
The Advanced Fiction Writing E-zine

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

This issue has been delayed by one day because I didn't feel like competing with those pesky national elections we've had. Fiction is fun, but for raw entertainment, nobody can match those whacky politicians.

Those of you who have joined in the past month (more than 250 of you are new since my 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, stop that unseemly gnashing of teeth -- 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>

Fiction 201 is here, finally! After months of hard work, I've finished creating a new product, Fiction 201, a worthy successor to the Fiction 101 product that so many of you have bought over the last few months. See details in this issue.

Last month, I invited you all to go on an Alaskan cruise with me and my buddy John Olson. All systems are go and we'll have quite a crew. Find out more below.

Last month, I started a series on proposals and why I LOVE writing proposals. (Book proposals, not the marriage kind. Even a weirdo novelist would never WRITE a marriage proposal.) I'm continuing the discussion this month.

Speaking of marriage reminds me that I started a series last month on how to write fight scenes. We'll pick up where we left off. Last month, I showed you the worst fight scene ever written. This month, we'll see how to do it right and start building new fighting skills. Don't let your characters fight like sissies!

If I'm famous for anything, it's gotta be my Snowflake Method. As of now, the Snowflake page on my web site has been viewed over a quarter of a million times. The Snowflake is all about getting your story analyzed and organized, which is something a computer could help with. I'm working with a software developer right now to make that a reality. Details below . . .

2) Fiction 201 is Done!

Yes, really. Back in February, I released a series of audio lectures in a custom-build software product, Fiction 101. The program was designed especially for beginning novelists -- "Freshmen" as I call them. A large number of you have bought Fiction 101 and have told me you like it. Modesty prevents me from repeating what you've said.

Oh, to heck with modesty. Many of you LOVE Fiction 101. Many of you have rapidly advanced from being "Freshman"-level writers to being "Sophomores". Many of you have written to me, asking when you can get another jolt of this stuff.

The answer is "now." Fiction 201 is available today.

For you "Sophomores" who want to advance to the "Junior" level, Fiction 201 is for you. It's an intensive series of audio lectures (with notes) designed to bump your level of craft up to the next level. I have two goals in this course: I want you to learn in infinite and gory detail how to "Show, Don't

Tell." And I want you to learn how to "Think Marketing."

One thing I've done in Fiction 201 was to examine many examples of various techniques used in well-known novels. I analyze each example in depth to show you what the author did right (and sometimes how the author could have done better).

Fiction 201 is not just more advanced than Fiction 101, it is also bigger. A lot bigger.

Fiction 101 was six and a half hours of audio lectures. Fiction 201 is EIGHT hours of new lectures. AND I've retained and/or updated an additional two and a half hours of "bonus material" from Fiction 101 that you still need to be reminded about, even if you're a Sophomore. So Fiction 201 has more than TEN AND A HALF hours of lectures!

Fiction 201 is a computer program that you can run in your web browser. It runs on Macs, Windows, or Linux. It's audio and it's visual, both at the same time.

Fiction 201 is HUGE. The files are over 111 MB. I've compressed the audio files pretty hard, but even so, ten and a half hours of sound is a lot of data.

Fiction 201 fits nicely on a CD. I don't have the CDs burned yet, so I'm offering a steep discount to early-birds who are willing to order now and then wait for a week or two.

If you don't want to wait, and if you have a fast internet connection, you can download Fiction 201 RIGHT NOW. It takes about 3 minutes on a fast DSL line or cable modem. I have quadrupled the capacity of my servers to make those downloads as fast and easy as possible.

If you don't want to wait AND you don't want to bother with a huge download, then there's another option -- you can run Fiction 201 ONLINE. When you buy Fiction 201, my shopping cart system will email you with a secret link to run the program directly from my web site. (Remember, Fiction 201 runs in a web browser.) You can literally type in your credit card number and be listening to the first Fiction 201 lecture a minute later.

I have done everything I could to hold the line on price. Fiction 201 is about 61% larger than Fiction 101, but I upped the price of the CD by only 5%. Is that a deal or am I just bad at math?

I want to emphasize that I DON'T HAVE Fiction 201 CDs yet, so I'm giving you a steep discount until Monday, November 13, noon Pacific time. I'll order them from my duplicator then when I know how many to order. My duplicator is fast and he'll get them to me within

days, and I'll ship them on to you right away. So if you order now, you'll have the CD within a couple of weeks. As compensation for that delay, you get a 47% discount!

But the DOWNLOAD version of Fiction 201 is available right now! And the ONLINE version of Fiction 201 is too! And I'm giving a large discount on both products to kick things off. So take advantage of me now or you'll be kicking yourself on Monday afternoon.

You can find out more about Fiction 201 here:
<http://www.kickstartcart.com/app/adtrack.asp?AdID=271908>

3) Update on the Alaskan Cruise

Last month, I wrote to tell you about a Fiction Writing Seminar at Sea that my buddy John Olson and I are putting together on an Alaskan cruise. Actually, John's wife Amy, who is certified as a "travel geek," is doing all the organization. John and I will be teaching classes, running group critiques, and doing one-on-one mentoring with each writer on the cruise.

(Just to be clear, there will be zillions of Normals on the cruise, and probably only a couple dozen writers, along with family members. John and I will NOT be teaching hundreds of people. This will be a nice, small group of writers and we're gonna have a GREAT time.)

Quite a number of you have already signed up, and we're pretty stoked about this. If we get many more writers to join us, we'll have to add another faculty member. And believe me, we know some excellent writing teachers.

As a reminder, you can bring non-writing family and friends along, if you like. Just bear in mind that the cruise will be tax-deductible only for writers. It's a business expense, just like any other writing conference, even if you're not yet making a profit on your writing.

I talked with Amy Olson about this just a few days ago to make sure there are still spots on the cruise and how long there might be cabins available. Here's what she told me:

"People can continue signing up for the cruise as long as there are cabins available on the ship. The final payment for the cruise is due April 30, 2007, so if there were still cabins available I'm guessing people could still sign up until then. I understand though that the Alaskan cruises are pretty popular, so they usually sell out, so we should encourage people to sign up as soon as possible, especially if they want Inside

cabins because they sell out the quickest."

The cruise will last 7 days, July 14-20, 2007. The boat leaves from Seattle and returns to the same location. And it's cheaper than I imagined it would be. A number of writers have already made their deposits. There is still time for you to join us, if you've been sitting on the fence wondering whether you should. But when the cabins sell out, that'll be it.

I've posted a few details, including contact info for Amy Olson, the Cruise Coordinator, on my web site at: http://www.advancedfictionwriting.com/home/cruise_info.php

4) On Writing Proposals -- Part 2

This is the second in a series of columns on writing a book proposal. In this issue, I want to talk about that infamous "hook" that everyone talks about.

What is a "hook?"

Strictly speaking, the hook is not part of the proposal, it's part of the cover letter. When you send in a proposal to an editor or agent, you include a cover letter on top that tells the editor/agent what it is they're getting. (So they know it's a book proposal, and not a shipment of toilet paper.)

The hook is that part of the cover letter that grabs the editor by the throat and forces her to read the proposal. Editors may get dozens of proposals per week. But every editor gets the same 40 hour work week that everyone else gets. (All the editors who read this e-zine are now snorting -- "40 hours??? What weed is Randy smoking?") So OK, editors have the same 80 hour work week as everyone else.

So when the editor opens YOUR proposal, her first prayer is, "Please, God, help me find a quick reason to say NO." (Her second prayer is, "Please let this be the next J.K. Rowling.")

Editors work fast. A good editor can scan a cover letter in less than 10 seconds and KNOW whether it's not any good. And a cover letter that lies there on the page like boiled tofu is not any good.

A hook does NOT have to be sexy. It can be as simple as this:

"I met you recently at the XYZ Writing Conference, and you asked me to send you the proposal for my novel ALPHABET SOUP. I'm enclosing it here."

That's not sexy. That's just telling the editor that she's already interested in your proposal so she can put it on her stack. That's all you need.

If you use this hook, you had better be telling the truth. If you lie at this stage of the game, you will eventually be caught and then you'll be dog meat. Do NOT rely on an editor's poor memory!

If you haven't met the editor at a conference, then you'll need to grab attention on sheer merit. Here's an example of a hook I used years ago to capture the interest of a top New York agent. This was for a historical novel I was writing:

"Have you ever wished murder were legal? Not so many centuries ago, it was!"

The next paragraph of my cover letter explained the ancient "law of the blood avenger" and then gave a quick summary of my protagonist's quest for vengeance.

The agent liked that hook so much, she requested the first chapter. She liked the chapter enough to request the full manuscript. She didn't like the story enough to want to represent me, but at least she read it. Without a good hook, that would never have happened.

What made this hook work was it's paradoxical nature. How can murder possibly be legal? If you use a paradox like this, you need to be able to explain it quickly and then tie it into your storyline.

Another option for your hook is to focus on yourself. If you have some special qualifications for writing your novel, this can be particularly effective. For example, any of these would light up an editor's pajamas:

"I've been an LA homicide cop for 30 years and I'm writing a police procedural set in Hollywood."

"I work in the lab of a Nobel laureate chemist and I'm writing a novel about big science gone awry."

"I'm a cardiac surgeon writing a medical thriller."

"I've ridden in rodeos so long I don't have any unbroken bones left in my body, and I'm writing a novel about a Mary Kay salesman with marital problems."

Oops! NOPE! If you're going to show what an interesting person you are, your life had better tie in to your novel. Make that last one a novel about "rodeo clowns" or "gay cowboys" or "a dude ranch comedy" and you've got something going.

A hook is NOT the one-sentence summary of your story. However, if you have a strong enough one-sentence

summary, then you don't need a hook. And yet most one-sentence summaries can be strengthened by a good hook.

Here's an example taken from one of my own books, in which I've integrated the hook with the one-sentence summary:

"I am a theoretical physicist from Berkeley writing a novel about a rogue physicist who travels back in time to kill the apostle Paul."

Not bad, eh?

Note that the one-sentence summary would have been pretty strong on its own: "A rogue physicist travels back in time to kill the apostle Paul."

But see how much stronger it is to include the hook: "I am a theoretical physicist from Berkeley writing a novel about . . ."

In this case, the hook makes it clear that I bring something to the party above just an intriguing storyline.

In the end, your writing is going to stand or fall on its own merits. But a good hook (and a good one-sentence summary) can give it a fighting chance with that pesky editor who's still up at 2 AM slitting open envelopes and hoping each one is either too horrible for words or too excellent to put down.

One final hook of my own: I discuss the role of hooks, one-sentence summaries, and cover letters in the lecture on Proposals in my Fiction 201 course, which I just released today. Yes, I am one sly devil, ain't I?

5) How To Write a Fight Scene -- Part 2

Last month we talked about fight scenes and I showed the most wretched fight scene ever typed. (I wrote it myself, and it stinks like skunk stew).

This month, we'll look at a better fight scene from a novel and analyze its strengths and weaknesses.

To do that, we need some way to measure good and bad in a fight scene. I'll remind you of the Official Fight Scene Rules that I gave last month. Actually, these are my rules, but I have no doubt that all right-thinking people agree with me.

Here are the Official Fight Scene Rules:

- a) Show, don't tell
- b) Make it happen in real-time
- c) Enforce causality
- d) Show sequence, not simultaneity
- e) Favor completed verbs over continuing action verbs
- f) Show the fastest stuff first
- g) For every action, show a reaction
- h) Use interior monologue and dialogue to set the pace

Let's take an example fight scene from a real novel. We'll look at *Timeline*, by Michael Crichton. This scene is on page 235 of the hardcover edition of the book. I'll do a running commentary on it as we go, explaining where Crichton follows the rules effectively and where he violates them effectively. Yes, he breaks the rules, but it's for a reason.

First, a little background. Our protagonist, Marek, has time-traveled back to 14th century France with some friends. He and a friend Chris have been finagled into a joust. Chris is a terrible fighter and has been unhorsed and is lying on the ground in a stupor. His opponent, the 14th century knight Sir Guy Malegant, is about to kill him, but fortunately Marek has dispatched his own opponent and has come to rescue Chris. Marek and Guy are now fighting with swords:

Marek swung his sword desperately. Behind Sir Guy, he saw Chris begin to move. Marek would have shouted to him to stay where he was, but he had no breath to speak.

Marek swung again, and again.

Randy sez: There's a problem here. Marek is swinging his sword again and again, but what's Sir Guy doing? We don't see any response. So this segment feels a little surreal. Is Marek making impact? Being parried? Missing like a fool? We don't know. Better to show Sir Guy's responses. Rule (g) is being violated here. Let's continue with the action.

Now Chris was pulling at his helmet, trying to get it off. Guy was still ten yards from Chris. Dancing backward, enjoying himself, parrying Marek's blows easily.

Marek knew he was almost at the limits of his strength now. His swings were increasingly weak. Guy was still strong, still smooth. Just backing and parrying. Waiting for his chance.

Randy sez: This is no longer in real time. Crichton has reverted to telling, rather than showing. He's

violating rules (a), (b), (e), and (g). And that's a GOOD thing. Crichton's goal here is NOT to show us every thrust and parry. At this point, he wants Marek to back Sir Guy up so he'll trip over Chris. So Crichton NEEDS to "tell" here, rather than "show." This is one of those rare cases when a fight scene actually needs some "telling." Nothing is really going to happen until Sir Guy trips over Chris, so it's best just to summarize. Continuing on with the fight:

Five yards.

Chris had rolled over on his stomach, and he was now getting up. He was on all fours. Hanging his head. Then there was a loud retching sound.

Guy heard it, too, turned his head a little to look--

Randy sez: Crichton is wrapping up the "telling" part. He's maneuvered Sir Guy into position to trip over Chris, so with the final paragraph shown above, Crichton switches back into "showing" mode. The fight scene will now resume as real action again:

Marek charged, butted him in the breastplate with his head, and Guy staggered backward, fell over Chris and went down.

Malegant rolled quickly on the ground, but Marek was on him, stamping on Guy's right hand to pin the sword down, then swinging his other leg over to pin the opposite shoulder. Marek held his sword high, ready to plunge it down.

The crowd fell silent.

Guy did not move.

Slowly, Marek lowered his sword, cut the laces to Guy's helmet, and pushed it back with the tip of his blade. Guy's head was now exposed. Marek saw he was bleeding freely from his left ear.

Guy glared at him and spat.

Randy sez: Crichton has now given us a nice sequence of actions and reactions. It's well done, and has the rhythms of a real fight, with one exception which could have been done better. That paragraph with Malegant rolling on the ground has a slightly out of focus pace, because of those verbs "stamping" and "swinging" which slow things down. And Sir Guy just lies there like a lump of Gumby, doing nothing. Why isn't he fighting back?

You may think me an arrogant varmint for daring to

rewrite Michael Crichton, but I'll take a stab at it. Yes, I'm arrogant. I've rewritten better writers than Mikey. Here's how I think it could have been done a bit better:

Malegant rolled quickly on the ground. Marek leapt forward, stamped on Guy's right hand to pin the sword down, and swung his other leg over to pin the opposite shoulder. Sir Guy arched his back and kicked uselessly. He spat at Marek. Marek raised his sword high, ready to plunge it down.

Randy sez: A little better, no? You be the judge. If I'm wrong, it won't be the first time. Ditto if I'm right. I think there are still problems here. Marek gets Guy immobile just a bit too easily. So I think this should be broken out into a longer sequence to make it more plausible. But enough is enough.

OK, let's wrap up here. This sequence comes at the end of a fairly long scene in which Crichton did a brilliant job of bringing jousting to life. It's a strong scene, and Crichton made a smart move in breaking the rules in order to get through a dull spot in the action and push Sir Guy into position to be tripped.

It's OK to break the rules, as long as there's a good reason. But you need to have a good reason.

If anyone doesn't agree with me, well . . . step outside and you can discuss the situation. With Marek. I'll sit there quietly throwing up on the ground.

Next month, we'll look at another fight scene, one of my favorites, from Irwin Shaw's book, RICH MAN, POOR MAN. See ya then!

6) Coming Soon -- A Snowflake Program . . .

People either love the Snowflake Method or they hate it. I love it, of course. I invented the thing, and it's served me well. November is National Novel Writing Month, NaNoWriMo for short, as many of you know. The goal in NanoWriMo is to write 50000 words of a novel in 30 days. That's pretty fast writing! Completing NaNoWriMo is a challenge, and a wonderful achievement, if you can write that fast.

But let me tell you, the Snowflake Method helps me write a lot faster than that. The last book I wrote

came in at about 95000 words, and I wrote it in 31 days. Not just one draft, either. Five drafts. The last three were pretty much spit/polish. But the first two were a marathon sprint. Over 3000 polished words per day, every day. That's hard work. And that was when I still had a day job.

I could not have done it without the Snowflake Method (to help me design the book) and my literary assistant (to tell me when the book was getting off track).

Some people write by the seat of their pants, and are known as SOTPs. Lord bless 'em, they have to write that way, but it sounds painful. Many of the SOTPs I know talk like the first draft is one long round of suffering.

Honestly, I can't write that way, and neither can a lot of other writers. We like to have some sort of a design method, and that's what the Snowflake does. For me, the first draft is a delight. If you're an SOTP, then apparently you gotta suffer, and that's fine by me, as long as it's not me doing the suffering. To each his own.

The biggest headache with the Snowflake Method is that you have to format up a Word document to hold all the different parts. And it can get a little repetitive to cut and paste the same character charts five or ten times.

Not long ago, a writer/programmer emailed me to ask about creating a program to manage the repetitive parts of the Snowflake method. I had a look at his portfolio of work and was blown away. This guy is GOOD! And fast.

He and I are currently working on a Windows program to walk you through the Snowflake Method. I love it! It makes the anal parts of the process a whole lot easier to get past. I'm talking with a Mac programmer to produce a Mac version of it too. When it's ripe, I'll let you know, because this is one tool I intend to use myself.

7) What's New At AdvancedFictionWriting.com

Whew! October was a brutal month. We made an offer on a house, lurched through escrow without tearing any eyes out (well, not too many eyes), and got moved in -- exactly one day before the weather turned on us.

Gack, let me tell you about weather.

Where I come from, in San Diego, it's pretty dry. I'm

now living in southern Washington and, would ya believe it, they have this strange phenomenon where water FALLS OUT OF THE SKY! Right on yer head. No kidding. And it happens a LOT. It happens so often, they have a special word for it: "rain". I wrote to my friends back in San Diego, and none of 'em would believe me. When you write fiction, everyone thinks you're a liar.

In any event, we're coping with this "rain" thing, and I've discovered that an excellent way to deal with wet shoes when you come in the house is to wipe them off on the cat.

The good news, as I mentioned above, is that Fiction 201 is done. Finito. Launched. As of today, it's on the market. I had hoped it'd be done two months ago, but living out of suitcases is not the ideal way to run your life. But my life is slowing down now, and I actually live in a real house again and am not spending hours every day dealing with selling or buying a house or schlepping hundreds of boxes around.

So life is settling back to normal and I hope to get some actual . . . WRITING done in the coming months.

Yeah, right.

8) Steal This E-zine!

This E-zine is free, and I personally guarantee it's worth 6169 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.

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.

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My new web site: <http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com>

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Randy Ingermanson
Publisher, Advanced Fiction Writing E-zine
