

How to Write a First Draft Without Crippling Perfectionism

Maybe you've heard that first drafts are supposed to suck, but what does that really mean? What does a sucky first draft look like? How do you allow yourself to suck? Why would you even want to allow yourself to write something that sucks in the first place?

Because otherwise, you'll most likely be crippled by a writer's biggest enemy: perfectionism.

Did you just cringe? We've all experienced it when we sit down to write, arrange everything just so, type a sentence or two (or a bit more if you're lucky), and then it strikes—your inner editor. It smacks you across the face and *demands* that you fix that grammar mistake *right now*. Or worse, you've written multiple chapters of your epic novel, and suddenly inspiration strikes ^{and you get} with a great idea for a new direction to take ^{your} the story that will make it so much better! But you can't just keep writing as if you'd written in that awesome new idea from the beginning. No, your inner editor screams at you to immediately go back to the beginning and rewrite the entire thing, ^{before you can possibly write anything else.} ~~There's absolutely no way~~ you can go on without fixing everything you've written up until this point. What a punk. That inner editor needs a roundhouse kick in the

balls.

How do you fight this monster? How can you possibly overcome such a powerful force telling you what you've just written isn't good enough ~~to remain in it's current state until you finish your project?~~ There may not be one fail-safe solution, but here's a list of perfectionism-busting tricks I've picked up after countless failures, trials and errors, and eventually a few success.

Go Analogue

Grab your favorite pen and notebook and just start scribbling. Don't like to write by hand? Have horrible handwriting? Suck it up and try it ^{any how} ~~any how~~. Putting ink on paper, even if it's literally scrawling "this is going to suck" over and over, will get your brain in writing mode faster than anything else. WAY faster than staring at a blank screen with your fingers on your keyboard and the entire internet just a click away.

If you've already written this idea off as stupid, hear me out. Writing an analogue first draft is awesome because:

- It's just you and your words.
- You can't edit anything, not even to fix spelling mistakes.
- ~~You can't delete anything~~ (you know, other than by scribbling over it).
- Colorful squiggles ~~don't show up~~ beneath your words when you ^{appear}

write something stupid.

- You can't open your browser and scroll through tumblr, peruse Wikipedia, check email, etc.
- No settings to adjust, and no formatting to ~~worry about~~ ^{deal with}.
- You don't have to worry about battery life or losing your file if you don't save it every ten seconds. Or a post-apocalyptic event destroying the cloud—the horror!
- You can drink coffee without a lid. Spill some on your page? No worries, it just adds character.
- The flow of ink across paper provides a tangible, tactile sensation that connects you with your words and makes you feel like you're building something with your hands, not just your mind.

Are you sold yet? I know you might be thinking, "Come on, this 2016, and technology has evolved to give us far superior writing tools than a pen and paper." I say bah humbug, newer doesn't always mean better. Besides, I love my fountain pens. Just try it long enough to actually finish a (short) first draft before you disregard it completely.

Create a **D**istraction-Free Writing Environment

Whether you're writing on a computer or not, there are a lot of distractions in life. Writing requires your undivided attention and concentration, so eliminating distractions is crucial to success. Here are some suggestions to consider:

- Disable the internet on your computer and all your devices or unplug it at the source if you can do so without angering the people who live with you. *Physically go somewhere without the internet if you have to.*
- Use a distraction-free text editor with as few features as possible. It should be just you and the words. Forget about formatting while you first draft, turn off spell-check, don't use backspace, etc. There are a TON of distraction-free writing programs out there. It doesn't matter which one you use—just pick one and *stick with it.*
- Complete any time-sensitive tasks before you start writing. Pay your *that bill that's due today* bills, let your dog out, *call mom* feed the goldfish, do the dishes. Whatever *if it's really urgent and important,* you know you'll have to do later, do it now so it won't be distracting you as you write and so you can't use it as an excuse to stop writing. *If it's not that important, leave it for later. Don't let little things you need to do become grounds for procrastination.*
- Try writing without music or background noise. It might seem weird at first if you're not used to it, but it's one less thing to think about, and it may help you clear your thoughts and *better* focus on the story.
- *Write with a friend so you can keep each other on track and yell at each other if you stop.*

Always Think About What to Write Next

No matter if you're just starting your story or you're approaching the final scenes, it's important to have at least *some* ~~a vague~~ idea of where your story's going or what you're going to write next. It's hard to write the next scene if you haven't at least thought about it before hand. So think about your story whenever possible before you start your writing

session. Work stuff out in your head and make some notes if you can. This will help you get excited and prepared to sit down and start writing.

Make a Mess

Don't worry about creating a neat, perfectly formatted document. Don't even worry about keeping your draft all in one notebook or one file on your computer. Life is hectic for most people, and trying to write a beautiful and organized first draft is counter-productive. Embrace the chaos and write anytime, anywhere you get a chance by whatever means you have available.

Don't let not having access to your notebook, computer, favorite pen, cloud account, etc. become an excuse not to write. ~~if an opportunity presents itself.~~ There are plenty of chances to write throughout the day if you don't sabotage yourself from taking them. You can organize it all later, *but you can't organize anything if you haven't written it.*

Write Your Notes and Your Story Together

Don't separate your notes and outline from your story text. You're writing a first draft, remember? That means you're basically dumping the contents of your brain into the open. The simplest way to deal with all that information is to keep it together.

Write in the margins, attach notes you scribbled on scraps of paper, interrupt a scene to work out a character's motivation *in the same document*, and so forth. This will prevent you from trying too hard to organize and structure your thoughts, which puts your perfectionism back in control. ~~Through~~ ^{Throw} the thought of getting things "just right" out the window so you can be free to write whatever the hell you want. That's the whole idea. Let your brain do its thing. Let it process the story as you write. Let it all come out however it wants.

Don't Look Back

Think the last scene or sentence you wrote sucked? Think you should change the beginning? ^{Think you need to go back and fix a continuity error?} Too bad. They are physically etched on paper, so there's nothing you can do about it. Don't look back, don't reread any of the story, and for the love of cheese in an aerosol can, don't try to change anything until you've finished the first draft!

Just keep charging forward. If you think you might forget about something you know you'll need to change later, write a note in the margins or in line with the rest of your story text and move on. Don't come back to these notes until you're done with the first draft.

Don't Worry About Consistency

The story you have in your head or in your outline will change as you

write it. That's a good thing! Emergent discoveries about your story as you write are some of the best parts of the process. Adopt them immediately and keep writing as if you'd written the story that way from the beginning. Whatever changes you need to make to what you've already writing in order to fully incorporate this new idea can wait. If you think of something cool and want to change the direction of your story halfway through, roll with it! You can fix continuity issues later.

Use Placeholders

While you write your first draft, don't ^{worry about using} ~~give a shit about~~ proper grammar, formatting, punctuation, accuracy, spelling, ^{the perfect} ~~description, underwriting,~~ ~~overwriting,~~ finding the perfect metaphor, picking good names, etc.

That just slows you down. If you can't think of the right word or need to fact check something later, leave a blank spot or use some special character you can easily find and change later. If it's holding you up, slap in a placeholder and move on.

Write as Fast as You Can

Don't overthink a first draft. Brain vomit it out as quickly as you can ^{Don't stop writing to research. It's ok to be wrong for now. No one will ever know you didn't research the important detail until your second draft.} however you can. Get it out of your head. That's the first and most important step. You can't find gold without digging, ~~so~~ Mine the story out of your brain so you can refine it later. The faster you do this, the less ^{time} you have to ~~struggle with~~ your inner editor.

[✓] to spend fighting

Don't Show Your Unfinished First Draft to Anyone

The first draft of your story is a secret diary between your eyes and your brain. It's allowed to suck—it's *supposed* to suck—and no one else needs to know about it. Initial creativity belongs to the voice inside your head alone. It's loud enough without having to consider the voices and opinions of anyone else. There's a time and place to get feedback, but while writing a first draft is definitely *not* one of those times.

Write Every Day

First drafts don't write themselves. You can know all these tricks, but they won't do you any good if you don't put in the time and effort to actually write. Be consistent and hold yourself accountable, and consider finding a writing buddy or accountability partner to check in with on a regular basis. Use a word count tracker or a "don't break the chain" calendar ~~to~~ to keep track of your progress and help you visualize your successes and failures. It might take a while to form the habit, but writing on a consistent basis is the only real way to make progress and finish things.

Don't Stop Writing Until You Reach the End

Stories are finite, and so are first drafts. Don't stop writing until you've

reached the end of your story. Finishing a first draft is a glorious thing, but that doesn't mean your work is done. It just means you can let loose your inner editor without fear of losing your forward momentum. Now you can move on to the next steps of the writing process.

Cut Yourself Some Slack

Don't hold yourself to any standards while you write a first draft. Allow yourself to experiment and explore different possibilities. Go in any direction you want, try killing that one character and see what happens, or let your character do something stupid just for kicks and giggles. You don't know what might work until you try, and you won't know what will fail miserably until after the fact. Reserve all judgement until the first draft is complete.

Find a writing process that works for you and use it, but don't hold yourself to it. It will change as you grow and improve. Allow yourself to be creative, make mistakes, try new things, learn, and stumble upon the creative genius inside you. You will ~~find~~ ^{find uncover} nuggets of gold, but most what you write in a first draft will be ~~plain old shit~~ ^{crap}. Accept that fact and *write it anyway*. Don't stop telling yourself to just keep writing, that first drafts exist to suck, and that you must finish the first draft before you can craft the story into something fully brilliant.

First drafts are a starting point. Finishing a first draft doesn't mean you've finished the story. It means you've created a foundation upon

which to finish ~~the~~ story. Remember that your first draft doesn't have to look anything like what you want the finished story to look like. You can't paint walls before you build a foundation. Work from the ground up, and think of your first draft as the construction site of your story. *Of course* it's going to be a mess until it's finished and you clean everything up! Embrace this and develop a realistic expectation for yourself.

Then just write.