You hear the word *perfectionist* bandied about a lot, but what does it mean? Are you a perfectionist if you only show your best work? Are you a perfectionist if you hone and refine and polish your work? Are you a perfectionist if you commit all your free time to writing?

No.

Perfectionism—much like inertia, a force that strangles a person’s ability to do any real writing—instills fears that you will never live up to a standard set in your mind or one that’s been set for you by others. People in the throes of perfectionism have great ideas they often struggle to follow through on and small bodies of work they don’t improve.

I don’t believe that people are or are not perfectionists in a cut-and-dried way, but rather that some writers may be susceptible to and fall under the influence of perfectionism, a nasty intoxicant that brings very little actual pleasure. People in the grip of perfectionism are not lazy; they’re afraid. And that fear leads to paralysis. If you think you might be in such a place, then be kind to yourself. (In fact, I venture that perfectionists are also great self-punishers—so please don’t beat yourself up further if you realize you may be experiencing perfection-
The bravery, dedication, time, and vulnerability required of writers can be daunting. If you aren’t at least a little bit afraid, it probably doesn’t mean much to you to put your work out there.

It’s not as simple as being a perfectionist or not—I see it more like an illness that overcomes you rather than a state of being. Think of it as a virus that may lie dormant inside you. You may only experience perfectionism in certain instances, when a particular fear gets the better of you; then you find yourself obsessing over a project or unable to let it go. In that case, you’re simply having an attack of perfectionism, like a stomachache or the flu. And the cure for this condition is to keep writing.

**COMMON FEARS TO OVERCOME**

Let’s unearth some of the most common fears at the root of perfectionism, those that keep you from letting go of your work or allowing others in to help you improve it. We’ll first break down each of these fears so that you can free yourself from their grip, and then we’ll go over strategies for combating them.

**Fear of Failure**

Failure is one of the most common reasons for paralysis among writers. There are so many opportunities for failure, from receiving a rejection letter to realizing that a work in progress isn’t coming together the way you want it to. Every time I see a status update from a hardworking writer that says something like “How did I ever think I knew how to write?” or “My novel hates me!” I always think: You’re right on track—and that track is not failure.

*Creation is an act of chaos.* I’m sorry to bring up the birth metaphor, but if you’ve ever seen a birth, human or animal, you know they are messy, wild affairs full of moaning and fluids and pain and frustration. Frankly, writing is not so different. The act of creation requires starts and stops, moving forward and back. Plenty of times you will write material that you will not use or pursue a path that proves to be fruitless.
But anything new is full of thrilling, marvelous wonder. No matter your spiritual point of view, if children popped out of the womb speaking French and completing times tables, you’d have to ask: What’s the point? We create because it is full of wonder and awe, even though it hurts a lot, or at the very least causes grown adults to wander around in public muttering under their breath and eating themselves into donut comas. (No? Just me?)

Writing is a process of discovery.

You discover things about yourself, about your ideas and feelings. You enter into perspectives you may have always wondered about and deepen your exploration of those you’ve known intimately all your life. You try on lofty propositions. You escape, you revel, you get weird. (No? Can’t just be me!)

Let me repeat: Creation is an act of chaos. And I don’t mean uncontrollable, formless chaos but rather the raw, wild, bursting, daunting energies the universe is made of. Wild stuff. Atomic stuff. Fundamental stuff.

If you are experiencing any one of the million feelings of failure and frustration in the process of writing a book, I’m sorry to break it to you, but you are not failing. You are herding your own Big Bang into being; you are riding quantum possibilities.

When you feel the shivery feelings of failure coming on, remember:

- Everything you do for your writing practice deepens it. Fear of failure means you’re doing something worthwhile and probably taking an important creative or personal risk necessary to growth.
- You really only fail if you quit (and even then, you can pick up and start again, so it’s not true failure, either).

Fear of Being a Fraud

You might think that the fear of being revealed as a fraud would only strike those at the beginning of a writing practice: novice or newbie
writers. Yet it seems to be a stock feeling that even the most successful writers carry. Even though you have published a story or a novel, have received an award or recognition, write every day for hours, are taking classes in writing, or have received a degree, sooner or later someone will lift that curtain and call you out for being full of it, a hack, an interloper. You may suffer from “imposter syndrome,” in which seemingly successful people do not feel they deserve their success or that they will be revealed as imposters at any moment by their colleagues and others. This term was coined by Valerie Young, author of *The Secret Thoughts of Successful Women*, and publications such as *Forbes*, *Pacific Standard*, and *Slate* have run articles on the subject. Though men and women both experience it, women are statistically more likely to feel undeserving of their success than men.

This feeling of being a fraud or an imposter can only hold up in the face of proving something to someone else. As long as you seek to prove yourself, you’re at the mercy, in essence, of that approval or praise. (More thoughts on the detrimental effects of praise in chapter sixteen.) Part of the necessary individuation of becoming a writer is learning to care less about what others think and more about achieving your vision as a writer. There does come a time and place for tailoring your work to an audience, but in so many cases writers stymie themselves at the wrong part of the process: as they’re trying to get raw material onto the page. Those in the grip of perfectionism are especially prone to this; if you never get it down on paper, then no one can dislike it, right?

The fear of being a fraud also surfaces when you are given a chance to step outside your comfort zone. Someone or several people have decided you are, in fact, the very opposite of a fraud—they want to see your work, have you speak, or publish you. But suddenly you’re crippled with terror that once they get what they’ve asked from you, they will be disappointed.
Over time, the more you do the work of a writing practice, the less fraudulent you will feel. It starts with your own acknowledgment that you are worthy and that you have something to say. With repetition comes confidence. The more you show up for yourself, the more you will trust yourself.

When you hear the lying voice of fraud in your mind, consider one of the following strategies.

- Give yourself permission not to show a particular draft or piece of work to anyone. Make yourself a deal. “I’ll share the next draft.” (Sometimes you just need to get past the fraud-crier in order to discover your project is better than you think.)
- Ask yourself these questions (I recommend journaling the answers): Who am I afraid of disappointing, and why? What will be the consequences of “failing” to deliver? Often you discover that your fear is amorphous—that when you look at the worst-case scenario, it’s not nearly as bad as your anxiety is making you believe.

**Fear of Having Nothing to Say or Being “Tapped Out”**

You wrote a killer story, novel, or essay that knocked your professor, best friend, or fellow writer’s socks off. They crowed, they raved, they promised you greatness would follow. Suddenly you’re gripped by an icy sensation. What if that was it? Your one shot at glory—the best thing you are capable of producing? What if no more material comes again or will ever be as good? The panic rises into your gorge, and then you’re hyperventilating on the floor in the fetal position, unable to write. Just me? No, I didn’t think so. Like the fear of fraudulence, the fear of being a one-hit wonder is so common it should be a badge that you earn in the Writer Scouts.

Once I was the manager of a spa inside a health club. I was younger than most of my staff, and it was my first management position. But my
boss liked me a lot, and amazingly, when we went to review my first-quarter sales goals for the products I was in charge of selling, I had exceeded them quite impressively (with no strategy in place). My boss gave me a bonus and words of praise, and then pointed out the ways we’d have to keep this success going. Within minutes, I was crying. My startled boss reared back and stared at me for a moment. “Are those tears of happiness?” he asked.

I shrugged, unable to explain my bizarre tears. All I could think the whole time we sat there, with my bonus check in my hand, looking at my boss’s proud smile, was How am I going to repeat this success? And if I don’t, he’ll know that I was never capable of it in the first place; it was a fluke.

It’s no different in the writing realm. You have a sudden success—a yes when you’re used to hearing no—and the terror sets in. But it doesn’t have to. Here are some tips for handling the fear of drying up.

• Give yourself this mantra (or one of your own): Each project requires something different. You don’t have to bring the same skills or energy to every one. Just as parents find new love for each new child, you will find new energy and inspiration for all of your projects.

• Set a timer for ten minutes, and pick three random words out of the dictionary. Now write a short story, poem, or stream-of-consciousness freewrite that incorporates all three words. This exercise helps you generate new material from random prompts, which can alleviate the feeling that you’ll never write again.

Fear of Being Out of Control
Nobody likes to feel as though they can’t control the outcome of a situation or project. Even for the most “go with the flow” types, such feelings are challenging. Tossing your work into the world can feel precarious and unmooring, and, for many, that fear leads back to where this chapter started: perfectionism. Many a writer has clutched a beloved
project to her chest for far longer than is necessary because the idea of letting it go feels a lot like letting go of control.

This can also extend to a fear of having no control over your work. If it’s published, will you lose say in the editorial process? Will your voice be refined within an inch of its life? These are normal fears that, more often than not, don’t bear out (though if you are really concerned, consider jumping straight to chapter twenty-three, “Go It Alone,” about when and why to self-publish).

Creating art, putting it out there, and then awaiting feedback and publication can create immense anxiety. When you have nowhere to put your anxiety, it can lead to what psychologists call “binding anxiety”—behaviors that help a person cope with those uncomfortable feelings. These behaviors can range from revising a page over and over or never sharing your work, or, worst of all, a deep and complex “block” that feels as though it can never be broken. Try one of these strategies when you feel an overwhelming loss of control.

- Submit to publications or contests with deadlines. Pick writing contests as a way to force yourself out of holding on. Or ask a member of your Creative Support Team to set “deadlines” for you to turn over your work to them.
- Remind yourself that all works of writing are collaborative—between you and the reader. Even when you set out to create a specific vision, readers bring their own perceptions and opinions to bear. In a way, no artist is really in control of his or her work, because you can’t control what people will think or feel while reading it.

**Fear of Being Seen or Being Honest**

At the root this fear is the fear of being rejected once the real, raw, honest truth is handed over to readers. Often we feel shame in putting our written words out there. Not only did you write your feelings into being, you now have hard, irrefutable proof in print that others can
linger on, hold up, and assess you by. And that’s scary. There’s also the fact that your truth may be different from someone else’s, so you open yourself to arguments, different opinions, and criticism. I think that’s what makes the comments sections of many websites so appealing to some writers, because it offers the option of anonymity: They can say what they want and then go back and hide behind their screens, never having to face any of those people in real life if they don’t want to—which is not always for the better.

But keep in mind the alternative: that you never express yourself, never improve upon your work, and keep all your thoughts and feelings bottled up.

When you feel that raw sting of potential rejection as you anticipate showing your real self in words, remember:

- For every person who might not like what you have to say, there is at minimum one, and probably many, who need to hear what you have to say and will be moved by it.
- Think of all the authors who have moved, touched, and inspired you. What if they had not put their work out there?

**WORK IT**

Choose the fear that resonates most strongly with you at the time of your writing. (You can also repeat this exercise for any other fear.) Make it the title or subject of a freewrite. For example, perhaps the fear of being a fraud is your chosen subject. Set a timer for a minimum of ten minutes and write a short story, a poem, or an essay without stopping to correct a thing. Just let it flow; don’t stop to correct anything. Don’t use quotation marks or punctuation, and don’t cross anything out. Just start a new “sentence” when you feel stuck. This exercise helps transmute a negative feeling into a positive outcome—it’s a mental version of the “Move It” exercises.
Perfectionism needs an antidote in order to dissipate: sloppiness, looseness, or, more specifically, permission to let go. I highly recommend these exercises.

1. **DANCE SESSION.** Put on music, be alone, and get silly: head-tilted-back, limb-flailing, singing-in-the-shower crazy.

2. **RUN IT OUT.** If dancing it out is too much for you, try running it out. Run in circles, run up and down some stairs, even run in place. The endorphins of some quick cardio have a powerful way of jolting perfectionism out of your body.

3. **FINGER PAINT.** There’s just something about finger painting that perfectly embodies what it means to let go of perfection. Try making a perfectly straight line with all that gooey paint on your fingers. You can’t! It’s a tactile experience of allowing yourself to loosen up a negative feeling and transform it through another medium.