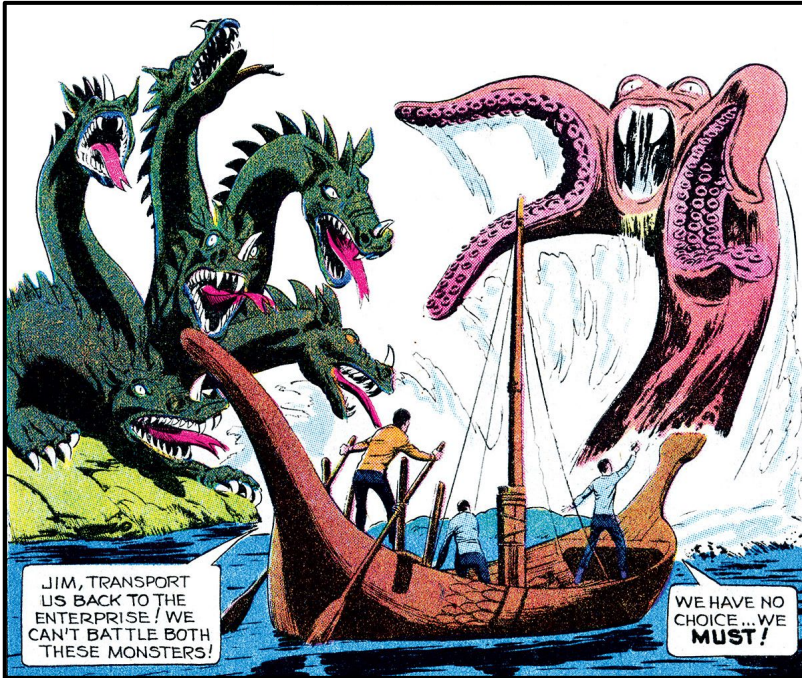


THE RELUCTANT WRITER



JIM, TRANSPORT US BACK TO THE ENTERPRISE! WE CAN'T BATTLE BOTH THESE MONSTERS!

WE HAVE NO CHOICE... WE MUST!

ON PROCRASTINATION

There was a great article in the *New York Times* last month called “Why You Procrastinate (It Has Nothing to Do with Self-Control)”. It pointed out that, contrary to popular belief, we don’t avoid work because we’re lazy. We do it because we can’t manage the negative emotions—like boredom or insecurity—that are stirred up by the work we’re doing. The solution, therefore, isn’t to pressure ourselves more, or to download another productivity app. The solution is to give ourselves more positive internal feedback, like compassion, to help us diffuse the internal tension.

In my experience, procrastinators are usually avoiding two specific sources of internal stress. I think of them as Scylla and Charybdis: twin mythical beasts that you have to navigate between, in order to proceed. The first is an **unidentified mood state**. When you’re anxious about being stuck, sometimes you can’t bear to face your overwhelming feelings...so you remain in a state of avoidance. The next time you notice yourself avoiding work, pause to acknowledge your emotions: “I’m nervous about sounding unprofessional,” or “I feel so tired I can’t think clearly.” Just naming the feeling will relieve some tension, and help you to identify a solution. Most likely, you actually need something, like a break, or food, or more information.

The second beast is an **unidentified next step**. In other words, you know the end result you need to produce, but you haven’t named a specific action that you could take toward it. This can be especially difficult for people with executive functioning difficulties. Try to come up with a very basic, concrete task that supports the current stage of your project....for example, making a to-do list, opening up a document, or skimming a reference or draft for quotes. Having this material in front of you will help you focus on a doable task. Stopping procrastination might be an Odyssean challenge, but it helps to know what monsters you’re fighting.

CONSULTING

Summer sessions can be designed around your existing travel schedule.

ADULTS

Weekly consultation and editorial feedback can be helpful if you’re stalled out on an old writing project, or would like to get motivated for a new one: **dissertations, book manuscripts, reports, website copy**, etc.

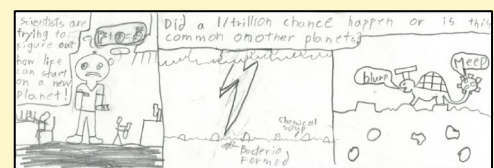
KIDS

Summer is a great time for a **creative project!** Ask me about book publishing, miniature museums, and private seminars. I also work with students on **application essays**.

Looking ahead to the new school year, **Learning profile assessments** can identify where writing challenges are coming from, and give you written recommendations to share with parents, teachers, and service providers.

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

SUMMER WORKSHOP: COMICS!



Spots are still available in my summer class for kids, age 10-16! “Writing in Pictures” will use comics as a visual and engaging way to learn how to plan a narrative arc, emphasize key ideas, and incorporate more depth and detail into analytic writing work.

There are three sessions to choose from: June 24-28, July 1-5, & August 5-9, from 1-4:00pm.

I’m also offering individual workshops for all ages, with a variety of creative projects available. If you’re looking for a summer program to boost your child’s writing confidence without piling on academic work, this is a great option.



THE PALACE WITH 3,000 ROOMS

I recently had the chance to spend a few days in Spain with my family. A guidebook I found at the library recommended a visit to the Royal Palace in Madrid. The photos showed a variety of rooms encrusted with gold, satin, and crystal, so ornately decorated that they made my eyeballs want to explode. It's not my aesthetic, but I thought it would impress my son to see it: a real-life storybook castle.

It took us almost 15 minutes just to find the entrance, which was through one of dozens of identical doorways and up a cold marble staircase. Once inside, we entered a sort of sitting room, mostly empty except for a small, uncomfortable-looking settee at the dead center of 6 screaming walls. Moving on, we entered another room of similar size, equally overdecorated and underfurnished. Another sitting room, I guess. A third room, also coated in florals and frescoes, with just a couple of hard chairs set against the wall. I imagined one or two very rich and deranged people drifting from room to room; just sitting, rigid and silent, for a few minutes in each one. Where did people cook, sleep, or go to the bathroom in this place? Posted signs occasionally explained that certain rooms had formerly been bedrooms or changing areas; they had probably been cleared out to make room for the tours. But the effect was to remove the storybook quality – there was no longer any content to indicate what went on in this incredible building.

Of course, this is an analogy, for a piece of writing that has lost its narrative arc. With no clear entry point or introduction, and no distinct purpose for each paragraph, writing begins to repeat itself. We may write longer and showier sentences to distract from the emptiness...and we can keep adding as many of these florid boxes as we need to fill up the required space. But without a bed, a stove, a closet, a toilet...no life is going to be lived in this structure.

Coming up with a strong narrative arc is easier said than done. But it can be helpful to use this architectural analogy. There should be an obvious and welcoming entryway into your argument, for example. Each paragraph is like a room, in that it should serve a distinct function from any other room. It should also adjoin and flow into other, related rooms. And each paragraph should be equipped with a few basic pieces of furniture related to its function – an assertion, an example, an interpretation – and not a whole lot of ornate wallpapering.

The Royal Palace was the product of an unbelievable amount of labor. But it felt a little like the labor of procrastination: doodling an infinite series of curlicues; avoiding any reminders of imperfection; amassing a pile of resources, but ultimately not knowing how to make anything practical with them. The result was repetition and disorientation. In writing, it's better to plan a small bungalow than a palace: coat closet, living room, kitchen, bedroom. Choose one focal point for each room. Invite the reader in, explaining the room's purpose, and then show her the way to the next one. Even if your house is extremely eccentric, its form can follow its function. This is one reason why pre-writing is so important: you need to identify the function of each room before you start to build and decorate.