This paper, Elusive Perfection, was written to fulfill an assignment in Dr. Tyler Blake’s Composition II class. Outlining her writing history, Sarah Wacker focuses on her journey as a writer battling with the desire for perfection.

Sarah Wacker

Dr. Tyler Blake

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Elusive Perfection

I shoved my antique chair away from my desk, throwing my head back, staring blankly at the glow-in-the-dark stars on my bedroom ceiling. My heart pounded, still racing from the scene playing out inside my head. It was perfect—finally! It was the missing link that would tie the complexities of this story together—but it would not come out. Piecing together what little composure I had left, I stared at the computer screen again, drumming my fingers on the keyboard and accidentally typing a row of unintelligible letters. I punched the backspace with my index finger, watching the computer swallow up the gibberish, along with a paragraph of hard-wrought prose. Two hours for nothing. I glanced at the page number—189.

This is how I had trained myself to write. Nothing was good unless it was perfect, and nothing was perfect until it had been polished until every word sparkled. There was no such thing as a rough draft for me. It was either perfect or it was worthy of deleting. Still, strangely, there was great joy in writing—there always had been for me. But the joy only came when it was perfect, and as Leo Tolstoy said in his novel, *Anna Karenin*, “if you look for perfection, you will never be satisfied” (ch. 4, par. 25).

I hadn’t always been this way. The very first stories I told, bouncing around the coffee table in my grandparent’s living room, had opened a whole new world for me. My hand-eye coordination leaving much to be desired, Grandma would take dictation, writing down the whimsical plots and characters my little imagination would dream up. Tales of Derby, the Beanie-Baby horse, Belsemer, the green balloon, and trees that had picnics swirled in my mind and sprang up on the blank page in the form of pictures and words. I didn’t care if these words were perfect. They were my words and that’s all that mattered.

From those days on I felt a connection with words, and I found pride in words that I could call my own. I remember writing short stories on a tiny note pad, and reading them and re-reading them, giddy with the satisfaction of what I had created. As I grew, the size and scope of my stories grew as well, along with my expectation for them. I spent countless hours throughout middle school and high school conjuring up scenes for a myriad of different novels, transfixed by the endless possibilities and overwhelmed by their complexity. Out of all those ideas, only a handful received any amount of diligent work. *The Aufdemberge Confession,* an ever-changing story of a young woman’s journey through the heartbreak of World War II, captured my heart and mind for upwards of three years. For years I labored on that plot, loving the characters but never satisfied with the story line. The main character changed names at least twice and nationalities several more. With each change, regardless of the size, I’d stop and gut the entire document, examining my words and finding them lacking. To this day, my “masterpiece” that was that story sits, unfinished, in a folder on my computer. There are chunks of the story taken out, completely discarded for simply “not being right.”

Thankfully, there was something that would remedy my plot angst. My sophomore year of high school, my parents enrolled me in the One Year Adventure Novel class, which eased my mind tremendously. It helped me to organize my story and take time to deeply explore the characters and the storyline before I even began to put it on paper. Outlining my story was key and relieved much of my desperation during the writing process. With the skills I had learned, I was able to write *My Father’s Dream*, my prized historical fiction novel. Sadly, this class did nothing to alter my need for perfect words. Mark Twain once said, “the difference between the *almost right* word and the *right* word is really a large matter—'tis the difference between the lightning-bug and the lightning,” and I took the concept to a whole new level (qtd. in Bainton 87-88). Writing two hundred pages of “perfect” prose in a five-month timespan ate at my passion and sense of creativity. By the time I had reached the denouement, I was satisfied, I was proud, and I was burned out. I left writing for the rest of my years of high school, the enjoyment and reward of it all never seeming worth the stress. I had checked that accomplishment off my life’s bucket list, and was ready to move on to new challenges: a job, a relationship, college.

In college I found a whole new world of writing, one encompassed a wide array of exegesis and historiography papers. This bland, “technical” writing did little to excite me, and hung like a dreadful storm cloud over the end-of-semester due dates. I had little time to write anything fun, and little time to write anything for my own enjoyment. If I wrote, it was going to be submitted to a professor and returned with a grade. During that time, however, I realized that what author Zora Hurston wrote in her autobiography was undoubtedly true, “there is no agony like bearing an untold story inside you” (213).

During my junior year in college, the opportunity arose for me to take a self-directed history class. My instructor, Dr. Hornor, her passion for fun and unconventional learning methods shining through, left it open to me what I would like to do as my final project. “You don’t have to write a long paper,” I remember her saying. “Those are no fun!” I wholeheartedly agreed. What came out of my mouth next shocked and terrified me. “Can I write a historical novel?”

Once again, I dove into the world of stories, painting with words what I saw in my mind. I learned all I could about the German revolutions, trying to get the setting into my head before starting the writing process. This was going to be my attempt to rid myself of my ravenous need for perfect words. Writing the opening pages went smoothly, but I soon fell headlong into the historical accuracy roadblock. I would stop abruptly in the middle of a scene, spending hours searching Google and a stack of inter-library loan books to find a miniscule fact like price of a carriage in Berlin in 1848. This interrupted the raw outpouring of words that I was attempting to unleash, bringing back my old perfectionist habits.

This essay is not a success story of how I conquered my agonizing perfectionist attitude toward my writing. That is still something I struggle with in every paper I write, and something I am struggling with now. It takes me hours to write a simple paper, when classmates can crank out the same A-level manuscript in a matter of minutes. There is a harness on my mind, tying my words to my sense of self. It is painful to let it go; painful to complete a rough draft without the pressure of making it spotless the first time. This is becoming my experiment, because I know that if I ever want to pursue my passion for writing as a career, I need to release this sense of expectation. Perfection is not possible, for only God is perfect. The meticulous placement of constellations of glow-in-the-dark stars that I had fastened to my bedroom ceiling were the best I could do, but God, who created the real heavens, made the placement of His stars perfect. He does not expect perfection from us, but only expects that we give Him our best. This essay marks the beginning of a challenge to myself, one that I hope will help me in my future writing.

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