

The Reality of Perfectionism

WR 121Z

Jenna Wallace

I have always been a perfectionist. I have always taken it upon myself to do the best I can, no matter what. If I believe that my best is not good enough, I will force myself to work until I am satisfied. I still have many of these tendencies. I work at something until I have it perfect, until I feel satisfied. Though I do believe I have come a long way in overcoming my toxic perfectionism, there is still more work to be done. Whenever I start an assignment or project, I hold the standard for myself that it should be perfect on the first try, with no eraser marks or backspace needed. Just straightforward, to the point, and no need to be changed. I was never taught to be this way; it was a learned behavior. I always strive to be the best. Whether that is the best version of myself, better than someone around me, or just better in my own head, I felt the need to be the best. I always thought I needed to be at the top of my class, and when I wasn't, it caused me to shut down and stop any progress on what I had already begun. If I'm honest, I don't know where this desire came from. I didn't have pressure on me from anyone, I didn't have strict parents or someone I felt the need to compare myself to. It was just how I was made.

Earlier this year, I learned where my perfectionism is rooted. I was diagnosed with OCD, obsessive-compulsive disorder, which I felt explained so much of myself and my habits, especially perfectionism. If you don't have OCD, I'm guessing you're thinking, "Oh, she just likes to keep things neat and tidy! If it's not, she'll be mad." I'm

not saying this isn't true, I do like things to be neat and tidy, but that is not one of my obsessions or compulsions. My OCD manifests in intrusive thoughts and the fear that if I do something imperfect or wrong, there will be consequences. Now, I'm sure you are thinking that I am crazy. Don't worry, I thought so too for a long time. Having this diagnosis has helped me learn so much about myself: I no longer think I am just confused or being dramatic, there really is a reason for the way I think. Knowing this very quickly began to affect the way I learn.

I was never very good at math. Math was never something that my OCD chose to be picky with. I don't know why, but that was something I didn't need to be perfect at, which was very frustrating in some ways, but incredibly freeing in others. I didn't flinch when I got a question wrong, I didn't cry when I failed a quiz, I didn't even care when I had to retake the class because I didn't pass the first time. My brain had never been oriented in numbers, but rather in words and writing. I started to use my knowledge and writing skills to journal and write poetry after my diagnosis. This process became something I really enjoyed. I would write poems on anything and everything, and it quickly became a strong coping mechanism for me. This helped me a lot with my perfectionism, as poetry, for me, didn't have rules and I could just say what I felt. All in all, this leads up to a larger "rule" in writing, the "rule" that first drafts must be perfect.

In "What is 'Academic' Writing?" written by L. Lennie Irvin, Irvin argues, "Nobody writes perfect first drafts; polished writing takes lots of revision" (5). This quote stood out to me in particular, as it reminded me of how my structured writing does not need to be perfect or my very best work on my first try. It is unnecessary and unrealistic. Irvin writes, "We put unrealistic expectations on early drafts ... by focusing too much on the

impossible task of making them perfect (which can put a cap on the development of our ideas)” (4). This is another quote from the same article, which stood out to me as well. Once I started thinking too hard about what I would write about, or focused too hard on how well I was writing, my creativity was lessened. I only focused on content and success, rather than producing original and new ideas. My sense of self and what I wanted to write was muted by the voices in my head, yelling at me to ignore my ideas and only do what I needed to succeed, or else I would never make it to where I wanted to go. This voice grew louder, and my writing became black and white and boring.

An outlet I used to mute these voices was dance. I have been dancing since I was four years old and have continued to use it as an escape from the static and noise in my brain. Once the music was on and I was floating across the room, it was like nothing around me mattered. No voices telling me to point my toes and extend my legs. Just me and the music. The dance community was always a safe space for me. Many of us used it as a way out of our own heads. Though many do experience toxicity in this community, I was surrounded by people who supported me on my mental health journey and did what they could to support me.

My dance teacher, Emily Wright, was one of those people. I had been dancing with her for about four years before my diagnosis. She always knew dance was important to me and let me have the freedom to be creative and expressive within the four walls of the studio. Even when I was young, dance was always a way to communicate without using words. I didn’t realize it at the time, of course, but it quickly became something I wanted to do for the rest of my life. That’s why I chose it as a minor in college, so I can continue my passion for it.

I taught dance classes in the fall through summer of 2023 and absolutely fell in love with it. I taught kids from the ages of three to five and seven to eight, and it felt incredibly rewarding to have an effect on these young lives. I used my writing skills to create lesson plans and develop choreography. Lesson planning for dance had similarities to writing one for a classroom, but the biggest difference is that it can be changed and developed as the class goes on. A dance lesson plan typically consists of a warm-up: like stretching or a cardio workout. Then you would normally jump into teaching new steps or reviewing ones from the previous class. It does not have to be a perfect outline on the first try, you can shape it to be what you need it to be for that day. The same goes for choreography; it does not have to be the exact steps and positions on the first attempt. You jot down a rough idea of steps or combinations you want, sometimes certain formations you would like to see. However, this can change when you put your writing to real situations. It flows and evolves to fit you and your dancers' needs. This taught me that my writing can be changed to fit my needs and does not need to be perfect on the first attempt.

I have used my real-life experiences to change my ideas on perfect first drafts. Though I do understand why this belief came to be, I believe that it is time to change this idea to something more realistic and attainable for all writers. I recognize that many people may develop what they believe to be a perfect first draft whenever they write, but it is also important to know that many individuals do not hold this ability. Though this rule may be effective for teachers in enforcing critical thinking and seeing students produce their best work, this rule may not have that same effect for the students. In my belief, this rule should not exist past elementary school. Truthfully, I do not think it

should be taught period, but I do understand that some prefer to move past their perfectionism or need for a “perfect” first draft on their own, which is what I experienced. I am glad I moved past this rule on my own, it taught me how to be a better writer, always developing and making my work better instead of having it be the best in the first go. I truthfully feel that nobody should have this internalized notion, and I am hopeful that sharing my story and experiences pushes everyone one step closer to writing as their authentic self. Unfiltered, messy, imperfect.

Works Cited

Irvin, L. Lennie. "What is 'Academic' Writing?" *Writing Spaces: Readings on Writing*.
Volume 1, edited by Charles Lowe and Pavel Zemlianski, Parlor Press, 2010, pp.
3-17.

Abstract: This essay explores the realities of perfectionism, and how I have grown to learn to battle this challenge. After receiving an OCD diagnosis, I wanted to explore how this disorder impacted my schoolwork and education. This essay highlights important ideas I learned, as well as impactful figures throughout my years in school. My writing illustrates the good, bad, and ugly of obsessive-compulsive disorder, and how it has silently impacted me over the years.

Bio: Hello! My name is Jenna Wallace and I am a first year student here at WOU. I am majoring in Psychology with a minor in Exercise Science with hopes of becoming a Pediatric Occupational Therapist. I am from Sandy, Oregon, and chose WOU for its beautiful campus. In my spare time, I like to read, watch movies, and take naps. My ultimate goal in life is to make a difference any way I can!

Keywords: Perfectionism, Obsessive-compulsive Disorder, Writing Process, Drafting, First Draft, Personal Essay, Outlining, Pre-writing, Writing Myths, Writing Construct, Composition

Teacher: Tandy Tillinghast