

## Getting to Good Enough

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Do you strive for perfection? Do you spend hours obsessing over the tiniest details of your life until they're exactly right? Do you feel uncomfortable when everything in your life isn't "just so"? Are you prepared for every eventuality, even the most unlikely?

In short, are you a perfectionist?

There are times when perfection is called for, of course, but allow me to suggest to you that most of the time, "good enough" will do. **There's a point where it takes more and more energy to achieve smaller and smaller gains** — where you're putting in as much effort as you've spent on a project so far to get a tiny 1% or 2% improvement.

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It can be hard to accept imperfections, though. We all want to shine, and often feel that we won't be recognized unless our work is absolutely flawless. Yet there are plenty of examples where this isn't the case. Walt Whitman felt that his book *Leaves of Grass*, the book that established his place in the American literature canon, was never quite right, and re-issued revised editions throughout his life. Countless authors have complained about their early work — some claim they

can't even bear to read the works that launched them to national attention! The sciences are based on the premise that you publish as soon as your work is “good enough” — and let the rest of the science world try to perfect it.

And yet we struggle. We concede a lot when we aim for less than perfection. Here are a few ways to get over these blocks and get your work, whatever it is, out into the world.

## Planning

As with everything else, **getting to “good enough” starts with planning.** Start with your objective: You may have an image in your head of what a perfect outcome would look like, but what does a an outcome you can live with look like? Begin your planning with an outcome in mind that's good enough to get the job done.

It might be helpful to compare your perfect outcome and your good enough outcome. What's different in how you achieve each? Consider, for example, the desire to write a book. Of course, we all want to write a best-seller, to sell millions of copies and go on Oprah and with the Nobel Prize for Literature. That's perfect! But maybe selling a few thousand copies, winning a couple of honorable mentions, and building a strong platform for the next book is good enough to be worth your time and effort. Some of the steps you need to reach either outcome are the same: getting a publisher, choosing a topic, marketing your book, making appearances, getting your book reviewed, and so on. But that perfect outcome is going to require you to take a lot of other steps, many of which are somewhat unrealistic (like getting nominated for a Nobel Prize). Planning can help you identify steps that are unrealistic given the nature of your product, your other obligations, your financial status, and the way the world works.

Second, **set benchmarks for your project that are good enough to move on.** If you're launching a business, maybe you'd like to have a thousand clients, but for now, getting the first 10 is good enough — it gives you something to work with. Again, by making clear benchmarks, and determining what you have to do to achieve them, you'll be able to identify some that are entirely unreasonable — tone those down to a doable level.

At any step, of course, you can always go beyond “good enough” towards “perfect” — but focus first and foremost on building the necessary foundation.

## Confidence

Often, our push towards perfection is not driven by a desire to do our best but by a fear that our work — and our self — isn't good enough. Since we lack basic confidence in our ability to make something worthwhile, we invest more and more energy into our projects trying to push them just a little bit further.

Confidence can be a tricky thing; just saying “be more confident” probably won't solve all your problems. **Building self-confidence is really a life journey, not a quick fix.**

That said, there are steps you can take to build up your confidence level.

- Catalog your successes, no matter how small.
- Set yourself up for successes by planning achievable benchmarks and goals (as above).
- Make a list of your strengths. Be honest — there are probably more than you think!
- Make a list of your weaknesses, and focus on improving them. Again, be honest — there are probably less than you think.
- Discuss your weaknesses with your loved ones. They probably have a different perspective!
- Give yourself explicit permission to fail at something. Don't make your self-worth contingent on constant success.

## Make perfect mistakes

One reason people become perfectionists is that they're afraid of making even the smallest mistakes — which is, ultimately, self-defeating. **Mistakes are the stuff of personal growth**, and making the right mistakes can help you build a firmer foundation for any project. Embrace mistakes as part of the process of getting to good enough.

Embracing mistakes means more than just accepting them, though. The point isn't to make the same mistake over and over but to analyze and learn from each

mistake. Sometimes they'll come as a result of your personal weaknesses, but not usually. More often mistakes are the result of unknown external factors and planning with insufficient information. Perfectionism doesn't correct for those things — it avoids them by keeping your project locked inside your head and away from the messy real world.

## Putting your best foot forward

The problem with perfectionism is that, ironically, it keeps you from putting your best work into the world. Even worse, it keeps your work from being as good as it can possibly be. Why? Because **in the effort to make your work better-than-human, it becomes less-than-human.** All the human imperfections that make it yours are squeezed out of it.

To err is human, they say. Those human imperfections add character, your character. I think of The Replacements, a band that Rolling Stone once featured on its cover with the caption “The Greatest Rock and Roll Band of All Time”. If you've ever heard them, you know that at their best, they were sloppy (often sloppy drunk), ragged, unpolished — their early songs always sound just on the verge of falling apart completely. Instead, they fell together, bringing an energy and vitality to music that had been stripped clean, over the course of the early MTV years, of all its appeal.

There's a difference between good enough and half-assed. There was nothing half-assed about The Replacements — they embraced their calling and made great music. A lot of the advice out there for perfectionists says to “settle for 80%, 60%, or less” — their hearts are in the right place, **but getting to good enough isn't about settling, it's about achieving greatness.** Perfectionism isn't a problem because it does too much, it's a problem because in trying to do too much it causes us to do nothing at all.

You can't “settle” for a half-assed job when your reputation, income, and possibly the well-being of your customers, audience, or clients are on the line. But the fact is you can avoid perfectionism and still create work that is good enough — that does what it's supposed to do reliably. Good planning, confidence in yourself, learning from your mistakes — these are the elements of a job done well enough; unrealistic planning, a lack of confidence, and avoiding mistakes are the hallmarks of both perfectionism and half-assed work.

Go figure!



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