

# Good enough went out on time

A short book about perfectionism, and the idea that high standards are what's slowing you down

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First edition

Written by AI with human guidance. It can contain mistakes, which later editions correct.

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## Before you start

This is a short book and you can read it in two or three sittings. It's about one habit. You finish a piece of work, and then you keep working on it. You go back over an email that was fine the first time. You hold on to a report for three days after it was ready. Some things you never send at all, because they never reach the state you had in mind. People call you a perfectionist, and you half agree and are half proud of it, and you suspect that your high standards are the price of doing things well.

I'm going to argue three things. The first is that the polishing makes sense from the inside. It feels like care, and care is a good thing to have. The second is that your standards aren't what's slowing you down. Researchers who study perfectionism separate two things that travel together. One is wanting to do excellent work. The other is dread of mistakes and of what people will think. The first does little harm and some good. The second does most of the damage, and it's also what's doing the polishing. You can keep the first and loosen the second. The third is practical. You decide what done looks like before you start. When the work gets there you check it once and send it. Chapters 12 to 14 cover how.

Nothing in this book asks you to care less about your work or to start turning in rubbish. If that's the fear that nearly stopped you opening it, chapter 11 is about exactly that, and you could read it first.

Three cautions.

Perfectionism can be part of something larger. Researchers find it alongside depression, anxiety disorders, obsessive compulsive disorder and eating disorders more often than chance would predict. If your standards are mostly about food, weight or the shape of your body, this book isn't the right help. The NHS says that if you think you may have an eating disorder you should see a GP as soon as you can. If your mood has been low for weeks, the NHS advice is the same, which is to see a GP and not to delay. Chapter 15 says more.

If you've had thoughts of ending your life, please get help today. In England that means NHS 111, an urgent GP appointment, or 999 if you're in immediate danger.

And some work has to be right. If you check drug doses, sign off accounts or service brakes, I'm not going to tell you to check less. Chapter 11 looks at how those jobs get accuracy, and it isn't by one person agonising alone at midnight.

The notes at the back give my sources and their limits. Where I'm giving my own reasoning and not a finding, I'll say so.

## Twenty to midnight

It's twenty to midnight on a Tuesday and you're at the kitchen table with your laptop.

On the screen is a two-page summary for Thursday's team meeting. Your manager asked for it a week ago. "Just a couple of pages on where the supplier review has got to, so we're all looking at the same thing." You wrote it on Sunday afternoon. It took about two hours, and at the end of those two hours it said what needed saying.

Since then you've spent four evenings on it. You've rewritten the opening paragraph six times. You changed "significant" to "substantial" in the second section, and tonight you've changed it back. You rebuilt the table so the columns line up, then decided the table looked cramped and turned it into a list, and then turned it back into a table. You've read the whole thing aloud twice. An hour ago you found a sentence on page two that could be read two ways if someone were determined to misread it, and you've been working on that sentence ever since.

Your colleague Priya sent her summary round on Monday morning. It was a page and a half. The heading had a typing mistake in it, "Supplier reveiw", and one of her figures was labelled as provisional. By Monday afternoon three people had replied with comments, and your manager had written, "Thanks, really useful, let's spend ten minutes on this on Thursday." Nobody mentioned the heading.

You'll send yours at five to nine on Thursday morning, five minutes before the meeting. Nobody will have time to read it. It will be the better document of the two, by a small margin that only you can see. Priya's will be the one the meeting discusses, because hers is the one people have read.

None of this is a disaster. You're good at your job and people know it. But count what happened. A piece of work that was ready on Sunday went out on Thursday. It took about ten hours where two had been enough. You were short of sleep on Wednesday. And the thing the summary was for, which was to give people something to read before the meeting, didn't happen.

I'll use a few terms throughout. **Polishing** is work done on something after the point where the person receiving it could tell the difference. **A pass** is one more trip through the whole piece looking for things to fix. **The wince** is the small jolt you feel when you spot a flaw, or imagine someone else spotting it. **The line** is the point at which a piece of work does its job. Most of this book is about learning to see the line and to stop when you reach it.

Polishing has some regular features. This list is my own observation and not a research finding.

It starts after the work is usable. The hard part is done, and what remains are changes no reader would notice.

The changes go in circles. You put a word in, take it out, and put it back. A circle is a good sign that you've passed the line, because real improvements don't reverse.

You can't say what you're looking for. Ask yourself mid-pass what would have to be true for you to stop, and there's usually no answer. You're waiting for a feeling, and the feeling doesn't come.

And it's private. Nobody asked for the extra passes and nobody will know they happened. The ten hours won't appear anywhere except in your week.

I'd like you to try one thing before reading on. Think of the last three pieces of work you sent. They might be reports, emails, a presentation or a birthday card. For each one, estimate two times. When was it first good enough to do its job? When did you send it? Write down the gap for each. If the gaps are small, you may not have this habit, and you can put the book down with my blessing. If they're measured in days, read on.

## What the polishing is for

If someone told you to stop polishing, you'd probably feel they were asking you to stop caring. That reaction deserves a proper hearing before I argue with it, because the polishing does give you things.

It gives you the feeling of being conscientious. While you're on the sixth pass you're plainly someone who takes trouble. Most of us were brought up to admire that. "If a job's worth doing, it's worth doing well" is a saying you probably heard before you could read.

It gives you safety, or the sense of it. Every flaw you remove is one fewer thing that anyone could criticise. If the work is flawless, nobody can say anything. The polishing feels like closing windows before a storm.

It puts off the moment of judgment. While the work is still on your screen it hasn't been judged by anyone. Once it's sent, it's out of your hands. Another pass keeps it in your hands for one more evening.

It protects an identity. You may have been the careful one since school, the child whose homework was neat, the colleague whose slides never have errors. People have praised you for it for years. It's reasonable to fear that without the extra passes you'd be someone else, and someone less.

And now and then it pays. Once in a while the seventh pass does catch a real mistake, a wrong figure or a name misspelt. You remember those catches vividly. They seem to justify all the passes

that caught nothing.

Underneath these are needs nobody should be ashamed of. You want to do good work. You want to be safe from criticism, or at least from unfair criticism. You want to be respected, and to go on being the person you've taken pride in being. The question for the next several chapters is whether the polishing meets those needs, and what it charges you for them.

One more thing belongs here, and I find it a comfort. You didn't invent this. Thomas Curran and Andrew Hill gathered 164 samples of American, Canadian and British college students who had filled in the same perfectionism questionnaire between 1989 and 2016. There were 41,641 students in all. Average scores rose steadily over those twenty-seven years on all three parts of the questionnaire. Students increasingly felt that others demanded perfection of them. They demanded more of other people, and they demanded more of themselves. The biggest rise was in the first of those, the sense that other people expect you to be perfect.

The study covers students only, and two commentaries were published beside it, so it isn't the last word. Curran and Hill's own explanation is cultural. They point to a more competitive and individualistic climate in those three countries since the 1980s. That part is their interpretation and can't be tested by a questionnaire trend. But the trend itself tells you something useful. If perfectionism were simply your temperament, there'd be no reason for it to rise across a whole generation. Something in how people are raised, schooled and graded is teaching it. What's been learned can be examined, and some of it can be put down.

I can't tell you where you learned it, but some routes are common, and this is my own observation. Many people with this habit were praised as children for results and seldom for effort. The neat homework got a gold star, and the messy attempt at something hard got nothing. Some grew up with a parent who noticed the one B among the As. Some found early on that being faultless was a way to stay out of trouble in a house where trouble came easily. Exams teach it too, since they take marks off for every mistake and offer none for finishing early or for knowing when to stop. Every one of those lessons made sense where you learned it. You've gone on applying them in places where nobody is marking.

## **"My standards are what make me good"**

This is the belief that holds the whole habit in place, so I'll take it first. It goes like this. I do good work because I'm a perfectionist. The long evenings are the price of the quality. If I let go of the perfectionism, the quality goes with it.

The belief treats perfectionism as one thing. For about thirty years, researchers have found that it behaves like two.

Joachim Stoeber and Kathleen Otto reviewed this research in 2006. They describe two dimensions that turn up across many different questionnaires. They call the first perfectionistic strivings. This is having very high personal standards and working hard to reach them. They call the second perfectionistic concerns. This is worry about mistakes, doubt about whether what you've done is good enough, fear of other people's criticism, and a constant sense of a gap between what you expected and what you produced.

The two go together often enough that ordinary speech uses one word for both. But they can be pulled apart statistically, and when they are, they point in different directions. Stoeber and Otto found that strivings were associated with positive things, such as conscientiousness, persistence and good results in exams. Concerns were associated with distress. Their conclusion was that striving for perfection is positive in itself, as long as the person isn't overly concerned about mistakes and about being judged badly by others.

Later work fits the same pattern. Andrew Hill and Thomas Curran pooled 43 studies of perfectionism and burnout, with 9,838 participants from work, sport and education. Strivings had small negative links with burnout, or none. Concerns had medium to large positive ones. When the overlap between the two was removed statistically, so that they were looking at strivings with the worry taken out, the protective link got stronger. People with high standards and little dread were the least burnt out of anyone.

I should be straight about the limits. These are correlations, mostly from questionnaires, and a questionnaire can't show what causes what. And not every finding flatters strivings. Karina Limburg and colleagues pooled 284 studies on perfectionism and mental health. Both dimensions were associated with psychological problems. When the researchers looked at what each contributed separately, concerns had the larger effect for most outcomes, and for some the effect of strivings was trivial. Eating disorders were the exception. There, high standards and dread contributed about equally, which is one reason for the caution at the front of this book. So I'm not going to tell you that high standards are harmless under all conditions. The fair summary is that concerns carry most of the cost, and that high standards do best when the dread is low.

Now go back to Tuesday night at the kitchen table and ask which of the two was doing the work. Your high standards operated on Sunday afternoon. They're why the summary was clear, accurate and well organised after two hours. They did their job and then they were finished, because the summary met them.

The four evenings came from somewhere else. Nobody changes "substantial" back to "significant" at twenty to midnight out of love of excellence. You did it because of the sentence someone might misread, the manager who might frown and the colleague who might think you'd been careless. That's the second dimension. It wears the first one's uniform, which is why it's been so hard to argue with.

This matters because it changes what you'd be giving up. You've been defending the polishing as though it were your standards. It isn't. Your standards did two hours of good work and stopped. If the dread were turned down, those two hours would be untouched. What would go is the ten hours after.

So here's the claim the rest of the book rests on, and it's my reading of the research and not a finding in itself. Keep the standards. They're yours, they're useful, and nobody here is asking you to lower them. The target is the fear that has attached itself to them.

## **"The extra hours make it better"**

Surely, though, the extra passes improve the work a bit. Even if fear is driving them, the result is a better document. That seems obvious, and it's partly true, so it's worth looking at how much better and at what price.

Joachim Stoeber and Michael Eysenck tested something close to this. They gave 96 students at a British university a proofreading task. The students had to find spelling, grammar and formatting errors in a piece of scientific text, and they could take as long as they liked. The researchers measured each student's perfectionism beforehand, and they timed the task.

Students with high perfectionistic standards weren't found to catch more of the real errors. They did flag more things that weren't errors at all. The researchers call these false alarms. When they divided each student's accuracy by the time taken, high standards went with lower efficiency. Stoeber and Eysenck put it plainly. People with perfectionistic standards, they wrote, tend to find fault even when everything is all right.

That's one study of one task, with students, and it shows a correlation and not a cause. I wouldn't hang a whole argument on it. But it matches what the circles in chapter 1 suggest. After a certain point, a careful person looking for faults starts to find faults that aren't there. "Substantial" wasn't wrong. Neither was "significant". A searching eye with nothing left to find will settle on something anyway.

The more general point is about how improvement is distributed, and this part is my own reasoning. Most of the quality of a piece of work arrives early. The first draft takes it from nothing to rough. The first proper revision takes it from rough to good. After that each pass adds less than the one before. By the fifth pass you're trading an hour for a gain nobody but you could detect. The hours are all the same length, and what they buy keeps shrinking.

And the gain has to be seen by someone to count. The purpose of your summary was to inform six people before a meeting. For that purpose, the version you had on Sunday and the version you had on Wednesday were the same document. No reader would have acted differently on one than on the other. The only place the difference existed was in your own sense of the piece.

You might think this still adds up over a career, and that the person who polishes everything ends up ahead. The evidence doesn't support that. Dana Harari and colleagues pooled the research on perfectionism at work. Perfectionism had sizeable and consistent links with several things that matter in a workplace. Its overall relationship with job performance, though, was what they called equivocal. On average, across the studies, perfectionists weren't measurably better at their jobs. I've read only the summary of that paper, so I can't tell you more about which jobs and which measures. But if the extra hours reliably made the work better, it's the first place you'd expect to see it.

There's a simple reason why it wouldn't show. Time is the one thing at work you can't get more of. The eight extra hours on the summary came out of something, perhaps the supplier calls you didn't make or the thinking you didn't do about next quarter. It

may only have been sleep, and sleep pays for Thursday's work. Polishing buys a small improvement in one thing at the cost of a larger loss somewhere less visible.

None of this means revision is a waste. The first revision is often where the real quality comes from, and I'd never talk you out of it. The claim is narrower. There's a line, and past it the hours stop buying anything that anyone will receive.

## **"They'll think less of me"**

Behind most polishing is a forecast. If this goes out with a flaw in it, someone will notice, and they'll revise their opinion of me downwards. The forecast is rarely put into words, which helps it survive. So put it into words and check it against what you've seen.

Start with Priya's heading. "Supplier reveiw" went to the whole team, including your manager. You noticed it. Think about what you concluded. I'd bet it wasn't that Priya is careless and can't be trusted. If you thought anything, it was that she'd typed it quickly. Within a minute you were reading her figures. That's how you read other people's work, and there's no reason to think they read yours more harshly than you read theirs.

Most people at work aren't examining what you send them. They're skimming it between two other tasks, looking for the part that affects them. They want to know what it says and what they have to do. A reader in that state doesn't see the difference between your fourth draft and your ninth. Often they don't see typing mistakes either, since the eye corrects them on the way past.

Then consider what colleagues do notice, because they aren't indifferent to everything. They notice whether the thing arrived when you said it would. They notice whether they can understand it, and whether it helps them do what they need to do next. They notice who holds things up. On every one of those counts Priya's page and a half did better than your two pages, and her typing mistake cost her nothing.

So the polishing protects you against a small risk that few people would act on, and it exposes you to a larger one. Lateness is visible to everybody, while most flaws are visible to almost nobody. If your manager ever does form a private reservation about you, it's much more likely to be that your work is excellent and comes late than that there was once a comma out of place.

There's a well-known experiment that's often quoted on this, and I'll mention it with a warning. In 1966 Elliot Aronson, Ben Willerman and Joanne Floyd published a study that's usually described like this. People listened to a recording of someone doing very well in a quiz. In one version, the person then clumsily spilt coffee over himself. Listeners liked the highly able person more after the blunder, not less. I haven't been able to read the paper itself, so treat that as the standard account and not as something I've checked. I also wouldn't build on a single experiment from sixty years ago. I mention it because it points the same way as ordinary experience. People whose work is good and who are visibly human are easy to like. People whose work is flawless and who seem terrified of a slip are harder to be around.

I'm not saying nobody will ever criticise you. Some readers are picky, and a few bosses do pounce on small things. Chapter 15 deals with them. But notice that the polishing doesn't prevent criticism even then. A determined critic finds something in any document, because there's always something. You can't get to a state where nothing could be said. The forecast assumes that state exists and that one more pass will reach it.

Here's a small test you can run this week without changing anything else. The next time someone sends you work with a slip in it, watch your own reaction. Notice how long you think about the slip, and whether your opinion of them moves. Then ask why you'd expect them to react differently to you.

## **"I'd rather not send it at all"**

So far I've written about work that goes out late. There's a quieter version of the habit, and it costs more. Some things never go out.

There's the job application you worked on for a fortnight and didn't submit, because the covering letter never sounded right. There's the email to an old friend after their father died. You drafted it four times, and every draft seemed clumsy next to what they were going through, and then so much time had passed that sending anything felt worse than sending nothing. There are the holiday photographs you meant to make into an album once you'd edited them properly, which are still on a memory card from three summers ago. You may also have a short story, a business idea or a letter to the council that never went anywhere.

The belief underneath is that a flawed thing is worse than no thing. While the application is unsent, it can still be excellent in principle. Once it's sent it's only as good as it is. Holding it back keeps the excellent version alive. It also guarantees a result of nothing, and that gets forgotten.

Look at it from the other end. Your friend didn't need a well-written email. They needed to hear from you, and three awkward lines in the first week would have done it. The employer can't hire someone who didn't apply. They'll appoint someone whose covering letter was ordinary and was in the pile. In each case the comparison you were making was between your draft and a perfect draft. The real comparison was between your draft and silence, and your draft would have won easily.

There's some evidence that this shows up in output, even among people whose careers depend on output. Simon Sherry and colleagues studied psychology professors. They measured how much each professor demanded perfection of themselves, and then counted publications. The more perfectionistic professors had fewer publications in total and fewer as first author. They had fewer citations too, and appeared in less influential journals. That held even after allowing for how conscientious they were. The authors suggest that demanding perfection of yourself can turn into a kind of overstriving that defeats its own purpose.

It's a single study in one profession, and it's a correlation. But it goes against a natural assumption. You might expect the perfectionists to publish less and better. They published less, and what they published was cited less. Whatever the extra care was doing, it wasn't producing the masterpieces that would have justified it.

Perfectionism also connects with plain delay. Fuschia Sirois, Danielle Molnar and Jameson Hirsch pooled the studies on perfectionism and procrastination, using the two dimensions from chapter 3. People high in perfectionistic concerns procrastinated more, across 43 samples and about ten thousand people. People high in strivings procrastinated less. The association was modest in both directions. It fits the picture so far, though. The dread makes you put things off, and the high standards on their own would have got you started sooner.

If not sending has been your pattern, here's a different way to think about the unsent things. Each one is currently scoring zero. A mediocre application scores something, even if it's only practice at

applying. A clumsy note to your friend scores a great deal. An album of unedited photographs gets looked at, and a memory card in a drawer doesn't. You aren't choosing between flawed and flawless. You're choosing between flawed and nothing, and nothing is the option you keep taking.

There's one action I'd suggest now and not at the end of the book. If there's a message to a person that you've been failing to write well enough, send a short plain version today. "I've been meaning to write for ages and kept not finding the right words. I'm so sorry about your dad. I'm thinking of you." It isn't polished. It will land better than you fear, and far better than the fifth unsent draft.

## **"Nothing I finish feels finished"**

You might expect the polishing to end in satisfaction. Eventually the piece is as good as you can make it, and surely at that moment there's a reward. If you have this habit, you'll know that the reward mostly doesn't turn up. What you feel when you finally send the thing is closer to relief, and within a day you've thought of what you should have changed.

Roz Shafran, Zafra Cooper and Christopher Fairburn wrote an influential analysis of perfectionism as clinicians meet it. Their account explains why satisfaction keeps failing to arrive. They suggest that the core of the problem is that a person's view of their own worth depends too heavily on striving for, and meeting, demanding standards they've set for themselves. Then they describe what happens at each outcome. If the person fails to meet the standard, they criticise themselves. If they do meet it, they don't celebrate. They conclude that the standard can't have been demanding enough, and they raise it.

Their paper is a theory built from clinical experience, not an experiment, and it describes people whose perfectionism is severe enough to need treatment. You may well be some way short of that. But the mechanism is recognisable at ordinary strength. Fall short of the mark and you've failed. Hit it and it turns out to have been too easy, which means it didn't count. The system has two outcomes, and one is failure and the other is a harder test.

You can see it in how you treat praise. Someone tells you the presentation was excellent, and you say, "Oh, the middle section dragged." You got a first in your degree and remember it as the year you nearly didn't. A flawless month at work registers as nothing, because flawless is where the scale starts. Only departures from it get recorded, and there's no way for one to be upwards.

This matters for the argument of the book, because it removes the best defence of polishing. The defence is that the effort is worth it for the pride you'll take in the result. But the pride is what the mechanism withholds. You're paying in evenings for a feeling that the habit itself prevents you from having.

It also tells you something about the wince. The wince presents itself as information about the work. It seems to say that the sentence has a problem and the table is wrong. But a signal that goes off whatever the quality of the work isn't measuring the work. If you winced at the Sunday version and you wince at the Wednesday version, and you'd wince at a version produced by the best writer in the company, then the wince is about you and your fear, and it would fire at anything. A spelling checker that underlined every word would tell you nothing about your spelling. The wince is like that. It marks everything, so its marks can't be read as faults.

That has a practical use. When you're mid-pass and feel the wince, you can ask a plain question. Is there a specific fault here that a reader would notice and that would matter to them? If so, fix it. If you can't name one, the wince has nothing to report, and you're allowed to feel it and send the work anyway.

You can test this on yourself. Find something you finished a year or more ago and were unhappy with when it went out. It could be an old report, a piece of writing or something you made. Look at it again now. Most people find that it's better than they remembered, and that they can't locate the faults that kept them up. The work hasn't changed since then. The fear has worn off, and you're seeing it roughly as other people saw it at the time.

Satisfaction, when it comes to people with this habit, tends to come from a different direction. It comes from seeing the work used. A summary was read and led to a decision, the application got an interview, or a friend wrote back. Those are rewards that exist in the world, and they need the work to have left your hands.

## "If it isn't right, it's wrong"

Perfectionism marks work in two categories. A thing is right, or it's wrong. There's no grade for good, or fine, or did the job. Anything short of the top mark lands in the same bin as failure.

You can hear it in the way people with this habit talk about their own efforts. The dinner was ruined, when what happened was that the potatoes were slightly overdone. The presentation was a disaster, when one slide was out of order. The whole house is a tip, when there's a pile of post on the table.

Two-category marking has some odd effects, and the oddest is that it makes you do less. If a job can only be done perfectly or not at all, then whenever perfect isn't available, not at all is what's left. You don't tidy the spare room because you haven't a full day to do it properly. You don't start learning the piano because you'll never be good. You don't invite people round because the house isn't how you'd want it seen. People take perfectionism for an excess of effort, and it produces a surprising amount of nothing.

It also explains why perfectionists give up on things abruptly. A new runner misses a week and concludes that the plan is broken. Someone learning Spanish has one humiliating exchange in a shop and stops. If the only passing grade is flawless, then the first flaw ends the attempt, and first flaws come early in anything worth learning.

The alternative is to mark in grades, as every sensible examiner does. In place of right and wrong, try a scale of one to ten and ask what this particular job needs. A note to the window cleaner needs a three. It has to be legible and say which day. An email arranging a meeting needs a five. A summary for your team needs a seven, which means clear, accurate and readable, with nothing that would mislead. A submission to a regulator or a wedding speech might need a nine.

Hardly anything needs a ten. Tens are for a very few things in a life, and even those are usually judged by other people on a kinder scale than yours.

When you think in grades, two things change. The first is that you can aim, which you couldn't before. "Make it perfect" gives you no stopping point, whereas "make it a seven" does, because you know roughly what a seven looks like. The second is that a seven delivered to a job that needed a seven is a complete success, with nothing held back. You haven't settled for less. You've hit the target, and the three points you didn't add were never wanted by anyone.

The grades apply at home as much as at work. Think about having friends round for supper. The two-category version says the house must be spotless, the food must be impressive and nothing may go wrong, and so you have people round twice a year and are too tired to enjoy it when you do. Ask what the evening is for. Your friends are coming to see you. They need somewhere to sit, enough to eat and a host who isn't in the kitchen for the whole evening. That's a five for the house and a six for the food. Nobody has ever gone

home from a good evening talking about the skirting boards. People remember whether they laughed, and whether you seemed glad they'd come.

You might object that this is just lowering your standards with better manners. I'd say it's the opposite. Someone who gives everything a ten's worth of effort isn't showing high standards. They're showing that they can't tell jobs apart. Real judgment about quality includes judging how much a thing needs. A good cook doesn't plate a Tuesday supper as if for a competition, and that tells you nothing about how well they can cook.

There's a private cost to two-category marking that I'll mention before moving on. If everything short of perfect is failure, then you fail most days, since most days contain something imperfect. A person who fails most days, by their own marking, ends up with a low opinion of themselves however good their work is. Grading gives you back the large middle of your own life, where most of what you do is good and is allowed to count as good.

## **"It's quicker to do it myself"**

The habit doesn't stay inside your own work. Sooner or later it reaches the people around you.

Your colleague drafts the client letter and you rewrite it before it goes. You don't think it was wrong, only that it wasn't how you'd have put it. Your teenager loads the dishwasher and you reload it. Your partner books the holiday, and you spend the evening checking whether they got the best price. A junior member of your team hands you a first attempt, and you fix it yourself overnight and never explain what needed changing, because explaining would have taken longer.

Each of these feels efficient and even kind. You're sparing them the trouble and protecting the result. The belief is that your way is the right way and other ways are errors. Correcting an error quietly seems a small thing.

In chapter 2 I mentioned that Curran and Hill's questionnaire has three parts. One of them measures what the researchers call other-oriented perfectionism, which is demanding perfection of the people around you. It rose over the years along with the other two. So this is a recognised part of the pattern and no special failing of yours.

It's worth seeing how it looks from the other side, though, because you rarely get to. The colleague whose letter was rewritten learns that their drafts don't matter, since you'll redo them anyway. Next time they put in less effort, which confirms your view that they

can't be relied on. The teenager learns that there's a right way to load a dishwasher which they'll never master, so they stop offering. Your partner learns that their decisions are provisional until you've audited them. None of them tells you this. They step back, and you find yourself doing more and more, and wondering why nobody else pulls their weight.

So the load you're carrying is partly one you've built. It's quicker to do it yourself this time, and it has to be done by you every time after. The hour you'd have spent showing the junior what was wrong with the first attempt would have been repaid within a month. Instead you've acquired a permanent job as their editor.

There's a cost to the relationships as well. Being corrected in small things, day after day, wears people down. It tells them they're not quite up to standard, on matters where they hadn't known there was one. People who live or work with someone like this often describe being tense around them. They say they're never sure what will be found wanting next. You wouldn't choose to have that effect. Nobody who has it means it.

The grades from the last chapter help here as well. Before correcting anyone's work, ask what grade the job needs and what grade they delivered. The dishwasher needs a four, since the plates have to come out clean. If they do, the job is done, whichever way the bowls face. The client letter needed a seven. If your colleague's draft was a seven in a different style from yours, it goes out as it is. If it really was a five, the useful response is to tell them the two things that would make it a seven, and let them make the changes.

This is harder than it sounds, because watching something go out at a seven when you could have made it an eight produces the wince at full strength. You'll find that the wince passes, that the letter is fine and that the client doesn't notice. Six months later you may also find a colleague who drafts well, and wants to, because their drafts are used.

## What the polishing costs

The costs have come up one at a time. Here they are together, since a bill is easier to judge when it's added up. Most of this chapter is my own reckoning and not research, apart from the places where I name a study.

**Time.** This is the obvious one and the largest. If you polish for even five hours a week, that's more than two hundred and fifty hours a year. It's six working weeks, spent on differences nobody received. Your own figure may be higher or lower. The exercise at the end of chapter 1 gives you a rough way to estimate it.

**Lateness.** Work that arrives late is worth less, and sometimes it's worth nothing. Your summary did no good at five to nine on a Thursday.

**Things never sent.** These were covered in chapter 6. They're the jobs you didn't apply for and the messages that never went, along with the projects you abandoned at ninety per cent.

**Things never started.** You can't polish what doesn't exist, and the prospect of having to do something perfectly is a strong reason not to begin. Chapter 8 covered the spare room and the piano. The research on procrastination in chapter 6 points the same way.

**Exhaustion.** Hill and Curran's analysis in chapter 3 found that perfectionistic concerns had a medium to large association with burnout. Burnout means more than tiredness. Researchers

describe it as exhaustion together with growing cynicism about the work and a sense of achieving less. It's an odd place for a person to end up when they started out caring so much.

**Health.** Limburg's analysis of 284 studies found perfectionism associated with depression, anxiety, obsessive compulsive disorder and eating disorders, as symptoms and as diagnoses. Sarah Egan, Tracey Wade and Roz Shafran have argued on similar evidence that perfectionism is a process that runs across many conditions and helps to keep them going. Association doesn't show cause, and most perfectionists never become ill. But it's one more reason not to treat the habit as a harmless quirk.

**Decisions.** The same turn of mind affects choices. Barry Schwartz and colleagues studied people they called maximizers, who feel they must find the best option and can't settle for one that's good enough. Across seven samples, maximizers were less happy and less satisfied with life. They were more prone to regret, and they scored higher on perfectionism. In one of the studies they were less pleased with their own purchases than people who'd settled sooner. Looking for the best possible kettle takes an evening, and you end up less pleased with the kettle.

**Learning.** Skills grow from attempts and feedback. If you produce one polished piece in the time someone else produces four decent ones, they've had four rounds of feedback to your one. Over a few years that compounds. I can't cite a study for this, and I offer it as reasoning. I think it's part of why the professors in chapter 6 did worse. They'd had fewer goes.

**The people around you.** These were covered in chapter 9.

Colleagues stop trying, the family keeps out of your way, and you end up carrying what they've put down.

**Enjoyment.** This may be the saddest item on the list. Most people with this habit began by loving some kind of work, whether it was writing, cooking, design or making things run well. The polishing turns each piece of it into a test that you might fail. Work that's a test isn't much fun. If you can't remember when you last enjoyed the thing you're good at, that's part of the bill too.

Set against all this is what the polishing buys. It buys a small improvement beyond the line, visible mainly to you. It buys protection against a kind of criticism that rarely comes and can't be fully prevented anyway. It buys a sense of safety that lasts until the next piece of work.

I don't think you'd accept those terms if they were offered to you openly. Nobody offered them. You've paid them an evening at a time, and no single evening seemed like much.

## "Without it I'd get sloppy"

This is the fear that keeps most people polishing long after they've seen what it costs. If I stop checking everything five times, mistakes will get through. I'll turn into one of those people whose work is full of errors and who doesn't seem to mind. The dread is unpleasant, but it's my quality control, and without it there'd be none.

I take this seriously, because it contains a real question. What does keep your work good, if fear doesn't?

Part of the answer came in chapter 3. Your standards keep it good. They're a separate thing from the dread, and they don't leave when the dread is turned down. You'll still know what a clear sentence looks like. A wrong figure will still bother you, as it should. The skill and the taste that produced the Sunday version in two hours are yours, and they don't depend on being frightened. Remember what Hill and Curran found when they separated the two dimensions. High standards with the worry removed went with the least burnout of all. Stoeber and Otto's review found the same group doing well on most measures. If the fear were what powered the quality, you'd expect people with high standards and low fear to do worse than the frightened ones. They don't.

The second part of the answer is that fear is a poor inspector. The proofreading study in chapter 4 showed it. The students with perfectionistic standards caught no more real errors, and they raised more false alarms. An anxious checker rereads the same paragraph four times without taking it in. They fix things that

weren't broken and sometimes break them. They're often too tired to see what's in front of them, because they were up until midnight the night before doing the same thing.

It's useful to look at how accuracy is achieved in jobs where it truly matters, and this is general knowledge and not something I've researched for this book. Airlines, operating theatres and accounts departments don't rely on individuals feeling dread. They rely on procedure. Pilots run a written checklist. A second pharmacist checks the dose, and a colleague who didn't write the figures reviews them. The check is specific and it has an end. It's also done once, and often by fresh eyes. When the checklist is complete, the plane takes off. Nobody goes through the checklist six times, or lies awake wondering whether to go through it again.

That's the model I'll suggest in the next two chapters. It swaps a vague, repeated, frightened search for a short, specific check that you carry out once. A check like that catches more than the search did, since a list tells you what to look for and a worried mood can only tell you to keep looking.

There's also the matter of which work deserves your full care. At the moment everything gets it, which means that in practice nothing does. The supplier summary and the note to the window cleaner draw on the same limited store of attention. If you spent less on the many jobs that need a five, you'd have more for the few that need a nine. Your best work might get better. It's a common experience among people who loosen this habit, though I can't promise it and I've no study to cite.

Then there's the blunt version of the fear, which is that you'll make a mistake and it'll get through. Yes, you will. You make them now. Every document you've ever sent that was longer than a page probably had something wrong with it, and you've survived all of them, mostly without knowing. Nobody chooses between a life with errors and one without. Everyone has some, and the choice is whether you spend your evenings trying to prevent the last few small ones as well.

When a real mistake does get out, the response that works is dull. You correct it, tell whoever needs to know, and carry on. "I've spotted an error in the table on page two, corrected version attached, apologies." A correction like that, sent promptly, does more for your reputation than the mistake did against it. People trust someone who owns up to a mistake promptly a good deal more than someone who seems never to have made one.

So the honest answer to "won't I get sloppy" is that you'll make slightly more small errors and no more large ones. The large ones are caught by the single proper check, and the small ones don't matter to anyone else. In exchange you get your evenings back, and your work arrives when it's useful.

## Deciding what done looks like

The practical part of this book has two halves. This chapter is the first. It takes about two minutes per piece of work, and it happens before you start.

The trouble with polishing, as chapter 1 said, is that you can't say what you're looking for. You're waiting to feel finished, and chapter 7 explained why that feeling doesn't arrive. So the decision about when to stop can't be left to the end, when the wince is in charge. It has to be made at the beginning, when you're calm and the work doesn't exist yet to be anxious about.

Before you begin anything that would normally tempt you to polish, write down four things. A sticky note will do, or the top of the document, to be deleted later.

First, who it's for and what they'll do with it. "The team, six people, to read before Thursday's meeting so we can decide whether to drop the second supplier." Most stopping problems are really purpose problems. If you know exactly what the thing has to achieve, you can tell when it's achieved it.

Second, the grade, on the scale from chapter 8. "This is a seven." If you find yourself wanting to write nine for everything, ask what would happen if it were a seven. Usually the honest answer is nothing.

Third, what done looks like, in terms someone else could check. Keep it to three or four items. "States where each of the three suppliers stands. Gives the two prices we're still waiting for. Says

what I recommend and why. No more than two pages." These are the line. Notice that none of them is "reads beautifully" or "couldn't be criticised". Those can't be checked, which is why they've been able to keep you up past midnight.

Fourth, a time budget and a sending time. "Two hours on Sunday. One check on Monday morning. Sent by ten on Monday." The sending time matters most. If someone else has set the deadline, make yours earlier, because the work is more useful early, and you want to break the habit of sending at the last minute. Where you can, tell the recipient. "I'll get that to you by ten on Monday." Once you've made a promise to a person, you'll find it harder to let the date slide than you did with a private intention.

That's the whole of it. It takes two minutes, and what it does is move the definition of finished out of your feelings and onto a piece of paper.

Some jobs will resist this, and it's worth knowing which. Creative work with no client and no deadline is the hardest, since nobody is waiting and there's no purpose outside yourself. For that kind, I'd suggest inventing the missing parts. Choose a reader, a particular friend perhaps, and promise them a date. "I'll send you the first three chapters on the first of the month, in whatever state they're in." A date that someone else knows about does most of the work that a deadline does.

Very small jobs don't need the four lines, but they do need the grade. Before writing an email, take one second to think, "This is a four." Then write it once, read it once and send it. If you currently

reread routine emails three times before sending, this one change could give you back half an hour a day. That estimate is mine and is only an illustration.

You may worry that you'll set the line too low. It's possible, and the first few times you may well misjudge it. That's what the next chapter's experiment is for. In my view you're much more likely to set it too high. Someone with this habit who aims for a seven is likely to end up nearer an eight.

One more suggestion. Get something in front of the recipient early when you can. This might be an outline, or a rough half-page, or a sketch. Ask, "Is this the right sort of thing?" It feels exposing, because the work is visibly unfinished. But it's the cheapest way of finding out what the reader wants. It also guards against the worst outcome, which is ten hours of polish on something that turns out to answer the wrong question.

## One check, then send

The second half of the method is what happens at the end. You've done the work within the time you gave it, and it meets the three or four lines you wrote down. The old routine would now begin. Here's what replaces it.

You do one check, and you do it properly. Then you send the work, and you don't open it again.

A proper check has a few features, and they come from the jobs I mentioned in chapter 11 where accuracy matters.

It follows a list that you wrote beforehand. For most written work, a list of five or six items covers nearly everything that could really embarrass you. Are the names spelt right? Are the numbers and dates correct, checked against the source? Does it answer what was asked? Is the attachment attached? Is it going to the right people? Is there anything in it I'd regret if it were forwarded? You can make your own list for your own kind of work. The list is what makes a check different from a pass. A pass is an open-ended search for anything that could be better. A check asks specific questions, each of which has an answer.

It's done after a gap. If you can, leave at least an hour between finishing and checking, or do it the next morning. After a gap you see what's on the page, and without one you tend to see what you meant to write.

It fixes faults and leaves preferences alone. During the check you'll see sentences you could phrase differently. Leave them. The question is never "could this be better", because the answer to that is always yes. The question is "is this wrong, or unclear to the reader". If it's neither, it stays.

And it happens once. When you reach the end of the list, the check is over. If you made changes, you can look at those changes. You don't go back to the top.

Then you send it, straight away and in the same sitting. Don't leave it in drafts overnight to see how you feel in the morning. You know how you'll feel in the morning, which is that it needs another pass.

After sending, don't reread it. This is a small rule, and it turns out to matter. Rereading sent work has no function, since you can't change it. All it does is give the wince another chance. You'll find a phrase you don't like, and spend an hour composing the apology you're never going to send. If a real error turns up later, someone will tell you, or you'll come across it, and you'll correct it as chapter 11 described.

The first few times you do this will be uncomfortable. I'd rather tell you that now than have you think something's gone wrong. You'll press send with the wince still going. For an hour or so you may feel exposed, as if you'd left the house without checking the door. That's the fear protesting at not being obeyed. It doesn't mean there's anything wrong with the work. It fades, usually within the day, and it's weaker the next time.

Treat the first month as an experiment, because your own evidence will persuade you better than my argument can. Keep a short record. For each piece you send at the line, note what you feared would happen, and then a week later note what did. Did anyone comment on the quality? Did anyone notice what you'd have fixed on the fourth pass? Did it do its job? After ten pieces, read the record through. I expect you'll find the feared reactions almost entirely absent. If the record shows that people really did notice, then your line is too low for that kind of work. Raise it a grade for that kind of work, and you'll have learned something the polishing could never have told you.

There's reason to think that this sort of change is possible, including for people with much more severe perfectionism than yours is likely to be. Samantha Lloyd and colleagues pooled eight studies of psychological treatments given to people with clinical levels of perfectionism or related disorders. Perfectionism scores fell substantially from before treatment to after, and so did symptoms of anxiety and depression. Eight studies isn't many, and comparing before with after is a weaker design than comparing with an untreated group. A book isn't a course of therapy either. Still, the finding fits what you'd expect if perfectionism is learned. With structured practice, people with severe perfectionism have been able to change.

## The decision

This chapter asks you to decide something. It comes late because at the start it would have sounded like advice to stop caring, and you'd have been right to ignore that. By now you've seen that your standards and your dread are separate, and that the polishing past the line reaches no one. You've also seen that a single proper check catches more than a worried search does. So here's the decision.

**I decide what done looks like before I start. When the work gets there, I check it once and send it.**

Here's what it involves.

**Four lines before starting.** As in chapter 12, you write down who it's for, the grade, what done looks like and the sending time. For small jobs the grade alone will do.

**A sending time that someone else knows.** Tell the recipient when to expect it, and make that earlier than the last possible moment.

**One check from a list.** As in chapter 13. Leave a gap first if you can. Fix faults and leave preferences alone, and go through the list once.

**Send in the same sitting, and don't reread.** The work leaves your hands when the check ends.

**Grades for other people's work too.** Before you correct or redo something that someone else has done, ask what grade the job needed and whether it got there. If it did, leave it as they did it.

**One record for a month.** Write down what you feared and what happened, as in chapter 13. This is where you'll get your proof.

Plans of the "when this, then that" kind make a decision like this much more likely to survive a busy week. Peter Gollwitzer and Paschal Sheeran pooled 94 tests of such plans and found that they made people a good deal more likely to follow through. Here are three, which you can adapt.

When I open a blank document, then I'll write the four lines before anything else.

When I catch myself changing something back to what it was before, then I'll stop, run the check and send.

When I feel the wince, then I'll ask what specific fault a reader would notice, and if I can't name one I'll carry on.

The second plan uses the circle as an alarm. Chapter 1 said that a change you reverse is a sign you've passed the line. Until now the circle has been a private embarrassment, and from here on it's your cue to check and send. The third does the same with the wince. It used to mean "keep going". Now it prompts a question that has an answer.

Here's what to expect, and I'll be careful, because I can't promise you an outcome. In the first fortnight you'll feel worse at the moment of sending and better in the evenings. The discomfort at sending is sharp and doesn't last long. The free evenings will seem strange at first, and you may not know what to do with them. After a month or so, if your record looks like the one I expect, sending will have lost most of its sting. People may remark that you've

become quicker. It's less likely that anyone will remark on a drop in quality, and if someone does, you adjust the line for that kind of work.

I can't promise that you'll be praised more, or promoted, or that you'll start enjoying your work again, though I think the last of those is likely. What I'd expect to change is that your work arrives when it's useful. The unsent things start going out. And the hours after the line, which are yours, stop being spent on differences no one receives.

## Hard bosses, real stakes and bad weeks

The method is simple. Some situations aren't, and I should be plain about them.

**If your boss really does pounce on small things.** Some do. If yours sends documents back over a misplaced comma, then for that reader small faults do matter. The line for their work is higher, and the check list for it should include whatever they usually catch. That's still the method. You're setting the grade by what the recipient needs, and this recipient needs an eight. What you don't do is apply that boss's standard to everyone else you deal with. It's also worth asking them early what they care about most, since people who pounce usually have three or four particular dislikes, and those can go on the list. If the pouncing is constant, personal and aimed at making you feel small, that's a different problem from perfectionism, and it's one to take to someone senior or to HR.

**If the stakes really are high.** A grant application, a legal document or a safety report deserves a nine. Give it one. Set a generous time budget, write a longer check list, and above all get a second person to read it. A second reader catches far more than your own fifth pass, because they don't know what you meant to say. High stakes call for a careful process, which isn't the same thing as a long stretch of suffering.

**If you're a student.** Essays and dissertations are where many people first meet this habit, and the marking does reward quality. It rewards it on the marker's terms, though. Read the marking

criteria before you start and use them as your description of done. They nearly always ask for an argument, evidence and structure, and hardly ever for a flawless sentence. A finished essay handed in on time with an ordinary final paragraph will beat a brilliant one capped for lateness. If you keep asking for extensions on work that was nearly done, tell your tutor or the university's support service what's happening. They've seen it many times and they can help.

**If you work for yourself or make things with no deadline.**

Chapter 12 suggested inventing a reader and a date. I'd add that you should set a limit on the number of drafts. Decide in advance that a piece gets three and then goes out.

**When criticism comes.** It will, now and then, and it would have come anyway. Try to sort it into two kinds. Some of it is information, such as "the second section confused me", which is useful and costs you nothing to accept. Some of it is taste, such as "I'd have started differently", which you can thank them for and leave. Neither kind is a verdict on you. If a single critical remark wipes out your week, that's chapter 7's mechanism at work, where your worth is riding on the work. It's worth noticing, and perhaps worth talking over with someone.

**When you've made a real mistake.** Correct it quickly and plainly, as in chapter 11. Then look at whether your check list would have caught it. If it wouldn't have, add a line. That's the entire lesson. It isn't evidence that you should go back to five passes, which wouldn't have caught it either. In chapter 2 I said you remember the rare catches. Far more mistakes got past all that polishing, and you never counted those.

**If this feels like more than a habit.** Some signs suggest it's worth seeing a professional. One is when the checking takes hours every day and you can't stop it even when you badly want to. Another is when it comes with intrusive thoughts and rituals. The NHS describes obsessive compulsive disorder as a condition of unwanted, repeated thoughts together with repetitive behaviours that the person feels driven to carry out. It says effective treatment is available. That's a different thing from the habit in this book, and a GP can help you tell them apart.

The same goes if your standards are mainly about eating, weight or your body. The NHS advice is to see a GP as soon as you can. It applies as well if your mood has been low for weeks, or you feel worthless whatever you achieve. In England you can also refer yourself to NHS talking therapies without seeing a GP first. If you've had thoughts of ending your life, get help the same day, through NHS 111, an urgent GP appointment, or 999 in an emergency.

**Weeks when it all comes back.** There'll be one. You'll be tired, or newly criticised, or facing a piece of work that matters a great deal to you. You'll find yourself at the kitchen table at midnight, putting a comma back. It happens to everyone who tries to change a long habit, and it doesn't undo what you've learned. The old routine had years of practice. When you notice what you're doing, do the smallest version of the method. Ask what done looks like for this piece, check it once against that, and send it tonight. After that, go to bed. You can go back to using the full method with whatever piece of work comes next.

## Thursday again

Here's a scene from some months later. It's an example of how things might go, and I'm not promising it.

It's a Monday morning and your manager has asked for another summary, this time on the contract renewal, for the meeting on Thursday. You open a blank document and type four lines at the top. "For the team, to read before Thursday, so we can decide whether to renew for one year or three. A seven. Done means it gives the three options with costs, the risks of each, and my recommendation, in under two pages. Draft today, check tomorrow at nine, send by ten." You message your manager. "I'll have the renewal summary round by ten tomorrow."

You write it that afternoon. It takes two and a quarter hours. At the end it says what needs saying. There's a sentence in the risks section that you aren't fond of. You notice the wince, ask what a reader would trip over, and can't name anything. You close the laptop at half past five.

On Tuesday at nine you open it with your list beside you. The names are right. One of the costs is wrong. You'd typed the two-year figure where the three-year figure should be, and you catch it because "check numbers against source" is on the list and you're fresh. You fix it. The attachment is attached. It answers the question. You send it at twenty to ten, and you don't read it again.

By lunchtime two people have replied. One asks a question about the break clause, which you answer in three lines. The other has spotted that you wrote "principle" where you meant "principal". She mentions it cheerfully in passing, and you reply, "So I did, thanks." It costs you a second's wince and nothing else. On Thursday the meeting spends fifteen minutes on your summary, because everyone has read it, and the team chooses the three-year option you recommended.

On Tuesday evening, the one you'd once have spent on the fifth pass, you did something else. It doesn't much matter what you did with it.

Things won't always be this tidy. Some pieces of work will still get their hooks into you. There are readers who'll make you nervous, and weeks when the old routine looks like safety. But the wrong figure got caught, by a list and a fresh eye at nine in the morning. The old you might have caught it too, on the third or fourth evening, and might not have, tired and looking at commas.

Your standards are where they always were. What's changed is that they now do their two hours of good work and are allowed to stop. Your work was good enough all along. The difference now is that it goes out on time.

If you do one thing after closing this book, take the next piece of work that comes to you and write the four lines before you start. Tell someone when they'll have it. If there's a message to a person that you've been failing to write well enough, send the short plain version tonight.

## Notes

This book gives general information. It isn't medical or psychological advice, and it's no substitute for a doctor or therapist who knows your situation. NHS guidance is quoted as I found it in September 2026 and applies to England.

I've kept sources out of the chapters where I could so they read easily. Here they are by chapter, with the limits I'm aware of. Unless I say otherwise, I read the published summary of each paper and not the full text. I checked each paper for a retraction or correction notice in September 2026 and found none. Where a chapter isn't listed, it rests on my own reasoning. That includes chapters 1, 8, 9, 12, 14 and 16, and most of chapters 5, 10 and 11. The people and sums of time in the examples are invented for illustration.

**Before you start.** The links between perfectionism and mental health conditions are from Limburg and colleagues and from Egan, Wade and Shafran, both listed below. The advice to see a GP is from the NHS pages "Overview: eating disorders" and "Overview: depression in adults". Urgent help routes are from the NHS page "Where to get urgent help for mental health".

**Chapter 2.** Curran and Hill, "Perfectionism is increasing over time: a meta-analysis of birth cohort differences from 1989 to 2016", Psychological Bulletin 145, 2019, pages 410 to 429. There were 164 samples and 41,641 students, all of whom completed the Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale of Hewitt and Flett. The

journal published two commentaries on the paper in the same issue, which I haven't read. The cultural explanation is the authors' own. The list of what polishing gives you is mine.

**Chapter 3.** Stoeber and Otto, "Positive conceptions of perfectionism: approaches, evidence, challenges", *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 10, 2006, pages 295 to 319. Hill and Curran, "Multidimensional perfectionism and burnout: a meta-analysis", *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 20, 2016, pages 269 to 288. There were 43 studies and 9,838 participants. Limburg, Watson, Hagger and Egan, "The relationship between perfectionism and psychopathology: a meta-analysis", *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 73, 2017, pages 1301 to 1326. There were 284 studies. I read the full text of the authors' accepted manuscript. The comparison between the two dimensions, and the exception for eating disorders, are from its discussion section. Researchers still disagree about whether perfectionistic strivings are ever truly healthy. Applying the two dimensions to the kitchen table scene is my own step.

**Chapter 4.** Stoeber and Eysenck, "Perfectionism and efficiency: accuracy, response bias, and invested time in proof-reading performance", *Journal of Research in Personality* 42, 2008, pages 1673 to 1678. I read the full text of the authors' accepted manuscript. There were 96 students, 87 of them women. The paper's second perfectionism measure, the sense of falling short of one's standards, went with finding fewer of the real errors and with reluctance to flag anything. Harari, Swider, Steed and Breidenthal,

"Is perfect good? A meta-analysis of perfectionism in the workplace", Journal of Applied Psychology 103, 2018, pages 1121 to 1144. The reasoning about diminishing returns is mine.

**Chapter 5.** Aronson, Willerman and Floyd, "The effect of a pratfall on increasing interpersonal attractiveness", Psychonomic Science 4, 1966, pages 227 to 228. I couldn't obtain the paper or a summary, and the chapter says so. The description is the one commonly given in textbooks. The usual account adds that the blunder made a mediocre performer less liked, which is worth knowing. The rest of the chapter is my own observation.

**Chapter 6.** Sherry, Hewitt, Sherry, Flett and Graham, "Perfectionism dimensions and research productivity in psychology professors: implications for understanding the (mal)adaptiveness of perfectionism", Canadian Journal of Behavioural Science 42, 2010, pages 273 to 283. Sirois, Molnar and Hirsch, "A meta-analytic and conceptual update on the associations between procrastination and multidimensional perfectionism", European Journal of Personality 31, 2017, pages 137 to 159. The average correlation with procrastination was .23 for perfectionistic concerns and minus .22 for strivings.

**Chapter 7.** Shafran, Cooper and Fairburn, "Clinical perfectionism: a cognitive-behavioural analysis", Behaviour Research and Therapy 40, 2002, pages 773 to 791. It's a theoretical paper. Other researchers replied to it in the same journal, and I haven't read those replies. Reading the wince as a signal that fires regardless of quality is my interpretation.

**Chapter 10.** Egan, Wade and Shafran, "Perfectionism as a transdiagnostic process: a clinical review", *Clinical Psychology Review* 31, 2011, pages 203 to 212. Schwartz, Ward, Monterosso, Lyubomirsky, White and Lehman, "Maximizing versus satisficing: happiness is a matter of choice", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 83, 2002, pages 1178 to 1197. The description of burnout as exhaustion, cynicism and a reduced sense of accomplishment is the standard one in that research, and I haven't sourced it separately. The figure of two hundred and fifty hours is arithmetic on an invented five hours a week.

**Chapter 11.** What I say about checklists and second checkers in aviation, pharmacy and accounting is general knowledge and I haven't sourced it. That a prompt correction helps a person's reputation is my opinion.

**Chapter 13.** Lloyd, Schmidt, Khondoker and Tchanturia, "Can psychological interventions reduce perfectionism? A systematic review and meta-analysis", *Behavioural and Cognitive Psychotherapy* 43, 2015, pages 705 to 731. There were eight studies. The comparisons were between scores before and after treatment. Keeping a record of what you feared against what happened is adapted from the behavioural experiments used in that kind of therapy. The check list is mine and hasn't been tested.

**Chapter 14.** Gollwitzer and Sheeran, "Implementation intentions and goal achievement: a meta-analysis of effects and processes", *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* 38, 2006, pages 69 to 119. The rule and its parts haven't been tested together, and what I say to expect is my expectation and not a finding.

**Chapter 15.** The description of obsessive compulsive disorder and the statement that treatment is effective are from the NHS page "Overview: obsessive compulsive disorder". Self-referral is from the NHS page "NHS talking therapies for anxiety and depression". The advice on eating disorders and low mood is from the NHS pages named above.