Why Do We Make Mistakes?

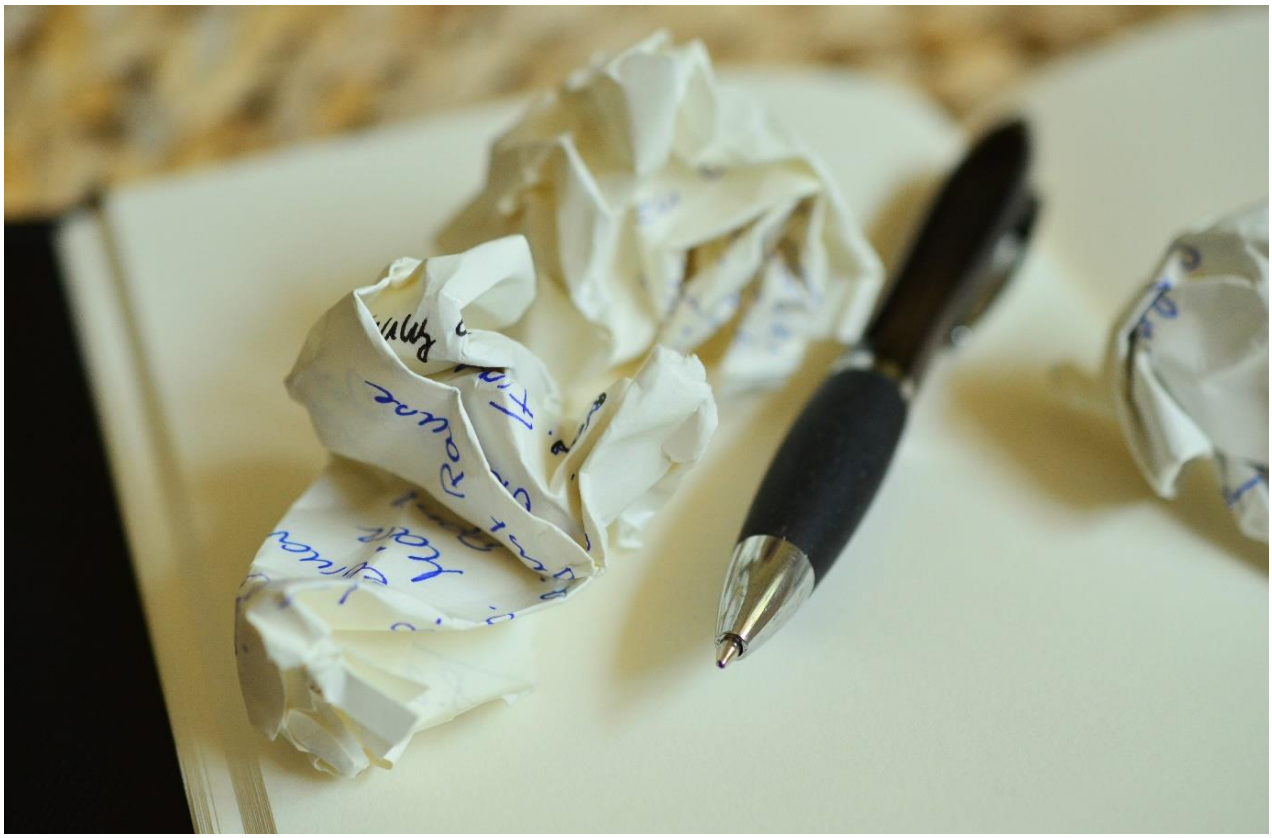


Image credit: congerdesign from Pixabay

'Anyone who has never made a mistake has never tried anything new.'

Albert Einstein

As a music proofreader and editor, part of my job is to spot and correct mistakes in compositions sent to me, without introducing any of my own. It's so much easier to notice errors in something we are not close to (and not ours!), which is one reason why the services of music 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.

As well as 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 sometimes give you a false sense of security if you take your eye off the ball.

It's when you start learning new skills that the inevitable and necessary experience of making mistakes rears its uncomfortable head quite consistently. But rather than getting disillusioned by this inescapable part of the human condition, I've become quite fascinated by my own mistakes and what patterns underlie this stumbling. Understanding such patterns can go some way to avoiding the worst of them, but I think it would be a mistake(!) not to welcome 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.

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

- **Competence (or incompetence)**
- **Distraction**
- **Forgetting and absent-mindedness**
- **Insufficient preparation**
- **Confidence levels**
- **Assumptions and confirmation bias**
- **Incomplete communication**
- **Haste**
- **Overload, stress and multitasking**

Let's have a look at these in turn, starting with the process of becoming competent, which involves moving from a level of making many mistakes to as few as possible.

Competence (or incompetence)

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.*

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 very 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. But even at that advanced stage, things can still go wrong if something external interrupts you!

Forgetting and absent-mindedness

This is a big subject in itself and an interesting one. There are two types of forgetting: 1) trying to recall something that you cannot remember; and 2) being unaware of something that should have been done! The second of these could be down to insufficient competence, or just simply overload, the solution being: make a list of what you have to do! When editing music, we have to keep checklists as there are so many separate parameters that need our attention on a one-by-one basis.

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 forget to do something. It's a sort of self-distraction. A lesson can be learnt 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'), then go back to the task in hand. Mindfulness is a great tool for combatting forgetfulness, in combination with making those useful 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 music is also a way of preparing fast when faced with very little time!

Good editors will always prepare a job by setting up style sheets, checklists, and by communicating with their clients in advance to see what is required, how much time is available to deliver the goods, and how much the budget will be. Preparation is a great way to avoid major errors.

Confidence levels

A potential source of error is the situation of feeling prematurely confident. This is where you assume you know more than you actually do! I have noticed, when learning a new skill (such as touch-typing, or learning the Dominic System of memorising numbers), that I go through a stage of thinking I am better at it than I really 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); then the next day you suddenly can't. It takes time to really assimilate a 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…)

Over-confidence often has to be tempered by the shock of making a mistake before you realise that more work, practice and awareness is needed. 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 benefits from constant workouts.

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, mistakes can then 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 that; just keep alert and be realistic about your growing competence, then believe in it.

Assumptions and confirmation bias

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 it! 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 just to 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. And that is stupid.

Confirmation bias happens when you look for what you expect to find. Again, another form of assumption. This is a particular danger for proofreaders. We are trained to look at what is actually there, not what we think is there. Confirmation bias can blind us to the actual sources of problems if we've made a faulty diagnosis regarding something we suspect or believe to be true. We sometimes ignore real evidence because it conflicts with what we think we already know. This happens because the brain wants to save time, rather than slowing down to examine the objective reality. It's hardwired into us from our hunter-gatherer days!

This is why composers need editors. When composers look back over their work, playing it through in their minds, they hear what they expect to hear, and the contours of the notes seem to confirm this. But it's all too easy to miss the mistakes, even glaring ones, because the creator's perception of the piece is different from the information set down on paper or screen. We look (and hear), but we don't always see.

Incomplete communication

Again, a major subject in itself. I learnt a bit about this when I did a TEFL course (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) some years ago. You give information which is apparently self-evident in your own 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 and querying. And the result? Wrong assumptions leading to avoidable mistakes.

When teaching the violin, I try to check that my student has understood, perhaps by getting them to answer some questions or teaching back to me what I have just shown them.

In music editing, I compile a list of queries for my composer clients, even if I think I can guess the answer in some cases. It's important to allow composers the chance to respond, as their work is still being fine-tuned during the editing process. They might see more solutions than my single deduced one, so I have to check back with them. They sometimes do minor rewrites as a result of something being flagged up.

So many mistakes come about as a result of faulty communication; making the assumption that other people's understanding of a situation wholly matches your own. That's why, when I take on an editing job, I ask the client many questions about the level of work they expect, as well as informing them of problems they may not have considered. It's a two-way street.

Haste

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

However, working to a deadline is certainly not a bad thing; sometimes having unlimited time can result in a lack of focus on work, and mistakes may still occur. There is an optimum level of 'urgency' that gets the balance right between working fast and working accurately.

I sometimes find when I am writing by hand that my brain gets ahead of itself, and instead of writing the current word, I write letters from the next one instead! (And that's an old skill!) The brain works faster than the hand, so that's when to try and slow down the thinking process a bit.

Overload, stress and multitasking

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 unrealistic deadlines can cause problems.

Fatigue is a very common cause of errors; the brain simply switches off and needs time to rest. When doing something creative, it's often a good idea to 'sleep' on something. Very often, solutions to problems will present themselves in the morning. But rest is also good for avoiding mistakes too!

Multitasking can cause mistakes to creep in; simply doing way too many things at once does not ensure attention to detail. The brain constantly has to shift its focus onto something else over and over again.

For example, when inputting music into Sibelius (or other setting programmes) it's easy to fall unwittingly into the trap of multitasking. This is when you input a rhythm first, then a note name, then an accidental, then an articulation, then a dynamic… You are constantly moving from one type of input process to another. It's actually easier to do a series of these individual parameters in isolation, such as doing the rhythms first with a series of basic pitches with no accidentals. Only then go back and fill in the missing elements. That way, the brain is not changing gear so often and introducing errors. Plus you get the benefit of initial proofreading in situ! (But more on that one in a future blog.)

Ivor McGregor November 2026

Ivor McGregor is a professional music proofreader, editor and typesetter. Need help presenting your written music? Visit ivormcgregorproofreading.co.uk