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The Advanced Fiction Writing E-zine

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What's in This Issue

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1) Welcome to the Advanced Fiction Writing E-zine!

Those of you who have joined in the past month (more
than 200 of you are new since my last issue), welcome
to my e-zine!

Like you, I hate "thpam." (That's a euphemism. I can't
use the real word here, because some "thpam" filters
don't like it, but you know what I mean). You should be
on this list only if you signed up for it on my web
site. If you no longer wish to hear from me, there's a
link at the bottom of this email that will end your
torment.

Some of you may have missed my recent issues. That's
because the large commercial email delivery system I
use had some problems with those pesky "thpammers" and
got black-listed for a while. The system administration
people tell me that all is now well and that all mail
should now be delivered. Sigh. Even a major service
like the one I use is susceptible to this ilk of ick.

If you missed a back issue, or if you lost it, remember that all previous issues are archived on my web site at:
http://www.advancedfictionwriting.com/ezine

If you are sharp-eyed, you'll note that the archive location has changed. I have totally redone my web site in the last month using some nice toys such as PHP and CSS. I've put in everything except my new blog and my new article library. Check out my nearly finished site:
http://www.advancedfictionwriting.com

I thank Triche Osborne for updating my banner graphics.
http://www.triche-osborne.com

I also thank Fai Khait of Arteculation Designs for helping me with my banner text and for her other suggestions.
http://www.arteculationdesigns.com

In the past month, reader # 5000 subscribed to this e-zine. You know what that means. Time to give away an iPod! Find out who the lucky winner is in this issue.

I'll also continue my series on the art of writing dialogue. This month I want to focus on dialogue tags. There is a right way and a wrong way and a hideous way to do dialogue tags.

Ever wondered what a reader looks at when they come to your web site? I've written an article on the latest hard scientific evidence showing the pattern a reader's eyes follow when they come to your site. The result may surprise you--and it may prompt you to move things around on your pages.

I'm still experimenting with ways to manage my time better. This month I'll continue the chronicle of my ongoing War On Time. So far, time is still winning, but I made some good jabs that drew blood.

There's an old saying that everybody wants to go to heaven, but nobody wants to die. Likewise, everybody wants to be famous, but nobody wants to deal with those pesky paparazzi. I have a few observations on how to set some personal boundaries as your sphere of influence grows.

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2) And The Winner Is . . .

In early May, my 5000th reader signed up for this e-zine. On that day, I held a drawing for a new iPod Nano, chosen from all those who have referred one of my

subscribers since the e-zine began. Nearly 1300 of you have at one time or another referred someone to me (some of you have referred dozens--thank you!) I used the randomize function in Excel to chose a name from the list of referrers.

And the winner of the 4GB iPod Nano is . . .

Wendy Noble, who lives in Adelaide, South Australia. (Wendy gave me permission to tell you her name and city.)

At first, I thought there might be a problem shipping an iPod to Australia. The Apple online store doesn't seem to allow for a US buyer to ship internationally. After some quick Googling, I located it on the Apple Australia web site. Take a look: http://www.apple.com/au/ipodnano/

With a little help from PayPal, I got the iPod to its rightful owner.

Congratulations Wendy!

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3) Dialogue and the Art of War -- Part 3

In the last two issues, I talked about why dialogue is not like "real conversation" and about what makes good dialogue. In both cases, it boils down to conflict. "Real conversation" either lacks conflict or it lacks the right kind of conflict. Good dialogue has conflict -- lots of it -- and the right kind.

Let's switch gears this month and talk about dialogue tags. The trend for a good number of years now has been to eliminate them, trim them, or change them to action tags. Anything to get rid of that boring "Sally said" at the end of a line.

Remember that you could do a whole lot worse than "Sally said." If you ever read those corny Arrow Joke Books when you were a kid, you'll remember Tom Swifties. If you never heard of a Tom Swifty, let me introduce you now, you poor naive thing, you. There are two kinds, the strong kind and the weak kind.

Some examples of strong Tom Swifties:

"I'm a plumber!" he piped.

"I killed the rooster!" she crowed.

"More air on the fire!" he bellowed.

You get the idea. The dialogue tag is a verb other than "said" which somehow fits the thing being said.

Weak Tom Swifties are easier because they replace the verb with an adverb. Some examples:

"I'm a stonemason," he said archly.

"Your son has the measles," she said feverishly.

"These fries are just right," he said crisply.

The possibilities for wretched dialogue are limitless. So many adverbs, so little time!

In modern fiction, it's considered bad form to use adverbs in your dialogue tags.

Why are adverbs considered a no-no? (Randy asked negatively.)

Simple. Adverbs are telling. Good fiction is showing. I'll pick on Tom Clancy just once more this month and then give the poor guy a break so his sales recover. Tom is famous for lines like this one:

"That dirty, filthy, rotten son of a b****," Jack said furiously.

Well, duh. Yes, Jack is furious here. The dialogue shows it, so why insult the reader's feeble little intellect by telling it?

I suppose a worse crime would be this (which I have never seen in a Clancy novel):

"That showed poor manners," Jack said furiously.

Now we've got the dialogue showing Jack's restraint and then the adverb telling us that he's furious -- entirely at odds with what we just saw. The reader will generally believe what she saw and will ignore the adverb, or worse, will disrespect the writer's competence.

In any event, the important thing to remember is that adverbs need to be tossed in the toilet. (Mildred said, flushing at the impropriety of it all.)

But adverbs aren't the only crime against humanity. It's also considered bad practice to use any verb other than "said" or "asked" in a dialogue tag. You've probably read books where the author was scared to death to use "said" or any of its synonyms more than once per page. So you get dialogues that look like this little abomination:

"Why are you late again?" Bossbert asked.

"What makes you think I'm late?" Dilbert queried. "By Hawaii time, I'm early."

"Go help Wally," Bossbert snarled. "He's behind again."

"Where is he?" Dilbert questioned.

"How should I know?" Bossbert interrogated. "Just find him!"

"OK, OK, no need to get huffy," Dilbert stated.

"Alice has the design documents," Bossbert informed.

"Dilbert, help us get Wally out of the trash compactor!" Asok requested.

"This place is a zoo," Bossbert spluttered.

The longer this kind of thing goes on, the more the reader gets distracted by the increasingly imaginative synonyms for "said" and "asked." And you don't want to distract your reader from the conflict of the story.

Novice writers always object at this point that it's boring to keep using "said" all the way down the page.

Yes, it's boring. You have two alternatives. First, you can get rid of the tag altogether. If you read John Grisham much, you'll have noticed that in one-on-one dialogues, he rarely uses "said" or any of its synonyms at all. He lets the character's voices tell us who's talking.

When you've got three or more characters in a dialogue, that's harder to do (but still possible if they have distinctive voices). However, you can always use action tags. An action tag eliminates the "Sally said" and adds a new sentence with Sally DOING something. This breaks up the dialogue and gives the reader something to look at -- always important to the video generation.

Let's look at Dilbert and Bossbert again, this time with action tags. It's still a dumb dialogue, but it's a bit more interesting:

"Why are you late again?" Bossbert leaned back in his chair and twirled his pointy hair with his pudgy fingers.

Dilbert tried again to make his tie lie flat against his shirt. "What makes you think I'm late? By Hawaii time, I'm early."

"Go help Wally." Bossbert bit into a donut. Jelly ran down his fingers onto the carpet. "He's behind again."

"Where is he?"

Bossbert shrugged. "How should I know? Just find him!"

"OK, OK, no need to get huffy." Dilbert tossed his briefcase into his cubicle, grabbed his coffee cup, and scurried down the hall.

"Alice has the design documents." Bossbert padded along behind him.

Asok the intern raced out of the coffee room. "Dilbert, help us get Wally out of the trash compactor!"

Bossbert whacked his hand against his pointy hair. "This place is a zoo."

We draw this bizarre scene to a merciful close. By getting rid of all the "said" words, we've put the scene in motion.

But that's not enough. There's still something missing to turn this into real dialogue. We'll look at that next month.

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4) Time Management -- Part 2

Last month I talked about my struggles to tame the Calendar Beast. Like a lot of people, I officially have Too Many Things To Do.

The question is how to tackle that.

I know there are some people who are going to start chanting, "Work Harder! Work Harder!"

There are others who are going to holler right back, "Work Smarter! Work Smarter!"

It's a "Tastes Great"/"Less Filling" kind of battle. What's a writer to do?

Let me recap where I've been with this over the last few months.

Some time in April, I made a list of Ten Big Tasks I want to get done. Then I estimated how long it would take to do each project and I tried hard to get them all done as fast as possible. I even started keeping records of how I was spending my time. If you know me, you know that's a desperation move. I'm not big on bean-counting.

In the May issue of this e-zine, I talked about the so-so results of that venture. My record-keeping showed that I was putting in plenty of hours but I wasn't keeping focused. So I was working plenty hard, but apparently not plenty smart.

Part of the problem is that Ten Big Tasks is way too many. It would be nice to cut the list down, but the question is how.

There is a way . . .

I was talking to a friend of mine about all this in early May. He's got a vested interest in seeing me get more productive, because one of the things on my Ten Big Tasks is a collaboration with him.

What he told me is this: "Pick the most important thing on your list and work on that like crazy until it's done."

Which is really obvious. I knew that. I've heard it a bunch of times. I've even tried to do it in the past. It's just never worked for me. Until now.

The reason it's a great idea in theory is that it lets you get something DONE and crossed off your list. So instead of Ten Big Tasks, you have Nine Big Tasks. Then Eight. Then Seven.

That's the theory, anyway. But the truth is that in the real world, you never get to work on your #1 Big Task full time until it's done. Life is full of interruptions. You get rolling on a project and the phone rings and you spend an hour talking to somebody on something that's urgent. But it's not your #1 Task. At the end of the day, you don't really know how much time you actually spent on #1.

Like I said, the idea never worked for me in the past. It sounded nice, but how to make it work in this real world I live in?

I think the reason was that I wasn't keeping track of my time. If you don't know how much time you're putting in on your #1 Task, then you don't know whether you're really working on it or if you're spinning your wheels. And if you don't know, then you can't make changes.

So what I did was to keep records of where my time went every day and at the end of the day, add up the time that went into each of the Big Tasks. Most days, I put in time on more than one Big Task. At the end of the day -- this was critical -- I looked at where my time went. If I was veering off track, I tried to figure out how to do better the next day. How to keep focused.

I think I made some progress. I also made one serious blunder, but never mind that. Progress is better than regress.

Of the Ten Big Tasks on my May list, I completed
four of them. Four! That's not bad. One of the tasks
was to write the May issue of this e-zine. Since it's
due out in the first week of the month, I focused on
that first and got it out on time. More or less.

The second task was to create a downloadable version of
my Fiction 101 CD. I knew that it could be done but I
had been having trouble finding time to do it. Fiction
101 is six and a half hours of audio, but it's highly
compressed and it takes up only 54 MB. That's less than
10% of a one-hour audio CD. That's pretty compressed!
But it was still too big for my shopping cart system.
So I figured out a way to do an end run on my shopping
cart. I had to work hard, but I got it done. You can
see the result here:
http://www.advancedfictionwriting.com/download/fiction101.php

The third task was to do the same thing for my
snowflake lecture. That was pretty much the same
problem as for Fiction 101, only easier, so I got it
done pretty quickly. (Getting #2 done ENABLED getting
#3 done.) The result is here:
http://www.advancedfictionwriting.com/download/snowflake.php

The fourth task was to completely redo my Advanced
Fiction Writing web site to make it easier to add in
new stuff. That was tricky, since I needed to learn
some new tools to get it done. But I focused on it and
. . . I finished! To see the results, see my main page:
http://www.advancedfictionwriting.com

Four tasks knocked off the list! Pretty cool, eh?
That's the good news.

The bad news is that for the month of June, I made a
new list and came up with Ten Big Tasks again! Four new
things got added to the list.

I find that a little scary. This calendar thing is like
the monster that keeps growing new heads every time you
cut one off.

But I take consolation in this. I knocked off four Big
Tasks in May. If I hadn't, then right now I'd be
looking at Fourteen Big Tasks.

I may not be getting ahead, but I'm not falling behind
either. I think it's likely I'll get six of my Ten Big
Tasks done this month. I finished one last Friday, and
when I get this e-zine done tonight, that'll be a
second.

You're probably wondering what my big blunder in May
was. I'm not going to tell you. Not yet, anyway. It'll
be Big Task #3 for the month of June.

I'll tell you next month, when it's a success I can
feel good about, rather than a screwup I'll just feel

bad about.

See ya then, when I have GOOD news on that front!

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5) Tiger Marketing -- What Does Your Reader See?

So you've got a great web site. You've got gorgeous
art. A clean professional design. Killer content.

You've got a signup form for people to sign up for your
newsletter.

And nobody is signing up.

Why?

There could be several reasons, but one of your
problems might be placement. Where on your page is your
signup form?

The smart people in internet marketing will tell you to
put your signup form in the upper right corner of your
page, (just below any banner art you've got and any
navigational menu).

Why put it there?

For a long time, nobody really knew. All they knew was
what worked.

Now we know. A recent study tracked the eyes of
real-life people while they browsed web sites. The
computer measured the time the users' eyes spent on
each part of the page and averaged this over a large
number of users.

The results were surprising and yet "obvious."

What the computers found was that peoples' eyes follow
a roughly F-shaped trajectory down the page. The user
starts in the upper left corner and tracks across the
top of the page, like the top bar of the capital letter
F.

Then the user's eyes go BACK to the upper left corner
and start moving DOWN the page vertically. About
halfway down the page, the user will start reading
horizontally and will go most of the way across the
page.

Then the user reverts to the left column and goes
skating down the left column.

Why this F-shaped pattern? Because users are in a hurry
to get information. They want it now, and so they adopt

a skimming pattern to figure out if what they want is there on the page.

Here is a web page where the results are shown graphically: http://www.useit.com/alertbox/reading_pattern.html

Notice several things:

a) The user starts in the upper-left corner of the MAIN CONTENT area on the page. This means the user doesn't spend much time looking at the top banner or the top menu bar. Nor does she look for very long at the left sidebar. (Conclusion: a signup form at the top of the left sidebar isn't going to get much attention.)

b) The user scans rapidly across the top line, which is normally some sort of headline that tells what's on the page. (Conclusion: the headline of your page should be interesting and clear.)

c) The user's eyes stop at the far right edge of the page. (Conclusion: if you have a signup form for your newsletter there, the user is going to be looking at that form for quite a long time, relative to the other places on the page.)

d) The user then starts skimming down the left edge of the page -- not the left sidebar, but the main content area. (Conclusion: if you want to interest this reader, make sure that the first few words of each paragraph give your reader the main gist of what you're trying to say.

So when your webmaster wants to give you a pretty top banner and a spiffy left sidebar, that's all fine. Pay your money for all that pretty stuff. Webmasters need to pay for their kids' braces too, just like anybody else.

But put your most important info where the user is most likely to be looking. On the top line. In the upper right corner. And down the left side of the main content area.

Remember the letter F.

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6) Setting Boundaries -- The Hazards of Being Famous

One of my readers wrote me awhile back to ask how to handle getting famous. She didn't put it in quite those words, but that was the gist of it. She was getting more comments on her blog than she could comfortably handle individually.

That's a problem. When you're a writer, if you have any

kind of success at all, you'll get more attention than you can easily deal with. And you need to find some way to handle that.

I'm not exactly famous. Notorious is more the word for me. Even so, I get a lot of email. If I post a whackball humor comment on a writing loop, I can expect to see a pile of emails in my inbox. That's all fine, and I'd love to answer it all. But I've slowly realized that I can't. I can barely keep up with my normal email, much less a flood of "Nice post!" emails.

The day after I send out my e-zine, I can pretty much count on seeing a big pile of responses. (Thanks to those of you who snip off the tail of your response so I don't see the whole e-zine beneath your email to me.) Even if only 1% of you write to me, that's more than 50 emails. I type fast, but not fast enough to answer all 50 at any kind of length. And if all 5000 of you wrote to me . . . the math gets kind of scary. By answering one email every minute around the clock, I could respond to everybody in three and a half days.

I'm sorry to say that, more often than I'd like, I scroll up through the last month of email in my inbox and discover that I missed responding to an important email that I really meant to answer. Usually what happens is that I don't have time to answer it the instant I see it, so it goes on the stack. And the stack keeps growing. And sometimes it just falls through the cracks.

I don't know what the solution is, but I don't think the answer is to feel guilty. Neither you nor I nor Stevie King is obligated to answer every email, nor stay on the phone for an hour with everyone who calls, nor say yes to every marriage proposal.

My feeling is that every writer has to set boundaries on their life. And that's hard for me, because I LIKE hanging out with writers and readers. So it bothers me that I can't hang out with all 5000+ of you. But I think you understand.

There's one thing I REALLY can't do, and that's evaluate manuscripts. If I started doing that, I'd be reading hundreds every year, and each one would take me a full day, and that would mean never writing again. I had a talk with my agent about that a few years ago, and he said to just say no. Evaluating manuscripts is an agent's job. A writer's job is to write. So I don't look at manuscripts. Period.

The one exception is at writing conferences. When I teach at a conference, I consider it the main part of my job to look at manuscripts and hand out advice, usually in 15 minute increments. That's fun. I enjoy it. I pretty much do that nonstop at conferences. In fact, if my friends want to see me at a conference, we make an appointment so I'll have an official excuse to

take a break.

Life is full of compromises. You make yours. I make mine. Thanks for understanding where my boundaries are. They keep me sane. (OK, they keep me maintaining a reasonable pretense of sanity.)

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7) What's New At AdvancedFictionWriting.com

Things are hopping here at Advance Fiction Writing. We're still working on selling our house so we can move to the Pacific Northwest. I'm teaching one of my daughters to drive, which may explain why my knuckles have turned permanently white.

And I've got a brand new computer on my desk. Yow, it's a spanking new iMac with a 2 GHz Intel Duo chip, piles of memory, tons of hard drive, a fast DVD burner, and a big beautiful 20 inch flat screen. And a built-in video camera. I love this thing.

In the coming month, I have a huge pile on my plate. I want to add a blog to AdvancedFictionWriting.com and create a library of free articles. I want to complete Fiction 201 -- some of you have been asking me when it'll be ready. Answer: soon. I have two more web sites to redo. Oh yeah, and a very nice consulting gig.

We had intended to clear out of San Diego in the second half of June, but with all of the above, I decided to wait another month and get some of these things done before we pull up stakes.

See ya next month with more stuff on the craft and marketing of your fiction!

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8) Steal This E-zine!

This E-zine is free, and I personally guarantee it's worth a billion times what you paid for it. I invite you to "steal" it, but only if you do it nicely . . .

Distasteful legal babble: This E-zine is copyright Randall Ingermanson, 2006.

Extremely tasteful postscript: I encourage you to email this E-zine to any writer friends of yours who might benefit from it. I only ask that you email the whole thing, not bits and pieces. Otherwise, you'll be

getting frantic calls at midnight asking where they can get their own free subscription.

At the moment, there are two places to subscribe:
My personal web site: http://www.RSIngermanson.com
My new web site: http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com

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9) Reprint Rights

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Award-winning novelist Randy Ingermanson, "the Snowflake Guy," publishes the Advanced Fiction Writing E-zine, with more than 5000 readers, every month. If you want to learn the craft and marketing of fiction, make your writing more valuable to editors, and have FUN doing it, visit
http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com.
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Randy Ingermanson
Publisher, Advanced Fiction Writing E-zine

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