

# THE PERFECT ESSAY

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Looking back on too many years of education, I can identify one truly impossible teacher. She cared about me, and my intellectual life, even when I didn't. Her expectations were high — impossibly so. She was an English teacher. She was also my mother.

When good students turn in an essay, they dream of their instructor returning it to them in exactly the same condition, save for a single word added in the margin of the final page: "Flawless." This dream came true for me one afternoon in the ninth grade. Of course, I'd heard that genius could show itself at an early age, so I was only slightly taken aback that I had achieved perfection at the tender age of 14. Obviously, I did what any professional writer would do; I hurried off to spread the good news. I didn't get very far. The first person I told was my mother.

My mother, who is just shy of five feet tall, is normally incredibly soft-spoken, but on the rare occasion when she got angry, she was terrifying. I'm not sure if she was more upset by my hubris or by the fact that my English teacher had let my ego get so out of hand. In any event, my mother and her red pen showed me how deeply flawed a flawless essay could be. At the time, I'm sure she thought she was teaching me about mechanics, transitions, structure, style and voice. But what I learned, and what stuck with me through my time teaching writing at Harvard, was a deeper lesson about the nature of creative criticism.

First off, it hurts. Genuine criticism, the type that leaves an indelible mark on you as a writer, also leaves an existential imprint on you as a person. I've heard people say that a writer should never take criticism personally. I say that we should never listen to these people.

Criticism, at its best, is deeply personal, and gets to the heart of why we write the way we do. Perhaps you're a narcissist who secretly resents your audience. Or an elitist who expects herculean feats of your reader. Or a know-it-all who can't admit that stylistic repetition is sometimes annoying redundancy. Or a wallflower who hides behind sparkingly meaningless modifiers. Or an affirmation junkie who's the first to brag about a flawless essay.

Unfortunately, as my mother explained, you can be all of these things at once.

Her red pen had made something painfully clear. To become a better writer, I first had to become a better person. Well before I ever read it, I came to sense the meaning of Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself." And I faced the disturbing suggestion that my song was no good.

The intimate nature of genuine criticism implies something about who is able to give it, namely, someone who knows you well enough to show you how your psychic life is getting in the way of good writing. Conveniently, they're also the people who care enough to see you through the traumatic aftermath of this realization. For me the aftermath took the form of my first, and I hope only, encounter with writer's block.

It lasted three years.

Franz Kafka once said: "Writing is utter solitude, the descent into the cold abyss of oneself." My mother's criticism had shown me that Kafka is right about the cold abyss, and when you make the introspective descent that writing requires you're not always pleased by what you find. But, in the years that followed, her sustained tutelage suggested that Kafka might be wrong about the solitude. I was lucky enough to find a critic and teacher who was willing to make the journey of writing with me. "It's a thing of no great difficulty," according to Plutarch, "to raise objections against another man's oration, it is a very easy matter; but to produce a better in its place is a work extremely troublesome." I'm sure I wrote essays in the later years of high school without my mother's guidance, but I can't recall them. What I remember, however, is how she took up the "extremely troublesome" work of ongoing criticism.

There are two ways to interpret Plutarch when he suggests that a critic should be able to produce "a better in its place." In a straightforward sense, he could mean that a critic must be more talented than the artist she critiques. My mother was well covered on this count. (She denies it, but she's still a much, much better writer than I am.) But perhaps Plutarch is suggesting something slightly different, something a bit closer to Cicero's claim that one should "criticize by creation, not by finding fault." Genuine criticism creates a precious opening for an author to become better on his own terms — a process that's often excruciating, but also almost always meaningful.

My mother said she would help me with my writing, but first I had to help myself. For each assignment, I was to write the best essay I could. Real criticism isn't meant to find obvious mistakes, so if she found any — the type I could have found on my own — I had to start from scratch. From scratch. Once the essay was "flawless," she would take an evening to walk me through my errors. That was when true criticism, the type that changed me as a person, began.

She chided me as a pseudo-sophisticate when I included obscure references and professional jargon. She had no patience for brilliant but useless extended metaphors. "Writers can't bluff their way through ignorance." That was news to me — I'd need to find another way to structure my daily existence. She trimmed back my flowery language, drew lines through my exclamation marks and argued for the value of understatement. "John," she almost whispered. I leaned in to hear her: "I can't hear you when you shout at me." So I stopped shouting and bluffing, and slowly my writing improved.

Somewhere along the way I set aside my hopes of writing that flawless essay. But perhaps I missed something important in my mother's lessons about creativity and perfection. Perhaps the point of writing the flawless essay was not to give up, but to never willingly

finish. Whitman repeatedly reworked "Song of Myself" between 1855 and 1891. Repeatedly. We do our absolute best with a piece of writing, and come as close as we can to the ideal. And, for the time being, we settle. In critique, however, we are forced to depart, to give up the perfection we thought we had achieved for the chance of being even a little bit better. This is the lesson I took from my mother: If perfection were possible, it wouldn't be motivating.

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