

paranoid irrationally suspicious and distrustful of others

patent attorney a lawyer specializing in the rights to inventions

perseverance not giving up, even when faced with obstacles and difficulties

precarious dangerously unstable

promissory note a written promise to pay someone a certain amount of money, like an IOU

pursuant to legal phrase meaning “according to”

refuge a place providing protection or shelter

stifling cutting off circulation or smothering

strenuous vigorously active

sundial a device for determining the time of day using sunlight. A pointer casts a shadow that moves slowly around a flat, marked dial.

tedious tiring and boring

ward a young person under the protection of the court

warden an official in charge of the operation of a prison

Louis Sachar on Writing



“Every time you write you learn from your writing.”

—Louis Sachar

Stanley Yelnats, the quiet hero of *Holes*, has learned to keep his mouth shut, since he believes that unpleasant things have a way of becoming more real when you talk about them. Stanley’s creator, Louis Sachar, also uses silence as a strategy. “I never talk about a book until I’m finished writing it,” Sachar says. “I think that is helpful for writing, as well as for anything else that takes a lot of self-motivation. The more you talk about something, the less you tend to do it.”

Each morning, Sachar holes up in his study to write. His dogs, Tippy and Lucky, stand guard, ready to growl at anyone who tries to disturb Sachar while he’s working. “Writing is a kind of self-hypnosis,” he says. “Interruptions break the spell, and it’s sometimes hard to get it back.”

Sachar writes for about two hours before he “runs out of steam.” It’s amazing what he manages to accomplish in that relatively short amount of time. So far he has written twenty-one books this way!

A book may begin with just a little idea, sometimes just a character trait. Sachar says that most of his ideas come from what he remembers “doing and feeling and thinking as a child.” He doesn’t plan or outline his stories in advance, so he doesn’t know what will happen next. Each story goes through a series of rewrites before Sachar feels satisfied with it.

“I write five or six drafts of each of my books. With each draft, the story changes and the ideas are transformed. What amazes me is that most days feel useless. I don’t seem to accomplish anything—just a few pages, most of which don’t seem very good. Yet, when I put all those wasted days together, I somehow end up with a book of which I’m very proud.”

Until now, all of Sachar’s books have been written for children. But *Holes* appeals to both kids and grown-ups. Now Sachar wonders whether he should try his hand at writing something intended for adults. That’s one way to make sure that your audience never outgrows your books!

You Be the Author!



- **Your writing process:** Every writer has a *process*: a way of working that is most productive for that individual. Some people write best at night; others feel more creative in the afternoon. One writer needs absolute quiet; another likes a little background music. Louis Sachar is a morning writer, and at the start of each day he spends two uninterrupted hours working on his latest project. That may not seem like much to you—after all, the average adult workday is eight hours or more—but so far Sachar has managed to finish a shelf full of books this way!

What is your writing process? You probably already have a sense of when and where you work best. Write a paragraph or two describing your writing process in as much detail as possible. At what time of day are you most productive? Do you write on the computer or in longhand with a pen and paper? Do you like to be near a window, or maybe even outdoors? Do you need a beverage at your elbow to sip while you're writing? Do you write multiple drafts? Next time you have a writing assignment for school, be aware of your own writing process and try to create the right environment for your best work.

- **Creating a guidebook:** In Chapter 5 of *Holes* we learn, "There's really only one rule at Camp Green Lake: Don't upset the Warden." But there are other rules for surviving in this harsh

environment, such as if you don't bother rattlesnakes and scorpions, they won't bother you—usually, that is. Write a guide for an unlucky camper headed for Camp Green Lake. What does that person need to know in order to survive there?

- **The Zeroni family reunion:** At the end of *Holes*, Zero (Hector) is accompanied by a woman we can assume to be his mother. “A woman sitting in the chair behind Hector was absentmindedly fluffing his hair with her fingers. She wasn't very old, but her skin had a weathered look to it, almost like leather. Her eyes seemed weary, as if she'd seen too many things in her life that she didn't want to see. And when she smiled, her mouth seemed too big for her face.” Imagine what the reunion between these two characters might have been like, how and where and when it took place, and what each person said and did. You might want to write it in prose, as a continuation of the book, or imagine it in a different form: a scene from a play or movie, a poem, or the lyrics to a song.

- **What's your signature?:** Many of the characters in *Holes* have a *signature*: an identifying trait or mannerism that tells you something important about them, such as X-Ray's filthy glasses or Onion Sam's phrase “I can fix that.” The people you know probably have signatures, too (your uncle Ed's Yosemite Sam mud flaps may speak volumes about him!). If you were a character in a book, what do you think *your* signature might be? Would it be a gesture, a phrase, an object, an article of clothing, or something else? Write a page or two describing yourself as if you were a character in a book and incorporate your signature into that description.

• **Tell a tall tale:** Part of what makes *Holes* such a good read is the way Sachar weaves together realism and fantasy, by including elements from fables and folktales in his story. Tall tales are a popular form of folktale in the United States. Find out about the characteristics of this kind of narrative by reading some tall tales. Good collections include *Tall Tale America: A Legendary History of Our Humorous Heroes* by Walter Blair and *American Tall Tales* by Mary Pope Osborne. Pay attention to how the writers of these tales use exaggeration to create humor. Watch for repetition of phrases and themes, and notice how animals often function as helpers. Then, try writing a tall tale of your own.

Activities



- **Wordplay:** “Stanley Yelnats” is a palindrome, spelled the same both forward and backward. Other palindromes include the words *mom*, *radar*, and *racecar*, and the names *Elle*, *Anna*, and *Otto*. Whole phrases can be palindromes, too, such as “A daffodil slid off Ada” and “Rats live on no evil star.” You can find more palindromes in Jon Agee’s book *Go Hang a Salami! I’m a Lasagna Hog!: and Other Palindromes*. Come up with some palindromes of your own, or make your name into a palindrome. You might also want to check out some of the Web sites devoted to palindromes like www.palindromes.com, www.fun-with-words.com, or www.mockok.com, to see how inventive people can get with this kind of wordplay.

- **What’s in a name?:** “There is no lake at Camp Green Lake.” Places are often named for things that no longer exist: Go down to Canal Street in New York City and you won’t find anything that looks even remotely like a canal! Make a list of some places in your town or city named for features of the landscape that are no longer there.

- **Be a tutor:** When Stanley agrees to teach Zero to read, he learns even more in return and he makes a friend, too. Consider volunteering to tutor a fellow student in a subject you especially enjoy. You can offer to work after school with someone who might

benefit from extra homework help. Besides, teaching somebody else is a great way to improve your own skills or knowledge.

- **Be inventive:** Stanley's father is an inventor who wants to find a way to recycle old sneakers. Eventually he stumbles on the solution to another problem: how to get rid of foot odor! Brainstorm a list of inventions you think would improve the world. If you come up with any really fantastic ideas, you might want to find out about the patenting process. The United States Patent and Trademark Office has a Web site for kids (www.uspto.gov/go/kids). Another good site for young inventors is www.kids.patentcafe.com.
- **Mock trial:** Put the Warden on trial! Enlist friends or family members who have read *Holes* to act as attorneys for the defense and the prosecution. Assemble evidence, call witnesses, argue each side of the case—you've probably seen enough TV shows that take place in courtrooms (*Court TV*, *Judging Amy*, *Law and Order*, *The Practice*, to name just a few) to have a basic idea of how the legal process works. Should you let the Warden testify on her own behalf? Find a friend who hasn't read *Holes* to act as an impartial judge, and let her or him reach a verdict based on the strength of the case each side presents.
- **Make your own sploosh!:** "Every summer Miss Katherine would pick bushels of peaches and preserve them in jars with cinnamon, cloves, nutmeg, and other spices. . . ." Zero calls the sweet, muddy liquid he finds in jars under the rowboat "sploosh," and it helps keep him alive in the desert after he runs away from