

Leaving Perfectionism Behind

A M Carley

Earlier, I wrote about perfectionism in writers, and asked, “What do we do about it?”

It’s time to revisit the topic, with some ideas for adapting our writing practices to become freer of the constraints of perfectionism.

A good place to begin is recognizing that you can be tripped up by it. It’s not always obvious, though, when it happens.

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Consider the ways in which perfectionism harms you. Write them down. To get you started, here are some that can often crop up — among many others.

- Perfectionism can keep you from completion. For example, “Just a little more work and then it’ll be ready.”
- Perfectionism can keep you from really beginning the main work. For example, “I’ll just do some more research, and then I’ll start writing.”
- Perfectionism can discourage you from believing in your project. For example, “I can’t get to this right now. I need to feel better about it before I get into the draft, or I’ll just ruin it.”

How does perfectionism trip you up?

How can your perfectionism harm you?

What are some more of these internal conversations that can harm you and distance you from satisfying creative work?

Make a list.



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Once you've made your list of the ways perfectionism can harm you, take a long look at those items on your list. Is it possible that writing down your list can actually be helpful to you in future? If you can see what you'd like to change, it's more likely to happen, right? So let's look at ways that change may be possible.

Because there are many flavors of perfectionism, it's likely that some of the ideas in the following list may not appeal to you, while others will look approachable. Take what you need and leave the rest.

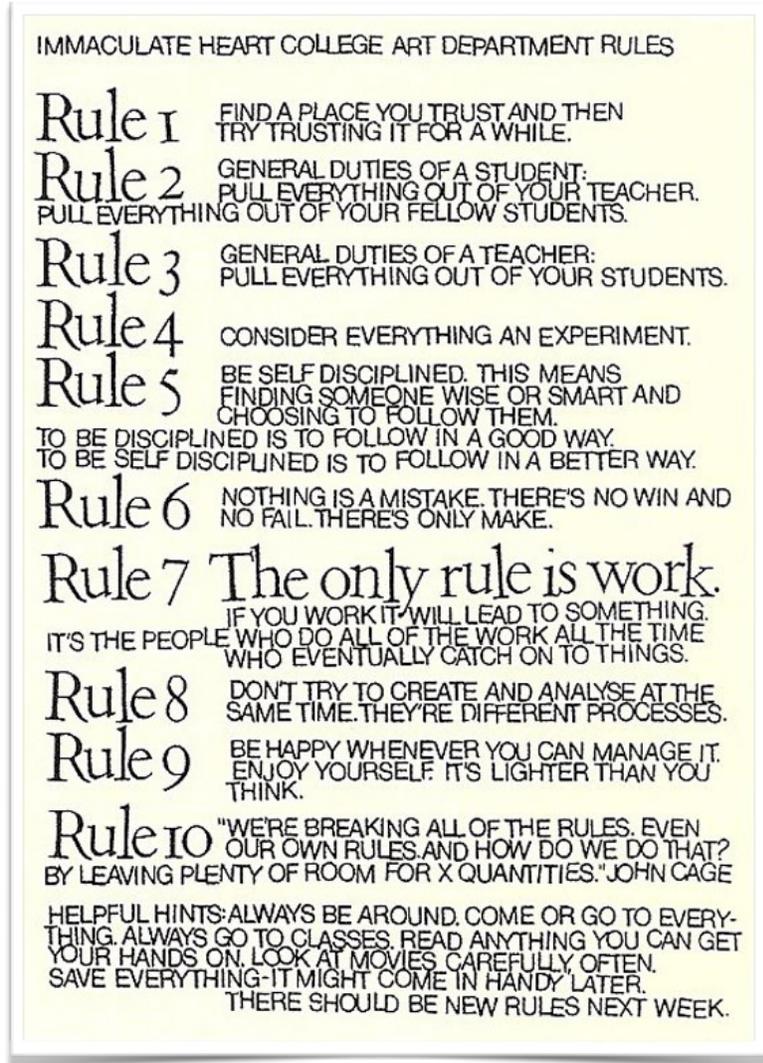
Ten Ways to Free Yourself from Perfectionism

- ◆ Every day, stop for a moment to list events and accomplishments that feel good to you. One great way to do this is, instead of comparing yourself unfavorably to others, compare yourself now to yourself last week, last year, or long ago. You can erode any imposter syndrome you've been living with, by making a habit of celebrating your daily wins. In my writers handbook, **FLOAT: Becoming Unstuck for Writers**, the tool called "Recap Routine" encourages you to do this. As I suggest, "Don't allow your primitive survival brain to forget the joy, connections, and successes you've achieved."
- ◆ Celebrate the routine of writing. If you don't already have a routine of writing, design and initiate one. Writer and creativity coach Eric Maisel suggests we treat our creative routine as a sacred part of life. Honor your creative life and its importance to you with a routine that is wise and realistic — and a source of continuity and inspiration.

Consider that an accomplishment can be a sort of success, without being perfect and winning the grand prize.

- ◆ Notice subtleties and shades of gray. Consider that an accomplishment can be sort of a success, without being perfect and winning the grand prize.
- ◆ Play with experiments. Start with no-stakes or low-stakes ones. Learn that failure is part of learning, which leads to success. Learn that the unknown is neither good nor bad.
- ◆ Reward yourself each time you overcome an instance of perfectionism. Over time, these rewards will help train your internal compass, so to speak, away from reasons why not to create, and toward ways you can guide yourself more readily into the creative process.
- ◆ Confront the fear of negative feedback head-on. Jason Freedman, a blogger and startup veteran, writes about “30 Percent Feedback” here. The principle applies readily to the loop of writing and editing. Whether the editor is yourself, a friend, or an outside professional, it can be wonderful to get feedback before you are even close to done with your project — when you are only 30% into it, in fact.
- ◆ Then graduate to doing an okay but not impressive job of something, again starting with a low- or no-stakes project. Without judgment, notice what happens.
- ◆ Learn to make kind lists. Every item on every to-do list you make must be doable and finite. This way, you can tell exactly when it’s complete. Rooting out ambiguity in your lists is a great gift you can give to yourself.
- ◆ Notice what outside influences can heighten your sense of inadequacy, your fear of failure or criticism, and your unreasonable expectations. For instance, when an unfairly critical judgment surfaces in your awareness, ask yourself, “Is this mine?” So often, it is not. Let it go. It doesn’t even belong to you.

- ◆ Laugh. Laughter is an antidote to taking life too seriously, and punishing yourself unfairly.



Corita Kent's rules

Sister Corita Kent's list may be familiar to you already, but I find it's always worth another look. While she geared this list toward a classroom, it's adaptable to individual creative practice.

Consider Stopping at “Good Enough”

The final idea I’ll propose has been hinted at above, but deserves its own paragraph. It may not work for you, or it may really bring you an a-ha moment: Learn to embrace “good enough.” In fact, consider whether the Pareto Principle applies to a given project of yours. (Sometimes it won’t — and sometimes, it may.) When a project is 80% complete, stop for a breather. Look at the diminishing returns that 20% more effort will bring, and analyze your standards in terms of the return on investment of your further time and attention.

As Voltaire said, “Perfect is the enemy of the good.”

Overcoming perfectionism isn’t done quickly or easily. Commit to the process, though, and you can learn to appreciate every step you take as you loosen the grip of perfectionism on your creative life.

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