

# Pedro de Alcantara

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## The Verb and the Noun (or, Work on the Solution, not on the Problem)

### Pedro de Alcantara

I know a brilliant boy of nine, verbally adept, fantastically athletic, curious, creative—a young genius in the making, the real McCoy. He has a problem, though: he’s a perfectionist, and he doesn’t like doing things at which he doesn’t excel immediately. He’s left-handed, and he’s developed a block about handwriting. He hasn’t found the feel of left-hand writing, he smudges things, he stiffens his hand and arm and neck, he feels embarrassed about it.

He really, really doesn’t care to write by hand anymore, ever again.

When it comes to his handwriting, he’s “wanting & reacting.” He wants to be perfect, and he reacts to his temporary failure. As long as he keeps “wanting & reacting,” he’ll fail. He needs to stop writing and trying to write, forget about everything having to do with writing at school, with homework, with obligations. Forget it.

Perfect handwriting is the problem. He must work not on the problem, but on the solution.

Let’s give him some Chinese calligraphy brushes in various sizes, plus an inkwell, plus express permission to waste the ink as he sees fit. And let’s give him tons of poster-sized sheets of newsprint. Newsprint is good. It’s disposable (unlike homework or grades, for instance). The fellow enjoys the big brushes best. He enjoys the feeling of the brush against the paper, the stiff handle and the soft bristles caressing the paper in round motions as he draws circles and ellipses, crosses, T-beams, I-beams, using extravagant gestures that employ his whole body, even the back and the legs. He’s a born athlete, after all. Gesture is good, thinking about writing not so good. The boy moves and draws mock Chinese characters, one looking like a stylized cockroach, another like a tic-tac-toe grid with curvy beams. He tacks a poster on the wall and plays tic-tac-toe against his dad, using exaggerated gestures, creating thick wavy lines with black ink.

It’s pure art, pure pleasure, pure discovery. It has nothing to do with writing.

After messing around with Chinese brushes for a while, the boy turns to graffiti, using cans of spray paint to tag the garage wall. He has loving, easygoing parents, and at any rate the wall needs repainting, so why not let the boy tag it? Now he’s playing with colors. The spray cans make wonderful sound effects, there’s a mist, and a marvelous intoxicating smell of something fresh and friendly. As a graffiti artist, the boy is joining a tradition going back millennia. It’s true: There’s graffiti in the pyramids, I swear!

The boy takes the can and sprays a skull on his garage wall, a heart, a dagger, any old boyish thing.

He's playing, he's laughing, he's dancing with the can in his hand, there's a whole rhythm & flow to his body and to his thoughts. By now he's forgotten his problem with handwriting. What does this garage-wall graffiti have to do with handwriting? Nothing whatsoever. It's just crazy fun. He loves it.

Now he switches to fat markers, a purple one, a red one, black, green, blue, whatever is lying around the house. He tags the wall some more, still with bold athletic gestures. Without thinking, he writes his name on the wall, once, twice, then his little brother's name. He draws big letters with uneven lines and curlicues, a new typeface being improvised on the spot.

Then the boy takes a smaller marker, draws some more on that garage wall, writes his name, draws a heart, writes "MOM + DAD" inside it.

He keeps his marker but moves away from the wall, sits with a fat notebook made of newsprint on his lap, plays Hangman with his mom, tic-tac-toe with his dad. They're perfect parents, [neutral](#), [alert](#), and [intelligent](#). They give their child space and time, and all the spray cans and tools and toys that the boy asks for.

He puts the marker aside, takes hold of a Bic, plays another round of Hangman. He draws a caricature of an old man with a toothless grin. He writes his name, his brother's name, the title of a movie he just loves.

Now he's writing by hand beautifully and freely, but he doesn't "know" that he's writing, he's not wanting & reacting, he's in the feeling of writing, not in the judging of it. He "is."

Every problem contains universal elements and particular elements. The universal ones are wanting & reacting, which are present if not at the problem's genesis, then at its infancy and adolescence and adulthood. Our approach to wanting & reacting is to do nothing, to give ourselves space and time, and to work on the solution, not the problem. We engage in intermediate steps and indirect procedures, and we allow ourselves the freedom to explore unrelated, tangential, impertinent, useless, mindless avenues . . . since we've given up on solving the problem.

And, indeed, the problem disappears sooner or later, quite without our noticing it.

Adapted in thousands of different variations, the same approach suits every last problem there is: political and economic problems, architectural and engineering problems, stage fright, writer's block, tendonitis, you name it. It's quite simple, really; we don't work on the problem, we work on the solution! Forget about the problem!

One way to see the difference between a problem and a solution is to consider the difference between a verb and a noun. A verb is an action in process, dynamic, changing over time, moving in space; a noun is an object, fixed in its dimensions, tangible. Most everything in life can be objectified: a project, a deadline, a concert program, a fitness goal, a meal, an actual object that you may build or put together from an IKEA kit. Once objectified, the project or the goal becomes a noun, and as such it's fixed and rigid—and your mind, too, becomes fixed and rigid as regards the object in question. Similarly, most everything in life can be lived as a verb. The cello, for instance, can become "playing with the cello," or "cello-ing." The concert program can become "exploring, preparing, discovering, choosing, checking, testing, loving, letting go." And perfect handwriting can become "dancing while holding a pen."

In short, the key to the noun-problem is the verb-solution.

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