



## Judgment v. Discernment



### Q: Can You Judge Your Own Work?

### A: Yes, But Why Would You Want To?

I've heard that Isaac Asimov claimed he never rewrote anything. I don't know if that's hyperbole or truth, but I do know that for the rest of us, good writing comes from rewriting. Creative work requires the willingness and ability to revise. You have to frequently step back from what you're creating and see it with fresh eyes (i.e. re-vision) to keep the work alive and true to the original vision.

Unfortunately, knowing revision is essential is not the same as knowing how to revise. Some of my students tell me they don't know where to begin revising or when to stop. They can see what's wrong (everything!), but they can't see how to change it. Time after time, they just give up and start something new (which is not surprising if they think everything is wrong with the work). Much of this difficulty comes from underdeveloped discernment and overdeveloped judgment.

To revise, you have to suspend judgment. Judgment is too focused on evaluating whether the work is what it **should be** to recognize what it really **is**. And because judgment does not accept what the work is, it cannot see how the work can be improved.

### Name Your Poison

There are two flavors of judgment, both equally poisonous. Negative judgment is what I hear about most often. Negative judgment consists of sweeping generalizations that the entire thing is crap, that it's hopeless, pointless and irrelevant. The characters are flat and uninteresting; the plot is unbelievable and

trite; the language is hackneyed and cliché. Or similarly, the colors are muddy; the tone is abysmal; the composition is unbalanced.)

Negative judgment often slides from overly harsh criticism of the work to scathing indictments of the writer/artist: I'll never be able to do this right; I don't have what it takes; I'm hopeless, uninteresting and clichéd. Furthermore, negative judgment assumes that what's wrong is so wrong it cannot possibly be made right.

Positive judgment can be more pleasant, but it's still deadly. Positive judgment, aka fantasy, is the belief that the first draft is perfect just the way it is. There's no need to revise or improve, because the work has magically achieved perfection on the first attempt. Where negative judgment denies the possibility of improvement, positive judgment denies the need for improvement.

Like negative judgment, this fantasy of perfection slides from a focus on the work to a focus on the writer/artist, and that is the greatest danger. Perhaps the reason I don't hear students complain about the effects of positive judgment is not that these effects are less devastating to artistic growth, but that writers/artists inclined to positive judgment can't see the damage. They can't see the need to revise their work, so they can't see why they'd need feedback, instruction or guidance. Positive judgment poisons not just the work, but the entire career of the writer/artist. Or should I say "potential career" because a writer/artist who is unwilling to learn, grow and evolve will never live up to her or his creative potential.

## The Healthy Choice

Discernment is the antidote to the poison of judgment. Where judgment makes sweeping generalizations, discernment makes specific observations. Because these observations are not poisoned by judgment, the writer/artist is able to take them in and use them. Instead of shutting down the writer/artist with “This whole thing is crap,” discernment observes “This section isn’t moving like the others. I wonder why. How can I change the pace?”

Observations open possibilities. They free the writer/artist to explore and expand her or his repertoire. Discernment allows a writer/artist to not only improve the current work, but to develop the craft skills needed to keep growing as a writer/artist.

Evaluation is a part of both judgment and discernment. The difference is that judgment offers a preliminary evaluation, then rejects (as bad) or elevates (as good) based on that incomplete evaluation without ever fully seeing, understanding and accepting what is. Discernment simultaneously accepts the work as it is and appreciates what it can be. This acceptance allows a discerning person to evaluate the work honestly and make effective changes.

## Developing Discernment

First, recognize that judgment will never serve you. Never. Judgment is the tool of the Saboteur. Don’t trust it. Embrace discernment instead.

Develop your judgment-radar. Listen to all the judgments you have about everything, all the time. Notice when you’re judging and stop. Easier said than done, I know. It helps to know that when you observe yourself judging your writing/art or anything else, that observation strengthens your discernment. Just noticing “I’m judging this traffic jam, email from my boss, or whatever” stops the judgment, at least for the moment, and replaces it with an observation. When you accept that you’re judging, you move into discernment.



*Discernment sees what's really there.*

*It simultaneously accepts the work as it is and appreciates what it can be.*

One of the benefits of process – creative play with no expectations – is the development of discernment. Every time you do process, you practice setting expectation and judgment aside. You participate and observe what happens, but it’s never a big deal. “Oh, the red finger paint does this” or “I need square paper if I want my origami swan to look like the one in the book.” Not “I screwed up, the red paint looks ugly when I mix it with green.” Not “My swan sucks.”

As a general practice, it’s wise to refrain from evaluating your work for a day or two. If you look at it too soon, you may find yourself slipping into judgment. When you notice you’re judging your work, remind yourself

“It’s too soon to judge.” It will always be too soon to judge. You really aren’t qualified to judge your own work and you never will be. But with a few days distance between creating and reviewing, you can set aside judgment’s “good or bad” dichotomy and discern “effective or needs something” instead.

Ultimately, judgment’s “good or bad” analysis is boring. It doesn’t take us anywhere new. Discernment makes creativity and creative change possible – and that’s where the real thrill is.

## Want a Hand?

If you want to establish writing habits that minimize judgment and receive support and encouragement to hold yourself accountable to your commitments, check out the Loft classes I’m offering this fall (see [www.Loft.org](http://www.Loft.org) for course descriptions and registration information). Or call me at 612-722-4139 to talk about how coaching might work for you.

**NEW this Fall - Writer’s Resistance:** You love to write, so why is it so hard to keep showing up? This class, for intermediate-level writers, will explore causes of resistance and how to respond to reach your dreams and goals. We’ll do weekly check-ins to help you notice when and how you resist your writing, and guided imagery to clarify what you need to write and

why. Exercises include demystifying which of the six common forms of resistance you've used to avoid writing and exploring what resistance has to tell you. We'll look at the connection between creativity and destructivity, plus engage in playful ways to energize your writing self. You'll brainstorm, freewrite, and dialogue in small groups. We'll shine a light on excuses, obstacles, and illusions. At class end you'll write/draw your action map for where you're going and how you're going to get there. Mondays: October 29 – December 10 (no class November 19) 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. at Open Book. Register online at [www.loft.org](http://www.loft.org) or 612-379-8999.

**The Writing Habit:** Talent is a gift we're all given to one degree or another. Techniques can and must be learned. But what really makes a writer is the habit of writing. In this course, you will identify your writing (or nonwriting) habits and adapt them to fit your writing goals. Our weekly check-in will give you safe and supportive witnesses to help you become accountable to yourself. We'll use in-class writing, two-person processes, and action mapping to explore the creative process, identify your priorities, generate plans, cultivate sustainable habits, and develop a support network to help you maintain your momentum. Section A: Mondays, September 17 – October 22 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. at Open Book. Section B: Wednesdays, September 19 – October 24 10:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. at the Shoreview Community Center in Shoreview. Register online at [www.loft.org](http://www.loft.org) or 612-379-8999.

## Please Give Me a Hand

If you've experienced writer's block or writer's high or anything in between, I want to hear about your experiences. Your participation in a writer's survey will not only help me, it will contribute to the publication of a book that helps all writers move past the pain of writer's resistance. Please spend 10 minutes completing my survey at [http://www.surveymonkey.com:80/s.aspx?sm=\\_2bxhgsIhnjrOxgQ\\_2bRPD7x2Q\\_3d\\_3d](http://www.surveymonkey.com:80/s.aspx?sm=_2bxhgsIhnjrOxgQ_2bRPD7x2Q_3d_3d)

Thanks!

### Students on Rosanne Bane:

Phenomenal! I'm writing again. I feel hopeful and capable of moving forward as a direct result of taking this class.

I found the strategies and techniques a great addition to my writing habits.

Rosanne has great energy and kept us all fully engaged.



### Rosanne Bane, Creativity Coach and Loft Teaching Fellow on teaching:

We get what we expect. Social science research proves it. I expect all my students to have great ideas and they do. I focus on their strengths and how they can keep growing and they do. I help them eliminate obstacles so they can focus on what they have to give the world through their writing and they give it.

### Coaching Client on Rosanne Bane:

E. L. Doctorow says "Writing is like driving at night in the fog. You can only see as far as your headlights, but you can make the whole trip that way." Rosanne's coaching is like tuning into a really good and clear all-night radio station to keep you company.

### Rosanne Bane on coaching:

My clients are a fascinating group of creative, powerful people. They are making a difference in their lives and in the world. It is my pleasure and privilege to guide, encourage, challenge and support them. I'd be delighted to work with you, too!