



**The
McGraw
Center**

for Teaching & Learning
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Getting Past Perfectionism

Instead of ...	Strive to ...
Setting standards beyond reach and reason so that mistakes become inevitable	set high standards achievable through effort
never being satisfied by anything less than a perfect product	focus more on processes such as revision or problem-solving outcome
becoming depressed when faced with failure and disappointment	view failure and disappointment as only temporary setbacks on the way to success
being preoccupied with fear of failure and disapproval to the point of paralysis	keep normal anxiety and fear of failure and disapproval within perspective and use them to focus effort to improve
seeing mistakes as evidence of unworthiness	see mistakes as opportunities for growth and learning

Everyone wants to produce high-quality work, and the pressure to do so can sometimes seem nearly oppressive. Problems arise, however, when pursuit of excellence becomes pursuit of perfection and when fear of mistakes becomes the main motivating impulse, replacing the desire to achieve one's goals. The results can often become crippling: assignments get bogged down in minor details, every critique becomes evidence of deep personal flaws. And perfectionism tends to lead, in practice if not in purpose, to procrastination and to a general and vague sense of uncertainty regarding when a project is actually completed.

The challenge is to preserve a healthy strive for excellence without precluding the possibility of success. Here are some strategies for dealing with perfectionist temptations:

- **Make a list of advantages and disadvantages of aiming for perfection.** List, for example, the trade-offs between strong self-criticism and the quality of work that actually gets submitted.
- **Take an honest look at how you spend your time** — particularly the amount of time spent on creating or starting projects as opposed to time spent worrying about and “fixing” them.

^{*}Drawn in part from “Perfectionism: A Double-Edged Sword,” by The University of Texas at Austin Counseling & Mental Health Center (<http://www.utexas.edu/student/cmhc/booklets/perfection/pefect.html>).

- **Triage, organize, and assign time limits for assignments.** And then adhere to those limits. If time runs out on the schedule, give yourself permission to move on to the next task.
- **To help keep yourself on schedule, set deadlines with *low* stakes attached.** Set a deadline on your schedule to produce a draft or part of one (an introduction, e.g.), and make an appointment with someone else, such as a Writing Center Fellow or your course instructor, to talk over that draft. Besides spurring progress, doing so also demonstrates the fruitfulness of criticism and the importance of sound process in writing.
- **When struggling, seek help.** Resources such as the Writing Center and The McGraw Center for Teaching and Learning are designed to help students past common struggles — not to confirm or to emphasize personal shortcomings. Course instructors also want their students to succeed and will do their best to make that happen.
- **Instead of throwing work away, “replant” it.** When working on writing assignments, try keeping two files open at the same time, the main version and a “garden” version. Instead of simply deleting phrases, sentences, and paragraphs from the main file when editing, cut and paste them into the garden file. Work therefore doesn’t get deleted but instead gets “replanted” for use at a different time.
- **Be realistic about what you can accomplish.** Definitely set high personal standards for your work, but realize that no one expects anyone to know or to be able to do everything. Strive to produce work at a level that lies just above what you can currently complete.
- **View receiving criticism as an opportunity to improve.** Learning depends upon mistakes. Convert criticism received on a paper or problem set into a list of suggestions to make your work better going forward, such as getting clear about what makes a thesis arguable, what insightful analysis of a source amounts to, or how the problems on a problem set connect up with and inform exams.
- **For each assignment, strive to produce the best work you can at this point and not the best work that has ever been produced on this topic or problem.** Fundamentally, realize that nearly all academic work — *at all levels* — tends to be surrendered instead of finished. Academic pursuits tend to be on-going conversations with the contributions of those who have come before. Accordingly, view any contribution as the latest word and not the last on any subject, question, or assignment.

Further Reading:

- Frost, R. O., Marten, P., Lahart, C., & Rosenblate, R. (1990). The dimensions of perfectionism. *Cognitive Therapy and Research*, 14(5), 449-468.
- Lynd-Stevenson, R. M., & M. Hearne, C. (1999). Perfectionism and depressive affect: The pros and cons of being a perfectionist. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 26(3), 549-562.