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DEMYSTIFYING THE DISSERTATION

Demystifying the Dissertation

Perfectionism -- II

April 16, 2010

By [Peg Boyle Single](#)

This past week, I was at George Mason University and University of Virginia giving talks to doctoral students and new faculty members. Whether I was talking to the students or the faculty members, I saw the most heads nodding in agreement when I started presenting on the joys of perfectionism. But I don't dwell on perfectionism or any of the derivations of writer's block. I present on it long enough for us to laugh at ourselves; then I quickly move on to those techniques that help academic writers develop habits of fluent writing.

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If you think about it, it is not in the least bit surprising that doctoral programs and faculty positions are filled with those who hold very high standards for themselves. We have held high standards for ourselves through years of academic preparation. Plus, [as I wrote in my last column](#), we have good taste. That is, according to the [Ira Glass video](#) I referenced in that column, our good taste and our abilities typically do not match up, especially early on in our careers. Certainly they come together over time, but ultimately we start off with better taste than our ability can meet. This is the problem of perfectionism. We stop ourselves from engaging in those tasks that move us forward in our abilities because we spend too much time focusing on the small decisions instead of the big decisions. Or, we stop ourselves from getting the type of feedback early on that helps us to improve our ability.

In this column, I will present how I have seen perfectionism manifest itself in academic writers. Then I'll suggest some specific remedies that have helped me and others transform our perfectionism from a liability into an asset.

Whenever I work with someone who is struggling about deciding on a dissertation topic, my perfectionism radar goes up. In these situations, I have noticed that they are not struggling over a decision about their

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dissertation topic; rather, they are struggling over a decision about their perfect dissertation topic. They tried out two or three topics, all of which were perfectly good topics, just not perfect. They can very eloquently tell me the reasons that this particular topic is not good enough and usually have another topic somewhat identified, although not completely formed. As a result, they have to spend more time struggling over a dissertation topic, but continue to put off committing to a topic and so delay working on their dissertation for a while more.

Another way that perfectionism manifests itself is when writers focus on finding just the right word -- no, not the right, nor the correct, not even the appropriate, but when they search for the perfect word. If you have a dog-eared copy of a thesaurus on your desk and have your online thesaurus open at the same time, you may know what I am talking about. Do you love flipping through a thesaurus? I do. Mine is always in arm's reach while I am writing. The difference today is that I have managed to keep in check my tendency to reach for my thesaurus while I am writing my first and early drafts.

Likewise, have you ever agonized over an eloquent introductory sentence or introduction? Yes, some introductory sentences are memorable. Tolstoy's opening line to *Anna Karenina* is widely praised as one of the best opening lines of all time: "All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." Dickens's introduction to *A Tale of Two Cities* is also in the running for the best opening lines: "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times..." Now I want everyone to be sitting down when you read what I will write next: neither of these books was originally published by a university press. Also, when searching around the Internet for memorable first lines, not once did an example from a scholarly journal pop up on the screen.

Chances are you can write a really good dissertation, a publishable book, or a journal article that makes it through the peer-review process. Although, the odds are against you if you want to write a memorable introductory sentence that reaches the heights of Tolstoy or Dickens. So as academic writers, while we may aspire to write that perfect, eloquent introductory sentence, perhaps we are better off writing a submission to the Bulwer-Lytton Fiction Contest, also known as the "Dark and Stormy Night Contest." Every year, dedicated members of San Jose State University's Department of English wade through thousands of entries to identify the worst unpublished opening lines. I've posted some of my favorites to [my Web site](#). I love reading through these comical opening lines for unwritten novels, but only after I have finished my writing for the day. Plus, they remind me that my goal is not to write a memorable introductory sentence but a good column, article, or book.

Another way I have seen perfectionism manifest itself is in prohibiting writers from sharing their error-prone early drafts with classmates or colleagues. As I told my audience last week, "The truth will be told." Eventually you will have to share your work with your dissertation adviser or committee members, or other gatekeepers such as colleagues or editors. Eventually you will have to show your writing to the light of day. Why not start by sharing it with a friendly audience first? Why not share it with an audience that you get to hand-pick?

While I will share particular remedies for each of these manifestations of perfectionism, I want to foreshadow that as you read this column and my future columns on the other forms of writer's block, you will start to see that the remedies start to look suspiciously similar. Just as Tolstoy noticed that happy families share some common traits, so do fluent writers. I will offer to you what I offered to my audiences last week: The Single System Guarantee. I guarantee that if you employ prewriting, engage in a regular writing routine, keep a writing graph, and contract with writing partners or groups, you will meet your writing goals and will enjoy writing. I promise. Guaranteed.

In a future series of columns, I will write about the stages of prewriting. For now and for the purposes of addressing perfectionism, I will focus on the concept of prewriting and on contracting with writing partners. From what I have seen, sitting down to write is not the biggest challenge of those who struggle with perfectionism (for those of you who struggle with perfectionism and procrastination, yes; but that is really associated with

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the manifestation of procrastination more so than perfectionism). Nor have I found that keeping writing graphs directly addresses the issue of perfectionism. But as I mentioned earlier, all the fluent writers I have known have managed to incorporate into their writing adequate planning and organizing (e.g., prewriting), regularly scheduled times (e.g., a regular writing routine), some mechanism for tracking output (e.g., keeping a writing graph), and opportunities for sharing ideas and drafts with other like-minded friends who may or may not be writers (e.g., writing partners or groups).

Prewriting is so important for those of us who deal with perfectionism because we want to spend, and even waste, time on the small decisions at the expense of spending time on the big decisions. Prewriting helps us to focus on the big decisions. What is the big point that I want my readers to walk away with? What are the three sub-points that I want them to grasp? This may sound contradictory if you are struggling over a dissertation topic. Although with those who struggle with perfectionism, the issue really isn't honing in on a dissertation topic -- it is committing to a dissertation topic. It is accepting that no topic is perfect and that there are many others that will be adequate. Some topics are better than others; none are perfect. In order to prevent yourself from searching for the perfect topic, you may want to contract with a writing partner, your adviser, or a mentor who can let you know when you have spent enough time on choosing a topic and when it is time to work on that topic. So if you are grappling over a dissertation topic, good, you know the importance of choosing a good topic. Although, please do not let the quest for the perfect dissertation topic prevent you from writing a good dissertation.

After you have committed to a dissertation topic, you still need to engage in prewriting, this time to ensure that you focus on the big decisions before focusing on the small decisions. Before starting to write prose, you will want to transform your dissertation topic into a one-page outline and then a long outline. This process will keep you focused on the big decisions, the decisions that matter for now. At each step, be sure to employ your supportive writing partners to review your work, give you feedback, and hold you accountable to moving forward. At any point in the process, the temptation to spin your wheels over writing the perfect short or long outline can hold you back.

As you begin to write prose, may I make two suggestions? The first suggestion is that instead of grappling over writing that introductory paragraph, you use a placeholder and write it later. Type in "Put intro paragraph here" and then move on with the rest of your writing. As you are writing and you find yourself leafing through that thesaurus while comparing it to the results of your online thesaurus, why not put down and close up both? Then type in "blank" and continue on with your writing. Later on, when you have that crummy first draft down on the page, you can write your introductory paragraph and replace blank with the appropriate words. I use blank as a placeholder every single time. Why? Because the last thing I do before sending a piece off to my editor is to search on blank and replace what I missed during the revision stage. I do not want to put myself in a position where I have used different, but assuredly clever, placeholders throughout my writing only to miss one in the revision stage and find it after my piece is published.

As a reader commented on my last column, "Perfectionism can be a double-edged sword!" Only after you have that crummy first draft down on the page can you leverage your perfectionism. After you have those words down on the page, you can revise and rewrite so that you can transform that crummy first draft into what Anne Lamott calls "good second drafts and terrific third drafts" (*Bird by Bird*, p. 21). Now you can leverage your ability to turn OK prose into great prose. In addition, because you have gotten into the habit of sharing your outlines and earlier versions with writing partners, it should be easier to share your early error-prone draft with your writing partners and to get good feedback from others who may also share your perfectionist traits. Ah, but the key to this being easy is that all along, your writing partners have also shared their early outlines and error-prone drafts with you. You see that others too start with crummy first drafts and through the magic of revision transform them into final drafts that are ready for public

consumption.

Donald Murray, in *The Craft of Revision*, wrote "Lower your standards until you are able to write. Create, then criticize" (p. 178). This is the challenge for any of us who struggle with perfectionism. The challenge is to lower our standards. We need to put words down on the page so that we can revise and raise our writing up to our standards. As you are starting out, keep your standards low, and with every additional writing project, raise your standards. As I wrote in my book, "Your dissertation should be the worst piece of research that you ever write — not that your dissertation should be bad, but all of your subsequent research and scholarship should be better" (*Demystifying Dissertation Writing*, p. 20).

In my next column, I will continue writing this series on Writer's Block. Watch for my next column on procrastination. Until next time, be well. As always, I look forward to your comments, suggestions, or questions.

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writing you say?

Posted by **James L. Secor**, Ph.D. at retired on April 16, 2010 at 11:30am EDT

Actually, here, in your approach, there is nothing about how to write—and that is the greatest problem. Why is it academics think that the only people who can help academics write are academics? Academics is only about writing in a particular form, using a particular framing device. If you can't write to begin with, it doesn't matter how nice your frame is, it's still bad writing. It's the old dress up a monkey and it's still a monkey cliché.

So, there is one problem: how to write? And most people don't know how to write. Writing is putting your thoughts down on paper. We don't think grammatically, we don't think in punctuation, we don't think in spelling, we don't think in how it looks—we don't even think in a straight line! If you can't just put your thoughts down on paper, you're sunk. If you're not writing what you're thinking, you're editing your thinking.

As for the beginning and focus of a dissertation, gaining a topic and writing an outline or two is compounding the problem. Trying to write about a static "topic" is like trying to get a rock to move on its own. Here's how it works: ask yourself a question. Answer it, usually "yes" or "no." Then prove it. Oh! Now I've got some focus. I know what I'm doing. So. . .write your answer (and proof) and you've got your dissertation.

When you try to force your writing, from the beginning, into a particular frame, you limit yourself and, in fact, tie yourself in knots forcing your elliptical thoughts into some square hole or other. Put your thoughts down on paper. It doesn't matter what that looks like because no one's going to see it. The first draft is yours—and maybe the 2nd or 3rd.

Perfectionism?

Posted by **Phred** on April 16, 2010 at 5:15pm EDT

As a cataloger and therefore certified perfectionist, the advice that helped me most in this area was Jim O'Donnell's who pointed out to me that the dissertation is a union card, not a magnum opus. Reading some dissertations by very good scholars also helped me realize that perfection was not the point. As in most of my subsequent writing, I left the introduction of my dissertation to the last. Write, then edit, then edit some more. Any perfection is in the editing, not the writing.

Posted on April 18, 2010 at 2:45pm EDT

My wonderful dissertation advisor encouraged something similar, now 35+ years ago:

"Don't get your soul involved. First, finish your dissertation and get your degree, and *then* you can

get your soul involved."

I followed his advice (it was a relatively brief suspension of soul-work) and have ever since been enjoying getting my soul involved with all aspects of being in the profession, including writing.

the urge to perfect

Posted by **Contessa** on April 18, 2010 at 8:45pm EDT

I have been given the "avoid perfectionism, your dissertation is not your last or best work, get it done, the Ph.D. is a union card" advice.

I would like to think it is all true. I am sure it was true for an earlier generation of scholars. But in my top-ranked grad program, the advice is to start positioning oneself for the job market immediately. There is this sense that one can afford no mistakes, especially since one is expected to publish a few articles before having finished the dissertation--to be considered merely *competitive* for tenure-track jobs.

So, projects have to be more ambitious, and show publication results faster. No wonder people's perfectionist tendencies kick in!

Perfectionism Syndrome

Posted , Undergrad Psychology student at CSUDH on April 27, 2010 at 1:15pm EDT

I have what I have deemed "perfectionism syndrome." I do not know how it started, where it came from, and who or what is responsible. It is so bad that I sit and dwell on the first sentence for at least a day, then I end up starting in the middle -citing previous methods and theory, only to return to the introduction and rewrite it fifty times before I consider it to be "ok."

Of course I am not writing a dissertation, but I am writing towards a journal article, and want it to be perfect. Following along the same ideas of a previous comment, the competition is fierce and I cannot afford to let the ball drop (I want to get in to a Ph.D program!). One of my mentors told me knowing how to write will half way ensure that you get the job, persistence will allow you to keep it. And wanting to be the best/have the best work means that you have to be a perfectionist to some extent.

The author of the article suggested perfectionists get a panel of peers to review their work before their mentor does: seems like its a great idea until you realize that your peers (1) could be telling you what you want to hear, or (2) dont really know the how to's of writing to give a solid review. In any case, in my mind I have to be the most critical of myself before another sees my work, and usually the next in line to review is my mentors- to ensure that my work is upholding my own standards as well as theirs.

Sincerely,

A hopeless perfectionist

Don't forget your writing center and possible interns

Posted by **Elizabeth** , Assistant Professor of Communication at Bethel College on May 17, 2010 at 10:30am EDT

This advice on perfectionism is perfect for me. I feel like I have to write the most profound opening paragraph and then obsess on it for days. While working on my doctorate, I served as the writing center director for our institution.

I had student tutors who were really good review some early drafts of my dissertation and then had one of them serve as the editorial assistant on my whole dissertation, funded first with grant money and then by me. This arrangement was a win-win, and she is now an editor of other people's work, and my project is done.

Don't forget to check out your writing centers as places where you might find assistance, guidance and allies in your writing journeys!



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