
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 (about 600 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.

If you need to change your e-mail address, there's a different link to help you do that.

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:

The successful novelist needs good organization, good craft, and good marketing. In this issue, we'll talk about each of these in turn.

Getting organized is partly a matter of using the right tool for the right job. There's a powerful tool many writers have that they rarely use. Can you guess what it is?

Last month we talked about the importance of pacing in a novel. This month we'll continue that discussion by looking at a practical example. Want to see what techniques Ken Follett uses?

Many authors these days are talking about the "B-word" -- branding. Will branding solve all your marketing problems? Or will it only tie you down? Or . . . is it possible that we've all been looking at branding wrong?

Are you reading my blog? Join the fun here:
<http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com/blog>

2) Organizing: A Tool Every Writer Can Use

Let's face it. Organizing your life is dull. Mind-numbingly dull. Most writers hate it, and rightly so. We were made for something better than making lists, sorting things, or adding up long columns numbers.

We were made for writing. Tragically, if we do no organizing at all, our world eventually rusts right to a halt, which prevents us from writing.

My own solution to this dilemma is to use power tools to do the dull stuff. And one of my most effective power tools is spreadsheet software.

I actually put off learning how to use spreadsheets for an embarrassingly long time. But there came a day when I had a choice between dealing with a ton of data by hand or finding some way to automate the process.

So I spent a few hours and learned to use Excel, and it changed my life. Excel is the spreadsheet software that comes along with Word and PowerPoint in the Microsoft Office package.

I've found that a surprising number of writers feel as I once did about Excel -- it's for bean-counters.

No it isn't.

Excel is for doing all the stuff you hate doing, as fast as possible, as accurately as possible, as easily as possible. What's there to hate about that?

You can use a spreadsheet for many things, but one common task is for handling lists. The simplest list is a list of items. For example, you can keep a list of what happens in every scene in your novel.

If that's all you do, then it's not terribly exciting. But you can take it a lot farther. You might decide that each item in your list should have two parts: what happens in the scene, and an estimate of how many words the scene will have.

In spreadsheet language, this list is called a "table" with two columns. Each row of the table represents a scene. One column holds what happens in the scene. The second column holds the number of words you expect for the scene.

What makes this useful is that a spreadsheet makes it very easy to add up any column of numbers. So you can easily add up all the word counts and estimate how long your novel is going to be.

If your publisher is strict about word counts, this gives you a good way to control the predicted size of your novel while you're writing it. After you write each scene, change your predicted word count for that scene to the actual word count (which you can get from your word processor).

Your spreadsheet will automatically recalculate the expected size of your novel each time you change the word count for any scene. So if your scenes are each coming up a little short, you'll know how many scenes you need to add to get the size novel you want. Likewise, if your scenes are all a little too wordy.

Of course, you could do all of the above by hand using 3x5 cards and a calculator, but why should you? Adding numbers is boring. It's also error-prone. It also wastes your time. Did I mention it's boring?

A spreadsheet also makes it very easy to move entire rows up or down in the list. So you can play with changing the order of scenes in your spreadsheet and see if that improves the plot.

Of course you could do the above with 3x5 cards, but you CAN'T save the original order of the 3x5 cards. Once you move them around, you've lost the old ordering, and that can be a nasty problem if you disimprove your storyline.

Here's where a spreadsheet shines. You can easily save the old order before you move things around. Then after you've changed things as much as you want, you can save the new version and compare them. You can save as many versions of the ordering as you like. Computers are good at remembering things.

There's more. You can add another column that represents the chapter number of each scene. Then instead of moving each scene up or down, you can just change its chapter number. Spreadsheets allow you to sort the rows automatically, moving each row up or down so that the entries in any chosen column are sorted. So you can renumber a bunch of chapters and then sort by chapter number.

Many tasks that we writers face involve keeping lists. Lists of scenes. Lists of things to do to edit the book. Lists of facts to check. Lists of errors in the galleys. Lists of addresses of people who'll get copies of our book. Lists of endorsers. Lists of sales of our books, including how much each copy sold for.

You can write all these lists down on paper. But why should you? Your computer can do it faster and better, leaving you more time to write.

If you've never used a spreadsheet, you can learn most of what you need to know in less than an hour from a seasoned user.

So here's a suggestion, if you're a novice. Find an expert user and ask for a little coaching. Tell your mentor you only want the most primitive basics. Stop after an hour and put what you learned to use.

If you're an intermediate user, play around a bit with some of the features you've never used. If you get stuck, find an expert to guide you through. Then use what you learned.

When you know enough to do what you need to do, stop learning. You'll be surprised how little you need to know in order to do the sort of things a writer needs.

Life is too short to do things the hard way, when computers are cheap and fast. Save your precious time for the fun stuff, and let the computer do the dull stuff.

3) Creating: Practical Pointers on Plot Pacing

Last month we talked about the theory of pacing. About

how when you have a fast-action scene, you spend a lot more words, showing every detail of the action. And when you have a dull scene, you blip through in just a few words.

This month, we'll try to make that practical by looking at an example.

Since I have a choice in showing either an exciting example or a dull one, I'm going to show an exciting one from *THE KEY TO REBECCA*, by Ken Follett.

We'll find something that may seem surprising. Even in a very fast scene, there are places where the pace slows way down. Here's the setting:

It's 1942 Egypt, and Erwin Rommel is closing in on Cairo. Our hero is William Vandam of British Intelligence, hunting down a spy who is Rommel's prime source of information. If Vandam fails, then Cairo will fall, and with it all of Egypt.

In this scene, the spy, Wolff, has kidnapped Vandam's son Billy and girlfriend Elene, but Vandam has pursued them. After Elene purposely wrecks the car, Wolff gets out to fight Vandam. We watch the scene from Elene's point of view.

Paragraph 1: Vandam jumped forward again. This time Wolff dodged back. Vandam kicked out, but Wolff was out of range. Wolff jabbed with the knife. Elene saw it rip through Vandam's trousers and draw blood. Wolff stabbed again, but Vandam had stepped away. A dark stain appeared on his trouser leg.

Randy sez: In this single paragraph, the pace is as fast as a knife fight can be. We see six actions and reactions by the two men.

Paragraph 2: Elene looked at Billy. The boy lay limply on the floor of the car, his eyes closed. Elene clambered over into the back and lifted him onto the seat. She could not tell whether he was dead or alive. She touched his face. He did not stir. "Billy," she said. "Oh, Billy."

Randy sez: In this paragraph, the pace slows down sharply. Why? What is Follett is doing here?

The answer is that Follett is giving the reader a chance to rest. You can only show fast action for a short time before the reader begins numbing. In this one-paragraph lull, Follett gives you a chance to recover. A little.

Paragraph 3: She looked outside again. Vandam was down on one knee. His left arm hung limply from a shoulder covered with blood. He held his right arm out in a defensive gesture. Wolff approached him.

Randy sez: The pace is still slow here, but the tension is ramping up hard. Wolff and Vandam are positioning themselves for the next series of moves. Vandam looks ready to collapse. It's not a fair fight. The odds are heavily against our hero.

Paragraph 4: Elene jumped out of the car. She still had the broken-off gear stick in her hand. She saw Wolff bring back his arm, ready to slash at Vandam once more. She rushed up behind Wolff, stumbling in the sand. Wolff struck at Vandam. Vandam jerked sideways, dodging the blow. Elene raised the gear stick high in the air and brought it down with all her might on the back of Wolff's head. He seemed to stand still for a moment.

Randy sez: The pace turns electric again, with every detail now shown, frame by frame. There are six actions here in this single paragraph, each one an emotional hit point for the reader. Now watch Follett bring the pace smoothly down to normal speed again in a series of short paragraphs:

Paragraph 5: Elene said: "Oh, God."

Paragraph 6: Then she hit him again.

Paragraph 7: She hit him a third time.

Paragraph 8: He fell down.

Paragraph 9: She hit him again.

Paragraph 10: Then she dropped the gear stick and knelt beside Vandam.

Paragraph 11: "Well done," he said weakly.

Overall, the pace of the scene is very high, but it's not constant. Follett varies the pace, faster, slower, faster, slower.

Like a violinist using vibrato to constantly vary the pitch, Follett makes the entire passage read better by constantly varying the pace.

This is a very important principle for your fastest action scenes: Vary the pace. The fast parts will feel faster by contrast with the slow parts. And in the slow parts, build tension by showing the preparations for more action in exquisite detail.

Your reader will love you for it.

I was teaching at a writing conference this past weekend and decided to sit in on a workshop on branding. The teacher laughed when I walked in, because apparently she thinks I know a fair bit about branding.

It's amazing how times change. Just a few years ago, I was at a conference and spent about an hour with a branding expert and a few of my friends trying to "figure out my brand." At the end of the hour, we all confessed we were stumped. Apparently, I was the world's first unbrandable author.

I've noticed that the world of publishing has split into two armed camps. One camp insists that branding is vital to the health of an author's career. The other camp says that the whole brandwagon is a load of hooey, that you can do just fine without letting yourself get typecast by some stupid brand.

Before we get all hot and bothered about branding, maybe we ought to define what it is. Unfortunately, when you ask six people to define branding, you get about eight different answers.

Rather than try to deal with all that, I'm going to give my own definition of an author's brand:

"Your brand is what other people think when they hear your name."

One reason I like this definition is because it's very operational. A lot of brand-talk is very ethereal and abstract, and you start wondering what kind of ozone these people are breathing.

Another reason to love this definition is that it makes it clear that every author has a brand. You can choose to help define it, or you can stand back and let nature run its course. But if you're a published author, you have a brand.

And if you're not published yet, then you don't have a brand. You might have some ideas on what you want your brand to become, but you can't have an author's brand unless you're actually an author.

One thing that should be clear is that angsting over "taglines" is horribly misguided. The authors I consider well-branded don't have a tagline. Stephen King doesn't have a tagline. Anne Rice doesn't. John Grisham doesn't. J.K. Rowling doesn't.

What they have is a very strong set of connotations. Stephen King connotes supernatural suspense. Anne Rice makes me think of vampires. John Grisham is synonymous with legal thriller. J.K. Rowling makes me desperately want to be 13 again, with a magic wand.

When I read a budding author's tagline in their email

signature, I confess that I often think, "That's very nice, but . . . what kind of fiction do you write?"

When people hear my name in the context of teaching fiction, I'll bet that a lot of them think, "the Snowflake guy." That's because my name is tied pretty tightly to that pesky "Snowflake method" that I invented a few years ago.

When readers hear my name in the context of writing fiction, probably the first thing they think is, "that science guy" or less charitably "that crazy physicist."

What this means is that you really can stop obsessing over figuring out your tagline. A tagline isn't your brand. Your brand is what people think about you, and it's not that hard to find out what people think of when they hear your name. What you do is ask them.

If that were all there is to branding, then it would be a pretty useless concept. But there's more.

The fact is that you do have some control over what people think of you. You control that by controlling the following:

- * The genre of books you write
- * Your publicity photo
- * Your web site or blog
- * The words you use to describe yourself

The question you should be asking is this: "Do all of the above tell a consistent story?"

Branding is really about consistency. If you write horror novels and your photo shows you in a lacy pink dress drinking English tea and your web site is decorated with Wild West motifs and you describe yourself on your site as "a chess fanatic who likes jousting and philosophy" then you aren't telling a consistent story.

By doing all the above, you might be trying to appeal to "everybody" but you are in fact going to appeal to nobody.

If there is one piece of advice on branding I can give, it would be this:

"Be one thing."

This does not mean that you have to typecast yourself forever as a writer of just one kind of tightly defined novel. Branding, unlike diamonds, is not forever. You can shift your brand. But be careful about making sudden moves.

At any given time, be one thing. As times change, you can change to some other thing. Be that other thing for a while. Be it consistently.

You may be asking why you can't write two different kinds of fiction if you want to. You can, but if you want to be successful at either, it's probably a good idea to use different names for each.

Ed McBain and Evan Hunter were the same guy, writing different kinds of fiction. Nora Roberts and J.D. Robb are the same person. It helps that both of these writers have been prodigiously productive. If you aren't, then you might want to rethink that double-branding thing.

The fact is that the branding aficionados have a good point. The reading public likes consistency. Authors that provide a consistent (and good) reading experience are going to find it easy to continue selling fiction to their past readers, while continuing to find new readers.

Is the reading public a bunch of lemmings for wanting consistency?

No, let's not be a dolt. Everybody wants consistency. If you like Indian food and find a restaurant that serves great Indian food, you'll go back. If they give you excellent French food next time, you might like that, but more likely you'll be a bit annoyed -- especially if the waitresses are still wearing saris.

Right now, the world looks like it's falling apart. It looks like it'll continue falling apart for awhile longer. In times like this, your reader doesn't want you messing with her head. Your reader wants some consistency.

Treat your reader the way you want to be treated. Because quality is not enough. Quality and consistency are enough.

Creating a reputation for consistency and quality will take you a long way to building the brand you want.

5) What's New At AdvancedFictionWriting.com

I recently posted the latest installment in my monthly humor column, "That Blocked Up Feeling." This month my nemesis, Sam the Plumber, tries to find a cure for writer's block, in his inimitable style. Here's the link:

http://www.ChristianFictionOnlineMagazine.com/biz_rooney.html

I teach at roughly 4 to 6 writing conferences per year, depending on my schedule. Here's what's coming up next:

I will be doing an 8-hour fiction mentoring workshop at the Mount Hermon Christian Writers Conference in April. Details here:
<http://www.mounthermon.org/adult/professionals/writers-conference>

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 3456 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, 2009.

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
