

## See, and See Again

With leadership, numerous distinctions and labels are applied to various techniques and styles, with more seeming to appear with every trip to the bookstore. Articles and books highlight servant leadership and transformative leadership; books delve into socialized and adaptive leadership, and training sessions encourage authentic and inspirational leadership...it sometimes becomes overwhelming to connect to what feels most suitable to you and your own leadership journey.

Growth and learning are keys to happiness: learning gives us self-confidence and motivation, and being willing to grow can expand our perspective and increase life satisfaction. (Eiluned Pearce, 2017). However, sometimes, it can all feel like too much. When that happens, take a moment, and refocus yourself. Reflect on what is happening, and why you may be feeling overwhelmed. You need to *look* and then *look again* at what is happening. Look at these common situations that can lead to feelings of burnout, being overwhelmed, imposter syndrome, or defeatism.

### **1. Reading leadership advice articles makes you feel inadequate or as if you will never be “good enough.”**

Leadership articles are a great way to study leadership, expand your knowledge, and find advice or insights to enhance your own practices. However, sometimes the infinite amount of articles touting “10 Things You Are Doing Wrong as a Leader” and “What Successful Leaders Are Doing (That You Aren’t)” can cause feelings of inadequacy, or like you will never measure up.

When this happens, step back for a moment and think about everything you **are** doing well as a leader. Look at where you have improved and acknowledge that for yourself. Next, consider the context: Everyone is in a unique situation, and there is no “one size fits all” regarding leadership. Your team, department, role, and even industry can have a massive impact on what “good leadership” looks like. What is successful in a factory won’t necessarily work in a board room or leading a team of programmers – each of those situations defines success differently. Take the time to decide how **YOU** want to define success.

**2. The things you want to prioritize learning or developing are too much! The mountains of information you feel like you don’t know is intimidating, and you cannot imagine ever learning enough.**

Start the same way: look at your strengths and successes and develop what success looks like to you. Once you have done this, you may realize how far you have already come or how much you already know. Then look at what areas you want to prioritize improving as part of your leadership development: start by considering where you want to be in the future, whether six months from now or three to five years from now. Use your journal – write this down! “In X years, I want to be...”.

With that clear goal in mind, what are the most important things you must develop to prepare yourself for the future you want? Focus on those, knowing you can always add on and build on these skills later: You don’t have to do everything all at once! If it’s difficult to start, don’t just focus on the leadership aspect. Write down

what required training you may need and what recommendations or hard requirements there are.

Work backward from your goal to where you are currently to find the most important areas for you to focus on. If your 3-year plan is to be a team leader, consider what traits a good team leader has in that position. (Look at the mind map exercise as one technique for this) Of the skills and talents you identified, which ones are you already good at, and which ones should you work on? Keep your focus on just a few of these areas at a time, starting with what you feel is the most important.

**3. The more information you find, the more inadequate you feel. Or maybe you spend too much time considering where you aren't meeting the mark.**

In either case, the cause is likely the same: Overthinking. Spending too much time thinking only of your faults and how you need to improve not only negates the hard work and successes you already have but also can lead to mental health issues. Depression, anxiety, negative self-talk – all these and more can create barriers to developing and growing as a leader.

You should act on the information you are reading or studying, not just thinking about it. Visualization is a fantastic technique commonly used by athletes at all levels, but even the most detailed and intense visualization won't win a trophy if it's never turned into action. Think, but don't overthink. (Or think negatively!)

When you catch yourself overthinking or in a negative thought pattern, there are a few ways to realign your mind.

- a. Notice when it happens *and acknowledge that it isn't productive.*
- b. Focus on Solutions *instead of focusing on problems. Just thinking about the problem isn't helpful, but thinking about solutions is. And if you don't think you can solve the problem? Think about mitigation, or strategies to help cope with it. You may know a hurricane is coming, but worrying about it won't change its course, and you can't really solve the problem. But you can devise strategies to mitigate the impact and stay safe.*
- c. Call yourself out *especially when you are catastrophizing. Everyone has times when they get carried away with negative thoughts. You feel like you bombed a presentation, which will result in a low employee review, which will cause you to be fired, which will mean you can't pay your bills and then you will have to live in a van down by the river. When you find yourself turning molehills into mountains, take a step back and look objectively at the situation. Journalling, contacting a mentor, or tapping into your support network can help you keep perspective.*
- d. Be mindful *by practicing mindfulness. Meditate, use a journal, draw – do anything that helps you live in the present moment. Like any skill, mindfulness takes practice but has enormous benefits. You can start with a simple 5-minute guided reflection using any number of apps on your phone or the internet to guide you and grow from there.*

e. Don't think about a polka-dotted penguin. *You can't always control your thoughts, and when you constantly tell yourself to "stop thinking about a polka-dotted penguin," the more the image of that decorated Sphenisciformes will pop up. Instead, engage your brain in other things. Take a walk, have a chat, work on an exciting project, or do anything else that will engage your mind and keep penguins and polka dots from taking center stage.*

**4. You were feeling overwhelmed, so you stopped reading/studying/learning/etc, and now you feel impossibly behind. Or maybe you had to take a step back for personal reasons and feel like the ship has sailed.**

It happens to us all. For whatever reason, you take some time away, and when you are ready to return, you feel like you missed out on too much. You aren't in the habit anymore, and it's hard. Maybe your situation changed, and the routines and schedules you had before aren't working anymore.

That's okay: change is one of life's few constants. Acknowledge the validity of your feelings, but also the need for action. Start where you can, and slowly build up your routines and efforts. If possible, try to identify what made you feel so overwhelmed that you had to do an "all-stop" so that you can avoid it in the future. Life happens to us all, and our priorities shift and change. Sometimes permanently, sometimes not. Give yourself some grace and get back in the game at a sustainable pace, relying on your mentors and support networks when you need to.

5. **You made a mistake. Or aren't doing as well as you thought you would. You tried something and it failed. You just aren't good enough.**

No one should expect perfection. Perfection means you have reached the pinnacle; there is absolutely nothing to improve, and thus, you can consider your leadership journey complete. Any authentic leader will readily tell you that it's not about perfection; it's about progress. When you remove the pressure to be perfect, you can instead commit to getting better one step at a time.

This is a process practiced in businesses worldwide known as *incremental improvement*. It is where you focus your efforts on smaller solutions or challenges that slowly move you closer to success. Rather than dramatic results, the immediate results will be more modest but will also be longer lasting.

Incremental improvement focuses on small rather than large changes. For example, rather than deciding to practice your presentation and public speaking skills at a significant organizational summit for the first time, start by speaking and participating in your weekly team meetings and grow from there. Because you are working on more minor changes, it's also less intimidating to try new things to see what works for you and your team while allowing for course adjustments.

**It's also important to check your own self-talk.** Who is demanding perfection – is that what you are being told? Or what you are telling yourself? You can always seek ways to leave a toxic work environment, but nothing will change if the true culprit is in your mind. Check-in on what standards and expectations you are measuring yourself against and whether they are reasonable. Use your journal,

mentor, or support group to discuss your feelings of inadequacy or failure – you may be surprised to find that you are the only one who views it that way.

All these suggestions share a common thread: being willing to look at something, then take a second, more introspective look. It is so easy to get caught up in the routine and patterns of our lives. Unless we intentionally remind ourselves to spend the time to step back and really observe what we are feeling or experiencing, it can be easy to fall into the trap of complacency or drown in feelings of inadequacy or being overwhelmed. Take the time to acknowledge your thoughts and action patterns and listen to your inner voice. Try to maintain the balance of holding a growth mindset while appreciating your progress. While there is always room to grow and improve, that doesn't mean we shouldn't also be proud and acknowledge our past accomplishments and achievements. Leadership is a journey of "both-and", not "either-or".

Following this idea of "seeing and seeing again", art gives us a wonderful phrase:

*Pentimento.*

### **Pentimento**

*Pentimento: (noun) a visible trace of earlier painting beneath a layer or layers of paint on a canvas.*

Derived from the Italian word "to repent", pentimento is the term in art referring to the literal presence of layers in an image. Today, many pentimenti are visible via x-rays and infrared scans in famous artworks, and these pentimenti mark the ways in which the painting in

question changed and evolved as the artist created it. And this is an important distinction: a pentimento is not a *mistake*, it is a change or evolution of an idea as it is created.

Leonardo da Vinci, Jan van Eyck, Edgar Degas and Vincent van Gough are all famous artists known for their practice of pentimento, especially when completing preliminary sketches. One of the earliest artists to embrace the idea of pentimento beyond the sketchbook was Paul Cezanne, who was an early adopter and pioneer of how pentimento could play a role in the enrichment of a finished work. Perhaps the most well-known example of pentimento is from da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*. In the early 2000's, an infrared scan was conducted on the famous painting, showing that originally, she was posed slightly differently and had a different hairstyle in the underpaintings, later changed for the final version.

Black out poetry is a creative writing and visualization activity that embraces the idea of creating layers of meaning. Most commonly, it is done by taking an existing piece of writing and redacting words to create meaning. You can use books, magazines, brochures, personal writing- nearly anything can be the starting point for a blackout poem. Because you don't have to "write" the poem, only "discover" it, it is also very accessible.

Like other forms of poetry and creative writing, blackout poetry can train our brain to "see" things from a different perspective. The use of poetry in self-development can help increase not only the capacity for self-expression but also provide a vehicle for a better understanding of the self. (Olson-McBride & Page, 2012) If other forms of creative writing don't interest you, blackout poetry can provide similar benefits in a more accessible format. Try a blackout poem now, and practice "looking and looking again" to see what messages and insights you uncover.



# Blackout Poetry

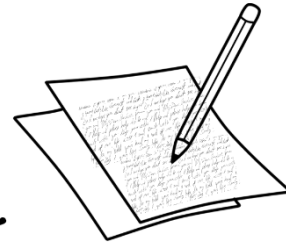
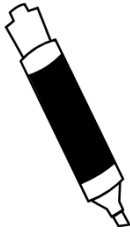
Try this technique on almost anything - newspapers or articles are great for this, but so are brochures, planning documents and books. You can create blackout poems that are independent of the source text (like the example here), or you can use them to identify, emphasize or even juxtapose the original message. Its a new way of thinking and communicating ideas, a brain challenge similar to other popular word puzzles (word searches, crosswords, etc).

## Supplies:

Marker or Pen (Black or any other color is fine)

Pencil (optional)

Text-based document (Can be anything)



...a pair of the gloves, and was just  
going to leave the room, when her eye fell upon a little  
bottle that stood near the looking-glass. There was no label  
on this time with the words "DRINK ME," but nevertheless she  
uncorked it and put it to her lips. "I know something  
interesting is sure to happen," she said to herself  
whenever I eat or drink anything; so I'll just see what this  
bottle does. I do hope it'll make me grow large again, for  
really I'm quite tired of being such a tiny little thing!"  
It did so indeed, and much sooner than she had expected  
before she had drunk half the bottle, she found her head  
pressing against the ceiling, and had to stoop to save her  
neck from being broken. She hastily

1. Start by skimming through the passage and making a box around words or phrases you like using your pencil, or if you don't have a pencil, you can use your pen or marker.

This is a passage from Lewis Carroll's Alice in Wonderland. Circled are words and phrases that I liked and want to keep, knowing I can go back and make changes later.

2. Begin "blacking out" words and phrases that are not part of what you highlighted, reading along as you go

Here you can see where I started blacking out phrases I was certain I did not want.

pressing against the ceiling, and had to stoop to save her  
neck from being broken. She hastily put down the bottle,  
saying to herself "That's quite enough—I hope I ~~can't~~  
~~grow any more—As it is, I can't get out at the door. I do wish I~~  
~~hadn't drunk quite so much!"~~  
It was too late to think that! She went on growing, and  
soon had to kneel down

3. Read through only the parts you highlighted/boxed in!

This is a very back-and-forth process, so you may read over a section a few times bouncing between step 2 and 3 before feeling like you are “done”

“I know something interesting is sure to happen,” she said to herself, “I can do more, whatever happens.”  
Luckily she grew still it was very uncomfortable, and yet—  
I do wonder what can have happened to me.

5. You can either leave your blackout poem as is, or copy out your poem on a different page. but keep in mind part of the art of blackout poetry is the visualization of the poem. You can make changes any time as your poem emerges (like you may notice above) until you are happy with it.

Luckily for me, the little magic bottle had now had its full effect, and she grew no larger: still it was very uncomfortable, and I almost wish I hadn't gone down that rabbit hole—and yet—and yet—it's rather curious, you know, this sort of life. I do wonder what can have happened to me.

4. You can make changes any time as your poem emerges until you are happy with it.

“I know something interesting is sure to happen,” she said to herself.  
So, it did.

She went on growing  
and  
said to herself,  
“I can do more,”

it was very uncomfortable  
and yet  
I do wonder what can happen.

## Activity

Using any/all of the example text on the following pages, or any text of your own, create your own blackout poem. The steps are simple:

1. Scan the text and underline or highlight words or phrases you like
2. Black out the rest
3. Read, repeat and revise until you are happy.

All texts are royalty free from [www.gutenberg.org](http://www.gutenberg.org)



Poetry

Alice was beginning to get very tired of sitting by her sister on the bank, and of having nothing to do: once or twice she had peeped into the book her sister was reading, but it had no pictures or conversations in it, “and what is the use of a book,” thought Alice “without pictures or conversations?” So she was considering in her own mind (as well as she could, for the hot day made her feel very sleepy and stupid), whether the pleasure of making a daisy-chain would be worth the trouble of getting up and picking the daisies, when suddenly a White Rabbit with pink eyes ran close by her.

There was nothing so very remarkable in that; nor did Alice think it so very much out of the way to hear the Rabbit say to itself, “Oh dear! Oh dear! I shall be late!” (when she thought it over afterwards, it occurred to her that she ought to have wondered at this, but at the time it all seemed quite natural); but when the Rabbit actually took a watch out of its waistcoat-pocket, and looked at it, and then hurried on, Alice started to her feet, for it flashed across her mind that she had never before seen a rabbit with either a waistcoat-pocket, or a watch to take out of it, and burning with curiosity, she ran across the field after it, and fortunately was just in time to see it pop down a large rabbit-hole under the hedge. In another moment down went Alice after it, never once considering how in the world she was to get out again. The rabbit-hole went straight on like a tunnel for some way, and then dipped suddenly down, so suddenly that Alice had not a moment to think about stopping herself before she found herself falling down a very deep well. Either the well was very deep, or she fell very slowly, for she had plenty of time as she went down to look about her and to wonder what was going to happen next. First, she tried to look down and make out what she was coming to, but it was too dark to see anything; then she looked at the sides of the well, and noticed that they were filled with cupboards and book-shelves; here and there she saw maps and pictures hung upon pegs. She took down a jar from one of the shelves as she passed; it was labelled “ORANGE MARMALADE”, but to her great disappointment it was empty: she did not like to drop the jar for fear of killing somebody underneath, so managed to put it into one of the cupboards as she fell past it. “Well!” thought Alice to herself, “after such a fall as this, I shall think nothing of tumbling down stairs! How brave they’ll all think me at home! Why, I wouldn’t say anything about it, even if I fell off the top of the house!” (Which was very likely true.) Down, down, down. Would the fall never come to an end? “I wonder how many miles I’ve fallen by this time?” she said aloud.



I remember the first albatross I ever saw. It was during a prolonged gale, in waters hard upon the Antarctic seas. From my forenoon watch below, I ascended to the overclouded deck; and there, dashed upon the main hatches, I saw a regal, feathery thing of unspotted whiteness, and with a hooked, Roman bill sublime. At intervals, it arched forth its vast archangel wings, as if to embrace some holy ark. Wondrous flutterings and throbbings shook it. Though bodily unharmed, it uttered cries, as some king’s ghost in supernatural distress. Through its inexpressible, strange eyes, methought I peeped to secrets which took hold of God. As Abraham before the angels, I bowed myself; the white thing was so white, its wings so wide, and in those for ever exiled waters, I had lost the miserable warping memories of traditions and of towns. Long I gazed at that prodigy of plumage. I cannot tell, can only hint, the things that darted through me then. But at last I awoke; and turning, asked a sailor what bird was this. A goney, he replied.

Goney! never had heard that name before; is it conceivable that this glorious thing is utterly unknown to men ashore! never! But some time after, I learned that goney was some seaman’s name for albatross. So that by no possibility could Coleridge’s wild Rhyme have had aught to do with those mystical impressions which were mine, when I saw that bird upon our deck. For neither had I then read the Rhyme, nor knew the bird to be an albatross.

Yet, in saying this, I do but indirectly burnish a little brighter the noble merit of the poem and the poet.



## Poetry

"You, who call Frankenstein your friend, seem to have a knowledge of my crimes and his misfortunes. But in the detail which he gave you of them he could not sum up the hours and months of misery which I endured wasting in impotent passions. For while I destroyed his hopes, I did not satisfy my own desires. They were for ever ardent and craving; still I desired love and fellowship, and I was still spurned. Was there no injustice in this? Am I to be thought the only criminal, when all humankind sinned against me? Why do you not hate Felix, who drove his friend from his door with contumely? Why do you not execrate the rustic who sought to destroy the saviour of his child? Nay, these are virtuous and immaculate beings! I, the miserable and the abandoned, am an abortion, to be spurned at, and kicked, and trampled on. Even now my blood boils at the recollection of this injustice.

"But it is true that I am a wretch. I have murdered the lovely and the helpless; I have strangled the innocent as they slept and grasped to death his throat who never injured me or any other living thing. I have devoted my creator, the select specimen of all that is worthy of love and admiration among men, to misery; I have pursued him even to that irremediable ruin. There he lies, white and cold in death. You hate me, but your abhorrence cannot equal that with which I regard myself. I look on the hands which executed the deed; I think on the heart in which the imagination of it was conceived and long for the moment when these hands will meet my eyes, when that imagination will haunt my thoughts no more.

"Fear not that I shall be the instrument of future mischief. My work is nearly complete. Neither yours nor any man's death is needed to consummate the series of my being and accomplish that which must be done, but it requires my own. Do not think that I shall be slow to perform this sacrifice. I shall quit your vessel on the ice raft which brought me thither and shall seek the most northern extremity of the globe; I shall collect my funeral pile and consume to ashes this miserable frame, that its remains may afford no light to any curious and unhallowed wretch who would create such another as I have been. I shall die. I shall no longer feel the agonies which now consume me or be the prey of feelings unsatisfied, yet unquenched. He is dead who called me into being; and when I shall be no more, the very remembrance of us both will speedily vanish. I shall no longer see the sun or stars or feel the winds play on my cheeks. Light, feeling, and sense will pass away; and in this condition must I find my happiness. Some years ago, when the images which this world affords first opened upon me, when I felt the cheering warmth of summer and heard the rustling of the leaves and the warbling of the birds, and these were all to me, I should have wept to die; now it is my only consolation. Polluted by crimes and torn by the bitterest remorse, where can I find rest but in death?"

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I could not help thinking of the wild ritual of this work, and of its probable influence upon the hypochondriac, when, one evening, having informed me abruptly that the lady Madeline was no more, he stated his intention of preserving her corpse for a fortnight (previously to its final interment), in one of the numerous vaults within the main walls of the building. The worldly reason, however, assigned for this singular proceeding, was one which I did not feel at liberty to dispute. The brother had been led to his resolution (so he told me) by consideration of the unusual character of the malady of the deceased, of certain obtrusive and eager inquiries on the part of her medical men, and of the remote and exposed situation of the burial-ground of the family. I will not deny that when I called to mind the sinister countenance of the person whom I met upon the staircase, on the day of my arrival at the house, I had no desire to oppose what I regarded as at best but a harmless, and by no means an unnatural, precaution.

At the request of Usher, I personally aided him in the arrangements for the temporary entombment. The body having been encoffined, we two alone bore it to its rest. The vault in which we placed it (and which had been so long unopened that our torches, half smothered in its oppressive atmosphere, gave us little opportunity for investigation) was small, damp, and entirely without means of admission for light; lying, at great depth, immediately beneath that portion of the building in which was my own sleeping apartment. It had been used, apparently, in remote feudal times, for the worst purposes of a donjon-keep, and, in later days, as a place of deposit for powder, or some other highly combustible substance, as a portion of its floor, and the whole interior of a long archway through which we reached it, were carefully sheathed with copper. The door, of massive iron, had been, also, similarly protected. Its immense weight caused an unusually sharp, grating sound, as it moved upon its hinges.

Having deposited our mournful burden upon tressels within this region of horror, we partially turned aside the yet unscrewed lid of the coffin, and looked upon the face of the tenant. A striking similitude between the brother and sister now first arrested my attention; and Usher, divining, perhaps, my thoughts, murmured out some few words from which I learned that the deceased and himself had been twins, and that sympathies of a scarcely intelligible nature had always existed between them. Our glances, however, rested not long upon the dead—for we could not regard her unawed. The disease which had thus entombed the lady in the maturity of youth, had left, as usual in all maladies of a strictly cataleptical character, the mockery of a faint blush upon the bosom and the face, and that suspiciously lingering smile upon the lip which is so terrible in death. We replaced and screwed down the lid, and, having secured the door of iron, made our way, with toil, into the scarcely less gloomy apartments of the upper portion of the house.

And now, some days of bitter grief having elapsed, an observable change came over the features of the mental disorder of my friend. His ordinary manner had vanished. His ordinary occupations were neglected or forgotten. He roamed from chamber to chamber with hurried, unequal, and objectless step. The pallor of his countenance had assumed, if possible, a more ghastly hue—but the luminousness of his eye had utterly gone out.

The once occasional huskiness of his tone was heard no more; and a tremulous quaver, as if of extreme terror, habitually characterized his utterance. There were times, indeed, when I thought his unceasingly agitated mind was laboring with some oppressive secret, to divulge which he struggled for the necessary courage. At times, again, I was obliged to resolve all into the mere inexplicable vagaries of madness, for I beheld him