
The Advanced Fiction Writing E-zine

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Circulation: 19481 writers, each of them creating a
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 (more than 500 of you signed up in January), 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 at the bottom 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.

* Have you ever sat watching your computer while it seemed to be frozen in thought? Ever wondered what it was doing while the seconds ticked by? Find out, in my article, "Does Multitasking Make You Stupid?"

* Characters are supposed to be like real people, but in one respect, they need to be unlike most people. Can you guess what that is? I reveal all in "The Path of Least Resistance."

* Many writers believe that your best marketing tool is strong writing. If that's true, then your first chapter is absolutely critical to your marketing plan. This month, I'll analyze two brilliant first chapters by published novelists to see what makes them shine in "A Killer First Chapter."

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

2) Organizing: Does Multitasking Make You Stupid?

Computers are faster and smarter and more efficient than ever. They run at gigahertz speeds, using gigabytes of memory, giving you giga power to get things done.

Even so, once in a while, most machines seem to freeze for several seconds, stuck in some mysterious inner world that you know nothing about.

If they're so fast and so smart, why should they ever freeze like that?

There are several reasons, but one common reason is that your computer is multitasking -- it's doing several things at once, and it's gotten its scheduling out of whack. It's forgotten to get back to you, at least for a while.

Multitasking is usually a wonderful thing, especially on modern machines with multiple brains. A well-programmed computer with several CPUs can work dramatically faster than a computer with only one, all

other things being equal.

The problem is that it's tricky to take account of all possibilities. Once in a while, your computer gets itself tied in a knot and it zones out on you, even with multiple brains. Multitasking occasionally makes your computer stupid.

It's dangerous to make a direct analogy between computers and human brains, because they really aren't the same thing. But it does appear that multitasking makes us stupid too.

Let's be clear about one thing -- the human brain is a fantastic computing device, capable of doing enormously complex calculations, especially in image-processing and in intuitive situations where logic isn't enough. So when I use the word "stupid" here, I mean it in a relative sense.

Multitasking makes us less sharp than we would be if we were focusing on only one thing.

Most times, this doesn't matter. Most people most days can walk and chew gum at the same time, and talk on the phone and consume oxygen and watch the ducks build snowmen.

But notice one thing -- of the five things I just listed, all but talking on the phone are pretty automatic and don't require conscious thought. You can walk without thinking about it. Ditto for chewing gum. Ditto oxygen. Ditto the ducks -- unless they really are building snowmen. If that's the case, as soon as your consciousness takes note of the snowmen, the phone discussion is going to shift direction radically.

And that's the point. Once one of your tasks percolates up to the conscious level, you lose the ability to focus on any of the others.

If you Google the phrase, "Does multitasking make you stupid," you'll find an amusing array of articles to choose from. (It's best to read these one at a time.) Here are some of the things you'll learn:

- * When you're trying to switch rapidly between several tasks that take conscious thought, you lose efficiency. A lot of efficiency -- as much as 30% to 50%.

- * Some studies show that when you're focusing on a task that takes a lot of concentration, an interruption that breaks your focus can cost you about 20 minutes of lost focus. This means that if you get interrupted more often than every 20 minutes, you might NEVER actually get into a deeply focused, productive state.

- * Multitasking can actually lower your performance on IQ tests -- by about 10 points. Smoking a joint only costs you 4 points. So if you have to choose between

multitasking and marijuana, the choice should be clear, although your boss and your government probably see things differently. Bosses and governments love multitasking.

When people say that "multitasking makes you stupid," all of the above is what they mean.

So what's a busy writer to do? You can't shut off the world, can you?

No, but you can shut off some parts of the world. If you're doing something that takes concentration (such as writing fiction), you can take a few steps to make yourself more productive for a well-defined period of time while you focus:

- * Unplug the phone or disable it or feed it to the dog. Do what it takes.

- * Close your e-mail program or at least disable it from doing those useless automatic checks every five minutes. The world is not going to end if you don't get e-mails instantly.

- * Shut down all instant-messaging, texting, or anything else that can interrupt you.

- * Get a clock with a timer and set it for 50 minutes of uninterrupted writing. Then write.

You can do a lot in 50 minutes of quality, productive, uninterrupted, non-multitasking time. An awful lot.

Many writers find that they write more productively when they're listening to music. Some writers can't listen to vocal music but they thrive on instrumental music. I'm the opposite -- instrumental music bores me into a potato-like state, but I can write 1000 words per hour with the right kind of vocal music.

Oddly enough, certain European heavy metal groups work best for me. I have no idea why, but it's a fact that just about any song by Nightwish or Hammerfall or Dragonforce makes me more productive. I discovered them on Pandora.com, a music streaming web site which is smart enough to learn what kind of music you like and bring you more of it.

If music gets you rolling, then find out what works best and use that. Load up your favorite music on your computer, or log into Pandora.com, or just turn on the radio, and then pour out the words.

Writers often ask me what my secret is for being so productive. If I have a secret, it's this:

Singletasking makes you smart.

3) Creating: The Path of Least Resistance

I've been reading a book on creativity lately, THE PATH OF LEAST RESISTANCE, by Robert Fritz. He's a musician who teaches people how to be creative and how to live life creatively.

Like everybody else who ever wrote a book, Fritz is admired by some people (just read his many five-star Amazon reviews to see what I mean) and is not admired by others (he gets a couple of one-star reviews).

The book is a self-help book and tends to have plenty of theory and anecdotal evidence, but it's not the sort of book that gets into empirical testing, so I don't know what psychologists and cognitive scientists would say about his ideas.

Speaking as a novelist though, I rather like what he has to say about how people can live their life creatively, because it highlights what makes a good character good in fiction.

Fritz says that most people most of the time do what is easiest for them. (Hence the title -- people usually follow the "path of least resistance" in getting through life.)

Unfortunately, according to Fritz, most people are trapped by their circumstances. They wind up being either "responsive" or "reactive."

In his terminology, "responsive" means that they follow the rules and let circumstances grind them down. "Reactive" means that they break the rules and let circumstances grind them down. Either way, people in "reactive-responsive mode" are letting circumstances run and ruin their life.

Creative people, on the other hand, live above circumstances. Yes, of course circumstances still affect them, but according to Fritz, creative people don't get ground down because they follow a simple strategy. At the risk of being simple-minded, I'll boil it down to these steps:

- * Creative people make a decision about what they want to achieve
- * Creative people realistically assess where they are right now
- * Creative people strategically plan how to get there from here
- * Creative people take action to get what they want

Fritz says that creative people, just like

"reactive-responsive" people, follow the path of least resistance. But because creative people are guided primarily by their vision, rather than reacting or responding to circumstances, their path of least resistance leads them to achieve their vision.

You may think that is just starry-eyed nonsense or you may think that is brilliant good thinking. No matter. The important thing, as a fiction writer, is to recognize that strong characters follow exactly those steps in a story.

I have a theory that every good model of fiction writing has to pass the "Star Wars test." If the model works for the movie Star Wars, then it has a chance to be right. If it doesn't work for Star Wars, then it's almost certainly wrong.

Let's apply the Star Wars test to see if good characters are like the creative people Fritz is describing.

In Star Wars, Luke Skywalker is trapped in circumstances that he doesn't much like but which he seems powerless to break out of. He wants to go off to military school and become a great pilot like his Daddy. But he can't, because his uncle needs him on the farm. Luke tries to follow the rules and do what uncle wants, but it frustrates him.

Then along come a couple of droids in Luke's life. One of them goes wandering off and Luke has to break the rules to get it back -- he goes zooming off searching for the droid without telling his uncle.

Bad things happen. Luke gets attacked. He meets a loony old man who claims to have known Luke's daddy. The old guy urges him to leave the planet and deliver the droid with its plans for the Death Star to Princess Leia's people. It's decision time, and Luke is still trapped in reactive-responsive mode and he can't decide. Instead, he dithers. He goes back to the farm. There he finds his uncle and aunt dead -- killed by Storm Troopers.

At this point, Luke breaks free of reactive-responsive mode and does something that creative people do -- he makes a decision. Luke decides to leave the planet, find Princess Leia, and join the Rebellion. That's Step 1 in Robert Fritz's schema for being creative: Decide what it is that you want most in life.

Notice that it's here that the movie becomes a story. Now Luke has a goal. Until this point, all he had was vague desires. But now he's made a decision to pursue those desires to some definite goal.

Also notice that Luke doesn't really angst much about whether the goal is possible or not. Frankly, it seems pretty crazy to go zooming across the galaxy in hopes

of taking down the Emperor. But creative people don't get all fussed about whether their goal is possible. They decide what they want and they make a definite decision to get it.

In the next step (which is pretty short) Luke and old man Kenobi take a look at where they are. They're on the desert planet Tatooine with no money and no transportation. That's a long way from where they want to be. They don't deny that. People in denial are apt to make plans that won't work because they take no account of the circumstances.

I think this is an extremely important point, whether you're trying to live your life or plan your novel. Your ultimate goal may be "impossible" and that's OK. But your immediate goal absolutely **MUST** be possible, and therefore it has to be well-grounded in reality. You can't get from here to there until you've figured out what "here" is and what "there" is. You just can't.

So Luke and Kenobi have followed Step 2 on the road to living creatively. But they don't stop there. They move on to Step 3: making a plan. It's a long-shot plan, and they don't know for sure it'll work, but it's plausible. They decide to sell Luke's vehicle and buy passage to Princess Leia's home planet. They'll deliver the droid to Leia's people and then hook up with the Rebellion. Somehow.

That's not a bad plan. It has a chance of working. It doesn't spell out the whole journey, but it moves them closer to their ultimate goal. It's probably the best plan they could make, given where they are right now.

Now Luke and Kenobi do the one critical thing that all winners everywhere do. They take action. They're not guaranteed to win if they take action. There's a good chance that they'll wind up as roasted chunks of meat floating in deep space.

But they have no chance of reaching their goal if they don't take action. If you're a logician, you'll note that taking action is "necessary but not sufficient."

That's Step 4 on the road to being creative -- taking action.

All of this happens in the first third of the story. The rest of the story can happen **ONLY** because this first third has all four of those crucial steps: Luke makes a decision to pursue a goal, he assesses his current position, he makes a plan, and then he takes action. If you remove **ANY** of those steps, the story collapses.

Now the rest of the story unfolds as it must. Luke and Kenobi pursue their quest, always following the path of least resistance. Circumstances change and they opportunistically react or respond to those new

circumstances in ways that lead them closer to their ultimate goal.

That's the key point: Because they know what they want, circumstances don't block them. Instead, circumstance just reroute them as they follow the changing path of least resistance toward their goal. Because they know what they want, circumstances only bend them, not bind them.

There are only two ways for the story to end. Either Luke reaches his goal, or he dies trying. That's what makes the story of Star Wars work.

Whether you do or don't think THE PATH OF LEAST RESISTANCE is a good way to live your own life, I suggest that it's the only way for your characters to live theirs.

Who knew a self-help book could be so . . . helpful?

For more info on THE PATH OF LEAST RESISTANCE, you can read all about it on Amazon:
<http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com/blinks/fritz/path.php>

4) Marketing: A Killer First Chapter

Some of my author friends loathe and despise the word "marketing." It's common for them to say, "The best marketing is good writing."

I agree with them, sort of. I'm not certain that good writing is the VERY BEST marketing a writer can do, but I'm confident that good writing is PRETTY GOOD marketing.

In the weird world of marketing, "pretty good" can be good enough, because nobody knows what the heck they're doing in marketing anyway. Many of the "great" marketers seem to be people who were successful once on one project for reasons they don't understand, and keep doing that ever after on other projects.

This month I'd like to talk about one aspect of good writing that certainly is good marketing -- writing a killer first chapter.

Some readers will reject a book by its cover, and there's not a thing you can do about that. The cover is your publisher's job. If they create a bad cover, you're at a major disadvantage.

But not all readers are like that. If they like the title, or if they hear good things about your book,

many readers will ignore even a dreadful cover and take a look at the first chapter.

That's YOUR responsibility. You can blame the publisher for the cover, but it's lame to blame them for your first chapter.

A good first chapter does four things well:

- * It makes a contract with the reader
- * It sets a hook in the first sentence
- * It sets a second hook near the end of the first page
- * It sets a third hook at the end of the chapter

Let's talk about each of those in turn, because they're all critical.

First of all, what's a "contract with the reader?"

That's simple. Your book is going to have a certain tone, pacing, style, and genre. Your first chapter should make clear to your reader what that tone, pacing, style, and genre is going to be. Your first chapter is a promise: The rest of the book will be like this one.

Imagine you read the first chapter of a book that has one long, adrenaline-laced car chase that ends with the bad guys driving off a cliff, falling 300 feet, and exploding in flames while the good guy drives off in his Maserati with his arm around a beautiful woman.

If you buy the book hoping for more fast cars and faster women, wouldn't you be outraged to find that the rest of the book is a slow small-town romance set in Milford?

Yes, you would, because Milford and Maseratis don't mix.

Your first chapter is a contract with your reader that says, "If you like this chapter, you'll like the rest of the book, because it's going to be similar."

Once you write the contract and your reader signs it, don't violate it.

Of course your first chapter should NOT telegraph the rest of the story. Your reader doesn't want you to give away the ending in chapter one. Your reader wants a promise of a certain tone, pacing, style, and genre. Period.

On to the next thing. What's a hook, and why do you need three of them?

A hook is something that makes your reader say, "What's going on? What happens next? I've got to read a bit more." That's all a hook has to do.

The reason you need hooks is because your reader always has the option to close the book RIGHT NOW. Early in your book, your reader hasn't yet committed to your story. Early in your book, you need to make the reader commit -- at least to read a bit more.

The reason you need three hooks is because readers have three increasing levels of commitment:

* If your reader likes the first sentence, she'll commit to reading the first page.

* If your reader likes the first page, she'll commit to reading the first chapter.

* If your reader likes the first chapter, she'll commit to the rest of the book. If she's in a bookstore, that's the point at which she buys the book. If she's in the library, it's the point where she puts the book on her checkout list. If she's at a friend's house, it's the point where she asks to borrow the book (or steals it if the friend turns uncooperative).

A hook is generally a sentence or two that DEMANDS the next level of commitment.

Now let's look at two examples of books with strong first chapters and see how well they spell out the contract with the reader and set those three hooks. Note that hooks are tactical, while the contract with the reader is strategic, so I'll discuss the hooks first and then the contract.

Example: THE HUNGER GAMES, by Suzanne Collins.

THE HUNGER GAMES is a young-adult futuristic adventure novel with overtones of romance told in first-person point of view by a teen female protagonist. It's one of the best books I've read in a very long time and I'll definitely read it again.

Hook #1: The first sentence reads like this:
"When I wake up, the other side of the bed is cold."

Analysis: That's a good, solid hook. Obviously, our protagonist is sharing her bed with someone. But who? And why?

The answers come fairly quickly on the first page. Our heroine shares a bed with her little sister Primrose, a fresh-faced innocent kid whom everybody loves. Prim owns the world's ugliest cat, Buttercup, which our heroine once tried to drown.

Hook #2: At the end of the last paragraph on the first page, we find these two sentences:
"Sometimes when I clean a kill, I feed Buttercup the

entrails. He has stopped hissing at me."

Analysis: Yikes, our heroine cleans kills? Why? It sounds like our protagonist is not nearly as sweet and lovable as Prim, but she definitely sounds interesting. What is she killing?

Again, some answers come quickly as the chapter progresses. Our heroine lives in a poor coal-mining town in a poor district of what used to be the USA. Her father is dead, but he left her a bow and she's quite a skilled hunter. It's illegal to hunt outside the town, but she does anyway in order to feed her family. One of her few friends is a boy named Gale whom she often hunts with, splitting the proceeds.

We eventually learn that our heroine has a name, Katniss Everdeen. We learn that Kat isn't romantically interested in Gale, but it's not hard to guess that this might change. Kat is 16 and Gale is 18 and they're friends.

As the chapter progresses, Kat and Gale fish and hunt, then return home for the main event of the day -- the Reaping. One boy and one girl are to be drawn at random from the inhabitants of District 12 to play in the Hunger Games -- a battle to the death between 12 boys and 12 girls from across the nation. The Hunger Games end when only one survivor remains.

Participation in the Reaping is mandatory. Kat shows up, along with Gale and all the other teens in their town. There's a ceremony before the drawing. Speeches. Stupid talk about "honor." Then the drawing . . .

Hook #3: The final sentence of the chapter tells the name of the girl drawn to represent District 12 in the Hunger Games:

"It's Primrose Everdeen."

Analysis: We're prepared for Kat to be chosen. We even expect it. But she isn't. Her innocent, defenseless, weak little sister is chosen instead.

That's the end of the chapter. That's a brilliant hook. If you've read that far and you can close the book, then you have no soul. It's that simple. You HAVE to read on to find out what happens next, even though you know from reading the back cover copy that Kat is somehow going to take her sister's place in a brutal set of modern gladiatorial games that will be televised to the nation.

Contract with the reader: The first chapter is written in first person from the point of view of a fairly cynical but hopeful young woman who is clearly a fighter. Katniss is trapped in a bleak, unfair, dangerous world, but she'll do everything she possibly

can to survive and to make sure her family survives. The pacing is quick and every sentence is well-crafted. The genre is clearly young-adult adventure.

If you are the sort of person who wants either a very slow pace or an adrenaline rocket, then this book isn't for you. If you want all romance and no violence, then skip this book. If you want all fluff and no grit, then you'll be disappointed. The first chapter sets the stage for what's to follow, and if you like the first chapter, you'll love the book.

All of which reminds me that I really want to read this book again.

Example: THE KITE RUNNER, by Khaled Hosseini.

THE KITE RUNNER is a literary novel set in the years between 1975 and the present, told in first-person by a young man who was born in Afghanistan and later came to the US.

Hook #1: The first sentence reads like this, in a chapter datelined December 2001:

"I became what I am today at the age of twelve, on a frigid overcast day in the winter of 1975."

Analysis: This is clearly going to be a retrospective novel, working through some coming-of-age issues. The immediate questions any reader would ask are these: What are you today? What happened in 1975? Why don't you sound happy about it?

It's a good solid hook. As the page progresses, we quickly learn that the answers aren't going to come quickly. There's a mystery to be unraveled here. But we also learn that the protagonist is going to face his past, because it's coming back at him now, 26 years later.

In the final paragraph of the first page, the protagonist gets a phone call from Rahim Khan, an old friend in Pakistan, asking him to come visit. Our hero doesn't say yes and he doesn't say no. He goes for a walk in Golden Gate Park in San Francisco. There he sees some kites, and that reminds him of an old, jagged memory:

Hook #2: The paragraph ends with the rather cryptic sentences:

"And suddenly Hassan's voice whispered in my head: For you, a thousand times over. Hassan the harelipped kite runner."

Analysis: This raises a LOT of questions. Who's Hassan? What would he do a thousand times over? What's a kite runner? And what's this got to do with 1975?

The rest of the chapter is just one more paragraph. We get another snippet of the phone conversation earlier, Rahim Khan's final comment before he hung up: There is a way to be good again.

That's intriguing. The chapter is short and it ends with the final hook:

Hook #3: The chapter ends with two sentences that set the stage for the rest of the book:

"I thought of the life I had lived until the winter of 1975 came along and changed everything. And made me what I am today."

Analysis: This raises again the questions that were first raised in the first hook. What is our hero today? What changed in 1975? Why isn't he happy? Will he find a way to be good again?

Contract with the reader: The first chapter is extremely short, just three long paragraphs told in narrative summary. Clearly this is a literary novel about redemption (or lack of it). The pace is going to be measured, the language will be thought-provoking, and the style elegant.

You learn several things in the first chapter: If your idea of a good book is measured in body count, decibels, or steamy scenes, then the first chapter tells you to look elsewhere, because this is not the droid you're looking for. If you insist on getting a happy ending, you know in advance that none is guaranteed here, although one is possible. If you want authentic Afghanistan, then you can tell right away that you'll get it here.

Now what about the first chapter of your novel? What's the hook in the first sentence? What's the hook at the bottom of the first page? What's the hook at the end of the first chapter? What contract do you offer to your reader?

Can you improve your hooks? Can you clarify your contract?

Don't get hung up on perfection here. The question is whether you can improve what you've got right now. If you can, then do so.

If you can't, set these questions aside for another day. You'll be a better writer next month and next year. Like Scarlett O'Hara, you can think about it later.

5) What's New At [AdvancedFictionWriting.com](http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com)

My new book, *WRITING FICTION FOR DUMMIES*, began shipping in late November and is now in bookstores just about everywhere. The book had a terrific launch and spent several days in the top 1000 on Amazon. You can find out all about *WRITING FICTION FOR DUMMIES* here:
<http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com/info/wffd>

I recently released my latest software product, "Snowflake Pro," which makes it fast, easy, and fun to work through the steps of my well-known Snowflake method for designing a novel. You can find out more about Snowflake Pro at:
<http://www.SnowflakeProSoftware.com>

I teach at roughly 4 to 6 writing conferences per year, depending on my schedule. My schedule for this year is already beginning to fill in.

In March, I will be doing a small group mentoring workshop at the Mount Hermon Christian Writers Conference. More info:
<http://mounthermon.org/adult/professionals/writers-conference>

In late July, I'll be doing another small group mentoring workshop in Oregon. More details when they're available online.

In October, I'll be teaching an all-day series of lectures in Houston. More details soon.

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 9271 times the price. I invite you to "steal" it, but only if you do it nicely . . .

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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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