

Miss to Make It

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In April 2016, I sat in a packed auditorium at Lenoir-Rhyne University to hear award-winning writer Anne Lamott speak as part of the college's Visiting Writers Series. She offered words of advice on writing to the gathered crowd. A recurring point in the evening was simple: First drafts are terrible but allow us to experience the "magic of messes."

Lamott's speech occurred in the final days of the NBA regular season. The Golden State Warriors were chasing the historic mark of 73 regular season wins. Steph Curry was also setting a record with every three-point shot. Curry was smashing the previous record of 286 that he set in the previous year. He'd surpassed the mark of 300 made three-point shots in March, well over a month before the end of the regular season. He'd eventually shoot just over 400.

Lamott's characterization of the writing process and Curry's shooting prowess underscored how accomplishments can be interwoven with missed attempts. Michael Jordan put it this way:

I've missed more than 9,000 shots in my

career. I've lost almost 300 games. Twenty-six times, I've been trusted to take the game-winning shot and missed. I've failed over and over and over again in my life. And that is why I succeed.

Anne Lamott's books received acclaim, not the drafts. Steph Curry misses from behind the three-point line over half the time.

How does this apply to data science? There are generally no awards or winning and losing. There are, however, attempts not at shooting or writing but at insight. To write a book, you must sit and write, even if the result is initially poorly conceived. Steph Curry must be willing to shoot the ball and inevitably miss over half the time in order to score. To gain insight from data, you must form a question, gather data, and perform analysis without a guarantee of helpful results. Lamott is a gifted writer. Curry is an MVP player. Those performing your data analysis should be trained and serious in their exploration. Still, missed attempts can lead to success.

The best-written chapters in a draft may not make the final book. Open shots from behind the three-point line may not lead to a score. In data science, you may have a clear vision of how to approach a problem. After tackling the question, you may find it is harder than expected—possibly even unanswerable in its current form. Such moments clarify what you know and don't know, what you can and cannot do.

You may, like writing a draft or shooting on a practice court, need to step back and do more background work. You may need to learn new ideas, revisit your question, or collect more data. Failing to attain actionable, insightful results can be disappointing but could be the step that leads to bigger insight than expected.

Other times, you won't have a clear vision for analysis and could feel stuck in the data science. When this happens, be sure, switching to a baseball analogy, that you are willing to risk a strikeout. As Babe Ruth said:

Every strike brings me closer to the next home run.

If you perform analysis and don't gain insight, ask

another question: why or what can you do differently. Answering this question can enable

you to win. Sometimes, we must experience those missed attempts in order to make

the game-winning moves that define our success.

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