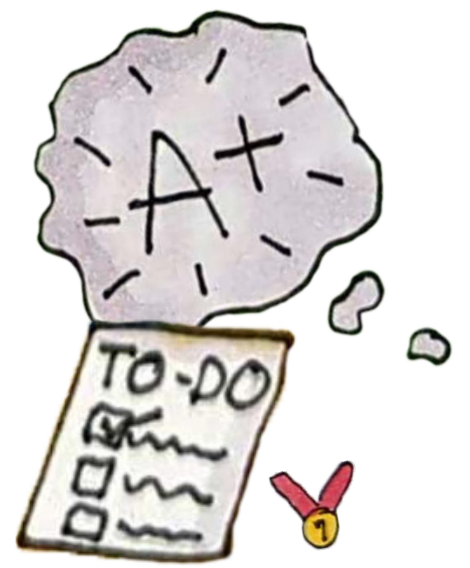


# Perfectionism: A Superpower or a Curse?



BY FREYA THAKAR

You log into Google Classroom. You press the link to the writing assignment, glancing at the due date. You have an hour to finish the assignment. ‘That’s more than enough time,’ you think to yourself. Many minutes go by, and before you know it, there are only five minutes left before the due date expires. You start to panic. Desperately searching for words to perfectly express your opinions and feelings. Reading every paragraph you write half a dozen times, making sure you are writing with perfect grammar. Perfecting your writing as the timestamp on your computer glares at you. The soft, ticking sound of a clock ringing like a phantom in your ears. Each passing second makes you more and more nervous. What can you do, though? Everything has to be perfect. You press the ‘turn in’ button with just seconds to spare, sighing with relief. You promise yourself next time you will not make that mistake again. You will not spend hours perfecting every single detail. Next time, you’ll let it be. But you know, no matter what you tell yourself, it will happen again.

One in three teens experience anxiety, a number that has increased by twenty percent in only five years, according to research from the National Institutes of Health. One of the factors behind this rising number is perfectionism: The desire to be perfect and not settle for anything less.

Katherine Morgan Schafner is a psychotherapist and author known for her book, “The Perfectionist’s Guide to Losing Control.” She believes that there is a good and bad side to perfectionism. “I think perfectionism is a power,” Schafner says. “I think of it in the same way that I think of other powers like wealth, or love, or art. Any power always has two sides. You can use it constructively for good, or you can use it destructively for bad.” For perfectionism, the good side is using it to inspire you, and the bad side is letting it bring you down. Which is why perfectionism might look good on the surface, but may not be as good underneath.

Perfectionism defines the life of people who experience it. It controls every move they make. Teenagers who experience it have a hard time finishing tasks, turning assignments in late, or even never. These situations happen in academics, but also in their daily lives. Some teenagers are influenced by what they look at online — people showing videos or photographs of their life, which may look amazing, but actually might be fake. This leads to teens also wishing their life was like that — perfect. After scrolling endlessly through social media, watching people show their ‘perfect’ lives, they begin to feel pressured to be perfect, fueling their perfectionism even more.

Perfectionism is an obsession with perfection. This obsession leads people to perfect every task they

do and not settle for anything less, whether they want to or not. At least that’s what it looks like on the surface. Thomas Curran is the author of the book, “The Perfection Trap.” He believes that perfectionism doesn’t really have to do with perfecting tasks and wanting everything to be perfect, but is much deeper than that. “It’s about perfecting ourselves, or to be more exact, perfecting our imperfect selves; going through life in defensive mode, concealing every last blemish, flaw, and shortcoming from those around us,” he writes in his book. Author Michael Law digs even deeper into it, describing it as, “At its root, perfectionism isn’t really about a deep love of being meticulous. It’s about fear. Fear of making a mistake. Fear of disappointing others. Fear of failure. Fear of success.”

People who experience perfectionism have their lives defined by it, especially teenagers. For example, in academics, students who expect all the work and assignments they work on to be perfect, spend hours on assignments that might not require that much time. The unnecessary time they spend on minor assignments is valuable time that could be dedicated to other assignments that actually need it. This in turn leads to many unfinished assignments. So caught up on making sure their work is perfect, students who experience perfectionism may turn in assignments late, or even never. Sometimes, perfectionism doesn’t even let them begin.

Procrastination can be a direct result of perfectionism. When students become scared that their work for an assignment will have mistakes or that it won’t be perfect, they may choose not to begin the work at all. Perhaps they have a writing assignment due in a week. They become so overwhelmed by wanting their work to be perfect, they feel as if they cannot even start. Their horribly high expectations that whatever they write must have perfect grammar or convey their ideas perfectly, overwhelms them and takes control. They expect their writing to be perfect immediately after they begin, without thinking that they can edit their work later. By not beginning the assignment at all, they avoid facing any mistakes they would make. But it’s impossible for them to avoid mistakes forever.

Daniel Harper, an eighth grader at Summit-Questa, believes he experiences perfectionism in his writing. “I like to be perfect with my writing because you set a standard for yourself, and when you don’t meet that standard, you feel bad about it,” he says. He continues by sharing an experience he had while writing his journalism article, “The Last Stop,” about how Florida’s public transportation system continues to fail its riders, leaving them behind, waiting on the bus. He had worked on half a story for months, and just a few weeks before it was set to be published, he started overthinking

everything. “I was kind of just rethinking everything,” he says. “I was like, do I need this? Is this good enough?”

Daniel is not alone in doubting his work and seeking validation. Mena Zavala, a seventh grader at Summit-Questa, shares her struggles with it, as well. “As a perfectionist, I have trouble trusting myself,” she says. “Whenever I’m doing a simple assignment, I always have to ask my friends if they got a similar answer, because even if I know I can do it myself, I always feel like others are more reliable than me, or have more reliable answers.” She also believes that perfectionism alone does not affect her. “All the things that go along with perfectionism, procrastination, taking a long time, comparison, anxiety, those are the things that really affect me negatively.”

Perfectionism can be present outside of school as well. It can take root in everyday activities and extracurriculars. Mena also believes she experiences perfectionism in her extracurriculars, in her case, dance. “In dance, they always tell you if nobody is correcting you, that means you’re doing well. But I always need to be corrected,” she says. “As a perfectionist, I feel like I’m always doing something wrong. Like I need a stamp of approval from others.” That wish for approval also comes up in school, since she doesn’t just wish for it from her peers, but her teachers as well. “I don’t just want to get a good grade, that’s always the goal, but I also want my teachers’ approval. I want them to say I did amazing,” she says. Whether it’s in academics, dance, or sports, teenagers still experience perfectionism. They may try to escape it by scrolling through social media, but even there, in the depths of social media apps, perfectionism might be lurking.

Perfect face. Perfect body. Perfect life. Perfect grades. Those are all things you might see someone showing in a post on social media, through a photo, or a simple comment. You might see one and believe it, but you have no real way of knowing

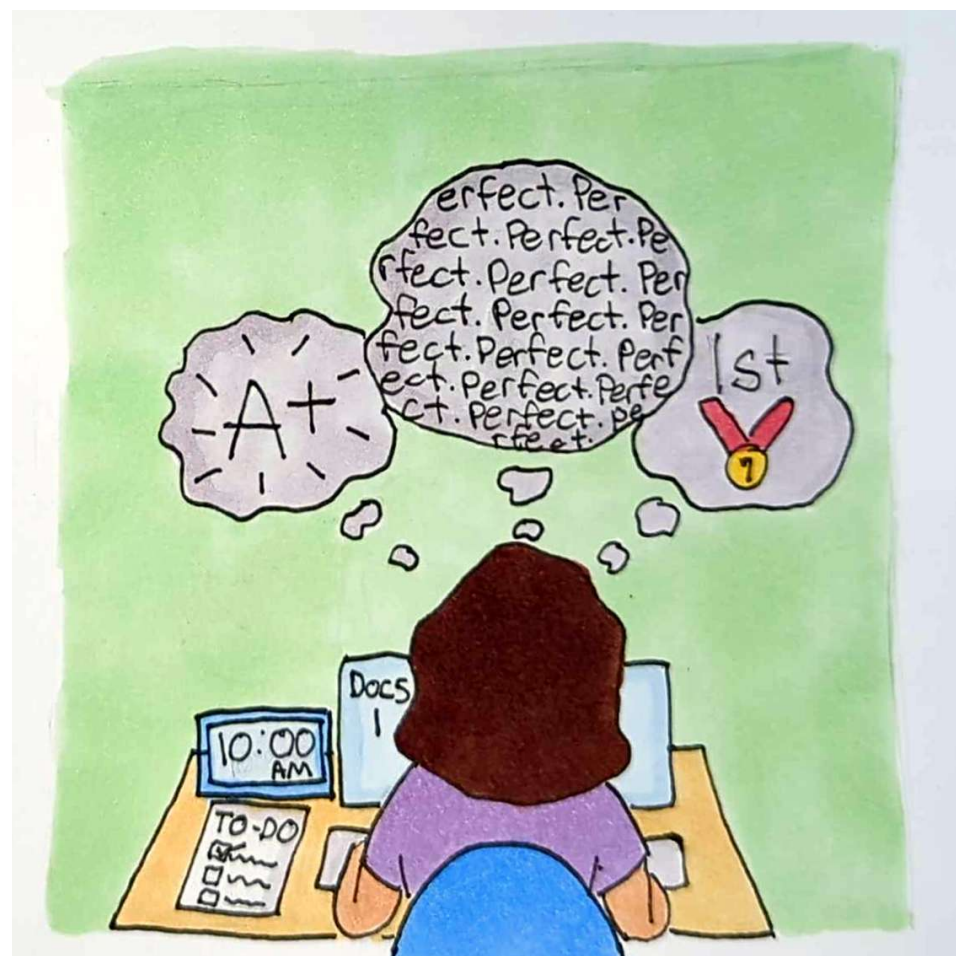
whether or not what they are posting about is actually true. For all you know, the photos could be staged, and the comments, plain lies. Whether they are real or fake, the damage they can do to people who view these posts is huge. Teenagers who are online, are influenced by what they see on social media. They might see a simple selfie of someone, which looks effortless but the person in the photo still looks beautiful. Perfect, to the teenager at least. They then start to wish they could look like that, effortlessly. When in reality, that picture might have taken hours to capture, instead of seconds. They might start to question why they don’t have a ‘perfect’ face like the one they see online, when even the person they see in the photo doesn’t even look like that. The teenager doesn’t know that. But, they believe it. This puts a fake impression on them, that they are lesser because they are not perfect. Seeing a simple photo, unlocks a new insecurity in them. One that will probably get worse as the teenager scrolls through social media, more and more.

Katherine Morgan Schafner believes that everyone, especially teenagers, should know and keep in mind the point of social media: to keep using the app so platforms keep making money. “If you don’t remember that, then you’re going to get sucked into all of the really negative parts of social media, which make it seem like other people have more than what you have.” She continues by saying, “If social media is not helping you, and it’s not making you feel good, you need to take responsibility for that experience and get off of it.” But it is so easy for teenagers to keep scrolling, even if they realize it is hurting them or not. It’s also incredibly easy for teenagers to believe what they see online. They can look at a photo and just assume that the poster is happy and has a perfect life. But, not just that. Believe that the poster is perfect. That can be horrible for anyone, especially teenagers.

“A big trigger for perfectionism is social media and that fear of missing out. It can be challenging to take a step back and recognize that what is being

## Artist’s Statement

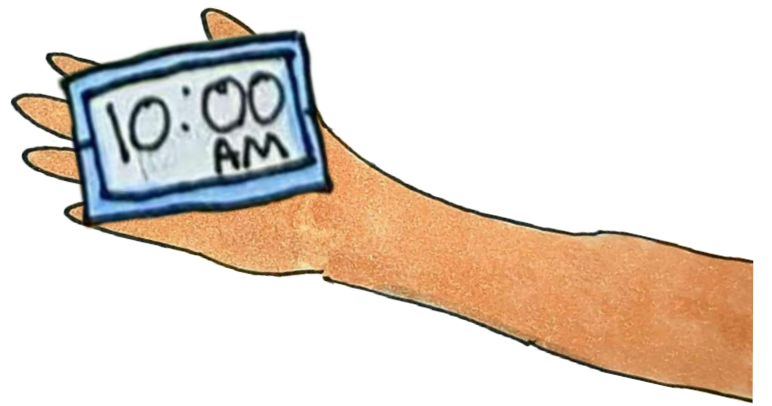
Through this drawing I wanted to show a girl, who is a perfectionist, staying up late, trying to finish an assignment. Her thoughts of hoping that she gets an ‘A’ and that her assignment has to be perfect, are hovering over her, almost like storm clouds, distracting her from her work and making everything worse. I wanted to show that perfectionism affects people in different ways, which is why I wanted it to not be clear how exactly perfectionism was affecting this girl. Whether it’s redoing everything due to not being satisfied with it, or procrastinating due to wanting her work to be perfect, behind both of these reasons and ultimately the reason she is staring at her computer screen, is perfectionism.



ART CREDIT: FREYA THAKAR

*"It's a voice in your head, that always pushes you to keep going, but also, it holds you back a little, because you're afraid to make mistakes."*

— MENA ZAVALA



posted isn't reality," says Jeremy Tyler, an assistant Professor of Clinical Psychiatry at the Perelman School of Medicine at the University of Pennsylvania, in a Penn Medicine blog post on how social media is related to perfectionism. He goes on to say that everyone assumes that people with those perfect photos don't have any problems. That they're as happy as they seem in the photos. But, they do. Everyone does. "It's important to remember that the people behind the lens are just as stressed and nervous as everyone else. Everybody suffers at some point or feels less than perfect." But why does everyone assume that they don't? Why, everywhere you look on social media, are posts about how perfect the posters' lives are? The reason is that no one wishes to post about the mistakes they make, or the troubles they face. Influencers don't want to show their followers the things they did wrong, only the things they do right. There could be many reasons behind why they wouldn't do this. Maybe one of them is that they refuse to accept that they made a mistake, so they refuse to post about it? That they refuse to believe that they are not perfect? Or maybe they refuse to disappoint the people who think they are?

Perfectionism can be bad, but also has its benefits. People who experience it strive for perfection. Whatever work they do eventually deliver is perfect, or very close to it. In return, they are met with praise and approval, but is that all worth it? Is living in a mindset where you believe your work can either be perfect or a failure worth the approv-

al? Is working to an impossibly high standard that you put on yourself, worth a simple compliment? It is obviously not, but that doesn't mean perfectionism is totally bad either. "I think it's a good and bad thing," Mena says. "I think it's something, a voice in your head, that always pushes you to keep going, and keep making sure that you can do the best you can. But also, I think sometimes, it holds you back a little, because you're afraid to make mistakes." Schaffer explains why there are such contrasting sides to it. "Perfectionism in its good form can really help us understand that it is a natural human impulse to want to chase ideals," she says. "The difference between healthy perfectionists and unhealthy ones is that healthy perfectionists know that ideals are only meant to inspire, not meant to be achieved. Ideals and goals are very separate, different things in the mind of a healthy perfectionist."

A way for someone to become a healthy perfectionist is by changing their meaning of the word 'perfection' altogether. Schaffer offers a different perspective on what it really means. "I think of it as wholeness," she says. She explains that the word 'perfect' comes from the Latin root 'per' or 'complete,' and 'facere' or 'done.' "When we describe something as perfect, we're not really saying it's flawless. What we're saying is that it's complete, you could not add one more thing to that to make it full." Which means that people struggling with perfectionism can start to think of perfection as what they think is complete, not

something that has no mistakes. Schaffer elaborates on this by saying the only thing that should matter for people dealing with perfectionism, is that whatever you do, you should feel like yourself, whole and complete. "I think sometimes we take shortcuts to those connections by being like, 'If I'm wearing this perfect outfit then other people will be able to see that I'm wonderful and cool.' Or, 'If I get an 'A' on the test, then people will be able to understand that I'm smart, I have ideas, I have creative offerings to share with the world.' And you can have all those things and still get a 'B.' You can have all those things and still just be chilling in sweatpants."

Another way of dealing with perfection is by aiming for near perfect, or excellence. And the first way of doing this is to accept mistakes. "Personally, I feel wiser from making mistakes," Tyler writes in that same blog post about perfectionism and social media. "If we were perfect creatures, we would be a fairly naïve species. Mistakes build character and empathy, and they teach us how to practice compassion for ourselves and in turn, others when they mess up." By accepting mistakes, perfectionists can realize how much they can learn from them. By doing this, they will start to strive for excellence. Their expectations will lower, but they will still be able to produce good work. "When we strive for excellence, we feel satisfied with a job well done. We learn from our mistakes and don't let them define us. We enjoy the process, not just the outcome of our endeavors. ... We don't get

stuck on all-or-nothing thinking or self-criticism," writes Sharon Martin, a psychotherapist who specializes in perfectionism, in an article on the blog PsychCentral. "And when we strive for excellence rather than perfection, we aim high, but we keep our lives in balance." By striving for excellence students who have a hard time turning assignments in on time, will be able to work quicker by accepting imperfection. Procrastinators can start assignments without having stress about perfection. By using the qualities they already have and ones they can develop by striving for excellence, such as accepting imperfection, perfectionists can reach their full potential without being burdened by expectations and pressure.

In our world, so many people look for perfection in whatever they do. Whether it's in school, at work, or even in everyday life, many people expect perfection out of themselves and others. But is perfection even real? Or is it just a product of our imagination? Some unattainable goal we wish to achieve? If it isn't real, why do we aim for it? Maybe we are afraid of imperfection. So afraid we do anything for perfection. To stop living like that, and learn to live with imperfection, we should not be afraid of making mistakes. After all, as the age old saying goes, nothing is perfect. So why should we be?

#### Artist's Statement

Through this drawing, I wanted to show, just as you reach the top of a ladder, you must first climb the steps below, so to achieve perfection, you must first go through the steps of your work being 'mediocre' and 'good enough.' I also wanted to convey how hard aiming for perfection can be, which is why I drew a hand reaching for perfection, but not actually achieving it. I also wanted to dial in on how this person is immediately reaching for perfection and is not willing to go through the necessary steps to achieve it.

ART CREDIT: FREYA THAKAR

