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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 500 of you signed up in April), 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 need to change your e-mail address, there's a different link at the bottom to help you do that.

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

What's in this issue:

The successful novelist needs good organization, good craft, and good marketing. In this issue, we'll talk about each of these in turn.

* If you want to write a novel, you need to have time. Quite a bit of time. Do you know how much time you need? Have you thought about where you'll get it? If you want to know what I've learned in my 23 years as a writer, I'll tell you in this month's organizing column, "One Less Thing."

* One of the lies editors tell writers is to "Show, don't tell." The fact is that there are times when "telling" is essential. Isn't that heresy? Won't that bore your readers? No and no. To see why, read my craft article, "Narrative Slips."

* When your book goes up for sale, whether online or in a bookstore, somebody has to write the product description. The difference between good copy and bad copy is huge. Want to know how to write copy that moves books? Read my marketing article, "Writing a Killer Product Description."

Are you reading my blog? Check out the massively popular "Ask A Question For My Blog" feature on my web site. In each blog post, I answer one question in detail from my loyal blog readers. Are you missing out? Join the fun here:

<http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com/blog>

2) Organizing: One Less Thing

When I started writing fiction years ago, I read an estimate that a novelist needs to spend 2000 hours learning the craft of fiction writing in order to get published.

I thought that was excessive. I figured a smart guy could learn to write a novel in a few hundred hours.

Maybe I'm just not all that smart, but it wound up taking me quite a bit more than 2000 hours of writing to get my first novel accepted by a publisher and on the shelves of bookstores.

Even though I wildly underestimated the amount of time it would take, I always knew it wasn't something you do in a weekend, so I made a point early in my writing

life to find ways to spend more time writing.

I believe that if you're a serious writer, you need to be writing at least 10 to 20 hours per week.

Why?

Because when you finally sell your manuscript to a publisher, they're going to expect you to polish your novel within a few months. And then they'll expect you to do a second novel soon after that. And then a third, and a fourth . . .

That level of effort is easily going to cost you 20 hours every week for the rest of your writing life. Easily.

If you're not already writing at least 10 hours per week by that time, you just plain won't be able to gear up quickly enough to meet those demands from your publisher.

You don't have to start out writing 10 hours per week when you first begin writing fiction, of course. Hardly anybody can do that.

I recommend that you work up to the level of writing about 5 hours per week by the end of your first year of serious writing. And yes, it may take you a full year just to get up to that level.

Once you're writing 5 hours per week, you can then ramp up over the next year or two to writing at that magic level of 10 hours per week.

How do you do that? How do you find that kind of time when you're probably already overwhelmed by all the other things you're doing in life?

It's not easy. It's going to call for you to make some hard decisions on what's most important to you.

We're all juggling a lot of different things in our lives. I am. You are. That's just how things are.

Think about all the things on your plate. You probably have 10 or 15 that are important. Maybe more. You've got 168 hours in every week, and you're awake for at least 110 of those. That's a lot of hours. How do you fill up those hours?

Is it possible that you could live your life with one less thing on your plate?

(I know that the grammar purists will probably say it should be "one fewer thing," but that just doesn't ring well in my ear.)

If you've never tracked your time, this might be an enlightening exercise. Keep a daily log of where your

time goes over the course of a full week. Keep a record of anything that takes longer than about 5 minutes. Lump together things that take less time than that.

You may be amazed at what you spend your time on.

Now it's time to get serious. Every three months, ask yourself if there's one less thing you could do. One thing you could shove off your plate that would gain you at least an hour per week in writing time.

Maybe it's an "essential" TV show that really isn't all that important.

Maybe it's time spent browsing the web, fooling around on Facebook, texting, Skyping, tweeting, or whatever your favorite way is to chitchat electronically. Can you carve out an hour from that?

Every three months, can you find one less thing that "must" be done? Something that's really not essential? Something you can offload to somebody else?

Can you take that time and use it for your writing?

One less thing, every three months. If that one less thing buys you an extra hour per week of writing time, then in a year, you'll be writing at least four hours per week.

In two years, you'll have an extra eight hours per week to devote to your writing.

In three years, you'll have twelve hours a week.

This is not easy. At first, that "one less thing" won't cost you much. But as the months go by, each "one less thing" is going to sting more and more.

Life is full of sacrifices. If you want to write a novel, you have to give up something else that you like doing. You have to give up lots of somethings.

You can get there. One less thing at a time.

3) Creating: Narrative Slips

Every writer has been told a thousand times, "Show, Don't Tell."

It's good advice, usually. But like most good advice, there are times when it's dead wrong.

One of those places is in a scene that would take quite

a long time if shown in real-time.

Suppose you have two characters having dinner at a restaurant. They eat. They talk. Not much else happens. The eating is repetitive, so after you've shown the first bite, you pretty much have to focus on the talking.

How much can you say in a one-hour conversation? Figuring 100 words per minute, that's 6000 words of dialogue, which works out to 24 pages of manuscript.

For one lousy scene in a restaurant.

If you show the whole thing in its entirety, your readers aren't going to stay with you. Not unless it's a crucial scene with stakes so high that your reader can't afford to look away. But scenes with ultra high stakes are rare.

Most scenes have much less at stake, and so they deserve a lower page count. So what do you do?

You solve the problem by mixing up your "showing" and your "telling."

You "show" the important parts of the scene in dialogue. Those would be the high-tension parts or the parts that reveal character or the parts that reveal absolutely essential information.

You "tell" the unimportant parts using narrative summary. You do this by using a sentence or a paragraph that allows a big chunk of time to slip by.

I call these parts "narrative slips" because you use narrative summary to "slip" the time forward. It's the moral equivalent of the fast-forward button on life.

To see how a narrative slip works in practice, let's look at a couple of examples:

In John Grisham's novel *THE FIRM*, protagonist Mitch McDeere is a young lawyer newly hired to a high-powered law firm. Mitch hasn't yet taken his bar exam, and his coworkers are lining up to help him prepare.

The first helper is Wally Hudson, who has a long conversation with Mitch that goes on for more than two pages. Wally explains in detail how he's going to help Mitch. Most of the scene is shown as dialogue.

When Wally leaves, Randall Dunbar walks in. Dunbar has even more to say to Mitch, but this time, the dialogue is summarized in less than half a page, with no direct dialogue.

Mitch's third helper is Kendall Mahan, and now Grisham takes barely a third of a page to summarize his

dialogue.

The scene then races ahead through the rest of the afternoon with a paragraph that summarizes everyone else like this:

The procession continued throughout the afternoon, until half of the firm had stopped by with notebooks, assignments of homework, and requests for weekly meetings. No fewer than six reminded him that no member of the firm had ever failed the bar exam.

The scene ends with a return to dialogue -- Mitch calls his wife and tells her he's going to be home late. Very late.

It's Mitch's first day on the job, and we've seen only a few pieces of it, yet we feel like we've been through hours and hours of exhausting work.

In Mario Puzo's novel *THE GODFATHER*, Don Corleone is riding in his Cadillac with all three of his sons and his consiglieri. The scene begins with a snippet of dialogue in which Corleone asks his youngest son Michael about his girlfriend. The rest of the ride is summarized in a paragraph:

Because of the gas rationing still in effect, there was little traffic on the Belt Parkway to Manhattan. In less than an hour, the Cadillac rolled into the street of French Hospital. During the ride Don Corleone asked his youngest son if he was doing well in school. Michael nodded. Then Sonny in the back seat asked his father, "Johnny says you're getting him squared away with that Hollywood business. Do you want me to go out there and help?"

The dialogue then resumes with several paragraphs in which the Godfather assures Sonny that his consiglieri can handle the problem in Hollywood on his own.

The scene is a short one, which serves to give the reader a bit of information about the family dynamics. It's not important enough to rate many pages of dialogue. Instead, Puzo whisks us through it in a single page.

How do you decide when to show a scene in full, and when to fast-forward through it using a narrative slip?

That's easy. Show the important stuff; tell the fluff.

Telling has value. It allows you to efficiently get through the lower impact parts of the story without seeming to break up the action.

If you sandwich a "narrative slip" between two slices of "showing," even the slow parts of your story will

fly.

4) Marketing: Writing a Killer Product Description

So far this year, more than 25 percent of the e-books on Amazon's Kindle Top 100 list have been self-published. That's a remarkable percentage, and it means that writers now have a shot at the big time without needing a major publisher to take them there.

If you want to make that Top 100 list, you're going to face stiff competition. Every part of your book needs to work. Your writing needs to be top notch. You need a great cover. You need to price your book competitively.

And you need a strong Product Description. (When you self-publish a book, Amazon lets you enter a Product Description, which is similar to the back cover copy on a printed book. Traditionally published books usually don't have Product Descriptions on Amazon; instead, they have Editorial Reviews, if any are available. If not, then they make a Product Description from the back cover copy.)

Let me give you my own thoughts on what makes a killer Product Description. I've identified four basic principles that can guide you. These aren't strict rules that you must follow to succeed. They're rules of thumb.

The first principle is that less is more. You only have a few paragraphs to catch the interest of your prospective reader. Keep them short, and pack the good stuff up near the top.

If you can summarize your story in a sentence or two, you might want to lead off with that. Here's an example from the Product Description for Amanda Hocking's novel SWITCHED:

"When Wendy Everly was six years old, her mother was convinced she was a monster and tried to kill her. It isn't until eleven years later that Wendy discovers her mother might have been right."

The first sentence grabs the reader's attention right off the bat. Who wouldn't empathize with a six year old kid whose mother tried to kill her?

The second sentence jolts the reader with a surprise. Is Wendy really a monster? If so, what kind? And . . . how come she's lived to the age of 16 without knowing?

The second principle is that you need to lead with your strength. Is your book plot-oriented? Then lead with the plot of your story. If your book is character-oriented, then lead with character.

Here's a plot-oriented lead from the product description for John Locke's novel LETHAL EXPERIMENT:

"What if someone offered you \$100,000 with the only stipulation being that a murderer would be killed if you accept the money? Would you take it? The people who choose to take it are about to find out the ramifications of their decisions to be part of this Lethal Experiment!"

That strong "what if" is intriguing, isn't it? It tells us absolutely nothing about the lead character (Donovan Creed). It tells us only the story premise. That's enough.

Notice that this Product Description simply assumes you'd take the offer. If you wouldn't take the money, then this isn't your kind of book. Then the Product Description sets the hook -- apparently, there are "ramifications." If you want to know what they are, you have to buy the book and find out.

Here's a character-oriented lead taken from the author's comments on THE PARIS WIFE, a novel about the first wife of Ernest Hemingway:

"Most of us know or think we know who Ernest Hemingway was -- a brilliant writer full of macho swagger, driven to take on huge feats of bravery and a pitcher or two of martinis -- before lunch. But beneath this man or myth, or some combination of the two, is another Hemingway, one we've never seen before. Hadley Richardson, Hemingway's first wife, is the perfect person to reveal him to us -- and also to immerse us in the incredibly exciting and volatile world of Jazz-age Paris."

If you love character-oriented fiction, then this is your book. The above intro tells you nothing about the plot, everything about who the lead character is.

The third principle is that your product description should raise a "Story Question."

The Story Question is the question you want to raise in your reader's mind: How will the story end? The ideal Story Question is a "will she or won't she" kind of question. Here's an example from an Editorial Review on the Amazon page for THE HUNGER GAMES, by Suzanne Collins:

"Each year, two young representatives from each

district are selected by lottery to participate in The Hunger Games. Part entertainment, part brutal intimidation of the subjugated districts, the televised games are broadcasted throughout Panem as the 24 participants are forced to eliminate their competitors, literally, with all citizens required to watch. When 16-year-old Katniss's young sister, Prim, is selected as the mining district's female representative, Katniss volunteers to take her place."

Will Katniss survive, or won't she? That's the Story Question of THE HUNGER GAMES. Of course, the book is much deeper than that, but at it's core, it's about survival.

A good Story Question is phrased so that the reader knows it'll be answered by the end of the book. The above Story Question is elemental. Either Katniss will be alive or dead at the end.

The fourth principle is to use "social proof" whenever possible.

What is "social proof?" It's any evidence you can give that lots of people think your novel is good. Some examples of "social proof" are the phrases "award-winning author" or "New York Times best-selling novel."

One of the strongest pieces of social proof I've seen is this one, taken from the Amazon page for several of John Locke's novels:

"Every 7 seconds, 24 hours a day, a John Locke novel is downloaded somewhere in the world!"

That's strong social proof. If you do the math, that works out to sales of over 12,000 books per day.

Social proof means that you don't have to decide if the book is good. Somebody else has already figured that out. All you have to decide is whether you like this kind of book. If you do, then you know that it'll be good because all those other people can't be wrong. That's the psychology of social proof.

Now it's your turn. Try your hand at writing a Product Description for your novel. Keep it under 200 words if you can, bearing in mind that many readers aren't going to read more than the first 50.

Remember the four principles that I outlined above:

- * Less is more
- * Lead with your strength
- * Raise a "Story Question"
- * Provide "social proof"

It's not as easy as it looks, is it?

Here's a homework assignment for you: Read the Product Descriptions of every self-published novel on the Kindle Top 100 list. You can do it in less than an hour, and you'll learn what you like and what you don't like.

Bear in mind that writing a Product Description is an art, not a science. You'll notice that some of the Product Descriptions on Amazon ignore all the principles I outlined above. Could you write a better one if you tried?

Your mission is to do exactly that for your own book.

The reason is simple.

If you self-publish your novel, the job of writing the Product Description falls on you.

If you work with a traditional publisher, you are almost certainly going to hate the back cover copy written by the marketing team. If you can do a better job, your publisher will usually be smart enough to take most of your suggestions. If you can't do better, then all you can do is grumble about what a hash your publisher is making of your marketing.

You might as well get started thinking about writing Product Descriptions now, because one way or another, you'll need to do it someday.

5) What's New At AdvancedFictionWriting.com

My book, *WRITING FICTION FOR DUMMIES*, has been selling well since it began shipping more than a year ago and is one of the most popular fiction writing books on Amazon. You can find out all about *WRITING FICTION FOR DUMMIES* here:

<http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com/info/wffd>

If you've already bought the book and like it, I'd be delighted if you wrote an Amazon review. Thanks to those of you who already have! I appreciate you!

I've also been gratified at the response to my latest software product, "Snowflake Pro," which makes it fast, easy, and fun to work through the steps of my well-known Snowflake method for designing a novel. You

can find out more about Snowflake Pro at:
<http://www.SnowflakeProSoftware.com>

Currently, my co-author John Olson and I are preparing our back list of novels for publication as e-books.

John and I are also creating some powerful online tools to make it easy for us to market our work effectively and easily. In due time, we'll make those tools available to other authors. More info on that when the opportune moment arrives.

I normally teach at roughly 4 to 6 writing conferences per year, depending on my schedule. For 2011, I have decided to cut back on my teaching so I can focus on a major project I'm working on. My schedule for 2011 is now all filled in.

I will be teaching at these conferences in 2011:

Oregon Christian Writers Conference, (August)
6 hours teaching a lecture series named "Fiction 101"
<http://www.oregonchristianwriters.com/summer-conference/>

American Christian Fiction Writers, (September)
4 hours teaching a lecture series on the Snowflake method
<http://www.acfw.com/conference/>

If you'd like me to teach at your conference in 2012 or beyond, email me to find out how outrageously expensive I am.

If you'd just like to hear me teach, I have a number of recordings and e-books that are outrageously cheap. Details here:
<http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com/info>

6) Randy Recommends . . .

I don't take paid ads for this e-zine. I do, however, recommend people I like.

I'm a huge fan of Margie Lawson's courses, both the ones she teaches in person and the ones she sells on her web site at
<http://www.MargieLawson.com>

Margie is a psychologist who applies what she knows about human psychology to writing fiction. I believe her material is brilliant. Check her out on her web site!

I've also become a fan of Thomas Umstatted's terrific uncommon-sense thoughts on internet marketing. You can read Thomas's blog at:
<http://www.AuthorTechTips.com>

Thomas is especially skilled at helping authors create an inexpensive but powerful web site using WordPress blogs. I am a huge fan of this approach, since it gives the most bang for the buck in an author site. Find out more about this at:
<http://www.UmstattedMedia.com>

7) Steal This E-zine!

This E-zine is free, and I personally guarantee it's worth at least 1000 times the price. I invite you to "steal" it, but only if you do it nicely . . .

Distasteful legal babble: This E-zine is copyright Randall Ingermanson, 2011.

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:
<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 2-paragraph blurb with it:

Award-winning novelist Randy Ingermanson, "the Snowflake Guy," publishes the Advanced Fiction Writing E-zine, with more than 25,000 readers, every month. If you want to learn the craft and marketing of fiction, AND 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
<http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com/ezine>
