

Productive Procrastination: Perfectionism and the Student in an Academic Environment

What do students nominate as the main obstacle to being an excellent learner?

■ Top 3 responses:

1. Procrastination
2. Inability to concentrate/focus (get easily distracted)
3. Time management/organisation skills

Difficulties with concentration and time and task management are all part of what is recognised as “Procrastination”.

Source: Dr Kerry Howells The First Year Experience: Starting with the Student; Conference Paper presented at The First Year Experience Conference 9-11 July 2003 QUT Brisbane

Dictionary Definition

(on the theme of Procrastination from The Concise Oxford Dictionary)



■ Procrastinate (intransitive verb)


defer action

Why can't people just "do it?"

Maia Szalavitz in *Psychology Today* July/August 2003 pp 50-54

- Self beliefs that support the attitude of: "I work better under pressure"
- Fear of Failure
- Perfectionism
- Factors related to self control (getting side-tracked or losing focus)
- Thrill seeking (always wanting the exciting and rejecting the mundane or routine)
- Lack of interest or relevance
- Avoidance of criticism (by others or self)
- Rebelliousness
- Task related anxieties (being anxious about a particular task e.g. driving in traffic)
- Avoiding what is considered too difficult or boring
- Unclear expectations
- Depression
- Not being skilled or practiced in setting priorities
- Poor time and task management

Understanding the complexity of Procrastination



gets easier with an

Understanding of Perfectionism

Dictionary Definitions

(on the theme of Perfectionism from The Concise Oxford Dictionary)

<p><u>Perfection</u> (noun):</p> <p>completion; making perfect; full development; faultlessness; comparative excellence; perfect person or thing; extreme, perfect specimen or manifestation of quality etc; an accomplishment.</p>	<p><u>Perfectionist</u> (noun):</p> <p>one who holds that perfection can be attained.</p> <p>one who aims at perfection in his or her work.</p>	<p><u>Perfect</u> (adjective & noun):</p> <p>complete, not deficient; faultless; absolute; thoroughly trained or skilled; exceedingly satisfactory; exact, precise.</p>	<p><u>To Perfect something</u> (transitive verb):</p> <p>complete, carry through; make perfect; improve.</p>
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Perfectionism can be a Positive Influence on Learning and Achievement

“Silverman (1995) believes that perfectionism is an inevitable part of being gifted and an energy which can be channelled positively and viewed as a strength in those who have the potential to achieve excellence.”

In Carole C Peters, Perfectionism (1996). paper presented at the Excellence in Education Conference, Perth Published @ <http://www.nexus.edu.au/teachstud/gat/peters.htm>

Silverman, L. K. (1995). Perfectionism. Paper presented at the 11th World Conference on Gifted and Talented Children, Hong Kong.

Perfectionism and likely Influence on Learning and Achievement

Perfectionism is likely to be experienced as a **positive** influence when:

- The student sets high and demanding (but not unattainable) goals.
- The student understands that striving for excellence requires a rigorous application of effort.
- The student can sustain the rigorous application of effort without becoming disheartened and frustrated by the necessary attention to detail that is required by process of attaining excellence.

Carole C Peters Perfectionism (Excellence in Education Conference, Perth, 1996)
<http://www.nexus.edu.au/teachstud/gat/peters.htm>

Perfectionism can be a Positive Influence on Learning and Achievement

- “Silverman (1995) stresses that we must value the positive aspects of perfectionism because the vision of what is possible and the determination to create one’s life as a reflection of that vision mark those with higher level development.
...gifted learners do seem concerned about accomplishment and the pursuit of excellence.”

In Carole C Peters, Perfectionism (1996). paper presented at the Excellence in Education Conference, Perth
Published @ <http://www.nexus.edu.au/teachstud/gat/peters.htm>

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Perfectionism can be a Positive Influence on Learning and Achievement

- Some perfectionists are able to derive great pleasure from their labour and hours of painstaking effort.
- They feel a real sense of satisfaction and truly recognise their achievements.
- They derive energy from what they do and this leads to great achievement.
- They understand that persistence and meticulous attention to detail is frequently required.
- **They recognise that perfection is not possible in all circumstances.**

Carole C Peters Perfectionism (Excellence in Education Conference, Perth, 1996)
<http://www.nexus.edu.au/teachstud/gat/peters.htm>

Perfectionism can be a Negative Influence on Learning and Achievement

- Perceived excellence leads to a sense of “how it ought to be done” and the desire to achieve the extraordinary may become intense. This intensity may be uncomfortable for the person seeking excellence and for those with whom they interact.
- There may also be an accompanying acute awareness of the possibility of failure and failure’s consequences.
- The drive for perfection may lead to feeling inferior if the high standards are not met or if they do not strive hard enough for the performance of which they know they are capable.

Carole C Peters Perfectionism (Excellence in Education Conference, Perth, 1996)
<http://www.nexus.edu.au/teachstud/gat/peters.htm>

Perfectionism can be a Negative Influence on Learning and Achievement

- Others are unable to feel much satisfaction as they never attain what they perceive as possible. They never reach the position of excellence that they think is “good enough” and so miss out on experiencing that satisfied feeling.
- They set overly high standards and reinforce their perfectionistic approach with a critically punishing attitude toward their own efforts.

Carole C Peters Perfectionism (Excellence in Education Conference, Perth, 1996)
<http://www.nexus.edu.au/teachstud/gat/peters.htm>

Perfectionism can be a Negative Influence on Learning and Achievement


- This self criticism can stunt the imagination, harm the spirit and handicap performance in ways that result in chronic underperformance.
- The striving for perfection keeps them in an inner turmoil and frequently means managing an intense dissatisfaction with themselves
- Perfectionism then becomes associated with psychological problems.

Carole C Peters Perfectionism (Excellence in Education Conference, Perth, 1996)
<http://www.nexus.edu.au/teachstud/gat/peters.htm>

PERFECTIONISM has Various Forms

- **Self-Oriented Perfectionism** is lived out by holding unrealistic standards for self.
- **Other-Oriented Perfectionism** results in unrealistic standards directed towards others and the expectation that the “other” will live up to those expectations.
- **Socially Prescribed Perfectionism** is based on the belief that others require of you highly exacting standards and motives that **must** be satisfied.

Academic PERFECTIONISM is Personally and Socially Reinforced



The DESIRE for consistently excellent grades may be intensified with each year of education by the systematically increasing importance that our society places on “success”, “achievement” and “getting it right” and the status that comes from earning a “place” in a much desired program at university.

Some people are more driven by Perfectionism than others but Why?

Innate tendencies:

Some people even when they are very young show a strong desire to pay attention to fine detail and to have things “just so”. Gifted children often show this tendency. Can you think of someone that you know or have known as a child who were like that?

Learned experience:

How many times during childhood does a child hear the phrases That’s not right; You are not right; That is right; You are right; That is wrong; You are wrong. The consequences of “having a go” and getting “it” right or wrong is frequently socially constructed and reinforced .

Some people are more driven by Perfectionism than others but Why?

Expectations of Others and Self:

The internalised sense of right and wrong, success and failure is frequently influenced by messages both overt and covert, conscious and unconscious, coming to us by those who interact with us on a daily basis.

Eventually these messages become so familiar and important that they become integrated into the conscious and unconscious life of the individual. These processes frequently continue to influence us even in adulthood.

Perfectionism as a Psychological Experience

Perfectionism has become an internalised and important reference point for an individual when:

- Personal motivation is driven by the need to attain excellence;
- Effort and outcome are not seen in a realistic context;
- Personal “performance” is viewed as defining of self esteem and personal value and is consistently judged as lacking in some way (I.e. Not Perfect)

Perfectionism as a Psychological Experience

How to understand the Perfectionist:

In the words of Burns (1980) these are individuals "whose standards are high beyond reach or reason, people who strain unremittingly toward impossible goals and measure their own worth entirely in terms of productivity and accomplishment" (p.34)

Quoted from Halgin and Leahy; *Understanding and Treating Perfectionistic College Students*, Journal of Counselling and Development Nov/Dec 1989 Vol 68 p 222-225

Perfectionism as a Psychological Experience

When the sense of self and the experience of achievement is filtered through the lens of Perfectionism the underlying internal dialogue (i.e. the conversation that we have with ourselves) is likely to be:

Question: *Is what I have done good enough?*

Answer: *No, ...because I have not achieved all that I perceived was possible.*

i.e. There is a difference between perceived possibility and actual achievement.

The Perfectionist Student and their Internal Dialogue

An Example:

A student gains a "Credit" grade for his/her first university assignment.

The internal dialogue might go something like this:


Question to Self:

Is a "Credit" good enough to give me a sense of achievement?

Answer to Self:

No it isn't. I should be able to get a "High Distinction" or a "Distinction" at the very least.

Impact of Perfectionism



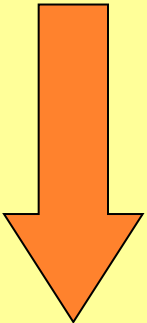
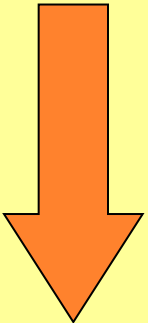
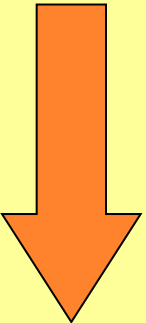
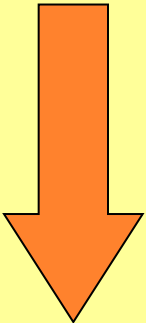
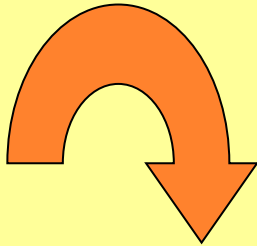
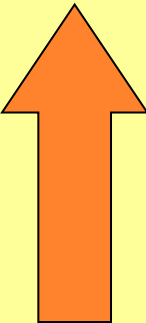
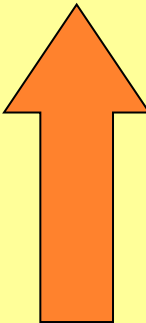
And so the “C” grade is found critically lacking in the experience of the student.

What happens to the sense of academic achievement?

What impact might there be on motivation?

What is the psychological impact of this internal process?

Impact of Perfectionism

Satisfaction with effort expended in the learning task if perfection not achieved	Level of academic confidence generated in undertaking the learning task if perfection not achieved	Personal valuing of the effort given to the learning task if perfection not achieved	Sense of self esteem, self value and self respect resulting from the learning task if perfection not achieved	Willingness to have a go at another learning task	Likelihood of anxiety being generated in relation to the next learning task	Likelihood of feelings of frustration being generated over time
						

Popular Strategies used by Students to Cope with the Impact of Perfectionism

“I’ll get it right” Obsessive approach

- Resolves to (and does) do more next time
- Resolves to (and does) try harder next time
- Resolves to (and does) give the next learning task extra effort
- Gives up other activities to focus on academic work
- Worries
- Keeps worry largely to himself or herself

Avoidance

- Avoidance is a favoured action plan
- Says “I can only work when the pressure is on”
- Experiences the question “How are you going?” as confrontational and a threat to self esteem and becomes defensive
- Gets short term relief from anxiety, and attempts to limit further erosion of self esteem and confidence by putting the task into the future
- Excuses procrastination in a multitude of ways

Long Term Consequences of the “I’ll Get it Right” Approach

- Little to no recognition of success despite the achievement being obvious to others
- Reduction in social and non academic activities
- Reduction in self esteem and self confidence

Long Term Consequences of the “I’ll Get it Right” Approach

- Increased experience of stress
- Increased episodes of illness
- Increased experience of anxiety about achievement
- Increased possibility of motivational burn-out
- Increased possibility of depression
- Increased possibility of social isolation


Long Term Consequences of Avoidance

- Underachievement which may be misunderstood as inability
- Possible increase in the use of social and other activities (TV, computer games) to escape the anxiety of approaching the academic task
- Self esteem and confidence protected from exposure to further erosion by avoiding events that might lead to a sense of failure or underperformance
- Stress and anxiety related to a specific (academic) task becomes more intense as the deadline approaches

Long Term Consequences of Avoidance

- Procrastination becomes a chronic pattern
- Increased episodes of illness due to increased stress
- Increased anxiety about achievement and “performance”
- Increased possibility of motivational burn-out
- Increased possibility of depression
- Increased possibility of social isolation due to feeling embarrassed by consistent underachievement and the feeling of letting others down

Procrastination is not Just Laziness in Action



Adderholt-Elliott (1989,p19) describes 5 characteristics of perfectionistic students and teachers which contribute to underachievement:

“Procrastination, fear of failure, the all-or-nothing mindset, paralysed perfection and workaholism.

Procrastination is a complex problem affecting many perfectionists.

The fear of being imperfect and the dread of not living up to one's own and others expectations can cause overwhelming feelings leading to profound procrastination.

Putting it off until the absolute last second is a painful avoidance tactic employed by perfectionists.”

Adderholt-Elliott, M (1989). Perfectionism and underachievement. *Gifted Child Today*. 12 (1), 19-21.

Procrastination is not Just Laziness in Action

In the words of a student:

“Procrastination is my middle name. Even a psychic once told my mother that I was a great procrastinator, lazy, who could do anything I wanted if only I’d start. Yes that’s pretty much me in a nutshell. Once I’m at my desk I’m fine. Once I get started there’s usually no stopping me. It’s a matter of getting my bottom on that seat. Instead the carpet suddenly needs vacuuming. During exam time, my room is always spotless but in every other month of the year, it’s the usual bomb.”

Game, A & Metcalfe, A (2003)p. 26 *The First Year Experience*. Federation Press

Procrastination is more than “I don’t care”

Procrastination can be related to the Fear of Failure Syndrome.

Here is a quote from a student:

“I’ve come to realise that there is a safety net in the night-before technique. If you finish the night before, and receive an almost expected though not hoped for bad mark, you get over it quickly because you know you didn’t pay the deserved attention. Whereas if you actually worked your butt off and ...still received a non-favourable mark, you are absolutely shattered.”

Game, A & Metcalfe, A (2003) *The First Year Experience*. P.27 Federation Press

Paralysed Perfectionists resort to complete inertia

“I have always wanted to be a writer but have avoided actually writing anything for fear of failure.”

Game, A & Metcalfe, A (2003) *The First Year Experience*. P.38 Federation Press

“I didn’t know where to start or what to do – I didn’t know the right word or the right process.”

Game, A & Metcalfe, A (2003) *The First Year Experience*. P.36 Federation Press

“I failed my course but I know it wasn’t that I didn’t have the brains for it. I actually wrote thousands of words on two of the assignments but I just couldn’t complete the work by handing it in. I still have those assignments in the desk drawer. I just couldn’t hand them in and I don’t understand why that was. I was totally interested in what I was learning and I really liked the lecturer. It was my own doing.”

Personal communication from a UNSW student. (2003)

Tips for the Perfectionist ⁽¹⁾

- Work with the desire to have high standards and big ideals and accept that this is part of who you are.
- Acknowledge the anxiety and frustration that perfectionist ideals provoke.
- Develop the inner strength and psychological tools that will allow you to contain the anxiety and frustration.

Tips for the Perfectionist (2)

- Accept that persistence is an attitude that you can master even in the pervasive awareness that failure is possible and even probable.
- Remind yourself that achieving excellence requires hard work that will take longer than you expect.
- Recognise that it takes year to achieve 'mastery' level. Allow time for the learning, application, or practice to consolidate so that the experience of 'excellence' can mature.
- Save your best achievement for the pinnacle of your life's work. Remember that the Nobel Prize is not likely to be awarded to an undergraduate nor even to a PhD dissertation!


Tips for the Perfectionist ⁽³⁾

- Accept that your aversion to chaos stems from your desire to have an orderly environment and is a reflection of your exacting standards.
- Be proud of being a perfectionist and know that your desire to achieve high standards is part of making a difference.
- Take time to reflect and recognise your accomplishments even if they seem small and insignificant.

Tips for the Perfectionist (4)

- Recognise the need to set priorities and to make decisions about what is REALLY important to you.
- Understand the learning that is embedded in mistakes. You would have nothing to learn if you already had it all perfect!
- Recognise that your own high standards are your own and don't impose them on others or you will be experienced as a tyrant.

Tips for the Perfectionist (5)

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- Listen to others and practice being flexible.
 - Let others reveal their own passions and inner strengths and learn to recognise what others have to offer. You might learn something from them.
 - Understand that procrastination is a part of the process.
 - Allow your ideas to incubate and allow the time necessary to build on your ideas and to express them.

Tips for the Perfectionist (6)

- Recognise when there is a creative process in progress even if it seems painfully slow.
- Understand that taking a risk when trying something new may seem VERY risky indeed because you are able to see ALL the possible consequences.
- Understand and learn to work constructively with the anxiety that comes from being SO aware of what is at stake.

Acknowledgements: Carole C Peters, Perfectionism (1996). paper presented at the Excellence in Education Conference, Perth Published @ <http://www.nexus.edu.au/teachstud/gat/peters.htm>