

THE PREDICAMENT OF THE PERFECTIONIST

J.J. Turner, Ph.D.

Few attitudes stop wannabe writers from turning the alphabet into words, sentences, paragraphs, pages, chapters, and books, than *perfectionism*. This is the agonizing belief that “I must get it right—perfect—the first time, or not at all.” This is a casket for anyone who dreams about being a writer. It is a major predicament that must be overcome.

The predicament the perfectionist creates is the blockage of the writing process; it prevents progress. Progress is the key to writing, not perfection. You become better the more you participate in the process of writing. Most of us don't remember when we were learning how to walk. We started out lying flat on our stomachs, as our parents helped us learn the walking process. The process involved rising on all four; then standing on wobbly feet; then taking stutter steps and falling; and in time we were walking, then running.

It's amazing to me that we understand process in all areas of life, other than in writing. Have you ever known anyone to pick up a trumpet for the first time and say, “I should know how to play this perfectly”? Why not? It takes a process to learn how to play a trumpet; just as it takes a learning process to become a writer.

Here are a few of the predicaments you face if you choose to maintain a perfectionist attitude toward writing:

- If you want to shut down your creativity, refuse to abandon your perfectionist attitude of “I must get it right the first time.”
- If you want to erase your work from your computer over and over, insist that your work must be perfect in your first draft.
- If you cannot accept the reality that being a perfect writer is not going to happen in your first effort, stay locked in your negative perfectionist attitude.
- If you are afraid to fail, be rejected, or laughed at, maintain your perfectionist

attitude with the tenacity of a lion on a piece of meat at feeding time.

- If you want to stay discouraged or frustrated, hang on to your perfectionist attitude and ideals.
- If you want to continually beat yourself up, feel like a loser, and have a pity party, refuse to leave your perfectionist zone.
- If you want to give up your right and freedom to write beyond self-imposed limits, keep on thinking and practicing your perfectionism attitudes and habits.

The winner of a Grammy Award for Lifetime Achievement, Bob Dylan, wrote in 1965, years before he became successful, “I have given up on making any attempt of perfection.” “Perfection” “is man’s ultimate illusion. It simply doesn’t exist in the universe....If you are a perfectionist, you are guaranteed to be a loser in whatever you do” (David Burns, M.D.).

Avoiding the writer’s block of perfectionism is not advocating sloppy or poor writing. It is an encouragement to start writing without this mental block. If you understand the writing process and practice it, you will continue to improve as a writer. Only thousands of words written during agonizing hours will reveal your success level as a writer. Always remembering, the key to the process is to write the first word.