

Monday, June 13, 2022

Tame Your inner Critic

Looking at our calendar this morning, we've realized that July is right around the corner. That means we're heading into the most intense time of summer writing, and whenever we're pushing hard to move writing out the door, [our resistance](#) comes out in full effect. We've already written about how [disempowerment](#) can fuel resistance to writing, so this week we want to turn to a far more common demon that underlies resistance -- **a hyperactive inner critic.**

When we sit down to write most days, we have to try a variety of tips and tricks to get started: freewriting, [mind-mapping](#), [Write or Die](#), or whatever gets our fingers tapping away on the keyboard. But once we sink into the writing, our inner critic comes out with a vengeance. She articulates a wide range of ugliness including (but not limited to) a litany of my shortcomings, questions about our competence, doubts about the importance of the work we're doing, and speculations about how dumb people will think we are once they read our writing, detailed descriptions of how ill-chosen each word we're putting on the page is, exhortations to delete and change them right away, or better yet, persistent pleas to stop writing immediately before we embarrass ourselves further. In short, our inner critic is loquacious, judgmental, and unpleasant. It's no wonder that we resist sitting down at the writing desk! Who would want to face this unending torrent of ugliness each day?

Thankfully, one thing we've learned from working with academic writers over the years is that we're not the only ones with a hyperactive inner critic. If all of this sounds familiar, then let us suggest some strategies you can try when your inner critic runs amok and threatens to shut down your writing. They are all aimed to help you reflect on your negative internal messages, release yourself from a sense of powerlessness over your inner critic, and respond in a way that enables you to talk back to the critic's negative messages. These strategies are intended to minimize the impact that she

has on your productivity while creating alternatives that motivate and empower you.

Track Your Inner Critic's Dialogue

The first step to taming your inner critic is to record his/her negative messages. This doesn't have to be cumbersome or complicated -- just keep a few post-it notes next to your keyboard and write down the messages your inner critic tosses out so freely. Do this for a week, and you will have your critic's full script. Seeing a week's worth of data will enable you to identify your critic's patterns and question the messages by asking: *Are these things true? Are they consistent with the reality of my past performance? Are they simply a repetitious and exaggerated statement of my deepest fears? Where are these messages coming from?* Also, take note if there are places and times that your inner critic comes out more strongly (morning vs. evening, private vs. public writing spaces, or with particular writing content or stages of the process).

Personify Your Inner Critic

[Dolores Umbridge](#) is the perfect embodiment of an inner critic (she is the Hogwarts High Inquisitor and temporary headmistress for those of you unfamiliar with *Harry Potter*). For Kerry Ann, she's some combination of the meanest nuns she ever had in school and her mother on her very worst day, except that she's also imbued with magical powers to torture you and capable of delivering the most vilifying narrative in a chillingly calm and sweet voice. Once you can picture your inner critic as a person, you can engage in a relationship with him/her. You can ask her to leave when she's not welcome, or you can tell her to be quiet, stop lying, and take her fear-mongering somewhere else.

Develop An Alternative

At some point, we have to create a new and positive script to replace the negative one that our inner critic keeps repeating. There are many different ways to do this and, of course, you can create your own based on what you feel comfortable trying. We've seen people successfully change the script by visualizing an alternative to their critic in the form of an inner

angel/guide/protector/superhero that can talk back to the critic when she shows up. We've also seen people stop their writing when they feel overwhelmed by their inner critic and freewrite a dialogue between themselves and their critic (or their hero and their critic). Others develop a series of positive affirmations to combat the negativity of their critic. You might consider downloading our [Powerful Positive Writing Affirmations](#) as a starting point.

Invite Your Critic Into The Process

The thing about inner critics is that they aren't completely negative and worthless. While critics can be destructive in some instances, they can also be quite useful when given a job other than tearing you down. For example, some people invite their inner critic into the writing process by weaving the critic's substantive insights into their manuscripts. Others encourage their inner critic to let loose when it comes to revising their writing. The key is shifting all that intensity away from you and onto your work at an appropriate point in the development of the manuscript (not the first draft).

Ultimately, inner critics are at their most destructive when they work on us quietly and without notice. Shining a light on your critic, identifying her silly banter, and strategizing about how to work effectively with (and around) her, won't make her disappear entirely, but these actions will diminish a significant portion of her power over you.

The Weekly Challenge

This week, we challenge you to:

- Write for at least 30 minutes each day.
 - Track your inner critic's dialogue every day this week.
 - At the end of the week, take a look at the composite script and ask yourself: "Is any of this true? Where are these messages coming from?"
 - Try to visualize who your inner critic is and begin to have a dialogue with that person whenever he/she shows up.
 - Select and try one strategy to combat the critic's negative message stream.
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If you are regularly haunted by a hyperactive inner critic, we hope this week brings you the commitment to track your critic's messages, the strength to question those messages, and the creativity to try whatever alternative is meaningful and empowering to you.

Warmly,

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