The Advanced Fiction Writing E-zine

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"Fiction Writing = Organization + Craft + Marketing"

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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 350 of you signed up in May), 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 let you update your address on my system.

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:

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

* Have you got a fragmented life? So does most everyone. Want to know how I deal with my fragmentation to still get things done? Read my organization column, "Your Fragmented Life."

* Is your lead character likable? Does she have to be? What if she just isn't? Find out my take in my column on craft, "Must Your Lead Character Be Likable?"

* The web makes it easy for somebody to plagiarize your work. If you think there's nothing you can do about it, then check out my marketing article, "Does Google Know You Wrote That?"

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2) Organization: Your Fragmented Life

So your life is fragmented beyond belief, right?

You need to research foods they ate in the 1880s in France for your novel.

And the repair guy is coming at 10 AM to fix the busted washing machine.

And you have a blog that needs feeding.

There's a storm coming and it might be time to clear the gunk out of the rain gutters before they overflow.

Did you remember to sign up for that writing conference that's going to have that agent you've been mooning over?

The cat is way overdue to be spayed and she's acting much too friendly with your teddy bear.

You haven't Facebooked in ages and you're not sure it matters anymore because you hate it anyway.

Your boss wants that report on his desk tomorrow.

You're supposed to be writing your novel.

All of the above, and more, is on your plate for today. Most of these tasks have been festering on your plate for days or weeks already. You hate your plate. You want all those tasks to just go away. They're all important. Quick -- which do you do first?

Does any of this sound remotely familiar?

Good, you're human. If your life isn't fragmented, you might be a robot. Or God. Or deceased.

So how do you deal with it all?

I can't tell you how you SHOULD deal with it all. But I can tell you how I deal with it. If it sounds like it might work for you, then try it.

There are really three basic steps here:

* Keep lists for the main Big Chunks of your life. All tasks go on a list for one of your Big Chunks, or else they go on the Miscellaneous list.

* Every day, pick a few of the Big Chunk lists to work on. Assign a priority for each list for the day. Set a fixed amount of time that you're going to work exclusively on each list, when you'll be totally focused on that list.

* When it's time to work on a given list, work on that for the assigned amount of time and then stop. Ignore all interruptions if you possibly can.

Does this work? Yes, it works for me. It might work for you too. Let's see how it plays out in real life:

Today, I have a boatload of things to get done. A lot more than I could possibly do in one day. All of them are important.

They fall into four Big Chunks, and for today, I put them in this order:

1) My novel. I'm proofing it for publication. Yay!

2) My business. I've got a ton of small tasks and one big task.

3) This e-zine. I've got three articles to write in the next few days, plus editing.

4) A giveaway campaign on Goodreads that I just started, and which I need to check up on.

Each of these Big Chunks has a bunch of tasks that all need to get done. So on each list, I've got the tasks in the rough order I want to do them.

This morning when I looked at my lists, it was pretty overwhelming. That's normal. I can't remember when my lists didn't look overwhelming. Yours look overwhelming too. That doesn't mean we need to be overwhelmed.

What we need is focus.

When I started work this morning, I assigned myself 90 minutes to work on the novel, 60 minutes to work on my business, 90 minutes to work on this e-zine, and 60 minutes to deal with the Goodreads campaign.

That works out to 5 hours total, which in my experience is a good day's work, because there is also email to be answered, small breaks to be taken, water to be drunk, exercise to be had, cats to be coddled, and crises to be managed.

The little things never go away, but you manage them by wedging them into the cracks between the Big Chunks in your day.

The point is that 5 hours of my day is scheduled for the Big Chunks in my life.

I began with Big Chunk #1 -- working on my novel. I had only 90 minutes assigned to it, which meant there was no time to mess around. I dived right in and got cranking. 90 minutes goes fast.

When my 90 minutes were up, I was on a roll and didn't

want to stop. So I kept on going until I reached 160 minutes. That was cheating, but my novel was my top priority for the day, so I wanted to run with it. I'm happy to cheat on behalf of the high priority things in my life.

I felt pretty good when I finished, so I took a break and did some e-mail. Not all of it, but enough to knock down the in-box a bit. That burned 15 minutes.

Then I moved into Big Chunk #2, my business work. There is an infinite amount of work on that plate, but I had budgeted only 60 minutes for the day. Which meant there was no time to mess around. I took the most important task, which really NEEDS to be done today, and started work.

There were some interruptions. Urgent phone calls from my boss which I really can't ignore. That happens. But I was pretty focused anyway, because I really wanted to get this one task done. It took two full hours. I had only one hour budgeted, but when you're halfway through, you really don't want to stop. So I got it finished.

Fact is, there are a dozen other important tasks I need to do for my business. I did only one. But I finished it. I could whine about the other eleven left undone, or I could be happy about the one that I did. I'll take the one. Some days, I don't get even one done. That's just reality.

I'm right now working on Big Chunk #3, this e-zine. I have 90 minutes budgeted for this, AND I have a crisis to deal with from my boss which I have set aside to ferment for a bit.

My theory on crises is you either kill them right away or let them take their turn with all the other crises in the world. This one is going to take its turn. I just don't think I can solve it today, so why should I let it interfere with the Big Chunks in my life? No

reason to do that. Not going to.

I have three articles for my e-zine I'd love to write today. Not going to happen in the 90 minutes I have budgeted. I'll be doing very well to get this one done in that amount of time.

But in fact, the first draft is almost done. I'm pretty focused right now. I've given myself permission to be focused for this 90 minute block.

After the 90 minutes are up, I'll need to go check the mail. And deal with the e-mail that's reproducing in my in-box. And pay obeisance to the cat, who has not been fed in two whole hours. And think about my boss-induced crisis.

I don't know if I'll get to the Goodreads task list today. It would be wonderful if I do, but the fact is that it was #4 on my list of Big Chunks.

On different days, I choose different Big Chunks. My life has several Big Chunks. Probably six or seven of them. On any given day, I can generally get something significant done on three or possibly four of them.

That's my life.

I bet yours is similar.

I bet yours is totally out of control.

Just like mine.

You will never get your life under control, if by "control" you mean that all your lists are finished.

Not going to happen until you die. Because things keeping adding themselves to your lists. Crises happen. Cats select you to be their humble servant.

Yikes, my friend is Skyping me right now. I'll allow

myself a couple of quick responses to be polite. Got to stay focused on what I'm doing.

Every day you can budget time on the Big Chunks of your life. 60 minutes for this. 90 minutes for that. If you get some actual work done, one or more tasks crossed off the list, on each of three Big Chunks every day, well that's progress.

Yes, we all want to get it all done.

No, none of us are ever going to do it.

Sure, your life is fragmented beyond all belief. But you can defrag it a bit, right now, today, tomorrow, and forever. By budgeting time for the Big Chunks.

What are your Big Chunks for today? (I'm hoping that working on your novel is one of those Big Chunks, but it probably can't be everyday.)

Which Big Chunk is most important for today? (On a good day, your most important Big Chunk might be your novel, but it probably won't be every day.)

How much time can you realistically spend on each of your Big Chunks? (Remember that the little pieces of life are going to intrude, so the time you spend on your Big Chunks is not going to be 100% of your day.)

Now go work on the first Big Chunk for the time allotted. Ignore all interruptions if you possibly can, until the time is up. Then deal with the interruptions, the crises, the incidental e-mail for a few minutes.

Then on to the next Big Chunk, and the next.

For me, three Big Chunks is a good day, and four is spectacular.

Divide and conquer. It worked for Julius Caesar. It can work for you.

One Big Chunk at a time.

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3) Craft: Must Your Lead Character Be Likable?

A friend of mine asked me recently to reread the newest version of her first chapter. Some of her test readers had said that her lead character wasn't likable enough.

I read the new version and I thought it worked better than the original. It was clearer to me who the lead character was and what she was trying to do in chapter one. And she may even have been a bit more likable.

That prompted me to ask myself whether it's really necessary to have a lead character be likable.

So I tried to think of some examples of unlikable lead characters for bestselling novels. It didn't take long.

Vito Corleone, the lead character for much of the novel, THE GODFATHER, isn't likable. Corleone is, in fact, a despicable person who runs an empire built on theft, bribery, and murder. The novel is the story of how his youngest son Michael, the only decent person in the family, is corrupted to become Vito's replacement.

The assassin known as The Jackal in Frederick Forsyth's novel, THE DAY OF THE JACKAL, is likewise unlikable. The Jackal is a professional assassin, hired to kill Charles de Gaulle. As he worms his way toward his chosen kill zone, he casually murders a few people who

get in his way or who could identify him. The Jackal has no conscience and you aren't supposed to like him.

Scarlett O'Hara isn't a murderer, but she's a selfish brat, intent on being the center of attention, willing to wreck other people's relationships if it suits her purposes. Scarlett is exactly the person you don't want your daughter to be like. She's the woman you don't want to marry. The one you don't want dancing with your husband.

If you think for five minutes, you can probably list several other examples of unlikable characters in leading roles.

So what makes them work? Why would anyone want to read a whole novel about these kinds of people?

I can think of a couple of main reasons:

* They're fascinating.

* The reader can still identify with them.

Vito Corleone is no two-dimensional villain. He's a "man of respect." He wants (and demands) that his friends show him respect. Anyone can identify with that. Everybody wants to be respected.

The way Corleone achieves respect is fascinating. He does it mostly with words. Corleone doesn't say a lot, but when he speaks, he terrifies people without ever making a threat. He's infinitely polite, but he's also subtle, leaving people to draw their own implications.

But when it's time for action, he's willing to do whatever it takes. If you've read the book or seen the movie, two words will remind you of exactly how far Vito is willing to go: Horse's head.

The Jackal is fascinating because he's able to maintain an air of mystery. Who is this man who knows when prospective employers are reading his dossier? What is his brilliant plan to murder the best protected man in the world? How can he be so sure he'll succeed?

One thing not mysterious is the Jackal's motive. He wants to retire to a life of comfort and ease. Every reader would like to do that. The Jackal is offered half a million dollars. In 1962, that's enough to retire well.

We see the Jackal at work as he builds his plan and executes it in excruciating detail. Yet we don't get inside his head enough to know what that plan is. No matter how much we watch the Jackal, we never understand him. In the final chapter, we learn that we knew him even less than we imagined.

Scarlett O'Hara is selfish, but it's easy to understand what makes her tick. She wants everyone to admire her -- at least the male half of the population. She wants to be the belle of the ball forever. And who doesn't want to be popular? It's easy to identify with Scarlett's motives, even if you hate the way she operates.

If you're looking for a likable character, you've got Melanie -- the girl who gets Ashley Wilkes. Scarlett, for no clear reason, has always had her heart set on Ashley, so she hates Melanie.

But if you're looking for fascinating, then Scarlett's your girl, because she's way more interesting than Melanie.

It would be a mistake to believe that these characters are fascinating because they're unlikable.

That's not it at all. These characters are fascinating

because the authors chose to go deep with them.

With Vito Corleone, we go deep into his background. How is it that a quiet, mild-mannered, polite young Sicilian became the Godfather? We see the exact points of decision in his life and we get right inside his head as he makes those decisions. And we wonder how we'd have chosen.

With the Jackal, we go deep into his methodology. He prepares for the assassination with infinite care. We don't understand exactly why he's taking each step. That's part of the puzzle to work out. But we know exactly HOW he's doing it. And we finish the book believing we could do that too.

With Scarlett, we go deep into her emotions. She's not the sharpest brick on the woodpile, that's for sure. But she might be the most emotive, and everybody has feelings. Everybody knows what it's like to want something they can't possibly have.

It's generally a good strategy to give your lead character some likable qualities. But it's not required.

What is required is to make your lead character as interesting as possible.

Find a way to go deep with your character. Find a way to make your reader identify with your character. Make your character fascinating.

If that makes your lead character more likable, then that's all to the good.

But if not, you might still be OK.

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4) Marketing: Does Google Know You Wrote That?

Here's something bad that happens to writers every day:

You write an article and post it on your blog. Or maybe on your web site. Or maybe you do a guest post on another site.

It's a great article which you poured your blood into. It's so good that within days, Google has seen it and started listing it high in the search results for some key phrase.

People start finding that article and coming to your site.

And then some plagiarist somewhere grabs the article and posts it on their site. Sure, you had a copyright notice on your article. But they do it anyway. A bunch of them.

Google sees that there are a ton of copies of the same article out there on the web. One of those articles is on a site with higher "authority" than yours.

And suddenly, some other site is getting the traffic that is rightfully yours.

What went wrong here? You did everything right. You created great content which should have brought you traffic.

But Google didn't know you wrote it. So when other people took it, the credit got split up many different ways.

And you're out in the cold.

That isn't right. Somebody ought to do something about that.

Somebody did do something about that. Google did. Google created a way to claim the authorship of an article.

If you do your part, then Google will do the right thing by you.

And the plagiarists will be left out in the cold.

As a side benefit, when somebody searches for a keyphrase and Google shows your page in the search results, your picture will appear there too.

To see how this works in action, Google the phrase "Snowflake method" (using the quote marks to make it a phrase match search). There are more than 32,000 results for this phrase. The top result is my famous article on the Snowflake method, and it shows my picture.

Google knows I wrote that article.

How do you make this work for you?

The key term you need to know is "Google Authorship." You can learn all the many details about Google Authorship by doing a search for this term.

I'll explain the core ideas right now:

* Google needs to know you exist.

* You need to "sign" your articles on your blog or web site.

* Google takes care of the rest.

Let's look at those ideas in more detail now.

First, how does Google know you exist?

That's easy. You create an account on Google Plus. You do that by going to this URL: http://plus.google.com

This will take you to a sign-in page. If you have a Google account (for GMail or Google Analytics or one of the many other Google services) then you can sign in right away. Otherwise, there's a red button in the upper right corner labeled "Create An Account" which you can use to create an account attached to any e-mail address you own.

Go to your Profile page and make sure you're on the "About" tab of the page.

This page has a number of sections where you can fill in your Story, your Education, your Work, your Basic Information, your Contact Information, etc.

You want to edit your Links. This lets you tell Google your Facebook account, Twitter account, LinkedIn account, etc. Click the "Edit" link at the bottom of this section.

A dialog will appear that lets you edit your Links.

There is a section labeled "Contributor to." You need to fill this in with the web sites where you contribute articles. These might include your web site or your blog or other blogs where you have an account as a contributor.

When you're done, click the blue "Save" button at the bottom of the dialog.

That's it! Google now knows that you are a contributor at these sites.

If you've uploaded your headshot to Google Plus, then Google also has your photo handy.

While you're on your Google Plus profile page, do one last thing. Notice that the URL for this page looks something like this:
https://plus.google.com/1234567890123456

That's your Google Plus account number. Copy that with your mouse because you'll need it in the next step.

By the way, this account number is public information. It will go onto every article on your web site that you want to claim as your own, and of course anyone can see that signature.

How do you sign your articles on the web sites where you're a contributor?

You do that using the URL that you just copied.

You just need to add a little snippet of HTML with that account number.

There are several ways to create the signature.

Here is the easiest way, which works if you have a WordPress blog and want to sign your blog articles:

* Log in to your WordPress blog under the user account that you use for posting articles. (Usually, this will NOT be the admin account.)

* You'll see your Dashboard appear.

* Click on the "Profile" menu item in the left sidebar.

* Your Profile page will appear.

* Scroll down to the "Contact Info" section of the page to the "Google+" field and paste in the URL that you copied from Google Plus. (If you don't see the "Google+" field, you need to install the SEO plugin by Yoast. Most WordPress blogs use this plugin, so you probably already have it installed. It's free.)

* Scroll down to the bottom of the page and click the blue "Update Profile" button.

* That's it! You've now signed every page of your blog that was posted under this WordPress user account.

If you're a contributor on other WordPress blogs, you need to do the same thing on those blogs in order to sign the articles you wrote there.

If you're not using WordPress, then there are other ways to sign your articles that take a little bit more work. You can learn the details by visiting the Google web page on Google Authorship:
https://plus.google.com/authorship

Once you've done the above steps, Google may take a few days to notice that you've signed your articles. After that, your picture will appear in Google's search results page when it lists your article.

From now on, every blog post you write will be signed and Google will know that you're the original author of the article.

In theory, Google can then track how popular you are as an author and establish a reputation for you.

In theory, Google can also see who posted an article first, so they know you're the original author and not a plagiarist who stole it.

It's not clear if Google is doing these things yet, but it's widely believed that either they are doing it now or will be doing it soon.

And that's good news to honest writers everywhere.

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5) What's New At AdvancedFictionWriting.com

I've finished working on the new edition of my novel DOUBLE VISION and have sent it to my proofreader for a final check.

My book, WRITING FICTION FOR DUMMIES, has been selling well since it began shipping more than three years ago. For the last couple of years, it's been the hottest selling book in its category in the Kindle store.

You can find out all about WRITING FICTION FOR DUMMIES here:
http://www.advancedfictionwriting.com/product/writing-fiction-for-dummies/

If you've already bought the book and like it, I'd be delighted if you went to your favorite online bookstore and posted a review.

I've also been gratified at the response to my flagship software product, "Snowflake Pro," which makes it fast, easy, and fun to work through the steps of my wildly popular Snowflake method for designing a novel. You can find out more about Snowflake Pro at:
http://www.SnowflakeProSoftware.com

I normally teach at four to six writing conferences per year. This year, I'm easing off some -- I'm currently booked to teach at only two in 2013, which should give me a bit of breathing room.

Why don't I teach at more conferences? Because teaching is an incredibly demanding blood sport and it sucks a huge amount of energy out of my tiny brain. I prefer to put my absolute best into a few locations than to muddle through at many.

I've already taught once this year, so I have only one more to go.

In August, I will be teaching a six-hour class on marketing for writers at the Oregon Christian Writers Conference in Portland. Details here: http://ocwsummerconference.com/

I'll also be attending the ACFW conference in September and the Novelist, Inc. conference in October.

If you'd like me to teach at your conference in 2014 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/products/

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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 Umstattd's terrific uncommon-sense thoughts on internet marketing. You can read Thomas's blog at:
http://www.AuthorMedia.com/blog

Thomas and his crew at AuthorMedia are the folks who reworked my web site recently, and I'm extremely happy with the results.

Please be aware that in this section I ONLY recommend folks who have never asked me to do so. Tragically, this means that if you ask me to list you here, I will be forced to say no.

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7) Steal This E-zine!

This E-zine is free, and I personally guarantee it's worth at least 1812 times the price. I invite you to "steal" it, but only if you do it nicely . . .

Extremely tasteful postscript: I encourage you to
e-mail this E-zine to any fiction writer friends of
yours who might benefit from it. I only ask that you
e-mail 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.

Of course you should not forward this e-mail to people
who don't write fiction. They won't care about it.

At the moment, there is one place to subscribe:
http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com

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Snowflake Guy," publishes the free monthly Advanced
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