

A FIELD GUIDE

The Difficulty

Eight difficulties every working writer faces, and what to ask when each one shows up.

"The difficulty in life is the choice."

GEORGE MOORE

WHY THIS EXISTS

A small field guide.

This is a small field guide for working writers. Not a system, not a method, not advice. It's a set of eight difficulties that every writer, artist, or maker doing real work will recognize, and a set of questions worth asking yourself when each one shows up.

The premise is simple. Most of the hard moments in a creative life are not technique problems. They're choice problems. And the choices recur: the same eight or so shapes, in different costumes, across the years. Naming them helps. Recognizing one when you're in it helps even more.

Use this however you want. Read it once and put it in a drawer. Read it slowly and sit with the prompts. Carry it as a reference and pull it out when something feels stuck. There's no right way.

DIFFICULTY 01

The work that *pays* and the work that *matters*.

There's the work that funds your life and there's the work pulling at you when you're alone. For most working writers these are not the same work, and pretending otherwise is one of the slower ways to lose yourself.

The signal: you finish a paying assignment and feel, instead of relief, a kind of dull resentment. Or you sit down to the personal project and the dishes suddenly need doing. The two pieces of you are bargaining without you, and one of them keeps losing.

The honest accounting is harder than the easy one. The easy one says you'll get to the real work eventually. The honest one names what *eventually* has cost you so far. Not all paying work displaces the work that matters. Sometimes it actually feeds it. But sometimes the relationship is parasitic and you've stopped looking.

THE REFLECTION

When did you last spend a full day on the work that matters most to you? If the answer is "I can't remember," that's the answer.

DIFFICULTY 02

Finishing what you started, or *starting what you really want.*

Loyalty to the project you've been working on for two years can become an alibi for not facing the project that's been calling you for six months. Both responses are real. The first one is also frequently a hiding place.

The cleanest version of this difficulty: you have a draft sixty percent done, and you have an idea, or worse, a feeling, that something else is the actual book you're meant to be writing. You can't quite tell whether to push through to the end of what's in front of you, or whether the new thing deserves the energy you'd be spending on completion.

The patience-and-grit literature will tell you to finish what you start. The instinct-and-listen literature will tell you to follow what's alive. Both are sometimes right and you're rarely sure which case you're in. What helps is being honest about what you actually know about each (the old project's specific weakness, the new one's specific draw) rather than letting the abstract virtues fight it out in your head.

THE REFLECTION

If you had to put one of these two projects in a drawer for a year, which would you mourn more by month four?

DIFFICULTY 03

Voice or *audience*.

Write what's true to you, or write what reaches the people who don't know you yet. Most working writers oscillate between these forever; pretending the choice goes away is a way of refusing it.

The voice-only path produces work that's authentically yours and finds an audience in its own time, sometimes never. The audience-only path produces work that sells and slowly hollows out the maker who made it. Neither pole is the answer. The hard part is that the productive tension between them isn't a position you find once and hold. It's a daily choosing.

This shows up smallest in the title of the next piece. Smallest, but most repeatedly. And the cumulative effect of those small choices, over years, is the writer you become.

THE REFLECTION

Of the last five things you made or wrote, which were primarily voice-led, and which were primarily audience-led? What does the ratio tell you?

DIFFICULTY 04

Stay or *pivot*.

Your established lane (the one you've earned, the one that pays) versus the work pulling you somewhere it's not obvious you can survive. Reinvention is romantic to talk about and brutal to live.

Stay-and-deepen has its own honor. Many of the writers and artists we admire most have spent careers carving the same vein. But there's a difference between deepening and not noticing the well's gone dry. The signal isn't usually loud. It's a low hum of "is this still the work?" that you keep silencing because the alternative (admitting you don't know yet) is a worse position to be in.

The pivot itself is harder than the question of whether to pivot. Pivots cost. Money, audience, identity, the version of yourself that already exists in other people's minds. The cost is real and you have to be willing to pay it. But you also have to be willing to refuse: to stay, deeply, when staying is the right call. *Knowing which is which* is most of the work.

THE REFLECTION

If you could not answer "what do you do?" with the thing you currently do, what would you say? How quickly does the answer come?

DIFFICULTY 05

The life *on the page*.

How much of your actual experience belongs in the work, and how much wants to stay yours alone. The contemporary pressure runs hard toward more confessional, more personal, more raw. But not every truth wants to be told, and the writer who hasn't decided what to keep loses the choice by default.

There's a particular failure mode here: mistaking confession for honesty. Honesty is harder. Confession can be self-indulgent, which is itself a kind of lying. Performing rawness for an audience that rewards it. Real honesty often *withholds*. It declines the easy disclosure because the easy disclosure isn't, on inspection, the truer one.

This is its own discipline, and it's not the same discipline as craft. You can be a brilliant writer who hasn't decided what's yours to keep. The decision goes piece by piece, and pretending you've drawn the line once and for all is the failure mode.

THE REFLECTION

What's something true about you that has not, and may never, appear in your work? What does keeping it intact give you?

DIFFICULTY 06

Ship or *polish*.

The work is sixty percent there, or eighty, or ninety. You can polish for another month and the marginal improvement will be real. You can also ship now and start learning what the work actually does in the world. There's no formula for which call is right, and the literature is no help: half of it tells you to ship, the other half tells you to honor the work.

Polish has its own seductive logic. Each round catches something. Each round, the thing gets a little better. The trap is that you can polish forever and the only person who notices the difference is you. Past a certain point, polish becomes a shelter. It looks like dedication. It feels like dedication. But it's keeping the work safe from contact with anyone who might actually use it, and that's a different thing.

Ship has its own trap. Ship too early and you've burned the only first impression you get. Some readers won't come back. Some opportunities won't repeat. The honest question is not "is it perfect" because nothing is perfect. The honest question is whether the work, as it stands, will do what you made it for. Two writers can answer that question opposite ways about the same draft and both be right.

THE REFLECTION

If you knew no one would ever see this work after you released it, would you still polish it for another month? If you knew everyone you respect would see it tomorrow, would you ship it as it stands?

DIFFICULTY 07

The reader you imagined and the *reader who showed up*.

You wrote the book for a particular kind of reader. You pictured them while you wrote. Then the work goes out and a different reader shows up. Sometimes adjacent. Sometimes nothing like who you expected. The choice is whether to write toward the reader who actually came, or to keep writing toward the one you imagined.

Writing toward the reader who showed up is the pragmatic call. They're the audience you have. They're the ones reading you, telling friends, paying for the next thing. There's a real argument that the audience that finds you is the audience that's right for you, and that resisting it is a form of vanity.

Writing toward the reader you imagined is the harder call. It assumes the imagined reader exists, somewhere, and that the work hasn't found them yet. Sometimes that's true. Sometimes it's a story you tell yourself to avoid noticing that the imagined reader was always partly fictional. The writer has to know which kind of case they're in, and the only way to know is to look honestly at the gap between who you wrote for and who actually came.

THE REFLECTION

Who's the reader you most want to be read by, and who actually reads you? When the two pull apart, what does the gap tell you about the work, and what does it tell you about your idea of yourself?

DIFFICULTY 08

Persist or *quit*.

The hardest one. There's no rule for when endurance is a virtue and when it's stupidity. The literature on grit is full of confirmation bias; the literature on knowing when to walk away is thinner. You make this call alone and you're rarely sure.

The grit advocates will tell you that almost no one quits at the last hard moment, and that the writers and artists we celebrate are the ones who pushed through when others stopped. They're right, and the data backs them up. The sunk-cost critics will tell you that almost everyone keeps going past the point of clear evidence, that loss aversion warps every "one more year" decision, and that the obvious move would be a clean break. They're also right, and the data backs them up too.

What helps isn't a rule. It's two questions, asked honestly: *Is the work itself still alive in you? And: is the world giving you any signal at all that you should keep at it?* Two yes-es and you keep going. Two no-s and walking away is the right call. One of each (that's most cases), and you make a judgment call alone, and stay willing to revisit it.

THE REFLECTION

If you stripped out hope of future success and asked only whether the work itself still feels alive, how would you answer about the project in front of you?

CLOSING

Eight difficulties. Eight questions.

The point isn't to resolve them. They don't resolve. The point is to recognize them clearly enough to make a real choice, instead of drifting into one by default.

Re-read the prompts when something feels stuck. Some of the difficulties will show up over and over; one or two might never apply to you. That's how field guides work. You carry them, and the bird you needed to identify shows up when it shows up.

The Difficulty is a podcast about exactly this kind of work: the choices that shape a creative life, and the courage it takes to make them. New episodes weekly. Subscribe at chadprevost.com/the-difficulty for new episodes, transcripts, and the next set of guides as they come out.

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