
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 (nearly 300 of you), welcome to the crew! This past month has been very busy for me. I released an e-book and launched a Tiger Marketing campaign for it. I also completely redid the look and feel of both of my web sites. Frankly, web work is not my favorite task in life, but it needed doing, and I'm too cheap to pay someone.

This coming month promises to be much more fun. I'm wrapping up revisions on a novel I wrote last year. I'm in the beginning stages of designing a brand new novel using my infamous Snowflake method, of course. (More news on that soon, when the ink is dry on the contract.) I'm permanently cutting back my hours at my day job. I'd like to believe my boss is dismayed, but I suspect he is secretly rubbing his Bossbert paws together at the prospect of having me around less. I'll also be teaching the main track in fiction at a conference in Colorado. Like Bilbo Baggins said, it'll be nice to see MOUNTAINS again.

2) Those Pesky MRUs

In the last couple years, I've gotten somewhat famous because of the "Snowflake" page on my web site. And that's ironic, because the Snowflake method doesn't really help you write your fiction. It's an organizing and analyzing tool, but you can't really point to any place in a finished novel and say, "There's the Snowflake at work."

What I'd like to talk about in this article is a technique that you CAN point to, on any page. Alas, there is no cutesy metaphor like "Snowflake" for this method. I learned it from Dwight Swain's book, *Techniques of the Selling Writer*. Mr. Swain, in a rare lapse of judgment, gave this technique the absurd name "MRU" (short for "Motivation-Reaction Unit".)

This is rather sad. Had he given MRUs a nice sexy name, they might have caught on. Instead, hardly anybody talks about MRUs, at least not in polite society.

Let me be blunt. MRUs, despite having a horribly geeky name, are one of the most important keys to writing gripping fiction. Just my opinion--make of it what you will.

I taught a fiction mentoring clinic at a writer's conference a couple of months ago. Eleven writers and I sat around a table for a total of eight hours. We worked over a few pages from each of their novels. I had a wonderful time. I think they enjoyed it too, although being critiqued is never a wholly joyous experience, unless you are one of those folks who loves being disemboweled in public.

(Just kidding there. I don't allow any cruelty in my critique groups. I prefer to identify what the writer does BEST and what they do WORST, and then spell out a plan to improve in both those areas.)

The experience level of my mentees ranged from Sophomore to Senior. I found it surprising how many of them needed some help on their MRUs. I'm hoping you may find MRUs useful too.

As it happens, I have a (longish) article on my web site that deals with MRUs in some detail. So I'm not going to lay it all out here. What I do want to do is whet your appetite for this unromantic topic.

Let's agree first on how we keep score as novelists. Your goal is to give your reader a Powerful Emotional Experience. (Please don't make a three-letter acronym out of that.)

Readers read fiction to experience emotions. Love.

Fear. Excitement. Horror. Nostalgia. Curiosity. Give them the emotion they crave and they're your love slave for life. (OK, I exaggerate here, but you get the point.)

The Magic Question is this: How do you give your reader that Powerful Emotional Experience? You can't enter into their brains and tweak their emotive neurons, can you?

No, you can't. But you can put Reader inside the skin of your Point of View character. Do that, and Reader will tweak her own emotive neurons and she'll think you did it.

OK, fine. How do you put Reader inside somebody else's skin?

The answer is that you show Reader exactly what your POV character can see, and NOTHING else. You make Reader hear exactly what your POV character can hear, and NOTHING else. Same with smells, tastes, touches, thoughts.

Great, but how do you do THAT?

The best answer I know is to use MRUs. Let me boil it way down. An MRU has two main parts, an Objective External Part and a Subjective Internal Part, and they happen in that order. First show the Objective External part. Then show the Subjective Internal part.

Dwight Swain calls the Objective External Part a "Motivation" and he calls the Subjective Internal Part the "Reaction". This is a bit too Pavlovian for me, but never mind that. My experience has been that when you write paragraphs that alternate between Motivations and Reactions, you magically create that Powerful Emotional Experience in your reader. And your critiquers magically stop scrawling "Show, Don't Tell" in red ink on your manuscripts.

The reason is that you are showing what happens instant by instant, just the way your POV character experiences it. First, you show the tiger dropping out of the tree. You record this with the brutal objectivity of a video camera. Then, you pop inside the POV character's skin and make that character experience a rush of fear. Your reader will experience that rush right along with the character. Powerful. Emotional. Experience.

Then you do it again and again and again, until the chapter's over. Pretty simple, no?

OK, there's a whole lot more to MRUs than what I've written, but I'm going to refer you to my web site and Dwight Swain's book for more details. Swain devotes about 60 pages to this one topic, and I just don't type that fast. Here's a link to the page on my web site where you can find out more:

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

By the way, in the mentoring clinic I ran, we did a LOT of analysis of MRUs (among other things). I think my mentees came away with a new appreciation for how important MRUs are. I came away with a new appreciation for how hard these things are to really learn.

My experience with mentoring writers is that everybody needs work on their MRUs. I do. Tom Clancy does. I bet you do too. Tragically, the only way to learn MRUs is to sweat through a bunch.

Don't let anyone tell you this is easy. Writing fiction is hard work, but it's fun work.

In the coming months, I'm hoping to produce some examples of how these MRUs work in real-life fiction. Dozens of examples. Maybe hundreds. Showing the Before and After, just like those wretched diet ads. I'll let you know when they're ready.

3) An Interview With Sue Brower

Sue Brower, Sr. Marketing Director of Trade Books for Zondervan, has been leading a team of creative specialists for Zondervan for over 8 years. She is currently responsible for Fiction and a variety of Christian Living titles, and for the marketing of all Zondervan products in the United Kingdom.

RI: When we talked on the phone a few weeks ago, you mentioned that you were beginning to focus more and more on marketing Zondervan's fiction lineup using the internet. Can you tell us some details about this? What strategies are you using to get the word out on Zondervan's books?

SB: I don't think we are focusing as much on Internet marketing as we are focusing on the CONSUMER, and the internet is a great way to have a dialog with the consumer. If you check <http://www.zondervan.com>, you will see two key initiatives for reaching the consumer. One is "Author Tracker." This is a subscription service that allows the consumer to sign up and receive automatic notification every time a new book is released from his/her favorite authors. The other is the Zondervan Breakfast Club. Similar to DearReader.com, a consumer can sign up to receive a daily email excerpt from some of Zondervan's newest and best titles. One book is featured each week so that by the end of the week, the reader has seen the first chapter or so of the book. Of course, once the reader is hooked, they have to go buy the book!

RI: There is a lot of talk among marketers these days about demographics. Boomers, Gen-X, Gen-Y, and whatever. Which age group do you see as being most open to internet marketing? Or is this the wrong question? Is it more a question of economic status than age?

SB: Randy, I don't approach marketing from either direction. In the May 2005 issue of Fast Company, Steve Murphy, President and CEO of Rodale, Inc. is quoted: "Interest groups are the new geography. Because of the Internet, old paradigms of demographic analysis and segmentation--sex, age, household income, and especially zip code--are meaningless. People are gathering around their interests. The more we can identify those interest groups the better we can serve them." I look at consumer BEHAVIOR more than anything else. Consumers who buy and read Francine Rivers will also like books by Robin Hatcher. Consumers who like Dee Henderson might also like the new title by first time novelist Donna Fleisher called Wounded Healer (Jun, 2005). Avid fans of the JAG series on TV, might like the new Navy Justice series from Don Brown, Treason (May, 2005).

RI: How do e-books fit into Zondervan's marketing strategy? Do you foresee doing coordinated electronic/paper releases of books? Will you release only e-books of selected titles, or will you do e-book releases across the board?

SB: I think I will answer this way...I don't think there are any formats that we will not consider for communicating our content to the consumer. E-books, audio downloads, text messaging--technology is moving so fast that by the time I finish this email, there may be some new way to market content. The strategy at this time is to look at each book to determine if the CONSUMER wants it in e-book format. Again, consider interest groups...who is most likely to embrace the e-book concept? Books that fit that interest group will be made available in that format.

RI: What one thing can the author do to market their own books?

SB: It has become increasingly important for the author to take part in the promotion of their books, particularly through the Internet. Readers want to know the story behind the story and they want to feel that the time and energy they have invested in an author is appreciated. Websites, newsletters, blogs--all these help build a dialog with the reader which encourages author loyalty. In this world of ATM's, Voice Mail, and self service, people want a relationship. Authors who cultivate that relationship are the most successful. For the author, this is time well spent. If you do

nothing else, create a simple website that includes the following:

Lists all your books

Coming Attractions

Bio

Testimony

Guestbook or review section

Place to sign up for any kind of email communication.

Even if you don't have time to do a newsletter, it doesn't take long to let your readers know of a new product release. In addition, your publisher may be creating an email campaign for their proprietary lists and this could be sent to your list.

RI: Thanks, Sue!

4) Tiger Marketing

In the last couple of months, I've talked about Tiger Marketing your novel, which is my rather goofball name for a marketing approach that Tom Antion, Seth Godin, Corey Rudl, and many others have perfected for selling non-fiction on the internet. I am pretty darn sure it'll work for fiction too, with the appropriate changes in tactics.

There are three claws in the Tiger's Paw:

- a) Your novel
- b) Your web site
- c) Your blog or newsletter

In this article, I'm going to talk about what drives people to your web site. This is crucial. You can have a great web site, but if nobody ever sees it, then what good does it do you?

First, let's do an experiment, shall we? Pull up Google on your web browser and search for the words "how to write a novel". I did this just now, and number 4 on the results list is a page some of you may have seen, The Snowflake Method of Writing a Novel.

That's my page!

OK, that was a nice piece of luck. Let's try another experiment. Google the words "write your novel". Do you see what I see? That dratted Snowflake page of mine is number 1 on the results list!

Try another one. Google the phrase "writing a novel".

Is that weird or what? The Snowflake page is #1 again!

There are several other combinations of words that will

return the Snowflake page in the top 5 results. You can experiment around and see what they are, but I'm sure you can guess they all have to do with fiction and novels and writing and "how to" in various combinations.

You may be wondering how much I paid Google to make this happen. The answer is simple. Not one lousy dime. It's true that I've tried my hand at writing Google ads in the past. And they work. My page on Mel Gibson's Passion movie got over 12,000 hits in a couple of weeks, thanks to a pretty carefully designed Google ad. But I paid hundreds of dollars for that. It was worth it--I got a TV appearance on Palm Sunday out of it.

But I didn't pay Google anything for that ultra-high ranking for my Snowflake page. And that ranking is valuable. The Snowflake page is now drawing nearly 2000 hits per week. Oops, I mean "page views", not "hits". There's a subtle difference. "Page views" means the number of times the page gets viewed. "Hits" means the number of URL requests that the page generates. A page with 100 graphic items on it will generate 100 hits every time it gets viewed. "Hits" are meaningless. "Page views" are what matter.

Now I'm going to tell you the secret behind the success of my Snowflake page. If you've read the "On Writing" pages on my web site, you know that you need three things in order to get published:

- a) Content
- b) Craft
- c) Connections

Let's look at each of those in turn, and analyze which is responsible for my Google popularity:

CONTENT: The Snowflake page spells out my methods for organizing and analyzing a novel. There is nothing particularly new there. And it certainly isn't universal. There are lots of people who don't like the method. That's fine by me. Because lots of other people find it very useful. And they talk about it to other people. But Google doesn't know that. Bottom line: the content is sound, but that's not the reason for the "Google popularity" of that page. So let's try . . .

CRAFT: I'm a decent writer, and I have a fairly provocative attitude when I write. That's by design. "Provocative" = "entertaining", at least for some people. Sure, not everyone is entertained, but some are. That's good, but Google doesn't know beans about entertainment. Google can't tell good writing from bad. So craft is not the reason Google likes my page so much. That brings us to . . .

CONNECTIONS: My web site has connections. Meaning links coming in to it. Lot of them. Hundreds of links. I have no idea how many. Altavista says there are 146 links coming in. Google counts 659 links. (Type in "links:

www.rsingermanson.com" in the Google search line.) Whatever, there are zillions of links coming to my site. And here's a fact you should know. Google ranks pages largely by how many links connect to the site that the page lives in. Google loves my page because it has connections.

You may be asking, how did that happen? What's so special about Randy?

Answer: It's a bit accidental. There's nothing much special about me. I started my web site in 1999 as a place to promote my very first book, a controversial little nonfiction book on the alleged "Bible code."

Remember that? Back in 1997, Michael Drosnin wrote his surprise bestseller, THE BIBLE CODE, and took it to the bank. After that, a whole bunch of books came out on the subject. Mine was one of those.

Unlike most, my book concluded that there ain't no such thing. I got some attention for that. Being a physicist AND a Christian AND a guy who could read Hebrew, I brought some credentials to the table.

Naturally, I attracted some mud. A few folks got mad at me. Some were Jewish, but I think the Christians threw the most mud. Yeah, ironic. At the time, I was ticked off, but now, I'm laughing.

Why? Because Mae West was right. There isn't any such thing as bad publicity. The mud-slingers had to link to my site in order to attack me. That brought me some readers, some of whom thought I was on track. So then they linked to my site too. We physicists call this a "nonlinear system," which is a sciencey way of saying "the rich get richer."

When it comes to links, the rich get way richer. Notoriety is good. As I added more stuff to my web site, I tended to get more links than I deserved, simply because I already HAD more links, and therefore was getting lots of traffic. All of which made Google sit up and take notice. So Google sent me more traffic and the whole thing snowballed.

I wish I could say that I'd planned it like that, but I didn't. I kind of lucked into it by getting mud slung on me early on. So no hard feelings to those who threw the mud. (Nor will I mention their names, because why give them a boost?)

You may be thinking you can pull a fast one on Google by setting up two sites that refer to each other zillions of times.

Uh-uh.

Won't work. This used to work, but Google is on to people like this now. This is called "spamming the

robots." (Google and all the other search engines use robots that crawl around the web looking for links.) When they find a site that just links to the same one over and over on the same page, they discount it. Or blacklist it.

That's bad.

There is a lot to know about "optimizing your site" for the search engines. There are whole web sites devoted to this topic. I won't cover it all here. What I will do is point out one practice that is fair and which can help build traffic to your web site over time. (Listen, nothing is easy, and nothing is instant. Ya gotta do some work.)

The practice is called "link trading." In essence, you link to the sites of your friends and they link back to you.

Of course, all the search engines know how to spot incestuous relationships like that, so if that's all you do, then you haven't helped yourself.

What you need to do is link to a site that is already "link-rich" and have that site link back to you. If you do this in a "responsible" way, then it benefits both parties. The rich site gets a little richer, and you get an endorsement from what Google considers a "famous site." So you get richer too.

I'm doing this now with my new site, AdvancedFictionWriting.com. If you look at my personal web site, RSIngermanson.com (a terrible name for a site!), you'll see that every page now has a link to my new site.

I still don't have much content on my new web site, but that will change soon enough. And when I get some content there, Google will notice, and the new site will get a high ranking in searches. That's not terribly fair, but a lot of things in life aren't fair. Tough beans.

You may be wondering how you can play this game too. The answer is that I'll be happy to play with you, but only if you play "responsibly."

What do I mean by "responsibly?"

Simple. First of all, I don't want to see any spamming of search engines. That just abuses the system and it eventually gets caught. If you spam the search engines, you'll get hurt. So be good to yourself and play fair.

Secondly, if you'd like to link to my new web site, I'd prefer that you do it in a way that benefits me. If you do, then I'll be happy to link to your web site in a way that benefits you. Let me elaborate on that a bit.

a) Web pages that carry thousands of links to other sites are what I would call "promiscuous." I don't know what Google calls them, but I'm pretty sure they don't respect a link on a page like that. So if you link to my web site, do it from a page that's not packed with a zillion other links. I'll do the same for you.

b) Not all links are created equal. What I want is for Google to know that my web site is the place to be for all things related to "fiction writing". And the way Google knows that is when it sees that the visible part of the link carries the words "fiction writing" in it. (Remember, there are two parts to a link. There's the visible part that a human sees when they view a page. That part is usually underlined and colored. Then there's the invisible part of the link, with something like "<http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com>". I want the visible part to have the words "Advanced Fiction Writing" in it.

c) Finally, humans also read web pages, not just the search engines! So a link to my page should have a sentence or two that tells the human reader what they'll find on the other end of the link.

If you do those three things for me, then I'll do the same for you. (Assuming you have a legitimate web site, and not one of those yucky sites that deals in human flesh.)

If you don't want to play this link-trading game with me, that's fine. You can play it with any group of friends you want, and it'll be no skin off my nose.

But if you want to play, check out this page on my web site:

http://www.advancedfictionwriting.com/html/afwe_readers.html

I just added this page tonight, so it is embarrassingly empty. It's just a page about the ingenious folks who read this e-zine. You have a chance to say what you like about the e-zine. You also get 25 words to say something about yourself, and you get a link to your own site. See my page for all the annoying details, but I think you've got the main picture.

You scratch my site and I'll scratch yours.

5) What's New At AdvancedFictionWriting.com

In the last month, I've spent a lot of time making my new web site prettier, and not much time adding content to it. Sigh. It's a little sad, but sometimes a pretty face trumps an empty head. My plan is to start filling up that empty head a bit more in the merry month of

May. The one thing I've added lately is an archive for back issues of this e-zine. I hope you'll agree that there's a BIT of content in these things!

In this coming month, I hope to finish moving copies of all my articles on writing over from my personal web site to my new site at AdvancedFictionWriting.com. I have a slew of ideas for new articles, but I want to get the old stuff moved over first.

Just a reminder to all of you. The subscriber list for this e-zine is growing rapidly, drawing me ever closer to the title of Supreme Dictator for Life and First Tiger. Each time somebody joins this list, the name of the person who referred them gets added to a hat. When the subscriber count reaches 2000 names, I'll celebrate by holding a drawing. The winner will get one of those sparkly new 512 MB iPod Shuffles from Apple.

By the way, the great majority of you were referred by Google or Yahoo or by various email lists or you just found me web surfing. None of those count (I am NOT going to give Google an iPod!), and neither do those of you who reported that you referred yourself. So the hat only contains a few hundred names. All of which means that your odds may be better than you think.

6) Coming Soon . . .

In next month's issue of this e-zine, I'll have another article on the craft of writing fiction and still more on Tiger Marketing. And I'll interview "Creative Lee" Silber, author of a number of books on right-brained writers. I tend to be balanced between my hemispheres, but a lot of writers are strongly right-brained (creative and disorganized) and Lee has some good stuff for right-brainers. I met Lee a few years ago at the San Diego Book Awards night, where my book OXYGEN won an award for best suspense novel and one of Lee's books won the Theodor Geisel (Dr. Seuss) Award, a very prestigious award that goes to the best book of the year across all categories. Lee's a sharp guy and I enjoy picking his brain on marketing ideas.

See ya then!

7) Steal This E-zine!

This E-zine is free, and I personally guarantee it's worth ten 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, 2005.

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.

At the moment, there are two such places to subscribe:
My personal web site: <http://www.RSIngermanson.com>
My new web site: <http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com>

That's all for this issue! See ya next month!

Randy
