obligations, and the importance of this phase of the project. Trust your judgment. Monitor the project in relation to your practical goal, and stick to the plan.
Use a good time management plan, with tasks to be completed by certain dates. Stick to it.

Build down- time into your schedule, so you get some distance from your writing. When you re-read your work, you may have a better perspective and be more objective.

Be aware of when you are “obsessing” over the quality of your work. Do a Cost /Benefit Analysis, or try a 4-Square Review.

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4 Square Review:
- Record your thoughts, as above
- Look them over
- Accept the contradictions within yourself…we are full of contradictions!
- If you are trying to make a decision, the content may be useful in weighing alternatives

Arrange with your supervisor or a friend to have regular check-ins, to help you stay on track with your time management plan.
Seek a qualified opinion regarding your final draft document, or use a copy editor.

Quiet your inner critic, that pushes you to seek uncompromising excellence and is never satisfied with what you offer. (See 4.1.2 above)

**5.1.3.3 Trouble saving your work?**
Try writing long-hand on paper if you frequently hit the DELETE key at the end of a session. You hand works slower than your mind usually, so you’ll have time to think more carefully as you write.

Start a “MAYBE USEFUL” folder and move work into this file for possible future use, rather than deleting it.

**5.1.3.4 Trouble letting go and handing IT in?**

**Aim for the latest word, not the last word!** You are joining a long line of individuals who have thought about this problem, or whose thoughts have led up to this problem.

Quiet your inner critic, as in 4.1.2 above.

Keep your perspective. In truth- others will have different things to say, at some point. Your writing captures your knowledge or perspective at this moment in time. **That is enough.**

Make a list of your strengths, past achievements, skills. Use this as a buffer for your ego if you are frightened to receive feedback.

Reframe the value of the feedback you may receive. It is not a reflection of your personhood, although your supervisor may make suggestions to improve your writing process or end product.

Forgive yourself for being human- living with flaws and faults.