

# Perfectionism

A M Carley

*“In order to go on living one must try  
to escape the death involved in perfectionism.”*

—Hannah Arendt

On its face, perfectionism seems like an easy thing to steer clear of. Hannah Arendt sets up pretty easy choices.

*Life, or death?*

*Good enough, or perfect?*

Perfectionism is not  
always obvious  
when it happens.

When you look at it like that, it's simple to vote for life, and for good enough.

And yet, even if we know better, we can be caught up in the impossible quest for perfection.

We can also empathize with the struggle. Like me, you may have occasionally discovered yourself bogged down in the nasty trap.

*Many people think of perfectionism  
as striving to be your best, but it is  
not about self-improvement;  
it's about earning approval and acceptance.*

—Brene Brown

## How to Recognize Perfectionism

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Here are some writing habits I've observed in perfectionists:

- They have trouble beginning to draft a new writing project. The pressure to do it brilliantly can be overwhelming, so by not writing anything at all, they avoid the problem, at least temporarily.
- They have trouble completing a writing project. Let's say we finally are able to get started. We even find a groove, and get most of the work done. But saying it's complete? Not so simple. Now, the pressure to keep working until it's perfect can be crushing. Rewriting becomes unending.

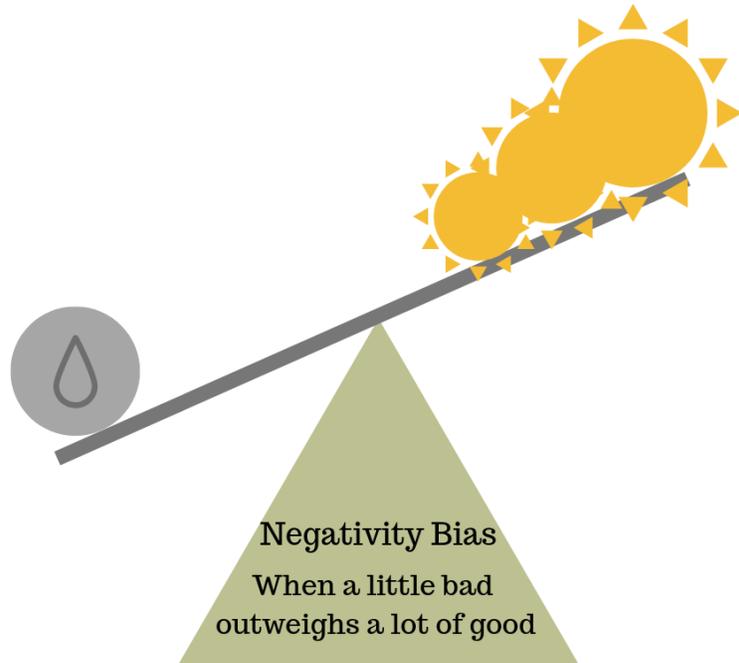
We tuck the project  
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Then, at 95% completion, we tuck the project into a file and let it languish.

- Only an external deadline can force the perfectionist to hand over a project, and often this happens with great angst and self-doubt, even self-loathing and recrimination — regardless of the actual quality of the work. “If only I had started sooner.” “If only I had done a better job.” “If only I were smarter.” “If only I could write.” “No one will ever ask me to write anything again.”
- Enjoying the satisfaction of a job well done is particularly hard for perfectionists. While we all are hard-wired with a [negativity bias](#), perfectionists can take this tendency to extremes, finding it really challenging to stop for a moment to enjoy the pleasure of having done well. (See the tool, *Recap Routine*, in [my book FLOAT](#) for more on how to overcome the negativity bias.) First, there’s the self-doubt that the work was actually any good. On top of that is the layer of the perfectionist’s discomfort with the stillness that is required for soaking in and anchoring the pleasure of completion. The perfectionist often prefers the comfortable discomfort of a quick shift on to the next challenge.
- We are accustomed to self-doubt when we’re perfectionists. This shows up when someone gives us a heartfelt compliment that we deflect. The perfectionist knows better: this compliment can’t possibly be based in

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reality. On the other hand, without a steady stream of outside validation, the perfectionist's confidence plummets.



- Moderation can be difficult. The idea of writing something that's good enough, for instance, can feel like torture to a perfectionist. Good enough is unacceptably shabby!
- Subtlety can also be hard to grasp. This can be a problem for writers, whose characters' lives will be richer when the writer understands how to distinguish between a person's behavior and a person's deeper reality. Perfectionists can be so judgmental that they lose sight of gray areas in real life, too. If a local writer is having a bad day, and speaks harshly, for example, some perfectionists will write their

colleague off as a bad person, never to be approached again.

- Perfectionists can trip themselves up in comparisons. “Am I producing as much as my colleague?” “Do I have as many Goodreads reviews as my friend?” “Did that person get a deal with the agent who turned me down?” These can be toxic and depressing thoughts, that lead to a cycle of inaction, judgment, and doubt.

Do you recognize any of these traits in yourself or in writers you know?

A persistent sadness underlies perfectionism, because it’s based on the assumption that we’re not enough as we are, that we’re not worthy of belonging. Anxiety, distress, and dissatisfaction result.

### What Do We Do About It?

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To overcome perfectionism is simple but not always easy. I love what [Tara Brach](#) has to say on the topic.

*Th(e) quest for perfection is based in the assumption that we must change ourselves to belong...What has helped me the most...is to remember that imperfection is not our personal problem — it is a natural part of existing. We all get caught in wants and fears, we all act unconsciously, we all get diseased and deteriorate. Yet, when we relax about imperfection, we no longer lose our life moments in the pursuit of being different and in the fear of what is wrong.”*

— Tara Brach

As we are able to embrace our imperfection, we are able to enjoy those life moments more. We can reduce the pressure, and can welcome a new project, knowing that if we decide to take it on, we will do our best. It will be imperfect. And, likely, good enough.

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