

Teaching Invention to the Perfectionist

By

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With reference to perfectionists, listeners might assume a concern for a rather limited, elite group of students who have so few problems, especially in writing that they don't need much attention. My use of the term perfectionist, however, is intended mostly to focus upon negative rather than positive intellectual attitudes, and upon attitudes that may be distributed much more widely than any of us dream. In fact, they may be prevalent among students who are as typically among our lowest achievers. On the other hand, some of the worst consequences from perfectionism tend to increase with more advanced academic experience. To clarify this, let me offer first a neutral definition and then suggest contrasting ways of interpreting it. A common desk dictionary defines the perfectionist as one who sets extremely high standards for himself and is displeased with anything less. We are accustomed to admiring the setting of high standards. The real problem comes from being "displeased with anything less." For those doggedly striving to excel, the attitude of being displeased with anything less than the highest standard must cause more frustration than success. As teachers, we need also be concerned that students, fearing they may fall short of supreme triumph, opt for an easier solution, instead; that is, they may avoid all challenges or complex problems that truly test their best abilities. My purpose here is to review ideas and practices from recent discussions of rhetorical invention with a claim that the greater flexibility and versatility in such practices will help reduce the common difficulties growing out of perfectionist attitudes.

David D. Burns, a psychologist, has shown that many of the people seemingly committed to perfectionist idealism not only never excel at anything; they show hardly any inclination to excel. In a popularized essay in *Psychology Today* (November 1980) entitled "The Perfectionist's Script for Self-Defeat," Burns provides a scale for measuring such attitudes, showing the different sides of such a personality. Many students of mine, of greatly varying abilities or achievements, have revealed attitudes much like these. And the attitudes affect their writing. For example, a perfectionist is one who feels that if she doesn't set the highest standards for herself, she will end up a second-rate person. She assumes that people will think less of her if she makes a mistake. Or a person thinks that if he cannot do something really well, he shouldn't do it at all. He should be upset if he makes a mistake and should never repeat errors. On the other hand, a perfectionist may feel that if she tries hard enough, she should excel at whatever she attempts. But failing at something

important means she is less of a person. A perfectionist probably believes that scolding himself for failing to meet his standard will help him do better in the future.

There are inconsistencies in these various tendencies, of course. But the person who both believes she can excel at anything and yet is afraid of mistakes and failure, with this inconsistency, is a very real and troubled person. Probably most people occasionally have some of these conflicting tendencies. In writing courses, we may have difficulty finding anyone who embodies in pure form all of these attitudes. And yet there are recognizable family relationships. For our purposes, we should consider it likely that one who believes she must always excel will suffer from writing anxiety or writer's block. Such a writer could become extremely cautious and inhibited or get bogged down in day-dreaming or procrastination. The person afraid of appearing foolish, if left to his own devices, is likely to shy away from experimentation. Further writing practice for a person dominated by perfectionist attitudes may well detract from rather than contribute to confidence, greater originality, or continuing growth.

And yet these perfectionist attitudes are not entirely negative. We should find a place for them in the writing process. Such lofty idealism is valuable, perhaps essential, for gathering data, editing, and some aspects of revising. But there are points at which we should counsel our students to hold their perfectionist impulses in abeyance, especially while concerned with invention. It is a moot question whether we should ever tell anybody to be satisfied with being second-rate. We might point out, however, that if one is always to do her best, she must consistently improve on her previous performances. This is not easy to do. We should also point out, and this is in harmony with many good inventive procedures, that second-rate, vague, or inferior ideas and statements are often useful temporary instruments for working towards more impressive and satisfying compositions. The solution to perfectionism in writing, I will suggest, need not depend upon psychological counseling, but could come from more practically creative writing methods.

At about the same time that Burns's essay appeared in *Psychology Today*, Mike Rose published an essay in CCC (December 1980), which related to these problems also, with the lengthy title, "Rigid Rules, Inflexible Plans, and the Stifling of Language: A Cognitivist Analysis of Writer's Block." He believes that writer's block is caused by faulty teaching of stultifying rules or at least by an oversimplified notion of what is needed for a creative composition. For example, one may have trouble trying to obey the rule: always grab your reader's attention immediately; or the old rule I grew up with: know exactly what you are going to say before starting to write. Rose does not use the term "perfectionism" in his essay, but while denouncing the overly disciplined approach to composition implicit in his title, he identifies goals and standards contributing to much the same sort of frustration, defeat, or mediocrity as was discovered by Burns in his study of perfectionist personalities. One might infer

that the perfectionist attitudes, as defined by Burns, constitute a mental "set" in Rose's terms, a cognitive habit that limits perception.

In his study, Rose reminds us of the contrast between two types of investigative rules: specific algorithmic rules, which lead to exact, definite solutions; and heuristics, or less definite methods of inquiry, that lead to probability rather than to certainty. The common distinction between algorithms and heuristics ties in importantly with the task of controlling perfectionist inclinations. Heuristics, practically by definition, encourage a more flexible, tentatively exploratory approach to problems; whereas the perfectionist, we might guess, will seize upon definite rules as instruments supposedly leading to air-tight, unchallengeable solutions. As Rose puts it: "Composing calls for open, even adventurous thinking, not for constrained, no exit cognition." (p. 399)

It undoubtedly would help students if they could distinguish between those times when it pays to be exact and when it is better to experiment with less definite hypotheses to see how well they hold up and what they can do. Two of the easiest inventive techniques encouraging more tentative and exploratory beginnings are free writing and brainstorming. These two techniques, in fact, are rapidly becoming two of the most old-fashioned. Free writing, as described by Peter Elbow in *Writing Without Teachers* (1973), is especially valuable for the person inclined to think that every sentence must be perfect. Elbow encourages us to write for the sake of discovery, to waste words as a necessary way to arrive at words worth keeping. He argues that one can write quite a bit rapidly, in one session, then throw it all away, and rewrite in a more clearly focused and relevant style. In fact, one can follow this procedure for several drafts. If one practices free writing, one is not likely to hold very long to perfectionist attitudes.

Brainstorming, as a private, individual activity, helps to bring to the surface of one's mind what one knows about a subject before starting to write. As one jots down the great variety of topics or facts related to the subject matter, there will necessarily be repetition and much irrelevancy. Ray Kytte's *Pre-writing: Strategies for Exploration and Discovery* (1970) may be the earliest writing text encouraging this approach. The writer jotting down notes in a personal brainstorming session, then selects those things which look most workable and valuable and show potential for a manageable focus. Brainstorming, like free writing, is a very inexact activity which enables somewhat unconscious or intuitive ideas, feelings, or attitudes to come to the surface. The writer practicing brainstorming sees enough options so that she is unlikely to think of any one way as absolutely correct.

But the heuristic attitude in itself is more important than any particular heuristics. Some of the older traditional techniques like taking more complete and elaborate notes or even the practice of outlining, if used with flexibility, can also break down a perfectionist inclination. It is possible, of course, for the perfectionist note-taker to ruin himself by continuing to gather data for the

sake of thoroughness. Such a person can accumulate impossible masses of notes, xeroxed pages, and additional bibliography which would necessitate never-ending inquiry, make focusing impossible, and encourage a rationale for indefinite postponement. But the truly inventive note-taker, besides recording data, must be just as attentive to discarding or filing away irrelevant, overspecialized, divergent, or digressive notes. For productive writing, one should be exact in taking notes, but might better be casual or almost indifferent about using them. The notes should practically prove themselves necessary to help explore, clarify, or resolve a well-defined problem before one includes them. In more sober terms, we can at least encourage students to think of the most important function of note taking as preparing one's mind for expression of one's own ideas. Occasionally the note itself must be included and perhaps quoted. But note taking should generate ideas, not merely provide substance for papers.

Much has been said against the practice of outlining in modern studies of the composing process. Janet Emig's *The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders* (1971) has clearly influenced many teachers to wonder about the necessity of outlining. Yet outlining can also help as an inventive technique, either as a tentative arrangement of material already gathered and expected, or as an instrument for reviewing and looking critically at that which has been written so far. Outlines are most useful when they are simple, flexible, and changeable. They can help one see what one has to work with and suggest directions for development. But the words and ideas actually written down can lead writers in unpredictable ways. The *act* of outlining, of making new, revised outlines as one proceeds, rather than following a decisive outline, can aid importantly in avoiding a faulty direction or in recognizing the need to move into an important neglected area. Thus outlines, like note taking, have their heuristic functions, too.

The same habits of mind implicit in the use of heuristics can be carried over into revising, an aspect of writing that must be seen as more nearly a continuation of invention than related to final editing. To set the tone for teaching productive revision, it might help to show photo duplicates of the radical changes made by famous professional writers in subsequent drafts of important manuscripts, if you have them. But, if you are bold enough, you might show examples from your own work as well. It is good to show students evidence. Plenty of research studies attest to the recursive character of productive writing. Much of the best work is by Nancy Sommers. In a key essay of hers, "Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adult Writers," *CCC* (December, 1980), she argues that good writers go back sporadically and unpredictably to alter earlier sections of their compositions rather than pushing on systematically in a linear process.

The more able writers seem to do this easily and continue amending incredibly messy, unreadable pages. This recursive activity may relate to perfectionism in some respects in that such writers are dissatisfied with

inadequate statements and keep changing them. But the good writer seems willing to record tentative, definitely second-rate statements while *en route*, presumably only half-consciously telling himself that he must come back to improve such passages.

There are various ways to communicate this principle. I confess to my students two typical tendencies in my own writing that necessitate regular revision. I will always prepare too lengthy an introduction to any subject I write about. It seems as though the writing out of needless preliminary data (that is to say needless *for my intended audience*) is necessary *for me* in some unconscious way to focus on the more relevant material worth keeping and presenting to readers. At any rate, I keep doing it without thinking about it until a draft is finished. It is a very easy problem to deal with: just discard the excessive introductory material, though I often don't discard enough. My other tendency, which shows a different aspect of invention, is to write what later on strikes me as exceptionally vague generalities in the earliest draft of a composition. But I write them with a more explicit understanding, in each case, that those statements cannot stand as written. Whatever refinement or greater precision these statements acquire through revision depends upon what comes later, depending somewhat unpredictably upon how various parts of the essay interrelate, upon how accumulated evidence dictates a more exact generalization, and upon the generative potential of key statements, especially those at the beginnings of paragraphs. This last point needs special attention as a technique that has pitfalls, but can help avoid problems caused by a perfectionist set.

Mike Rose, in the essay referred to before, concedes the necessity of rules and plans for good writing, but warns against rigid rules and inflexible plans. It seems like a good rule to push oneself hurriedly through a crude draft of a composition to construct a series of underdeveloped paragraphs that are the equivalent of a sentence outline. Some parts of such an essay are easier to work with at first and practically write themselves. Other parts seem recalcitrant, probably because the lead statements at the beginnings of potential paragraphs do not lead the writer on to useful productive thought. We should emphasize as an important part of inventive strategy the need to remove or revise lead sentences that close off or frustrate further development. Each writer probably has her own inclinations. I find myself frequently stopped because I make extravagant claims, or promise to develop points I don't know much about; in other cases, I am disinclined to continue because my statements look like needless repetition or dreary truisms. Some statements of these types need instant removal; others need modification or time for reconsideration. The less experienced writer probably has difficulty seeing such errors. But, if one is taught to look for and admit the probability of such errors, she should learn to change such statements and avoid getting bogged down.

Students with perfectionist tendencies surely have the potential to be excellent writers and we should help fulfill a good bit of that potential, though

we probably will never know how many actually incline that way. It is necessary, however, to prepare such students for the complexity, unpredictableness, and imperfection in the writing process. Helping them realistically understand invention is an important first step. But attitudes need changing, too. We should openly and enthusiastically advocate an approach to writing characterized by flexibility, experimentation, candid admission of the probability of errors in early drafts, and abundant strategies for revision. Perhaps for those students sufficiently caught up in the spirit of such writing programs, many of the less desirable perfectionist inclinations may never surface in their minds.

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