



## Understanding and Addressing Imposter Syndrome

Imposter syndrome or intellectual self-doubt plagues many high-achieving students with feelings that they don't belong in a job or program, that they are not as smart or capable as their peers, or that their achievements are owed to luck, a mistake, or someone else's generosity. Feelings of doubt and inadequacy can be a matter of "mindset." But a program's climate plus broader social inequities also stoke imposter syndrome in graduate students who by race, gender, and other identities may feel—and may be made to feel—out of place.

The below tips are drawn from the sources listed near the end—further resources to keep intellectual self-doubt from impeding your writing, inclusion, and success.

***Cultivate community and break the silence.*** Talk with other graduate students and professionals in your field (in your program, across the campus, and beyond) about experiences of self-doubt and inadequacy. It is very likely that you will discover you are far from alone. When you start to build a community of others who share your research interests and believe in your work, you also create a support network to sustain you in your graduate career and beyond.

***Name the source.*** Sometimes self-doubt and fears of failure come from within, but you may also be in a setting where, directly or indirectly, your confidence and sense of belonging are undermined. "Instead of taking your self-doubt as a sign of your ineptness," writes Dr. Valerie Young (link below), "recognize that it might be a normal response to being on the receiving end of social stereotypes about competence and intelligence."

***Develop a healthy attitude toward failure.*** You can't learn and advance if you can never allow yourself to make a mistake. You can't submit a dissertation's or article's final draft without working through messy, confused, and (if prematurely judged as a final product) inadequate first drafts. Remember that you are an emerging or apprentice scholar, researcher, or professional, and give yourself space, including space to make mistakes, so you can grow.

***Develop a healthy attitude toward achievement.*** Practice learning to accept compliments about your work. Also practice stating—*owning*—your accomplishments. Because people who experience intellectual self-doubt often understate their achievements or hedge their claims in their writing, practice overstating them (or what feels to you like overstating).

***Use the buddy system.*** Seek out supportive mentors, including beyond your program; mentor texts that can teach you how to craft a compelling literature review or winning grant application; peer writing groups; and the support of the Graduate Writing Center. Bear in mind: writing gets harder, not easier, as you transition into and progress through a graduate program because the kinds of writing you do are increasingly complex and the audiences increasingly demanding. It's a myth that some people "just know" how to do this work.

**Try these exercises**, several of which are adapted from the Yale Center for Teaching and Learning link below, to write your way out of imposter syndrome:

- ***Take stock:*** Write out an inventory of the writing and communication genres, including posters, figure design etc., that are currently in your professional toolkit (i.e., that you feel skilled in and

confident about). Then list those you'd like to add to your toolkit. Consider these new and challenging genres as opportunities for adding to your toolkit!

- *Write your research origin story*: how you've come to this field of study; the interests, commitments, and experiences that inform what you do; the people and circumstances who have inspired and nurtured your work and given you a sense of belonging.
- *Get a bigger picture*: Write a paragraph or a page about the importance of your research and its community impact for a broader audience (not just specialists in your field).
- *Define yourself*: Bernard et. al. (2017, link below) found that scholars and professionals can reduce the adverse effects of social stereotypes by naming and understanding them as such. Try writing a series of statements with this template: *They think ... but I know ...* to prevent others' ignorance and bigotry from infecting your self-perceptions.
- *Build a nest*: When you sit down to write, surround yourself with the books, articles, studies, and other texts that whose ideas, methods, or prose style inform and support what you aim to do. Even if you won't be citing all or any of the texts in your nest, they create a sense of belonging, community, confidence, and even bravery.
- *Send your inner critic packing*: Create an image of your internal critic—the person (real or imaginary) or voice that can stop you from writing with its ceaseless criticism and doubt. Decide on a place to send this inner critic or an activity to keep it busy while you are drafting so you have room to think and write without self-censorship.
- *Mark the trail ahead*: When you are ready to finish writing for a day, consider ending within a section or paragraph that you feel confident about or even in the middle of a sentence whose end and next sentence you can already imagine. That makes picking up the trail easier the next time you sit down with this draft. Or write yourself a post-writing memo: where you started, what you figured out and accomplished, and a short list of next steps to guide you back into writing next time.

**Learn more about Imposter Syndrome or Intellectual Self-Doubt:**

- <https://matermea.com/diversity-in-workplace-advice-for-black-women/>
- <https://impostorsyndrome.com/10-steps-overcome-impostor/>
- <https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2015/04/13/essay-how-graduate-students-can-fight-impostor-syndrome>
- [https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Lori-Hoggard/publication/316173439\\_Racial\\_Discrimination\\_Racial\\_Identity\\_and\\_Impostor\\_Phenomenon\\_A\\_Profile\\_Approach/links/58fa236faca2723d79d60](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Lori-Hoggard/publication/316173439_Racial_Discrimination_Racial_Identity_and_Impostor_Phenomenon_A_Profile_Approach/links/58fa236faca2723d79d60)
- [https://ctl.yale.edu/sites/default/files/basic-page-supplementary-materials-files/writing\\_through\\_imposter\\_stress\\_eight\\_tips\\_updated\\_fall\\_2018.pdf](https://ctl.yale.edu/sites/default/files/basic-page-supplementary-materials-files/writing_through_imposter_stress_eight_tips_updated_fall_2018.pdf)

**Make an appointment with the Graduate Writing Center** at [uvm.mywconline.net](http://uvm.mywconline.net). In your consultant you will find an interested and supportive audience to help you plan, draft, and rehearse before it is time to share with higher-stakes audiences in your program or field.