
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 (more than 350 of you are new since my last issue), welcome to my e-zine! You can find all the previous issues on my web site at:
<http://www.advancedfictionwriting.com/html/afwezine.html>

The last month has been one of the most stressful in my appallingly boring and tedious little life. We're getting our house ready to sell so we can move to the Portland area. One of my book projects has had me climbing the walls lately with that pesky anxiety thing. I've been working with a university friend of mine on a Tiger Marketing project to sell some of his intellectual property, and that's been taking way longer than we expected. And I've been wrapping up a major project that I've been planning for a long time--Fiction 101. All of that has kept me hopping. This e-zine is scheduled to go out on the first Tuesday of every month, which was yesterday. I'm a day late, drat it. Stuff happens. I bet you understand.

In this issue, I get to announce the release of my latest baby, Fiction 101. I like to think of this as "a

writing conference on CD."

I'd also like to answer a few reader questions that have come in during the last month on various issues with novel formatting, word count, and other irritating issues.

Last month, I talked about the Big Picture in story analysis, the Three Act Structure, interleaved with the Three Disaster Structure. I analyzed a couple of movies, Pirates of the Caribbean and then Pride and Prejudice. In this issue, I'd like to continue that by analyzing two more movies, The Merchant of Venice by Mr. Shakespeare and North by Northwest by Mr. Hitchcock. The point I want to make here is that the Three Act Structure/Three Disaster Structure apply to just about any kind of story you can imagine. Movies, plays, suspense, chick-stories, whatever.

2) Fiction 101 is Here!

I teach a lot at writing conferences, usually those pesky 3-day or 4-day or even 5-day beasts that cost hundreds of bucks and suck days and days of precious time out of your life. Mostly, I've been teaching a course called Fiction 101. It's been immensely popular because it covers ALL the essentials for the beginning to early intermediate novelist. If you master what I teach in Fiction 101, you'll be a strong intermediate novelist. I've taught Fiction 101 to hundreds of students and I LOVE teaching it.

The big problem is that going to a writing conference is expensive and time-consuming for YOU. It's not unusual for people to pay \$500 to \$1000 to come to a conference. Plus they have to take time off from work and leave the family for days and days.

The bigger problem is that I'm not teaching Fiction 101 anywhere in the world this year. I'm teaching other things but not that. So even if you had the time and money to come hear me teach Fiction 101, you can't. I'm not available.

Like they say, though, if you can't take Moses to the mountain, take the mountain to Moses. I've been working for the past few months on a way to box that conference experience up on a CD and ship myself to you.

It's done! Woohoo, I am SO glad I've got it finished. There were many technical problems to solve. I wanted to give you my notes AND my audio, with each page of notes linked to the audio clip of me talking about that page. Learning happens best when you get both visual and audio. And I want my students to learn everything I know.

Also I wanted Fiction 101 to work for anybody who had a web-browser. Finally, I wanted the audio part to transfer straight to an iPod, if you have one, with no fussing around.

It's done! I am now smashed down flat onto a CD and you can order me right now! For way less than it costs to go to a writing conference. Way, WAY less. And you don't have to travel to me. I'll come to you, squeezed onto a CD.

I need to ask you for a favor. My problem is that I have no idea how many CDs to order from my supplier. He'll burn as many as I need, but how many is that? I dunno. There are more than 4000 of you, and . . . that's a lot of people. And a lot of upfront expense. I'll get a price break if I order more, but burning those CDs will cost me a lot of green, no matter how I slice it.

So I decided to give you a HUGE price break--in exchange for a slight delay in getting your CD. I'll give you a 40% discount, right off the top. And I'll pay the postage, no matter where you are in the world, Priority Mail.

There's one pesky catch to all this. The discount ends as soon as I place my order with my supplier. After that, the CD will cost you full price, because after that, I'll know how many CDs to order in my first burn.

I'll take pre-orders on my web site at 40% off until next Monday, February 13, at noon California time. At that exact instant, I'll call my supplier and order my CDs. They are fast and good. In a few days, they'll deliver them to me and I'll stuff them in envelopes and send them to you Priority Mail, which takes 2 days in the US and less than a week anywhere in the world.

Oh yeah, and if you order 2 or more CDs, then it's a 50% discount, not 40%, because that saves me on labor costs. So find a friend and place a joint order!

Fiction 101 contains my talk on the Snowflake method, along with the Snowflake Goodies Package, so if you've bought either of those on my web site, I'll be emailing you an electronic coupon for the amount you paid (less tax and shipping). Look for it within the next few hours. That'll save you even more!

For all the juicy details on Fiction 101, check out this link:
<http://www.advancedfictionwriting.com/html/courses/info101a.html>

I've gotten some recent questions from readers of this e-zine on various issues with formatting a novel and setting its word count. I'll tackle those now, because if one person is asking a question, it's likely that others are wondering the same thing.

Q: I recently took a chapter in my novel that was 4 Microsoft Word pages (in size 12 Courier font) and "double spaced" it. The chapter then became 8 pages. I was amazed. Am I cheating by doing this or is it the normal standard for manuscript spacing?

A: You are not cheating. You're doing exactly the right thing. No editor in the world will want to see a manuscript single spaced. They will insist on getting it double spaced, even if this seems "wasteful" of paper. Editors want to make marks in between the lines, so they need double spacing. And reading a single spaced manuscript is tedious on the eyes.

By the way, dump the Courier font (unless you are a screenwriter). Use a modern font with a serif, such as Times or Times New Roman. Personally, I prefer Times New Roman 12 point. I would avoid a sans serif font such as Helvetica. A font with a serif is a bit easier to read on paper, I'm told. (The opposite is true for web pages, where a sans serif font such as Helvetica, Arial, or Verdana is a bit easier to read on monitors, which lack the resolution of paper.)

Courier made sense in the bad old days when manuscripts were handed in on paper and the best way to estimate the word count was to count pages and multiply by 250 words per page.

Nowadays, you hand in a Word file (or WordPerfect or whatever) and the editor hits the word-count button and an exact count of words pops up.

Also, the old rule of putting two spaces after a period is dead too. Now you can just type one space. The editor will need to remove the extra spaces if you put them in.

Screenwriters still need to work in Courier, because 80 years of experience has taught the moviemakers that one page of screenplay in Courier font equates to one minute of movie time. So a rigidly defined format is REQUIRED for a screenplay. Otherwise, every screenplay would have to be reformatted by agents and producers and that would be chaos.

Q: You often discuss Scenes and Sequels. Is there any rule of thumb for how many Scenes and/or Sequels should be in a chapter?

A: For those readers just joining us, Scenes and Sequels are discussed on my web site in the article

"Writing the Perfect Scene".

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

There are no rules on how long a Scene or a Sequel or a chapter should be. I average a bit more than 2000 words per chapter, but that's just me. Some authors prefer really short chapters. Others like them long. Your choice.

The same goes for Scenes and Sequels. I typically have about 100 scenes in a novel, and my books tend to be 100,000 words or so. So my scenes average about 1000 words. For me a very long scene is about 2500 words (rare) and a very short scene is about 400 words (also rare).

I would guess that my Scenes are slightly longer than this and my Sequels are a bit shorter. The trend in modern fiction is to shorten or eliminate Sequels in favor of Scenes. Scenes are where the action is. Sequels are more reflective and introspective. The modern reader wants more bang-bang and less think-think. I call this the Grishamization of fiction, and it's neither all good nor all bad. It's just the way things are and it's what readers expect.

Getting back to the question, I tend to have either 2 or 3 scenes in a chapter, although some chapters have only 1 long scene and some chapters have up to 5 or 6 short scenes. A lot depends on what pace I'm trying to achieve, and how much I want to move the action around between different viewpoint characters.

Bottom line: There aren't any rules here, but I suspect my averages are pretty typical of many writers.

Q: How can you make a novel longer without "padding" it (assuming you have a solid Three Act / Three Disaster structure)?

A: Add a new viewpoint character. Every character is the star of their own private storyline. For most of your characters, that private storyline isn't of interest to your story. But for some of your characters, that private storyline is extremely important because it has a major impact on the story you're trying to tell. Choose those characters to be your viewpoint characters. If your novel isn't long enough, add in another viewpoint character, and that will automatically add words that are central to the story. Ergo, no padding.

A minor viewpoint character can be good for an extra 5000 to 10000 words of story. A major viewpoint character can easily add 20000 to 40000 words.

I typically use 3 or 4 major viewpoint characters and then possibly a few other minor viewpoint characters. I've written books with as few as 2 viewpoint

characters (both major, and both told in first-person). I've written other books with as many as 7 or 8 viewpoint characters, and maybe 4 of those were major.

Q: How many small disasters should lead up to the three Major Disasters?

A: As many as it takes. If you split your book into quarters, with one big Disaster at the transition points between quarters, then each big section of a 100,000 word novel would be 25,000 words. If you have 25 scenes in each section (averaging 1000 words per scene) with 15 to 20 of those being Scenes and the rest Sequels, then you'll have 15 to 20 disasters. (Each Scene ends in a disaster, but Sequels never do.)

I don't really think in those terms. I tend to just put in the scenes that I think are essential to the story. I also try to plan my novel a bit short which allows me to add in new stuff as I'm writing. So if I want a novel of 100,000 words, I'd plan it to be 85,000 and the end result would be right on target. I know, I'm a wordy varmint. That's my curse in life.

4) Plot Structure of The Merchant of Venice

Not too long ago, my 7th grade daughter needed to watch The Merchant of Venice for her English class. So I hopped onto the NetFlix web site and put the DVD in my queue. Not the R-rated version starring Al Pacino. The BBC version, which is unrated and presumably a bit more 7th-grade-friendly.

When it arrived, I was busy working on one of my zillion projects, and I didn't have time to watch it with my wife and kids. So they watched it alone. When they got done, my wife told me the movie was kind of embarrassing because it had some women with low necklines.

This, of course, called for a fact-finding mission. I made time to watch the DVD. The first thing I noticed was that the thing was rated R. The second thing I noticed was that Al Pacino was playing Shylock. Which told me that NetFlix screwed up my order and my wife isn't too observant.

The third thing I noticed was that those ladies weren't wearing low necklines. The poor dears didn't have any necklines at all. I gather the ladies were Venetian prostitutes, and the director figured that a bunch of buck naked bosoms would get a nice R rating and sell more tickets. Ah, art.

Now, I've been married long enough that I've seen buck

naked bosoms a zillion times, and it ain't a big deal. But there was this very odd scene that made me laugh. Al Pacino is delivering that famous Shylock speech about what it's like being Jewish in an anti-semitic world. "If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die?" And so on.

It's a powerful scene. Maybe the strongest scene in the movie. Al is doing great, really making a terrific case. The scene is shot on a foggy, cold Venetian night and Al is wearing a cloak against the cold. The other men are dressed pretty warm too. And there in the background are two ladies with their buck naked bosoms on display and THEY DON'T LOOK COLD. Not even a little bit cold. Not even a wee bit nippy cold, if ya know what I mean. They look pretty darn comfortable. And the illogic of that little incongruity yanked me right out of the moment.

Which is too bad, because all my attention should have been focused on Al. It was Al's scene, a powerful serious scene, and the director made me LAUGH at him. Tsk, tsk. Methinks the director boobooed.

On to an analysis of the Three Act Structure/Three Disaster Structure. We'll analyze it from Bassanio's point of view, since he's the ostensible hero of the story.

In Act 1, our hero Bassanio asks his friend Antonio for 3000 ducats so he can woo a wealthy lady, Portia. Antonio is a rich merchant, but all his money is tied up in several expeditions at sea, all to arrive home within a couple months. So Antonio goes to the Jewish moneylender Shylock to arrange a loan. Shylock hates Antonio for spitting on him recently in the street and calling him a dog.

This brings us to Disaster 1. Shylock could refuse Antonio, but instead he gives him the loan, taking as collateral a pound of Antonio's flesh "nearest the heart". Antonio is confident he'll soon have money to pay back the loan, so he accepts the terms of the deal. This is the deadly decision that propels the rest of the story. If Antonio refuses the offer, there would be no story worth telling. But Antonio takes it, thereby putting himself in mortal danger if his ships should sink.

In the first half of Act 2, Shylock's daughter elopes with a friend of Antonio, taking a pile of Shylock's money. When Shylock finds out, he goes into a rage, but there's nothing he can do. The system is stacked against him because he's a Jew. Then word arrives that one of Antonio's ships has sunk. Then another. We also see some scenes of the wealthy Portia being wooed by various undesirables (meaning "not Bassanio").

Disaster 2 comes when Shylock's fellow moneylender

brings him word that his daughter has been seen in Genoa wasting his money as if it were nothing AND that another of Antonio's ships has gone down. Shylock vows to take his bond--a pound of Antonio's flesh. This disaster keeps Act 2 from losing steam at its midpoint.

In the second half of Act 2, Bassanio has sailed off to woo the lady Portia, and he succeeds! Meanwhile, back in Venice, Antonio's loan ends without him able to repay Shylock. Shylock demands his pound of flesh and calls in the Duke to judge the matter. He rightly points out that if the Duke overturns their legal document, then the rule of law is broken in Venice, and all its wealth is at risk. The Duke agrees to hear the case. Bassanio, newly married, hears that Antonio is in mortal danger and returns to Venice with 6000 ducats of Portia's wealth to bail out his friend.

Disaster 3 comes at the trial when Bassanio offers the 6000 ducats to Shylock--twice the amount of the original loan. And Shylock refuses! He insists that it's his right to take his bond, and he'll have it--a pound of flesh from Antonio's chest. This disaster is again critical to the story. If Shylock accepts the payment, then there would be no story here. All that came before would not matter, because Antonio would be easily out of danger. Shylock's decision forces Act 3. Without it, the whole story would have little interest.

In Act 3, the lady Portia arrives at the trial, disguised as a young male lawyer who is sent to argue Antonio's case. The arguments are made, and Portia stuns the Duke by saying calmly that the law is clear--that Shylock is due his pound of flesh. Shylock prepares his knife and moves to collect his bond. At which point Portia notes that the bond is a pound of flesh only--not a drop of blood can be taken. Shylock loses his case, and is then deprived of half his estate. There is a somewhat comic epilogue when Bassanio returns to the lady Portia without his ring.

The story is structured perfectly with three Acts and three equally spaced Disasters, as seen from Bassanio's point of view. Bassanio, as I noted earlier, is the ostensible hero. I have to say, though, that my sympathies are more with Shylock than with Antonio or Bassanio. Antonio is cruel to Shylock whenever he's not begging for money or for mercy, and he has no reason to be cruel, other than a hatred of Jews. Shylock is cruel to Antonio, preferring his pound of flesh over repayment of the loan, but he has a clear motive -- revenge for ill treatment. Shylock is the better man.

There's a long-running debate on whether Shakespeare intended the play to portray Jews as vile dogs, with Shylock as a typical example of the stereotypical bloodthirsty Jew OR whether Shakespeare intended to subvert anti-semitism by showing it in all its dehumanizing ignominy.

I suspect that Shakespeare intended a bit of both. He shows Shylock as a real human, beaten down by anti-semitism, cheated of his daughter, spit on, insulted, robbed. This subverts anti-semitism. But then Shakespeare lets Shylock take his case too far, playing up the "evil Jew" stereotype by demanding his pound of flesh. The story structure clearly makes Bassanio the hero, since the turning points in the story are from his point of view and they neatly divide the storyline into four nearly equal quarters. If you look for the story points that are disasters from Shylock's point of view, they don't divide the storyline anywhere so neatly. From a structural point of view, Shylock can't be considered the hero.

So was Shakespeare anti-semitic or not? Methinks he was not. In my opinion, the words he puts in Shylock's mouth about the humanity of a Jew are the words of an anti-anti-semite. So I would argue that making Bassanio the hero of the story is intended as a subtle irony that will be missed by the rude masses (and keep Shakespeare from getting kneecapped).

One could argue that Shakespeare was a bit too subtle in his irony. To this day, the word "shylock" is an insult that means a bloodthirsty money-grubber. The humanitarian in me says that Shakespeare should have made his case against anti-semitism a bit more consistently. But the storyteller in me says that if he had, there would have been no story. The entire storyline depends on that Disaster 3, where Shylock refuses mercy and demands the law.

So Shakespeare had to compromise in order to get his message out--"If you prick us, do we not bleed?" I don't like the compromise, but FROM A STORY POINT OF VIEW, I don't see how he could have avoided it.

But at least he's not responsible for those pesky bare-bosomed ladies lounging comfortably outside in a freezing Venetian fog.

5) Plot Structure of North By Northwest

North by Northwest is generally considered one of Alfred Hitchcock's best movies. Let's apply the Three Act Structure and Three Disaster Structure to analyze it.

In Act 1, Cary Grant plays Roger Thornhill, an advertising honcho who gets kidnapped by evil thugs. The thugs have mistaken Thornhill for a government man, George Kaplan, who they know is trying to bring to justice their Big Thug, Phillip Van Damm. Thornhill escapes them and calls in the cops, who don't believe his story. Thornhill investigates Kaplan and is led to

the U.N. building to meet a U.N. honcho.

Disaster 1 strikes here. The thugs murder the U.N. honcho, making it look like Thornhill is the killer. Now Thornhill must not only evade the thugs, he has to evade the cops too. This forces the rest of the movie, because now Thornhill MUST either give himself up (in which case there's no story) or go on the run. He goes on the run.

In the first half of Act 2, Thornhill takes a train to Chicago in search of the mysterious George Kaplan. He doesn't know that there IS no Kaplan. Kaplan is a hoax created by the Feds, who are trying to catch that Chief Thug, Mr. Van Damm. On the train, Thornhill meets and seduces a gorgeous young blonde woman, Eve Kendall. The audience learns that Ms. Kendall is in cahoots with Van Damm. It's tempting to think this is Disaster 2, but it is NOT. It's not a disaster until Thornhill knows it, and he doesn't know it yet. When they reach Chicago, Ms. Kendall sends him to an isolated country road to "meet George Kaplan."

Disaster 2 arrives, finally, when Thornhill is attacked by a cropduster. As the plane flies just over his head, you can see in his eyes that he knows Ms. Kendall set him up to be killed. THAT is the disaster.

In the second half of Act 2, Thornhill returns to Chicago and tracks down Eve Kendall. She ditches him, but he finds her AGAIN at an art auction. Now she's with the evil Van Damm, and all the cards are on the table. The thugs close in on Thornhill, but he escapes them by getting himself arrested by the cops. It's a desperate move, throwing himself on the mercy of the Chicago police, but it fails. The cops release him into the custody of The Professor, the chief Fed trying to track down Van Damm. The Professor tries to recruit Thornhill, but he isn't interested in helping the Feds. Until . . .

In Disaster 3, the Professor tells Thornhill the terrifying truth. Eve Kendall is really a government agent who's gotten close enough to Van Damm to take him down. But now she's been put in terrible danger by Thornhill, because Van Damm now suspects her. Once again, this forces a decision by Thornhill. If he walks away, there's no story. If he agrees to cooperate with the Feds, he plunges into Act 3. He plunges.

In Act 3, Thornhill confronts Van Damm and Eve Kendall at a restaurant near Mount Rushmore. Kendall whips out a gun and shoots Thornhill. While Thornhill lies on the floor dying, Van Damm and Kendall escape to Van Damm's remote house near the Mount. Thornhill is driven away in an ambulance, and only then do we learn that it was a setup. The gun had blanks and Thornhill is unharmed. Now Eve Kendall can complete her mission, having regained Van Damm's trust. But Thornhill refuses to stay out of the action. He pursues Van Damm and Kendall

to their hideaway and finds that Van Damm has learned Kendall is a double agent. She's dead meat unless Thornhill can save her. Which he does. Good triumphs. The thugs take nice dives off Mount Rushmore. Happy ending.

As usual, Disaster 1 and Disaster 3 serve as crucial links between the various Acts, while Disaster 2 serves to prop up the middle of Act 2 to keep it from sagging. It's a beautifully structured story, well told. Hitchcock had the good sense to put his usual cameo appearance in the very first scene. That let him keep to his tradition without breaking the flow of the story when the audience spots him. In the first scene, the story hasn't even started yet, so there's nothing to break.

6) What's New At AdvancedFictionWriting.com

As I said earlier, my family and I are pulling up stakes and moving to the Portland area to be near my wife's parents. This is a MAJOR life change for us. So expect me to be grumpy for the next few months.

At the same time, I'm shepherding my next book through an abnormally difficult maze and I'm pushing forward on a Tiger Marketing effort with my university prof buddy.

I never thought I'd say this, but I'm busier now that I'm unemployed than I was when I had that wretched Dilbertesque day job. Life has been a little crazy ever since I started getting published. Now it's a LOT crazy.

I'd wish for a bit of normalcy, but I don't think I'd recognize normalcy if it kicked me in the face.

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

7) Steal This E-zine!

This E-zine is free, and I personally guarantee it's worth 2006 times what you paid for it. I invite you to "steal" it, but only if you do it nicely . . .

Distasteful legal babble: This E-zine is copyright Randall Ingermanson, 2006. Sorry about the disgusting legal-speak, but if I don't do it, my lawyer will put me in a headlock and hold me underwater. I hate when he does that.

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.

If you email it to a friend, remind them tactfully that when they sign up they should name YOU as the person who referred them. When my subscriber count reaches 5000, I'll hold a drawing for a brand-new iPod Nano. Your name will be entered once for each subscriber you referred. Subscribers who name themselves as referrers unfortunately don't get credit, so they might as well be honest and admit it was you!

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