

Overcoming Imposter Syndrome by Anya Pavelle

I'll never forget the first time I queried a literary agent with an infant draft of my book, *The Moon Hunters*. I'd spent weeks finding the perfect agent to help shape my manuscript into a book worthy of publication. I next committed her query requirements to memory.

My dream agent asked that a prospective author paste a query letter and the first chapter of the novel into the body of an email. I drafted a query letter with the agent's preferences in mind, but my frantic eyes only saw gibberish as they scanned the query for any deviation from the agent's specifications.

I then deleted the letter, something I regretted. My heart racing, I took a few deep breaths and drafted another query. I resisted the urge to delete that version.

Over the next few days, I obsessed over every detail of my book's first chapter. I finally grew sick of revising. I had more books to write, a dog to pet, and Netflix to binge.

After addressing an email to the agent, I pasted the query and chapter into the body of an email. My heart raced, and my mind spun with questions. What if my dream agent rejected me? What if my manuscript was derivative? Would the publishing world mock my attempts at fiction? I took another deep breath as my finger hovered over my laptop's mouse. No matter what I did, I couldn't press the mouse to engage the "send" button.

I had **Imposter Syndrome** to thank for my paralysis. More specifically, I didn't believe I was worthy of attempting to get my book published. I'd met the dreaded Madame Imposter Syndrome as I called her when I was writing my doctoral dissertation. I wasn't alone.

My colleagues and I suffered under so much angst that we drowned our sorrows at a local 1960s tiki-themed bar whose owner liked to host Bingo and trivia nights while wearing a gorilla suit. At that awesome place, my cohort and I drank Green Chartreuse and discussed critical theory as a distraction from our raging insecurity. I would have enjoyed that bar and camaraderie with my colleagues much more fully if we hadn't felt like the academic world would expose us as frauds at any minute.

Despite my graduate school insecurities, I successfully defended my dissertation and moved on to the next phase of life. I found a job at a college and started writing *The Moon Hunters*. Little did I know that trying to publish the book would stress me more than writing it.

As I tried to send that first query email, I told myself that if I could complete a doctorate, I could gather up the courage to ask my dream agent for representation. My panicked brain had assigned her powers akin to a mythical deity.

Literary agents are gatekeepers to big publishing houses, but they're also human beings with faults of their own. My dream agent had the power to reject my book. She did not, however, control the entire publishing world.

With hard work and luck, I could get my book into the hands of readers. I knew I'd likely have to wade through *many* rejections before I found a home for *The Moon Hunters*. Confident I'd done my best on my query letter and sample chapter, I took a shot of tequila and hit "send."

In case you've been reading with bated breath to see if I landed a contract with my dream agent, well, I didn't. In fact, I never even heard from her. I survived this rejection, though. I learned from the process and improved my querying skills.

After months of sending query letters and the corresponding requisite materials to literary agents and small publishers alike, I received an offer from Chandra Press, a small publisher of science fiction. This press accepted submissions from authors directly instead of requiring an agent, and I signed because the acquisitions editor shared my vision for the book.

I'm very happy with that decision and that I took the emotional risk of putting my book out in the world for judgment. If I'd let Imposter Syndrome get the best of me, I'd never have hit "send" on that first query letter.

Although Imposter Syndrome causes suffering, mental health professionals haven't classified it as a disorder in the *Diagnosis and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, the book used to diagnose patients.

Psychologists Suzanne Imes and Pauline Rose Clance coined the term in the 1970s to describe people who "attribute their accomplishments to luck rather than to ability, and fear that others will eventually unmask them as a fraud" (Weir, 2013).

I certainly felt like a fraud during my graduate studies. I survived solely by embracing the fallacy of sunk costs. I'd devoted years to the degree, and even if I was an imposter, I was determined to maintain my crumbling facade of competence. In sum, I successfully defended my dissertation because my desperation to finish my doctorate outweighed my feelings of inadequacy.

A few years after defending my dissertation, I decided to query my novel. I knew I needed a healthy way to combat Imposter Syndrome that time around.

I found such a strategy in a professional development seminar on Growth Mindset, a concept developed by a psychologist, Dr. Carol Dweck. Dweck argues that instead of a fixed mindset, people should adopt a growth mindset. Those with growth mindsets challenge themselves, accept failure as a natural occurrence on the road to mastery, and embrace criticism as a means of improvement. They also achieve their goals through hard work (Dweck, 2007).

At first, I worried that growth mindset was an offshoot of self-help theories that argued the act of creating a dream board would force the universe to manifest a Ferrari complete with a Henry Cavill clone on the wisher's driveway.

Dweck's theory didn't feel like hype, though. She asserts that work and a willingness to learn, not simple thoughts, are the foundations of success.

To my relief, adopting a growth mindset lessened my fears of rejection because I viewed failure as a normal result of trying something new. There's a freedom in embracing the inevitability of rejection.

I trained myself to welcome the critical feedback sent to me by agents and publishers. *The Moon Hunters* became stronger with each revision, and I got more responses to my queries with each tweak.

In the querying trenches, I also learned that rejection didn't necessarily mean my book wasn't worthy of publication. Countless blogs recommend authors find agents and publishing houses that feel passionate about their books. Sometimes, a *no thanks* simply meant that the person I queried hadn't fallen in love with my project.

I best understood this type of rejection in terms of food. When I'm choosing a restaurant, I don't pick one that specializes in French cuisine because that's not my favorite type of food. I prefer Indian, Thai, Japanese, or Greek restaurants. This doesn't mean French food isn't excellent. I simply choose to spend my money and calorie allotment on foods that make my taste buds swoon.

Finding someone with a similar passion for my book would require patience. After months of querying, I found that person for *The Moon Hunters*. I'm glad I didn't give up my dream of publication before it started. Growth mindset didn't eliminate my insecurities. Instead, I learned to manage my fears healthily.

I've discussed ways writers can use a growth mindset to battle Imposter Syndrome when querying. Dweck's paradigm can also help independent authors navigate criticism before and after self-publication.

Most indie authors don't publish in a vacuum. They share their work with editors and beta readers, whose job it is to point out a book's flaws before it's published.

A growth mindset permits indie authors to see constructive criticism as a necessary tool to improve their manuscripts. Launching a book with obvious issues into the world causes a host of problems. Disappointed readers will, for example, make their opinions known on Amazon and Goodreads. Embracing critical feedback helps indie writers publish the best version of their books.

Even the most well-written novel will find its way into the hands of dissatisfied readers, though. Accepting this inevitability makes criticism and negative reviews easier to accept. On the journey to publications, writers must navigate a minefield of rejection and criticism.

The publication process becomes easier when we learn from critical feedback and work hard to improve our craft. It's normal to feel like an imposter in the literary world, but we don't have to suffer those feelings of inadequacy. Traditionally published and independent authors can combat Imposter Syndrome with a growth mindset and the knowledge that rejection is inevitable.

Anya Pavelle is the author of the fascinating dystopian fiction novel [Moon Hunters](#). She blogs about life and writing at <https://anyapavelle.com/>

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