

Why Do We Make Mistakes?



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All men make mistakes, but only wise men learn from their mistakes.

Winston Churchill

As a proofreader and editor, part of my job is to spot and correct the mistakes of others, without introducing any of my own. It's so much easier to notice errors in something we are not close to, which is why the services of editors are called upon. It doesn't mean we are infallible, of course, and it would be very rash indeed of any editor to promise perfection.

Alongside being a proofreader, I play classical violin in orchestras. It's a profession where attention to detail is paramount. Experience gained over a long period of time can

help you avoid certain audible, and often quite funny, errors, but it can also give you a false sense of security.

It's when you start learning new skills that the inevitable and necessary experience of making mistakes rears its alarming head quite consistently. But rather than sink into exasperation by this inescapable part of the human condition, I've become quite fascinated by my own mistakes and what patterns underlie some of this stumbling. Understanding these patterns can go some way to avoiding the worst of them, but I think it would be a mistake(!) not to make mistakes, for how else would we learn? The 'shock' of getting something wrong is in itself a very good aid to memory! It's what happens during rehearsals for concerts and helps ensure that the mistake does not recur in performance. Similarly, editorial training is a 'rehearsal' for real-life projects and clients, and it can't be recommended too highly!

So, what are the patterns underlying our sometimes unfortunate, occasionally embarrassing but tremendously useful predispositions to come a cropper? I see nine main categories of error-making:

- **Competence**
- **Distraction**
- **Forgetting and absent-mindedness**
- **Insufficient preparation**
- **Confidence levels**
- **Assumptions**
- **Communication**
- **Haste**
- **Overload and stress**

Let's have a broad look first at the process of learning, which involves moving from a level of making many mistakes to as few as possible.

Competence

The following four levels of competence are well known and a good measure of the process of learning:

Unconscious incompetence

I have no idea what skills are required here and not a clue what I am doing.

Conscious incompetence

I can now see what I need to be able to do, but I can't quite do it yet!

Conscious competence

I'm getting better at this. I do have to think about it, but if I take my eye off the ball, it can still go wrong . . .

Unconscious competence

I could almost do this in my sleep. It's second nature now.

The great French composer Claude Debussy once said (perhaps apropos of learning the piano) 'Hurry, hurry to learn in order to forget.'

Distraction

If you are still at a low level of skill competence, then there is a strong chance that any distraction or interruption will cause you to make an error. Recently, I was working in an orchestral library and I had to operate a photocopier with quite an elaborate set-up and an infuriatingly short time-out mechanism. Despite writing the instructions down and practising, if anyone spoke to me while I was photocopying, I invariably went wrong and lost my way. So, while it was tempting to blame the interrupter ('Look what you made me do!'), the reality was that I had not arrived at a level of competence where I could go on auto-pilot and allow my brain to temporarily split its attention.

Forgetting and absent-mindedness

This is a big subject in itself and a very interesting one. There are two types of forgetting: 1) being aware that you cannot remember something and trying to recall it; and 2) being unaware of something that should have been done! Again, that could be down to insufficient competence, or simply overload, the solution to which is to make a list of things to do! In editing, we must make checklists as it is far too easy to overlook things. Absent-mindedness goes hand in hand with forgetfulness. If you find yourself thinking of other things while performing a task (at any level of competence), there is a high chance you will make a mistake. A lesson can be learned from meditation here. The moment your mind starts to wander, gently observe that you are thinking about something else ('Ah, I'm thinking about such and such,') and go back to the task in hand. Mindfulness is a great tool for combatting forgetfulness, in combination with any necessary lists.

Insufficient preparation

The more you prepare something, the less scope there is for error. An orchestral colleague of mine was once asked what was the secret of good performance and he replied, 'Preparation.' All musicians prepare throughout their rehearsal periods. Learning how to sight-read (an ability once much flaunted in the UK) is also a way of learning fast when faced with minimal preparation time! And good editors will always prepare a job by setting up style sheets, checklists, and by communicating with their clients to see what is required and how much time is available to deliver the goods. Preparation is a great way to avoid major errors.

Confidence levels

A big potential wellspring of error is the situation of premature confidence. This is where you assume you know more than you actually do! I have noticed, when learning a new skill (such as

touch-typing), that I go through a stage of thinking I am better at it than I actually am. It's humbling to realise that more practice is needed. The aggravating thing is that one day you can actually type fast (or play that piece of passagework on the fiddle) and then the next day you suddenly can't. It takes time to really assimilate the new skill, but there is this strange and frustrating transition period of being simultaneously good and bad at something! Unfortunately, when it comes to driving a car, the results can be very dangerous indeed. (Fortunately, I don't drive.) Over-confidence often has to be tempered by the shock of a mistake before you realise that more work and practice is needed, as well as more awareness. As we get older, the brain needs a little more learning time to assimilate things, but continuing to learn can offset that to some extent. The memory is like a muscle, and it needs a workout.

Strangely, the opposite can occur. You can suffer as much from under-confidence too. While it's good to be realistic about your skills, if you continue to doubt them, then mistakes can creep in as a self-fulfilling prophecy. Fear of making a mistake can bring about the unwanted outcome! So don't set yourself up to do this; just keep alert to your growing competence and believe it.

Assumptions

It is so important to get all the facts in front of you because, if you make an assumption, nine times out of ten there will be some unforeseeable factor which will contradict your assumption! I try to counter this by being mindful of when I am making an assumption and to open my mind up to other possibilities. But the best way to avoid assumptions is to just communicate with other people and ask what the facts actually are. I believe there is no such thing as a stupid question, particularly in unfamiliar contexts or new work situations. The fear of looking stupid (or not knowing something) can result in a mistake.

Communication

Again, this is a major subject in itself. I learnt a lot about it when I did a TEFL course (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) some years back. This links in with the previous topic of assumptions. You give (or are given) information which is apparently self-evident in the giver's eyes, but actually incomplete in the receiver's. The giver is at fault for not checking that understanding is complete; the receiver is at fault for not checking their own understanding. Perhaps out of fear of looking stupid! And the result? Wrong assumptions leading to probable mistakes.

When teaching the violin, I try to check that my student has understood, perhaps by getting them to answer some questions or to teach me back what I have instructed them. As an editor, it's crucial to compile query lists for clients, because we must not fall into the trap of rewriting or interfering with their voice as a writer. Also, the client will know far more about their subject matter than the editor. The editor must respect that and do the job of editing, which is their subject.

Haste

'More haste, less speed' as the old adage goes. There is no time to check that things are being executed properly and, as noted above, if you are using a new skill, it's so easy to over-estimate one's competence. There's no getting away from the fact that if you take more time and care over a task, you will, in all likelihood, perform it better.

Overload and stress

Hand in hand with haste, taking on too much means that you overwork, you get tired, your concentration lapses and errors creep in. The sense of urgency that comes with stress and deadlines can cause problems. On the other hand, this is not to say that working to a deadline is a bad thing; sometimes having unlimited time can foster a lack of focus on work, and

forgetfulness may occur. There is an optimum level of 'urgency' that works to ensure the most error-free work without causing self-defeating levels of stress. When you know what that level is, you are 'in the zone'.

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