

Rewriting Imperfection

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Introduction

Students in this WRS class were asked to write a personal narrative relating in some ways to their writing experience. Jillian Morrison takes us back first to her childhood, which was filled with storytelling, then to her school days, where writing became a source of anxiety because it was graded. She encourages us to learn from our childhood and to maintain that childlike wonder throughout our lives.

Keywords: childhood, imitation, literacy, storytelling



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² *Writing across the University of Alberta* (WAUA) publishes undergraduate student writing from writing studies courses and courses focused on writing studies practices and scholarship at the University of Alberta. You can find WAUA online at <https://writingacrossuofa.ca/>.

When I think about my love of literacy and how it evolved throughout my life, the first thing that comes to mind is my constant, imperfect storytelling. This creative pastime emerged in an incredibly untraditional sense; in fact, I couldn't read, let alone write, when I started crafting these works of fiction.

I have foggy memories of four-year-old me, bent over at my small art desk in our living room, furiously scribbling pages upon pages of illustrations. "This one is called Rapunzel Cooks an Egg", I remember excitedly reciting to my mom. She would then transcribe the story I wanted to tell above my clumsy yet personable drawings.

I had always thought of these stories as being impressive for a kid who hadn't even gone to kindergarten yet, but while rereading them I began to realize they didn't make quite as much sense as I had previously envisioned. Sometimes the characters completely changed throughout the story; often there was no resolution to the story or any remote sense of conflict, and there were times where the words and pictures ended abruptly.

However, I don't really think that this is the point. Reading these stories, although I noticed a lot of normal childlike imperfection (I was in no way shape or form a child prodigy), I also noticed something really interesting about my stories: I was imitating other forms of media I was exposed to at the time, such as TV shows and picture books. My stories offered an opportunity for me to learn about writing conventions, such as how to structure a story or develop a character.

At the same time, I was writing as an outlet to understand the changes happening in my life, almost a precursor to journaling. I can only imagine that being four years old is an incredibly complicated age—every new experience an unexplored depth of unknowns. One of my stories featured detailed pictures of an optometrist's chair and waiting room, almost certainly written after my first visit to the eye doctor. Another humorously named "The Night Before Kindergarten Was All About Work" encompassed the routines and tasks that needed to be done before I went to school for the first time, clearly a way for me to wrap my head around this new place and stage of my life. My storytelling acted as a buoy amidst this oncoming wave of anxieties.

Not only was the content of my stories surprising, but the quantity was overwhelming; stacks and stacks of stories, each varying in length, but many of them over 10 pages long. Sifting through and skimming the pages, the progress was palpable. During my development from a budding kindergartner to a confident second grader, the wording became more complex, the illustrations more vivid, and the story more organized.

Although this passion for self-expression and creativity has stuck with me to this day, the consistent practice of writing is something I lost over the years. Enter the rigorous grading

system of high school, pressure to take advanced placement classes, and high stakes for getting into my desired university program. My insatiable desire for academic validation quickly stole all the joy out of my writing experience and replaced it with feelings of fear, insecurity, and self-doubt. Instead of focusing on getting my ideas onto the page, I obsessed over the mechanics of a sentence until the words melded together and sounded like gibberish in my head. I'd begun to fixate on finding the right word until my computer screen would shut off and my document faded into the darkness. Perfectionism felt like an unattainable goal—a feeling of satisfaction that was always just out of reach.

Images flood my brain of sitting at my beloved English teacher's desk, discussing an essay that I had spent hours obsessing over with every fiber of my being. "I think you need to reevaluate your writing process," I remember her saying, as I tapped my anxious fingers against the hard plastic chair. "Prioritize getting your ideas down on the page, instead of hesitating in fear of producing an imperfect outcome." What did she mean? I asked myself. I worked so hard on this, and now I have to come up with an entirely new thesis? Instead of accepting this as an opportunity for growth, I silently berated myself for every small suggestion.

After further reflection, I realized that writing no longer felt like something I loved; it was a skill I clung to when I had a mandatory assignment with a deadline fast approaching. I began to wonder, Why do we seem to lose the enjoyment of writing as we grow up? Where would we be in our writing journey if experimenting with new ideas and furthering our creativity was something we practiced habitually? In order to produce a truly meaningful and thought-provoking essay, I knew I would be forced to reconcile my relationship with writing.

Ultimately, reflecting upon my childhood writing experiences made me realize that we can all learn a lot from our four-year-old selves. Be brave, try new things, be imaginative, and practice consistently. Rather than writing for a certain result or sense of achievement, I've learned to shift my perspective and embrace imperfection. I now emphasize the value of discovery and how this has allowed me to find myself through the words and process.

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