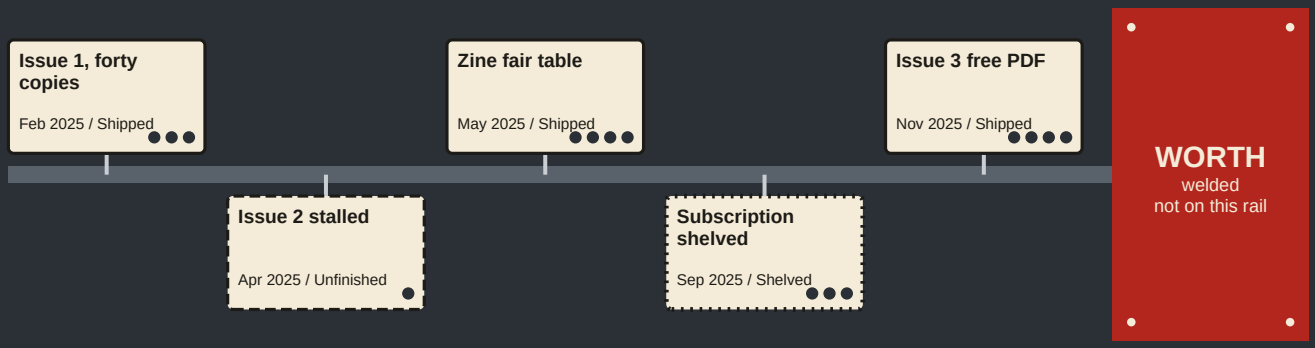
FIELD GUIDE / RESEARCH MEETS ART

Proof of Work, Not Proof of Worth

A portfolio is a record. You are not a record. This guide teaches you to keep the two on separate rails: to read your work honestly, take critique usefully, and leave your dignity out of the audit.



Fictional demonstration: the Tide-Table Zine and its maker, Mara Venn, are invented for this guide.

Companion to the interactive essay at sahiltayal.com (route proposed, not yet published). Return to sahiltayal.com / Write to Sahil: sahil@sahiltayal.com

01 Two ledgers, one life

FACT

“Proof of work” began as a computing idea. In 1992 Cynthia Dwork and Moni Naor proposed that a sender do a small computation before mail is accepted, so junk costs something to send. Adam Back’s Hashcash made the idea practical. Its key property: the work leaves a trace anyone can verify cheaply without trusting the claimant.

METAPHOR

A good portfolio has that property. It is a checkable trace of effort, and that is all it is. A valid proof says the computation happened. It says nothing about whether the machine deserves more air.

FACT

Kant separated what has a price, which can be swapped for an equivalent, from what has dignity, which has none. He gave dignity to persons.

LEDGER ONE: THE RECORD -- dated, checkable, revisable, comparable

LEDGER TWO: WORTH -- not dated, not compared, not earned, not lost

a review reads ledger one; it cannot write into ledger two

Why a “no” feels like a verdict

FACT

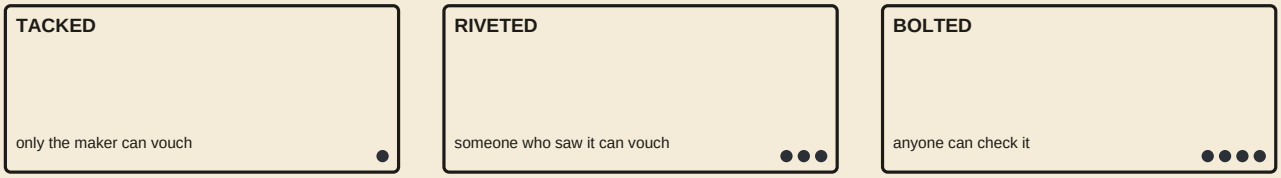
Crocker and Park (2004) argue that staking your worth on success in particular domains carries costs to learning, relationships, autonomy and health. Campbell (1979) and Strathern (1997) describe how a measure used as a target stops being a good measure.

INTERPRETATION

Followers, stars, grades and offers start as signals about the work. Once they become the target, you start shaping yourself to the signal. The rail breaks the loop: signal on one ledger, self on the other.

Neff (2003) offers the alternative stance: kindness toward yourself in failure, the sense that setbacks are common to people, and balanced awareness of painful feelings. None of it asks you to stop caring about quality.

02 What a plate can honestly claim



checkability of the RECORD -- never a grade on the person

Strength	Says	Cannot say
Tacked	This happened, and I say so.	That anyone else saw it.
Riveted	Someone else saw it.	That a stranger can confirm it.
Bolted	Anyone can check it via a public trace.	Talent, character, potential or worth.

What each state of the work claims

Shipped claims the work exists and was shown. **Unfinished** claims effort and direction, not completion. **Shelved on purpose** claims a decision was made on a date, with something learned.

Three rules of the rail

1. A gap of three or more empty months is an **unrecorded interval**. Unrecorded is not empty, and certainly not wasted.
2. A plate dated after this month is **planned**, not a record, and is excluded from counts.
3. The worth line is welded. There is no input that changes it.

HYPOTHESIS

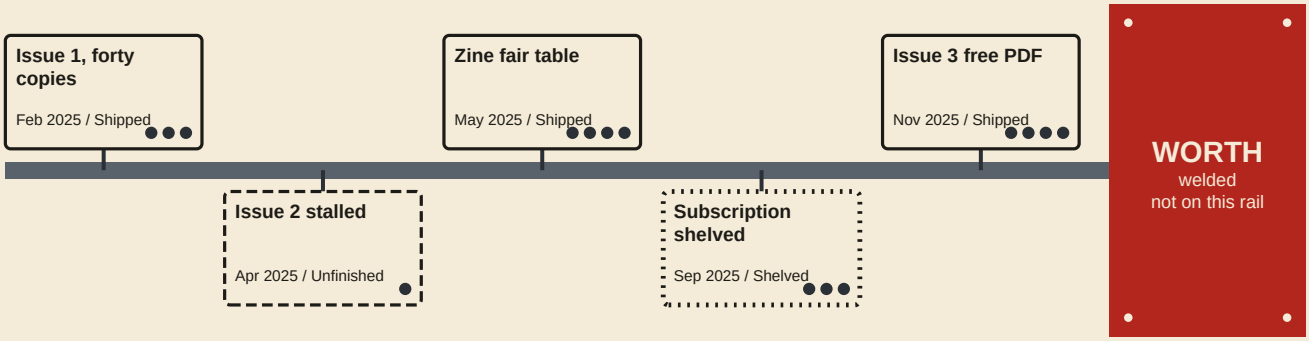
Keeping a dated record that includes unfinished and shelved work may make it easier to treat setbacks as events rather than identity. This guide has not tested that. Try it on yourself and judge.

The scale grades checkability, not effort. A thin record can reflect limited access to time, tools or audiences, so never read it as a ranking of the person.

03 Worked examples

FICTION

Mara Venn does not exist. Her zine is the seeded baseline in the interactive rail.



Read as a record: two Bolted plates, two Riveted, one Tacked, and one unrecorded interval (June to August 2025). **Read as a person:** nothing has happened to her. Change the stalled issue two to Bolted by publishing the page count and date. The sentence changes. The worth line does not.

Counterexample



FICTION

Here the best-checked plate is a shelved failure with a public post-mortem. The shiny prize is barely checkable. Shipped does not mean strongest, which is why shelved work earns a plate.

Edge cases to try

- Two plates in one month (they sit side by side, no ranking between them).
- A 13-month empty stretch (called unrecorded, not failed).
- A planned plate (shown, not counted).
- An empty rail (a record state, not a verdict).
- One plate only (a record, but it cannot show a trend).

04 Worksheet: your rail

Fifteen minutes. One real project. Five plates at most. At least one must be unfinished or shelved. If you cannot find one, ask why.

Plate 1	Name: _____	Month: _____
	State: [ ] Shipped [ ] Unfinished [ ] Shelved	Check: [ ] Tacked [ ] Riveted [ ] Bolted
Plate 2	Name: _____	Month: _____
	State: [ ] Shipped [ ] Unfinished [ ] Shelved	Check: [ ] Tacked [ ] Riveted [ ] Bolted
Plate 3	Name: _____	Month: _____
	State: [ ] Shipped [ ] Unfinished [ ] Shelved	Check: [ ] Tacked [ ] Riveted [ ] Bolted
Plate 4	Name: _____	Month: _____
	State: [ ] Shipped [ ] Unfinished [ ] Shelved	Check: [ ] Tacked [ ] Riveted [ ] Bolted
Plate 5	Name: _____	Month: _____
	State: [ ] Shipped [ ] Unfinished [ ] Shelved	Check: [ ] Tacked [ ] Riveted [ ] Bolted

WORTH: not on this rail. Leave this box as it is.

Prompts

1. Which plate do you reread most, and which ledger do you file it under?
2. Think of your last “no”. Which sentence about the *work* does it support? Which sentence about *you* does it not support?
3. What have you kept off the record because it did not ship?
4. Change who can check one plate. What changed in the record? What did not change in you?

05 The counterargument, properly

“The world does judge portfolios.” It does. Panels, committees and clients choose using records, and pretending otherwise is naive. The rail tells you which plates carry weight. It refuses only the step from “declined” to “less.”

“Dignity talk is armour against criticism.” It can be. But the separation is what makes critique usable: you can only revise what you are not defending with your whole self.

“Records flatter privilege.” Partly. Access varies, which is another reason a record is not a ranking of the person.

“Shouldn’t worth be earned?” Some traditions say so and the question is not closed. This guide takes a side: basic dignity is not something a portfolio awards or revokes. The record ledger works even if you disagree.

Methodological caveat

This is an essay and a small authored model, not a study. The strength scale and gap rule are design choices, not validated measures. The research cited concerns contingent self-worth, metrics and self-compassion in general. Nobody has tested whether this method helps. Nothing here is therapy.

Sources

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