
The Advanced Fiction Writing E-zine

Publisher: Randy Ingermanson ("the Snowflake guy")
Motto: "A Vision for Excellence"
Date: July 13, 2006
Issue: Volume 2, Number 5
Home Pages: <http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com>
<http://www.RSIngermanson.com>
Circulation: 5374 writers, each of them creating a
Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius.

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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!

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 put you out of your misery.

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>

This issue was originally scheduled for July 4, but here in the US, that's a foolish date to issue an e-zine. Unluckily for me, on July 5 I was frantically packing to leave for Denver for a major booksellers convention. It was a great convention, but it's not a great place to be writing an e-zine, so I decided to

wait till I got home to send it out. That's why this month's e-zine is a bit late. If that's been a problem for you, please feel free to sue my cat. He'd be thrilled to get the attention, but all his assets are locked up in kibbles, so you'll get zippo.

In this issue, I'm including a link to an important recent online article, [THE DARK SIDE OF PUBLISHING](#), on the hazards of bogus or ineffective literary agents.

I'll also continue my series on the art of writing dialogue. Last month I showed how the correct use of dialogue tags could begin bringing a dead dialogue to life. This month, I'll show how to continue that process by paying attention to Point of View.

It's no secret that I'm not Superman. I'm not great at managing the zillion tasks that beset me, but I've been trying hard to get better. In recent months, I've chronicled my battle with the Infernal Clock. I'll continue that saga here, and I'll tell you why it's sometimes NOT a good idea to get everything done on your To Do List.

This month, in place of my regular Tiger Marketing column, I'll tell you about a more ordinary kind of marketing -- selling yourself to an agent or editor. And the tool of choice for making first contact is often the query letter. There's nothing particularly hard about writing a query letter. I'll tell you what I know here and demonstrate with an actual letter I once used.

2) Avoiding Scammer Agents

A good agent is worth his weight in contracts. I have a terrific agent (Lee Hough). The agent I worked with before Lee was also amazing (Chip MacGregor, who has now moved on to a job with a major publishing house.) The agent I worked with before them (now deceased) was rather less effective, but he was honest.

In this article, I want to talk about the sludge of the publishing world -- dishonest agents.

That is a nasty, dangerous business to be tangling myself in. By good luck, I don't need to get tangled very far. Lynne Marie Zerance has already done all the tangling necessary.

Lynne, as you may recall, edits the e-zine for The Editorial Department, a highly respected independent editorial group. If you've ever read the classic book, [SELF-EDITING FOR FICTION WRITERS](#), by Renni Browne and Dave King, then all I need to tell you is that Renni

Browne founded the company. (If you haven't read the book, then . . . why haven't you? Most published novelists have.)

In the May 31 issue of The Editorial Department's e-zine, Lynne wrote an article on The Dark Side of Publishing. Here's how the article begins:

"There's no question about it: Writers, as a group, are among the most vulnerable of people. And let's face it, we're among the biggest dreamers, too. Perhaps that's what makes us a prime target for those who make their living preying on people they perceive as naive and gullible. After all, who better to tell (and sell) a tale to than a writer with a tale they're trying to tell -- and hopefully . . . someday . . . actually sell?"

You can read the rest of the article here:
<http://www.editorialdepartment.com/content/view/209/99/>

It's a long article, but I highly recommend that you read it. Now.

The article includes a list of the 20 most questionable literary agencies in the business. Are you working with one of these agencies? Find out!

The article also includes a list of 20 tips on how to spot a bogus literary agency. I will make one caveat to this tip list:

Tip #17 says to beware of agents who are not located in or near the East or West Coast publishing centers. (Here, "East Coast" means New York, Boston, Philadelphia, or Washington, D.C. and "West Coast" means Los Angeles or San Francisco.)

However, if you are writing for the Christian publishing business (about 20% of the readers of this e-zine write for that niche market), then Tip #17 does not apply. Many of the top agents in Christian publishing are NOT located in those areas. For example, Alive Communications is in Colorado Springs; Books and Such is in Santa Rosa; The Knight Agency is in Atlanta; The Steve Laube Agency is in Phoenix.

If you want a quick way to find the best agents for your niche market, do what a friend of mine did -- ask a few editors for their recommendations. While this may sound like asking the fox for the names of some good watchdogs, it isn't. A bad watchdog means an easy chicken dinner for the fox today, tomorrow, and forever. A bad agent means a miserable negotiating experience for an editor today -- and no sales for that agent's clients ever again.

And how do you get a good agent? Great question. Long answer. We'll discuss that next month. See ya then.

3) Dialogue and the Art of War -- Part 4

In the last three issues, I talked about why dialogue is not like "real conversation", about what makes good dialogue, and about the importance of using dialogue tags. In all three cases, it comes down to showing conflict, not telling it. Dialogue is war and you need to show the battle in all its gory glory.

This month, I want to add another dimension to this discussion. The key point is that every war has a "good side" and a "bad side." (That's the theory, anyway. In practice, it ain't necessarily so.)

The "good side" is Us. The "bad side" is Them. War is all about Us against Them. And so is dialogue.

More precisely, dialogue is about Me against Them.

And that brings us to the topic of Point of View (POV). Those of you who've ever heard me speak or have worked through my Fiction 101 series know that there is only one goal for the novelist: You must give your reader a Powerful Emotional Experience. Period.

There is no substitute for this. Everything you do as a novelist should be directed to creating that Powerful Emotional Experience.

Remember that emotion is centered in a character, the POV character. In any given scene, there will be ONE POV character. Your goal as a novelist is therefore extremely simple: Put your reader inside the skin of that POV character and give your reader the same Powerful Emotional Experience that the character is having.

Do that and you are a novelist. Fail to do that and you are forever a wannabe, because even your mother will yawn through your writing.

I'm being dogmatic here because I'm right and every published novelist in the world knows it.

How does this relate to dialogue? Simple. In your dialogue, there are two sides: Me and Them. "Me" refers to your POV character. "Them" refers to everyone else.

You MUST show your dialogue through the lens of your POV character. You must.

Remember the wretched dialogue we looked at last month? (If you've forgotten, you can look it up in the archives on my web site:)

<http://www.advancedfictionwriting.com/ezine/index.php>

Last month, we buffed up that wretched dialogue by adding in action tags. This month, we'll make it better by choosing a POV character and showing the entire dialogue from within the skin of that POV character. In fact, we'll do it twice, from two different POV characters. (Warning: it'll still be wretched dialogue, because you just can't rescue this abomination, even with proper technique.)

Dialogue #1, from Dilbert's POV:

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

Dilbert smoothed his tie again. The thing still wouldn't lie flat. This had to be that laundry woman's fault. She hated him -- that was it. "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."

Dilbert was sick to death of helping Wally, but he was even more sick to death of arguing with Bossbert. "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. At least he was rid of the pointy-haired demon from --

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

Dilbert wondered if life could possibly get any better than this.

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

Dilbert's heart began racing, but he was pretty sure Asok's news was too good to be true.

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

Dilbert stared at him. Could you die of irony?

* * *

Dialogue #2, from Bossbert's POV:

"Why are you late again?" Bossbert leaned back in his

chair and twirled his hair with his fingers, wondering what kind of sad excuse Dilbert was going to make this time.

Dilbert smoothed at his tie like he did every day. It sprang back up again like it did every day. "What makes you think I'm late? By Hawaii time, I'm early."

And how was a boss going to get anything done with an employee like that? Maybe the only hope for Dilbert was osmosis off the star employee in the group. "Go help Wally." Bossbert bit into a donut. Jelly ran down his fingers onto the carpet. Alice had probably sabotaged the donuts again. "He's behind again." And no wonder, when all Wally's teammates were such screwoffs.

Dilbert got that helpless look on his face that could drive you nuts if you let it. "Where is he?"

Bossbert shrugged. He was not going to let Dilbert get to him. He was NOT. "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.

That kind of evasion was just typical of the little worm. Bossbert wasn't going to let him off the hook. He hurried after Dilbert. "Alice has the design documents." You had to spell things out for a guy like Dilbert.

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 head. Thirteen months and fifteen days till retirement. IF these monkeys didn't give him a stroke first. "This place is a zoo."

* * *

Like I said, there's not a lot you can do with a scene this horrible, but we did our best here. In Dialogue #1, we showed the war from Dilbert's side, and Bossbert was the bad guy. Everything Dilbert does has a reason. Everything Bossbert does is inane.

In Dialogue #2, it's the reverse. Now Bossbert is the smart guy, and Dilbert is the dork.

We achieved these effects with a little interior monologue woven into the dialogue. Interior monologue is the train of thoughts inside the POV character's head. A little interior monologue goes a long way toward getting your reader inside the skin of your POV character.

Of course, you need more than that to write great dialogue. You need stakes. And in the Dilbert/Bossbert

scenes above, there really aren't any stakes. Next month, we'll look at some examples of scenes with stakes that are a bit higher.

4) Time Management -- Part 3

In the last couple of issues, I've chronicled my battle to learn to manage my time. I've talked about keeping records of my time. I've talked about focusing on one Big Task until it's done.

What I haven't explained is how you decide which Big Task to focus on next.

There are any number of ways to decide that, but they all amount to a question of value and effort. What Big Task will get you the biggest bang for the buck?

That's a little vague, so let's talk about both sides of that equation, the value side and the effort side.

What's value? It can be many things:

- * Money
- * Prestige
- * Happiness
- * Health
- * Tools or skills that will earn you one of the above

Value can be either positive or not-negative. And what do I mean by that? Let's look at some examples:

A paycheck is positive money. An award is positive prestige. A baseball game or a fishing trip or a roll in the hay with your love-bunny are positive happiness. Bigger biceps are positive health. Building a better mousetrap is a positive tool (if you get paid for catching mice). Learning to type is a positive skill (if typing helps you earn more money).

Getting your debt cancelled is not-negative money. Avoiding an IRS penalty for late taxes is not-negative money. Saving face by doing a task you promised is not-negative prestige. Avoiding a spanking is not-negative happiness (unless you LIKE getting spanked, you sicko!) Losing some of that excess fat is not-negative health. Building a mousetrap that can't smash your fingers is a not-negative tool. Learning to avoid wasting time is a not-negative skill.

Value is just as good, whether it's positive or not-negative. (If that's confusing, here's a way to think about that. Suppose the IRS penalty for late

taxes is \$1000 bucks. If you spend all day working to get your taxes done on time, you've avoided that penalty. That's exactly as good as getting paid a thousand bucks for doing a day's work.)

So now we've talked about value. But there's another side to it -- effort.

Effort comes in several forms:

- * Time spent doing the task
- * Money invested to do the task
- * Aggravation inherent in the task

Different tasks will make you expend different kinds of effort, but you can usually figure out a tradeoff by thinking like this:

* I hate dealing with Joe, and I'd charge an extra \$50 for the aggravation of having to work with him.

* I'm going to have to invest \$100 to do this job, and I value my time at \$50 per hour, so it's like working an 2 extra hours if I want to get this job done.

By calculating these kinds of tradeoffs, you can figure how much effort in hours you're expending to do a task, even if some of those hours are really "aggravation hours" or "investment hours".

Once you've done that, any task you do will get you a certain value in return for a certain effort. The hard part is deciding the tradeoffs in value. Which is more important to you? Money? Prestige? Happiness? Health?

That's up to you. Nobody can decide that but you. If money's the big thing for you, then you'll put all your effort into getting money. Ditto for prestige, happiness, or health. Or whatever.

And that would be that, except for one thing. Remember we said that another kind of value is a tool or skill that will get you more of the thing you value. That's a special kind of a value, because a tool or skill keeps on earning for you forever. A new tool reduces your future effort. A new skill increases your value. Skills and tools are the gift that keeps on giving. And that's going to screw up all your equations in the future. A tool or skill isn't just value -- it's leveraged value.

Let me give you an example. Suppose you value money highest and suppose you get paid for hammering nails. Then one strategy is to spend every hour you possibly can hammering nails. The more you hammer, the more you get paid.

But there's another strategy: Spend part of your time hammering nails so you'll have enough money for TODAY. Then spend the rest of your time building (or buying) a tool to hammer the nails for you -- a nail gun. You won't earn a dime on that nail gun until you build it

or buy it. But AFTER you have it, you'll start earning money a whole lot faster and with less effort.

SO . . .

The optimal strategy is the following:

- * Figure out what you value
- * Decide how little you can get by with right now
- * Expend just enough effort to get what you need
- * Expend the rest of your effort building or buying a new tool or skill
- * When you've got that new tool or skill, repeat the process and start acquiring ANOTHER new tool or skill

Here's an example with some not-very-realistic numbers:

- * Joe values money
- * Joe needs \$1000 per week to live on
- * Joe earns \$50 an hour hammering nails, so he works 20 hours per week to earn his \$1000
- * Joe spends the rest of his time working specifically to buy a nail gun
- * When Joe owns the nail gun, he finds that he can earn \$200 an hour
- * Joe cuts his workload to 5 hours per week and starts saving for a bulldozer that he hopes will earn him \$5000 a day

The cool thing here is that once you get through this process a time or two, you'll find that you can spend less and less of your time working for what you NEED and more and more of your time investing in new tools or skills that will make you ever more efficient.

I've always been a tool-builder kind of guy. (Or a tool-buyer, when the tool is available for sale.) I don't mind investing in my future. As a writer, I find certain tools invaluable -- a computer, word-processing software, time-management methods.

As you already know, a big part of what I do now is to create tools for other writers. That's why I created the Snowflake method. It helps me (and you) write better and faster.

http://www.rsingermanson.com/html/the_snowflake.html

That's also why I created Fiction 101 -- to help me teach (and you learn) better and faster.

<http://www.advancedfictionwriting.com/download/fiction101.php>

Getting back to the grand tale of my battle to manage my time better: How did I spend the month of June? The details aren't terribly important. The big picture is this. I completed 4 Big Tasks on my list (out of 10 Big Tasks). I spent about half my time doing actual work to cover actual bills. I spent the other half of my time doing work FOR FREE that will give me new skills that I can use in the future to earn me money at a higher pay

rate.

Good deal?

I think so. I've learned something this month that I think will be extremely valuable. It's not how MUCH I can earn that matters. It's how little money I can get by with NOW while I acquire new tools and skills that will earn me money quicker in the FUTURE.

What that means is that it can be a GOOD thing to not get all the Big Tasks done on my list. Some of those Big Tasks can be done faster and easier in the future, once I've got the tools and skills to do them.

That's either a profound idea or a clever-sounding justification for procrastinating.

I'll know which is which in a couple months. Stay tuned as the saga continues . . .

5) On Writing a Query Letter

This article is in response to a reader question to me a couple of months ago. The question was, in essence, "How do you write a query letter?" I felt it better to respond here than via private email, since the answer is a bit long.

Writing a query letter is the SECOND best way to get the attention of an editor or agent. The best way is to meet Mr. Rightagent or Ms. Perfecteditor at a writing conference and wow them with your perfect pitch, your punchy proposal, and your powerful prose.

But sometimes that's just not in the cards. It might be that your pesky Mr. Rightagent or Ms. Perfecteditor isn't coming to a conference near you until sometime in the next century.

Whatcha gonna do?

First step: Weep those little eyes out, because it really is a lot easier to make contact at a writing conference.

Second step: Write a killer query letter and send it off.

Understand this first -- a query letter is a polite way to introduce yourself AND your project. That's all it is. And that means it's partly about you. Most agents and editors are hoping you'll be more than just a one-book pony. So they want to see that you've got the

ideas to write about and the skills to write them.

When you write a query letter, you have one goal: to get permission to send either a proposal or your manuscript. So it's easy to measure the success or failure of a query letter. They either say yes or say no.

There's one overriding principle here: Be quick. Your query letter might be one of fifty that comes in every WEEK to the editor or agent. They do not want to read an encyclopedia. Because of the numbers, they are looking for a reason to say no. Any reason will do. Here are some excellent reasons to say no which you yourself would LEAP on if you were an editor or agent:

- a) They spelled your name wrong
- b) They have bad grammar or spelling
- c) Their novel is in a genre you don't do
- d) Their story idea is boring
- e) Their query didn't FORCE you to say yes

(a) through (d) are obvious enough. If a writer is careless, inept, or dull, then they are wasting the time of the editor or agent. (e) is a little less obvious, but imagine you get fifty letters a week, and ten of them have perfect spelling and grammar, are in a genre you like, and have an interesting story idea. Do you request all ten?

NO! If you did that every week, on average, you'd be getting ten proposals or full manuscripts every week. And you do have other things to do besides read stuff that "isn't boring." You only want to spend your time on work that has a lot more going for it than "not boring." You want zing. You want pizzazz. You want your inner fire lit.

Here's the strategy then for your query letter:

- a) Tell who you are and why you're interesting
- b) Set the hook for your killer story idea
- c) Sketch your storyline QUICKLY
- d) Tell why you're the person to write this story
- e) Ask permission to send more

That's it. Do that as fast as possible. (a),(b) and (c) can be in any order, but (d) and (e) should come in that order at the end of the letter.

Here's an example of a reasonable query letter, almost identical to the cover letter that John Olson and I actually used for our novel OXYGEN. (We already had permission to send the proposal, because we'd made contact at a writing conference. But if we hadn't had permission, this is the query we'd have sent. It would have worked.)

This letter was sent in 1999 and used the best information we had at the time regarding NASA's plans.

We used the editor's name in the greeting. Watch for the hook in paragraph 1, the storyline in paragraph 2, our unique qualifications in paragraph 3, a marketing hook in paragraph 4, and the request for permission in paragraph 5.

Dear Editor:

In the spring of 2001 the incoming President of the United States will be presented with a unique opportunity -- to go down in history as the President who put mankind on Mars. NASA, the Planetary Society, and the Mars Society plan to launch a huge media campaign to gather public support for an affordable program to take us to Mars.

Hoping to surf the resulting media wave, we are writing a novel based on the actual technology that NASA plans to use in 2014 -- but with a major twist. Soon after trans-Mars injection, an explosion leaves the crew without enough oxygen to get to Mars and without sufficient fuel to return to earth. To make matters worse, evidence suggests that the ship was sabotaged by one of the crew members. The only way they can reach Mars is for one astronaut to put the others into drug-induced comas. But first they have to decide whom they can trust.

We are uniquely qualified to write this book. Randy has a Ph.D. in physics from UC-Berkeley and John has a Ph.D. in biochemistry from UW-Madison. We have both spent months researching NASA, the Mars Semi-Direct plan, and the complex web of issues behind a manned Mars mission -- including its profound implications on current evolutionary theory.

While we were interviewing a NASA doctor at the Mars Society Conference in Boulder, Colorado last August, a man walked up and joined us in asking the doctor questions. We learned that he is planning to release a Mars Direct-based novel and two movies in the spring of 2001. His name is James Cameron -- of Titanic and Alien fame. The race is on! Anybody who joins the race soon enough is sure to be a big winner.

May we send you a proposal and some sample chapters?

Sincerely,

Randy Ingermanson and John Olson

* * *

If you got this query letter, what would you do? Our editor bought it and published the book -- in the spring of 2001. If only NASA had worked a little harder on their Mars promotion, and if only there hadn't been that little to-do on 9/11 . . .

6) What's New At AdvancedFictionWriting.com

Sometime before the next issue of the Advanced Fiction Writing E-zine comes out, my family and I will be relocating. We've picked out a date and talked to the movers, but you know what they say about the best laid plans of rodents and Randys. So I make no predictions of an exact date. All I know is that this is going to be an interesting month, in the very worst possible sense of the word.

I will survive this move. I WILL survive this move.

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

7) Steal This E-zine!

This E-zine is free, and I personally guarantee it's worth eleven 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 desperate calls at midnight from your friends 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>

8) Reprint Rights

Permission is granted to use any of the articles in this e-zine in your own e-zine or web site, as long as you include the following blurb with it:

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>. Download your free Special Report on Tiger Marketing and get a free 5-Day Course in How To Publish a Novel.

Randy Ingermanson
Publisher, Advanced Fiction Writing E-zine
