

YOU CANNOT BE A WORSE WRITER THAN I WAS

So many of my students are embarrassed that they don't write perfectly. They seem to believe that I'll think less of them if they need to improve. So, at the beginning of each semester, I tell this story:

When I was a freshman at Stanford, we all took a yearlong literature course. I got the highest marks, and I fancied myself quite the success. At year's end, I asked my professor to proofread an essay I had written for another class. It was a gorgeous California spring day on a beautiful campus. The air felt warm with sunshine and opportunity. Then my favorite professor turned to me and said, "Quentin, you write like s**t."

I struggled to comprehend; I was a star student! She pressed on: "I would have submitted your final paper for the first-year writing award. Your ideas were fantastic—when I could understand them. But, I was too embarrassed for you to have anyone read a paper with your name on it." The ground tilted wildly. "You have more writing problems than I can possibly correct in an hour of proofreading. I suggest that you do three things for rest of the time you're here:

- Take every writing intensive course you can. Good writing is about practice.
- Look up every word that's three syllables or longer before you use it.
- And, for Pete's Sake, don't write a single sentence longer than two lines!"

I picked up my shattered ego and followed her instructions exactly. By my final year, a professor did nominate me for a writing award. I got second place. Considering where I started, that felt pretty good.

The message I wish to impart is this:

You should NEVER judge yourself for needing to improve. Everyone, no matter how accomplished they may seem, started from the same place or worse. Look at how bad I was! I still work on improving every time I write—and I still hear my professor's voice in my head.

Go forth confidently, not because you think you're perfect, but because you know that it is ok to be imperfect. The real triumph comes from always working to get better at what you do.



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Quentin".

Left: The site of my lesson (many years later). Below: My first year Stanford self.

