
The Challenge and Joy of Finishing

Why we don't — and how to overcome it to
experience joy.

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1st Edition



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Introduction

Mozart. Bach. Van Gogh. Rodin. Margaret Mitchell. Stephen King. Stephen Spielberg. George Lucas.

Have you heard of these folks? They all finished something. Did they know they were done? Probably, they just got tired of messing with whatever they were working on, put a period, an ending, a final splotch of paint or marble or editing scissors down and called it done. Many “artists” admit they are never done. They just abandon the project and move to the next one.

But what does that mean? It means that at some point these creatives finished the project. The musical piece was finally written. Maybe there were several instruments. Maybe just one. The marble statue was finally ridded of the stuff that wasn’t needed to make the statue (quote Michelangelo), and the life size piece could stand on its own without the sculpture’s chisel hovering near its unprotected loins.



For every writer, filmmaker, painter, or project manager, businessperson, or code writer, the creative venture needs a finish line. Someone needs to say the magic words: “It is done.” “It is ready.” “It is finished.” At some point, hopefully, the artist’s work is shipped—published, distributed, shown, or sent to the marketplace.

Then the pain begins.

Or not.

For every successful creation there are hundreds that are crap. But that is actually wonderful. The only way we can know our work is “good” is to send it out. On the other hand, it also makes absolutely no difference if nobody likes your work. Your blood, sweat, and tears spot the pages, but maybe they just do not like your face. They might not be ready for you yet. They might be looking the other way. The timing is wrong. Your luck sucks.

It doesn’t matter.

If you have finished something—anything—good or bad, you have won. You are a success. You finished what you started. Finishing is difficult.

It’s not impossible. Look at the music, the books, the businesses, the inventions, the paintings, cars, sculptures, computer programs, cell phones, and every other thing you can think of ever created. They were finished. At some moment in time, a human being started something. Then they finished it. That. Is. Awesome.

Quotes on Finishing

“Why do I talk about the benefits of failure? Simply because failure meant a stripping away of the inessential. I stopped pretending to myself that I was anything other than what I was, and began to direct all my energy into finishing the only work that mattered to me.

~ J. K. Rowling

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“Whatever it takes to finish things, finish. You will learn more from a glorious failure than you ever will from something you never finished.”

~ Neil Gaiman

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Fear of Shipping [My interpretation: Shipping = Finishing]

Shipping is fraught with risk and danger.

Every time you raise your hand, send an email, launch a product or make a suggestion, you're exposing yourself to criticism. Not just criticism, but the negative consequences that come with wasting money, annoying someone in power, or making a fool of yourself.

“It's no wonder we're afraid to ship.

“It's not clear you have much choice, though. A life spent curled in a ball, hiding in the corner might seem less risky, but in fact it's certain to lead to ennui and eventually failure. ...”

~ Seth Godin

Thought #1

Why Finishing Is Important

For You and For Us

Finishing is critical because we need to fail! We need to fail so we can do it right the next time and the next and the next. Who is one of the biggest failures on the planet right now? Elon Musk. Who else was a huge failure? Steve Jobs. They were successful because they allowed failure into their lives.

From many, many, many podcasts, articles, how-to books, and blogs, I know that failure is the key to success. If failure is the key to success, finishing is the key to failure.

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Finish  **Fail**  **Succeed**  **Repeat**

- Finishing is making a contribution.
- Finishing is you making your mark on the earth.
- Finishing is why you are here.
- Finishing is your life's purpose.
- Finishing brings you joy.

Enjoying the journey to the finish line is important, too. Don't beat yourself up if you are enjoying that journey. That's okay. Try to finish, though.

Thought #2

We Need to Fail!

... even though it's not fun.

I hate to fail. No one likes to fail. We don't want to be failures. People like winners. True. No one wants to be the last one in the race. Few people want to come in fourth at the Olympics. They don't get a medal. But what they did get was experiencing the Olympics! How good must they be to make it through all the competitions and trials to get to the Olympics in the first place?

Failing and being a failure are two different things, however. Failing is a temporary thing. In fact, failing a bunch of times is how you eventually get better.

Failing is learning. "Oh! How interesting! That didn't work. I'll try something else."

Failing is helping other people learn. "Wow. Look what they tried! Let's see if we can do it better or differently."

Failing is winning the game of perseverance. Gaining strength. Experiencing grit. Knowing how golly gosh darn badly you want it.

Failing is a gift.

Unfortunately, failing multiple times can keep some of us from finishing. We grow tired of the skinned knees, the broken airplanes (Wright Brothers), the cotton gin that breaks (Eli Whitney) and the telephone that doesn't ring (Alexander Graham Bell). We give up. We will not finish that book. We will never hear the musical piece. We leave our sculpture in a heap of rocks and rubble, and we will punch a hole in the painting. No one will ever experience your novel, your Mona Lisa, your Nutcracker Suite, or your David statue.

So you are not John Steinbeck or Leonardo da Vinci? You are not Tchaikovsky or Michelangelo? Did they think they were when they created their works? *How would they know in the beginning if they did not finish anything?*

Every one of the artists you know didn't know they were any good when they started. John Steinbeck was rejected dozens of times. Starving artists starve for a reason. Are they failures?

Here's the deal. These creatives are only failures if they measure success by money and fame. Many of the famous artists never saw fame or fortune while they were alive, so they did not think they were any good!

Fail. Fail often. Keep writing, painting, making music, sculpting, and inventing. In the meantime, let's look at why we don't finish our works so that we can find a way around it.

Thought #3

Why We Don't Finish

It's very common.

ONE WORD . . .

The word is...

FEAR

Fear Takes Many Forms

Sometimes, the fear “choice” we make is acceptable by society’s standards. We do want things to be perfect, for example. We would prefer that our cars’ brakes work correctly, right?

Busy-ness is another example of an acceptable form of fear. In our western Puritan ethic American culture, having too much to do and being overloaded are “good” for the community. “Busy hands are happy hands.” However, Socrates said, “Beware the barrenness of a busy life.” I like: “Don’t equate activity with accomplishment.”

- o Perfectionism (Fear)
- o Procrastination (Perfectionism + Fear)
- o Time and Overload (Procrastination + Fear)
- o Prioritization (Time + Procrastination + Fear)
- o Don’t Know How! (Fear of looking dumb.)

Perfectionism

It has to be perfect! They’ll laugh at me if it’s not perfect. I hate mistakes! (I do.) I just need to work on it a little more. Then it will be perfect. One more time.

Once more.

One more.

Once more.

And again.

Only one more.



Look at the pattern. It’s stair steps. Down.

It’s fear. Fear of getting it wrong. Fear of finishing. Fear of putting your (unfinished, imperfect) work in the public eye. It’s safer inside where no one can see our warts. No one will laugh at our

spelling errors, our inappropriate camera settings, our composition screw-ups, our terrible color choices, background proportion blunders, or visible chisel marks.

SO WHAT? If it is not brakes, or a building, or surgery, a little mistake isn't going to end the world. Fuggedabout it. Finish it. And ship it!

Procrastination

This is my favorite, I think. I am particularly good at finding some huge, pressing projects that are laudable to have accomplished... except they are not my dream project. They're sneaky ways of procrastinating while having some part of myself be gosh darned proud of checking them off my lists.

I can mop the floors, do laundry, go grocery shopping, and make a cake. I am not finishing the chapter. I plan Christmas, or plan a vacation, or plan a meeting. I am not writing my book. I write another short piece. Ship an article to a customer. Call my brother, email my friend, walk the dog.

These are all great accomplishments! But, I am not moving my characters, plot, or theme forward. Here's the irony: I'm procrastinating by writing this handbook on the challenge of finishing.

The completion of the above tasks is, as I said, laudable and necessary sometimes. However, we (I) need to be aware. I must be mindful and know when I'm off the path to finishing what I most want to finish. The BIG thing. The thing I was put here to do.

Oh, and don't forget, being a "perfectionist" also serves as procrastination. It keeps us from shipping. It keeps us in the "fun" of "fixing." It's safe. We are convinced that we can make it perfect if we work hard enough. Perfect doesn't happen very often. It's a lovely ideal, but the pursuit of perfection can be our worst enemy. Watch out and be extra conscious of the time you spend proofreading, changing a color in a painting, chiseling that last micrometer off the sculpture, or editing the scene in a movie. You may be an artist, or you may be dawdling. (Don't you love that word?)

Time and Overload

The secretary to the president of the firm says, "I'm SO busy!" The president of the firm with 20,000 employees says, "I'm SO busy!" They're both busy. Artist, author, and long time podcaster Debbie Millman says, "Busy is a decision." That means we choose how our time is spent, and we elect what we work on at any given moment.

"I have a job," you say. "I have bills." How many people have jobs that keep them barely ahead of the bill collector, or just ahead of bankruptcy, whatever their pay?

"Money is something we choose to trade our life energy for," from Vicki Robin, *Your Money or Your Life*. The things we choose to do are our "busy" things.

Some people give up stressful jobs to preserve their mental powers for their art form. I cannot tell you how many people I've met at the Trader Joe's checkout counter who are artists, musicians, writers, and painters that 'just need a little money so they can do what they love.' The decision comes with sacrifice.



You do not buy brand new cars; or you decide on a smaller house and trips to discount grocery and shoe stores, and other lifestyle shifts. If lowering the financial bar saves mental stress, and allows the freedom to create, it may be worth downsizing. Then, the decision to be busy is a decision to be busy with creativity. You reduce your cerebral load to embrace the you that is you.

Prioritization

First things first. Nothing else matters as much as this thing you want to finish. Nothing will get in the way. Start. Continue. Finish.

Some critical concepts come to mind here.

1. Time management
2. Time blocks
3. Saying no
4. Desire
5. Discipline
6. Grit
7. Rewards
8. Consciousness
9. Clarity
10. Focus

For many of the above ideas, there are applications to help you. *Time management* must have a few dozen apps, but for creatives, there is nothing like two- or three-hour *time blocks* to accomplish your creative output. Ten minutes here and there may work for some people (I know published authors who write on their 30-minute lunch breaks), but this is especially hard. Diving into a big project before you recommence is often a 30-minute process by itself. Do the best you can to create time blocks by using better time management.

"*Saying no*" may come in the form of an app like "Freedom," which shuts off all internet, email, and other distractions from your computer, mobile phone, etc. Or, just say a polite "no" to the coffee date or free flying lesson.

Desire, discipline, and grit are interconnected. Having the *desire* means being motivated—wanting beyond all else to finish the piece or attain that goal or knowledge, milestone, etc. The only way to get there is through *discipline*. Practicing every day. Writing every day. Learning, painting, creating, every day—even when the output sucks, you’re tired, you’re sick, you’re making no progress, and no money — and you have no friends and no fun. The trick here is *grit*. Sticking with it. For more information, check out the TED talk on grit by Angela Lee Duckworth.

Rewards are controversial. Some folks think the work is the reward. Others say rewards help you keep going forward. It’s very personal. Maybe one person needs new shoes another can get by with a Starbucks latte. Consider the idea of a reward for reaching a milestone.



Consciousness and *Clarity* go hand in hand. To be *conscious* of your every action of the day, the question to ask is, “Is this the best use of my time right now?” OR, “Am I on task for the work I want to finish?” The second concept, *clarity*, helps us be not only clear but honest about the time and energy we spend. We may be busy, but we are not accomplishing anything.

Focus helps us avoid distractions. It’s becoming a lost art in today’s social media, 24/7 interconnectedness. The idea of freeing ourselves from internet and phone connections is useful, as in the “saying no” choices, but beyond saying no, we must say yes to staying in the flow of our work. For writers, it’s keeping our butts in the chair; for musicians, it’s staying the course with the instrument, the musical score. It is being in the moment. Meditation practice helps with this. Many creatives—and even sports people and entrepreneurs—swear by meditation. Try it.

Don’t Know How!

Hah. I thought I knew how to write. But writing a whole book (fiction or non-fiction) is an entirely bigger ball of wax than writing an article, or website copy, or emails, for gosh sakes. What made me nuts was thinking about all the people who have successfully written books. They had done it. Why couldn’t I? Something was wrong with me. It must be easy, or all these people wouldn’t have published a book. Right?

Let’s look at the numbers.



Per the bibliographic information company Bowker®, there were about 305,000 print books published by traditional publishers in 2013. The non-traditional publishing sector print output was 1.1 million titles for a total of about 1.4 million titles. Sound like a lot? Here’s what’s interesting: There were about 315 million people in the United States in 2013. Approximately 80% were adults. That would mean that .55% of adults (approximately 252,000) in the U.S. published a book. It is

not 55%. It is not 5.5%. It is .55%, which is about 55 adults out of 10,000. It's a small number, and one can say that publishing a book is a big deal.

Not being able to overcome the challenge of finishing is probably one reason. The other might be they do not know how to do it. Or, they don't have any interest, of course. However, one survey said that 81% of all adults think they have a novel in them.

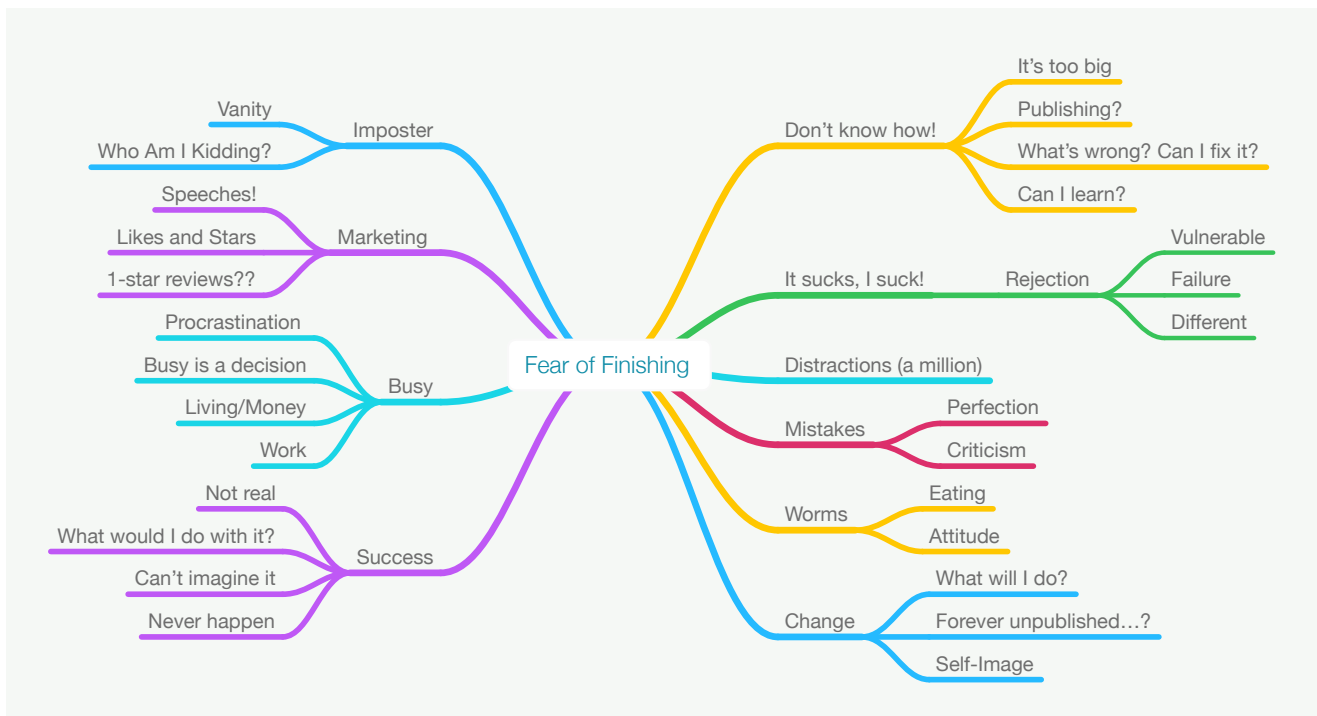
If you want to finish a book (or anything for that matter) and don't know how, then take a class. Read a book on writing a book or doing whatever your dreams tell you. Join a critique group. Take a workshop. Go to a conference. Free is good, but sometimes you get what you pay for. Either way, not knowing how certainly hasn't stopped some people! There are some crummy books out there. But we should not let not knowing keep us from finishing something. Let's look at that Neil Gaiman quote again. How else will we know?

Thought # 4

What Are You Afraid Of?

Check your assumptions.

Take a look at this spidery thing. Maybe take some notes to understand the source of your fear of finishing.



Notes and Thoughts

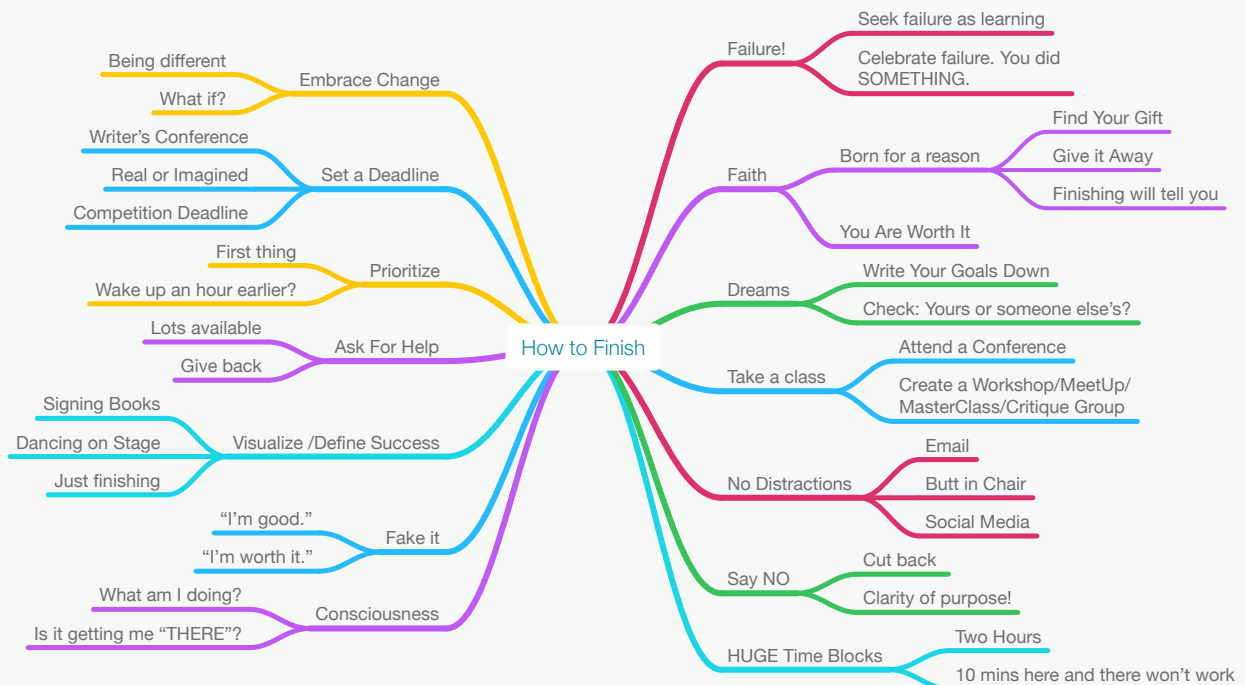
This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

Thought # 5

How to Finish

Pssst . . . You are worth it!

You know your fears now. Look at some ways you can overcome your fears and finish your life's work. Add more notes to help you overcome your fears.



Thought # 6

Open to the Universe of Possibility

Feel joy

Am I an expert on finishing? Heck, no. I've finished a few things. That makes me dangerously smug and complacent. The reason for this book is to provide myself a Kick in the A** (KITA) to move from midpoint to endpoint on my next project. I am a little stuck.

Mostly, though, I wanted to let people know the surprising joy I felt on finishing the first little book. And then another, bigger book. I think everyone deserves to feel that joy.

Here's one last trick. One of the podcasts I listened to said to write down an affirmation 20 times every day for a month. Here's an example. "I _____ (state your name) am a _____ (give yourself a title like famous painter, world-class, published author, or highly-respected filmmaker)." Note: Do not use want to be or wish to be. Use the present tense "am." The Universe likes this. She told me so.

Write your affirmation, and wait for the magic. My last book was a result of this exercise. Power of suggestion or universe of possibility: which is it?

It doesn't matter. It worked for me. Try it.

* * * Feel the joy of finishing. It doesn't get much better than this. * * *



References and Further Readings

Getting Things Done by David Allen

As a Man Thinketh by James Allen

How to Stop Worrying and Start Living by Dale Carnegie

Tribe of Mentors (and almost any book) by Tim Ferriss

Bird by Bird by Anne Lamott

Your Money or Your Life by Joe Dominguez and Vicki Robin

The Magic of Thinking Big by David J. Schwartz, Ph.D.

The Art of Possibility By Rosamund Stone and Benjamin Zander

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