

# THE RELUCTANT WRITER



## THE BIRD OF SELF-KNOWLEDGE

I recently came across this image of the Vogel Selbsterkenntnis or “bird of self-knowledge.” He reminds the viewer to be familiar with her own mind, and have the courage to apply her own understanding. I’m considering making him the new office mascot.

In the process of writing, it is incredibly easy to lose sight of your own thoughts. Most of the time, you’re trying to present the work of experts (authors, references) to other experts (teachers, colleagues), and your own voice feels weak in comparison. But your own expertise—your singular point of view—is the most important aspect of anything you write. It provides the structure, the motivation, and the interest of the piece. So, when you are writing, remember this bird.

## CONSULTING

*If you’re thinking about after-school sessions or a beginning-of-the-year writing assessment, now is a good time to get on the schedule!*

### 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

### KIDS, age 8-18:

For young writers struggling with school assignments, I offer the following options:

### BOOK PROJECTS

This is ideal for young writers (age 8-12), and those whose writing is impacted by anxiety or rigidity.

### ESSAY-WRITING SUPPORT

For those with specific academic goals, I focus on one stage of the writing process at a time, meeting weekly or biweekly throughout the semester.

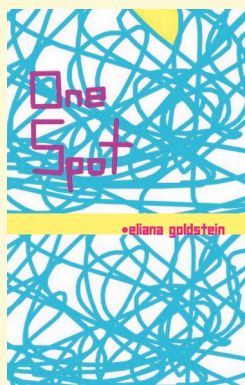
### EDITORIAL FEEDBACK

After-school time slots are limited, so if I’m unable to meet with your student, I can provide feedback in the form of draft annotations.

### 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:  
510 49<sup>th</sup> St. (@Telegraph), #209  
Oakland, CA 94609*



## FEATURED PUBLICATION: ONE SPOT

Clients’ completed book projects are published by my own small press, Barnacle Books. I’m pleased to announce the upcoming release of *One Spot* by Adina Goldstein, age 8. Follow the adventures of Hallowa, Willowim, Iflipa and their friends as they attend school inside a hollow tree, and stand their ground against a secret society of invaders!

*“Who are those people outside, coming up to the school?” Everyone in the class looked. They had brown messy hair, and very unique and weird contacts on, that made the middles of their eyes very small, and their eyes were deep brown. They didn’t wear a uniform. Everyone from the classroom went outside, looked, and realized the mysterious people were setting the school on fire! They watched in horror for a few minutes...they were so panic-stricken that they couldn’t move.*

Find out what happens next... *One Spot* will be available through Barnacle Books in September!

# “FEAST OR FAMINE” ASSIGNMENTS



The beginning of the school year always reminds me of one of the most dreaded essay assignments: "What did you do over summer vacation?" It seems like a simple question...which makes students feel terrible when they can't answer it. Many writers will stare at it for half an hour without writing a single sentence.

The "summer vacation" essay is deceptively difficult, for several reasons. First, it relies on comprehensive memory. Many people simply can't call to mind a list of their activities over the past several months. Second, it covers a really broad range of possibilities: are we talking about places I went, things I learned, daily activities? Third, it's very unclear what the goal of the assignment is. What would a "good" version of this essay even look like? Parents and teachers, seeing the student agonizing over this seemingly "fluffy" assignment, often advise, "Just write anything!" Which only makes it worse.

A writer paralyzed by this question is probably experiencing either a "feast" or "famine" of information—that is, she either has too many ideas to choose from, or none at all. If the problem is too many ideas, she may feel flooded, overwhelmed, and unable to discern which among her choices is best or most important. If the problem is not having any ideas at all, she may feel trapped in an impossible situation, like one of those nightmares where you have to give a speech in front of a crowd and you've lost your notes (and probably your pants).

In fact, writers' "famine" is usually just a disguised version of "feast": there are so many possibilities that no individual ideas rise to the surface. The inability to get started is most often due to an overwhelming number of indistinct or unappealing options.

Once we think of the writer's problem as "information overload," we can begin to think of workable solutions. A back-to-school analogy that comes to mind is the packing of school lunches. You stand at the open refrigerator, staring at a bunch of food, and think, "There's nothing usable here."

One of the best solutions I've found for the lunch problem is a bento lunchbox, divided into compartments. This way, instead of reviewing every mysterious container in the fridge, I can ask myself: what main proteins do I have? If there's bread, I can make a sandwich; if not, maybe sliced salami and cheese or a hard-boiled egg. To fill the smaller compartments, I just need to find one fruit, one vegetable.

The bento box provides productive limits: it limits what components you need to remember, the range of possible ingredients, and the definition of a good lunch. It does *not*, by the way, limit how creative you can be, and it doesn't require a fully-stocked larder.

When you're stuck in a "feast or famine" writing paralysis, a good first step is usually to "scan the fridge" – that is, make a quick list of what you have on hand (what you currently know), without making any decisions about what to do with it. It's fine if your list is not comprehensive – just a few things you remember or understand about the topic.

Once you have a general idea of what's on hand, you can look for a "main protein," which might be a recurrent theme or a single point of interest...again, without deciding how it will be prepared.

Other items from the list might be good "side dishes" for your smaller compartments / topics. Specific examples are like "dessert": i.e., your lunch would be boring without one.

If you find it helpful, you can draw an actual refrigerator and bento box to contain ideas on your scratch paper. If you're still stuck, you may need another person to provide additional limits by listing options for each compartment.

At this point you may not be ready to write, but you're ready to engage the prompt question. This is a model I will be developing further in my practice; I would love to hear your feedback if this strategy helps you with your own "feast or famine" writing challenge.