
The Advanced Fiction Writing E-zine

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Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius.

"Fiction Writing = Organizing + Creating + Marketing"

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

Those of you who have joined in the past month (more than 350 of you have joined since the last issue), welcome to my e-zine!

You should be on this list only if you signed up for it on my web site. If you no longer wish to hear from me, don't be shy -- there's a link at the bottom of this email that will put you out of your misery.

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

What's in this issue:

As we move into 2008, I'd like to talk about strategic planning. What do you hope to achieve as a writer this year? That depends on where you are, I'm sure, but one thing is very likely -- you want to advance your writing career, not stay put.

In the first article, on organization, we'll talk about the only thing you can do that actually works for reaching goals. Do you know what that one thing is?

It's nice to be organized, but the core skill we all need to improve is our craft. How do you do that? In the second article, I'll give you the five steps I follow to continuously improve my craft. I'm not done improving yet. I'll never be done. Neither will you. Perfection is impossible. Improvement is always possible.

You can be the best writer in the world, but if nobody knows it, you won't sell any copies. So marketing is a job that every writer needs to tackle. In our third article, I'll talk about a key marketing tool that can help just about any writer. It's one you've heard of, but you may not have thought of it as a marketing. Can you guess what it is?

We've been talking about some of these topics already on my blog. Have you been missing out? Join the fun here:

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

2) Organizing: After You Set Goals, Then What?

The New Year is a traditional time for making New Years Resolutions. I consider the making of New Years Resolutions a disease. Not a fatal disease, but definitely one that sensible people should avoid.

I hate, loathe, and despise New Years Resolutions. My reason is simple -- they hardly ever work.

Want proof? Today is January 8, only one week after New Years Day. What percentage of all resolutions have survived a week? Take a guess. Don't peek at the answer below. Take a guess first.

OK, here's the answer:

Three percent.

Surprised? Of course not. You knew the number was something like that, didn't you?

Do you believe that number? Of course you do, even

though I made it up just now out of thin air. I don't know the real number. What I do know is that you very likely believed the number I made up, because it's a believable number.

That's the proof that resolutions hardly ever work.

Don't get me wrong. I think goal-setting is good. Setting goals at the beginning of the year is a sensible thing to do. Let me define a "goal," because I don't want to leave room for fuzzy thinking here. I'll capitalize the word, so it's clear that this is my definition, not the standard one.

A Goal is something you want to achieve. A good Goal is clearly defined, worthwhile, and possible. All three of those are essential.

If your Goal is fuzzy, then you'll never know if you hit it.

If your Goal is not worthwhile, then why bother?

If your Goal is impossible, then you're setting yourself up for frustration.

The trouble with New Years Resolutions is that they typically state a bad Goal (fuzzy, not worthwhile, or impossible), or a good Goal without an action plan.

Let me be blunt. Without an action plan, any Goal is dead before its ugly little corpse falls splat onto that shiny yellow legal pad you wrote it on.

There is really only one way to achieve a Goal: Take action consistently for as long as it takes.

There are three ingredients in that recipe:

* Take action. An action is something specific and concrete you can do right now. Something you can finish right now. It's a bite out of that pesky elephant. If you never take action, you will never reach your Goal. If you do take action, you aren't guaranteed to hit the Goal, but it's your only chance, so just do it, like the Nike people say.

* Be consistent. One action does not take you to your Goal, unless it's the last action in a long chain of previous actions. Take action almost every day. (There will be some days when life trumps your Goals. Roll with it.) If you don't schedule your life so you can take action consistently, then your Goal is really not worthwhile to you, so dump it. There's no point lugging some Goal through life that you really don't care about.

* Take as long as it takes. I've seen talented writers who gave up too soon. A marathon is 26 miles, 385 yards. If you quit at 10 miles, then you ran a long

way, but it wasn't a marathon. If your Goal is worthwhile to you, don't quit till you reach it. Or change it to a Goal you really care about.

That's it: If you want to reach your Goal, take action consistently until you reach it.

This is not a secret and most people know this already. But the fact is that most people reach very few of their Goals. Why is that? Are they bad? Weak-willed? Predestined to fail?

I don't think so. I think part of the problem is that Goals are hard. I'll say that again.

Goals are HARD.

If Goals weren't hard to achieve, then we wouldn't value them. If any fool could write a great novel in a few days, then you could buy them on the street for a nickel.

Goals are hard. Writing an excellent novel is very hard and it depends on some things that are out of your control. Writing a novel takes talent; it takes time; it takes energy; it takes money. Some people are born with more of those and some are born with less. You have no control over what you were born with.

But you DO have control over what you do with your talent, your time, your energy, your money. Almost every day, you can take action to develop your talent, to become more time-efficient, to build your energy, to make the most of your money.

There's that verb again: "Take action."

I think that is the secret of the most successful people I've met. They don't take action ONLY to reach their Goals. They ALSO take action to improve their talents, to use their time effectively, to grow their money, to maximize their energy.

Let me give a very simple example. Suppose your Goal is to write a novel. Suppose you can type only 3 words per minute. You could take action every day to work directly on your Goal, but you'd make very slow progress.

But suppose you spent a month taking a good course in typing. Suppose you got your typing speed up to 40 words per minute in that month. For that ONE month, you wouldn't make progress toward your Goal of writing a novel. But for every month after that, you'd make a LOT more progress.

Taking action to directly reach your Goal is a good thing. But sometimes it makes sense to take an indirect action -- to develop a skill, manage your time, leverage your money, expand your energy -- that will

help you when you take direct actions.

There are a lot of indirect actions you can take:

- * Clean up your workspace
- * Learn time management skills
- * Buy an inexpensive training course or book
- * Outsource some task you hate doing
- * Get a good critiquer to read your work
- * Cut unnecessary expenses
- * Learn all the tricks in Microsoft Word
- * Set up a backup system so you never lose your work
- * Turn off the TV
- * Get more exercise
- * Thousands more

Those indirect actions are what people mean when they talk about "continuous improvement." Continuous improvement is about getting better at taking action.

People who are successful in reaching their Goals are very often committed to continuous improvement.

Continuous improvement does NOT mean that you try to get to Nirvana in one quick step. That's never happened. Doesn't happen now. Won't ever happen. That's my complaint about New Years Resolutions -- that in one day, we are suddenly supposed to do a jolt about into somebody else.

Continuous improvement means that every day you are taking small steps that will add up over time into massive change. That can happen. It does happen all the time. That's how successful people become successful.

Continuous improvement is the compound interest of life.

Here's a meta-resolution you can make any day of the year, even if it's not the New Year, even if you hate New Years Resolutions:

Commit yourself to doing one of the following almost every day:

- * Take action toward your Goal.
- * Take action to improve your ability to take action.

In the next article, I'll talk about some steps you can take to continuously improve your craft.

As for managing that elusive time/energy/money combination, I've become a huge fan of Mark Joyner in the last few months.

Mark's free time-management course, "Simpleology 101," has made an enormous difference to me since I started it in September. I use his time-management tools every day to map out specific actions that I'll take. Every day. I love his tools because they work. Here's a link:

<http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com/links/s101.php>

I've also become better at managing my money by taking Mark's "Simpleology 102" course. I'm just now wrapping up his "Simpleology 103" course on increasing personal energy. Neither of these courses is free. Each of them taught me a lot of well-known facts that I could have looked up for myself, if I knew where to look. But they're both brilliant because they gave me specific actions that I can do, day by day, to do all the little things that add up to big changes over time. Stuff I vaguely knew I should be doing, but never got around to because they all seemed unimportant. But they add up.

Here's my challenge to you for the coming year: Almost every day, take action that will EITHER move you toward your Goal OR improve your ability to take action.

If you do that almost every day this year, email me next January to tell me what amazing things you achieved in 2008. Because you will. I know you will.

3) Creating: Five Steps To Continuous Improvement

In the previous article, I talked about the importance of continuous improvement, and I mentioned my favorite sources for improving my use of time, energy, and money.

What about your writing craft? Is there a magic key to continuously improving your craft?

No and yes.

There is no potion that will make you a great writer. You've got to take action to become a great writer. You've got to take action to even become a mediocre writer. The bitter truth is that you've got to take SOME action to become a wretchedly bad writer. The words won't type themselves.

But there is a general series of steps you can take to continuously improve. These steps apply to every area of life, and I didn't invent them. I just use them. Here they are:

First, make a commitment to constantly improve your craft. Improvement doesn't happen by chance. It can only happen when you make a conscious decision to improve.

Second, get an objective opinion on where you are as a writer. Ask a critique buddy or pay a writer or editor to do it.

Third, choose EITHER your strongest point OR your weakest point to focus on for the next few months.

(Editors buy your work because of your strengths and reject it because of your weaknesses, so put your effort where it will do the most good -- on your strengths and weaknesses.)

Fourth, get help! Buy a book, take a course, go to a writing conference, ask for a critique, pay a coach, do WHATEVER you need to do to improve in the specific area you need help on. Work on it relentlessly until you've made significant progress.

Fifth, repeat steps 2 through 4 until you die.

That's it. It's really that simple. No doubt you knew all five of those steps already, or you had a strong suspicion that they are the right course of action.

But are you doing them? Are you taking action to improve? What specific aspect of your writing are you improving this month? Do you have a written goal? How will you know when you're done? Do you have an objective outsider who can tell you that yes, you made significant progress, or no, you haven't changed?

I've been working on a proposal for the last few months. The proposal is done. My agent has looked it over and made suggestions. The sample chapters are written.

But I'm not ready to send it out yet. Why? Because my freelance editor identified a specific issue I need to work on. So I bought a course and I'm working through it and applying everything I'm learning to my sample chapters.

[For what it's worth, here's what I'm studying: Margie Lawson's course on "Empowering Character's Emotions." Margie is a psychologist with some amazing insights for novelists. She's got a ton of examples on nonverbal communication, proprioceptive stimuli, paralanguage, haptics, proxemics, and several other words that I never heard of until I read her material. I haven't learned so much so fast since I read Dwight Swain's book years ago. Margie's web site is right here: <http://www.MargieLawson.com>]

I love it when I hit a motherlode of new, fresh info on how to write better.

That's what continuous improvement is all about. That's what professional writers do.

Now here's a little exercise for you: What is your greatest strength as a novelist? What is your greatest weakness? Which of those two are you working on right now?

Nothing happens unless you take action. What actions will you take this month to permanently make yourself a

better writer?

4) Marketing: The One Marketing Tool Every Writer Needs

Writing is a funny business. You need to be EXCELLENT in at least one thing, and you need to be at least adequate in everything else.

Most writers choose to be merely adequate in marketing. The reason is often that we don't want to be "selling out." We can all think of writers who write shlock and market it outrageously well and make tons of money. Nobody wants to be that kind of writer. Most of us avoid that horrible fate by refusing to excel in marketing. I believe that it's perfectly fine to be a good marketer, but I also believe it's no crime to be just adequate.

Part of being adequate as a marketer is making the connections you need early in your career to meet that perfect editor or agent who will click for you.

I have long believed that the best place to do that is at a writing conference. Conferences are not the only place to make connections. But they're way ahead of whatever is #2 on the list.

Writing conferences, I believe, are a powerful marketing tool for the writer. We don't usually think of them that way, but that's what they are.

It's the beginning of a new year, and now is an excellent time to start thinking about which conference you might go to this year.

There is no one best answer. I have three conferences on my must-do list every year -- two of them national conferences in my niche, and one of them a good local conference in my niche. I teach at these conferences, but even if I didn't, I'd still do my best to go to two out of the three every year.

I go to conferences for a boatload of reasons:

* To learn. I always learn something totally unexpected that I didn't even know that I didn't know.

* To meet editors and agents. (I don't need an agent. I have a great one already. I hang out with agents because they are most always smart and fun and they will tell you things that editors can't. Editors are also usually smart and fun, and they'll tell you stuff the agents don't know.)

* To hang out with writers. The blunt truth is that novelists are the coolest people on the planet. Don't tell this to the screenwriters, because they get upset. Even if I had never got published, I'd still consider my time at writing conferences worthwhile because of all the fun writers I've met over the years, whether famous or not.

* To help other writers. It is a misconception to think of other writers as your competition. They are not. You are your competition. To get published, you have to overcome your own instincts for self-sabotage. Do that and the other writers are not even an issue. So go help a fellow writer. It's fun.

* Once in a while, a deal is made at a conference. Or a connection that leads to a deal. Or a connection that leads to a connection that leads to a deal. Many writers think this is the main reason to go to a conference, but the truth is that it's way down the list, and I hardly ever think about deals when I go to a conference. Deals come from relationships. Relationships come by serendipity. Serendipity is oozing all over the floor at conferences and it will seep right up through your shoes if you let it.

All of these are great reasons to go to a conference, but there are some practical issues. You need to figure out: which conference to go to; how to get time away from work/family/life; how to pay for it; how to write a proposal to take with you, if you are ready for that.

Let's tackle these in order.

Which conference should you go to? That's impossible to say. There are a zillion conferences, all different.

It's not easy to classify conferences, so let's be very generic and label them by length.

"Short" conferences typically last one day, or one day plus an evening. These are often local or regional conferences with a faculty of mostly writers and a few editors or agents. Usually, a number of individual workshops are offered on a variety of topics.

"Medium" conferences run about three days. Generally, these will be regional and will draw a faculty of more prominent writers and more editors and agents. These will have individual workshops and usually lecture series.

"Long" conferences last four or five days, or even more. These are usually national and have even bigger-name writers and even more editors and agents. These have a ton of workshops on every imaginable topic, along with continuing sessions that may include six or eight hours of total instruction.

Any conference that has editors or agents on the

faculty will let you make appointments to meet them. And you can most always meet with the faculty writers for critiques or advice.

Which should you go to? That depends on what you write and where you are in your career.

It makes a lot of sense to go to a conference that caters to your niche, whatever that might be. There are conferences that cater to romance writers, mystery writers, etc.

It makes sense to go to a nearby conference, to keep down travel expenses and travel time.

It makes sense to find one that has the sort of instruction you need. If you are trying to learn how the publishing world works, you'll learn that at most any conference. If you want a sustained lecture series on basic craft, look for a multi-day conference that has what you need. If you want more specialized instruction, there's a conference somewhere that has it.

If you are ready for an agent, and if you've identified a few agents that might be a good fit for you, check to see if they'll be at a conference this year. If so, go meet them! Take a good proposal and stellar sample chapters and make a case that you're ready to be published.

Figure out what kind of conference you need and then go looking on the web. If you have any skills in online research, you'll find what you need.

Once you've identified which conference you want to go to, make it one of your goals for the year (or next year, if it just can't happen this year). But make a goal. Then figure out the details.

Conferences are a big investment. They cost time, energy, and money. That's a shame, but it's the way things are and nobody has figured out how to change it. Many conferences offer scholarships, so check into that.

Back in 1996, I decided to start investing in one major conference per year. At the time, I'd been writing for eight years and had gone quite often to a small regional conference, but had "no luck" in breaking in. By 1999, my "luck" changed and I sold a nonfiction book and a novel within a few months of each other. Both of those sales came as a result of contacts made at conferences.

It's amazing what can happen when you decide that you really need to go to a conference and you are going to do what it takes to go. If you want to go to one this year, now is the time to start taking action. Nothing happens unless you take action.

5) What's New At AdvancedFictionWriting.com

I recently finished writing a technical article that will not earn me a dime. But it was worth writing and it's on a subject related to my fiction and it might well get me some valuable name recognition. Or it might not. Either way, I felt like doing it, so I did.

I have been thinking hard about what I like to do most and what goals I should set for the coming year. Besides writing fiction, I also like to write software. So I've made a goal to develop some cool products that relate to the craft of writing fiction. More news on those as they develop.

I'll continue to teach at conferences and create information products on how to write fiction for the foreseeable future. Info on all my current teaching products is available here:
<http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com/info>

One goal for this year is to take a complete break from everything in June to volunteer on an archaeological dig. That will take a lot of time, energy, and money, so I'm already gearing up for it. Stay tuned for news on that!

6) Steal This E-zine!

This E-zine is free, and I personally guarantee it's worth at least 1905 times what you paid for it. I invite you to "steal" it, but only if you do it nicely
. . .

Distasteful legal babble: This E-zine is copyright Randall Ingermanson, 2008.

Extremely tasteful postscript: I encourage you to email this E-zine to any writer friends of yours who might benefit from it. I only ask that you email the whole thing, not bits and pieces. Otherwise, you'll be getting desperate calls at midnight from your friends asking where they can get their own free subscription.

At the moment, there is one place to subscribe:
My fiction site: <http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com>

7) Reprint Rights

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Randy Ingermanson
Publisher, Advanced Fiction Writing E-zine
