
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 (more than 300 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:

In the last month I've been thinking about what I'd like my web site and e-zine to focus on in the next year or so. And I decided that I want to focus on "Best Practices for Fiction Writers." I'll detail what I mean

in this issue.

I took an informal poll on my blog this month to find out what my readers are MOST interested to learn more about. The winner by a whisker was "time management for writers." So we've spent a couple of weeks discussing that on my blog. I'll summarize that discussion here.

If you want to see what we're talking about NOW on my blog, join us Monday through Friday at:
<http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com/blog>

Sooner or later, most novelists think about working with a publicist. In this issue, I interview Rebeca Seitz, a publicist who does ONLY fiction. Do you know what a publicist can -- and can't -- do for you? Read on.

2) Using Best Practices

Years ago, I worked for a small startup company in San Diego that specialized in radically speeding up various engineering processes. I spent a couple of years as the technical lead on a team that built a piece of software that could design a certain piece of industrial equipment in hours instead of months.

Sounds impossible, but it's true. We were building it for a company that typically budgeted about 13 man-weeks to design their equipment. The software we wrote could do that design in an afternoon.

That's what you call a productivity boost.

But here's the ironic thing: Our methods of designing and writing the software weren't very productive.

As a result, the project almost got cancelled. About five times. It cost a lot more to write the software than we expected. It took a lot longer than we expected. (And it worked a lot better than anyone expected.) In the end, the project was a roaring success. But getting to the end was a rough haul.

That was the first large team effort I'd been a part of, so I really didn't know any better. I just assumed that my managers knew what they were doing. They assumed they knew what they were doing too. But they didn't. So we had one crisis after another, and there were some horrible all-nighters that we pulled.

About that time, I got interested in learning how to do things better. Working all night, or all weekend, isn't any fun. Especially when you were hoping to do other things such as eat or sleep or write novels.

So I started studying books on how to build software better. I learned that there are "Best Practices" for managing a project, for designing a system, for developing a product, for testing it, and all that.

Using "Best Practices" won't guarantee you a flaming success. Talent still counts. Cleverness still counts. Imagination still counts.

Using "Best Practices" just gives your talent and cleverness and imagination a fighting chance. It's a brutal world out there, and if you're competing with other people who are using their time and energy and money efficiently, then you're hobbling yourself if you're using inefficient methods.

Writing isn't engineering, of course. But you can still make decisions that speed up your writing. You can use methods that make you more creative. You can develop skills that save you money.

"Best Practices" typically save you money, make your writing better, or help you write faster. In some golden cases, they can do all three.

For the next few months, I'm going to be blogging about various "Best Practices" that I've come across in fiction writing. Of course, my readership has a combined intelligence way higher than mine, so I'll also be learning from my loyal blog readers. I hope you'll join us, but even if you don't, I'll be summarizing the results here on the e-zine every month.

My reasons for doing this are purely selfish. I want to get better at my writing. I want to be more organized. I want to be more creative. I want to market myself better. But I don't want to work any harder, because I'm a lazy cuss, just like you.

By the way, I want to make it clear that "Best Practices" aren't magic. They typically take some effort to learn. And each one typically makes just a small improvement. But those small improvements MULTIPLY.

I'll give you an example of the power of small improvements. Suppose you made a tiny improvement each day -- just 1% improvement. Over the course of a year, you might think that you'd improve 365%, which would be pretty good.

But you'd actually improve a lot more than that. Because of the compounding effect, a 1% improvement every day for a year would give you an improvement of 3678%! It's probably impossible to keep improving every day by a whole 1%, but you can see the value of continuous small improvements.

Anyway, that's the mantra: Continuous small improvements

by adopting "Best Practices." Are you game for that? I am.

One other thing I should make clear is that there can be more than one "Best Practice" for a given task. When I studied up on software engineering, I found that there were about a dozen ways to design a large system. A couple of those ways were awful. (Our managers were using one of them.) Several of them were mediocre. Several were good. And a few were excellent -- they were "Best Practices."

Typically, when you launch a big software project, you look at the available "Best Practices" and choose the one that is likely to work best in your situation, with the project you have, with the team you have, with the money you have.

The important thing is to choose methods that generally work well and avoid methods that generally don't work well. Just be aware that what works best for your buddy won't necessarily work best for you.

I have started a new "Best Practices" section on my web site, where I will be writing a series of articles on "Best Practices" for many different aspects of fiction writing. I've put together a list of topics on that page that I hope to cover in coming months. Take a look and let me know if you have other topics you'd like to see.

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

In the next article, I'll talk about some significant improvements I've made recently in learning to manage my time better.

3) Time Management for Writers

I've been working on my time-management skills for at least the last year and a half. If you've been reading this e-zine long, you'll recall that I've chronicled my struggle to use my time better. I'm way ahead of where I was two years ago.

In the last couple of months, I've made some substantial improvements, and I'd like to talk about those here. I haven't reached Time Management Nirvana yet, but I can see a clear improvement in how much I'm getting done and a clear reduction in my stress levels.

That's my measure of success. And the system I'm using is set up to guide you in making continuous improvements.

From what I've seen, all time management systems tell

you the same basic ideas. You need to figure out your goals, prioritize them, make out an action plan, take action, and get past any obstacles that pop up.

Duh, that's really simple.

But if it's so simple, why isn't everyone doing all that?

I can't speak for everyone, so I'll tell you the problems I've had in doing all that:

- * I have too many goals.
- * They're all high priority.
- * Real life keeps intruding.
- * The big picture gets lost in the details.
- * It's a hassle to keep the action plan up to date.
- * My goals keep changing.

I developed a system last year to help me keep track of the big picture and the little picture at the same time. It was a good idea and it helped me a lot, but I was doing it on paper, and I had no incentive to prioritize.

Over the last few months, I've realized that I really wanted software to do this stuff. Paper is a hassle. The one advantage paper has is that it's cheap, whereas software can be expensive. So I was hoping to find cheap software to do it.

And I wanted software that forced me to set priorities, because otherwise everything is "Highest Priority," which really means that nothing is.

I found a web-based software system that does all that. I'm sure there are other systems, but this is the one I've been using. It's free. It works well. It forced me to set priorities. And it walks me through a daily routine to figure out what to do each day.

If it's free, how can it be any good? Why would anyone create a valuable product and let you use it for free?

The answer to that is simple. They give it away for free to encourage you to use it. They make it work well to encourage you to buy other products they make that aren't free. Their plan worked, because I started using the free time-management software and then I bought one of the followup products.

I like the product. I use it every day. It works for me.

The only thing I don't like is the name: "Simpleology". To me, that smacks of "simplistic" and in my world, real life is complex, not simplistic. So I don't like the name, and that's tragic. The key point is what I said above: I like the product and I use it every day and it works for me.

Simpleology comes with a 20-day training course that walks you through the basic concepts of time management. They simplify it way down. I found it too slow and zipped through the course in a few days. Then I started using the tools.

The tools work very well. There's one that helps you define your goals. It asks you questions about what you want in life. What would make your life perfect? A terrific job? A Ferrari? A fabulous body? A deep spiritual life? A huge house? Great relationships? A published novel? All the things you think would make you happy, type those in. The system will remember them all for you, and you can make changes whenever you feel like it.

OK, great, you've got a bunch of high-level goals. Pick one.

That's the thing I love about Simpleology. The system is set up so you CAN'T pick more than one major target at a time. The ultimate plan, of course, is to reach all your goals -- or else drop them if you decide that you really don't want them.

But FOR NOW, pick one of your goals as your current Long Term Target. Pick the one that means the most to you right now. Maybe it's to write a best-selling novel. Yes, of course, it's to write a best-selling novel.

Now what?

The answer is to make an action plan to reach that goal. How do you do that? Simpleology gives you a nice little tool to figure it out. Basically, you work backwards from where you want to be to where you are now. Map out the big steps along the way. Which is obvious, but sometimes it's easy to forget the obvious. Simpleology reminds you to do the obvious stuff.

Now pick the first step. That is your Medium Term Target. How do you achieve that? You will typically need to take several smaller steps. Make a list. Choose the first one. That is your Short Term Target.

Hit that target. Then hit the next one. And so on. When you reach your Medium Term Target, cross it off and choose the next. If you keep doing this, you'll eventually reach your Long Term Target or abandon it.

So far, so normal. Everybody knows to do all this. But for various reasons, a lot of us get side-tracked. Life happens. It's easy to lose focus.

What I like about Simpleology is that it keeps you on focus. Every day, you work through a daily planning routine. You make a list of all the "stuff" in your life that needs doing, either now or later. Trips to the dentist, changing the oil, dry-cleaning the cat.

Once you've made that list, decide what to do with it. If it's gotta be done today, then put it on the Daily Target list. If it should be deferred to later, save it off to your Mental Lock Box. No worries -- you've got it stored where you can always find it.

Now look at your daily list a little harder. Can you delegate stuff to someone else? If so, that makes you more efficient. Delegate it and push that task into your Delegation Station. That way, you can make sure you don't lose track of it.

Look at your Short Term Target. What action can you take TODAY to help you reach that target? Add that to your daily list. Simpleology is action-oriented. It constantly encourages you to take action to get closer to your goal. Even if it's a small action, it's an action. Do it.

During the course of the day, as you do things, you check them off the list. If you think of some cool thing that you want to do, add it to your "Dream Catcher." Tomorrow when you do your daily routine, you'll see everything in your Dream Catcher, and you can either do it or delegate it or defer it till later.

Of course, you could do all this yourself on paper, and it'll only cost you the price of the paper. I prefer to use the software, because that doesn't cost me a dime, and it's just easier than messing with paper.

The funny thing is that I knew about Simpleology for several months before I started using it. I was put off by that name. Dummy me. A name is just a name. The tools are what matter.

I have to say that I love the Simpleology tools. (I still don't like the name, but I can deal with that.) I use the tools every single day. They keep me focused. They tell me when I'm getting sidetracked.

And I know with certainty that I'm working as fast as possible to reach the one goal that's most important to me right now. That happens to be "Become a best-selling novelist." That's my goal, and I have an action plan to reach it.

If you want to check out Simpleology 101 (the free time-management course and tools), click this link: <http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com/links/s101.php>

If you have used Simpleology and you know of a system that works BETTER, then email me to let me know, especially if it has a cool name. (But only if you've used BOTH systems. I want to hear direct comparisons from real users.)

See, I'm looking for "Best Practices." And right now, Simpleology is my "Best Practice" for time management.

But if there's a better one, then I want to know about it. If I find one, I'll tell you about it.

It's all about continuous improvement.

4) Interview With a Publicist

Sooner or later, just about every novelist thinks about hiring a publicist. What can a publicist do for you that you can't do for yourself? Is it worth the time, energy, and money to work with a publicist?

This month I'm interviewing a publicist about whom I've heard very good things from multiple sources. Rebeca Seitz works in a very narrow niche -- Christian fiction -- which has been one of the fastest growing sectors in the publishing world for several years now.

Rebeca Seitz is founder and president of Glass Road Public Relations, a publicity firm dedicated solely to representing works of entertainment written from a Christian worldview.

You can learn more about her and her company at:
<http://www.GlassRoadPR.com>.

On to the interview . . .

Q: What can a publicist do for a novelist that the novelist can't do for himself?

A: Have you ever sat down by a lady with a new baby and thought, "Okay, all babies are cute, but that baby is only cute on the inside"? Media representatives have been in the same boat, metaphorically speaking of course. They answer the phone and Jane Author is there, talking about her latest release and how beautiful it is -- all newborn and wide-eyed and perfect. So he says to send it on and he'll take a look. True to his word, when the book arrives in the mail, he takes a look. And sees a wrinkly, red, scrunched up little thing that kinda resembles a baby...that must be cute on the inside. Wonderful. How is he going to tell this nice lady that he doesn't love her baby? He won't. He just won't call her. But then she, being a good author, does her follow up and calls him back. Now he's got to hem and haw and beat around the bush. He's really uncomfortable. So, why do you need a publicist? Because it's not uncomfortable to say to the stranger sitting on your other side, "Hey, buddy, did you see that baby? Only a mother's love..."

Q: Tell us about the process of a publicity campaign.

How long in advance of the book's release date do you start, and what's going on during the months up to launch day?

A: We begin our campaigns about six months before the book is set to ship from the publisher's warehouse. At the six month mark, we read the book, talk to the author about branding and imagery to communicate that branding, create press materials, form media lists, and test pitches. Think of this as the bright, sunny day where we're sitting on the front porch and dreaming up a nice, long dinner party.

At five months, we serve appetizers. We pull the trigger on long-lead media by mailing out press packets and advance copies of the book to all the long-lead media contacts on our list. We email and call these media...a lot. Their reviews will flavor the next course.

At three months, the full-course comes out. Contact is made to short-lead media outlets, which can include internet, blog tours, newspapers, radio, television, and newsletters. Advance books and press packets go out. Those press packets may now have been sprinkled with the flavoring of early reviews garnered from long-lead outlets. We email and call these media...a lot.

For anyone who's been to an extended dinner party, you realize the main course can take a good hour in and of itself. Full of rich conversation and savoring of the dish. Likewise, this part of the campaign is most lengthy. We keep talking to all the media outlets, arranging interviews (re-arranging interviews when the author or media rep inevitably calls to cancel or forgets the day and time), getting copies of all the reviews and interviews, sending thank you notes to everybody that gave us coverage, using that coverage to get more coverage at new media outlets, and generally talking to everybody and anybody about the book and author.

Then the book hits store shelves. And it's dessert, sweet dessert. The fruits of our labor come forth and the public begins to see the reviews and interviews we've spent months securing. This will, hopefully, continue for 6-8 weeks. At the 8 week mark, we retire to the living room. We talk through the highs and lows of the meal we just had -- what worked well together, what didn't. And we reminisce on that perfect interview or review, the one that will help the author even into his/her next campaign. And we smile.

Q: I believe that a publicist can only help a novelist who is publicisable. Can you tell us what makes a novelist publicisable, and how we can make ourselves more publicisable?

A: First, I've decided to name my next pet publicisable. That's so much better than Fluffy. Second, I think we can help any author. Introvert. Extrovert. Personable. Not personable. Publicisable. Nonpub..well, that's just too long of a word. A good publicist can tailor a campaign to suit the author's personality and disposition. He/she can ferret out a publicisable component of anything - a salt shaker, a speck of dirt, a dust bunny. Authors who have the ability to engage an interviewer, to be entertaining and thought-provoking, will probably end up with more and better coverage. They'll get interviews. And one interview breeds another, breeds another, breeds another. Interviews sell books. But for the author whose tongue blows up to Mt Everest proportions when the camera's red light comes on, there's still hope (not for your tongue, that'll need to be removed surgically). The publicist should simply focus on securing reviews of the work rather than engaging the author in media relations. For those outlets that insist on an interview, there's the fabulous world of email -- no threatening red lights, no need to perform on command.

Q: Part of the publicity game involves writing press releases. What goes into writing a press release, and what makes it succeed or fail?

A: Writing press releases is one of my favorite aspects of being a publicist. Press releases -- whether print or electronic -- have thousands of opportunities to express your brand. From the color of your text to your font choice, pay attention to the thoughts and feelings your visual choices evoke. Are they in line with your book? If you write humorous fiction, why put your text in boring old Arial? If you write scary suspense, how about a font that isn't familiar to my eye? Just as it was when crafting your story, word choice is supremely important when crafting your press release. (Which is why the publicist must read the book to write the press release well.) If your story is lyrically written, then so, too, should your press release be lyrically written. If your story is choppy, your press release should be choppy. The press release is a representation of your work and your brand. Make sure you have consistency from one to the other. And, because the publicity gods will steal my chocolate in the nighttime if I don't say it, don't forget to include the following on your press release: contact name, contact phone, contact email, book title, author, ISBN, book release date, publishing house, price, page count, and trim size.

Q: Have you got a favorite success story of a novelist you worked with who got great publicity and beat the publisher's expectations?

A: Oh, yeah! We've got a few of these. They're the ones

we sit in the living room and smile over. :) A few months ago, we were told of one publishing house's experience with GRPR. We were given two authors. They were the only two authors we had ever worked with at this particular publishing house. Those two authors tripled the sales of every other fiction author at their house by the end of our campaigns. At another publishing house, one of our clients doubled their first-year projections in the first three months. Now, please don't hear me saying (or read me typing) that GRPR is going to double or triple your sales. I'll be the first to admit that the success of a book hinges on many factors, some of which are shrouded in the mystery of the consumer's psyche. But, in so far as we can measure it, publicity sells novels. Especially publicity at a grass-roots level.

Q: Everybody in publishing talks about the mystical power of "word-of-mouth" for promoting books. What creates word-of-mouth, and how can you keep it rolling, once it starts up?

A: Ah, yes, word-of-mouth. A recent article I read said that 25% of book buyers purchased a book because a friend told them about it. The only factor more influential in their purchasing decision was previous familiarity with the author's name. (Which is why, henceforth, you can call me Jom Grishalm.)

Word-of-mouth isn't really a mystery. The reason more folks don't have it is simple: it requires work. Lots and lots of work with lots and lots of media outlets. Which leads to the reason I think more publicists don't handle fiction. You do all that work -- and the hits aren't sexy.

Since every eyebrow in the room just went up, allow me to explain. Numerous authors (the majority?) dream of the day they'll sit on Oprah's couch and be lauded as entertaining, witty, wonderful, and likable. Or they fantasize about the questions Matt Lauer will have prepared after staying up all night - captivated by their story. So, when Podunk News calls up and wants an interview, the author isn't really jazzed. "Podunk News? Are you kidding me? Isn't that the free thing you get at the grocery store? Why am I wasting my time with that?"

But Great Aunt Edna picks up Podunk News every Sunday, when she makes her trek to the grocery store. She likes doing the word search in it. And she tells all the ladies at bingo about that nice author she read about last week who was so interesting. Those ladies, since they can't possibly have Edna be in the know, stop at the bookstore on the way home from bingo and pick up a copy.

Later that week, Aunt Edna's best friend Opal calls her granddaughter two states over and, in the midst of

catching up, mentions this book she just finished reading. "I'll send you a copy, sweetheart. You'll just love it." Sweetheart is sure she won't (Grandma Opal reads the strangest books), but when it arrives and she glances at the back cover copy, she thinks maybe it's worth a second look. And she reads the book. And tells her friends.

The difficulty with w-o-m is that you have to talk to hundreds of Podunk News folks to get the brush fires started. Wouldn't it be easier to just talk to Matt for 2 minutes and cover the whole country? It might be, yes. But Matt's got a handful of slots each year and about two of those are open to novelists. And while you're at home waiting on Matt to call you back, I'm getting an author on the phone with the reporters at fourteen Podunk News outlets.

Randy sez: Thanks, Rebeca, for answering my questions! You've given ME a lot to think about, and I hope you've done the same for my readers.

Gotta run...Podunk News is on the other line!

5) What's New At AdvancedFictionWriting.com

In October, I shuffled my task list around to reflect my real priorities. I'm working hard on a proposal for my next novel. I spent a couple of weekends teaching at two regional conferences in my area.

I also ran a series of teleseminars with guest expert Mary Byers on how writers can generate revenue while promoting their books through public speaking. Mary gave me several good ideas that I've put on my list for early next year.

An interesting project came up late in October that was a now-or-never type thing. It meant putting several other things on hold for a couple of weeks, but it was a tremendous opportunity to do something cool for the world. I decided that it fit in well with my long-term plans, so I went for it. I'm not allowed to say much about it, so I can't talk about it just yet. In a couple of months, I'll reveal all.

6) Steal This E-zine!

This E-zine is free, and I personally guarantee it's worth at least 4316 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, 2007.

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>

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Randy Ingermanson
Publisher, Advanced Fiction Writing E-zine
