Confessions of First-Time Authors
Karen Frith

What writer ever started with confidence of success? As a nurse author and teacher of a graduate course, "Writing for Publication," I encounter students who have misgivings about their ability to write something meaningful with clarity. I remember my own experiences in graduate school, and I know there are barriers to writing - most self-erected. Because barriers to writing are so universal, I asked students to write about their inner critics (Heinrich, 2008). We are sharing these critics with the hope that the critics, once exposed, can be easily recognized and cut down to size.

INNER CRITICS

Dread Monger by Diana Dowdy

My inner critic is a genderless and cold personification with inhuman expectations. I call it the dread monger. It is sinister and silent – it lies in stealth, just beneath the surface of apparent tranquility. Although it is transparent to anyone looking in, its toxin is ever insidious and present. Its eyes are always searching for something wrong – the incessant editor and corrector of imperfection. Denigrating all frivolity and creativity as things that are useless and unnecessary, it forces its prey into a cage of indecision and safe thinking, extinguishing any sparks of free thought. Gifts of compliments from others are deflected away, considered undeserved. Its voice in the night whispers darkness and dread – stirring fears of inadequacy. Its eyes are cold and dark – unfeeling – critical – looking through me as though I am invisible. This critic has no familiar form or features on which to place any feelings of humanity; otherwise, it could be minimized and tamed to a level of understanding and forgiveness, or maybe even caricaturized.

Though strict and demanding, this critic has been of benefit to me, driving me to do excellent work. It keeps me humble, often motivates me to work harder. I have made its harshness work to my advantage. I challenge my inner critic to discourage me from doing something, because now I show the critic just what I CAN do.

Professor Boris by Melissa Samuelson

Professor Boris is a rather short man with bushy eyebrows over eyes that wander in opposite directions. He can cause me to think left when it is really right or right when it is really left. His fascination with right/left is disturbing to me, but it seems to be a favorite pastime for him. He inserts letters where they shouldn’t be, just reverses them for the fun of it. He causes words to stick in my brain and strains my writing.
Professor Boris has an index finger on his right hand which is approximately 5 inches long. When he wants to make a point he aims his right index finger expecting me to quiver. On more than one occasion he has pointed that index finger at me and told me to quit. He always emphasized my lack of ability, my failures. I know he loves to intimidate me and watch me fail. But it doesn't work anymore. Or, at least I don't allow it to happen too often any more. I have learned to compensate. When he points his finger, I ignore him or I get mad. I have found ways to defeat him!

**Medo and Duvida by Lori McGrath**

The Portuguese language provides an eloquent translation for the characteristics of my inner critics. Medo means fear, and Duvida means doubt. My inner critics aim to cause fear of failure while tossing on heaps of doubt for reinforcement. Medo is a small, dark green, winged urchin who flies around in my head offering words of fear and discouragement. He puts fearful thoughts directly in my head such as "how many times are you going to submit that article before you figure out they don't want you?" or "did you remember to back up your computer?". Medo's favorite fear-inducing comment is "remember that once you hit the SEND button it's gone, and you can't take it back". His criticisms create so much fear and anxiety in me that I begin avoiding my study area. Once Medo has pulled me away from writing, he enjoys taunting me with thoughts like "you better hurry up and turn in your assignment or you'll be late" or "are you sure your article is due next week or is the deadline tonight?"

Duvida, on the other hand, is a subtle critic and chooses to linger around all the time. Like a prayer shawl, she sprawls her fairy-like body across my right shoulder while making little discouraging sounds or comments aimed at undermining my creative flow. Her favorite comments consist of "are you sure you want to write about that topic?" or "what if no one understands what you are trying to say?". She causes me to ponder every decision I make and then spreads on a thick layer of doubt. She coos into my ear that she is trying to keep me from getting hurt or embarrassed.

Managing Medo and Duvida requires tremendous energy and discernment. Realizing that they are not early morning risers has helped me manage them. While still drugged with sleep, Medo and Duvida remain quiet and usually refrain from making discouraging comments. My creativity flows and I am able to quickly place my thoughts on paper.

**Mommie Dearest by Sharon Fleming**

"Mommie Dearest" is my personal inner critic. She is the one that makes my life difficult with her constant nagging and finger pointing. Just when I have decided to sit on the couch to read my textbook she says, "look at all of that dust on that table, when was the last time you cleaned that glass!" "Mommie Dearest" chuckles as I bite my lip and whine when my group member calls to review assignments that I haven't finished. Later, with her glasses hanging over her nose "Mommie Dearest" reminds me that I am too old to be in school, especially an online program that requires so much writing. The worse blow that she has given me was when she told me to "weigh yourself" after she has watched me stuff my face with potato chips, birthday cake, and candy while I write. She has been stretching and jogging in my face making me feel like a "couch potato."

**Mean Girl by Shelly Turner**
Within my grey matter lives an apparition named Mean Girl. Most days, I can contain the voice of Mean Girl. However, when I write she takes control of my vocal cords and causes me to utter phrases under my breath such as, “No one cares what a small town girl thinks.” Because of the power Mean Girl seems to have over my confidence and self-esteem, I believe that one day she will emerge for others to see. If this happens, you will certainly be able to identify her dressed in the latest fashion with a perfect figure. Physically, she is the girl every woman secretly wishes she could be, and intellectually she is the person you can never become. Yet on closer approach, you will immediately be repelled by the arrogance that she exudes. Fittingly, her forehead is permanently engraved with a deep set wrinkle in the shape of an “M” from the callousness she consistently demonstrates.

LESSONS LEARNED ABOUT INNER CRITICS

Inner critics are relentless in their pursuit of harsh criticism. These critics find a first-time author’s vulnerable places: doubt, dread, and deadlines. They spread fear and doubt to the point of paralysis. They steal creativity and joy.

Inner critics are insidious. Although no one else can see inner critics, they are hard at work on an author’s self confidence. In one case, an author’s inner critic used dyslexia to trick her when writing. Even though the primary goal of inner critics is to interfere with thinking and writing, their poison can spill over into an author’s personal life. Usual good habits of healthy eating, exercise, and meditation can be pushed aside.

Inner critics take on different forms while doing damage to authors. They are sometimes the epitome of health and beauty--personified perfection that authors cannot attain. Others critics are as hideous to see as their messages are to authors. Regardless of the form of inner critics, they are always in the personal space of authors: “wrapped like a prayer shawl,” “on my shoulder,” “just below the surface [of consciousness],” pointing a finger, or inside the author’s brain.

Authors do find ways to overcome the devastating games that inner critics play by noticing when critics interfere with their ideas or writing. Some authors find the right time of day, others just push through the negative inner critics’ messages, and some of the most determined authors use their critic’s message as a challenge to achieve. These authors, now more aware of their inner critics, have realized that most writers have similar experiences. This normalization of the “inner critic” helped authors to gain power over negative self-talk and build self confidence.

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