
The Advanced Fiction Writing E-zine

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

Those of you who have joined in the past month (about 350 of you are new for this issue), welcome to my e-zine! You can find past issues of all the previous issues on my web site at:
<http://www.advancedfictionwriting.com/html/afwezine.html>

My last issue of this e-zine received a very enthusiastic response. Apparently, those pesky MRUs continue to be interesting. In this issue, I'll analyze a section from one more literary novel, this time by Alice Sebold. For those of you just joining us, check out the past few issues of this e-zine in which I define and explain MRUs (Motivation-Reaction Units) at length. My experience has been that studying MRUs gives intermediate level novelists the biggest bang for their buck. And published novelists can learn a thing or two, even little-known guys like Clancy and Crichton.

In this issue, I'll also discuss an important topic in Tiger Marketing: search engine keywords. If that subject leaves you cold, you're not alone. So try this experiment: Go to Google and type in the phrase "writing a novel" and see who comes up first. That's

right, it's me! A few months ago, I explained how that happened. It's not an accident. This month, I'll explain how you can duplicate that feat for your own web pages. You'll need to work at it, and it won't happen overnight, but it's possible--if you know what to do. Which I'll tell you.

I'd also like to say a few words about the infamous Snowflake method. Yes, there are still a few grammatically correct sentences that haven't been said about the Snowflake. You'll see them all here!

I went to the funeral of a friend of mine this morning. Larry Nelson was only 47, just a few months older than I am. Today, I'm reflecting a bit on life and death and other important stuff, and since I'm a writer, I can't much help writing about it. Strictly speaking, this is not really about writing, except insofar as writing is about life and death and other important stuff. You can safely skip reading this--I've saved it for last--but if you want to see if I can actually string together an article without a single joke in it, read it.

Oh yeah, one more thing! As you can all see, the circulation of this e-zine has just recently gone over 2000. As I promised a few months, this means that I'm going to hold a drawing for a free iPod Shuffle among all those of you who referred new subscribers. I'd have done it already this week, but it's been a little frenetic. I'll announce the winner early next week.

2) Analyzing The Masters

In May, I gave away one of my biggest secrets in the craft of writing fiction. I spilled the beans on MRUs.

If you missed that article, now would be a good time to go read it or to check out the article on my web site on "Writing the Perfect Scene" at http://www.rsingermanson.com/html/perfect_scene.html

As a VERY brief reminder, an MRU has two parts, a "Motivation" and a "Reaction". The Motivation is objective and external. The Reaction is subjective and mostly internal to your Point of View character.

In June, I showed how an analysis of MRUs could improve on the work of Tom Clancy, Dan Brown, and Michael Crichton. In July, I showed how a study of MRUs could reveal some of the magic behind such literary authors as Leif Enger and Audrey Niffenegger.

This month, I'll take one last literary example, from Alice Sebold's novel *The Lovely Bones*. If you're squeamish, be forewarned that this is a novel about a fourteen-year-old girl, Susie Salmon, who is brutally raped and murdered in the first chapter. The rest of

the book is told from her vantage point in the Hereafter, watching as her killer evades punishment while her family tries to deal with the aftermath.

Here is a sample from that gut-wrenching first chapter. Susie has been lured into an underground lair by her neighbor, Mr. Harvey:

- 1 Mr. Harvey asked me if I would like a refreshment. That was how he put it. I said I had to go home.
- 2 "Be polite and have a Coke," he said. "I'm sure the other kids would."
- 3 "What other kids?"
- 4 "I built this for the kids in the neighborhood. I thought it could be some sort of clubhouse."
- 5 I don't think I believed this even then. I thought he was lying, but I thought it was a pitiful line. I imagined he was lonely. We had read about men like him in health class. Men who never married and ate frozen meals every night and were so afraid of rejection that they didn't even own pets. I felt sorry for him.
- 6 "Okay," I said, "I'll have a Coke."
- 7 In a little while he said, "Aren't you warm, Susie? Why don't you take off your parka."
- 8 I did.
- 9 After this he said, "You're very pretty, Susie."
- 10 "Thanks," I said, even though he gave me what my friend Clarissa and I had dubbed the skeevies.
- 11 "Do you have a boyfriend?"
- 12 "No, Mr. Harvey," I said. I swallowed the rest of my Coke, which was a lot, and said, "I got to go, Mr. Harvey. This is a cool place, but I have to go."
- 13 He stood up and did his hunchback number by the six dug-in steps that led to the world. "I don't know why you think you're leaving."

Enough! It gets worse soon after this creepy segment. Let's analyze it:

- 1a Mr. Harvey asked me if I would like a refreshment. That was how he put it.

This part of the paragraph is Motivation. It is objective and external. The second sentence shows a bit of the narrator's personality, but I would classify it as still part of the Motivation. This paragraph is done

in narrative summary (without quote marks), which any writing teacher will tell you is Telling, rather than Showing. The reason Sebald does this is probably because she is just wrapping up a very long parenthetical comment about how her parents later reacted to her disappearance. Using narrative summary allows her to segue back into the story again.

1b I said I had to go home.

This is clearly a Reaction. A Reaction can have up to three parts, a Feeling, a Reflexive Action, and a Rational Action. This has only the last of these parts. Speech is almost always a Rational Action (except for certain reflexive words.) Again, this segment is Telling, not Showing. And that's OK.

2 "Be polite and have a Coke," he said. "I'm sure the other kids would."

This is a new Motivation, Mr. Harvey's response to Susie's previous Reaction. Note that we are fully back into Showing now. We've re-entered the story stream.

3 "What other kids?"

This is Susie's Reaction, and it again contains just a single part, Rational Speech. This keeps the story moving.

4 "I built this for the kids in the neighborhood. I thought it could be some sort of clubhouse."

Another Motivation, a couple of lines of dialogue by Mr. Harvey.

5 I don't think I believed this even then. I thought he was lying, but I thought it was a pitiful line. I imagined he was lonely. We had read about men like him in health class. Men who never married and ate frozen meals every night and were so afraid of rejection that they didn't even own pets. I felt sorry for him.

Sebald slows down the story a little bit here, letting the creepiness build by putting the reader inside the head of a victim and showing a sequence of thoughts. All of this is the first part of an extended Reaction by Susie, and it is all Rational Thought.

6 "Okay," I said, "I'll have a Coke."

This completes Susie's Reaction by showing the outcome of that sequence of Rational Thought--some Rational Speech. Notice that there is not a lot of emotion being shown here by the character. (Other than the fact that Susie felt sorry for Mr. Harvey.) It's not necessary to show this, because the reader is getting thoroughly creeped out, partly by Mr. Harvey's behavior and partly by the fact that Susie is so naive.

7 In a little while he said, "Aren't you warm, Susie? Why don't you take off your parka."

Another Motivation. The creepiness is building here, but Susie has only a tiny inkling of what the reader knows. Suspense is built when the reader knows something the character doesn't!

8 I did.

This is Susie's Reaction, and by now the reader is absolutely freaking out, yelling, "No, Susie, get the heck out of there!" Notice that Sebold doesn't waste words here. Two words, four letters. It's so stark it rips you up to read it.

9 After this he said, "You're very pretty, Susie."

This is another Motivation, and now even Susie is getting the creeps:

10 "Thanks," I said, even though he gave me what my friend Clarissa and I had dubbed the skeevies.

This is Susie's Reaction, and it now has two parts. The first part is Susie's Rational Speech, "Thanks." The second part is that Susie is now experiencing the skeevies. This actually violates the rule of MRUs that says Feelings should be written before Rational Actions.

Does it work to break the rule? Yes! What's going on here is that the reversed order shows how subliminal those skeevies really are. Susie still doesn't get it. And that's what has the reader screaming, "NO, get outta there now!"

11 "Do you have a boyfriend?"

This is another Motivation, another creepy question from Mr. Harvey.

12 "No, Mr. Harvey," I said. I swallowed the rest of my Coke, which was a lot, and said, "I got to go, Mr. Harvey. This is a cool place, but I have to go."

This is Susie's Reaction, a sequence of Rational Speech, Rational Action, and more Rational Speech. Susie is aware enough to realize she needs to get out fast, and even toss a little flattery about the dugout. Anything to get out.

13 He stood up and did his hunchback number by the six dug-in steps that led to the world. "I don't know why you think you're leaving."

Another Motivation from Mr. Harvey, and it's the Motivation that pushes Susie over the line. From here

on out, she'll be resisting. But her resistance is too little, way too late. It's an absolutely horrific passage, brilliantly written.

3) Tiger Marketing

A key part of Tiger Marketing is driving traffic to your web site. After all, what good is a web site if nobody visits it?

The big question is this: How do you get people to come to your site?

That's a simple question with a long and complex answer. We already discussed part of it in the May issue, when I talked about the importance of having links pointing at your web site. Google believes that a site with many incoming links is more important than a site with no links. Makes sense, as far as it goes.

OK, but there's more work to be done. No matter how many links point to your site, Google won't send you visitors unless those visitors care about the stuff on your site. Duh!

And how does Google know what those people care about? That's really easy. The users of Google tell it what they care about by typing in words to search for. Those words are known as "keywords." A "keyword" is any combination of words that a user might type into Google. The following are all possible keywords:

- 1) "madonna"
- 2) "hunchback of notre dame"
- 3) "what was john elway's winning record?"

Keyword #1 above is fairly general, and Google won't know if it's about a singer or the mother of Jesus, so the results will yield a large number of pages (6,270,000 as of now), many of which are not what the reader ordered.

Keyword #2 is more specific (and also of narrower interest) so Google will yield a smaller number of pages (a mere 380,000), but those pages will probably be something close to what the user actually wanted.

Keyword #3 is even more specific (and of interest to far fewer readers) but Google will probably provide the right answer somewhere in the top ten results (there are 744 results, and the top result gives the correct answer).

Here's the thing. If you want people to come to your web site, they have to find you and they have to stay. They won't find you through a search engine unless you

rank very high up in the search ranking for a keyword they're interested in. And they won't stay unless your page is actually related to what they wanted.

Your mission, should you be loony enough to accept it, is two-fold:

- 1) identify some common keywords related to your site
- 2) create a web page targeted to each of those keywords

Let's look at each of these in turn. Let's suppose you have a camel ranch and you sell camel milk. (Don't laugh, there actually is a place like that here in San Diego County.) You have a web site that extols the virtues of drinking camel milk, and you want to increase your traffic.

The good news is that if somebody Googles the phrase "camel milk san diego" they will find you. You'll be right at the top of the 125,000 hits for that keyword. So you already "own" a keyword that gives you a top Google ranking.

The bad news is that people hardly ever Google that keyword. So you own it, but the keyword is useless. The question is how to find keywords that people will actually be searching for. They may not know that they're interested in camel milk, but you want to persuade them that they are. A tricky proposition, no? This calls for some serious market research, which generally means spending big bucks and waiting for months and months.

But we Tiger Marketers are impatient cheapskates. We don't spend big bucks and wait months when we can get the answer right away for free. You can find out what related keywords people actually search for by using a tool that is only five seconds away. Here it is:
<http://inventory.overture.com/d/searchinventory/suggestion/>

If you click on that link, you'll go to a web page for the Overture search engine. Overture is similar to Google. They sell ads to people, and it's in their interest for their ad-buyers to buy ads for keywords that might actually get searched for. So they provide a tool to tell you what keywords got searched on in the last month that are related to your proposed keyword.

Let's play the game and see what the search tool tells us. The page has a text field into which I'll type the keywords "camel milk san diego".

Overture returns the dreaded result, "no suggestions".

So let's try again. We'll ask Overture to make suggestions for keywords related to "camel milk".

Overture is again fairly pessimistic. It tells us that:
"camel milk" was searched for 257 times in May
"camel milk threads" was searched for 38 times in May
"buy camel milk" was searched for 25 times in May

So you might want to design web pages that stress those three keywords, so as to capture those particular searchers. However, let's face it, those aren't a lot of hits. It's time to get crazy. Let's ask Overture to tell us what keywords are related to "milk".

Bingo! Overture now tells us that
"milk" was searched for 61020 times
"breast milk" was searched for 17833 times
and so on down a very long list.

This is progress! Be aware, of course, that it's going to be very hard to be the #1 Google result for the keyword "milk". Maybe you can get that ranking someday, but in the meantime, look down the list. You'll find some illuminating results:

"soy milk" had 6744 searches performed
"goat milk" had 4490 searches performed
"milk allergy" had 3992 searches performed
"raw milk" had 1794 searches performed
"organic milk" had 1363 searches performed
"rice milk" had 1323 searches performed

Those add up to quite a few searches! Here's a strategy you could try. Create several web pages that discuss each of those kinds of milk, and compare them to camel milk. If you do a good job, each of those pages might capture quite a few hits from people who care about their health and are considering alternatives to cow milk. And that's who your target market is!

But you can do even better! You started with the single-word keyword "milk" and you generated a list of more specific two-word keywords. Now use the Overture tool again and type in each of those keywords you found. You'll generate more keywords that are even more specific, nicely sorted in order of importance. Here are some you'll find:

"benefit of soy milk" 1077 searches
"soy milk allergy" 200 searches
"raw goat milk" 416 searches
"goat milk for infant" 294 searches
"benefit of goat milk" 166 searches
"allergy milk" 3992 searches
"allergy milk symptom" 905 searches
"allergy milk protein" 505 searches
"allergy child in milk" 417 searches
"allergy infant milk" 357 searches
"allergy baby milk" 265 searches
"allergy milk soy" 200 searches
"allergy cow milk" 187 searches
"allergy breast milk" 166 searches
"allergy in infant milk" 155 searches
"allergy milk toddler" 150 searches
"allergy baby in milk" 149 searches
"allergy child milk" 141 searches

This suggests a bunch more pages you could write, each targeted to a specific keyword. This is a bit of work, but it's targeted work! You know which are the good keywords and which aren't.

Next month, I'll talk about how to write a web page that targets a particular keyword.

In the meantime, let's remember what all this has to do with marketing your fiction. Here's the thing. People don't care about your book. I'm sorry, but they don't. It's not that they're rude. Either they don't know about you or they don't know about your book or they don't realize your book is related to what they care about.

So your job is to find things that they ARE interested in that are in some way related to your book. And the Overture keyword selector tool helps you do that. Start with a single generic word related to your book. (Like "milk" in our example.) Run the keyword selector and look for more specific keywords related to your book. Then run those through the keyword selector. Make a list of the "good keywords" that you want to target. Then wait till next month, when I'll tell you what to do with those keywords.

See ya then!

4) Thoughts on the Snowflake

I'm known around the world as "the Snowflake guy." Most of the readers of this e-zine first heard about me because of the famous Snowflake page on my web site. http://www.rsingermanson.com/html/the_snowflake.html (Currently, I'm averaging over 300 hits per day on that one page, and quite a few folks are also enamored with my audio CD lecture on the Snowflake which is for sale on my site.)

I frequently hear from two types of people:

1) Enthusiasts who tell me they love the Snowflake, it has given them hope, they are finally going to write their novel, etc. And that's good, I'm always happy to hear it.

2) "Seat of the pants" writers who say it would never work for them, that they prefer to just let that story flow, and how dare I claim that the Snowflake is the one true way to write a novel.

A few comments are in order here, in no particular order. First, the Snowflake is not a paint-by-numbers scheme that will magically get your novel written. There's a lot of work to do, and at best, the Snowflake will give you a framework to analyze your evolving

story and keep it all organized. The Snowflake is not magic. The magic comes when a person with talent sits down to write. The Snowflake either helps you get into the chair, or it hinders you. If it helps you, then that's great, use it. If it hinders you, ignore it. Either way, the magic is still up to you.

All this came into very personal focus for me on the book I just finished writing. (The book that was due August 1, which was the date I intended to put out this e-zine. This e-zine is late because I have twisted priorities and believe that my pesky editor gets first dibs on my time.)

For various reasons, I was a bit blocked in doing revisions on this manuscript. The Snowflake helped me get myself unblocked, because it doesn't take all that long to write up a new Snowflake document. So the Snowflake was a help in getting me rolling.

HOWEVER, (and some of you will be laughing up your sleeves at me) I was having trouble with the ending. I had a nice Snowflake that told me what was going to happen. After all, this was merely a revision of the manuscript, so I was pretty confident the story worked. But my characters decided they wanted to change things. So I gave them the reins and let them redo the ending. I threw out a bunch of chapters and wrote some new ones, pretty much in the last few days before the book was due. It worked. The new ending was better. It seemed to fall together by magic. Fiction is funny that way.

The lesson, I hope, is clear. The Snowflake is handy, but never ever let it get in the way of the Magic.

I'm still trying to figure out why some people like the Snowflake and some find it unusable. I had a theory that I thought explained it very well. The theory is that left-brained people like to do detailed plot synopses and right-brained people like to write by the seat of their pants. People like me who are balanced between right and left brains like the Snowflake, which is a balance between the two extremes.

That was my theory. I had good evidence, too. I once took one of those brain analysis tests and I came up 52% right-brain, 48% left-brain. Give or take. That looked like proof of my theory to me.

HOWEVER, I recently talked to one of my seat-of-the-pants friends who is well known for freaking out at the very mention of the word "snowflake". We kid each other about this a lot. Well, it turns out she's 51% left-brained, 49% right-brained. Basically, she's as balanced as me, but she finds the Snowflake unusable.

I'm still looking for a theory. I don't have the answer yet. One of these days I'll figure it out.

5) What's New At AdvancedFictionWriting.com

I've spent the last month completing work on my next novel, DOUBLE CROSS, which should be out in a year. It's a story about a con man and a whole lot more. I'm way too tired to know if it's any good yet. I expect my cranky editors will want a bunch more revisions, but I can deal with that. Just not today.

I've also been spending a lot of time working with a small group of writers who have banded together to help promote each other's work. We all contribute some money and some time and we all do the things we're good at. I'm the webmaster. We have people to do database work, media contacts, blogging, e-zines, publicity, bookstore contacts, media training, and on and on. I'm not quite done with the web site, but you can check out our progress at <http://www.christianauthorsnetwork.com>

We are not accepting new members at this time, but there's nothing in the world that prevents you from finding a group of like-minded people and starting your own co-op. It's a whole lot more fun working on marketing stuff with friends.

6) Steal This E-zine!

This E-zine is free, and I personally guarantee it's worth 13.26 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, 2005.

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. That way, they'll know where to go to get their own free subscription, if they want one.

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

If you want to read Randy's thoughts on life and death and all that, read the next article. If not, then that's all for this issue! See ya next month!

7) In Memoriam--Larry Nelson, 1958-2005

I met Larry Nelson a few years ago on Thanksgiving Day. His wife and mine were co-teaching a chemistry class for a group of home-schooling kids. So they invited us over for Thanksgiving. There were probably two dozen adults and three dozen kids in the house. That's the kind of guy Larry was--he always had a ton of people around him. He was the kind of person who would invite a bunch of people to play mud football on New Year's Day. He had a lot of mud in his back yard, and by the end of the game most of it was on my youngest daughter.

Larry was a builder, president of his own construction company. He had a big home, a big heart, and a gregarious personality. It didn't take long for him to find out I'm a novelist, and he immediately bought some of my books. I don't remember ever going to his house without selling a bunch of books--to his friends. When Larry liked a book, he told people about it. A lot of people.

Larry was working on his own roof last Friday afternoon. When it came time to quit, he was covering it up in case of rain and accidentally fell through the cutout for a skylight. He had massive head injuries and was pronounced dead the next day.

My wife is out of town, but my daughters and I went to Larry's funeral this morning. The turnout was huge. I'm guessing 600 to 800 people showed up to pay their respects and to "celebrate a life well-lived." Larry belonged to a large church here in San Diego and he had an amazing number of friends. I had no idea. See, whenever I spent any time with him, he made me feel like I was one of his five best friends. That's the kind of guy he was. I'd like to be more like Larry.

I'm listening to the American Idiot album by Green Day right now. The song that's on is Boulevard of Broken Dreams. The first few verses go like this:

"I walk a lonely road
The only one that I have ever known
Don't know where it goes
But it's home to me and I walk alone.

I walk this empty street
On the Boulevard of Broken Dreams
Where the city sleeps
And I'm the only one and I walk alone.

My shadow's the only one that walks beside me
My shallow heart's the only thing that's beating
Sometimes I wish someone out there will find me
Till then I'll walk alone."

I can relate to that. Like the majority of writers, I'm an introvert. I walk alone a lot. Larry Nelson wasn't like that. Wherever he went, he made people his

friends. He didn't wait for someone out there to find him. He went out and found them.

Larry didn't walk alone when he was alive. I have a feeling he's not walking alone right now. If I know him, he's organizing a game of mud football with his new best buddy, Saint Peter. I expect some day, I'll join him. And Larry will be there to welcome me like I'm one of his five best friends.

Randy Ingermanson
Publisher, Advanced Fiction Writing E-zine
