

Strive for Excellence Not Perfection on Dean's Date Assignments and Final Exams

There is a key difference between striving to produce excellent work and perfect work. While excellence is attainable with effort, skills and strategies, perfection is an unrealistic standard. Understandably, in the midst of working on independent work and other big projects it can be difficult to realize that what one is working towards (often unconsciously) is unrealistic perfection. Princeton demands your best work, but that doesn't mean perfection. It's crucial to reflect on and manage your personal expectations given the reality of your situation at this juncture in the semester and work towards reasonable and attainable goals. Establishing perfection as your goal adds more stress to already demanding tasks and sets you up for inevitable "failure" because perfection isn't really possible. You might think that setting exceedingly high goals helps you succeed, even if you don't reach those goals. But for most, the actual result is stress, frustration, and disappointment.

Here are some strategies for dealing with unhelpful perfectionist temptations:

- **Make a list of advantages and disadvantages of aiming for perfection.** List, for example, the trade-offs between strong self-criticism and the quality of work that actually gets submitted.
- **Take an honest look at how you spend your time.** Consider, particularly, the amount of time spent on preparing or starting projects as opposed to time spent worrying about and "fixing" them. See if you can get started before you feel ready and make an initial try which you know you will build upon.
- **Triage, organize, and assign time limits for assignments.** And then adhere to those limits. If time runs out on the schedule, give yourself permission to move on to the next task. Return to earlier efforts to refine or polish if time allows.
- **Instead of throwing work away, "replant" it.** When working on writing assignments, try keeping two files open at the same time, the main version and a "garden" version. Instead of simply deleting phrases, sentences, and paragraphs from the main file when editing, cut and paste them into the garden file. Work, therefore, doesn't get deleted but instead gets "replanted" for use at a different time.
- **Be realistic about what you can accomplish.** Definitely set high personal standards for your work, but realize that no one expects anyone to know or to be able to do everything. *Strive to produce work at a level that lies just above what you can currently complete.*
- **View receiving criticism as an opportunity to improve.** Learning depends upon mistakes—and feedback. Convert criticism received on a paper or problem set into a list of suggestions to make your work better going forward, such as getting clear about what makes a thesis arguable, what insightful analysis of a source amounts to, or how the problems on a problem set connect up with and inform lectures.

For each assignment, strive to produce the best work you can at this point and not the best work that has ever been produced on this topic or problem. Fundamentally, realize that nearly all academic work — at all levels — tends to be surrendered instead of finished. Academic pursuits tend to be on-going conversations with the contributions of those who have come before. Accordingly, view your contribution as the latest word and not the last on any subject, question, or assignment.