
The Challenge and Joy of Finishing

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

Kathryn Atkins

2nd Edition



What's
Stopping You?

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Introduction

Mozart. Bach. Van Gogh. Rodin. Margaret Mitchell. Stephen King. Steven 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 their work. The musical piece was finally written. Maybe there were several instruments. Maybe just one. The marble statue was finally rid of the stuff that wasn't needed to make the statue (loosely quoting Michelangelo), and the bigger-than-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](#)

*

“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](#)

*

“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](#)

“Shipping [Shipping = Finishing] 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. Don't give in to it.”

~ [Kathryn Atkins](#)

Why Is Finishing Important?

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 writers, musicians, and artists, failure is the key to success. If failure is the key to success, finishing is the key to “failing forward,” and thus, failing and its friend finishing are the keys to success.

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

- Finishing is contributing.
- Finishing is you making your mark (or a Steve Jobs-like dent) in the Universe
- 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.

Why Don't We Finish?

FEAR... and Fear Takes Many Forms

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

Busy-ness is another 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 of airing our mistakes)
- o Procrastination (Perfectionism + Busy-ness)
- o Busy-ness (Procrastination + Poor Prioritization)
- o Prioritization (Art before Laundry)
- o Laundry (Put it last on the to-do list, I tell you. Last)

Perfectionism

“It must be perfect!” “They’ll laugh at me if it’s not perfect.” We hate mistakes! (I do.) We just need to work on it a little more. Then. It. Will. Be. Perfect.

One more time. That’s it. Promise. Oh, wait.

Once more.

Just one more time.

Uh oh. I’ve got to fix THAT!

Seriously. Only one more minute.



There’s a pattern. It’s an escalator going down. And 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, inappropriate camera settings, composition screw-ups, 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.

Fuhgeddaboutit.

Finish it. Then ship it!

Procrastination

This is my favorite, I think. I am particularly good at finding huge, pressing projects that are laudable to accomplish...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, a vacation, or 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 advancing my characters, plot, or theme. Here's the irony: I'm procrastinating by writing this handbook on the challenge and joy 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 form of 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?)

Busy-ness

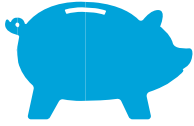
The secretary to the president of the firm says, "I'm SO busy!" The president of the firm with 20,000 employees says, "I'm SO busy!" They're both busy. Artist, author, and long-time podcaster Debbie Millman says, "Busy is a decision." That means we choose how we spend our time and what we work on at 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 energy for their art. I cannot tell you how many people I've met at the Trader Joe's checkout counter who

are artists, musicians, writers, and painters who ‘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 that you who is the best version of you.

Prioritization (“Art before laundry” – from Kevin Kelly)

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:

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

Many of the above ideas have “apps” to support 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 your best to create time blocks through better time management.

“*Saying no*” may take the form of an app like “Freedom,” which blocks 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. Another great word is passion. But 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 [2013 TED Talk](#) by Angela Lee Duckworth on grit, which runs about six minutes.

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 24/7 interconnectedness on social media. 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, athletes, and entrepreneurs swear by meditation. Try it. “Headspace” and “Calm” are two to try.

Laundry, Statistics, & Learning

Ha! 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?

Statistics



According to the bibliographic information company Bowker, about 600,000 books were released by traditional publishers in 2024 (up from 500,000 in 2018, when this booklet first appeared). Total industry output (including self-published books) exceeded 2.5 million in 2024. Sound like a lot? Maybe, but the United States Census Bureau counted about 340 million people in the country in 2024. Only 0.7% (*not even 1%*) of the population published all the books released in 2024.

That’s equivalent to 70 people out of 10,000. It’s such a small number! Doesn’t that mean that publishing a book is a big deal? You bet!

Why is it a big deal? Because overcoming the challenge of finishing is a giant reason the number is so tiny. The other bigger hurdle might be not knowing how to do it or where to start. Or, you don't have any interest, of course. However, one survey said that 81% of all adults think they have a novel in them. What about painting? Or songwriting?

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 novel, or painting a landscape, or 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! We should not let ignorance keep us from finishing something. Let's look at that Neil Gaiman quote again.

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

He says failing is learning.

What's the answer?

Here it is (again):

--

DO.

Write, paint, compose,
sculpt, code, run, dance,
sing.

FINISH.

FAIL?

SUCCEED?

FAIL?

REPEAT.

But I Don't Want 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 the experience of 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 "cottonless" cotton gins (Eli Whitney), and the ringless telephone (Alexander Graham Bell). We give up. We do not finish that book. We won't hear our music. We leave our "Really? No Really!" sculpture with only one arm, and we punch a hole in our painting.

No one will ever experience your *Gone with the Wind*, your Mona Lisa, your Nutcracker Suite, or your David.

So what if you are not John Steinbeck or Leonardo da Vinci? Nor are you Tchaikovsky or Michelangelo. Did they think they were those people when they created their works? *How would they know in the beginning if they did not finish anything?*

Every one of these now-famous creators 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 well-known artists never achieved fame or fortune while alive, so they did not think they were any good!

What Are You Afraid Of?

Mind Map 1

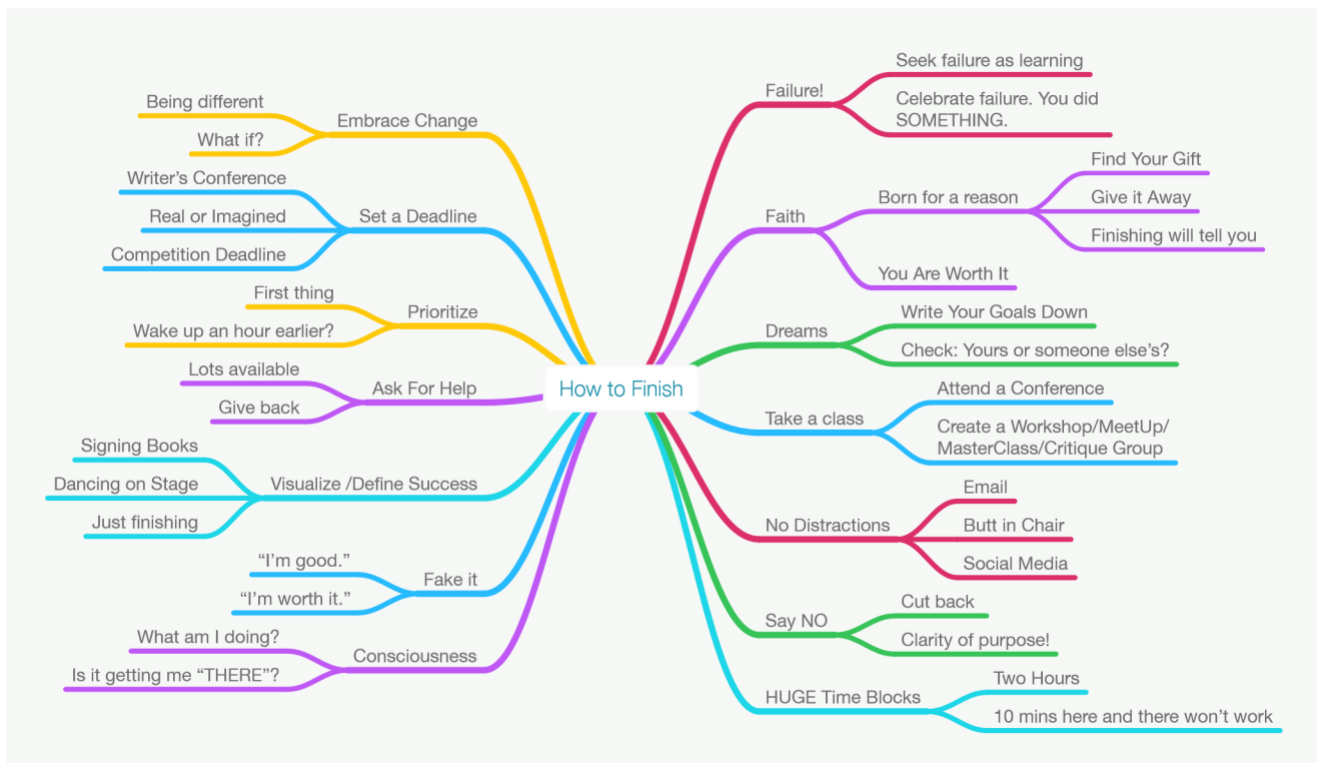
Look at this spidery thing. Maybe take some notes to understand the source of your fear of finishing. A recent Harvard study found that 65% of people fail to act because they fear others' judgment.



How to Finish

Mind Map 2

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.



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 when I finished 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

Things I Have Finished & Published

Masquerade Towing (Audible short story)

Audible.com Release Date: June 14, 2017

Giving My Self to the Wind (Collection)

Publication date: October 13, 2017

My Piano Hands (Memoir)

Publication date: July 14, 2020

Silver Screen (Short story)

Publication date March 30, 2022

Deathlist (Novel)

Publication date: May 2, 2022

Packed Light, Thought Heavy (E-book)

Publication date: January 19, 2026

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