

**Title:** “Purposes Marred Perhaps More Than Purposes Achieved”

**Synopsis:**

This blog takes Herbert Butterfield’s concept of history - "purposes marred perhaps more than purposes achieved" - and explores its implications both in real life and fiction. Butterfield’s argument that history is chaotic, unpredictable, and full of failed goals challenges the idea of neat, linear narratives. The blog applies this to current events and fiction writing, suggesting that the messiness of failure, missteps, and unachieved goals can make for the most compelling stories. Writers are encouraged to embrace imperfection and use these themes of failure and unexpected twists to create authentic, complex characters.

The Snark’s Blog: [here](#)

**Discussion Questions**

*Use these questions to spark conversation and reflection in the classroom:*

- Butterfield argues that history is not linear but "labyrinthine." How does this apply to your own understanding of history and current events? Do you agree that life often doesn’t follow a predictable path?
- How does the idea that “purposes are marred more than purposes achieved” influence the way we think about success and failure in both personal life and fiction? How can this idea be liberating for writers and readers?
- How do you think a character-driven plot benefits from embracing failure and unpredictability? Can you think of an example where a character’s mistakes or failures made the story more compelling?
- In the context of writing, how can you show the unpredictability of life while keeping the plot cohesive? How can unexpected twists still feel meaningful and not just random?
- Do you think it’s more interesting to write about a character’s imperfect success, or their journey of failure and learning? Why do we tend to gravitate toward the messier, flawed narratives?

**Writer’s Prompts**

*Creative exercises to help students apply the themes of the topic:*

- **Prompt 1:** The Struggle of Unachieved Goals. Write a scene where your character has a clear goal, but despite their best efforts, they fail repeatedly. Show how they react to the failure and what it reveals about their personality. What does their failure teach them?
- **Prompt 2:** Character Evolution Through Failure. Write a scene where your character experiences a major setback. How does this failure shift their worldview? Do they embrace it and learn, or do they become bitter? Use this moment to show growth or a new understanding.
- **Prompt 3:** The Unexpected Outcome. Write a story where the character's main goal is to achieve something, but in the end, they fail. However, the failure leads to an unexpected,

yet meaningful, outcome. How does the character reconcile this outcome with their original desires?

- **Prompt 4:** The "Messy" Romance. Write a romance where the characters' goals and intentions are repeatedly thwarted by external forces (or their own mistakes). Make the ending not a perfect resolution but something real and hard-won through the messiness of life.
- **Prompt 5:** The Labyrinthine Journey. Imagine your character is navigating a literal labyrinth - representing their journey through life. Each turn they take leads to an unexpected consequence. Write a scene where the character is forced to accept the unpredictable nature of their journey.
- **Prompt 6:** The Consequences of Perfect Plans. Write about a character who plans every detail of their life but is thwarted by something completely out of their control. How does their world unravel, and how do they handle the disruption? Does this change their view of control or fate?
- **Prompt 7:** Writing the "Failing" Hero. Write a scene where your protagonist fails in a big way. Their quest for success ends in complete collapse. How does this failure define them? How do the people around them react? Show the raw, emotional aftermath of this failure.

### **Class Activities**

*These activities will help expand on the themes of the topic:*

- **Group Discussion:** Break into small groups and discuss how Butterfield's idea of "purposes marred" applies to both history and storytelling. Share examples from history, personal experiences, or fiction where unachieved goals led to unexpected, yet significant, outcomes. How can writers use historical events, where things didn't go according to plan, to fuel their stories? What makes these real-life messes compelling in fiction?
- **Design Exercise:** Have students create a visual "labyrinth" or "web" of a character's journey. Begin with their goal at the center and use branching lines to show all the mistakes, failures, and unexpected outcomes that happen along the way. How does the complexity of their journey contribute to their growth?
- **Debate:** Hold a debate where one side argues that perfect stories with clear successes are the most satisfying, and the other side defends the chaotic, unpredictable stories where the character's goals are never fully achieved. Discuss how these two types of stories affect the reader's emotional engagement.
- **Collaborative Story-Building:** In groups, create a short story where a character has a clear goal but is constantly thwarted by external or internal forces. As a group, brainstorm different plot points where the character experiences failures and setbacks, leading to an unexpected but meaningful conclusion.

**Closing note from the blog's writer, The Snark**

*Well, there you have it, folks: embrace the mess. You could write a perfect, linear story where everything happens exactly as planned. But then, what's the fun in that? Life, history, and good fiction are all about the chaos - the unexpected twists, the mess of unachieved goals, and those beautiful moments when things go completely off the rails.*

*So, let your characters trip over their own feet, let them fail spectacularly, and let them learn the hard way. Because guess what? That's where the drama is. That's where the growth is. And honestly? It's just more fun to write.*

*If you're still clinging to the idea that your characters should always have it together and achieve their goals in a perfectly tidy way, well... good luck with that. Meanwhile, I'll be over here, writing characters who make a mess of everything. It's where the real stories lie.*