

THE RELUCTANT WRITER



Barnacle Books

I am pleased to announce the official launch of my publishing company for young writers, Barnacle Books. This has been in the works for a long time!

I have always thought that one of the most frustrating things about living with a learning difference is how it impacts self-expression. Struggling writers feel like they are constantly failing to get their ideas out clearly. Even worse, they may feel that their own communication doesn't even belong to them; it can simply seem like an unpleasant requirement forced upon them by school or work. The truth, though, is that self-expression is a basic human right and need.

I love collaborating with kids on book projects, because it gives them a chance to hear their own voices. Most of the time, they are quite surprised at themselves when they see what they are capable of producing. Recent work from clients who've claimed to "hate" writing include a comedy screenplay, a sci-fi chapter book, and a persuasive essay on the psychology of *Star Wars* villains.

Barnacle Books publishes the work of all clients who commit to completing all stages of book production – brainstorming, organizing, drafting, editing, and presentation. The result is a beautiful, professionally-printed object that they can hold in their hands, and share with their friends.

CONSULTING

I am currently enrolling for the Summer session!

KIDS, age 8-18: BOOK PROJECTS

This Summer I will be working one-on-one with clients on creating and publishing their own books. This is a personal project that most kids find supportive and confidence-building. We start with an initial meeting to discuss your goals, and end with a pack of strategy cards you can use when school starts up again in the Fall.

Many spots become available when the school year ends, and because these projects are individual, they can usually be scheduled around your existing summer plans.

ADULTS:

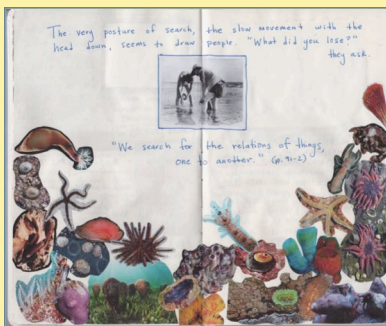
Individual adult clients can schedule weekly sessions, or arrange a sequence of meetings and draft reviews based on a specific project or deadline.

ASSESSMENT:

A written assessment helps you or your child to identify and prioritize writing goals for a specific project or time period. It provides a roadmap for those working on improving writing skills at school, at work, or at home, and for families or providers who are coordinating an IEP or intervention team.

*Sessions take place at my Temescal office:
510 49th St. (@Telegraph), #209
Oakland, CA 94609*

SUMMER PROJECT: THE LOGBOOK



Most productive writers will tell you that the key to success is keeping in regular practice. Of course, it can be difficult to stick to this intention, especially over the course of an extended break from school or work. One suggestion – for kids and adults – is to keep a logbook of your summer pleasures, whether that means traveling, reading, watching movies, or playing games or sports. You don't need to write fully-formed essays to practice your skills...you do a lot just by pausing to process the "narrative" of your experiences.

A logbook can be largely visual, filled with doodles, clippings and quotes that seem meaningful, funny, or puzzling to you. I recently read a great book about John Steinbeck's research into the marine invertebrates of Baja, *The Log from the Sea of Cortez*. One afternoon, I decided to research online all of the creatures he collected in a single day at the tidepools. In my logbook, I made a collage of their images (left), along with Steinbeck's observation, "We search for the relations of things, one to another."

THE SHORTCUT FALLACY



In 1846, when the Donner and Reed families set out in a wagon train from Wyoming to California, they already knew they had a long and trying journey ahead. The trip typically lasted several months, and travelers faced serious threats of hunger, sickness, exposure, and attack. When an adventurer named Lansford Hastings offered them a shortcut, it probably seemed like a risk reduction, since it meant less time on the trail. Unfortunately, Hastings had only tested the route a few times, and never with wagons. The rough terrain delayed the party by three critical weeks, leaving them trapped in the Sierras as winter set in. Spoiler alert: this story did not have a happy ending.

When a reluctant writer embarks on a new assignment, she may find herself in a “Donner Party situation.” She already knows that the process is going to be long and difficult, and the potential risks can feel like visceral threats. A natural response is avoidance: *Is there some kind of shortcut I could take to reduce the amount of time on this dangerous trail?* Often, as a way of saving time and potential suffering, the writer chooses to go with the first idea that comes to mind.

The problem, as you can see, is that this is not an informed choice. It’s an untested route. Most commonly, a topic that seems “easy” to begin with just doesn’t have enough debatable content to support multiple paragraphs and a thesis; conversely, a topic that seems “big enough to fill lots of pages” may have no internal organization. A few steps into the writing process, the writer becomes stuck, without options. Like the Hastings Cutoff, this route is liable to take much, much more time than anticipated, and generate a lot more risk.

So, how can an anxious writer choose the right topic at the outset, before it’s too late?

Be strategic by evaluating more than one possible route. Write down the first idea that comes to mind, and then keep going, thinking of one or two more. If your mind is a blank, try talking with a friend, thumbing through your book or notes, or listing whatever you know about the prompt, off the top of your head.

Write your potential topics at the top of a piece of paper, listing underneath what you know and wonder about each one. Inevitably, one list will be much longer or more interesting than the others, and your best choice becomes clear. As an added benefit, you now have some examples ready to write about. This preparatory work may add a little time and aggravation, but rarely more than you’d suffer *without* doing it.

The Donner Party analogy reminds me how unsafe the act of writing feels to many people. Just because someone else has done it and survived, isn’t very reassuring. What does help is some advance sense of the terrain. When a writer has evaluated her choices herself, and holds a map in her hand, some justifiable fear and risk can be eliminated from the process.