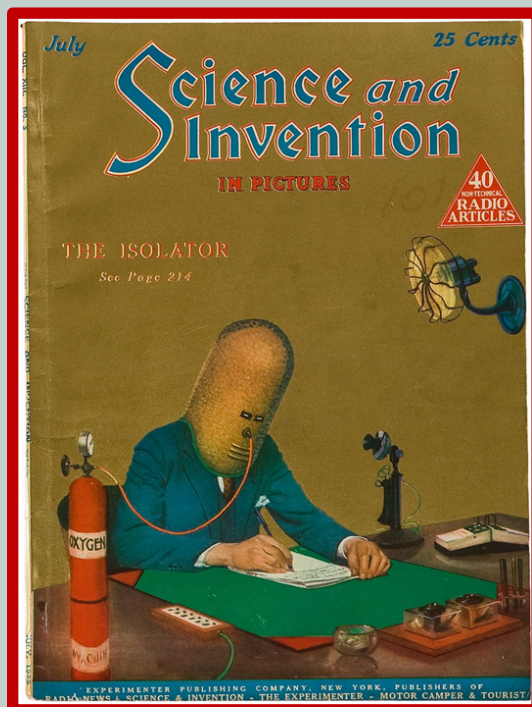


# THE RELUCTANT WRITER

## SPECIAL QUARANTINE EDITION



Over the past few weeks, I've been talking to lots of people about writing under quarantine. Unsurprisingly, everyone is under stress and feeling unproductive. People are having a hard time focusing for long periods, and they don't feel like their projects are important enough to compete with the surrounding crisis. Many are having to share limited work time and space with partners at home, or are trapped in the house with small children. Long-distance learning has become a huge burden for parents of kids with learning differences. People feel like they're failing at all the things they had under control in early March.

I think we'd all agree that we're not individually and personally responsible for this pandemic. Yet many people are still blaming themselves for not getting more done. I want to encourage everyone to scale their expectations way back for a while. Adjusting to big changes, and planning without clear precedents, requires a lot of mental energy, even when we're not consciously aware of it.

At the same time, the energy we *do* invest in writing can be especially rewarding at a time like this. We spend all day taking in news about COVID, and when we talk to each other...it's also about COVID. Writing about your own ideas allows you to exercise the skills of reflection, self-regulation, synthesis and communication that are otherwise a little stifled right now.

Here are some tips for writing at home under quarantine:

**Be realistic about how much time and focus you actually have available for your writing. It might only be 20 minutes a day.** If you commit to a goal of this size, you're much more likely to make consistent progress, instead of feeling like you're failing to complete work every day.

Synthesizing tasks are much harder to do under stress. **If you're not able to write complete paragraphs, try bullet lists, brainstorming maps, or free-writing.**

Just having a task list for the day doesn't give you enough structure. **Every morning, make a schedule for the day that includes specific time slots for work and personal obligations, as well as one writing priority.** (On the Archive page of my website, there's a printable daily planner you can use for this.) Try to schedule your writing time in the morning, since your mental focus is likely to decrease over the course of the day.

Don't work in total isolation; writing is communicative and requires occasional feedback. **Ask a partner or colleague to meet with you to talk through your ideas...** even if it's just for 20 minutes.

If you find yourself zoning out or procrastinating, of course that's normal...and it won't help to chastise yourself. Instead, just be more aware of how you're feeling. **If you can identify your mental state** ("I'm really anxious right now") **and then choose a way to take care of yourself** ("I'm going to watch a YouTube video and have a snack") – **you'll be replacing a passive avoidance defense with an active problem-solving strategy.** This active approach will have a positive effect on your ability to manage anxiety and get back to work.



## WORKING WITH RELUCTANT STUDENT WRITERS AT HOME

I know that most parents don't have the time, expertise, or mental energy to coach their children through stressful distance-learning assignments at home. But if your child is really struggling, and you end up arguing and nagging over homework every day...investing some time in scaffolding and structuring their work might end up saving you time and energy overall. Below are some general suggestions that can be adapted to different types of learners and tasks.

First, resist the impulse to minimize the problem by suggesting that your child should "just try a little harder" or "just pick a topic." She probably needs a more concrete framework, so this response will just increase her anxiety. Instead, **reflect and empathize with her frustration.**

Reduce competing stimuli and increase motivation by **setting up a quiet and pleasant workspace.** Provide earplugs or ambient relaxation sounds. Provide snacks, tea, cozy socks, etc. Make sure all the materials your child needs are visible, accessible, and organized.

Use time as a structuring element. **Work at the same time each day; and set a timer for just 10-20 minutes of writing work at a time.**

**Help your child to set a *specific and realistic* goal for the set time period,** like "Write 1 paragraph summarizing the chapter" or "Answer 3 questions (2 sentences each)."

**Most important of all: help your child to translate instructions into concrete terms.** For example, if the prompt says, "Summarize the chapter," that may not be explicit enough. A better translation might be: "Go back and skim the chapter, making a bullet list of 4 things you notice that create a conflict or change in the plot." Or, "Write 2 sentences to describe the main problem and 2 sentences to describe the consequences."

Sometimes concrete instructions aren't enough, and kids will refuse to work or start to panic. In that case, here are a few things you can try:

- **Start by asking your child to list what she already knows about the subject.** This is a very effective strategy for getting started. It may help if you **transcribe** from her verbal description. Then you can review the results together, and ask her to identify the most important or interesting point on the list. Or, ask her to put the items into a good storytelling sequence.
- Another useful tool is the template. Your child may have ideas about the subject, but no clue how to arrange them into a paragraph. You can **provide a "Mad Libs"-style fill-in-the blank sheet** to guide him through it. "One interesting event in this chapter is \_\_\_\_\_. It shows how \_\_\_\_\_. The consequence is that \_\_\_\_\_."
- If the trouble is with identifying what's *most important* in a book or article, or coming up with a thesis, **ask your child what was most unexpected** in a particular part of the book. This is often a very productive place to get started on an idea.
- If the trouble is expanding on an idea, **have your child choose a specific example and describe *what is happening and what it shows.***
- **Implement a rewards system.** It's not bribery to provide a source of external motivation when internal motivation is missing. (And once the skill is learned, the reward will no longer be needed). It's best if your system doesn't involve any punishment (like eliminating a significant reward if the assignment isn't done by a certain time). Rather, a small reward is given whenever a small step is completed. For example, "If you skim the chapter and put post-its on 2 examples, then I'll make you some popcorn." You can also award points that build toward a larger reward, like a new video game. If possible, have your child participate actively in setting the goal by identifying what he wants to get done for each step, and how he plans to do it.