
The Advanced Fiction Writing E-zine

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Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius.

"Fiction Writing = Organizing + Creating + Marketing"

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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 have joined since the 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, don't be shy -- there's a link at the bottom of this e-mail that will put you out of your misery.

If you missed a back issue, remember that all previous issues are archived on my web site at:
<http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com/ezine>

What's in this issue:

I believe that success in fiction writing comes from balancing three aspects of the writing life: organization, creativity, and marketing. I'll discuss each of these in one of my regular columns.

In the organization column, I'll talk about a simple way to manage the versions of your novel so you can always find any of them in just a few mouse clicks. Are you using this method already?

In the creativity column, I'll talk about one of the most important paragraphs you'll ever write -- the first paragraph of your novel. Does your first paragraph compel your reader to read the second one?

In the marketing column, I'll talk about how to run an electronic newsletter. It's easier than ever, and is probably the best marketing tool a writer can have. Do you know how to do it legally AND effectively?

In a bonus column, I'll interview John Olson, who recently launched his latest novel FOSSIL HUNTER with a grassroots publicity campaign that saw him reach #535 on Amazon. Want to know how he did it?

Are you reading my blog? Recently I've been critiquing the first paragraphs of the works in progress of my loyal blog readers. Join the fun here:
<http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com/blog>

2) Organizing: Managing Your Drafts

People ask me all the time, "How do you keep track of the various versions of your novel? How do you keep from losing stuff?"

I wish I could say that I have a complicated and expensive answer to those questions that will cost you a hundred bucks to solve.

Unfortunately, the solution is simple and quick and will cost you nothing. I can find and open any version of any of my books in five mouse clicks. You can too.

Here's how to set yourself up in 5 easy steps:

Step 1) Make a folder named "Books" and put it in any convenient place on your computer.

If you have a Mac, the usual place to put this folder

is somewhere in your "Documents" folder.

If have a PC, you'd likely put it somewhere in your "My Documents" folder.

But it really doesn't matter where you put it. If you want, you can bury it in some obscure place on your hard drive. It's up to you.

Step 2) Now you want to make that "Books" folder instantly accessible.

On a Mac, open your Finder, locate the "Books" folder, and drag it into the far left column of the Finder. That doesn't MOVE the folder, it just makes an "instant link" to the folder that you can always reach in 2 clicks (open your Finder with one click, then click on the "Books" folder in the left column).

On a PC, navigate to your "Books" folder, double-click on it to open it up, then click on the "Favorites" menu and choose "Add to Favorites". Now you can always reach it in 4 clicks (right-click the "Start" button, click on the "Explore" menu item, click on the "Favorites" menu, and click on the "Books" menu item).

On either a Mac or PC, you can also just put your "Books" folder directly on your desktop, but this may be more trouble than it's worth if you have a lot of windows open. Suit yourself and find whatever works best for you.

Step 3) Inside your "Books" folder, make one folder for each book you're writing or that you have already written. Name each folder with the working title of the book.

Step 4) Inside the folder for each book, create folders with the following names: "Proposal," "Research," "Draft 1," etc. If you use the Snowflake Method, make a folder named "Snowflake."

Step 5) As you work on your book, put your Snowflake documents inside the "Snowflake" folder. Put any cool research items inside the "Research" folder. Put your proposal inside the "Proposal" folder. (You may want to have separate folders inside the "Proposal" folder for each version of your sample chapters.

Put your first draft files inside the "Draft 1" folder. You may prefer to write just a single document or you may choose to write it in many separate documents -- it's up to you. Name the files so that alphabetic order puts them in the correct order for the story. The important thing is to put them all in "Draft 1."

When you finish the first draft, make a copy of the "Draft 1" folder and rename it as "Draft 2." Now you can safely edit anything in "Draft 2," knowing full well that you can always go back to "Draft 1" if anything goes wrong in your second draft.

Repeat this for as many drafts as it takes to get your book done. You may need new folders for such things as "Critiques," "Marketing," "Reviews," "Artwork," "Awards," or whatever.

Remember to back up your "Books" folder! For an author, there is nothing worse than losing your entire book in a hard drive crash. You should backup your most critical data in multiple ways -- on a flash drive, on your iPod, on CDs, using online storage, or whatever works for you.

That's really all there is to it. It's not hard to organize your books. It's Xtremely useful to be able to reach any version of any book in just a few mouse clicks.

Are you using a scheme like this already? Good for you! If not, you can set up a "Books" folder in five minutes and put all your existing book projects in it and get them organized. Have fun!

3) Creating: Your Novel's First Paragraph

A few weeks ago, readers on my Advanced Fiction Writing Blog suggested that I critique the first chapters of their novels.

I thought that sounded like fun, so I invited them to post a first paragraph. More than 80 of them did, and I began critiquing one or two of them every day.

If you want to read some of those first paragraphs and the critiques that I made, check out this blog entry and those that follow:
<http://www.advancedfictionwriting.com/blog/2008/04/15/submit-your-first-paragraph-now/>

It turned out to be more than just fun. In critiquing them, I was forced to think hard about what works and what doesn't in a first paragraph.

Now let's be clear on one thing: There aren't any rules in a first paragraph. For just about every rule you can invent, I can find an outstanding opening paragraph in a published novel that violates your rule.

So there aren't any rules except one -- your first paragraph needs to compel the reader to read the next paragraph.

What makes a compelling first paragraph? Here is the one principle that came up again and again:

Principle #1: Bring your lead character for the scene on stage in action and in character.

A number of the paragraphs that I critiqued began with a description of the setting. That worked fine in nineteenth-century fiction, when readers were more tolerant of a page of description to set the stage.

The only problem is that those tolerant and patient nineteenth-century readers are all very tragically ... dead.

Their pesky great-grandchildren are impatient devils who get bored by description.

The modern reader generally wants to meet your lead character NOW. In action and in character.

What do I mean by "in action?" I mean that the character needs to be doing something.

Far too many of the first paragraphs I read began with the lead character enmeshed in backstory -- some long explanation of who the character is and how he got there.

That's all very interesting, eventually. Great writers invariably create detailed backstories for their best characters. If you are going to write good fiction, you need to know your characters' life histories.

But you don't need to lay it all on the reader in the first paragraph. For that matter, the reader almost certainly doesn't need to know any backstory on the first page. Probably, the reader doesn't need much backstory at all in the first chapter.

Have you ever met somebody and in the first two minutes, they were launched on a long explanation of their life stories? Was it interesting? Did you care?

You have. It wasn't. You didn't.

The brutal fact is that you don't care about Scarlett's life history until you know Scarlett. Once you know Scarlett, then you MAY be interested in hearing about her backstory. (Or you may just want to jab her in the eyes.) But you don't know until you've spent a little time with Scarlett -- right now, in the present tense.

So bring your character on in action. But bring her on in character, also.

What do I mean by "in character?"

I mean that in that critical first paragraph, you need to show us something essential about your character.

If your lead character is a dull accountant who spends her evenings alphabetizing her coupons, then it's misleading and unfair to the reader to bring her onstage in the middle of a helicopter chase. Or flirting with her married boss. Or breaking up an attempted mugging.

So what do you do with that accountant? Well, that's up to you, but if you're writing a novel about her, there must be something interesting about her. Normally, that "something" is tied in to what she wants.

Everybody wants something. Being perverse, most people want something that they can't have.

Once you know what your lead character wants and can't have, you have a story. The purpose of your first chapter is to key into that frustrated desire, whatever it is. By the end of the first chapter, your reader should know whether she wants to read this particular book about this particular character with this particular desire and this particular obstacle.

The purpose of your first page is to get the reader to read the whole first chapter. The purpose of the first paragraph is to get the reader to read the first page.

Let's look at a nice example of this in the first Harry Potter book. The first chapter introduces us to the infant Harry Potter, who has somehow survived a murder attempt by the evil Lord Voldemort. Harry is "the Boy Who Lived" and Chapter One ends with an enormous question -- why did Harry live?

It's an extremely successful first chapter. How did J.K. Rowling get us to read that first chapter about this magical child? By introducing us first to Harry's very ordinary Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia and Cousin Dudley, the wretched Dursleys.

By the end of page one, we know that the Dursleys have a terrible secret -- there is something peculiar about Aunt Petunia's sister, who married a man named Potter. We don't know what that secret is, but we care about that secret and want to find out what it is. We care enough that we MUST read the entire first chapter.

So page one is enormously successful also. By what magic did J.K. Rowling get us to read the first page? She did it with a great first paragraph. In that paragraph, we meet the Dursleys in character (although not in action):

"Mr. and Mrs. Dursley, of number four, Privet Drive,

were proud to say that they were perfectly normal, thank you very much. They were the last people you'd expect to be involved in anything strange or mysterious, because they just didn't hold with such nonsense."

Now the Dursleys are as dull a family as you could ever want. Not only are they dull, but they like it that way. Their main desire in life is to remain dull, to avoid anything strange or mysterious.

The reason paragraph one works is that it makes it immediately clear that the Dursleys are NOT going to get their wish. Something strange and mysterious is about to enter their life, and they don't know it yet.

But the reader does. The first paragraph compels the reader to read the rest of the page, which reveals the lurking family secret with the Potter cousins. The first page compels the reader to finish the chapter, which introduces the mystery of "the Boy Who Lived."

As I noted above, the first paragraph brings the Dursleys on in character, but not in action. The entire first page is narrative summary. Is that wrong?

No, because it works. For most writers, it wouldn't work, but for J.K. Rowling, it did. If it works, use it, even if it doesn't perfectly follow Randy's Handy Dandy Rules of Writing. Don't mess with what works.

If your first paragraph works, then run with it. If it doesn't (and you know when it stinks like a dead muskrat), that's when you go back to first principles. And the first principle is, in my opinion, this:

Bring your lead character on stage in character and in action.

4) Marketing: Web Sites and Blogging, Part 4

Last month in this column, I talked about the three most common purposes of a web site -- brand development, lead development, or product sales.

I argued that the main purpose of having a web site or blog, for most writers, should be lead development.

In practice, that means building a database of e-mail addresses of readers who are interested in your books. Then as each book comes out, you can notify these readers and give them a reason to buy your book.

The question is how you build that database, and I promised to answer that question this month.

When building an e-mail database, you have three goals that are partially in conflict:

- * You want to be ethical
- * You want to be legal
- * You want to be effective

There are methods that are ethical but not legal or effective. Likewise, there are legal methods that are neither ethical nor effective. And of course there are highly effective methods that aren't legal or ethical. I won't talk about any of these methods here, except to tell you not to do them.

Let's talk ethics first, since this is the easiest to follow and yet is commonly botched. The rule is simple: Don't violate your readers' trust. If people give you their e-mail address, then use it for the reason they gave it to you. Don't rent that address, don't sell it, don't give it away, and don't misuse it yourself.

What about legality? It is also easy to be legal. You can get the official info on legality from this web page:
<http://www.ftc.gov/bcp/online/pubs/buspubs/canspam.shtml>

To summarize the main legal issues:

- * Your email headers must not be false or misleading
- * Your email subject line should not be deceptive
- * Your email should give a way to opt out of your list
- * Any ads you send out must be identified as ads
- * Your email must contain a valid physical mailing address (a post office box will do)

All of these are easy to satisfy except the opt-out requirement. If you try to handle opt-out requests manually, you will eventually go nuts. The right way is to handle those automatically, and to do that, you need an e-mail list manager.

There are any number of e-mail list managers. Many authors run their e-mail newsletters through free list managers, such as Yahoo Groups or BraveNet. There are plenty of these, and you can easily find them by using your favorite search engine for the phrase "email list manager".

Other authors prefer to pay a monthly fee to use a service that offers more features. The two services that I hear about most often from authors are Constant Contact and Ezine Director.

Any of these will do the job for you if your goal is to automate your e-zine and be legal.

But I believe that if you're going to run an e-zine, you should try to do it as effectively as possible. Otherwise, why bother?

What do I mean by "effective?" An effective e-zine is one which people actually sign up for.

Have you ever gone to a web site and noticed an e-zine signup box that said simply "Sign up for my e-mail newsletter!"

Did you sign up?

You probably didn't. I usually don't. I have several reasons for not signing up for these things:

- * I'm lazy
- * I don't know what I'll be getting
- * I don't see a privacy policy
- * I don't see any reason to sign up

People who visit your web site are a lot like me, and they usually won't sign up for your e-zine, unless...

Unless you provide answers to all of the above objections. Let's look at each of those in turn:

Objection #1: I'm lazy. If I see an e-zine signup box that wants my first and last name, mailing address, phone number, and name of my first-born cat, there is no freakin' way I'm going to sign up. Because I'm lazy.

The solution to this objection is to ask only for the minimum information necessary. Ask for "Your First Name" and "Your Primary E-mail Address". That's really all you need.

Objection #2: I don't know what I'll be getting. When I see a signup box for a "free newsletter" I want to know what it is before I give them my name and e-mail address. Are there any samples I can look at first?

The solution to this objection is easy. Post all your back issues on your web site. Then anyone can see free samples of what you've got. As a side benefit, the search engines will index them and bring people to your web site.

Objection #3: I don't see a privacy policy. I want to see some sort of assurance that my e-mail address will be used responsibly. I don't want it sold or given away or rented or scratched on the bathroom stall. I want it to be used only by the person I give it to.

The solution to this objection is to show your privacy policy. Mine is this: "I respect your privacy and will never rent, sell, or give away your personal information." This is a common privacy policy. If you look around the web, you'll see variations on this. Figure out your own and put it in the signup form for your e-zine. It tells people you're professional.

Objection #4: I don't see any reason to sign up. This is the biggie. If you can answer this objection, you will likely have a great e-zine. If you can't answer it, then you almost certainly won't.

I am a selfish coot, just like you are, and I don't sign up for free newsletters unless I have a reason. A selfish reason. Something that will benefit me. Right now.

The solution to this objection is to give people a reason to sign up. Subscribers to the Advanced Fiction Writing E-zine get a free "Special Report on Tiger Marketing" along with a free 5-day e-mail course on "How To Publish A Novel." Both of these contain useful information that I could sell. I prefer to offer them as an inducements to sign up for my e-zine.

The important point is that my system can deliver both of these inducements electronically to anyone who signs up for my e-zine. The delivery is virtually instantaneous, it costs me nothing, and it happens automatically. My system does it all.

This is probably the biggest difference between an effective e-mail list manager and an ineffective one. An effective list manager can deliver electronic freebies automatically. An ineffective one can't. This is the reason why I pay for my e-mail list manager -- because it can do this automatic delivery for me.

The key feature that my e-mail list manager has is called an "autoresponder." An "autoresponder" automatically sends out a series of emails to anyone who signs up for my e-zine. This series can be timed to go out over a sequence of days.

In my opinion, the autoresponder feature is the make-or-break feature for any e-mail list manager. It lets you deliver electronic goodies for free, instantly, automatically.

This is why I don't use a free list manager or a cheapie. I use a professional list manager. There are three list managers that I recommend that have good autoresponder features: KickStartCart, AWeber, and ProSender. Here are links to them:

<http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com/links/ksc.php>
<http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com/links/aweber.php>
<http://www.ProSender.com>

Every writer is different, so I don't have any one-size-fits-all recommendation. Your own particular situation will determine whether it's time for you create an e-mail newsletter and, if so, which list manager to use.

If you do decide to create an e-mail list, I strongly encourage you to do it ethically, legally, and effectively. Otherwise, don't bother.

5) Interview: John Olson's Promotion Strategy

John Olson is a pretty special guy. He and I co-wrote two novels a few years ago, and anyone who can get along with me during the time it takes to write 120,000 words has a real gift for diplomacy.

John is a talented novelist, but he also holds a Ph.D. in biochemistry from the University of Wisconsin at Madison. He worked for years at a bioinformatics company in San Leandro, where he served as Director and Principal Scientist and managed a large international team of software geeks. Then he quit to write full time.

Recently, John launched his latest novel, FOSSIL HUNTER, and ran an innovative publicity campaign. Naturally, I wanted to pick his brain and find out how he did it, so I asked for an interview. John waited the appropriate interval of several nanoseconds and then said yes.

Here's the interview:

Q: Tell us a little about your book FOSSIL HUNTER.

A: I usually describe FOSSIL HUNTER as a fast-paced, Indiana-Jones-style thriller about a beautiful young Christian paleontologist who discovers a fossil that doesn't seem to mesh with current evolutionary theory -- but I'm terrible at describing my books once they've been written. You read FOSSIL HUNTER. What did you think of it?

Randy sez: That's not fair to make me answer my own question! But since you asked, I'll say that you write a pretty darn good "woman scientist in jeopardy" book. In fact, I'd say you're probably the best in the world in this genre. (Pretty safe bet. Does anybody else write this genre?)

People who liked Sigourney Weaver in ALIEN or Valkerie Jansen in OXYGEN are gonna love Katie James in FOSSIL HUNTER.

Q: FOSSIL HUNTER gives the feel of being "right there" in Iraq. How many months did you spend in Iraq?

A: All of us Americans have been in Iraq one way or another for the last seventeen years -- ever since the first Gulf War started in 1991. But I've never actually visited Iraq in person. Most of my information comes from interviews with my friend Chuck Holton, an adventurer and fellow author who visited the country on a press junket a few years ago while there was still quite a lot of fighting going on.

What I didn't get from Chuck, I got from reading books and new articles on the subject and from vague childhood memories of tagging along with my biologist dad when he did a summer-long desert bacteriology project in the deserts of Arizona. Arizona... Iraq... It's practically the same thing. They're both foreign countries and neither of them know how to do Daylight Savings Time -- or is it always Daylight Savings Time? Who can remember?

Q: Your book released on May 1 and hit #535 on Amazon (according to www.titlez.com) on the day of release. You were using an innovative method of promoting your book. Tell us about that.

A: First of all I need to come clean and admit up front that I'm a complete marketing moron. I hear about great marketing ideas all the time, but for some reason I can't bring myself to implement any of them. I don't know my brand; I don't have a coolicious tagline; I can't even give you a two sentence elevator pitch. Even when people ask me what I do for a living, I fumble the opportunity. I usually just mumble that I'm a bum and leave it at that.

So how did I get the word out about FOSSIL HUNTER?

By being my typical marketing moron self.

A few weeks before the book was scheduled to be released, I realized that none of the elaborate marketing schemes I'd been working on -- the live action adventure game at Barnes & Noble, the plans for speaking to youth groups about intelligent design, the complicated PHP/mysql community-building website I'd been programming -- not one of them was going to happen in time (if at all). So I admitted to myself and all my friends that I was pathetic and asked them for help.

The plan was really simple. I asked everyone to email their friends and tell them about the book. And if they were willing, I asked them to let their friends know two things:

- 1) If anyone was planning to buy the book anyway, I asked them to wait until May 1 (the release date).
- 2) If anyone reads the book and sends a recommendation to their friends (and CCs me on it to let me know),

I'll send them a random quirky token of my undying gratitude. The best two recommendations sent out will earn brand spankin' new iPod Touches.

That's it. I sent out a bunch of emails to my friends and watched in open-mouthed amazement as they put huge amounts of creative energy into helping their marketing moron friend. Some of their emails even went into their blogs. Here are a few examples:

<http://supernaturalcraving.blogspot.com>

<http://jenndoucette.blog-city.com>

<http://realwomenscrap.typepad.com>

The most important thing to understand is that none of my friends were doing this because they wanted a quirky gift or an iPod. In fact most of them wrote me and told me they didn't want me to send them anything at all. They were doing it because they had a friend in need and wanted to help. Of course that doesn't mean I'm not going to send them something anyway. And because I made the gift random, I'm having all kinds of fun buying and sending stuff out. Things such as signed books, Ghirardelli chocolates packed in Easter egg tins, 100 million year old fossils, old ARCs, weird artwork, and copies of my all-time favorite books.

So why did this work so well?

I'm not really very good at this kind of thing, but I think this worked for three main reasons:

1) I have a lot of kind, wonderful, selfless, creative friends, and I was willing to swallow my pride and give them an opportunity to help me.

2) I gave them a specific date to buy the book and in most cases I gave them a reason for the date (the fact that I was trying to spike the book onto a bestsellers list).

3) Mystery: The fact that everyone who sends out a recommendation will receive an unknown gift may pique the curiosity of a few inquisitive souls.

Q: What other methods of promoting your book are you using?

A: I created a simple new website to feature the book (<http://www.fossilhunternovel.com>). Beyond that it's mostly been Tyndale House and Rebeca Sykes at Glass Road PR advertising and sending out ARCs for review. Rebeca is working to put together a tour of Christian music festivals across the country, and Premise Media, the movie company that produced Ben Stein's EXPELLED movie, will be cross-promoting FOSSIL HUNTER with the DVDs of their documentary, but these things won't happen until later this summer.

Q: What is the relationship of FOSSIL HUNTER to the movie EXPELLED?

A: I wrote FOSSIL HUNTER in partnership with Premise Media. They originally approached me about doing a novelization of an "intelligent design" screenplay they had in house, but I didn't think I was the right guy for the job. However, I've always been interested in exploring faith and science issues in my stories, and our talks started me thinking. So when I came up with the idea for a scientific thriller that explored what it's like to be a Christian caught in the middle of the faith vs. science debate, I discussed it with them. They were excited about the idea and wanted to cross-promote it with their documentary. And if the novel and the documentary do well, there is even talk of a FOSSIL HUNTER movie!

So PLEASE... Have pity on this marketing moron and read the book. And if you like it, send out recommendations to all your friends. If you CC me on the emails you send out, I'll send you a random quirky token of my undying gratitude. Remember, the best two recommendations will earn brand spankin' new iPod Touches -- even though I know you're doing it out of the goodness of your hearts.

Randy sez: You can find out more about FOSSIL HUNTER at <http://www.FossilHunterNovel.com>

You can email John via the Contact page on his web site at <http://www.Litany.com>

Q: Any question I should have asked but didn't?

A: Yes, my favorite dinosaur is the Triceratops, and Randy Ingermanson is my favorite marketing guru, and I like vanilla better than chocolate.

Randy sez: My favorite dinosaur is the Stegosaurus. It had a lot more seating than the Triceratops, (although the Tri seating was admittedly much more comfortable than the Steggie). John Olson is my favorite writing buddy. I like chocolate mint better than either vanilla or chocolate.

6) What's New At AdvancedFictionWriting.com

I've been busy in April and early May on an Xtremely tight deadline for a non-writing project. If you are interested in innovative software for high-content

screening, then you can see what I've been up to at
<http://www.ValaSciences.com>

I also had a great time in Coeur d'Alene at the end of April, where I taught a weekend workshop for the Idaho Writers League. I taught for about 8 hours, and I think I used up my quota of spoken words through 2011, but it was fun.

7) Steal This E-zine!

This E-zine is free, and I personally guarantee it's worth at least 95076 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, 2008.

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 is one place to subscribe:
My fiction 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:

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Randy Ingermanson
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