

THE RELUCTANT WRITER



MARI-TIME MANAGEMENT: Navigating the River of Time

Let's say you've finally set aside a block of writing time; an hour to work on your outline or draft a few paragraphs. Excellent. It may seem as if there's nothing left to do except "do it" – get as much writing done as you can.

In my experience, though, this is something like casting yourself adrift on the river of time. You're in a raft, just floating wherever the water flows: into eddies that never move, fishing holes without any fish...and you might not reach your destination by nightfall. To say "let's see how much I can get done" is to use time passively. Using this method, your project as a whole could take weeks, months, years...who knows?

On the other hand, you could use your time limits to your advantage. This requires setting a concrete and realistic goal for the steps you can complete by the end of the designated hour. For example: half an hour skimming your notes, and half an hour listing key themes for your outline? 20 minutes drafting paragraph 1, followed by a 20-minute break, then 20 minutes of editing?

This approach allows you to adapt your navigational methods; it's more like manning a nimble kayak than a rudderless raft. First of all, you know the purpose of your trip – tourism, fishing, high speeds? You can eliminate side-trips that don't fit your charter. Second, knowing that you must reach your destination by a specific time means you can decide what you can and can't afford to do. For example, in 20 minutes, you can draft a paragraph, but not pause to look up references. Ideally, you should be modifying the way you work to fit your specific writing goals and deadlines, not just writing "as much as you can" every day.

CONSULTING

I'm currently accepting new clients for the Fall. Please contact me for more information about available time slots & writing support options.

KIDS, age 8-18:

Young writers 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*

THE DEATH OF SCRATCH PAPER?



As computers become our masters, we learn to defer to them automatically. This extends to our writing as we adapt our practices to their tools: we do more reading online, composing on keyboards, editing on word processors, etc. One insidious side-effect of this development is the disappearance of scratch paper. A student recently told me that she no longer makes a plan before writing in school, because she has no paper... all her in-class work is done on a Chromebook. Even if she were to take some brainstorming notes within her word processor, that medium is less visual, less tactile, and more self-conscious than hand-writing (because you are already writing "for" the page or the computer, not just yourself. And heaven forbid you're composing "live" in a shared Google doc.) As a counter-measure, I recommend that all writers place thick notepads next to each of their devices, and keep a small notebook in their pockets or purses.

PERILS OF PASSIVE WRITING



Many authors unconsciously try to erase themselves from their own sentences.

...But pretending there is no author doesn't produce a successful illusion of objectivity.

The other day, a young client was interpreting an abstract sculpture. Her verbal description involved a vivid battle between dark and light emotions. But in her written draft, she had only described the dark and light *colors* in the artwork, not the battle itself. When I encouraged her to speak up more about her ideas, she hesitated, saying, "It sounds too weird to start a sentence with 'I.'" She meant that it's too blunt, too obvious, and too un-poetic to come right out and say, "I think this is a symbolic battle." I thought this was astute! But it's also a common reason that people end up defaulting to passively-constructed sentences and watered-down analysis.

It often seems like it would be more artistic, more professional, more modest, or more factual to avoid bringing your own "opinions" into your writing. The problem is that, without your authorial guidance, the reader doesn't know what you want them to see in the material. They may come to a different conclusion, or no conclusion at all...just a series of impressions. This is probably the most common cause of weak writing: not a lack of ideas, but a lack of *ownership* over the ideas you do have.

In my experience, the most common passive writing habits are these:

- **Generalizing.** Even though the author understands the nuance of a situation, she may relay only broad themes in order to stick to the most objective and unarguable elements.
- **Letting data just "sit there."** In an effort to be neutral or scientific, an author may present facts or quotations without interpreting their relative significance, assuming that it's somehow self-evident.
- **Not connecting the dots.** Sometimes the most important function of the author is to clarify the implicit and meaningful relationships between adjacent statements.
- **Deferring to your sources.** Many authors are intimidated by the more established reputations of the experts they're referencing, and end up mostly summarizing their sources instead of contributing to the discussion.

In the end, my client had several options for asserting herself without being blunt. Instead of using "I" as her subject, she could use the work itself: "*The sculpture* reveals a clash between forces." She could also use metaphor or simile to show what the colors mean: "*The dark blue* is like a stormy sea"; "*The colors* battle against one another."

The result of "self-erasure" in writing is not a more objective-sounding argument; it's basically a lack of argument. Authority is an important part of authorship; it gives your work clarity and meaning. If you're struggling with either of these, you may need to make your opinion "louder" in key sentences, by highlighting themes and implications.