

Keystrokes to Perfection

Rachel Geisel

“Read this sentence and tell me what is wrong with it?” That question is frequently part of fun, challenging banter between my parents. As the only child of two journalists with keen eyes for typos, grammatical blunders and clunky sentences, my writing has been picked apart with a fine-toothed comb over the years. Looking at the literary world through the lens of two journalists has developed my appreciation of and affinity for the written word and language in general. Though writing came easily—or maybe even because of this fact—I have grappled with living in the shadow of my journalist parents, wondering how I might stack up.

Several events have served as touchpoints in my development as a reader and writer. When I was a toddler, my mother, who read to me nonstop, brought me to story hour at the public library. Week after week, we listened to the librarian, Ms. Kim, not simply read books, but tell animated stories. After the hour was up, my mother let me select a book to bring home until the next week. Soon I was finishing my sentences with “she said” or “she cried,” giving attribution to my speech at all times, until my family thought I had developed a tic. Long after I aged out of story time, my mother and I took trips to the library where she encouraged me to read a wide array of books.

At the beginning of every summer vacation, my mother and I would make our pilgrimage to the library so I could get my copy of the summer reading list the librarians created for students. There were prizes and an ice cream social at the end of the summer for those who read all the books, but for me, the real prize was delving into a story and becoming immersed in the plot and characters. I felt a sense of accomplishment finishing one book after another and checking them off the list. It was these summers that gave me the chance to realize not only the joy of reading, but also how the right words can create the perfect story.

The more I read, the more I wanted to write. I filled notebooks with narratives I created, excited rather than intimidated by the act of putting pen to paper, even if it took time for the words to flow. The notebooks were extensions of my being, they were suspended in a space-time continuum where the concept of perfection did not seem to exist. Here, in the world

that I created, there was no journalistic standard, no “right way” to say something, no such thing as “word economy.” These terms that my parents bounced around as they edited stories or interviewed sources did not apply to me then.

While I excelled in writing classes and peers asked me to edit their work, I lived in dread of “good enough.” I wanted my work to surpass expectations. I craved the approval of peers and teachers, but more than anything, I wanted the approval of my parents. I yearned to show them that I had talent too, that I could be a part of this exclusive club of writers. As I got older, I thought that I was on the verge of club membership. My writing was becoming more mature as I began to grasp the concepts of diction and tone.

Then I had a setback in the form of a seventh-grade assignment. My English teacher assigned an essay on our impressions of a novel about an Antarctic voyage. While most of my classmates found this tale of Antarctic adventure gripping, I read the book as quickly as I could—just to say I finished it—and was eager to be through writing a paper on a subject I found to be incredibly dull. I breezed through the essay, paying little attention to the content and construction of my sentences, simply hoping to check the boxes on the rubric and scrape by with just enough effort to meet the criteria for an “A.” I gave the paper to my mother to proofread. After she was finished reading she told me very matter-of-factly that it was “simply unworthy of turning in.” I confessed that I hated the book and the subject. “It shows,” she said. “This is not your best work.” My mother handed the paper back to me, instructing me to rewrite the assignment and let it reflect my capability and pride in my work.

This was a different experience for me. Usually I grappled with the insecurity generated by perfectionism and the need for approval, my writing was good and I wanted to make it better. I wanted to prove myself with every assignment. I relished every glowing comment or good grade I received. This time, it was not about turning good into great, it was about creating great from utterly unacceptable.

All my life I had been known in school as the rule follower. Disappointing people made my stomach churn. A reprimand for talking in class left me feeling ashamed for days. This time, I was disappointing myself. I was defeated. I had been told I was a good writer for the entirety of my—albeit short-lived—academic career. Now, I was at a crossroads:

give up because I did not like the subject or complete an assignment to the best of my ability even though I did not enjoy it. The literary world was sufficiently ingrained in the way I grew up that I chose to revise. I reread the paper, chiding myself at the sheer apathy with which I wrote the essay and the silly mistakes I made. It took hours, but I managed to turn nothing into something, unacceptable to good, and good into great.

The teacher praised my essay, but I wanted to redeem myself in my parents' eyes. Praise came, but in a form I did not expect. The writing itself and the improvements I made to the piece did not go unnoticed, but the commendation they gave me focused my willingness to rewrite. "Good writers struggle, especially when they are writing about something unfamiliar or uninteresting to them," my parents told me. Though I felt better after having received praise on the new and improved essay, I lost interest in writing for fun and for no one but myself. I stopped filling notebooks with stories and quotes. I no longer saved newspaper articles and letters. Paraphernalia of the written word seemed to have little merit.

Living in a world expanded by words, the idea of having a voice that was silent yet loud at a young age resonated with me. The words I strung together to make sentences and paragraphs and stories mattered. The words I read in books published by acclaimed authors mattered. My parents taught me that communication is the greatest power anyone can possibly have. I would not trade my love affair with the English language for anything else, though writing under the pressure of eyes trained to catch each and every mistake fueled my perfectionism. I wanted all of my work to be worthy of a byline. I had to get over the sting of the words my mother said to me about the essay in seventh grade. In order to do this, I had to write. The hiatus I took from filling notebooks with narratives had to end. I had to prove to myself that perseverance is a more powerful tool than raw talent.

The next school year, I reclaimed my voice. In eighth grade, I was lucky enough to have an English teacher who unearthed my passion for writing. My favorite unit of the year was on George Orwell's *Animal Farm*. The class put Napoleon the pig on trial for the murder of the much beloved horse, Boxer. I was selected to be the lead attorney for the prosecution. This meant I was in charge of a team of "attorneys" and "witnesses" that would build our case. I was to give the closing statement at the end of the trial as part of my role as lead attorney. I was engrossed in the assignment.

I wrote draft after draft of my closing argument, delivering it to my parents after each iteration. The day of the trial finally came, and our teacher invited parents to watch as our eighth-grade class acted as lawyers and witnesses. I delivered my closing with passion and a smile a mile wide.

I have always called myself a writer. Sometimes, I have been a writer frustrated with her craft, but a writer nonetheless. I am a writer in a family of writers, searching for how I want to use my talent. It is easy to get entrapped by the myth of perfection and the need for approval. It is much harder to accept that perfection may not exist in writing, even if we want it to be so. Calling myself a writer and a bibliophile means embracing the fact that I can be my own worst critic when I attempt to measure my writing against someone else's metrics.