

Giving Voice to the Inner Critic

750-800 words for each part

Overview

We've all experienced it: getting back a paper marked with singular squiggles (? or !!), cryptic one-word comments ("awkward"), or lots of underlined misspellings. These markings are discouraging and rarely helpful, and may have the unintended consequence of reinforcing the belief that we cannot write. We may develop a critical inner voice that bombards us with messages such as "I don't know what I'm doing," "I have nothing interesting to say," and "People will think I sound stupid." While some self-criticism is a good thing, too much of it leads to the distortion of perceived shortcomings, a lack of willingness to take risks, or the predictable route of "playing it safe"—writing cautious but acceptable papers instead of less-than-perfect papers that take chances. Self-criticism can squash good ideas and in extreme cases, generate disabling anxiety or "writer's block."

Assignment

I invite you to have an exchange with what we will call your "Inner Critic." The assignment will take the form of two letters, one from the Inner Critic to you, the writer, and a second letter in which you respond.

Part I

Before you begin writing, envision the Inner Critic. Are they stern, fearful, worried, or protective? How and where do they show up, and what happens then? What is their job description? Has their sense of authority gotten the better of them? You are ready to channel their voice. In the letter, have them tell you

- Their purpose, their job, their intentions in pointing out your shortcomings
- What they perceive as your key shortcomings as a writer
- How they think others—including your instructor—see you
- What they think will happen if you make mistakes or fail
- What they encourage you to do as a writer (e.g., avoid risks or play it safe), and
- Anything else they want you to know—including helpful messages.

Here's another way to think of the assignment: you are giving voice to your own naysayer, the voice that casts doubt on your abilities. Let the critic really go at it!

The letter should be addressed to you and signed by Your Inner Critic. If you have a nickname, use that; the critic knows you well and would use a familiar name.

Part II

Next, reflect on the Inner Critic's beliefs, both positive and negative. Are they accurate? What evidence has the Inner Critic overlooked or distorted? Who's the boss here: the critic, or you? You can't really fire them, but you can "talk back." In your letter to the Inner Critic, take stock and realistically appraise

- What you do well, what you enjoy about reading, writing, and conversing (in class)
- How you have progressed as a writer; the skills you have cultivated
- Your capabilities as a writer
- What you hope yet to achieve, and
- How they can more effectively support your efforts.

Let the critic know how they can be helpful if they serve a useful role. Use *reasons and evidence* to be persuasive.

Format

Draw on the skills we have practiced, including reasons and evidence, and precise language; give the Inner Critic the useful task of proofreading. Each letter should be at least 750 words.