



STRIVE TO FAIL

Use these counterintuitive goals to shake up your writing routine.

BY ANICA MROSE RISSI

You wouldn't be a writer if you didn't dare to dream, and dream big. Whether the ambitions that drive you are creative, critical, commercial, or all three, those dreams (and delusions) are part of why you started writing in the first place. Wild hopes and lofty goals can help motivate you through the hardest and most dispiriting parts of the writing and publishing processes. But they also can throw you off track, position you for failure, and even get in the way of the writing itself.

If visions of starred reviews, prestigious bylines, best-seller lists, and fat royalty checks keep dancing in your head, they can easily distract from the work at hand. A focus on grand aspirations makes the unglamorous task of sitting down to write feel overwhelming, insufficient, and undoable. So turn off the music, tell those dreams to take a seat, and try these less-obvious goals and ambitions on for size. You might even find that striving for failure sets you on a path to success.

Aim lower

So you want to write a best-selling novel that will endear you to critics, fill your exes with regret, and allow you to quit your day job and live off the royalty checks forever? Great. Put that goal aside and start with a much, much smaller one – preferably one that's not only within reach but also within your control. Instead of “write a novel,” aim for “add a new page to my draft every day.” In place of “sell my

book this year,” shoot for “query six new agents each month.” Rather than “hit the best-seller list,” go for “offer to Skype with a dozen book clubs,” “ask 20 friends to request that their libraries purchase the book,” and “set up a fun launch event at my favorite local bookstore.”

Aiming too high can make writing and publishing seem more daunting than they need to be and set you up for repeated letdowns. Setting a truly reasonable and achievable goal broken down into manageable steps means you won't have to psych yourself up so much to approach the task – and you'll be more likely to meet or even exceed the goal.

Seek rejection

How often your work gets published is somewhat out of your control, but you *can* control how often it gets rejected. Set an ambitious yearly goal for the number of rejections you hope to receive and be unabashed in pursuing it. Resolve to submit your work widely and accumulate “no thank yous” from the most prestigious agents, editors, publishers, and publications you can find. Striving for rejection will get you in the habit of putting yourself out there, help you grow a thicker skin, and stop you from *self-rejecting* by failing to submit your work in the first place.

If one of your submissions gets accepted for publication, don't be deterred! Dust yourself off, write and polish another piece, and see if you can get it turned down from someplace even better.

Write something mediocre

Take the pressure off your writing and shake things up by playing around in a genre outside your comfort zone and area of expertise. If you're a novelist, write a poem. If you're a poet, draft an essay. If you write sci-fi tomes, scribble a postcard to a friend. Put your memoir aside and pen some fan fiction, a picture book, or the lyrics for a love song. Spend an hour, a week, a month of stolen time working on something for which you have no ambitions other than the fun of creating it, and relish the freedom of knowing the results will be amateur. Removing expectations of quality and throwing yourself into the joy of experimentation will loosen you up creatively, spark new ideas, and remind you what it's like to just *write*.

Stop doing what you love

Writing isn't always fun, and it often requires sacrifice – especially if you have another job, a family, other interests, or a social life. You might not always be in the mood to type, but making time to write is a necessary evil for all, um, writers. So make it happen: Resolve that once a week, you will say no to something (or someone) you would probably enjoy – a movie, a dinner date, a stop-in on social media, an extra hour of sleep – and commit that time to writing instead. Writing is as much about habit, discipline, and routine as it is about talent and inspiration, so carve out space for creativity in your life, and prioritize and protect it from other temptations.

Slack off

Grit, discipline, and determination are as crucial for writers as skill. But the key to creative success is not only making a writing routine and sticking with it, but also knowing when to slack off and break it.

Sometimes the best thing you can do for your project and productivity is to step away from it and fill your brain

with other stories, new ideas, and different air – or let it be filled with nothing at all. If your writing's in a rut, give yourself permission to set it aside and allow your day's work to be energizing your mind with a change of scene and pace. Take a hike, fly a kite, see a new film, make a craft project, or spend an afternoon with family and friends. Get some distance from your writing so you can return to it refreshed and revitalized.

Under deadline and can't afford to slack off? Fake it. Instead of working on your laptop at your desk like usual, bring a notebook and pen to the dog park and draft in longhand while cute pups romp nearby. Instead of writing at a local cafe all Sunday afternoon, prop yourself and your laptop up in bed and make it a low-budget, cozy retreat. Take yourself and your notebook out to dinner and jot notes on your next chapter in between courses. Writing someplace where you don't usually work can help it feel less like *work* for that day. You might even fool yourself into having fun.

Read terrible books

Reading a book you loathe can be as instructive and motivating as reading books you love and admire. Don't avoid lousy writing and clunky plots – relish them! Reading terrible books is a terrific way to hone your craft and inspire yourself to write better than those other mediocre writers did. As you hate-read a book, pay close attention so you can pick it apart in detail. Thinking hard about why exactly you hate it, what you wish the author had done differently, and how you would improve it if you could will bring your own writing goals and priorities into sharper focus, and help you write the kind of book you love.

—Anica Mrose Rissi is the author of *Always Forever Maybe*, the *Anna, Banana* chapter-book series, and the picture books *Watch Out for Wolff!* and *The Teacher's Pet*. Follow her on Twitter and Instagram at @anicarissi.