

## [The Write Place At the Write Time](#)

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Come in...and be captivated...

### [Writers' Craft Box](#)

What this section is intended to do:

Give writers suggested hints, resources, and advice.

How to use: Pick and choose what you feel is most helpful and derive inspiration from it- most importantly, **HAVE FUN!**

What a Writers' Craft Box is: Say you're doing an art project and you want to spice it up a bit. You reach into a seemingly bottomless box full of colorful art/craft supplies and choose only the things that speak to you. You take only what you need to feel that you've fully expressed yourself. Then, you go about doing your individual project adding just the right amount of everything you've chosen until you reach a product that suits you completely. So, this is on that concept. Reach in, find the things that inspire you, use the tools that get your writing going and see it as fulfilling your self-expression as



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opposed to following rules.

Writing is art and art is supposed to be fun, relaxing, healing and nurturing. It's all work and it's all play at the same time. A Writers' Craft Box is whatever your imagination needs it to be- a lifeboat, the spark of an idea, a strike of metaphorical lightning, a reminder, or simply the recommendation of a good book. Feel free to sit back and break out the crayons. Coloring outside the lines is heartily encouraged.

***In this edition of Writers' Craft Box, we have some philosophical, personal and writing snippets of conversation with best-selling author, Elizabeth Berg, whose great works include (Durable Goods, We are all Welcome Here, What we Keep, The Art of Mending, Open House, Home Safe)...***

***DISCUSSION VIA E-MAIL CORRESPONDENCE:***

***You work from a palette of everyday life- the different hues, the fighting colors on opposite sides of the color wheel being conflict, the families of warm and cool, the derivatives of them with like feeding like, needing balance, all reminiscent of the inner relationships of our closest circle- our family, our romantic partnerships, and our relationship to ourselves. Many of your books such as Durable Goods, We are all Welcome Here, What we Keep, The Art of Mending and the latest, Home Safe, focus on the theme of parent-child relationships. In describing What we Keep, you say that "One of the issues addressed in this book is what our mothers owe us and what we owe them". What do you feel are the***

***most important legacies we can leave to the next generation?***

*Speaking as a member of Woodstock nation, I want to pass on the Beatles notion that all we need is love. Really. From this will come peace and respect--for each other, for the planet, etc. But we have a little problem called human nature. We need to work on that.*

***Influences:***

*My charming, optimistic and loving Irish grandfather, whose gravy should have won multiple awards. My father, who is an example of someone who always tells the truth, consequences be damned. Two male teachers I had in high school, and a humanities and a theater professor in college. All these men inspired me. As for authors, I found E.B. White and J.D. Salinger most inspiring.*

***On balancing life and career:***

*It's my belief that a person is a person first, not a profession. It is true that my focus is on ordinary life and that is what I prefer to experience in literature, art and film.*

***In this issue, one of the essays in this particular installment of Writers' Craft Box discusses perseverance and salvaging an old piece of writing to turn it into something extraordinary as with the process you describe in the evolution of Open House. Could you describe that process for us in terms of taking a concept and breathing fresh life into it upon our return visit to the material as writers? How did you let go of your previous notions of what the story was originally supposed to be and step aside to let it evolve naturally?***

*The hardest thing to do when writing is what sounds easy: LET GO. Let the wise presence inside you guide you. Don't tell the book what to do; let the book tell you. So when I rewrite something, it's with an eye toward being willing to let anything and everything go, to move my own preconceptions out of the way. I like to be surprised by what comes up. The best writing for me comes when I have no idea what I'm doing.*

***Your book on writing, Escaping into the Open- The Art of Writing True, is a tender journey through both the creative and technical aspects of the publishing world- complete with a recipe for chocolate cake. Thank goodness- only those who are familiar with the scathing, soothing, violent love affair that is a writing career, get that. Survival is survival and chocolately oblivion is just that. Yet onto the elements of crafting a story, do you feel that one of the most important factors of writing true is to deeply observe as you so deliciously describe in your latest novel, Home Safe?***

*"After the paper, there was the grocery shopping and laundry; expeditions about town to run errands; and always, always people watching. Helen thought of observation as a kind of shopping too: into her writer's basket would go snatches of conversation, the sheen of someone's long, black hair, an exaggerated limp, the look that passed between lovers. Natural events that she witnessed- furious summer thunderstorms, the oblique flight of migrating birds, the cocooning of caterpillars, the formation of fuzzy stars of frost against her window- all these seemed rich with potential for metaphor. She would walk past a nursing home and see an imaginary Elwood Lansing, trembling hands resting on his knees, waiting for his five o' clock supper; she would see a couple arguing in a car and create lines of blistering dialogue for them both. She would walk along a narrow dirt path in the woods hearing things characters in whatever novel she was working on were saying to each other. Oftentimes, embarrassingly, she used to blurt lines of dialogue out loud. Once, a man turned around and said "Well, hey. You too." **Paragraph three on page 13 of Home Safe.***

*For me, observation is not only important; I can't NOT do it. Woe to the person in the grocery store who stands in line behind me; I stare at their selections mercilessly and make up stories about what all that stuff means. I think most writers feel the same way--they are in the habit of noticing, as Richard Ford once said.*

***In the spirit of the season of change, for this autumn issue, what do you foresee on your creative compass in terms of future directions for your career and in general?***

*Well, most of all, I want to keep myself interested and AWAKE. I want to do more theater: I adapted a novel into a play (The Pull of the Moon) which was great fun and pretty successful--great audience turnout, great audience reaction. Now I want to adapt a short story into a play--I was just contacted*

*by a director to do that. Also I want to keep writing book-length works: novels, short story collections, and I have an idea for a non-fiction book as well. And I want to make a lot of new recipes for soups this winter.*



"Fun" N.M.B Copyright 2009

Writer, editor, and writing coach and consultant, Noelle Sterne publishes widely in writers' and mainstream magazines. Articles have appeared in Archetype, Children's Book Insider, Long Ridge Writers eNews, Pure Inspiration, The Write Place At the Write Time, Writer's Digest special issues, Writers' Journal, and The Writer, with additional pieces scheduled for later in 2009 and beyond. A short story about a middle-school boy who discovers his healing powers appears in the Star Stepping Anthology (Wild Child Publishing, June 2008). Based on Ms. Sterne's academic consulting practice, she is completing a psychological-spiritual handbook to help doctoral candidates finish their dissertations (finally). Other book-length projects include a collection of essays for writers, *First You Find Your Desk: Start Writing and Keep Writing with Less Agony and More Joy*.

A Saga of Writerly Persistence

by Noelle Sterne

This is a saga of rejection, but not one that ends with rueful self-pity or a spew of expletives at malevolent editors. Because of this story's time frame and

circumstances, it stands apart from many rejection tales. It's the kind of marvel you read about once in a while and say, "Yeah, yeah, okay for you. But it could never happen to me. It's too unbelievable, too unlikely, too implausible. When I get rejected, I stay rejected. That's it."

Anticipating such responses, I recount this story for a mix of reasons. The first two admittedly serve my ego:

1. I'm proud of the final outcome.
2. It precipitated delicious feelings of vindication, validation, and a perfect irony in my favor.

The next four reasons, I hope, moderate your cynicism:

3. I used no special methods of submission but went "over the transom," as most of us do. So, with the same approach, you too can experience similar ultimate results.
4. This description, with its peaks and troughs, is meant to shore you up and cheer you on to continue taking the steps of submitting and hanging in.
5. The narrative should demonstrate that you don't have to consider rejected pieces as dead, only to be mercifully buried at the bottom of a storage box. They can be resurrected. You just have to discover how.
6. Finally, this history is intended to prove once again that editors' rejections aimed straight at your entrails are not a sweeping damnation of your work, talent, and life. Editors are not impenetrable icons—they change positions, policies, and their minds.

It All Started When . . .

In October 1999, with the usual blend of anticipated glory and stomach-sinking trepidation, I submitted an essay about my love for the thesaurus to one of the top writing magazines. With the manuscript, I enclosed a letter summarizing the essay and listing some credits.

A month later, to my shock, I received a personal note from the editor-in-chief,

a venerable figure in publishing. In the first paragraph, she rejected the essay with great grace: “I regret that we cannot make a place for it and I am returning it to you herewith.”

But it was the second paragraph that bowled me over, and incidentally saved me from the canyons of depression:

*I note that you have written a very successful book for children [my *Tyrannosaurus Wrecks: A Book of Dinosaur Riddles*] [1] and perhaps you'd like to try your hand at a piece on writing nonfiction books for young people. If you do so and are willing to submit it on spec, we'll be glad to give it a careful reading and prompt reply.*

More than ecstatic at this invitation, I set to work. But instantly I froze: all I knew about writing for kids was creating the riddles for the dinosaur riddle book. Never having taken classes in children's writing or written much in the genre, I felt wholly inadequate to producing “a piece on writing nonfiction books for young people.”

Besides, how could riddles be considered nonfiction? Science fiction, maybe—I'd pushed the envelope, and almost ripped it, with puns that belonged on the far side of the red planet—blushingly outrageous. But as I kept rereading the invitation, I realized—like a classic slap on the head—that I should write what I knew.

Over many weeks, I squeezed out a first draft on the techniques I used discovered, and invented for creating the 450 riddles for the book (of which 146 were used). And then, over several more months, I carved a second draft, adding representative riddles. But I knew, with that insomnia-inducing feeling, that the piece was far from finished. So, I dragged through a third, fourth, and fifth.

By this time, the winter had long melted, the New Year had come and fizzled and spring was raising its daffodiled head. Six months after receiving the editor's letter, in April 2000, I could finally sleep—the piece was ready to send.

Repeating to myself that she had actually asked for the article, I sent the manuscript with a note reminding her of her invitation. Daily with sustained excitement, I visualized the acceptance envelope arriving in the mail.

## The Judgment

Only a week later, a letter arrived. Even before reading it, I felt rejected: the return address didn't show the editor's name but that of one of her minions. Barely noticing her compliment, I tried to fend off the deathblow: "*While the piece is certainly well-written, we feel that, overall, it's too specialized for our readership.*"

At first, I cursed the tunnel vision of editors— hadn't I made a graceful disclaimer about my partial knowledge of children's writing? Hadn't I pointed out in the introduction that the writing principles described could apply to many kinds of children's writing?

But then, capitulating to the writers' race belief in editors' flawless judgments, I cataloged why the piece had really been rejected. It was too short, too long, too general, too specific, too cute, too serious, too superficial, too profound, had too many riddles and not enough riddles.

With finality, I stuffed the letter and all my drafts way back in the writing file drawer, my equivalent of the morgue. And couldn't rekindle interest in any other writing projects.

One day, sitting at my desk with screen blank and cursor scolding in regular rhythm, I thought dolefully, Where to go for solace? I'd worn out all my friends and belonged to no writing groups from which to scrape a crumb of empathy.

My eyes swept the nearby shelf of writing books. And caught the title of one long out of print, that's still often quoted for its universal panacea: Rejection [2]

Like a magnet, my hand plucked out the book, and I opened it at random. Here wolfing the words, I read of Dr. Seuss, whose books were rejected two dozen times before he became a children's idol. And of Gertrude Stein, who submitted poems for twenty years before an editor published her first. And of William Saroyan's pile of rejection slips that numbered, it was sworn, about 7,000— before he got any acceptance at all.[3]

Tonic for the soul, indeed. Drunk with the justification of being in such great company and tempted to keep reading, I nevertheless tore myself away. But with



the bribe that after writing 100 words of anything I could return.

### Mounting Up Again

So, I climbed back on the horse. Forgetting that lone piece, I chose another trained it for public appearance, and sent it forth. And then another and another. As I kept jogging out, to my delight, more acceptances appeared. Such results gave me the courage to jump on more horses.

In the early fall of 2004, I sent a proposal for an interview with a children's writer's magazine editor to a special issue of *Writer's Digest* on writing for children.[4] Organizing the interview questions, I thought of my dinosaur book and the article on creating the riddles. The piece had been interred for nearly four and a half years.

So, holding my breath, I exhumed it. Holding my nose, I read it. And, relaxing my rib cage, I sighed, not with disgust but relieved surprise—it wasn't so bad. Of course, my now more mature critical eye saw the piece needed to be reworked, tightened, and polished throughout, but the revisions were manageable.

Heartened by this self-assessment, I recalled that the magazine I'd sent the article to in 1999 had been recently sold. Now it had a new look, a new editor and a new staff. Why not? In late September 2004, I sent the spruced-up article and a note to the freshly anointed editor. My cover letter complimented the revamped format and offered wishes for success. I waited.

And waited. And eventually forgot about the mailing.

One bright summer day, ten months later in early July 2005, I spotted in the mailbox not my own manila SASE but a #10 with the magazine's return address. At first, hope leapt like a fawn. But then, I squashed such foolishness: obviously they'd lost my envelope and had sprung for the stamp to make sure I got the form rejection.

I unfolded the letter slowly, squinting at the type. And felt like the starlet who landed a lead in *Beauty and the Beast*—as the beast. The verdict was from a senior editor:

*We discussed your article at a recent story conference and think it may have*

*potential for us down the road, but we are not in a position to purchase it at the moment. We are keeping your article charted and on file and will get in touch with you if a slot opens up for it.*

“Charted and on file?” What the blinkin’ syntax did that mean? “If a slot opens?” This was almost worse than an outright no, and I was certain they’d contrived such elaborate rejective phraseology as tacit apology for having kept the piece so long.

This time, though, slightly more toughened, I sighed, shrugged, and stuffed the letter into the writing morgue next to the article and first correspondence. Sitting not quite so tall in the saddle, I rode out again into other writing fields.

And Then . . .

And then, one day five months later, In December 2005, among the bills and my own SASEd returned manilas, I spied a #10 with that same distinctive return address logo. This time, I knew not to expect anything. But when I read the letter, I almost fell off my pile of rejected manuscripts. The signature at the bottom was the managing editor’s, and the words I’d so long hungered for and had almost given up on sang out like a Broadway chorus of praising critics:

*We’d like to publish this piece in a future issue. Please let me know if you accept and/or if you have any questions.*

If I accept? When I called him, I tried not to drool into the phone.

And so, the almost-defunct dinosaur riddle piece, which had risked fossilization in my writing files, emerged snorting with life and belly-laughing riddles. The article came out in 2006—six and a half years after its first rejection by this very magazine.

The Lessons of Persistence

What are the lessons here? Many. If you’re going to write, you’re going to accumulate a lot of pieces, some of which find immediate berths, some of which dock after roundabout sojourns through the magazines, and some of which bob on the sea of anonymity for years, maybe decades. I’ve known of writers who have resurrected, recirculated, and finally published articles twenty years old

My dinosaur riddle article wasn't quite that hoary, but it was still long in the woolly mammoth tusk.

So, although you've heard it before, persist in your publication efforts. No matter how old a piece is, it can likely be revitalized and resent. Many subjects we write about deal with timeless issues—like principles of children's writing—or experiences everyone has had and will continue to have as long as we remain human.

Read your manuscript critically and with an eye on current issues and expression. If your characters are a little fussy, give them some edge. If some of your phrases are dated, bring them current—"groovy" to "awesome," for example, or "hep" to "cool." If your allusions give away a former era, fix them. You may need to change "typewriter" to "computer," "note" to "text message," "desk phone" to "cell phone," or "seminar" to "webinar." Such updates will hardly violate the spirit or substance of your piece.

Let this chronicle remind you, especially, that "No" doesn't have to be permanent. Let it show you that times, tastes, markets, ownerships, editors, and editors' judgments can and do change—miraculously—in our favor.

So, go ahead. Dig into that old storage box or corroded file. See what dusty rejected pieces catch your eye and heart. Remember your early high hopes for them, like children, and how you thought they were so good. Maybe, with a little revising, they still are or with a lot of revising can be. Maybe your growth in craft and intuitive judgment will impel changes that increase their substance and professionalism.

If you sent the piece out before, try the same markets—remember my change of editors. And explore new ones. If you've been keeping up with your market research, you know that new markets are emerging all the time. Enlarge your view of where your piece might fit, and boldly send the manuscript where none of its type has gone before.

Start with one piece. Retype it fresh and work on it until you feel satisfied. Send it out. Send it out again. And again and again. And one day, after it's finally accepted, you too will be able to boost discouraged fellow writers with your own unbelievable, unlikely, implausible, and wonderfully fantastic saga of persistence.

## ENDNOTES

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[1]Tyrannosaurus Wrecks: A Book of Dinosaur Riddles (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell/Harper Collins, 1979, 1983).

[2]John White, Rejection (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1982).

[3]These examples from White are on pp. 3, 5, and 7. The book is replete with endlessly comforting rejection stories of now-famous individuals, not only from the literary world but also from the other arts, science, politics, and entertainment.

[4]Published in 2005: Noelle Sterne, "Once Upon a Time . . .," Writer's Digest special interest magazine You Can Write for Children (July 2005), pp. 35-37.

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At first, I cursed the tunnel vision of editors— hadn't I made a graceful disclaimer about my partial knowledge of children's writing? Hadn't I pointed out in the introduction that the writing principles described could apply to many kinds of children's writing?

But then, capitulating to the writers' race belief in editors' flawless judgments, I cataloged why the piece had really been rejected. It was too short, too long, too general, too specific, too cute, too serious, too superficial, too profound, had too many riddles and not enough riddles.

With finality, I stuffed the letter and all my drafts way back in the writing file drawer, my equivalent of the morgue. And couldn't rekindle interest in any other writing projects.

One day, sitting at my desk with screen blank and cursor scolding in regular rhythm, I thought dolefully, Where to go for solace? I'd worn out all my friends and belonged to no writing groups from which to scrape a crumb of empathy.

My eyes swept the nearby shelf of writing books. And caught the title of one long out of print, that's still often quoted for its universal panacea: Rejection [2]

Like a magnet, my hand plucked out the book, and I opened it at random. Here wolfing the words, I read of Dr. Seuss, whose books were rejected two dozen times before he became a children's idol. And of Gertrude Stein, who submitted poems for twenty years before an editor published her first. And of William Saroyan's pile of rejection slips that numbered, it was sworn, about 7,000— before he got any acceptance at all.[3]

Tonic for the soul, indeed. Drunk with the justification of being in such great company and tempted to keep reading, I nevertheless tore myself away. But with

the bribe that after writing 100 words of anything I could return.

### Mounting Up Again

So, I climbed back on the horse. Forgetting that lone piece, I chose another trained it for public appearance, and sent it forth. And then another and another. As I kept jogging out, to my delight, more acceptances appeared. Such results gave me the courage to jump on more horses.

In the early fall of 2004, I sent a proposal for an interview with a children's writer's magazine editor to a special issue of *Writer's Digest* on writing for children.[4] Organizing the interview questions, I thought of my dinosaur book and the article on creating the riddles. The piece had been interred for nearly four and a half years.

So, holding my breath, I exhumed it. Holding my nose, I read it. And, relaxing my rib cage, I sighed, not with disgust but relieved surprise—it wasn't so bad. Of course, my now more mature critical eye saw the piece needed to be reworked, tightened, and polished throughout, but the revisions were manageable.

Heartened by this self-assessment, I recalled that the magazine I'd sent the article to in 1999 had been recently sold. Now it had a new look, a new editor and a new staff. Why not? In late September 2004, I sent the spruced-up article and a note to the freshly anointed editor. My cover letter complimented the revamped format and offered wishes for success. I waited.

And waited. And eventually forgot about the mailing.

One bright summer day, ten months later in early July 2005, I spotted in the mailbox not my own manila SASE but a #10 with the magazine's return address. At first, hope leapt like a fawn. But then, I squashed such foolishness: obviously they'd lost my envelope and had sprung for the stamp to make sure I got the form rejection.

I unfolded the letter slowly, squinting at the type. And felt like the starlet who landed a lead in *Beauty and the Beast*—as the beast. The verdict was from a senior editor:

*We discussed your article at a recent story conference and think it may have*

*potential for us down the road, but we are not in a position to purchase it at the moment. We are keeping your article charted and on file and will get in touch with you if a slot opens up for it.*

“Charted and on file?” What the blinkin’ syntax did that mean? “If a slot opens?” This was almost worse than an outright no, and I was certain they’d contrived such elaborate rejective phraseology as tacit apology for having kept the piece so long.

This time, though, slightly more toughened, I sighed, shrugged, and stuffed the letter into the writing morgue next to the article and first correspondence. Sitting not quite so tall in the saddle, I rode out again into other writing fields.

And Then . . .

And then, one day five months later, In December 2005, among the bills and my own SASEd returned manilas, I spied a #10 with that same distinctive return address logo. This time, I knew not to expect anything. But when I read the letter, I almost fell off my pile of rejected manuscripts. The signature at the bottom was the managing editor’s, and the words I’d so long hungered for and had almost given up on sang out like a Broadway chorus of praising critics:

*We’d like to publish this piece in a future issue. Please let me know if you accept and/or if you have any questions.*

If I accept? When I called him, I tried not to drool into the phone.

And so, the almost-defunct dinosaur riddle piece, which had risked fossilization in my writing files, emerged snorting with life and belly-laughing riddles. The article came out in 2006—six and a half years after its first rejection by this very magazine.

The Lessons of Persistence

What are the lessons here? Many. If you’re going to write, you’re going to accumulate a lot of pieces, some of which find immediate berths, some of which dock after roundabout sojourns through the magazines, and some of which bob on the sea of anonymity for years, maybe decades. I’ve known of writers who have resurrected, recirculated, and finally published articles twenty years old

My dinosaur riddle article wasn't quite that hoary, but it was still long in the woolly mammoth tusk.

So, although you've heard it before, persist in your publication efforts. No matter how old a piece is, it can likely be revitalized and resent. Many subjects we write about deal with timeless issues—like principles of children's writing—or experiences everyone has had and will continue to have as long as we remain human.

Read your manuscript critically and with an eye on current issues and expression. If your characters are a little fussy, give them some edge. If some of your phrases are dated, bring them current—"groovy" to "awesome," for example, or "hep" to "cool." If your allusions give away a former era, fix them. You may need to change "typewriter" to "computer," "note" to "text message," "desk phone" to "cell phone," or "seminar" to "webinar." Such updates will hardly violate the spirit or substance of your piece.

Let this chronicle remind you, especially, that "No" doesn't have to be permanent. Let it show you that times, tastes, markets, ownerships, editors, and editors' judgments can and do change—miraculously—in our favor.

So, go ahead. Dig into that old storage box or corroded file. See what dusty rejected pieces catch your eye and heart. Remember your early high hopes for them, like children, and how you thought they were so good. Maybe, with a little revising, they still are or with a lot of revising can be. Maybe your growth in craft and intuitive judgment will impel changes that increase their substance and professionalism.

If you sent the piece out before, try the same markets—remember my change of editors. And explore new ones. If you've been keeping up with your market research, you know that new markets are emerging all the time. Enlarge your view of where your piece might fit, and boldly send the manuscript where none of its type has gone before.

Start with one piece. Retype it fresh and work on it until you feel satisfied. Send it out. Send it out again. And again and again. And one day, after it's finally accepted, you too will be able to boost discouraged fellow writers with your own unbelievable, unlikely, implausible, and wonderfully fantastic saga of persistence.

## ENDNOTES

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[1]Tyrannosaurus Wrecks: A Book of Dinosaur Riddles (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell/Harper Collins, 1979, 1983).

[2]John White, Rejection (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1982).

[3]These examples from White are on pp. 3, 5, and 7. The book is replete with endlessly comforting rejection stories of now-famous individuals, not only from the literary world but also from the other arts, science, politics, and entertainment.

[4]Published in 2005: Noelle Sterne, "Once Upon a Time . . .," Writer's Digest special interest magazine You Can Write for Children (July 2005), pp. 35-37.

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