

# Bad Brain Days

Rachel Toor for the Chronicle of Higher Education, May 28, 2012

Most days I don't think about my hair. Maybe I'll brush it in the morning, but to be honest, often I forget. Then there the days I wake up and notice that it's too long or too frizzy. On those days I spend way too much time thinking about my hair, and worrying about all the things I'm not thinking about when I'm thinking about my hair.

Having a bad brain day is like that, only worse. With hair, I can convince myself that my identity is not dependent on the shininess of my locks. When my brain isn't working right, it's a different story. I know a bad brain day is under way when I reread what I've written and it all seems obvious and dull. The sentences clunk and creak. I think: This is no good. I am no good. Those days cloud my mental sky and send my confidence running for cover.

I tell myself: Be disciplined. And just keep going. Then I get frustrated, and I decide that Hemingway and his one true sentence can go right to hell. Nothing helps on those days.

When I first started running I heard about an Olympic runner who lived nearby. On the days when she couldn't hit her splits, she would walk away. Instead of continuing to disappoint herself, getting tired and even slower, she would take off her spikes and leave the track.

That surprised me. That's how you got to the Olympics? By quitting? By going away when the going got tough? What happened to the wisdom that is supposed to be the foundation of clichés?

Then I understood. Nothing good, she knew, would come of continuing to slog away. Better to get away, get distracted. I know people like that, people who seem to be comfortable forgiving themselves for not always succeeding, and I'm always impressed by their self-knowledge and self-confidence. If they miss a deadline, they shrug. When they get a rejection, they don't wallow, but instead think about where else they can try. They recognize the process and realize that the final product isn't dependent on every little step going well.

On the other hand, one of the things I've noticed about the scientists in my life is that they learn to get comfortable living with some degree of stuckness. They seem to believe Edison's pithy statement about 99-percent perspiration, and operate on the assumption that there is something to be said for just showing up.

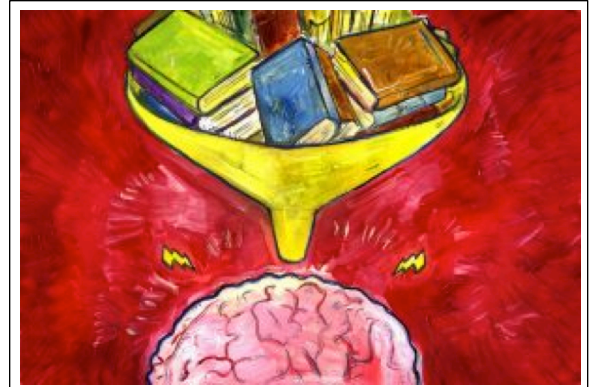
The work of the Florida State psychologist Anders Ericsson on the 10,000 hours it takes to become an expert has gained currency in the popular culture thanks to two freakonomists named Steve and to Malcolm Gladwell's book *Outliers*. Spending lots of time with the butt in the chair—or the bat in the hands or the tuba in the mouth—seems to be the way to go if you want to be excellent. Developing consistency in work habits is probably smart if you want to get anything done. You just keep plugging. One true sentence. Five hundred words a day. Three hours of piano practice. Plug, plug, plug. Even when it seems hopeless.

But what's the fulcrum between self-knowledge and self-loathing? How do you know when you're torturing yourself unnecessarily or struggling toward some productive end? I don't know the answer, and I wish I did.

I've now advised enough master's theses to tell my students to expect to experience a meltdown six to eight weeks before their final version is due. They listen and say they understand, but most of them don't believe it will happen to them. They feel good about their work, know that they've learned a lot since they started the program, and believe they have plenty of time to complete and polish their theses.

And then, right on schedule, they lose it.

They decide that everything they've written is bad. They have been steeped in reading the best that has been thought and said, and in the face of that excellent literature, their own work looks shabby, juvenile, and embarrassing. They know what they're supposed to be doing, what "good" looks like, and see only the flaws and



Brian Taylor for *The Chronicle*.

hitches in their own writing and thinking. They want to scrap the whole manuscript and start again, but they're panicked because they know they don't have time to do that. While they can see the problems, they are not sure how to solve them.

That's when they ask for an emergency thesis meeting and I remind them that their meltdown is right on schedule. But that doesn't help. So I tell them that they are feeling this way not because they haven't learned enough, but because they've learned so well. They understand how hard what they're trying to do is, and know that they're not there yet. I quote to them from Wallace Stevens, that the difference between a good poet and a great poet is that a good poet reads his work and is satisfied.

I try to lighten the mood with a few jokes, but I know it's hard to find anything funny when you're thinking that your thesis is a steaming stinky pile just before it has to be turned in. Usually the best students have the biggest meltdowns. I point to the progress they've made, show them specific places in their work that are beautiful, and remind them where they started from.

Finally, in what may be the most useful move, I tell them what I've said a hundred times before—that a thesis is not a book. This is the last step in a process, their final product as a student. Just keep plugging, I tell them. Get it done.

What I don't mention is that "thesis meltdown" continues long after the degree is conferred.

My bad brain days—the ones I spend thinking that nothing I do is up to my own standards—keep coming. Sometimes they are the result of having to meet a deadline when I feel like I don't have enough time. More often, a bad brain day is the result of emotion-driven self-doubt that feeds on itself.

A running friend once gave me great advice about racing that I have used to get through a rough spot in my writing. He said that when he hits a painful part of a race—even in just a 5K—he tells himself he knows that he will feel bad for a while, but then he'll be strong again. He recognizes the patch of pain, remembers that it will pass, and keeps going. I've told myself that during 50-mile races, and it does work. In fact, the longer the race, the more certain you can be that things will change. Getting through the part where you hate the world and are crying for your mommy is never easy, but you can, I've learned, get past it.

So, when those bad-brain days come, after a period of sitting angry in front of the computer and not writing, of sighing and yelling at the dog, of not washing my hair for way too long, I tell myself that I will probably, eventually, start to feel better. At least that's what I tell myself.

*Rachel Toor is an assistant professor of creative writing at Eastern Washington University's writing program in Spokane. Her Web site is [www.racheltoor.com](http://www.racheltoor.com). She welcomes comments and questions directed to [careers@chronicle.com](mailto:careers@chronicle.com).*

To read this article online, visit <http://chronicle.com/article/Bad-Brain-Days/131941/>.