

Procrastination: A New Take on the Topic

“A writer will do anything to avoid the act of writing.” – William Zinsser

Every writer or published author has dabbled or delayed in their quest to finish a writing project. This truth may comfort you. It happens to all creatives at one time or another: the flow is interrupted and the words disappear.

The malady has a name: procrastination. Synonyms include *deferring action*, *stalling*, *hesitating*, and my personal favorite—*dithering*. It’s not a character assessment - you’re not a weak person if you’ve dabbled with delay. But you may have developed a bad habit, one that may prevent (or at least postpone) achievement of your writing goals.

You’re not alone. Statistics reveal that 95% of the population procrastinates at times, with 26% of the population identified as *chronic procrastinators*.¹ The trend today continues to rise.

The cost of procrastination as a writer is significant:

- Missed deadlines
- Missed opportunities (often related to previous missed deadlines)
- Stress and pressure to get something on the page when you are not “in the flow”
- Damage to your reputation and reliability when work is late or poorly completed because you put it off until the last minute

Is it possible to change the behavior? *It is.*

Dr. Tim Pynchyl, author of *Solving the Procrastination Puzzle*, has done a tremendous job of research on the topic. He identified a set of triggers that make a task seem more aversive – also

¹ Dr. Tim Pynchyl, author of *Solving the Procrastination Puzzle*

defined as *daunting, overwhelming, or unpleasant*.² And when tasks create that sense of dread or overwhelm it's easy to see why we put them off. *Perfection and procrastination are partners in crime*.

So let's experiment with a quick exercise. Bring to mind something you're currently struggling with in your writing. You'll probably find the task that comes to mind includes some, if not all, of the characteristics that Pynchyl discovered that make a task procrastination worthy.

Here are his top five examples and how they sound:³

1. Fear of the Unknown – “*I don't know how to get started.*”
2. The Task is Difficult – “*I can't do this. It's too hard.*”
3. The Task is Boring – “*I thought writing was a creative process. It's not fun!!*”
4. The Task is Ambiguous – “*I'm totally confused - every expert says something different.*”
5. Task is Unstructured / Feels Overwhelming – “*Who am I kidding? I'm not a writer.*”

Why is how it sounds important? It's vital – these assessments are what we're *telling ourselves about ourselves*. And it's damaging self-talk that can convince us to quit. If you believe you are called to write, this can be devastating.

These five procrastination traps are common, but not necessarily the most common, especially among creatives – including writers. The most common trap among this group is often believed to be *perfectionism!*

How do we address it? What can we do when it strikes?

Maybe you had a mom like mine who taught me “anything worth doing is worth doing well.” And while that has served me often, it's also caused me to be hyper-hard on myself if it's not

² Dr. Tim Pynchyl, author of *Solving the Procrastination Puzzle*

³ Dr. Tim Pynchyl

perfect *in the moment*. Perfectionism lobbies for it all to be perfect *now* – and limits the definition of success to an unrealistic standard.

“Clear thinking becomes clear writing; one can’t exist without the other.”
- William Zinsser

How does your awareness of “clear thinking” equip you to write when perfection isn’t present on the page? Acknowledge you’re stuck, distracted, or discouraged. Recognize when procrastination badgers you to do it tomorrow, go shopping, or clean out your closet. *Think clearly* and redirect your efforts to more manageable or appealing activities *that still support your writing!*

Stop staring at the blank screen. Don't rewrite that opening paragraph ten times and trash it.

Turn your attention to other tasks:

- Research material for your book or article.
- Work on the proposal: research comps, select a format.
- Read a chapter in *Writing Well* by William Zinsser that will fill a knowledge gap.
- Edit work completed previously.
- Listen to a podcast on writing that will advance your knowledge.
- Brainstorm with a writing buddy. Don’t have one? Find one!
- OR . . . WRITE—and disconnect from the procrastinator’s prayer: “Please God, make it perfect right now!”

Is that last one possible? Successful writers know perfection is not always or easily attainable. Have you ever finished a late-night writing session, hit SAVE with great satisfaction, assured the writing is brilliant? Then wake to discover it’s not brilliant. It’s not even passable. That’s why there are second draft, critique groups, and amazing bolts of lightning when you are engaged with some other activity.

Redeem the day—invest in dumping perfectionistic thinking in your writing. Pump your productivity with other writing related tasks. Then return when you can think and write clearly.

And never forget: one can't exist without the other!