Chapter 2. Adopting Productive Writers' Habits

This chapter will prepare you to:

- Recognize how habits and dispositions affect writers
- Identify strategies for improving dispositions such as confidence, motivation, self-regulation, persistence, and openness
- Acknowledge and respond to structural advantages and disadvantages writers face
- Reflect to reframe "failure" as an opportunity for growth as a writer

  A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.

  If you think it, you can achieve it.

Dress for the job you want to have.

Fake it 'til you make it.

Have you ever encouraged someone with one of these statements, or had someone encourage you? Like many aphorisms, they are overstated—you can't mend a broken bone just by thinking you can, and nobody wants their firefighter or pilot faking their way through a crisis—but they each point to a fact of human behavior that research has helped us demonstrate. Generally, scholars have shown that people who pay attention to their typical *actions* and *attitudes*, and develop productive habits they can rely on, increase their ability to improve in any field or situation. Writers stand to benefit significantly from forming good habits of mind: our intentions, attitudes, perspectives, and motivations strongly affect the ease or difficulty of writing and the quality of what we write, whether it's a lyric poem or a financial report.

2.1 Writers Rely on Habits of Mind

When we start to think about writing as a *verb*, a way that we interact with other people, then we understand that *learning about the rules of writing* is only a small part of our growth: each of us also needs to *learn how to think and act as a writer*. Writers make limited progress when we focus on creating a perfect document on the first try (mostly, we end up just feeling frustrated if it's not perfect). On the other hand, writers can experience significant growth when we

- reflect on the actions we take and the attitudes we have, to see which ones help us and which ones hold us back;
- identify and reframe attitudes that may be interfering with our goals as writers; and
- review our struggles and failures to learn from them how to improve and grow as writers.

That is, to succeed as a writer, you don't have to master everything at once. Instead, you should adopt some actions and intentions that writers often use, and practice them frequently enough that they start to become writing habits.

Several of the threshold concepts that writing scholars emphasize are relevant to our exploration here of habits of mind. Which of these concepts is already, or might become, part of your story about writing?

🚪 You can become a good writer and a better writer

You already have many viable writing skills, and you are capable of becoming a better writer and a competent writer of many kinds of texts.

> 🚪 **Writing involves strategies more than talent**
>
> Writing is usually not a revelation from an invisible muse or a demonstration of innate talent, but is a skill that requires practice, strategic thinking, and flexibility.

> 🚪 **Advanced writers study and reflect on their writing**
>
> Writers study writing just as chemists study chemistry and musicians study music—and advanced writers use repeated reflective practices to understand our own work.

This focus on reflective practice and habit building may seem like a distraction when you have a chemistry lab due in six hours, a psychology group project to finish by the end of the week, or a quarterly report to finish for work this month. But instead of just "cranking out" a draft, you will benefit from spending some time developing productive habits. Your mental fitness as a writer will help with your writing tasks this week, with your writing challenges next week, and especially as you seek to become more flexible and confident as a writer overall.

In this chapter, we explore how writers address challenges in connecting with readers, by balancing the rhetorical demands placed on us by readers' expectations with our own goals and with the complexities of the issues we're writing about. These sections focus on how writers get our own practices in order, so that we have a strong internal foundation of writerly habits. Chapter 3, Reflecting Throughout Your Writing Process, follows up by exploring how writers engage in reflective practice to integrate our perceptions, habits, and actions.

2.2 Practice Productive Habits of Mind

Have you ever procrastinated on a writing project? If you're at all like me, you didn't just answer, "Yes!"; you answered "Yes" and felt a little bad about that answer, as if that signaled that you had a flaw in your character. Yet current researchers in psychology don't identify procrastination as an immutable flaw: instead, they see it as a situational disposition.

Dispositions involve the ways that we arrange our responses and practices as we complete particular tasks in specific situations—and anything that can be arranged can be rearranged. After all, you may have a pleasant personal disposition overall, but you can still find yourself on a particular Tuesday afternoon with an unmotivated disposition regarding a specific essay for your anthropology class. Moreover, writing scholars note that all writers face disposition problems, and so we all have to develop strategies to manage our emotions and attitudes related to writing just as carefully as we manage our sentences and sources. That is, we need to practice *better habits of mind*.

Identify and reframe disposition problems

Disposition problems are real problems, and they directly affect your writing: if you are unmotivated and you don't address that problem, you may invest less time, energy, and insight into your writing, and your final document will suffer from that loss. Fortunately, since disposition problems have more to do with your approach or attitude about a series of events than with your core personality, they can be solved.

You should know that studies of experts generally, and of expert writers specifically, have not found that they see their jobs as easy, or that they manage their time perfectly, or that they are certain from the start of impressing their readers. Experienced writers often face disposition problems: we get frustrated or disengaged, underestimate how much time a task will take, or worry about whether we have the ability to complete a writing project successfully.

However, such studies have identified attitudes and habits of mind that many experts cultivate, approaches that help them in their fields, and can help us as writers. The most successful writers deliberately reframe their attitudes to be more confident, motivated, self-regulating, persistent, and open. When writers cultivate more productive dispositions about writing, we can increase our insight and creativity, and have more time and brain power to spend solving other writing problems.

To improve your writerly habits of mind, you should watch for any disposition problems and learn some strategies for coping with those challenges. Disposition is related to the story you tell yourself about your writing, and that story is powerful: if you tell yourself a different story, you can actually re-arrange your relationship to your writing task and become a more successful writer.

This chapter focuses on five powerful dispositions for writers, though you may have others as part of your writing story:

- Confidence
- Motivation
- Self-regulation (this includes time management)
- Persistence
- Openness

As you consider how your dispositions affect your work as a writer, you should focus on three key habits you can practice to solve disposition problems:

- **Tap into hidden assets**. Often you can identify mental resources that are not immediately obvious: for instance, you can recall early successes with writing projects or seek a connection between a writing task and an issue that inspires or motivates you.

- **Tell yourself a positive story**. Friends who tell you to "Think positive!" or "Envision yourself succeeding!" have a really good point: research shows that when you tell yourself positive stories, you create mental space that can help you solve a disposition problem.

- **Behave as if you have solved the problem**. You may know this strategy as "Fake it 'til you make it": if you put on a suit and stride confidently into a job interview meeting, or you try to smile at some flowers or kittens even when you are feeling sad, you don't just fool other people, but you change your own mental state.

The more you get into a habit of recognizing your current disposition and re-framing your story to improve your attitude, at least temporarily, the more you gain power as an advanced writer and spend less time feeling frustrated or stuck.

Explore 2.1

Think of a writing project you completed recently. Describe one or two *disposition problems* with that task that you faced and solved, or that you could have solved. How might you have changed your attitude or your behavior to cope with that problem (even) more successfully?

Strengthen your habits of confidence

Writers can work on building two kinds of confidence habits. In one approach, you can strengthen your backwards-looking confidence. As you recall your recent past, you can identify evidence that you have previously succeeded at a writing task like your current one, and so you can reasonably believe that you will succeed at this task now. This is a *hidden-assets strategy*: when you identify what relevant skills and accomplishments you already bring to a writing task, you can increase your confidence.

You can also increase your forward-looking confidence by taking an optimistic view that even if there are challenges, you can apply your problem-solving skills to come up with a reasonable solution. Stanford University researcher Carol Dweck calls this a *growth mindset*. Her research has demonstrated that people who have a fixed mindset (they believe that "I am just no good at writing," for instance) can learn to adopt a growth mindset ("anyone can get better at writing, including me"). This is a *positive-story strategy*: the more you tell yourself that *you can learn* what you need to succeed as a writer, the more you will learn, and the more confidence you will gain.

Direct your habits of motivation

It can seem as though motivation is all-or-nothing: you have it or you don't. But motivation is an attitude, and writers can develop habits of mind that direct our

thinking toward higher motivation. One motivating habit is to look beyond the current task for other *external* rewards. Maybe you don't feel particularly motivated to write about trade routes during the Ming Dynasty in China or last quarter's energy expenses, but you can remind yourself how you'll feel if you earn a good grade or receive some praise from your manager in the short term, or you can focus on longer-term successes in completing your major coursework or earning next year's salary bonus for high performance. This *positive-story strategy* can help writers gain energy and focus.

Writers build the strongest motivation habits, though, when we can connect to *internal* motivations: we look for opportunities to link a current project to an issue or event that already motivates us. You could start a habit of asking, "How might this connect to my interests or values?" and seeing what an online search brings up: you might find some surprising links between "Federalist papers *and social media*" or "traffic regulations *and dessert.*" Or perhaps you need to dig deeper for other *hidden assets*: maybe you are a person who values learning, community relationships, or efficient operations, and you can see how your work on this writing task enables you to act on those deeper values. If that doesn't work, you might have to *fake it* a bit: imagine what someone who *is* motivated by this task would feel and do, and see what happens when you take that approach.

Upgrade your habits of self-regulation

The phrase "time management" suggests that writers need to make changes to time itself, which feels daunting—but when you think of it as "*self*-management" or part of a larger category that psychologists call *self-regulation*, you can see how this is an arrangeable disposition. If you truly don't mind always running late, you might not need an upgrade—but be sure that you're sure, and not just buying into a myth about how stress makes us work better (research shows this is not generally true). Remember that human beings are adept at rationalizing our actions, even when those choices actually make us unhappy. And don't try to change the universe: you should focus just on upgrading your self-regulation approaches, not turning yourself overnight into a mythical being who never procrastinates.

A first key step is a *positive-story* step: you need to be honest with yourself about what you're avoiding and why, and then see if you can reframe that story toward a positive outcome. If you are avoiding something that seems difficult or painful, try to identify one aspect of it that might be relatively easy or interesting, or remind yourself of how you succeeded at it before. If you are feeling tempted by short-term pleasures (like another round of that video game or a tasty sandwich), tell yourself a vivid story of how good you'll feel if you can complete even a small piece of your current writing task and not have the whole thing hanging over your head. Try to focus on your *ultimate values and priorities*: What kind of person, student, or writer do you most want to be in the long run?

Writers develop self-regulating habits by making a plan to do a small task, monitoring our actions and feelings while working on it, and then adjusting our plan depending on how well the work went. You might want to use a journal, to-do app, or calendar to make your first plan and write your notes. If it feels strange to be doing your writing on a set schedule, a little at a time, rather than waiting for inspiration or panic to hit all at once, you may need to *fake it* for a while: follow a schedule for a week even when you don't believe that will help you, and check in at the end to see if anything felt helpful. Research shows that people who act deliberately to identify and manage how they use time are ultimately more successful writers and learners.

Reinforce your habits of persistence

In everyday discussions, persistence is often framed as a *fake-it* quality: even writers who are neither motivated nor confident can grit their teeth and do their work, like an exhausted marathon runner pushing through the twenty-sixth mile. Writers who are working on daily required tasks for their courses or workplaces talk about this kind of persistence a lot with friends and colleagues: "Yeah, I just have to get it done."

Yet writers also need to cultivate and reinforce our habits of persistence not just to complete a whole task, but to stay focused when we are struggling with a particular section or stage, and to stay optimistic when feedback from instructors or other readers indicates that we didn't meet our goals. Expert as well as novice writers need to make a habit of going forward even—perhaps especially—when the path is rough. In fact, researchers have shown that advanced writers actually spend *more* time planning, debating, agonizing, failing, rethinking, and revising during their writing process than novice writers do, and so we need powerful persistence. Just as video game players learn a little more each time their race car crashes or their character dies, writers learn from trying and failing and trying again. To increase your persistence as a writer, you may need to use a *positive-story strategy*, to convince yourself that "failing *and trying again*" signals your success persisting in a complicated or important writing task (rather than signaling that you were not meant to be a writer). The more you practice persisting, the stronger this habit will become.

Foster your habit of openness

The state of *openness*—along with its active cousins, *curiosity* and *creativity*—is a crucial habit of mind for anyone whose job it is to *create knowledge* the way writers do. Even when you're writing a summary or a report, you are still being a "creative writer": the facts you select, and the order and emphasis you give them, create a new experience for readers to share. Like motivation and self-regulation, openness and

curiosity don't just happen (or fail to happen): when writers direct ourselves to take an open, questioning stance, we increase our curiosity, expand our capacity to see new ideas and connections, and set the stage for creating knowledge.

While prior knowledge can increase your confidence as you write, your certainty can also get in the way of both understanding and motivation. Writers are more excited and more attentive when we are curious about an idea, a process, or a community, and so we can bring more accuracy, engagement, and insight to our writing. Curiosity can be supported with a *hidden-assets* approach: even if you are not innately curious about the history of US tax codes, you might tap into your more general curiosity about governmental powers, community justice, or last year's tax refund.

If you're not feeling very open or curious as you write, you can always *fake it* a bit: you know that curious people ask questions, and so you can imagine the questions that *someone* would have, and adopt them for your own. Writers also need to foster openness about our own writing, so that we can receive and learn from readers' feedback. Instead of following a first impulse to feel hurt or disgruntled that readers did not immediately gasp in amazement at your writing, you can tell yourself a *positive story* about how writers succeed through struggle, feedback, and revision, and let that story boost your curiosity (if not yet your complete agreement) regarding your readers' experiences.

Explore 2.2

Of these five habits of mind—confidence, motivation, self-regulation, persistence, and openness—which one comes most easily to you as you write? Which one seems most like a habit you could try to practice more deliberately this month? What steps could you try in a current or upcoming writing project that could help you tell a positive story, uncover hidden assets, or even just fake it a bit to help you develop your writerly mindset?
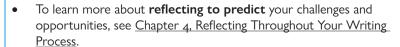
Practice

- To **explore your** dispositions, see Attitude Inventory or Values Freewrite.
- To strengthen your optimism, see Funny Story or Gaining a Growth Mindset.
- To manage an upcoming writing task, see Deluxe Project Scheduler or Learn-Write Timeline.
- To engage your **motivation and curiosity** as you start a project, see Problem Solver Parallels or Ten Ways to Choose a Topic.

  NOTE: These Practice features provide links to exercises in Chapters 23 through 29. If you are reading this book in print, you can find an alphabetical list of exercises at the end of the book. The list includes the section in which each exercise can be found.

2.3 Focus on Equity: Recognize and Respond to External Barriers

Despite all of our efforts to retrain our brains to be flexible and to develop productive habits, writers can still run into challenges that "habits of mind" cannot solve. These may be a result of personal limitations or resources; they may also be a result of more systemic discrimination. Not all writers have equal access to resources, knowledge, or fair judgment by others. However, when we identify these problems and decide how we want to respond to them, we can retain our sense of ownership and achievement as we work on becoming better writers—and we can think about how to increase equity for all writers.

Identify any position problems

While your *dispositions* are situational and manageable, there are some problems you may not be able to solve in the middle of a writing task. Your *positions* as a writer are often defined for you before you begin. More than just whether you are sitting at a desk or curled up on a sofa, your writing positions include:

- The amount of control and knowledge you already possess
- The amounts of time and other resources you have or can gain access to
- The institutional structures that influence the production and evaluation of your writing
- The cultural expectations and biases held by other people that affect your access to knowledge, resources, and approval

In your writing story, you might identify some specific position problems: elements of your housing, budget, family, school, or community situation that other people define and control. It's important to learn how to identify position problems that can affect your work, as a writer and in other areas of your life.

- You can summon up persistence and grit to address a tough project, but others around you may have been taught more information, coached in more skills, or given more tools than you have access to, so you start from a less advantaged position.

- You can often manage how you spend your time, but your family or work responsibilities may significantly limit your flexibility, and you may not currently have access to a more flexible job or additional child care, so you operate from a more constricted position.

- You can often talk yourself into a more confident approach, but others may repeatedly judge you based on your race, gender, language, or other aspect of your identity rather than only your performance, so you are positioned to have less access to a higher rating or evaluation.

You might not receive the grade or praise you'd hoped for if your position limited your access to resources—but when you recognize that in a particular case, other factors besides your skill and dedication were affecting the outcome, you can continue to practice productive habits of mind and action to use on the next project rather than deciding you're just "not a good writer." It can be useful as well to identify *advantages* that your position may provide. When you are new to a situation, you bring more openness and fewer limiting biases; the same job or family that draws on your time also bestows perspectives and support that other writers do not have; and the qualities that some people devalue you for may be crucial for how you connect with and inspire readers in and beyond your community.

Understand common position problems of writers in school

In recent decades, writing scholars have identified some position problems that many US students face as they learn, practice, and are evaluated on their writing in academic settings. For instance:

- Some writing scholars argue that when schools and governments judge students' overall writing abilities by grading a timed essay examination, they do not accurately measure all of students' important writing skills. A timed essay puts writers into a limited position in which they cannot demonstrate their ability to discover new angles, to revise an early draft, or to adapt their writing to new audiences or new genres.

- Other writing scholars point out, similarly, that school writing assignments can limit writers' positions by having them produce only academic essays rather than composing in other genres, or by having writers produce documents that meet "good writing" guidelines that are rooted in specific cultural assumptions (such as US cultures that value directness)—especially when modern professional and community-based communication includes a much wider variety of successful modalities.

- Finally, scholars note, requirements that students always produce writing that has zero errors according to Standard Edited Academic English may limit students' positions and lower their opportunities to learn and share as writers—after all, research shows that they can be successful

communicators using other styles of English, "correct" or "incorrect," in personal and professional writing outside of school.

Research into national trends shows that students from marginalized racial or cultural populations, students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, students who are among the first in their families to attend college, and students from multilingual backgrounds are systematically rated as less successful writers than White, middle-class students who are part of the college-going cultures that helped define these narrow measurements—even when these diverse students have very strong skills in both mainstream and alternative ways of writing. Although it is important to be clear about the "standards" for writing in any situation, if a single "standard" repeatedly doesn't measure the full capability of all smart, hard-working writers, then we all need to investigate the standards and expand our understanding of what "good writing" is.

Respond to position problems

Facing an external constraint doesn't give you a free pass: you're not automatically exempt from completing an essay exam in your sociology course just because you know that it doesn't measure your full skill set. Nor does discovering an immovable limitation always mean you need to choose between quitting or failing. Depending on your resources—which may include your safety, status, and social networks as well as access to time or money—you might choose different responses in different situations.

- **Identify priorities and accept some consequences**. If you need or choose to prioritize your job or your family, that can be a reasonable decision even if it means that this week's writing project won't turn out as well as you know it would if you could make it your top priority (you're still a "good writer," after all!).

- **Seek assistance or allies**. Popular US culture valorizes individual superheroes who solve their own problems, but research shows that most successful people lean on others to survive and succeed. Especially while you are in school, it's smart to ask questions, take advantage of office hours or tutoring, and invite others to join your informal study group or group text, especially when you're facing position problems.

- **Adapt to a limitation temporarily**. People in low-power positions often have to follow the rules set by more powerful people, even when those rules are unfair or harmful. Writers have an advantage here, because we know that good writing always balances *some adaptation to readers' needs* with *some commitment to the writer's goals*: we can adapt to a strict report or exam format today, while knowing that we still have powerful messages to communicate in our own style or voice tomorrow.

- **Find or create alternate pathways**. Few position problems create a 100% barrier to all communication. When your position limits one part of your writing success, you can look for alternative audiences or publications to communicate your ideas. You can also watch for places where you can bend the rules or stretch the limits: maybe you can code-mesh by including some phrases from your home language to express your true experiences in a school essay, or propose an alternate topic or project focus that resonates more with your job or family priorities.

- **Challenge the status quo**. Alone or with your allies, you can question or even challenge a barrier once you spot it. Writers have an advantage here, too, because we constantly practice identifying our readers' misconceptions or resistance points and selecting evidence and arguments that may successfully challenge that resistance. When you can present a reasonable alternative that allows many people to benefit from more flexible or equitable positions, you help others as well as yourself.

Some of these responses may be unacceptable to you, and some may be unavailable in a particular situation. But writers are more successful when we choose our path and find successful stories to tell ourselves, so even choosing a somewhat-frustrating response over a truly terrible option will help you strengthen your writerly habits.

You should assess any position problems you have as you enter each writing project, so that you are prepared to choose your responses while continuing to improve as a writer. And while for now, you may not be able to change your position, you can take note of a special challenge and commit yourself to trying to change an assumption or policy in the future, so that you and others can gain more powerful positions as writers.

> ## Learn
> - Learn more about how **"good writing" is not a neutral judgment** in Chapter 1, Rethinking Your Writing.
> - Learn more about **code-meshing** and other adaptations to Standard Edited American English in Chapter 11, Editing in Context.

Acknowledge position advantages

As a mindful writer, finally, you should take time to become aware of any *position advantages* that you have. You may have received good grades on your writing in large part because of your talent and hard work, but you may also—like a bicycle rider with the wind at their back—have had opportunities, resources, and support that other writers did not have access to.

All writers have some position advantages. Because of who we are, where we live, and what responsibilities we carry, we have had more time, encouragement, access to resources, insider knowledge, or community respect than other writers who are just as intelligent and hardworking as we are. The more a writer's background or situation aligns with the background of powerful people—in the US, these have historically been people who are White, male, straight, cisgender, Christian, able-bodied, neurotypical, and wealthy—the more position advantages that writer will have. Your awareness of these advantages doesn't detract from your success, but it can let you ally with other writers to help ensure that everyone has equitable opportunities to succeed. Moreover, you help yourself when you are honest about your positions: since *there is no single definition of "good writer,"* you know better than to expect that success in one kind of writing means you will always be successful, so you will be more open to learning and growing beyond your current achievements.

2.4 Attend to Failures In Order to Grow as a Writer

Despite all of our mindful actions, new stories, and hidden assets, writers still fail—a lot! Of course, you might not have *seen* writers failing the way you've watched your favorite sports teams fail, or the way you've seen your business ventures or laboratory projects hit dead ends, because writers tend to work and thus fail in private. On the other hand, any time you have gotten frustrated trying to follow the directions to assemble a piece of furniture, or stopped watching a TV series because it just wasn't as good as you hoped, you have encountered a public writing failure.

To succeed as a writer, you will need to employ habits of mind and reflective practice concerning your struggles.

- Tell yourself a new story, by understanding that failure is a normal and necessary part of writing, just as it is for any complex task.
- Be honest and open about failure: Instead of covering up your challenges, develop strategies for acknowledging and growing from your own failures.
- Understand the role that fear can play in writing, and adopt affirmative counterpoints to limit that role.
- Build new habits and communities that accommodate failure: Get comfortable with sharing your failures in writing, and support other writers in growing through their failures.

Some or all of those actions may seem not just uncomfortable but hazardous: in most places in your life right now, failure is often hidden, unappreciated, misunderstood, and even discouraged or forbidden. In some cases, you may have seen that only complete success earns the top prize. Moreover, people in many US and

Western cultures take great satisfaction in ranking *everything*, from safe cities for families to flavors of chewing gum to internet memes about cats: Many "likes" is good, and few or no "likes" indicates a failure.

More specifically, we know that US school culture has focused students' attention on avoiding failure, and even avoiding all but a very specific kind of success: success on standardized tests with one right answer, or success using one right format for writing. To be a "good student" has come to mean always succeeding where people can see you, never letting on that something is difficult, and getting something right on the first try. If "good students" fail, we rarely see it. Why would anyone in their right mind want to fail *more*?

And yet: you probably also participate in groups or activities in which you expect to fail, and perhaps even enjoy it. Most video games—whether they involve card decks, rainbow candy, fast cars, mad birds, exploding creepers, or shrewd elves— are designed to have players fail dozens or hundreds of times before they succeed at a level, a task, or a quest. It may sound unusual to describe it this way, but ultimately in these games you are paying good money for the pleasure of failing again and again. (If you always succeeded, you'd probably quit and go looking for more challenging adventures, right?)

Likewise, if you play a sport or an instrument, if you throw pottery or record dance videos, if you write code or combine amino acids or create new salsa recipes, you know that practice and failure are crucial parts of the learning process. You spend a lot of time being wrong or only partly right before you finally succeed. Failure is *normal and necessary* during these learning and creating and discovery processes, all of which may take a long time.

For advanced writers, directly addressing one's failures is a key step toward success. You may initially find it strange to publicize and analyze your failures, to examine your fears, or to support other writers by sharing and even celebrating one another's failures. But writing is as complicated an endeavor as any sport, science experiment, role-playing game, or computer code, and so all writers fail. Moreover, a writing project can only be improved when another person reads it and points out weaknesses. In order to improve as a writer, then, you have to be willing to fail as best as you can in front of other people—and to help them fail well, too.

Explore 2.3

Think of something you failed at recently *by choice*. That is, you knew when you started that your first effort wouldn't be perfect, and yet you chose to try it anyway. Write a few sentences about it: What did failing feel like? Did you get better all at once, or in small steps? Did anyone else see you fail, and if so, what were their reactions? Would you do this again, even knowing what you know now?

Tell a new story: Failure is normal and necessary for growth as a writer

When you are working on a writing project, it may seem that failure is the state you most want to avoid. Failing at a video game is cheerful: it comes with bright colors and exciting music and no real-world penalty. But failing at writing can mean late nights and high anxiety about the consequences that come tomorrow. In writing as in video games, though, the only way to succeed 100% of the time is to stick with simple tasks on Level 1 and never make progress. Writers who fail are writers who grow.

It may help to remember the perspective of scientists like Thomas Edison. Although Edison didn't exactly say that he had failed "10,000 times," as is sometimes reported, he did tell an interviewer that he had to create thousands of entirely plausible (but wrong) theories about electricity before he found two that turned out to be useful. Indeed, researchers have since discovered that students like Edison who try out an idea, fail, and then learn how to improve their work often perform better overall than students who manage to get it right the first time. And it's not just scientists: you can run an internet search for "famous writing failures" or "famous authors rejected" to see which writers have had to suffer more than usual.

Changing a reader's mind requires writers to take risks: if the powerful writing you are working on were simple to do well, someone else would already have done it. So your goal is to become a writer who tries new approaches, fails during the process, and thus creates an opportunity for learning to write better.

Finally, you should remember that failures themselves can sometimes become or produce successes. Alexander Fleming's failure to follow his lab's rules and close up all the Petri dishes led to his first encounter with penicillin. Spencer Silver was known at 3-M Corporation as the guy who had completely failed to make a permanently adhesive tape, until a colleague named Art Fry suggested taking the failed tape and creating Post-It ® sticky notes. And Oprah Winfrey got demoted from an early TV job in Baltimore—but that was where she met her friend and partner Gayle King who helped her launch her successful TV empire. You may not discover a wonder-drug or completely reshape daytime television, but all innovation requires bending or breaking a previously established boundary—and so you have to learn to be good at failing, and willing to fail repeatedly, in order to learn to be successful at writing as at other parts of your life.

Don't just fail: Analyze your failures to enable growth

Biologist Alexander Fleming, media mogul Oprah Winfrey, and inventor Spencer Silver did not automatically and immediately benefit from failing. Fleming and other scientists ran studies on penicillin for over a decade before successfully

producing a form of the drug and a procedure to treat infections in humans. Winfrey spent months failing to write "objective" journalistic scripts, but used that experience to decide that she needed a job that let her build more personal connections. Silver needed an outside perspective from his colleague Fry to help see how his failure to create a permanent adhesive could be useful in other cases. Many kinds of professionals routinely examine failed efforts in order to gain useful knowledge: surgical teams review procedures, basketball teams watch game films, and management teams examine case studies of failed public relations efforts, all hoping to spot mistakes they can avoid and innovations they might capitalize on.

To make failure useful rather than just frustrating, you need to know more about it rather than moving past it as quickly as possible. After all, your goal is always to fail forward: not to fail at the same things again and again, but to fail in a way that helps you improve. Instead of ignoring a failure or seeking a quick fix, take time to reflect on your challenges and ask yourself "fail-forward" questions:

> **Why did you fail?** It's easy to skip this step, or to just shrug your shoulders ("Eh, I guess I wasn't paying attention"). Instead, hold an honest conversation with yourself, and give a specific answer: what was the biggest challenge, and what else might you have tried? Even if you're not sure exactly what led to the failure, identifying one or more possible causes gives you a way to improve.

> **What eventually helped you move toward success?** Sometimes success is even more difficult to track than failure: you just "got in the flow" or "knew what to do" somehow and the writing worked. Try to uncover whether the difficulty was less daunting than you expected, whether you had good resources or dispositions to draw on, or whether you used a particularly apt new strategy.

> **How can you apply what you've learned?** Instead of fixing one problem and dashing away, describe to yourself how the fix could work generally. A failure and remedy in one part of a document are likely to be connected to other parts as well. You might also be able to isolate one or two key skills or strategies to practice in future projects. So keep asking yourself how to transfer your new insights: What other sections of your document might also need a narrower focus or more supporting data? How could you improve your final project for music theory class using similar strategies?

You don't have to be relentlessly cheerful about your failures or pretend that a partial success is a grand-prize-winning experience; most failures are frustrating and don't result in the invention of a billion-dollar product. And of course, not all writing projects will give you opportunities to learn-by-failing. For instance, when your boss surprises you with a new project due tomorrow, you might not have enough time or

security to tinker with new strategies that could lead to the best possible report; likewise, when you have an essay exam at the end of your child psychology course, your grade for the semester may depend on the quality of your first-try answer. In situations like those, the consequences of failure can be part of a position problem that you can't just solve with a "new story," so you need to create the best possible document. But the more you can use your writing class to practice diagnosing, recovering from, and growing through your failures, the stronger a writer you'll become.

Take some control: Face fears and activate affirmations

Because communication is such a foundational human activity, writing can get tangled up in many of the fears and apprehensions that we encounter in our daily lives. What if we write the wrong thing, don't finish a task on time, have errors in our writing, get a low grade, or offend someone? We aren't usually physically at risk from an inadequately completed research paper, but we can face both emotional stress and real-world consequences, so fear is a normal reaction. That said, fear and anxiety inhibit critical thinking, openness, and persistence, all of which writers need, so writers need steps to lower our stress levels.

It can help to know *what* you are afraid of, just as it helps to identify any other problem you face as a writer. Are you concerned about meeting someone else's standards, or living up to your own goals? Are you remembering a specific past problem, considering a problem that you see happening now, or worrying about a possible danger in the future? Are you overwhelmed by "everything," or can you pinpoint a particular task or encounter that is generating anxiety? When you know more about your worries, you can try an alternate path or seek out feedback or assistance; you can also try a "new story" by telling yourself an affirmation.

Affirmations are optimistic statements about strengths, achievements, goals, values, and safety, and they can become a powerful part of your writing story. As with other problem-solving strategies in this book, the use of spoken, written, or even just consciously considered affirmations to improve performance is well-documented in research as a step to improve writing, learning, and performance in many professional fields. Affirmations are part of developing a growth mindset.

Whether we use them regularly through a practice of meditation or coaching, or situationally just at a point of need, affirmations can be a key strategy to counterbalance fear. Which of the affirmations below do you think might be helpful to you when you are most stressed about your writing?

- **Improvement:** I am continuing to improve as a writer.
- **Effort:** I am working hard enough on this project.
- **History:** I have succeeded on projects like this one before, and will do so again.

- **Growth:** I am here to learn; if I make mistakes, I can learn from them.
- **Strength:** I am proud of my strengths as a writer (or a student, or a person), such as ____.
- **Perspective:** I can take one step at a time and be successful.
- **Grace:** I will treat myself as kindly about this challenge as I would treat a peer or friend.
- **Values**: I am staying true to my core values of ___ and ___ as I work on this project.
- **Belonging**: I am in the right place for my goals, needs, and abilities at this time.
- **Vision:** I can imagine myself completing this task successfully.

You might know of or create other affirmations could you try. Remember that like any new story, affirmations may need some time and repetition to have their full effect.

Of course, affirmations won't get you or any of us out of a position problem: your narrow-minded boss is still your narrow-minded boss even when you're feeling confident, and your 10-minute meditation won't reduce racism or stop global warming. But it can help to think of these strategies as a "put your own mask on first" approach. Airline flight attendants instruct adult passengers that in case of an emergency, we should put our own oxygen mask on first before helping children or other family members, because if we lose consciousness, we can't help anyone. If you can reduce your own fearfulness and lessen your stress response, you will be not just a better writer but a better friend, colleague, parent, and activist supporting those around you and improving your community.

Team up: Build communities that support growth-through-failure

Psychologists find that learners who stick with a difficult task—who fail and keep trying—have stronger potential for success in an area than learners who are inclined to just give up if the challenge is too hard. Like other writerly habits, persisting through difficulty and using failures to help you grow takes practice, patience, and especially support. It's not a surprise that sports teams and laboratory teams have regular procedures for addressing failures: having a team to share the struggle with makes a huge difference.

Although the image of "the solitary writer" is a powerful one, writers who are learning need teams as much as, if not more than, any other learners. Sprinters can tell by the stopwatch if they've met their goal; programmers can run a program to see if their code produced the desired result. Writers can't even tell if we've succeeded with a basic sentence unless a reader who lives outside our head says "I get it!" Moreover, we improve our skills much faster when readers we

trust identify exactly where they stumbled or disconnected while reviewing our writing.

A writing class can be a great team, especially if you help the team build trust by sharing your struggles and encouraging others to share theirs. When you're surrounded by a community in which everyone's goal is to learn more about writing, you will have extra support as you experiment, fail, and revise: brainstorming wild ideas with your peers, sharing early drafts that explore unexpected arguments, and getting feedback on your project organization during low-risk activities or assignments before a major project comes due.

In addition to learning productive strategies for reviewing peers' drafts, you can help your classroom team, friends, or work colleagues adopt a writerly approach to acknowledging failures and using them to improve:

- Share your challenges as a writer with your peers, so that others know they don't suffer alone, and so that they can see how your success comes out of trying and failing and trying again, rather than as inspiration from some magical muse: "I had a really hard time staying focused on the main idea in this assignment; last night I cut out two whole paragraphs that didn't work!"

- Ask other writers in your community what challenges they face or risks they are taking with their writing, and encourage them to try complicated or unfamiliar tasks that will eventually increase their writing power: "I sympathize with your difficulty summarizing such a complex scenario; have you tried using an online-mind-map site to sort out all the key pieces?"

- Pay special attention to the new strategies your peers are working on, so you can praise them for trying and perhaps initially failing at these key tasks: "I think your argument goes too far right now, but it's great that you're exploring new options!"

- Keep an eye out for "failures" in other writers' work that could be turned into advantages: "I think your personal anecdote isn't working in the middle of this essay, but maybe you could use it to form a powerful introduction or conclusion."

- Thank your peers when they provide honest, specific criticism, so they know you appreciate their efforts to help you improve: "It's frustrating that I need to do even more research, but I appreciate you telling me you're not persuaded yet."

When you write in a community that acknowledges difficulty, empathizes with failure, and supports experimentation, it's easier to go beyond "Writing a good paper" into building habits that will help you succeed as a writer in many current and future situations.

2.5 Nurture Writerly Habits of Success

All this talk about struggle, problems, and failures may start to feel depressing—until you start to see how adopting small habits of mind and action helps to increase your confidence, decrease your "writer's block" episodes, and enable small but crucial successes. Your goal is certainly not to submit a failed project or to be the writer who always messes up. Instead, you want to struggle and then improve, like a pole vaulter or programmer or video game race car driver. When you develop a growth mindset and you adopt writers' habits you can steer yourself toward success, and you also increase your openness to feedback that will speed your journey.

If you're still uncertain that changing your habits, your stories, or your attitudes will help you as a writer, there's no better place than a writing course to try out these approaches and find what works for you. In a class, you can predict your resources and challenges much more consistently than in a workplace or community setting. Moreover, you are surrounded by a community that values your learning, and you can improve every day by watching how you and your peers learn from your challenges. The more regularly you tell yourself a productive story—"I tried, I failed, I improved, and I ended up as a better writer!"—the stronger your successful habits will be, and the more you'll be able to take risks, make mistakes, and eventually solve any problems you encounter as a writer.