

# How To Be Anal-Retentive, Part I of Many

by Patrick Gibson

While many people seem to harbour ill will towards those who are anal-retentive, it is important to remember that anal-retentiveness is an important aspect of our lives. Without it, cupboard doors would remain open, toilet seats would be left up, and piles of papers would be stacked unevenly. Many people see anal-retentiveness as black or white – you either are or are not. This, however, is not true. The doors of anality are open to anyone willing to accept this discipline into his or her life. It should be noted, though, that these doors are *one way*. Once you become an analyst<sup>1</sup>, there is no going back. Rest assured, one cannot be forced into the life of an analyst – it must be welcomed with an open mind and a determined heart. Let us pause momentarily while your mind opens and your heart shifts into determined-mode... Great, we are ready to begin.

Anal-retentiveness applies mostly to cleanliness and order. These two virtues must be at the forefront of your thoughts at all times. In fact, these virtues must become so important to you that anything which disputes them will actually cause you to become annoyed and discontented. An average analyst has tens or hundreds of mannerisms which could be discussed; however, in Part I of this series, we shall only review a few basics: the importance of alignment, order, and imposition.

I always say, “It’s not a wrong angle if it’s a *right* angle.” Aligning objects to be perfectly perpendicular or parallel is very important in the art of anal-retentiveness. Figures 1 and 2 respectively show an example of the incorrect and correct way of *aligning* two pens on a surface. You can see that the aligned pens in Figure 2 have a symmetrical peace to them which is clearly missing from that shown in Figure 1. Remember that while it is important for objects to be parallel or perpendicular relative to one another, you must also make

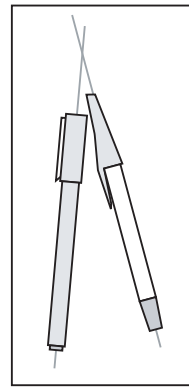


Figure 1: Misaligned Objects

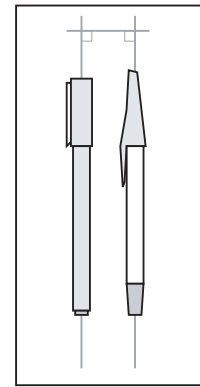


Figure 2: Aligned Objects

<sup>1</sup>One who is anal-retentive.

note of how the objects fit into their surroundings. For example, on a desk with three pens, the pens should all be parallel to each other *and* to the edge of the desk. You may encounter criticism from some when executing such an action. A non-analyst may say, “Why bother? They’re just pens.” You will find that many non-analysts are unable to look at the “big picture.” Think of the pens as abstract objects. These abstract objects could represent anything: streets of a city, train tracks, or even lines of text, much like what you are reading now. Now imagine that the pens in Figure 1 were actually depicting the route of two trains which would normally run parallel. What would happen when two trains, running on either track, were to intercept each other at the cross point? One train would either have to stop and wait for the other to pass, or the two trains would collide at the point of intersection. Either way, disaster would occur. When you take a step back and abstract something which may seem trivial, you will realize the sheer importance of alignment. Why don’t you briefly break from reading and align all objects within reach... There, I bet that feels better already. Alignment is great, but there is no reason to stop there.

Suppose there are three objects on a desk (as shown in Figure 3). While they are aligned to be perfectly parallel, there still is something “off” about the way they look. If we rearrange the objects to be *ordered* in an ascending fashion, all of the sudden there is a greater sense of harmony between the objects. (Note that ordering these objects in a descending manner would also be acceptable.) As an analyst,

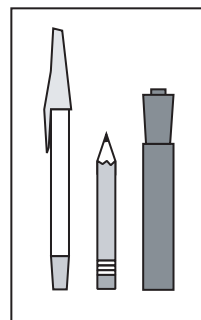


Figure 3: Unsorted Objects

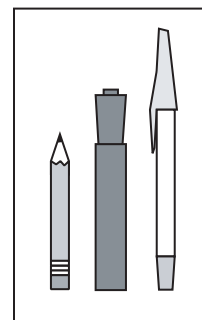


Figure 4: Sorted Objects

you must be able to recognize such scenarios and be able to quickly correct the situation. I have found a good way to practice ordering is to take about two drinking straws and cut each one of them in two. For each straw, make the cut at a different spot from the last. You should have four uneven pieces in front of you. Close your eyes, mix them up, and arrange them to be parallel to one another (and to their surroundings if possible). When you open your eyes, you should have the four pieces arranged in a similar way to the objects shown in Figure 3. Move the straws around until you end up with an ordered series, ascending or descending by length (Figure 4).

(For consistency<sup>2</sup>, you should decide on either always sorting ascending or descending.) This straw exercise can be repeated, adding additional straws each time. You can also vary the number of pieces into which you cut each straw. You will find you will develop an “eye” for that which needs to be ordered. There are, however, some cases where you may be fooled into thinking something is properly ordered when it, in fact, is not.

I enjoy playing pool (eight-ball, to be more specific). In the game of eight-ball, there are fifteen numbered balls, and one “cue” ball which is completely white. Typically, these sixteen balls are kept in a device which stores the balls in a four-by-four grid (see Figure 5). This is what you will be given at the average pool hall. Unfortunately, there is not much you can do about the order in which the balls are presented when you first arrive. (It is hard, but do your best to ensure that such a disarray does not affect your performance for the task at hand.) After playing several games of pool, you will probably be

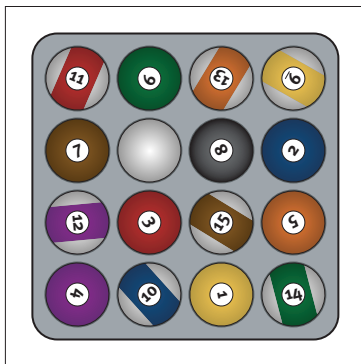


Figure 5: Unordered Objects

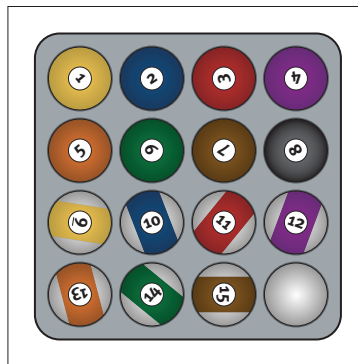


Figure 6: Partially Ordered Objects

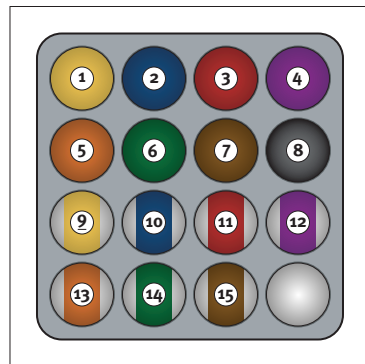


Figure 7: Perfectly Ordered Objects

ready to leave. Pool hall etiquette states that you must put the balls back in the container from which they originated and return them. This is your opportunity to make a difference. As shown in Figure 6, place the balls in an ascending numerical order, left-to-right, top-to-bottom. This will settle your nerves, and possibly put a smile on your face. But wait! Merely *ordering* the balls is not enough. You must also *align* them in a logical way. Figure 7 demonstrates a higher level of anality than that of Figure 6. The numbers on the balls are both orientated in a consistent fashion, and parallel to the edges of the carrying device. Combining anal-retentive mannerisms can only makes things better.

<sup>2</sup> Another skill of an analyst, discussed in greater depth in Part II.

With your newly-acquired alignment and ordering skills, you are probably operating in a pretty well-organized environment. You are also probably beginning to notice how disorganized everyone else around you is. This is where the final basic analyst skill comes in: *imposition*. Most non-analysts are not very open to listening to your new ideas as to how they can improve themselves, so it is better to simply impose yourself upon them. I work in an office, and I've found it quite easy to go around to other people's desks and tidy up for them. Some take offense, others are thankful. Either way, I know it must be done, and so I do it. You can also do this in many other places, such as your home, in a store, or in a library. Imposition is where you will find the most resistance, so you must be as resilient as possible. It may be difficult for you at first, but you will get better as you go along.

Three essential skills have been discussed in Part I of *How To Be Anal-Retentive*: alignment, order, and imposition. They are the necessary building blocks you will use to form a foundation for your journey into becoming a full-blown analyst. Alignment is used to provide an initial visual sense of properness. Order establishes a logical relationship between objects, a necessary element for peace in the analyst's mind. A combination thereof is like the icing on the cake. With such a union, a true analyst can feel the correctitude flowing into his or her self. Finally, imposition makes it possible for the analyst to be around other non-analyst people without going insane. Like any discipline, you must constantly practice these skills, keeping each one as sharp as the next. Stand up to resistance, and remain set in your ways. There must be no compromising between analysts and non-analysts. Remember, there is no such thing as *mostly* parallel – eventually, the two lines will cross. Anal-retentiveness is a beautiful, fulfilling way of being and by embracing even just the three skills outlined above into your life, you will become a better, happier person.