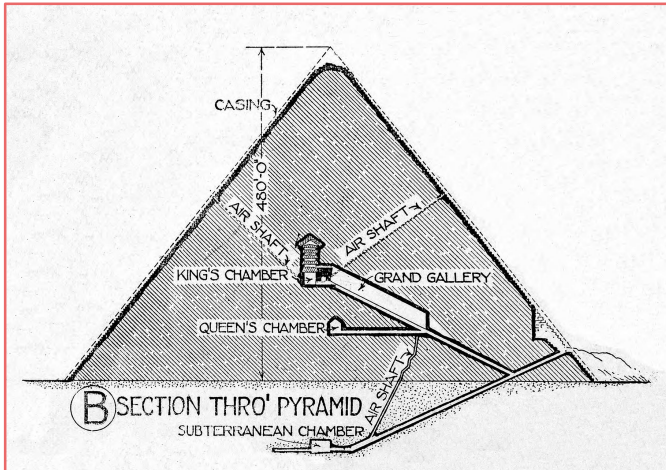


THE RELUCTANT WRITER

BURIED PROMPTS



Many of my young clients report that the most intimidating part of the writing process is the moment they receive an essay prompt. They don't understand what it's asking for; they find it deadly boring; they can't determine where to start. I imagine the prompt like a pyramid: a huge, daunting edifice, of mysterious purpose, with no visible entrance.

The teachers and administrators who write these prompts aren't sadists; they're usually just trying to give students a "jumping-off point" for creative thinking. "Write about an important moment in your life"; "Is social media a positive or negative influence?" They want students to have some room to choose topics that interest them. The problem for many writers is that the implicit terms of the question are hidden and abstract. What is the purpose of writing about this? What does the teacher mean by "important"? What style should it be written in? What would a correct answer look like? There are meaningful pieces of the prompt hidden inside, and like the chambers of a pyramid, it's difficult to access them, or even to know whether they exist.

With school assignments as well as with personal and work projects, it's hard to make progress without a purpose. It's important to understand that prompts can be *broken down* in order to find purpose, and *re-written* to reflect their hidden elements. Take a few minutes at the beginning of any project to define a few crucial elements:

1. **What the audience wants.** Is this piece primarily supposed to be creative, comprehensive, interpretive, organized, practical? What is it supposed to teach or contribute? If you're not sure, you can ask!
2. **How you want to define key terms.** For example, "important moment" could mean a traumatic event that changed your life physically, or a small interaction that gave you a big insight. "Positive influence" could refer to an effect on individuals or institutions; on commerce or psychology. When possible, replace the vague wording in the prompt with your own, more specific definitions.
3. **What aspects you find important or interesting.** Essays are usually better (and easier to write) the narrower their topics are. Make a list of a few possible sub-topics and allow yourself to dive into one that you actually have thoughts and questions about.

CONSULTING

I'm currently accepting new clients for January 2018, with some after-school time slots available. Please contact me for more information about writing support options.

KIDS, age 8-18:

Students can work on academic and personal goals, either in the context of school assignments or with a fun extracurricular book-publishing project.

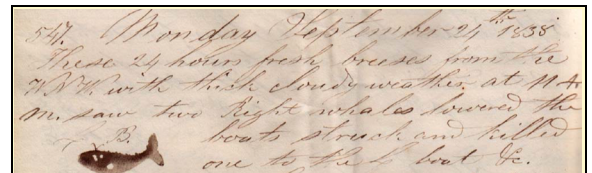
ASSESSMENT:

A written assessment helps parents and teachers to understand where writing challenges are coming from, and how to prioritize effective interventions at school and at home.

ADULTS:

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 49th St. (@Telegraph), #209
Oakland, CA 94609*



ONE LINE A DAY

Do you have a noncommittal resolution to write "a little bit every day"? This is a great idea that for many people just never becomes reality. Another obligation always comes along and takes priority, and the project becomes weighed down with high expectations. For a more viable New Year's resolution, I recommend starting a one-line-a-day journal. At the same time each evening, spend just 2 or 3 minutes to sift through the day's events and jot one down. There's no pressure to be poetic or brilliant. Just the act of reviewing information, choosing one detail, and articulating it will keep you limber (and leave you with an interesting record of the year). To show you how simple and lovely this can be, here's a sample entry from a daily whaling log, written by a little girl in 1868:

*Tuesday 19. Papa opened one of the coconuts.
It is soft inside. Prescott loves them. There is a fly
on my finger. He has flew off now.*

HOLIDAY GIFTS FOR THE NEURODIVERSE & THE WRITING-AVERSE

During the holidays, I like to recommend gifts that encourage creative thinking, articulation, planning, and organization. (I am not affiliated with any of these products or vendors.)

FIND HIDDEN CONNECTIONS



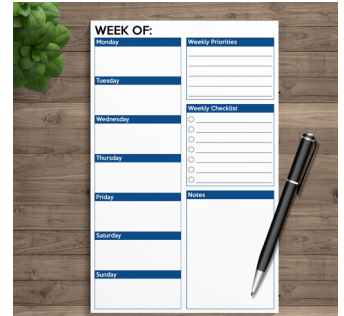
HIVE (\$32) is a strategy game played with a simple and satisfying set of chunky tiles. The game play is shorter, more lighthearted, and more portable than chess, but similar, in that each piece can only move a certain way, and players need to anticipate future moves in order to come up with winning strategies. I think of strategy games as a writing exercise, because they force you to think from multiple perspectives, over an unfolding expanse of time, toward a specific goal.

PLAN YOUR NEXT MOVE



THE STORYMATIC (KIDS) (\$30) is a set of 360 storytelling cards, divided into characters (yellow) and scenarios (blue). You can use them for games, creative writing projects, bedtime stories, etc. It's a great way to practice making connections between points in a narrative. Having the cards choose key elements for you can also free you up to work on other writing goals like adding detail or creating an arc. Imagine if a **slowpoke** and the **owner of a pet store** were at a **museum at midnight**...

BRAINSTORM YOUR WEEK

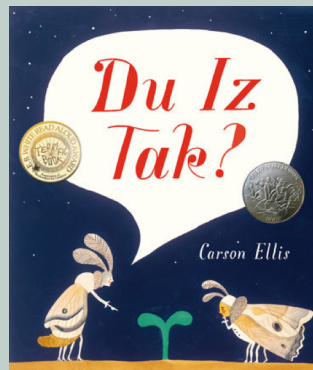


21 DONE WEEKLY PLANNER PAD (\$9) For most people, writing only happens when a specific time has been reserved for it. Making active choices about your schedule for the week gives you more motivation than being told what to do; it also helps you to get a more realistic sense of available time, how long things actually take, and what your priorities are. (This planner is like a weekly version of my daily "Simple Planner," available on erikaclowes.com).

RECOMMENDED READING

Theft by Finding (David Sedaris). Sedaris has a genius for observation. Each of his journal entries is just a few simple sentences, recording everyday events, but with such thoughtful fascination that they become tableaux or parables. It's a refreshing way to think about writing skills like incorporating detail and judicious editing. If you're thinking of starting a journal in 2018, this book is an inspiration.

**DAVID SEDARIS
THEFT BY
FINDING
DIARIES
1977-2002**



Du Iz Tak? (Carson Ellis) is a simple picture book, presumably for young children, but suitable for all ages. Its story is told entirely through dialogue in an invented language. It's a great lesson in how we communicate narrative through image and tone, not just words...and how it sometimes feels to encounter unfamiliar language, find a way in, and make meaning out of it.