

The Writer's Inner Critic Part II: A Cognitive-Behavioral Approach to Dealing with the Inner Critic (or: How to Stop Awfulizing and Start Writing)

By Carolyn Kaufman, PsyD

People don't just get upset. They contribute to their upsetness. -Albert Ellis

The Inner Critic can be the writer's worst enemy. Each time we sit down to work, it feeds on our insecurities, reminds us of past failures, and criticizes everything we put down on paper.

Until now you've probably thought, like most people do, that the Critic's sinister whispers should be brushed away so you can try to get back to work. But brushing them away is the worst thing you can do, because you're not dealing with them. And that means they'll just come back.

But you know that. That's why you're reading this article.

Imagine a room with a floor that "settled" a little too much, and now everything is tilted in toward the middle. If you drop a basketball on the floor, it will roll to the middle. You can push it back toward the wall, but as soon as it loses momentum or hits the wall, it's going to roll right back.

Now imagine yourself sitting right in that sunken spot in the middle, and imagine ten basketballs. If they settle against you, it's hard for you to write (they roll over your keyboard or paper, they bang into your elbows), so you have to push them. Even if it's a really big room and the basketballs are leisurely, repeatedly pushing ten of them away is going to keep you from getting much writing done. You'd be better off dealing with the problem directly: gathering up the basketballs and getting them out of your way.

The Critic does the same thing as those basketballs. It keeps you so busy trying to ward it off that you don't get much done.

So let's talk about how to pick it up and get it out of your way.

Learning to Listen

The activities we'll do below are based on the work of Albert Ellis, the man whose quotes are peppered through this article, and Aaron Beck. Both men believe that irrational and distorted thinking are the true cause of most problems.

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Because Ellis began his work first, he's considered the father of cognitive behaviorism, one of the three main branches of psychotherapeutic theory. North American psychologists voted him the second most influential therapist in history¹ and the most influential therapist living today.

He's also the most outrageous character in psychology. He's loud and abrasive, he swears like he's getting paid to do it, he makes up ridiculous songs, he calls excessive use of the word *must* "musterbation," and he says things like "shoulds are shit; so when you say 'should,' you're shoulding all over yourself." And he does it all in a nasal New York accent.

Ellis believes that we make ourselves miserable with three main "musts:"

- "I must do well or I'm no good"
- "You, you louse, must treat me well or you're worthless and deserve to roast in hell"
- "The world must give me exactly what I want, precisely what I want, or it's a horrible, awful place" ²

Beck, meanwhile, has come up with a big list of distorted thinking patterns including:

- **overgeneralization:** viewing a negative event, like receiving a rejection letter, as proof of a larger pattern, i.e. that you are a failure across the board
- **all-or-nothing-thinking:** there's rejection/failure and acceptance/success, and nothing in between
- **emotional reasoning:** you feel like a failure, so you must be one

Digging In

The first thing you're going to do is spend some time writing down all the nasty things the Critic says to you. Often people say, "It makes me feel bad and I want it to go away, and you want me to pay *more* attention to it?"

Yes, that's exactly what I want you to do.

Here's why: you have to know your enemy to fight it. If you were a detective hunting down a villain, you'd need to know that villain's techniques. Does he march right up to a victim, or does he sneak in the back door? What does he say to the victim to disarm him? What tricks does he play to make the victim think he's a friend?

Until you can hear all of its insults, you won't know when or how to fight back.

Once you start to pay attention, you'll notice that the Critic knows just which things will make you feel the worst, and it repeats those things the most. Part of what makes it so virulent is it knows your deepest insecurities and fears, and those are what it uses against you. It's successful because *you're afraid those things are really true*.

Worse, it's stealthy enough that most of the time you're not consciously hearing what it's saying to you. You've been listening to it for so long you hardly even notice its voice. Instead, you assume that your reactions or fears are based in objective reality.

Especially because it uses insults that are hard to defend against. For example, it's hard to argue with "You're not creative enough" because it's hard to define what *creative enough* really is.

Exercise 1: A-B-C

Our secret weapon: the ABC model.

We use a chart for our homeworks in CBT. There are 5 columns, which we'll label A, B, C, D, and E. For right now we're just going to worry about A, B, and C though.

A	B	C	D	E
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B stands for Beliefs

To start, write down all the nasty things the Critic says to you under column B. Even the things that seem small and silly. Remember, you need to take detailed notes on what the villain is doing if you're going to beat him. Be sure to include any phrase that uses the "hot" words the Critic likes best: should, shouldn't, must, mustn't, have to, can't, etc.--words that make us feel stuck because they don't leave room for alternatives.

	B Beliefs/thoughts			
	What's the Critic saying to you? (This isn't just words;			

	<p>sometimes the Critic uses memories or pictures. Write about those, too.)</p> <p>What is it trying to make you think or believe?</p>			
	<p>Example:</p>			
	<p>I don't know why I even bother sending out queries, I always get rejection letters. Obviously I don't have any talent and I just look stupid to everyone who sees my work. I should just give up and admit I'm no good.</p>			

Don't be surprised if your list is several pages long. That means two things. First, you're doing a good job with this, and second...well, you're a writer. Of course you're going to write quite a bit!

For some people, this may be difficult. In some cases, it may even be painful. If you feel really angry, or small, or sad as you work, that's all right. In fact, the more difficult it is to write, the more important it is that you do it and the better this is working. If you're afraid someone will see them, you may even find you want to hide them. If the urge is strong, go ahead and do that-- tuck it in the pages of a book if you need to, or lock the file on your computer.

C stands for Consequences

As you work, write down any emotions you're feeling in the C column; that is, the emotional consequences to the beliefs in column B. Some statements might make you angry, some might make you sad, some might make you anxious. Just write it all down, and don't worry if you're repeating the same emotions beside different kinds of Critical thoughts.

	B Beliefs/thoughts	C		
	<p>What's the Critic saying to you? (This isn't just words; sometimes the Critic uses memories or pictures. Write about those, too.)</p> <p>What is it trying to make you think or believe?</p>	<p>Your feelings as the Critic talks</p> <p>Consequences</p>		
	Example:	Example:		
	<p>I don't know why I even bother sending out queries, I always get rejection letters. Obviously I don't have any talent and I just look stupid to everyone who sees my work. I should just give up and admit I'm no good.</p>	<p>Hopeless, depressed, hurt, angry, worthless</p>		

A stands for Activating Event

Now. Every time you sit down to write, get “stuck” in your writing, worry about the time you have set aside for writing, find ways to avoid your writing time, or make excuses for not writing, you need to quickly backtrack and record what you were thinking in the B column and how it made you feel in the C column. Then, in the A column, write down what happened to trigger the thought and feeling. Did you get a rejection slip? Did you see a writer on a talk show? Did you realize your writing time is coming up?

A Activating event	B Beliefs/thoughts	C Consequences		
What happened?	<p>What’s the Critic saying to you? (This isn’t just words; sometimes the Critic uses memories or pictures. Write about those, too.)</p> <p>What is it trying to make you think or believe?</p>	Your feelings as the Critic talks		
Example:	Example:	Example:		
Received a rejection slip	<p>I don’t know why I even bother sending out queries, I always get rejection letters. Obviously I don’t have any talent and I just look stupid to everyone who sees my work. I should just give up and admit I’m no good.</p>	<p>Hopeless, depressed, hurt, angry, worthless</p>		

So you're going to be cataloging three things:

A stands for Activating Event (what happened?)

B stands for Beliefs (what you thought, what the Critic said to you)

C stands for Consequences (how you feel)

A, activating events, contribute to C, consequences in our gut. But it's B, our belief system, our philosophy, which mainly, largely, or certainly in great part, makes us feel and think the way we do — I should say behave the way we do, especially in a disturbed manner. We disturb ourselves. - Albert Ellis

Most people do better with the next part if they spend a week or two just doing the A-B-C part. We're always impatient to jump ahead, but getting ahead of yourself can make it difficult to get what you should out of the exercise. If you *genuinely* want to get the most you can out of this activity, it's a good idea to set aside this article for a couple of weeks.

What we're going to do next with the D and E is put the Critic in its place.

Exercise 2: D-E

After you've spent your week or two recording your A-B-C, you're going to add D and E.

D stands for Dispute and E stands for Evaluate Effects

A Activating event	B Beliefs/thoughts	C Consequences	D Dispute	E Evaluate Effects
What happened?	What's the Critic saying to you? (This isn't just words; sometimes the Critic uses memories or pictures. Write about those, too.) What is it trying	Your feelings as the Critic talks	Looking at the Critic's assertions more carefully and disputing them	Checking in to see how you feel.

	to make you think or believe?			
Example:	Example:	Example:	Example:	See below
Received a rejection slip	I don't know why I even bother sending out queries, I always get rejection letters. Obviously I don't have any talent and I just look stupid to everyone who sees my work. I should just give up and admit I'm no good.	Hopeless, depressed, hurt, angry, worthless	<p>What evidence do I have that I'm a failure? Well, all these rejection letters.</p> <p>What evidence do I have that I'm not? Well, my friends say they like my stories, and I did win that award back in college...</p> <p>What if I never got published? Would it kill me? No, but I'd feel bad. I guess I have to focus on how much I enjoy writing...</p>	Well, I bother because I really care about my writing and would like to get published. But I write for myself first, because I enjoy it. As much as I want to get published, it's a process and I'm going through the same thing most writers do--even the ones I admire the most! I just have to keep working to get better. Maybe I could go to that writing conference I heard about...

The D takes some effort, but it's worth it; if you're able to practice, this will become second nature.

Questions to ask yourself as you dispute the Critic's claims.

- What evidence do I have that _____ is true?
- What evidence do I have that _____ isn't true?
- Is there another explanation?

- If it's true, how true is it on a scale from 0% to 100%. For example, if you're saying, I'm a failure, are you a failure in EVERYTHING? (You can read, you can spell...as funny as it may sound, you're not failing at those things! Where else are you not failing? For example, do you have friends? Do you have pets who love you? And so on.)
- If the feared statement is true, then realistically, what's the worst thing that can happen?
- So what if that happens? How would that be so terrible? How will my world be *destroyed* if this happens? (In other words, am I being melodramatic by saying so many awful things will happen? How?)
- What would I tell a friend if she said these things to me?
- What would that mean about me if this were true?
- What effects are these thoughts (the Critic's words) having on me?
- Is it reasonable for me to be so hard on myself for this?
- What would happen if I changed the way I was thinking?
- If it's really a problem, what can I do to make it better? (Should I take a class? Join a writing group?
- Practice my writing more?)
- If I had to prove my statement to a scientist, could I really provide enough data to convince him or her? How good is my proof? ³

Pretend you've got your Critic on the stand in a court. How are you going to convince a jury that it's a liar?

Secondary Gain

One of the toughest things about Disputation is that it's much easier (and in a backwards kind of way, a lot more fun) to wallow in self-pity. I genuinely believe that sometimes we need to wallow a little, but put a limit on it. If you take more than a day or two, you're just avoiding the problem.

Also be careful not to take your frustration out on a partner or friend. Wallowing is fine. Torturing someone else with your wallowing isn't.

ELLIS: If you didn't musterbate, then you wouldn't awfulize, terribilize, catastrophize, say "I can't stand it," and put yourself down. If you only stuck with, "I'd like very much to do well, but I never have to," you wouldn't then disturb yourself.

MISHLOVE: In a sense...people are using that...as a screen to keep from getting in touch with their genuine feelings of disappointment.

ELLIS: That's right. Their very genuine feeling, their good negative feeling, would be disappointment: "I don't like this. What can I do to change it? How bad, how unfortunate." And they miss that with, "How awful, how horrible, how terrible." And then again they get bad results and sit on their rumps

again and do nothing, instead of forcing themselves to go back to the grind and change what you change what you can change and to accept what you cannot. ²

Rewriting

After you've put together your Disputation, re-evaluate how you feel. I like clients to take an extra step and re-write the original critical statement into something more balanced and positive. For example, if your original statement was something like "I'm a miserable failure as a writer," after your disputation you might realize places that's not true (or that it's not as bad as you're telling yourself), so you rewrite the thought as "Sometimes when I'm having a hard time saying what I want to say, I feel bad and am afraid I might fail. But other days I feel like material is flowing, and no matter what other people think of me, I write because I love to do it."

Or

"If I never get published, I'll feel sad, but lots of famous writers got hundreds of rejection slips; what made them special was that they never gave up in spite of that. Even though they sometimes feel personal, they're not rejections of me or even necessarily true rejections of my work--they're just telling me that my work isn't right for that publication right now, not that it's terrible. I need to keep looking to find my work the right home."

It can help to go through a list of cognitive distortions and circle or star the ones you use most. There's a good list at academic.alliant.edu/mbrown/CBT05.rtf.

Knowing, for example, that you have a tendency to take things personally can help you come up with better disputations. Maybe you'll realize that a rejection letter isn't a personal rejection--the person who sent it doesn't even know you! And your writing just might not be a good match for that agent, editor, or house; a rejection doesn't mean you're no good. And--worst case scenario--if your work really does need a lot of improvement, you can improve. There are lots of books, websites, and writing groups to help you.

It can be helpful to read some books that remind us that our heroes have or had trouble with their writing, too. Try *Rotten Reviews and Rejections* by Bill Henderson and Andre Bernard, *The Courage to Write* by Ralph Keyes, and *The Forest for the Trees* by Betsy Lerner. I also love *Quotable Magnets* by the Quotable Cards company. [Fridgedoor.com](http://www.fridgedoor.com) has an enormous collection: <http://www.fridgedoor.com/quotcarmag.html>

Whittling the Critic Down to Size

Remember, the Critic has spent a long time teaching you to believe a lot of bad things about yourself and your writing, and it will take time and practice for you to learn new thinking patterns. When you think something over and over, your brain actually aligns molecules in such a way that it's easier for that thought to occur. The only way you're going to disconnect that chain of molecules is to let it dry up by refusing to go over and over and over that thought. Instead, you create a new chain that says something more realistic.

You may want to practice these new statements a few times a day. Stick them on the bathroom mirror or over your writing desk. Say them out loud. Tell the Critic.

Remember those old cartoons where a big scary shadow would appear on the wall and the hero would cower in terror, only to have a teeny little mouse come around the corner? That's what the Critic is like. It casts a big scary shadow, but if you shine some light on it and confront your fears, you'll find that the Critic itself is just a little pipsqueak.

And now you have the skills you need to handle that pipsqueak.

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References and Works Cited

¹ Carl Rogers, the father of humanism, was voted first; Sigmund Freud, the father of psychodynamic theory, was voted the third. Since these are the founders of the three most significant theories in psychological history, it makes sense!

² [PHILOSOPHY IN PSYCHOTHERAPY with ALBERT ELLIS, Ph.D.](#)

Transcript from the series *Thinking Allowed, Conversations On the Leading Edge of Knowledge and Discovery*, with Dr. Jeffrey Mishlove. <http://www.intuition.org/txt/ellis.htm>

³ Beck, J. S. (1995). *Cognitive therapy: Basics and beyond*. Guilford: New York.