

# Chapter 1: Failure is Not an Option

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Failure, so goes the dominant cultural narrative, is a sign of weakness. Of laziness. Of stupidity and bad breeding and busted bootstraps. Failure will ruin your life. In action, suspense, and sports films, *failure is not an option*. In real life, failure only happens to bad people. Or, more to the point in this context, to bad writers. Failure in writing betrays dullness of mind, smallness of imagination. The failed writer—the one who cannot learn to write well (which is to say, according to accepted conventions of good writing)—is discounted as dim, unprepared, non-serious, wacky, or weird, distracted, behind.

Or, failure is acceptable if we learn from it. If we can recuperate it, if it brings us virtue and strength and morality because what doesn't kill us makes us stronger. And if we never, ever do it again.

No. Stop with this. This is stupid, and the opposite is actually true: Failure should be welcomed, if not actively sought out, signaling as it does both the presence of creative, risky thinking and an opportunity to explore a new direction. To writing especially, failure is integral, and I will go so far as to assert that the best writing (and the best learning-to-write) happens when one approaches the activity from a mindset trained on failure. Failure represents a certain against-the-grain jettisoning of established ideas about what counts as good writing in favor of rogue, original, attention-capturing, and intentional art. To fail willingly in writing is to be empowered by the possibilities that emerge. It is to trust oneself and one's ideas, a quality too rare in the age of hyper-achievement, in which the only progress that counts is progress that moves up.

## A History of Failure

Broadly speaking, failure's bad reputation is an inherited relic of another time. Though it would certainly be possible to trace its

origins back to many religious mythologies, I will in the interest of brevity go back only so far as the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century in America, when the economy shifted from one based in agriculture to one based in industry (closing, in theory, the opportunity gap between rich and poor). From this backdrop grew the recognition that literacy, the ability to read and write (and generally comprehend information), would be the bedrock of a thriving community. Thus, literacy took on the status of social necessity for the masses, not simply a luxury for the ruling class. By the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a system of common schools had been codified, and central to its curriculum was grammar instruction and conventions of speech and writing.

According to literacy scholar John Trimbur, from whom I have been piecing together this history, reading and writing instruction functioned “as both a means to regulate popular literacy and a social marker to divide the literate from the illiterate, the worthy poor from the unworthy, ‘us’ from ‘them.’” Given the then-corresponding (perhaps correlative) rates of illiteracy among incarcerated populations, success and failure in this realm came to be perceived not simply as an indication of intelligence or economic advantage, but as a matter of moral fiber. To fail in reading or writing meant a failure of moral fortitude.

But cultural attitudes toward failure remain as sinister as ever, perhaps more so in the wake of standardized testing, No Child Left Behind, and Race to the Top. Failure continues to represent not just ill preparedness, but weakness in spirit and mind, stupidity, inadequacy, and a lifetime of toiling. And there is something about failure in writing that amplifies these judgments, suggesting that the subject somehow deserves to be judged and disadvantaged in these ways.

## **An Alternative View**

What we have failed to grasp—why the idea that failure is bad needs to die—is the integral connection between failure and risk, creativity, and innovation, not to mention emotional and cognitive resilience. This relationship is well documented, making its tenacious hold on cultural ideology especially confounding. For example, many of us use and benefit daily from innovations discovered by accident: penicillin, Corn Flakes, Post-it Notes, Corningware, WD-40, oral contraception, and potato chips. All of these were discovered when the discoverer was working on a different puzzle. And discoveries like these are the norm, not the exception. This is the primary activity of lab research, after all: A researcher may

run hundreds, thousands of trials and experiments, each a failure in its own unique way (and some leading to accidental discoveries) before landing on, say, the polio vaccine or the secret to the expanding universe. Likewise, in the tech industry, we need only look as far as Silicon Valley and the dozens of stories of failed start-ups to understand how integral failure is to the culture of innovation there (even when it is difficult to stomach). In fact, failure is so common and so prominent in tech, they've developed an entire annual conference around it, FailCon.

And though writing is not obviously about discovery of life-altering products, it is about discovery of a different sort and thus, the virtue of failure should be similarly celebrated. In fact, knowing what I know about learning to write (as a writer and a writing teacher myself), I would argue that it is impossible for one to develop anything approaching a good writing ability without years—decades, probably—of repeated failure. We aren't born pen in hand, fully primed to write sonnets or political treatises as soon as we get a grip on those fine motor skills. Writing is learned slowly, over a long period of time, and with much difficulty, and anybody who says otherwise is lying or delusional or both.

Consider the testimony of renowned journalist and public intellectual Ta-Nehisi Coates who, in an interview for *The Atlantic's* "Creative Breakthroughs" series, describes writing as a process of repeated failures that, with persistence, accumulate to create breakthroughs. "I always consider the entire process about failure," he says, "and I think that's the reason why more people don't write." Similarly, novelist Stephen King speaks publicly (and repeatedly) about his impressively large stack of rejection slips before *Carrie* was finally picked up by Doubleday, thereby launching his illustrious career (powered by persistence, no doubt, in the face of his continued fear "of failing at whatever story I'm writing"). Pulitzer Prize winning novelist Junot Díaz writes memorably of his difficulty in writing his second novel, a years-long exercise in failure; it famously took Jane Austen fourteen years to write *Sense and Sensibility*; and Joyce Carol Oates, in her "Notes on Failure," reminds us that Faulkner considered himself a failed poet and that Henry James only became a novelist after a failed turn at playwriting.

There is much disagreement, or shall I say healthy debate, in the community of writing scholars about the best and most effective ways to teach writing. The specifics in this case are immaterial, because these scholars do agree on (at least) one foundational

idea: that writing is a *process*, which is a coded way of avoiding the harsher truth: Writing—and learning to write—involves a great deal of failure. We start a draft; we get frustrated or stuck or side-tracked, or we discover halfway through that we’re actually interested in something else. We move to a clean sheet of paper or a fresh document and start again. And the process continues until we’ve made something cohesive, something that works. We scholars know this not only because we’ve researched it, but because we are writers ourselves, and we spend a great deal of time with people struggling to improve their writing.

Writing scholars don’t use the word “failure” very often (or at all), but we should. There is something bold there, something that a dogged denial of failure closes off: permission to make a mess, to throw something away, to try thirty different ideas instead of toiling away on one. It’s a reset button for the brain. That didn’t work! Let’s salvage what we can and try again! Scholars and teachers don’t use this word, but we should—it is the most honest thing we have to say about writing.

## **Making Failure an Option**

What should be clear is that failure is a significant part of the entire scene of learning, an assertion that, again, is borne out by widely respected research. Malcolm Gladwell isn’t wrong when he insists upon the 10,000-hour rule, which, in suggesting that it takes 10,000 hours to truly master anything (shooting free-throws, playing an instrument), implicitly builds in a generous rate of failure. It’s true that writing is not stable in the way that chess is stable, but the broad message of Gladwell’s limited theory—that to excel at anything takes a tremendous amount of practice and persistence—easily aligns with prevailing thought on what is central to development in writing: Writing is difficult and complex, and development is not linear. More recently, Carol Dweck’s concept of *growth mindset* suggests that people learn better when their efforts are assessed and praised as opposed to their autonomous being: “You seem to be working really hard” instead of “You’re smart.” Drawing on this learning paradigm, cognitive researcher Manu Kapur tells us that our brains are actually wired for failure.

Failure is integral to learning and development, more so than external markers of achievement or success. An avoidance of failure in learning, or in writing, or in industry or parenting or any other human/community endeavor, represents an absence of

creativity and an abundance of predictability, little to no risk, and perhaps even harmful or counter-productive thinking. This is not a mindset anyone should encourage or reinforce. Instead, teachers, scholars, mentors, and anybody involved in the conversation about writing development should be taking concrete steps toward normalizing failure. This means rethinking the frame of the entire scene of writing, including what it means to learn how to do it and what it means to teach it. As my invocation of Gladwell above demonstrates, it is foolish to imagine writing as a discrete and stable skill that can be mastered, a mindset that unfortunately dominates much writing instruction (especially in this era of testing); instead, it is crucial that the project of developing as a writer is understood as an always ongoing process of learning and discovery and that writing classrooms should be thought of as laboratories where experimentation and question-asking prevails over rule-memorization and formulaic discipline. Writing is not a list of dos and don'ts, nor is success in writing a universally acknowledged ideal. Writing is about risk and wonder and a compulsion to make something known. Failure—and a willingness to fail often in large, obvious ways—should always be an option.

## Further Reading

To learn more about the correlation between organized writing instruction and the rise of industrial capitalism, see John Trimbur's essay titled "Literacy and the Discourse of Crisis" in the collection *The Politics of Writing Instruction: Postsecondary* (Boynton/Cook), edited by Trimbur and Richard Bullock.

Cultural attitudes about education, learning, and literacy have been challenged in recent years, most successfully by advocates for a "growth mindset," which strives to distinguish learners' natural ability from learned and determined effort, ultimately empowering students in the face of struggle and failure. To learn more about this research, see Ingfei Chen's "New Research: Students Benefit from Learning that Intelligence is not Fixed" (*Mind/Shift*), Manu Kapur's "Productive Failure in Learning Math" (*Cognitive Science*), and Katrina Schwartz's "Growth Mindset: How to Normalize Mistake Making and Struggle in Class" (*Mind/Shift*).

Stephen King may be the most well-known writer to address failure, as evident in Lucas Reilly's article "How Stephen King's Wife Saved *Carrie* and Launched His Career" (*Mental Floss*) as well as Andy Greene's interview with him (*Rolling Stone*). Outside the

world of writing, the culture of failure thrives most prominently in technological innovation. For more, consider Rory Carroll's "Silicon Valley's Culture of Failure... And the 'Walking Dead' it Leaves Behind" (*The Guardian*), Kevin Maney's "In Silicon Valley, Failing is Succeeding" (*Newsweek*), Bo Yaghmaie's "A Case of Startup Failure" (*Techcrunch.com*), and "146 Startup Failure Post-Mortems," compiled by the editor at CBIInsights.com.

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## **Author Bio**

Allison Carr is an assistant professor of rhetoric and Director of Writing Across the Curriculum at Coe College. Beyond researching the intersection of failure and emotion for her doctoral dissertation, Allison considers herself a failure *savant*, leading her students by example toward riskier, frightening, and sometimes downright stupid undertakings. She tweets about food, politics, writing, and baseball @hors\_doeuvre.