

Failure can be an Important Part of Writing Development

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It may seem counterintuitive to suggest that the teaching of writing should focus as much on puzzling out failure as it does on rewarding success. We often forget, however, that successful writers aren't those who are simply able to write brilliant first drafts; often, the writing we encounter has been heavily revised and edited and is sometimes the result of a great deal of failure (see 4.4, "Revision Is Central to Developing Writing," and 4.3, "Learning to Write Effectively Requires Different Kinds of Practice, Time, and Effort"). As renowned writer Anne Lamott observes, "Almost all good writing begins with terrible first efforts. You need to start somewhere" (Lamott 1995, 303).

As students progress throughout their educational careers and the expectations for their writing evolve from year to year and sometimes course to course, there is no way we can expect them to be able to intuit these shifting conditions. They must have the opportunity to try, to fail, and to learn from those failures as a means of intellectual growth. Edward Burger (2012), professor of mathematics and coauthor of *The 5 Elements of Effective Thinking*, explains that "in reality, every idea from every discipline is a human idea that comes from a natural, thoughtful, and (ideally) unending journey in which thinkers deeply understand the current state of knowledge, take a tiny step in a new direction, almost immediately hit a dead end, learn from that misstep, and, through iteration, inevitably move forward."

In the writing classroom, when assessment is tied too completely to final products, students are more likely to avoid risking failure for fear of damaging their grades, and this fear works against the learning process. They focus instead on what the teacher wants and simply hope to be able to get it right on the first try. Burger (2012) advocates building "quality of failure" into his courses and reports that his students are willing to take greater risks and to examine their missteps for what they can change about them.

One of the most important things students can learn is that failure is an opportunity for growth. As sites of language development, writing classrooms, especially, should make space for quality of failure, or what Lamott describes as "shitty first drafts," by treating failure as something all writers work through, rather than as a symptom of inadequacy or stupidity. Writers need the time and space to explore Thomas Edison's proverbial ten thousand ways that won't work in order to find the ways that do. Such practices will enable writing teachers and students to develop a healthy dialogue around the experience of failure, perhaps leading to the development of what we might call pedagogies of failure, or ways of teaching that seek to illuminate the myriad ways writing gets done by examining all the ways it doesn't. Embracing failure in the writing classroom in these ways makes failure speakable and doable.

Outside of the classroom, the capacity for failure (and thus success) is one of the most valuable abilities a writer can possess. The ability to write well comes neither naturally nor easily; the thinkers we praise and admire are not the lucky few born with innate talent. Rather, they are the ones who are able to make mistakes, learn from them, and keep writing until they get it right. J. K. Rowling (2008), for example, is quite open about how she "failed on an epic scale" before she was able to write the *Harry Potter* series. In her 2008 commencement address at Harvard University, she explained, "It is impossible to live without failing at something, unless you live so cautiously that you might as well not have lived at all—in which case, you fail by default."