**Falling short: seven writers reflect on failure**

Diana Athill, Margaret Atwood, Julian Barnes, Anne Enright, Howard Jacobson, Will Self and Lionel Shriver reflect on their own disappointments in life, love and work

[**Diana Athill**](https://www.theguardian.com/profile/diana-athill)*,*[**Margaret Atwood**](https://www.theguardian.com/profile/margaret-atwood)*,*[**Julian Barnes**](https://www.theguardian.com/profile/julianbarnes)*,*[**Anne Enright**](https://www.theguardian.com/profile/anne-enright)*,*[**Howard Jacobson**](https://www.theguardian.com/profile/howardjacobson)*,*[**Will Self**](https://www.theguardian.com/profile/will-self)*and*[**Lionel Shriver**](https://www.theguardian.com/profile/lionelshriver)



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**Diana Athill**



 Diana Athill. Photograph: David Levene

From the age of 22 to that of about 39 I knew myself to be a failure. For many of those years I was not positively unhappy, because I was doing work I enjoyed, was fond of my friends and often had quite a good time; but if at any moment I stood back to look at my life and pass judgment on it, I saw that it was one of failure. That is not an exaggeration. I clearly remember specific moments when I did just that. They were bleak moments. But they did lead to a subdued kind of pride at having learned how to exist in this condition – indeed, at having become rather good at it.

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The reason for it was banal. Having fallen in love when I was 15, and become engaged to marry the man I loved three years later, I had known exactly what my future was to be. As soon as I finished my education at Oxford (not before, because I was enjoying it so much) we would be married. I would join him wherever he happened to be stationed (he was an officer in the RAF) and my life as a wife would begin. I didn't doubt for a moment that it would be happy. My childhood and teenage years had been very happy so I was a young woman who expected the answer "Yes". And then, not suddenly, but with excruciating slowness, I got the answer "No".

He was stationed in Egypt. After three months he stopped answering my letters. His silence endured for month after month, reducing me to a swamp of incredulous misery, until at last a letter came, asking me to release him from our engagement because he was marrying someone else. Like, I am sure, most young women at that time, I had seen giving my life over to a man, living his life, as "happiness". Doing that was what, as a woman, I was for. And this I had failed to do. I did, of course, see that the man had behaved badly, cruelly in fact, in leaving me in limbo without any explanation for so long, until (I guessed) being advised that he ought to guard against me "making trouble". But I was so thoroughly the victim of current romantic attitudes that, in spite of that recognition, I was unable to withstand a sickening feeling that a woman worth her salt would have been too powerfully attractive to allow this disaster to happen. And I was not that woman.



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I was saved from total loss of self-confidence by the solid happiness of my childhood and teens; but my sexual self-confidence was wiped out. For most of my 20s and 30s I equated love with pain, plunged into hopeless relationships and staggered out of them further reduced, so that I became almost invisible to men. Though presentable, my looks had never been those of a "trophy" woman, so I needed to make an impression in other ways – and I didn't do so. Many years that might have been good ones were turned grey, but they did force me into some very useful knowledge: I learned that it is perfectly possible for a woman to live her own life, not someone else's, her value does not, in fact, depend on how she is seen by a man. And the clearer this became to me, the more colour was restored to my life. Bit by bit, enjoyable sex crept back into it. A romantic commitment to passion never came back, but physical pleasure did, and then the reliable warmth of friendly love – and something else happened, just as important or perhaps even more so: I discovered that I could write.

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It was the writing that really put an end to failure. In the early 1960s nine stories "happened" to me. I say "happened" because I did not decide to write them, but suddenly felt a peculiar sort of itch, which produced them. One of them won the Observer's short-story prize. I was told that I'd won it on my birthday, in December, and having submitted the story in March I had forgotten about it. The news was astounding, and became even more so when I went to collect my cheque and they kindly offered to show me the room in which all the entries were stored: two thousand of them. Two thousand stories, and mine had been judged the best! I understood at once what had happened, and it was by far the best part of a lovely experience: that dreary bedrock under the surface of my life was no longer there, and off I could go into happiness. Almost at once I started the most satisfying relationship of my life, which lasted for 40 years until it was ended by the illness of the man I was living with. When sometimes during those years I stood back and passed judgment on my life, I saw it as happy. And that is still true, because when love-happiness faded out, writing-happiness took over. I had enjoyed writing three books during the 1960s and early 70s, and had then, with only mild regret, ceased to write. After retiring from my job as a publisher I started again, and the three books – plus a collection of letters that I have written and published since I was 80 (I am now 95) – have gone surprisingly well, well enough to astonish me, and to please me a great deal. Success in old age, when things have stopped really mattering, has a frivolous sort of charm unlike anything one experiences in middle age. It feels like a deliciously surprising treat. Perhaps as one advances into second childhood one recovers something of first childhood's appetite for treats. Whatever the nature of the feeling, it allows me to state that it is possible to recover from failure: to digest it, make use of it and forget it. Which is something to remember if you happen to be experiencing it.

**Margaret Atwood**



 Margaret Atwood. Photograph: Mark Blinch/Reuters

Failure is just another name for much of real life: much of what we set out to accomplish ends in failure, at least in our own eyes. Who set the bar so high that most of our attempts to sail gracefully over it on the viewless wings of Poesy end in an undignified scramble or a nasty fall into the mud? Who told us we had to succeed at any cost?

But my own personal failure list? It's a long one. Sewing failures, to begin with. The yellow shortie coat with the lopsided hem I crafted when I was 12? It made me look like a street waif, and caused my mother to hide her eyes every time I ventured out the door in it. Or maybe you'd prefer a few academic failures? My bad Latin mark in Grade 12, my 51 in Algebra? Or my failure to learn touch-typing: now that had consequences.

But such adolescent slippages come within the normal range. Something more epic, perhaps? A failed novel? Much time expended, many floor-pacings and scribblings, nothing achieved; or, as they say in Newfoundland, a wet arse and no fish caught.

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There have been several of those. Let's take Blakeney, Norfolk, in the winter of 1983. We'd gone there to write and watch birds; the second activity was most successful, but the first was a washout. I had some complicated fictional scheme in mind, and was pursuing it in a cobblestone ex-fisherman's cottage with cold stone floors, a balky Aga, and a tiny, smoky fireplace I never did master. My plot involved various time layers and improbable interweavings of badly realised characters, and the digging up of Mayan eccentric flints – that's what they're called – in a part of Mesoamerica I knew little about. What had set me off on this track, a track that became narrower and narrower and finally petered out in a field bestrewn with burdocks and cow pats?

I soon gave up on the eccentric flints, but I had to put in the time somehow because I had such a lovely (though cold) workspace. So I would read through the accumulation of Jean Plaidy novels left by generations of summer visitors, thus adding to my already excessive stock of Tudor lore. Then I'd walk back to where we were living – a rectory haunted by nuns, allegedly – and put my chilled feet up on the fender, thus developing chilblains. Perhaps it was those six months of futile striving, tangled novelistic timelines, rotten Tudors, and chilblains that caused me to break through some invisible wall, because right after that I grasped the nettle I had been avoiding, and began to write [*The Handmaid's Tale*](http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2012/jan/20/handmaids-tale-margaret-atwood)*'*.

Get back on the horse that threw you, as they used to say. They also used to say: you learn as much from failure as you learn from success.

**Julian Barnes**



 Julian Barnes. Photograph: Richard Saker/Rex Features

When I was growing up, failure presented itself as something clear and public: you failed an exam, you failed to clear the high-jump bar. And in the grown-up world, it was the same: marriages failed, your football team failed to gain promotion from what was then the Third Division (South). Later, I realised that failure could also be private and hidden: there was emotional, moral, sexual failure; the failure to understand another person, to make friends, to say what you meant. But even in these new areas, the binary system applied: win or lose, pass or fail. It took me a long time to understand the nuances of success and failure, to see how they are often intertwined, how success to one person is failure to another.

I was a tardy arrival in literary London – in my late 20s when I started freelancing, my early 30s when I got my first desk job. It was a largely male environment, and far more competitive than I had imagined from the outside. I looked around and fairly soon identified those I admired and those I didn't. I needed both role models and failure models: one sort to imitate, another as warning. There were a fair number of failure models on view: the drunk, the incompetent, the placemen and the pompous. I was astonished to find that it was possible to spend your life surrounded by great literature and remain (or become) paralysed by snobbery. One senior literary gent took me to his club for lunch, and on the steps afterwards, apropos of nothing except a display of his own worldliness, explained that one should never "pursue an illicit liaison" within the space "from the Embankment to the Euston Road, and from the Gray's Inn Road to Regent Street". It was for such advice, I reflected, that young men take up book reviewing.

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I used to whisper to myself, "Don't fuck up like X, don't fuck up like Y." Early on, I knew that the primal sin of the artistic life was the sin against your own talent. There was a particular X whom I didn't want to fuck up like. He was a generation above me, and I probably took him as a counter-example because he too had been a scholarship boy and a Francophile. In his early years he had published very good poetry and some fiction; he was handsome and witty. By the time I met him, he was a just-about-functioning alcoholic, who used to say – the old drunkard's excuse – that life was simply more interesting when you drank; sobriety was boring. His prose remained elegant while his life became crumpled. His diet appeared to consist mainly of vodka, Special Brew and Gauloises. His marriage had "failed" – by now I was putting the verb in quotes, as some of my own contemporaries' marriages were already collapsing. He had two children, lived on his own in a council flat, and eked out a living from a weekly column. He could be charming company; he could be a pain in the arse to work with. Don't fuck up like X, I would repeat to myself.

Our ways parted. Occasionally he would telephone, usually when drunk, always for a trivial purpose – help with a crossword puzzle or competition clue – though also (I guessed) with the deeper purpose of combating loneliness. After one long, rambling, solipsistic intro, he finally asked me, "Why am I ringing you, love? Why am I ringing you?" Exasperatedly, I replied, "Because you've reached B in your address book."

More years passed. He got the sack from his weekly column. His byline appeared sporadically. I heard that he had quit the booze, and was trying to quit smoking. He was down to 17 a day, and to encourage self-discipline used to keep a note of each time he lit up. He had become increasingly hermetic, using any excuse not to leave his flat. Then there was silence; then I heard that he had died – alone of course. They worked out the probable hour of death from the last entry in his smoking log.

I went to the funeral. Some of his early, highly skilled poems were read out, and I was saddened again by the subsequent offence against his talent. Then others spoke. Finally, his son and daughter addressed the small gathering. They had turned out well; both were charming and intelligent. They spoke with proper roundedness and affection for their father; the daughter described how he had coached her to get into Cambridge, how patient and helpful he had been. It was very touching. And I had been wrong, or had only partly understood. As I left the crematorium for the wake, I was saying to myself – and to him – "No, you didn't fuck up after all."

**Anne Enright**



 Anne Enright. Photograph: Eamonn Mccabe

I have no problem with failure - it is success that makes me sad. Failure is easy. I do it every day, I have been doing it for years. I have thrown out more sentences than I ever kept, I have dumped months of work, I have wasted whole years writing the wrong things for the wrong people. Even when I am pointed the right way and productive and finally published, I am not satisfied by the results. This is not an affectation, failure is what writers do. It is built in. Your immeasurable ambition is eked out through the many thousand individual words of your novel, each one of them written and rewritten several times, and this requires you to hold your nerve for a very long period of time – or forget about holding your nerve, forget about the wide world and all that anxiety and just do it, one word after the other. And then redo it, so it reads better. The writer's great and sustaining love is for the language they work with every day. It may not be what gets us to the desk but it is what keeps us there and, after 20 or 30 years, this love yields habit and pleasure and necessity.

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So. All this is known. In the long run we are all dead, and none of us is Proust. You must recognise that failure is 90% emotion, 10% self-fulfilling reality, and the fact that we are haunted by it is neither here nor there.The zen of it is that success and failure are both an illusion, that these illusions will keep you from the desk, they will spoil your talent; they will eat away at your life and your sleep and the way you speak to the people you love.

The problem with this spiritual argument is that success and failure are also real. You can finish a real book and it can be published or not, sell or not, be reviewed or not. Each one of these real events makes it easier or harder to write, publish, sell the next book. And the next. And the one after that. If you keep going and stay on the right side of all this, you can be offered honours and awards, you can be recognised in the street, you can be recognised in the streets of several countries, some of which do not have English as a native language. You can get some grumpy fucker to say that your work is not just successful but important, or several grumpy fuckers, and they can say this before you are quite dead. And all this can happen, by the way, whether or not your work is actually good, or still good. Success may be material but is also an emotion – one that is felt, not by you, but by the crowd. This is why we yearn for it, and can not have it, quite. It is not ours to hold.

I am more comfortable with the personal feeling that is failure than with the exposure of success. I say this even though I am, Lord knows, ambitious and grabby, and I want to be up there with the rest of them. Up! There!

The sad thing is, when the flash bulbs do pop and fade, you are left, in the pulsing after-light, with a keen sense of how unhappy people can be with what they have achieved in life. Perfectly successful people. With perfectly good lives. And you come to appreciate the ones who have figured all that shit out. Meanwhile, and briefly, you are a "success", which is to say an object, whether of envy or acclaim. Some people like all that, but I, for reasons I have not yet figured out, find it difficult. I don't want to be an object. I find jealousy unpleasant (because it is unpleasant). I resist praise.

The writer's life is one of great privilege, so "Suck it up", you might say – there are more fans than trolls. But there are two, sometimes separate, ambitions here. One is to get known, make money perhaps and take a bow – to be acknowledged by that dangerous beast, the crowd. The other is to write a really good book.

And a book is not written for the crowd, but for one reader at a time. A novel is written (rather pathetically) not to be judged, but experienced. You want to meet people in their own heads – at least I do. I still have this big, stupid idea that if you are good enough and lucky enough you can make an object that insists on its own subjective truth, a personal thing, a book that shifts between its covers and will not stay easy on the page, a real novel, one that lives, talks, breathes, refuses to die. And in this, I am doomed to fail.

**Howard Jacobson**



 Howard Jacobson. Photograph: Murdo Macleod

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It starts early. You can come into the world smugly trailing clouds of glory, already sainted in the life before life, or you can enter it reluctantly and ashamed, helpless, naked, piping loud – Blake's baby not Wordsworth's, at the first sight of whom your mother groans, your father weeps. I was a Blake baby. I failed birth. I kept my mother waiting, arriving not just late but at a peculiar angle. I caused her pain and disappointed my father, who didn't weep exactly but would have liked his first child to have a more relaxed attitude to existence, though this was made plain to me only gradually, after years of his entering me in talent contests whenever we went on holiday to Morecambe, or pushing me up to join other kids on stage at the end of pantomimes, or shouting "Here!" and pointing to me when magicians asked for volunteers.

Success for him didn't mean making money or excelling at anything in particular – it simply meant being at home in the world and fearing nothing. So it wasn't because he wanted me to be a footballer or a cricketer that he objected to the notes my mother wrote every Wednesday, requesting I be excused from games. He would just have liked me to be everybody's friend, the way he was. And I failed him. I failed my mother too by taking far too precocious an interest in sex. And I failed myself by not knowing how to get any.

But you have to see failure as an opportunity. I took the route favoured by all worldly failures and became a spiritual success. That might be an inflated way of putting it, but failures are nothing if not grandiose. If the world doesn't value us, we won't value the world. We seek solace in books, in solitary and sometimes fantastical thinking, in doing with words what boys who please their fathers do with balls. We look down on what our fellows like, and make a point of liking what our fellows don't. We become special by virtue of not being special enough. I doubt many writers were made any other way.

Art is made by those who consider themselves to have failed at whatever isn't art. And of course it is loved as consolation, or a call to arms, by those who feel the same. One of the reasons there seem to be fewer readers for literature today than there were yesterday is that the concept of failure has been outlawed. If we are all beautiful, all clever, all happy, all successes in our way, what do we want with the language of the dispossessed?

But the nature of failure ensures that writers will go on writing no matter how many readers they have.You have to master the embarrassments and ignominies of life. And, paradoxically, one of the best ways of achieving this mastery over failure is not to drown it in alcohol, not to take pills or see a shrink, but to relive it, over and over, in words. It isn't that the words enable you to change the outcome and exact revenge – that invariably makes unsatisfactory reading. You can tell when writers are reinventing their experience vaingloriously. What writers at their best achieve is a saturation of shame, triumphing over it by excluding or extenuating nothing, possessing it as theirs, and handing it back again, depersonalised, in comedy of one sort or another.

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The first novel I wrote had failure as a subject. My hero was failing to write a book about it. Had he succeeded in finishing I'd have had to write about success and I knew I never wanted to do that. It would have been a kind of sacrilege. Success as the worldly estimate it is, is rarely a subject for literature. Gatsby cannot possibly get Daisy. Dorothea Brooke cannot be allowed to change the world. Thus does art get its own back on those without the imagination to fail.

**Will Self**



 Will Self. Photograph: Murdo Macleod

To attempt to write seriously is always, I feel, to fail – the disjunction between my beautifully sonorous, accurate and painfully affecting mental content, and the leaden, halting sentences on the page always seems a dreadful falling short. It is this failure – a ceaseless threnody keening through the writing mind – that dominates my working life, just as an overweening sense of not having loved with enough depth or recklessness or tenderness dominates my personal one. It follows that to continue writing is to accept failure as simply a part of the experience – it's often said that all political lives end in failure, but all writing ones begin there, endure there, and then collapse into senescent incoherence.

I prize this sense of failure – embrace it even. As a child I loved a [John Glashan](http://www.johnglashan.com/) cartoon that showed a group of meths drinkers lying around on the floor of a squat. "Anyone can be a success," one of them was saying, "but it takes real guts to be a failure." Clearly I intuited what was coming. When anyone starts out to do something creative – especially if it seems a little unusual – they seek approval, often from those least inclined to give it. But a creative life cannot be sustained by approval, any more than it can be destroyed by criticism – you learn this as you go on.

People say my writing is dreadful, pretentious, self-seeking shit – they say it a lot. Other people say my writing is brilliant, beautifully crafted and freighted with the most sublime meaning. The criticism, no matter how virulent, has long since ceased to bother me, but the price of this is that the praise is equally meaningless. The positive and the negative are not so much self-cancelling as drowned out by that carping, hectoring internal voice that goads me on and slaps me down all day every day.

It follows, I'm afraid, that what we might call institutional success – prizes, fellowships, honours – also seems pretty irrelevant to me. I may think those who accept them gladly are being hopelessly infra dig, but I still envy them: to believe that worldly success is the great desideratum is, in one way at least, to be at home in the world – something I am not. And then there are those who both believe in the verdict of posterity, and also believe – somewhat paradoxically – that they have already achieved it. In the literary world this consists in having your works taught on school and university syllabuses, and a body of secondary critical literature beginning to coalesce around them. Some poor fools, at this point in their careers, get a pharaonic delusion that they are being interred in the canonical Cheops while they yet breathe. We've all seen the symptoms of this: a tendency to the oracular appears both in print and in person; the writer also is tempted to speak about themselves in the third person – or write memoirs in the second. An unavoidable sequel of the posterity delusion is the death of the writerly self, which depends too much on incoherence and inconsistency to remain pompous for long. And of course, the vast majority of today's mummified immortals are tomorrow's Ozymandiases.

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No, this is the paradox for me: in failure alone is there any possibility of success. I don't think I'm alone in this – nor do I think it's an attitude that only prevails among people whose work is obviously "creative". On the contrary, it often occurs to me that since what successes I do manage are both experienced and felt entirely in solitude, there must be many others who are the same as me: people for whom life is a process to be experienced, not an object to be coveted. There may be, as Bob Dylan says, no success like failure, but far from failure being no success at all, in its very visceral intensity, it is perhaps the only success there is.

**Lionel Shriver**



 Lionel Shriver. Photograph: Eamonn Mccabe

As if the story of the book itself were fated to duplicate the story inside the book, my sixth novel, [*Double Fault*](http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2006/may/27/featuresreviews.guardianreview13)*,* was purchased by Doubleday in 1997 with great fanfare, yet in hardback sold so poorly that no house bid for the paperback until many years later. At core, that book is about failure – a subject about which, as a struggling writer, I'd grown depressingly expert. Hungry for both fantasy and inspiration, readers crave protagonists who, after overcoming seemingly insurmountable obstacles, triumph at the end of the day. No one wanted to buy a book about disappointment.

Yet most people fail. In the big picture, few of our careers live up to the dreams we nursed when we were young. In fact, one underside of success is that it's nearly always penultimate, and so every accomplishment merely raises the bar. Each new success conjures new standards we can't meet, thereby inventing ingenious new ways to fail. I've not been awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, and may never be. My latest novel missed the Times top 10 bestseller list by 46 copies. Most of the reviews were good, but they weren't *all* good. It's a doddle to locate a perspective from which I am still failing.

Even in the little picture, failure is commonplace. Our team loses the pub quiz, or we're slaughtered in a game of squash. A job interview goes badly, or we burn the lasagne. A joke falls flat. Letting ourselves down in some fashion is such an integral part of daily life that the paucity of literature on the subject is baffling. There are scads of self-help books on how to succeed, but I've never come across a single one on how to contend with not succeeding – which is more the form for practically everybody, right?

I'm fascinated by failure, a far more difficult experience to ride out with grace than victory, which tends to bring out the best in all but gloating arseholes: magnanimity, generosity, ease, confidence, joy, relaxation, energy, festivity, and a positive outlook. In contrast, failure naturally elicits bitterness, resentment, dolour, enervation, listlessness, pessimism and low self‑esteem – a pretty ugly package.

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Yet, against the odds, it's possible to fail well – to rise above the unpleasant basket of emotions that come with the territory and to not allow disappointment to sour one's very soul. I am bowled over by the massive number of remarkable people who face down the fact that no, they are not going to be film directors, famous artists or billionaire entrepreneurs and still come out the other side as cheerful, decent, gracious human beings. As emotional achievements go, that is much more impressive than making a go of something and avoiding becoming a complete jerk.

The trajectory of my own career as a novelist is sometimes held up as an example of perseverance, since six commercial duds were finally followed by a [proper bestseller](http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2011/may/17/lionel-shriver-we-need-talk-kevin). Looking back, I'm torn on whether for a dozen years I "failed well". I was often glum, and I nursed my share of resentments. But I guess I still made my partner a decent dinner every night, and I wasn't relentlessly crap company. I kept writing books, even if no one bought them. Because my black years were artistically productive, it's tempting to romanticise them. That would be a mistake.

I do think that very early success is more bane than boon, and not having had my career handed to me on a plate must have been good for me, not only as a writer but as a person. Nevertheless, those were dark times – getting my hopes up for one manuscript after another and having them dashed. It wasn't ennobling. True, after having carved out a little place for myself in the world, I am probably a warmer woman with a lighter spirit, but that may not be to my credit. We celebrate success, hope for the best, and admire determination. So we shy from acknowledging that there's a point at which it's pretty clear that whatever it is we're so determined to achieve is not going to happen. In which case, why keep beating our heads against the wall? There's something to be said for giving up. Hell, maybe there's such a thing as "giving up well", too.



21 Famous Failures Who Succeeded

*“It is impossible to live without failing at something, unless you live so cautiously that you might as well not have lived at all, in which case you have failed by default.” — J.K. Rowling*

One of the most devastating circumstances in life revolves around failure. When you pour your heart and soul into an endeavor, whatever it might be, and it fails, it results in a catastrophic upheaval in our lives. When we fail, life turns upside down. Everything we once thought we wanted, seems to disappear into thin air.

However, what most people don’t realize is that failure acts as a stepping-stone towards success. It’s through our greatest failures that we learn more about life, love, goals, happiness and all the things that make us into who we are today. Plus, some of the most [famous people in the world have failed the most times](https://www.wanderlustworker.com/48-famous-failures-who-will-inspire-you-to-achieve/).

If you’ve recently experienced the gut-wrenching effects of failure, or you’re going through it right now, understand that failure will make you stronger. It will make you wiser — more attuned to the things you want out of life, and more knowledgable on just how to go about getting there.

To put things into perspective, here’s a list of 21 of some of the most famous failures in our time that have succeeded. They’ve been through failure but were able to bounce back. When you truly know their stories, you’ll realize that achieving greatness isn’t something that comes easy whatsoever. But it does eventually come as long as you don’t give up.

#1 — Albert Einstein

Albert Einstein, one of the greatest thinkers of our time, didn’t speak until he was four-years old. He also failed his entrance exam to the Swiss Federal Polytechnic school located in Zurich at sixteen-years old. And, even his father, up until the time of his death, considered his son to be a major failure. After eventually graduating from college, Einstein actually worked as an insurance salesman, but quit after some time because he failed at that as well.

#2 — Beyonce Knowles

With a net worth of nearly $500 million, Beyonce is one of the most successful recording artists in history. She’s [sold over 17 million albums](https://www.google.hu/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=3&ved=0ahUKEwjO_e_Y35PPAhWCNJoKHTOUAKQQFggnMAI&url=https%3A%2F%2Fen.wikipedia.org%2Fwiki%2FBeyonc%25C3%25A9_discography&usg=AFQjCNGC9yTzw7hFQFYH1hmrkE20T1BCCg&sig2=UKVtCESKqon3ptrosmebzg) as a solo artist and another 17 million albums while a member of *Destiny’s Child*. When she was 9-years old, her group, *Girl’s Tyme*, appeared on *Star Search* and lost. In 1996, after signing to Columbia Records, the group had huge internal drama, forcing the departure of two members.

#3 — Bill Gates

Bill Gates has amassed a mind-boggling net worth of close to $80 billion, and is known as the infamous father of modern personal-computing software. He brought us operating systems such as Microsoft DOS and Windows, along with wildly-popular titles such as Microsoft Office’s Word, Excel and PowerPoint. However, at the age of seventeen-years old, his first software company called, Traf-O-Data, which analyzed raw traffic logs, failed.

#4 — Charlie Chaplin

Charlie Chaplin was one of the greatest comedic minds of all time. However, he grew up in sheer poverty in the UK. His father abandoned his mother when he was just two-years old, and he was forced to live in a workhouse at the age of seven-years old. When he was nine-years old, his mother was permanently committed to an insane asylum. Throughout his adult life, he failed numerous times, yet he’s still one of the most famous comics ever.

#5 — Colonel Harland Sanders

Colonel Harland Sanders was the late founder of Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC) restaurants. Throughout his entire life, he failed in just about every endeavor he was involved in. However, at the age of sixty-five-years old, he set out with his famous chicken recipe and only a $105 social security check to his name, in an attempt to sell his franchise chicken model. 1,009 restaurants rejected him before one accepted his offer.

#6 — Dr. Seuss

One of the most celebrated children’s authors of all time is also one of the most famous failures. Dr. Seuss intended to earn his PhD in literature Lincoln College, Oxford, but failed and subsequently dropped out of school. After he wrote his first book, *And to Think I Saw it on Mulberry Street,* it was rejected 28 separate times. But he didn’t give up. By 1991, at the time of his death, he had sold over 600 million copies of his books in 20 different languages.

#7 — Fred Astaire

Fred Astaire’s career in the entertainment industry lasted for seventy-six years. Grace Kelly once said, when speaking about him that, “the history of dance on film begins with Astaire.” However, it didn’t quite start out so famously for Astaire. According to legend, he was rejected during an early Hollywood screen test when the producer stated, “Can’t act. Slighty bald. Dances a little.”

#8 — Henry Ford

Henry Ford is the father of the automobile, and quite possibly one of the most famous industrialists to have ever lived. He helped bring transportation to the masses in America, and subsequently throughout the world. But his start was far from noteworthy. Ford’s first company went bankrupt. His second company also went south when, after a dispute with partners, he was forced to walk away with only the rights to his name.

#9 — Howard Schultz

Howard Schultz is the American pioneer and business magnate that brought Starbucks to the international stage. However, the early years were anything but easy for this famous failure. While still an employee for Starbucks, Schultz envisioned bringing the Italian coffee shop to the masses. However, the owners were not so convinced. So, Schultz bought out the name. However, 217 of the 242 investors that he approached had turned him down.

#10 — Jim Carrey

Jim Carrey is a comedic legend, and also a firm believer in the power of the [Law of Attraction](https://www.wanderlustworker.com/habits-that-reinforce-the-law-of-attraction/). But Carrey, who grew up extremely poor as a child, didn’t have his fame handed to him. At the age of fifteen-years old, Carrey actually worked as a janitor to help his family pay the bills. And, during his first performance at Yuk Yuk’s, a comedy club in Toronto, he was booed off stage.

#11 — J.K. Rowling

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One of the most successful authors in history is J.K. Rowling. However, unlike what some might believe, Rowling’s fame didn’t come easy. While she didn’t grow up poor as a child, as an adult, she struggled. She was a single mother living on welfare, trying to support her daughter. It took her seven years to write the story of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone,* and when she finished, all twelves major publishing houses rejected the book.

#12 — Katy Perry

Katy Perry is a wildly-successful singer and songwriter who had a long journey filled with consecutive failures before she reached stardom. In fact, her first album sold only two-hundred copies before the record label went out of business. She was subsequently dropped from two other labels. It took her nearly ten years of failure and hard work before she released the critically-acclaimed hit song, *I Kissed a Girl,* in 2008.