
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 (nearly 200 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 e-mail that will put you out of your misery. (In recent weeks, I've culled my list of a couple of hundred email addresses that were bouncing.)

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:

I believe that success in fiction writing comes from balancing three aspects of the writing life: organization, creativity, and marketing. I'll discuss each of these in one of my regular columns.

In the organization column, I'll talk about the most important thing you can do for yourself to make sure you don't lose your work. Are you using this method already?

In the creativity column, I'll talk about design patterns in fiction and why novelists should be interested in them. Do you know the difference between a pattern and a formula?

In the marketing column, I'll talk about those pesky "opt-in strategies" for your electronic newsletter. You have three choices. Are you using the one that's best for you?

Are you reading my blog? This week I'm critiquing short segments from the works in progress of my 1000+ loyal blog readers. Join the fun here:
<http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com/blog>

2) Organizing: A Backup Strategy 4 U

Imagine that you had all your money in one bank. Imagine that every year your bank completely lost all records of about 20% of its customers.

How long would you keep your money in that bank?

If you think nobody would keep their money in a bank like that, then you are dead wrong. Everybody keeps their "money" in a "bank" like that.

This is the Information Age. You are a writer -- an Information Worker. You keep virtually all your "money" (your information) in a "bank" (a computer) that is pre-destined to lose it all.

You just don't know when.

It happened to me a few years ago. I had a brand new Mac iBook laptop, fresh from the factory. It was only a month old when the hard drive died. Pffffftttttt, like that. These things happen (even on a Mac, for you Mac-Zealots who think all Apple products never fail -- Apple uses the same hard drives that everybody else

does.)

Luckily, I hadn't yet begun using my laptop as my main machine. I lost a month's worth of email and that was about it.

I learned my lesson and "got religion." I created a backup strategy and began using it.

What about you? Have you "got religion" yet?

At least once a month, a friend of mine e-mails me to say, "Gack, my hard drive just crashed and my life is in total disarray, so that's why it took me six weeks to answer your e-mail."

Hard drive crashes happen to everybody. My best estimate is that your odds are about 20% of it happening to you this year. I might be wrong, of course. It might be 10%. It might be 30%. The point is that your odds of losing everything are way too high.

The good news is that it's easy to solve. You have any number of options, and most of them are cheap.

You really only need two things to solve the problem:

- * You need a "backup device"
- * You need "backup software"

The "backup device" is some place to make a copy of all your valuable information. The "backup software" is software that will copy all the files that have changed since you last made a copy. (That way, you won't be copying EVERYTHING every time you back up your work -- you'll only be saving what's different, which is a tiny fraction of everything.)

Let's talk about those in turn.

What kind of options do you have for "backup devices?" You have a ton of them:

Flash drives. A flash drive uses "flash memory" to save data without a hard drive. It plugs into the USB port on your computer. I recently bought a flash drive with 2 gigabytes of memory for \$17. That's pretty cheap, and it holds a ton of stuff. I keep all my critical stuff on this flash drive and carry it with me all the time. If the house burns down, I've still got my data.

CDs or DVDs. You can easily burn your data to a CD or a DVD and sock it away somewhere safe. If you have a safe-deposit box at your bank, that's a nice place.

External hard drives. You can buy hard drives for a couple of hundred bucks that are huge -- big enough to save everything on your computer. They usually hook up to your computer by either FireWire or USB. iPods are great for this kind of backup. For years, I've kept a full backup of all my information on my iPod, which has

a 30 GB hard drive. When I leave the house without my laptop, I take my iPod. Again, if the house burns down, I've got the whole computer's data with me.

Online storage. There are any number of services on the web that allow you to backup all your stuff over the internet. This can be slow, if you have a lot of stuff, but you can automate the process so it happens at night when you're sleeping. Mac owners can use the .Mac service, and there are many others that work for both Macs and PCs. I know writers who email their latest novel to their Gmail account. Gmail gives you a ton of storage, and it's free. The virtue of an online storage service is that it's not where your computer is. If your machine is stolen or your house is destroyed, your data is somewhere else -- maybe in another state.

What's best for you? I would recommend backing up your absolutely critical data in several ways. If you have financial data, books, or whatever that you **MUST NOT LOSE**, then back it up on a flash drive, burn it to a CD, copy it to another hard drive, save it online.

The key thing to remember is that backups don't last forever, any more than your hard drive does. I recently had a flash drive fail on me. (That's why I bought a new one.) More recently, I had my iPod fail (after 7 or 8 years of hard use), so I'm about to buy a new one.

This is why you should have multiple backups in place. The probability of any one device failing within the next 24 hours is very low. The probability of that same device failing in the next ten years is very high. So use enough backup devices to make sure that **AT ALL TIMES**, your data is safe, somewhere.

So much for "backup devices." What about "backup software?" Again, you have a lot of options. Most computers these days have some sort of backup software already, although it may not do all that you want.

Years ago, I bought a \$50 product named "Tri-Backup" that helps me easily backup my data to any number of devices. It only makes copies of the files that changed since the last backup. It works very well, and fifty bucks is a lot less than the value of my data, so I think it's money well spent.

What's right for you? That depends on you. You can get a good list of software options by going to www.VersionTracker.com and doing a search for "backup software." Or you can ask your favorite search engine.

If all your money were in a bank that lost track of 20% of its customers every year, you'd do something right away, wouldn't you?

Have you done something about your data?

3) Creating: Pattern and Formula in Fiction

Thirty years ago, an architect named Christopher Alexander coined the term "design pattern" to describe recurring patterns which he saw in architecture. I'm told this changed the way architects thought about their work.

Fifteen years ago, four software architects (Erich Gamma, Richard Helm, Ralph Johnson, and John Vlissides -- aka "The Gang of Four") wrote a book, DESIGN PATTERNS, applying Alexander's ideas to the world of software design. Since one of my main talents in life is architecting software, I picked up many ideas from The Gang of Four and applied them to my fiction writing.

What is a "design pattern?" Let me just quote Christopher Alexander on design patterns: "Each pattern describes a problem which occurs over and over again in our environment, and then describes the core of the solution to that problem, in such a way that you can use this solution a million times over, without ever doing it the same way twice."

In architecture, doors and windows qualify as "design patterns." The purpose of a door is to allow people to walk through it at certain times, and to bar the way at other times. But there are million ways to do that, and the fun of architecture design is finding new ways to do it that work perfectly in context. Architecture has many "design patterns" and a good architect will know zillions of them.

For the world of software, The Gang of Four listed 23 valuable design patterns that recur over and over. I regularly use many of these in my software development. Some of my favorites are the Composite, the Strategy, and the Singleton. Each time I use one of these, I do it slightly differently to fit the context.

In the world of fiction, likewise a good novelist will know dozens of design patterns. (Amusingly, The Gang of Four listed "Tragically Flawed Hero" and "The Romantic Novel" on page 1 of their book as examples of design patterns in literature.)

There are many, many design patterns in the art of writing fiction. My "Snowflake method" is an organizational design pattern, one of several. "Scenes" and "Sequels" are two structural design patterns. The "Three Act Structure" is a structural design pattern at a higher level of structure. "Motivation-Reaction Units" are a structural design pattern at a lower level of structure. "Villains" and "Heros" and "Sidekicks"

are three of the many available character design patterns.

The reason to study design patterns is to learn from other people's experiences. Of course you have to be wary of thinking that you can learn some "magic formula" that you can then use without effort. Knowing the pattern gives you a starting point. From there, you still have plenty of creative freedom to do something new and cool.

On the other hand, there are always people who insist on learning everything anew for themselves and who refuse to learn from others. Originality is good. I'll say that again -- originality is good, and most of the progress in this world is made by people who think for themselves. But it's hard to be original until you know what's been learned already.

There's a middle ground. Learn the design patterns that others have identified. Learn why they work. Learn when they work. Learn how to work them. Then when you are well-versed in the existing technology, get creative and try to improve it.

Sometimes writers resist using design patterns because they don't want to write "formula fiction." Is this a valid concern?

It is possible to use design patterns to do formula architecture or great architecture, depending on the skill of the architect. You've seen plenty of both kinds.

It is possible to use design patterns to do formula software or great software, depending on the skill of the designer. I've seen plenty of both kinds.

It is possible to use design patterns to do formula fiction or great fiction, depending on the skill of the writer. We've all seen plenty of both kinds.

My point here is that if you are worried that learning the design patterns of fiction will turn you into a "formula fiction" writer, then you have things exactly backward. The "formula" is not in the design pattern, it is in the writer. If you are not a "formula writer," then learning design patterns can't possibly turn you into one. Studying those pesky patterns will only make you more original.

I mention all this because we are studying one of the critically important design patterns of fiction right now on my Advanced Fiction Writing Blog. This question came up, and I don't think I answered it well there. So I'm answering it again here.

Any design pattern has four parts:

- * The name of the pattern
- * The problem it solves

- * How it solves the problem
- * The consequences of using the pattern

Let's do a quick analysis here of the Motivation-Reaction Unit (MRU) design pattern. I am not going to teach you MRUs here, I am going to analyze the MRU design pattern. For a detailed article on HOW to write MRUs, see my article on "Writing the Perfect Scene" at <http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com/art/scene.php>

* The name of the pattern is "Motivation-Reaction Unit." This was coined by Dwight Swain and is agreed by all to be a wretchedly bad name. But hey, "Ingermanson" isn't such a great name, either. Sometimes you just play the cards fate dealt you.

* What problem are we trying to solve with MRUs? That's easy -- the problem of "telling" when we want to be "showing."

Now be aware that sometimes "telling" is appropriate. In that case, don't use the MRU design pattern. Use a different one. But if you've decided that a particular passage needs to be "shown" rather than "told," then that's a perfect time to use the MRU design pattern.

Please note that you should apply the MRU design pattern when you are editing, NOT when you're writing your first draft. You don't want to mix analysis with creativity (unless you love having writer's block).

* How do you apply the MRU pattern? Again, that's easy. Look at your draft and put paragraph breaks between those parts that refer to your point-of-view character and those that don't.

This is easiest to do with dialogue, since you probably already put a paragraph break each time a new character speaks. Part of the MRU pattern is to put a paragraph break ALSO each time a new character acts. This prevents you from globbing together the actions of different characters into one fuzzy smear (which is "telling").

When you've done that, verify that the paragraphs that refer to your non-POV characters are an objective account of what happens, capturing the scene the way a videocamera would -- in sights and sounds. Show the action point by point. This prevents you from smearing it into a section of narrative summary.

Then verify that the paragraphs that refer to your POV character are subjective, focusing on three distinct aspects. What does the character FEEL? What does the character do REFLEXIVELY? What does the character do RATIONALLY? Again, show the action point by point.

Here I am summarizing long stretches of my "Writing the Perfect Scene" article. I refer you to the full article for all the annoying details.

* What are the consequences of using MRUs? If you do them correctly, then you will obliterate all "telling" from your writing. Remember that "telling" is efficient but boring, while "showing" is inefficient but interesting.

Only you can decide which parts of your novel need to be efficiently "told," and which parts need to be captivatingly "shown." The trend in commercial fiction these days is to "show" more and "tell" less.

I have never seen a novel that is 100% "showing" or 100% "telling." Either extreme would be intolerable. (An agent friend of mine has told me that she's seeing more and more fiction that has "too much showing" in it.)

As I said earlier, we are doing MRUs this week on my blog. I refer you there for much more detailed discussions of the nuts and bolts:
<http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com/blog>

Using design patterns will not turn you into either a great writer or a hack writer, any more than using a paintbrush will turn you into either a great painter or a hack painter. Greatness or hack-ness are part of who you are, not the tools you use. But generally you'll do a better job if you use the right tools.

4) Marketing: Web Sites and Blogging, Part 5

Last month in this column, I talked about how to create and build an e-mail database of people who are interested in your writing and are willing to hear from you periodically.

I believe this is critical for marketing your fiction, so it's not only worth doing, it's worth doing exceptionally well.

This month, I want to focus on one issue in building your e-mail database: What method will people use to "opt-in?"

You have three choices, but only two of these are kosher:

* Zero opt-in (you sign up people without their consent)

- * Single opt-in (people sign up on a form on your site)
- * Double opt-in (ditto, and then you require confirmation)

It should go without saying that using a zero opt-in method is completely illegitimate. You should never, ever add people to your e-mail list without their consent.

And yet it needs saying. Of the dozens of e-mail lists I belong to, I was put on roughly half of them without my consent. Yes, really. Some of these are best-selling authors and all of them are my friends, so I really don't mind. But I'd mind if they weren't my friends.

So I'll say it again: Don't ever, ever add people to your e-mail list without their consent. Don't add your relatives. Don't add your friends. Don't add people who send you emails telling you how much they love your books. Don't add anyone. If they want to be on your list, they'll add themselves. Don't you do it.

It's fine to tell all these folks about your list. It's fine to mention your list in the signature of your e-mails. But don't sign them up yourself.

I know authors who have built large lists by adding anyone who ever e-mailed them. Eventually, when they realized that they needed to get legal, they had to throw away all those names and start again from scratch. That gets messy.

Don't go down that road, don't look down that road, don't think about that road. There is a saying about handbaskets that comes to mind here.

What this means is that you really have two options, single opt-in or double opt-in. Let's look at those in more detail.

When you use a single opt-in method, you post a form on your web site. People visit your site, fill in the form, press the "Submit" button, and they are magically added to your e-mail database. That's all.

When you use a double opt-in method, you do all of that, but when your visitor presses the "Submit" button, they are taken to a page on your web site that says, "You're not done yet. My system will send you an e-mail. You have to respond to that e-mail to confirm it, or you are NOT on my list."

Which is better, single opt-in or double opt-in?

That depends what you mean by "better."

The single opt-in method is easier for everyone. Once people sign up, they're on your list. No muss, no fuss, no wasted motions.

But I'll argue here that the double opt-in method gives

you a better quality list. There are three main reasons why:

* Your dear visitor may have mistyped their e-mail address.

In a single opt-in system, you now have a wrong address in your database. Your visitor will never receive your e-mails. Either your e-mails will get lost in cyberspace, or (worse) they'll go to somebody else who happens to have that wrong e-mail address. But you won't find this out until later, after you start getting complaints. In any event, you now are paying your system to manage an e-mail address that is useless to you.

In a double opt-in system, a wrong address will never be confirmed. One message will go to it, and that's all. You will not get any complaints from angry people.

* In a double opt-in system, your dear visitor may never bother to confirm their membership in your e-mail list. In that case, they really don't care much about you, do they? In a double opt-in system, you won't add such people to your list. In a single opt-in system, you will, and the quality of your list will be lower.

* Those pesky "thpammers" like to send their robots around the web filling in forms. (I have to use the word "thpam" here, because if I spell it correctly, this e-zine will be misclassified as, um, "thpam." It's a weird, weird, world.)

If you have a single opt-in system, when a "thpammer" robot signs on your site, a bogus e-mail address is now in your list. You waste space in your system holding that useless address. You send that address an e-mail periodically, giving the "thpammer" renewed reasons to send you back some more of their tasty "thpam." It's a lose-lose situation.

But if you have a double opt-in system, when their robot signs up for your e-mail list, your system sends out one single e-mail to them. They never confirm, so they never get added to your official list. You do not ever send them another e-mail, and eventually they forget about you.

For these three reasons, I believe that a double opt-in system is better. Much better.

I used to run this e-zine as a single opt-in system, but eventually I realized that it was smarter to require a double opt-in system. My list doesn't grow as fast, but it's a better list because new signups are guaranteed to be correct e-mail addresses and not

"thpammers."

I am still culling my list of the "thpammers," which I have to do by looking for "bounces" and then guessing whether my e-mails are bouncing for various technical reasons or because the address is actually bogus.

One final technical note:

With a double opt-in system, you need to do a bit of house-cleaning every so often, because your system will keep track of those people who signed up but failed to confirm.

I routinely check my system for the list of recent signups. If somebody hasn't confirmed their signup in a week, I delete them. They are either a "thpammer" or they're not terribly interested in me. Either way, I delete them from my system. It takes a few minutes per week.

If you don't do this house-cleaning, your database will fill up faster than it should, because it'll have all those unconfirmed entries. Since you pay for these names, it just makes sense to delete them. They don't care about you. Get over that horrid sense of rejection you feel and delete them.

5) What's New At AdvancedFictionWriting.com

Right now, a LOT of my time is still being taken up by software development work, which is, alas, time away from writing. I expect that to moderate over the course of the summer, but at the moment, that's just how things are.

I teach at roughly 4 to 6 writing conferences per year, depending on my schedule.

If you want to hear me speak on fiction writing, there will be a couple of opportunities in coming months.

I will be teaching for several days on marketing for novelists at the Oregon Christian Writers conference at the end of July. Details here:
<http://oregonchristianwriters.org>

I will be teaching on those pesky Motivation-Reaction Units at the ACFW conference in Minneapolis in September. Details here: <http://www.ACFW.com>

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

If you'd just like to hear me teach, I have a number of recordings and e-books that are outrageously cheap.

Details here:

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

6) Steal This E-zine!

This E-zine is free, and I personally guarantee it's worth at least 98604 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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