

Revise with Confidence Free Video Series

Video #2: Distance Yourself

Transcript

Hey, welcome back; nice to have you here. This is the second of three videos in the free Revise with Confidence video series, and because each one builds on the one that came before it, it's important for you to take a look at the first video in the series if you haven't already done so. You'll find a link just above this video, so do please do watch that one before turning your attention to this one.

In the first video, we took a look at the first step in the simple three-step process for determining once and for all if your writing is really any good. As a reminder, the 3 steps are:

1. Gain Fresh Perspective – on why you worry in the first place
2. Distance Yourself – so you can see yourself as a writer more objectively
3. Use Simple Tools – that will help you advance your skills as a writer

Gain Fresh Perspective + Distance Yourself + Use Simple Tools = You as A More Confident Writer

In that first video I hope you were able to Gain Fresh Perspective on why you worry in the first place, and I hope you discovered what might be behind your concerns about whether your writing is really any good

- The speed-happy culture in which we're all operating, the rush to crank out a draft and

publish quickly, which can lead to sloppy writing that *isn't* all that good;

- The psychology behind the self-doubts so many of us have about the quality of our work, how they began in childhood, when we're primed from an early age to have low self-esteem
- How the culture of rejection in which we operate can damage our confidence
- The fact that our initial writing probably *isn't* terribly good, and that that's okay
- How you're not alone and are in fact in good company with thousands of writers like those I've worked with, who have pushed beyond their concerns to invest in themselves as writers in order to ensure that their writing is the best it can possibly be, people like Shannon Huffman Polson, Tim Queeney, Maureen C. Berry, and SK Lamont
- The need to reframe the question, from "is my writing really any good" to "how can I ensure that my writing is as good as it can possibly be?"

That's what we're going to look at today: how you can begin to ensure that your writing is as good as you can make it. We'll focus today on the 2nd step in the 3 step process:

- Distance Yourself – so you can see yourself as a writer more objectively –not being fully aware of the type of writer you are is one of the critical things that can get in your way of making sure your writing is as good as it can possibly be.
- We'll take a look at
 - what to do if you don't like your own writing – I have a story to share from my own personal experience, and one I love from author George Saunders, and
 - we'll look at a psychological tendency called 'self-handicapping' that might be getting in your way

Don't forget that here's what I'd like you to imagine. By the end of this video series you

- Won't worry anymore about whether or not your writing is really any good,
- Won't be afraid that you're wasting your time,
- You'll simply be able to get straight to work, focus on your writing, and do what's necessary to ensure that your writing is as good as it can possibly be.

Because feeling like that is far better than all that worrying. Trust me, I've been there. Let me tell you a short story about my own writing life history, which I like to call The New Hampshire Writer, or Dempsey Lite (think Lite beer).

And actually, before I even get to that story, let me back up and give you the chronology that led to that story, because you might be able to relate. I already told you about my first writing workshop at Grub Street Writers, back in 2000, with Manuel Munoz. It took me seven years, from the time of that first workshop, through a lot of learning, including getting my MFA in creative writing at AULA ... seven years and a lot of rejection before I had my first story accepted for publication. So I know something about self-doubt, and I know something about rejection. But hey, I got to this point – where I work with words and the craft of writing and writers like you every single day, I spend my time among books here in the shed, and I'm able to set aside any worries about whether my writing is any good, and get right down to work.

Here's what those seven years until publication looked like for me:

- First workshop at Grub Street with Manuel Munoz

- Two other fiction workshops with fantastic writer and teacher Bruce Machart, author of the story collection *Men in the Making* and a novel, *The Wake of Forgiveness*, and then I worked privately with Bruce for a time, which gave me a fantastic foundation into how to write fiction; it was in part thanks to Bruce's encouragement that I kept on writing. I submitted for his review the beginning of a short story that ultimately became *Leaving the Ledges*, which was published in *Alligator Juniper* in the summer of 2009 and was a finalist in their fiction competition. When Bruce read the draft of the opening of this story, he was working from home, and he told me that he called out to his then wife: "Hey," he said, "I've finally found a real writer!" I clung to those words for years, and they helped me whenever that "my writing isn't any good" thing rose up to haunt me.
- After that, in 2002, I attended the VT College Post Graduate Writers Conference, which I was happy to get into since I didn't yet have my graduate degree in writing, and I took a fiction workshop there with Melissa Pritchard, author of eight books of fiction, a biography and a book of essays, who is now professor emeritus at Arizona State University.
- On the strength of what I learned in these workshops, from these teachers, and from all the writing and reading about craft that I did, all of which I did around the margins of full time day jobs, I applied for and was accepted into the MFA program at AULA.
- From 2003 to 2005 I immersed myself in learning about writing, and absolutely LOVED the MFA program. (I went into significant debt to attend that program – thank you, student loans, which I'm paying off like a mortgage.) At Antioch I started my first novel, *Vigilant*.

And this is where *The New Hampshire Writer: Dempsey Lite*, story begins. Antioch was one of the highlights of my writing life, and still it was there that I experienced the disappointment of hearing a friend of mine mention me in a seminar she was teaching; she described me as a “New Hampshire Writer”. At the time, for various reasons, I was living sort of unhappily in NH, because I had spent the previous 22 years quite happily living in Boston and I missed it, and I’d grown up in NH and felt a little like living there again was a step backwards. My friend at Antioch meant “NH Writer” as a compliment, and she went on to talk about my strong ability to capture a sense of place, and how my stories have a real New England sensibility. At the time, though, hearing that I was a NH writer totally fed into my own insecurities about the quality of my writing; I heard “New Hampshire writer” and quite honestly – with sincere apologies to all the fantastic NH writers out there - it made me think “limited, colloquial, folksy”, when what I wanted to be was expansive, worldly, and sophisticated. I was so frustrated, because what I was putting on the page was not the same thing as what was going on in my mind. I described it to my friends as feeling like I was writing *Dempsey Lite*, a watered down version of what I really wanted to write, which in my mind was dark and complex, more like a hand-crafted stout made by Trappist Monks at some remote monastery. What I felt like, in short, was disappointed in myself. I began to feel like my writing really wasn’t any good, and it took enormous effort for me to overcome that feeling to stay at the writing desk.

One thing that helped a lot was hearing the author George Saunders speak. Saunders is a professor in the MFA program at Syracuse University, the author of nine books, was named by Time Magazine as one of the most 100 influential people in the world, and has been awarded both a Guggenheim and a MacArthur Fellowship among many other awards. In short, he’s no

slouch! I can't even remember at this point what book he was selling at the time I heard him, but I distinctly remember him talking about exactly the same experience that I was calling Dempsey Lite. Saunders is a funny, funny guy, but he told us he spent ten years during the early years of his writing career trying to be something he's not. He wanted nothing more than to be writing super serious literary stories – New Yorker stories – he might have said, stories full of serious, serious stuff. He described copying the styles of other writers he admired – I can't recall now specifically who they were – but important, serious contemporary writers, because he wanted to *be* them, and yet he never felt truly confident about the stories he was writing. As he matured, he finally began to admit that who he is, in part, is a funny, funny guy, and he finally allowed that humor to enter into his writing, and he finally found *his* true writing voice. The irony is – and it's not that surprising – he's now a regular contributor to the New Yorker, and while his stories often contain humor, the best ones also pack a serious punch.

I want to encourage you to take a moment right now, while these stories are fresh in your mind, to stop and reflect on your own self as a writer. What have people said about your writing style, or what's your greatest fear about your writing style? What's *your* equivalent of being a NH writer, or a funny writer? Pause the video, take a moment to think about this, and if you want, share your thoughts in the discussion area below; I look forward to reading them. And then hit play again and come on back – I'll be right here.

Welcome back. How'd you make out?

Here's how I made out.

A New Hampshire Writer?!

I distanced myself by taking a hard and objective look at myself and my own work, and you know what? I *was* a NH writer! I decided right then and there just to go with that, and to make sure that the NH stories and the NH novel I was working on at the time were the *best* NH stories and novel I could possibly write. What I didn't want to settle for, though, was Dempsey Lite. I wanted to improve my writing to the point where I wouldn't feel frustrated that what I put on the page was different than what had originated in my head. So I kept on investing in my education after getting my MFA so I could continue to improve my writing skills. We never stop learning; we never stop improving.

What do you do if you don't like your own writing? You have several choices – as you're listening, jot some notes to yourself about which of these choices – or combination of choices – makes the most sense for you:

1. You can **quit** – and for some people that's a legitimate option. Maybe you've found that you enjoy writing less than you thought you would, and it's not for you after all. That's fine. Life's too short. Do what feels best for you.
2. You can **fret**. I know I certainly did, and George Saunders fretted for 10 years while he was writing in a style that didn't really suit him. Some amount of fretting is inevitable, as long as you don't let it cripple you. Keep writing, despite your fretting.
3. You can **face the truth** of who you are, and accept yourself – your equivalent of a NH or funny writer – and strive to be the best of that sort of writer that you can possibly be, or
4. You can **refuse to settle** for anything “lite”, and work like crazy to get better at the craft of writing, or

5. Some combination of #s 2-4, which is what I did.

I continued to do my share of fretting, but it was diminished because I had decided to accept myself as a NH writer, although I did slightly amend that title and decided to call myself a “New England Writer”, which of course also encompasses Boston, which made me happy, and I refused to settle for Dempsey Lite.

As an aside, in the next video I’ll share with you exactly what I did from from that point on that allowed me to progress from an unpublished, Dempsey Lite writer writing in the margins of time around a full time day job, to the published writer I am today, who works full time with words and writers like you, every day from here in the shed.

Right now, though, let’s take a look at a psychological tendency called ‘self-handicapping’ that might already be getting in your way of being the best writer you can be, or that might get in your way of progressing past not liking your own writing.

The first thing you need to know is that self-doubt – like worrying that your writing really isn’t any good, or it’s too ‘lite’ - can have its benefits. Really. It turns out that the self-doubt is not there just to drive us crazy, it’s there for a good reason—it protects us from pain. It can even give us an ego boost. It does a good job, too, which is why we keep repeatedly employing it as a helpful tool for self-preservation.

Psychologists have known this for a long time. There is, and I quote: “a large body of literature

[which] indicates that people sometimes self-handicap, or put barriers in the way of their own success, to protect and enhance their self-esteem and the esteem in which others hold them.”

This quote is from *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification* by Christopher Peterson and Martin E.P. Seligman. This 800-page handbook was written to provide a positive counterpoint to the psychology profession’s diagnostic bible, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, better known as the DSM. It is, in a nutshell, an attempt to approach psychology from an appreciative perspective, to look at what’s right with us rather than what’s wrong.

In that spirit of appreciation, I’m suggesting we step back, get some distance on our worries and fears, and cast a different light on those worries and fears.

Rather than worry about whether our writing’s any good, or that we’re wasting our time, let’s look instead with an appreciative eye at why we do these things in the first place.

Here’s the official definition of self-handicapping, from *Character Strengths and Virtues* [read from book]:

Self-handicapping is often operationalized as a failure to persist, especially to persist at practice or preparation for a major task. Self-handicapping by failing to practice serves to protect and enhance esteem by altering the attributions that can be made after success or failure. If one fails to practice enough before a test and then fails, the reason for the failure is somewhat ambiguous. The failure could be due to low ability, or it could also be

due to lack of practice. If one fails to practice enough before a test and then succeeds, then one can claim very high ability, because one succeeded despite the handicap of little or no practice. Self-handicapping thus protects esteem in the case of failure and enhances esteem if one should succeed despite the handicap of inadequate practice.

Now how does that translate into what we're concerned about here – getting over our fears that our writing isn't any good and that we're wasting our time – this means that our self-doubt creeps up and keeps us from our writing in order to protect us from feeling bad about ourselves if we do write and our writing turns out to be lousy, or to give ourselves a boost if we write something terrific and did so without much effort.

In short, our self-doubt wants us to feel okay about ourselves and our writing, which is actually kind of a nice impulse.

Let's say you've not been writing for some time, so when you finally do sit down to write you find you're really rusty. You write a few pages and when you show them later to a writing friend you can tell she thinks they're no good; they're worse than 'lite'. But you dismiss her reaction because "I'm totally out of practice," which means, of course, that if you chose to practice, your work would be a lot better.

See how we use this strategy to avoid pain?

And in that same scenario, if you show your pages to a writing friend and she says "Wow, this is

fantastic”, you can think about how great you could be if you really applied yourself.

So either way, you end up feeling pretty good.

But this is where our appreciation for self-protection needs to end. The benefits of self-doubt have their limits. The pain-avoidance/ego-boosting strategy is like eating a whole bag of Doritos because you’re bored or lonely or frustrated – you feel momentarily better but later you’re spinning from all that MSG, your stomach’s bloated, and the boredom or loneliness or frustration isn’t gone.

And let’s face it; we’re not truly fooling ourselves with all this talk of lack of practice. We know we’re slacking off and we don’t feel very good about it, just like we know Doritos are not what we really seek.

But here’s some hope. Psychologists have demonstrated that if we really understand that our failure is a result of our own lack of effort, we still believe we can increase our effort and succeed.

In other words, if you know in your heart of hearts that you haven’t given your best effort, you still believe you can decide to give it your best effort and actually achieve what you’ve set out to do. You believe, in other words, that you have total control over making a decision to enhance your efforts.

And you know what? That's true, you do have control!

By engaging in things like this video series, for instance, you've already made a decision to take control and learn something new about yourself as a writer, and that can only be a good thing for your writing life. In the next video we'll dig more specifically into the 3rd step in the three step process – the simple tools that will work best for you to take control of your writing life, and ensure that your writing is as good as it can possibly be.

Just to recap. Here's where you are in the three-step process:

- In the first video you completed the first step: Gain Perspective on yourself as a writer:
 - The speed-happy culture in which we're all operating, the rush to crank out a draft and publish quickly, which can lead to sloppy writing that *isn't* all that good;
 - The psychology behind the self-doubts so many of us have about the quality of our work, how they began in childhood, when we're primed from an early age to have low self-esteem
 - How the culture of rejection in which we operate can damage our confidence
 - The fact that our initial writing probably *isn't* terribly good, and that that's okay
 - How you're not alone and are in fact in good company with thousands of writers like those I've worked with, who have pushed beyond their concerns to ensure that their writing is the best it can possibly be, people like Shannon Huffman Polson, Tim Queeney, Maureen C. Berry, and SK Lamont (focus on results)
 - The need to reframe the question, from "is my writing really any good" to "how can I ensure that my writing is as good as it can possibly be?"

Today, you completed the second step: Distance Yourself, so you can see yourself more objectively, a crucial step in turning your focus away from yourself and onto your writing, so you can do what's necessary to ensure that your writing is as good as it can possibly be.

We took a look at:

- How to step back and figure out what to do if you don't like the style of your own writing
 - The NH or funny writer syndrome, the “lite” writer. You can:
 1. Quit
 2. Fret
 3. Face the Truth
 4. Refuse to Settle
 5. Or some combination of #s 2-4
- We looked at the psychological tendency called ‘self-handicapping’ that's both protecting you, and getting in your way, and you heard that you are able to choose to push beyond that tendency, like you're doing right now by participating in this video series.
- a) And in the next video you'll have a chance to explore a variety of tools in three different categories that will help you advance your skills as a writer, and you'll get a special invitation to the Revise with Confidence companion course.

Don't forget:

Gain Fresh Perspective + Distance Yourself + Use Simple Tools = You as A More Confident Writer

In the next video I'll also tell you a little more about the Revise with Confidence online companion course to this video series, and how this same simple three step process – gain fresh perspective, distance yourself, and use simple tools – can be applied directly to your writing itself, so you can see your writing more objectively in the same way you're beginning to see yourself more objectively, both of which, together, will ultimately lead you to more confidently revise your own writing so you ensure that your writing is as good as it can possibly be.

For now, I'd love to hear from you again in the comments area below. If you haven't already shared your equivalent of The NH Writer or the Funny Writer, I'd love to hear what you identified, if anything, and if you'd rather not, that's okay, too. I'd also like to know what you think about the psychological tendency towards self-handicapping; what are your thoughts about that? Feel free to ask any questions, too. I look forward to hearing what you have to say, and I'll see you again in the next video.