

How to Defeat Your Perfectionism in Writing

by [Ruthanne Reid](#) | [46 Comments](#)

We have an important topic to discuss today: the dangers of perfectionism in writing.



I know that being a perfectionist has its perks. We apply “perfectionist” to folks who are detail-oriented, reliable, and efficient. Unfortunately, being a perfectionist does precisely the opposite in writing: it obfuscates details, lets your deadlines whoosh by, and creates a deeply inefficient and unsatisfying writing habit.

I struggle with perfectionism in my writing, but I’ve learned to beat it back with a few large sticks—and it’s my pleasure to teach you my tools of the trade.

Identifying Perfectionism in Writing

How do you know if this is you? If you struggle with perfectionism in your writing, here’s what you’re likely to experience:

- A lack of satisfaction in your own writing (because it’s never good enough).
- An inability to stop editing it and just move on (because it’s never good enough).
- Aggravated fear and stress at the thought of your writing going public (because it’s never good enough—yes, we said that already).
- A feeling of failure regarding your work (because it’s never... you get the idea).
- An absence of fun or enjoyment when you write (completely understandable because *it’s never good enough*).

Any of those items ring a bell?

Here’s the thing: part of the reason perfectionism in writing is so deadly is **because it’s a vague standard**. What the heck is “perfect” in writing? Is there such a thing? Seriously? There are no “perfect” books or authors; even Shakespeare has readers who loathe him, as does every other author in the universe including your personal favorites.

“Perfectionism” in writing is deadly because it doesn’t actually mean anything. All it does is poison the well.

So where does that leave you? There’s no “off-button” for the drive of perfectionism, but there is hope.

“Perfectionism” in writing is deadly because it doesn’t actually mean anything. All it does is poison the well.

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Admit You’re Wearing Blinders

You will never see your story as clearly as other people do. This goes back to that thing I refer to as “writer-brain.” We do not see our writing the way a reader would. We can’t; we’re too close to it, too wedded to the rhythms and pacing.

In your writing, you will see every single flaw. You will see flaws in spots where your voice just hasn’t fully formed yet as a writer (which is fine because that takes TIME). You will see flaws even where there aren’t flaws—just places that could be worded differently. To you, these flaws seem like glaring, horrifying potholes.

The good news is, these flaws might not be as bad as you think.

This is one of those reasons it's essential to belong to a healthy writing community. When we write alone, our muses tend to be cannibalistic and eat each other. The helpful opinions of other writers *do* matter, and if they don't think that chapter sucked like you thought it did, you have to acknowledge they may be right.

“

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Tweet this

Be Willing to Put it Aside For a While

“What the hey, lady?” you might be saying. “Every article, you’re telling me to take time off from writing. Is this about writing or not-writing, anyway?”

It’s about writing—kind of like an exercise program is about exercise *even on your days off*.

Our minds and bodies work the same way. We have to exercise them to get in shape (the more you write, the better you get), but just like your muscles, if you don’t take time off, instead of growing, your writing muscles will atrophy and possibly get sprained.

Any of you who’ve ever done a real exercise program know this. The days you take off are every bit as important as the days you work out. Skip them to your detriment—and writing is the same way.

Publish It—Even When It’s Not Perfect

Okay, I can hear your screams from here. Take a minute to breathe. I’ll wait.

Do you remember [this video](#)? (If not, I highly, HIGHLY suggest you watch it. And if so, I suggest you watch it anyway.)

I know how hard it is to release your words to the world when you feel they aren’t quite ready. *I know*. But the reason it happens is because you know how

good you want it to be, and you're subconsciously comparing it to your favorite authors—most of whom have been writing years longer than you.

(Seriously. [Watch the video.](#))

Right now, *at this time*, you may not be able to get that piece of writing up to the standard you want for yourself.

That's okay.

That's normal.

It doesn't mean you don't publish it.

If you want to become a better writer, you *have* to be willing to put stuff out there that isn't perfect. Yes, you edit it, yes, you have beta-readers comb through it, yes to all of that—you make it as good as you're capable of making it *right now*. **But after all that, if you don't make it public, you're feeding the poison of perfectionism, and you will find yourself paralyzed.**

This step is crucial. Neil Gaiman said it this way: “Remember that, sooner or later, before it ever reaches perfection, you will have to let it go and move on and start to write the next thing. Perfection is like chasing the horizon. Keep moving.”

Conclusion: Avoid the Vagueness of “Perfect Writing”

Be brave, fellow writers. Perfectionism will only harm you. Are you ready to keep moving? I hope so. I need encouragement on that front myself, so let's all help each other. Trust your writing community to help you get the story into the shape it needs to be, and keep on writing.

Do you have any pieces you're frozen on because of perfectionism? Let me know in the [comments section](#).

PRACTICE

Take something you've been working on forever. Something you're afraid of sharing. Something that hasn't felt quite right yet, something that's paralyzed you—and share it in the comments below. Don't forget to respond to three other writers, too!

166Shares 100 66 0 0×166Shares

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About Ruthanne Reid

Bestselling author Ruthanne Reid writes about elves, aliens, vampires, and space-travel, and she is the author of the *Among the Mythos* series. Subscribe to her articles at RuthanneReid.com, and follow her on [Twitter \(@RuthanneReid\)](https://twitter.com/RuthanneReid)

46 Comments

The Write Practice

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LilianGardner • 6 months ago

Thanks, Ruthanne for this great post.

I aim at writing well and I edit to improve grammar and punctuation. I'd like to have style, too.

I'm certainly not a perfectionist. I have another abhorrible vice; I procrastinate far too much, telling myself, 'I'll do it later'. Now I have six unfinished stories.

I know my writing is not as good as I want it to be, but I'm not abashed if others read what I've written and give negative criticism.

I must take your advice, that is, to publish.

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share >

[Ruthanne Reid](#) → [Lilian Gardner](#) 6 months ago

Ruthanne Reid → Lillian Gardner · 6 months ago

Hi, Lillian! Oh, I know that feeling all too well. I have a ton of unfinished stories, too!

I'm so glad for the advice from Joe: Publish it. It gives confidence and helps us learn how to do this even better than I would have dreamed.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›

Lillian Gardner → Ruthanne Reid · 6 months ago

You, too! Unfinished stories? Ruthanne it makes me feel better towards myself. An excellent 'push' from Joe, that is, publish it.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›

Saud Shahid · 2 months ago

I must admit I am a perfectionist, but I tend to give in my pieces and meet deadlines, however they may be. Till the very minute, I am stressing about how the structure, grammar and composition are not tuned. Although, through my experiences I do believe that it is nothing but a constant deaf and blind paranoia.

It helps when you finally decide to ignore your inner screams, give in, and just publish! It lifts the entire pressure in a minute, and THEN you feel good about what you've written. It is just like sleeping: You keep sleeping and feeling tired as long as you keep hitting snooze on your alarm. Although, when you finally decide to get up and put off the alarm, that is when the weariness lifts off completely.

Just. Keep. Sharing.

Cheers!

^ | v · Reply · Share ›

Ruthanne Reid → Saud Shahid · 2 months ago

I hear you, Saud! Ignoring your inner screams is definitely one of the most important keys for reaching publication. Thanks for sharing this!

^ | v · Reply · Share ›

Jp Lundstrom · 5 months ago

Claptrap. You're not talking about perfectionism, you're talking about Obsessive-compulsive Disorder. All writers want their work to be the best it possibly can. It's healthy and good for the reader.

If the only thing you're worried about is not being able to say "finished," then set yourself a rule--a certain number of revisions, or accepting the judgement of beta readers, or whatever you'd like for a standard. Then stick to it.

You must have other ideas you'd like to get started on. Think about them instead.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›

Ruthanne Reid → Jp Lundstrom · 4 months ago

Hi, JP! I'm really glad for you that you don't struggle with this. :) However, as you might be able to tell from the many comments (not to mention statements from such people as Neil Gaiman and more), this isn't OCD. This is about fearing that

what you're doing isn't good enough; it's about quality, and fear of being judged. It's also about knowing that what you write isn't quite up to your taste yet.

You're absolutely blessed not to have the normal level of self-doubt attached to this. :) The rest of us have a longer road to walk.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

Toni East • 6 months ago

Thank you so much Ruthanne for this post. I even find myself stopping to edit on a ten to fifteen minute warm up!!! The spotlight has hit in the right place. I too have stories 'on hold' because I fear they are not good enough. One thing that has helped is a free online programme called Draft that does not allow you to edit while you are writing. VERY frustrating but it is helping to break the habit when I feel brave enough to use it!!!! Thank you once again. I love this site. So many interesting and practical posts.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

Ruthanne Reid → Toni East • 6 months ago

I'm so glad to hear that, Toni! Draft is SUPER-helpful... and super-frustrating. :) I know that feeling all too well! Best of luck pushing that "publish" button. I'll be crossing my fingers for you!

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

George McNeese • 6 months ago

This is a great post. I have too many works that I have "on hold" because I am such a perfectionist. I write them in a notebook, unwilling to put them on a laptop because I feel putting it on a laptop signifies me completing the work as if it's a final draft, even when it's not. This is a frustrating thing for me because I want people to like what I write and I want my work to be the best with minimal effort. I get that it's a recipe for self-destruction as a writer. I'm working on ridding myself of that kind of thinking. Lately, I have been encouraged to write in my laptop and send my drafts to friends on Twitter. Admittedly, I am a bit hesitant, but I am working on it. I'm working on not letting fear and perfectionism rule my writing life.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

Ruthanne Reid → George McNeese • 6 months ago

George, you are in good company. I'm really proud of you for sending even the drafts out to friends - that's a HUGE first step.

You can do it. Keep writing. Start sharing. I can't wait to see the result.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

George McNeese → Ruthanne Reid • 6 months ago

A lot of my Twitter and Facebook friends have congratulated me on overcoming my fear. It's only a short story, but people have celebrated this accomplishment, nonetheless. Some part of me thinks this is a big deal because it's been years since I've shared anything. Some part of me doesn't

because I feel I should have been doing this since the beginning. I've been out of practice of writing so long, I've forgotten how harrowing it is to let others read my work and offer their opinions.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

EmFairley • 6 months ago

Thanks Ruthanne! This is so me! As a Virgo I'm very much a perfectionist and turning the editor off is a struggle. I think I'm done and go do a final read through, only to find yet more that needs tweaking. Again. Gotta keep on the scroll bar, not the keyboard. Maybe that should be my new mantra?

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

Ruthanne Reid → EmFairley • 6 months ago

I HEAR YOU! In a way, this is where I found self-publishing to be both a boon and a curse. :) When I found more things to change in my debut novel, I could change them - but it meant constantly uploading and reconvertng into different versions. More of a time sink!

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›

EmFairley → Ruthanne Reid • 6 months ago

I'm working with a coauthor, so for ease of use we're doing everything in Google Drive. Only when we're both totally happy with the full manuscript, (we're working one chapter at a time and editing as we go) will we convert to the various formats ready for publication. Not only does it save time, but it also means we can both work simultaneously when we can :)

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

Vincent Harding • 6 months ago

Once again, I walk away from yet another Ruthanne post feeling enlightened and inspired to the finer details of the craft. Thank you!

I read the posts and comment on the rare occasion though I can't say I'm a part of any writing community. Although, I think I'd like to be.

I wrote for years on staffed writing blocks for established IP's before very recently pushing off to pursue my solo act. I have beta-readers lined up for my current MS when it's finished so that hasn't been overlooked. However, it would be beneficial to have fellow book writers that I can trust to have a dialog with, at the very least, about my work and the work that's out there.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

Ruthanne Reid → Vincent Harding • 6 months ago

I love your attitude, Vincent! this sounds like quite a journey you've taken. I really look forward to seeing the results of this next step!

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

dpswiftstar58 · 6 months ago

Thank you so much for this post, Ruthanne. I never realized I struggled with perfectionism until reading this. In fact, I think this may be the cause of my recurring writer's block. Now I can nip this thing in the bud and get back to my writing!

Thank you again, I cannot stress enough how much this has helped me!
:)

^ | v · Reply · Share ›

Ruthanne Reid → dpswiftstar58 · 6 months ago

You're so welcome, Dianna! This is something that's tripped me up for YEARS. I'm so glad my stumbling discoveries have helped someone else. :)

^ | v · Reply · Share ›

Mary L. Farmer · 6 months ago

OMG this is me to a T. I sometimes labor and labor over one page until the spontaneity and the "voice" gets lost and don't know how I'm going to get it back and I'm sad. I self-pubbed some short stories a couple years ago that I cringe when I go back and read now, but this article has made me feel better about them. They were the best I could do at the time and that's all that matters. I can always re-write them and publish a 2nd edition, right? Good things will happen if I keep plugging away and improving and reading other authors I like and admire. I think perfectionism is just a fear of being criticized, and that's going to happen anyway, so why should I get all wound up and second guess myself about every little thing?

^ | v · Reply · Share ›

Ruthanne Reid → Mary L. Farmer · 6 months ago

They WERE the best you could do at the time - and yes, that matters! Mary, this is great to hear. It's so difficult to give up that second-guessing habit; I really love that you're tackling it now. May your writing flourish!

^ | v · Reply · Share ›

Dennis J Coughlin · 6 months ago

Thanks for the inspiring article and I loved that video!

^ | v · Reply · Share ›

Ruthanne Reid → Dennis J Coughlin · 6 months ago

You're welcome, Dennis! That's one of my all-time favorites. :)

1 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

Freda Merlyn Nott · 6 months ago

I just can't thank you enough for this write up.

Is this topic good enough to write on?

I haven't put it down the way I feel.

Maybe if I used a different tone it would be more interesting?

Questions like this always always play in my head when I sit down to write. I wonder if I am doing justice to the idea. And then I go back to reading my favourite authors for guidance or inspiration. By now I am so sure I am not good enough.

The surprising part here is I know I have to publish to get better not only write. Yet it is difficult to bring myself to submit the piece I have written. Wondering away if I could make it any better.

Thanks again

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

Ruthanne Reid → Freda Merlyn Nott • 6 months ago

Freda, you are SO welcome. All the questions you ask here are crazy-familiar to me!

I really have to lean on Neil Gaiman when it comes to this in the end. We can always make it "better" or improve it, but there comes a time when we just have to call it DONE, or we won't move on.

Keep writing!

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›

= (^__^)+ • 6 months ago

You shouldn't strive to be perfect when writing at certain points of doing so. Sure, you have to get your style guide-based reference clean and perfect, but . . . well . . . writing is a very HUMAN thing. And as humans, we'll make mistakes even with the best of intentions.

THE English professor that I outright IDOLIZED when I was at university said it best: "your writing is almost NEVER finished . . . at some point, you have to hand your work. You might be able to do revisions later, but, you have to be able to finalize your work." Amen to that.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

Ruthanne Reid → = (^__^)+ • 6 months ago

That's right! I fully believe that no piece of writing is ever "finished." It reminds me of this quote: "No piece of writing is ever finished. It's just due." — Bill Condon

At least we're not alone in this struggle, right? :)

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›

Harsh Rathour • 6 months ago

You know, I would say yes, I have many ideas of stories written briefly but I have left them in the middle, just because I found them stupid after I wrote the beginning..

I have many such stories left incomplete..

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

Ruthanne Reid → Harsh Rathour • 6 months ago

We all have, Harsh! Sometimes, it's necessary to just push through that and publish anyway, which helps us to move on and write more.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›

Harsh Rathour → Ruthanne Reid · 6 months ago

OK mam..

But you know, some people criticise your writing when you publish and that is what reduces the confidence to write..

It feels as if I can't write well & bla bla....

^ | v · Reply · Share ›

Ruthanne Reid → Harsh Rathour · 6 months ago

I know just what that's like. You know what helps?

Go look up famous writers and see what their low-star reviews say.

Even SHAKESPEARE gets criticism. Every single author does, no matter how good, and no matter how long they've been writing.

You're in good company!

^ | v · Reply · Share ›

Xeno Hemlock · 6 months ago

Those signs of perfectionism are on point. Can totally relate. Now I'm aware and will try to be a little "imperfect" from here on out. Great article Ruthanne!

^ | v · Reply · Share ›

Ruthanne Reid → Xeno Hemlock · 6 months ago

That's awesome to hear, Xeno!!

^ | v · Reply · Share ›

Joyce Saad · 6 months ago

A great way to overcome perfectionism in writing that I have found useful in the past is to purposefully write a REALLY bad story, especially one full of cliches. Something about that exercise really takes the pressure off, and seeing that lightning doesn't strike you down when the terrible writing is on paper helps overcome the fear of mediocrity.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›

Ruthanne Reid → Joyce Saad · 6 months ago

Hahaha! Joyce, I've never heard that one before, and I kind of love it. It reminds me of the Bulwer-Lytton fiction contest. Ever heard of it? Sounds like you might already have an entry. :D <http://www.bulwer-lytton.com/>

^ | v · Reply · Share ›

Beth · 6 months ago

Thank you, Ruthanne. This is wonderful advice, well seasoned with humor and heart. OK. I will do it! I will make just one more pass on that current wip.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›

Ruthanne Reid → Beth · 6 months ago

I'm so happy to hear that, Beth! You can do it! ONE more pass - I'll hold you do that. ;)

^ | v · Reply · Share ›

Beth → Ruthanne Reid · 6 months ago

Thank YOU for your encouragement. I will keep you posted! Tonight, the big accomplishment was getting my hubby's Vietnam era novel up and e-published. Done! Now back to my stuff.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›

Stephanie Ward · 6 months ago

Great post! I love the quote about cannabalistic muses. :-)

^ | v · Reply · Share ›

Ruthanne Reid → Stephanie Ward · 6 months ago

Haha! Thanks, Stephanie! That sure is what mine do. :)

^ | v · Reply · Share ›

Tina Seward · 6 months ago

I'm not sure if this counts as "perfectionism", but I have an obsession with getting certain details exactly right. I'm working on a crime/suspense novel, and I find myself asking questions which are good (I just asked, are there one or two people who question a witness to a crime) but I'm so worried about not getting those details *exactly right* that I think it hinders my writing.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›

Ruthanne Reid → Tina Seward · 6 months ago

That's definitely perfectionism! It's such a struggle to figure out where that line is - the line between "perfect ENOUGH" and that vague "better than it is" boundary line that we just can't ever reach.

You can do it!

^ | v · Reply · Share ›

Kate (Southern Belle Simple) · 6 months ago

I had been working on this post earlier today and left it because I felt like it just wasn't right. Your words encouraged me to revisit it and I got brave and hit publish. Thanks for sharing this! <http://www.southernbellesimple...>

^ | v · Reply · Share ›

Ruthanne Reid → Kate (Southern Belle Simple) · 6 months ago

Kate, that is awesome! I REALLY like that post, too. (And I hadn't realized there

were only 99 days left - YIKES!)

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

Suzanne Cable • 6 months ago

Why would I want to defeat my 'perfectionism?' In fact, my perfectionism is one of my most useful (not to mention amusing...) 'IMperfections!' :-)

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

Ruthanne Reid → Suzanne Cable • 6 months ago

:) Hi, Suzanne! Simple answer to that: you want to defeat it if it's preventing you from moving forward.

Too many of us struggle with the fact that our work isn't perfect, and since it isn't perfect, we won't simply publish it and move on to the next piece. That's a terrible trap to fall into, and it's where perfectionism can lead.

If you've got the balance down of "perfect ENOUGH" so you can move on to the next project, and the next, then you rock. :D For the rest of us, we have to learn where that line is.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

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