

How early failure can lead to success later in creative careers

[Stephen Langston](#), University of the West of Scotland

November 8, 2022

¹ Failing early in our careers can make us question whether we are on the right path. We may look at people who have succeeded from the outset and wonder why it doesn't come so easily to us. Classical violinist [Nigel Kennedy](#), actor [Natalie Portman](#) and painter [Pablo Picasso](#) are examples of young geniuses who were successful early on.

² But for some of us, failure at the beginning of our careers is important to later success. For many creatives, how we deal with those moments when things aren't going right or you've received yet another rejection letter can make or break us.

³ The author and self-improvement lecturer [Dale Carnegie](#) maintained that inaction breeds doubt and fear; action creates confidence and courage, which inevitably ends up helping a person to succeed. This chimes with what American psychologist Carol Dweck outlines in her 2006 book [Mindset](#).

⁴ Dweck discusses the concept of people with a "fixed mindset" versus a "growth mindset". The former is a way of thinking where there is a lack of self belief and a negative persona while the latter is where no challenge or task is too large to take on board. Which mindset you have dictates how you will interpret failure and success and how well you approach everyday life.

⁵ A passion for learning and a desire to improve upon failure creates opportunities to learn and challenge yourself. This mentality is a boon to creatives. While yes, there are the Picassos and Portmans of the world, there are also a few famous creatives who had to overcome failure early on in their careers. These individuals demonstrate the "growth mindset".

Rejection doesn't have to kill dreams

⁶ A young school teacher from Maine, US, was a passionate part-time writer who worked tirelessly trying to get his novels published (unsuccessfully) in the late 1960s. He continued to believe in himself and chase the dream of becoming a successful author. But sometimes the reality of failure gets the better of a person and after 30 rejections he famously threw his fourth attempt at a novel away.

⁷ Fortunately, the manuscript was saved by his wife who, having confidence in his work, persuaded him to continue trying. Eventually, the novel was sold for an advance of £2000, a nice bonus for a schoolteacher. The publishing rights were ultimately purchased for an additional £200,000 and the novel [Carrie](#) turned [Stephen King](#) into a household name.

⁸ Dreams can propel us forward but they can also be crushed by rejection. The composer [Johnathon Larson](#) spent years working on his 1991 musical [Superbia](#) only for it to be turned down by theatre producers. He was told by his agent to "go away and write something you know about".

⁹ This was a crushing moment for Larson. Eight years of work rejected. However, he listened to the advice and his next musical [Rent](#) premiered on Broadway in 1996, becoming a box office sensation. The semi-autobiographical [Tick, Tick Boom](#), which Larson began performing as a one-man show in 1990, went on to also be a hit when it premiered in 2001. It has recently been turned into a major motion picture directed by [Lin-Manuel Miranda](#) (creator of [Hamilton](#)).

¹⁰ Larson's secret was to learn from failure and take on the advice given to him. He used that experience to propel himself forward. Sadly, Larson never witnessed his triumph, he died on the eve of Rent's Broadway premier in 1996 from an aortic dissection. But his life, including his failures, made him successful. His roadblocks became his inspiration. Both of his successful productions tell the stories of larger-than-life characters struggling with their failings while trying to achieve a degree of success.

Overcoming difficult circumstances

¹¹ There are situations in life that conspire to make us fail. However, adversity can often act as a springboard of determination to succeed. My turning point as a youngster was failing my grade five music theory exam. That one singular event, although heartbreaking, made me determined to succeed in music and become a composer and producer of Scottish Musicals.

¹² Others deal with much more difficult circumstances. Imagine being homeless, penniless with partial facial paralysis, yet dreaming of an acting career. Never-ending rejection from talent scouts and agents, hours of waiting for appointments that never materialise, such a life would be demoralising. However, the realisation of personal failure can become the catalyst for success.

¹³ This real-life scenario eventually earned [Sylvester Stallone](#) over £178 million and catapulted his writing and acting career to stardom. He didn't let these circumstances, which led to failure, stop him. The key here is that he believed in his ability and that drove him onward. Continual failure reinforced his resolve to succeed.

¹⁴ [Steven Spielberg](#) had poor high school grades and was rejected three times from film school. He battled through his early career failures before eventually directing 51 films and winning three Oscars. Again, it was his perseverance and self belief [that drove his determination to succeed](#).

¹⁵ We might never become the next Spielberg, King or Larson but the lesson learnt from their experiences is a sharp reminder of [the mantra of playwright Samuel Beckett](#):

Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.

¹⁶ Failure is not damaging, it is part of a proactive progression and once we learn to accept that we might be unstoppable. I eventually passed my grade five theory exam and went on to get two degrees and a PhD in musical theatre, the rest is history ... my personal history began with a failure for which I am very proud.

[This article is part of Fail Better](#), a series for those of us in our 20s and 30s about navigating the moments when things aren't quite going as planned. Many of us are tuned into the highlight reel of social media, where our peers share their successes in relationships, careers and family. When you feel like you're not measuring up, the pieces in this special [Quarter Life](#) series will help you learn how to cope with, and even grow from, failure.

[Stephen Langston](#), Senior Lecturer and Programme Leader for Performance, *University of the West of Scotland*

This article is republished from [The Conversation](#) under a Creative Commons license. Read the [original article](#).