

THE RELUCTANT WRITER



SUMMER (NON-)WRITING PROJECT

Over the summer, we tend to get out of the practice of writing. This is true for adults as well as kids. And no matter how much you swear that you're going to do that extra-credit book report, it can be almost impossible to get into a work mentality while you're on vacation.

In that case, instead of berating yourself for not writing, I recommend setting an *analytic* goal. Take a recreational trip to a museum, either locally or during your travels, and choose a specific room or exhibit to focus on. If you can come away with a theory about your subject, and articulate it to your dinner companions that night, you've taken some significant steps toward improving your writing skills.

Locally, I recommend the Oakland Museum, the SF MOMA, the SF Asian Art Museum, Musée Mécanique on Pier 41, or the Computer History Museum in Mountain View.

If you're lucky enough to be in New York, I highly recommend the chicken helmet in the Arms and Armor wing of the Met. On a recent visit, my son and I were struck by its unnatural combination of aggression and comedy. Although it was not typical among its fellow helmets, we noticed that almost every helmet had its own kind of "face" built in to the design. This pattern held across cultures—for example, Samurai armor traditionally included detailed masks. We spent about an hour looking at the variety of faces, and were struck by how intimidating they made the armor look. They were inhuman coverings for human occupants: insects, robots, wild animals. We concluded that, while armor is primarily a defensive protection, its aesthetics make it into an offensive weapon, weakening the opponent through fear.

Anyone can learn something new at a museum by passively taking in information, but the goal of this project is to actively generate your own argument. Think about which objects interest you the most, and why. Look for common themes, and small discrepancies, among different examples. Identify some questions you have about the object, and see if you can answer them. Practicing these analytic skills in the context of physical objects can help you to bridge the gap between concrete and conceptual.

CONSULTING

Summer is a great time for a book project! Sessions can usually be scheduled around your existing vacation & camp schedules.

KIDS, age 8-18:

I meet with clients daily or weekly to tackle side projects (like college essays), practice key skills (like note-taking or paragraph construction) in the context of a personal interest, or to do the fun book project there was no time for during the school year!

ASSESSMENT:

A written assessment—based on interviews and writing samples—helps you and your child to understand more precisely why writing challenges arise, and to prioritize effective strategies.

ADULTS:

Individual adult clients can schedule weekly sessions, or arrange a sequence of meetings and draft reviews based on a specific project or deadline.

*Sessions take place at my Temescal office:
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Oakland, CA 94609*

RECOMMENDATION: BACKGROUND NOISE

Many writers have a hard time concentrating when there's either too much or too little noise in the surrounding environment. For this, I recommend a "noise machine" app with the terrible name of "Relax Melodies." It allows you to layer different background noises from a large menu of choices. Imagine a location where you would write productively, and then, simulate it with sound. For some, it might be a busy café or a sunny beach; for me, it's an abandoned Victorian on a windy sea cliff, with a grandfather clock ticking away in the corner. Not sure why, but this combination always brings my scattered thoughts into focus. The use of headphones also has a nice isolating effect and blocks out interruptions.



SOCIAL ASPECTS OF WRITING



Writing often means working in isolation, and is a favorite activity of people who enjoy solitary reflection. However, there are a lot of people who operate more relationally and in the moment. I've noticed recently how important it is for many of the writers I know to "work with others" rather than alone.

SPEAKING TO AN AUDIENCE. Many people who have a hard time articulating themselves on paper are, in contrast, excellent speakers. Speaking rather than writing your ideas can free you from overthinking, and forces you, almost unconsciously, to focus on the most salient points. The presence of an "audience" also gives you a more concrete sense of the rules of communication, and of why you're engaging in this exercise in the first place. Your audience could be a parent, a friend, or a tape recorder; it can also be very helpful just to imagine a specific person whom you respect. If your recorded or transcribed result is too "messy" or informal-sounding, it's easy to go back and convert it into more "proper" language.

ANSWERING QUESTIONS. Some writers have trouble formulating an idea in a vacuum, but they are great at answering questions posed by others. Questioning puts you in the position of the "expert," and points you to what specific information is expected or needed. In this case, you may need to enlist a friend or join a study group.

SELF-AWARENESS. Some people really lose track of their time and objectives when they're writing alone. The presence of others is a subtle reminder of the context you're working in. It may help just to have people sitting in the same room or working nearby. Try writing in a café or library, or in another person's office, to see if this makes you more productive. You could also get a group of friends together to meet at a designated time every week, reserved for writing at a shared table.