

## The 3 "P's" -- Perfectionism, Procrastination, Paralysis

Do you set your standards high, but always feel like you've failed? Do you procrastinate in writing your dissertation? Learn about the 3 "P's" and end the vicious cycle that keeps you stuck and ineffective.

### The Vicious Cycle

Perfectionism, procrastination, and paralysis – one often leads to the next, in a vicious cycle, especially on large, long-term projects with no clear deadlines, such as dissertations and research publications. Let's look at each part of this cycle, and explore ways to disrupt the cycle.

### Perfectionism

Although most of my clients seek dissertation help after they have started suffering from the second or third "P," I will start with the first, one: perfectionism. This trait can be defined as striving towards impossibly high goals. The perfectionist is caught in a trap – he or she can never be good enough. Usually a perfectionist engages in a rigid, black or white kind of thinking about his own performance – if it isn't perfect, it's horrible.

I see perfectionism as existing on one end of a continuum. Up to a certain point, aiming high can help you become successful. Most academics who have made it to graduate school have set high standards for themselves and have met those high standards. There is nothing wrong with pushing yourself to attain excellence. It only becomes a problem when the goal is always set beyond your reach.

### The Mediocre Perfectionist?

Ironically, the perfectionist often achieves a product that is far less than perfect. At times, their performance is, at best, mediocre. In contrast, those who aim at more realistic goals can outperform the perfectionist. How could that be? The procrastination and paralysis that results from overly high standards causes the perfectionist to wait until it's too late, then rush to do something; anything. The more relaxed realist, in the meantime, is able to put an effort in earlier, over a more prolonged period of time, with more chance to let time and subsequent editing improve the final product.

### Why Now?

As an undergraduate, and in the classes in the first couple of years of graduate school, you were given strict deadlines. However annoying these deadlines were, they always pushed you to hand your term papers in, or face complete failure.

The problem for ABD students and professors who tend towards perfectionism, is that the deadline is rarely clear-cut. If

you are taking too long to write your dissertation, you can request an extension. If you haven't published in a year, you can get to it next week or next month. The consequences of inaction lie in the future. This leads me to the second "P."

### Procrastination

When you secretly believe that your dissertation or next piece of research should set the world on fire, that it will be talked about among the cognoscenti for years to come, you are setting yourself up for failure. At some level you know that this level of achievement is unlikely. And it saddles you with an invisible, critical audience. Each paragraph you write, each idea that floats to the surface, causes the audience to murmur, "she thinks THAT'S worthy of a world-class dissertation?" or "He's sending THAT to the top journal?"

When faced with that level of criticism, even though it's coming from within (and you might not even be aware of it) you lose your energy and excitement for your project. The human being is a positive reinforcement system. We get lit up and energized by praise and acceptance, and we curl up in a ball when we are criticized.

On a football field, when the coach yells at the team that they are a bunch of @\$#% for playing so poorly, the players may play better. That is because they are enraged at being humiliated and they can use the rage to batter their opponents. This technique does not work in other spheres. The criticism you hear from that inner critical audience slows us down, and interferes with your thinking process.

Every time you think of what to do next, you get an uneasy feeling. If you write a sentence or two, you feel the need to delete, erase, and do over. It is so easy to put the next step of your project off until tomorrow when you experience unpleasant feelings and lack of progress. Being intelligent, however, it is hard for you to ignore the fact that you are not living up to your own high expectations for yourself. This makes you feel down on yourself and ineffective. That critical audience doesn't help either. You find yourself thinking: "I'm lazy." "I have no will power." "I could kick myself."

As time goes on, you start to grind to a halt. That leads to the third "P."

### Paralysis

I have worked with clients who had not written for months, or even years. I'm sure many of you are aware of the grim statistic that 50% of graduate students don't ever finish their dissertation. Often it is due to the setup outlined here. It's really a shame, since it is preventable. It is so unnecessary for so many incredibly bright people to feel like failures.

### How to Avoid the 3 "P's"

There are steps that you can take to avoid falling into the vicious cycle of the 3 "P's." If you can conquer this cycle, you will have a much happier academic career.

I've even seen those who are unable to imagine a career in academe change their mind once they conquer the 3 "P's."

- Become aware of the perfectionistic audience voices in your head (no, you're not crazy.)
- Learn how to answer them back (don't do it out loud or people will think you're crazy.) An example would be, "OK it's not the best chapter but at least I'm handing it in."
- Look for role models who are satisfied with "good enough." Note how they get things done, are satisfied with themselves, and are not looked down on by others.
- Set up realistic goals. One way to tell if a goal is realistic is if you can actually do it. For example, "Read two articles and write for 15 minutes before 5:00 tonight" is a realistic goal. "Read two articles and write for 6 hours and write 10 pages before 5:00 tonight" is not a realistic goal.
- If you have reached the third "P," drastic steps are needed. Seriously consider getting help from a peer who can be a "writing buddy," the counseling center, your advisor, or a dissertation coach (me, for example.) Do Not Give Up – it is very possible to get yourself out of the paralyzed state and back to productivity with just a little help.

#### A Final "P" or Two

#### Productivity

Start with baby steps. Do a little every day. As you observe your own productivity, however small, you can start to feel better about yourself. You were capable all along – it's just that your unrealistic expectations stopped you from functioning adequately. Eventually your productivity will start to look like Progress. And that's the last "P" for today.