

Finish 1st Draft Before Editing

The Source

The advice has several versions, all aimed at the same practical problem: writers who polish the first page forever while the novel goes unwritten. Anne Lamott's 'shitty first drafts' concept, from *Bird by Bird* (1994), argued that permission to write badly was the prerequisite for writing at all — that the editorial mind, if engaged too early, would strangle the generative one.

The principle was sound as corrective. Many writers, especially early in their practice, are so self-critical during generation that they cannot produce material at all. The instruction to turn off the internal editor, to give yourself permission to write the imperfect draft, to finish before fixing — this addresses a real and damaging block.

The Morph

The corrective for editorial paralysis during drafting became a prohibition against any backward engagement with the work:

- Stage one: don't let editorial self-criticism prevent you from generating material.
- Stage two: keep moving forward; don't stop to revise.
- Stage three: do not look back until the draft is finished.
- Stage four: touching earlier material during drafting is cheating, or weakness, or poor process.
- Final form: the first draft is a document that must be completed before it is evaluated. The editorial mind belongs

in a separate phase, never concurrent with the generative phase.

The Reality

For the discovery writer — the writer who works in the Zone, who finds story through writing rather than through prior planning — the idea of a strict phase separation between generation and evaluation is often false to how the work actually proceeds.

Discovery writing involves reading back. The writer enters the previous day's material not just to pick up momentum but to find the story's current direction. In this reading-back, evaluation is inseparable from continuation. You cannot always know where to go next without knowing what you have already done. For some writers, the morning's return to yesterday's pages is the Zone's entry point — the path back in is through the work already there.

Mandatory forward-only movement can produce drafts that have wandered far from what the story actually needed before the writer discovered what the story actually needed. For a plotter, this may be manageable — the outline already knew the destination. For a discovery writer, a prohibition on re-engagement with earlier material may mean arriving at the end of a draft whose beginning no longer serves the story the ending discovered.

What Works

The relationship between generation and evaluation serves the work when:

1. The generative impulse is protected — the internal critic is not permitted to paralyze output.

2. The writer knows their own process: some writers genuinely need strict phase separation; others genuinely need concurrent re-engagement.
3. Re-engagement with earlier material serves forward movement rather than substituting for it — reading back to find the story, not polishing to avoid continuing.
4. The writer can distinguish between productive re-engagement and avoidance behavior.

What Fails

The strict phase separation fails when:

1. It is applied to a discovery process that requires backward engagement to proceed forward.
2. It produces a completed draft so internally inconsistent — because early material was generated before late discoveries were made — that the revision required is effectively a complete rewrite.
3. It builds a habit of ignoring the work's own developing signals in favor of forward production.
4. It creates an endpoint — the completed draft — as the primary goal rather than the quality of the material.

The Irony

The prohibition on pre-completion editing was designed to protect the generative process. But for discovery writers, strict adherence can damage the generative process — can produce a draft at such variance with what the story became that the writer's next encounter with their own material is a document they barely recognize. The corrective for editorial paralysis has become, for some writers, a prescription for generative blindness.

The Actual Principle

The actual craft principle is not 'complete the first draft before editing.' It is:

Protect the generative process from premature critical paralysis, and recognize that for your particular process, protection may look different than it does for someone else. The generation of material and the evaluation of material exist on a spectrum, not in cleanly separated phases. Know where your process lives on that spectrum, and work in the way that produces your best material — which may include reading back, re-engaging with earlier pages, and allowing late discoveries to reshape early decisions.

Or more simply: finish what you start. But finishing is not always linear, and knowing where you've been is often how you know where to go.

Why This Corruption Matters

The rule, applied rigidly, creates a specific writing problem: the writer who cannot engage their own work in progress because they have been taught that engagement is evaluation, and evaluation is premature. They barrel forward producing material while the story signals directions they are not permitted to follow until the draft is done.

For the discovery writer in particular, this is an instruction to ignore the process by which their best work emerges. The Zone is a state of receptivity — to what the story is doing, to where it is going, to what has already been found. A rule that forbids looking at what has been found in order to find what comes next misunderstands the process entirely.