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The Advanced Fiction Writing E-zine

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Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius.

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"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 800 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.

You can't have a perfect life. Bad things happen outside your control, despite your best planning. But it's your responsibility to make the best of your situation. Want to learn how? Check out "Your Approximately Perfect Life."

For the last couple of months, we've talked about the importance of pacing in a novel. This month we'll continue that discussion by looking at any writer's essential tool -- the much maligned narrative summary. Do you know when you should TELL rather than SHOW?

Marketing is hard work. Every writer wants to get the biggest bang for their marketing dollar. Want to know the absolute, foolproof, guaranteed way to get the best return on your marketing time, energy, and money?

In a bonus column this month, I talk about the Eleventh Commandment for novelists. Can you guess what it is?

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

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## 2) Organizing: Your Approximately Perfect Life

There are a lot of horrible things that can ruin your life.

You could get hit by a bus. You could lose all your money in a financial crisis. Your spouse could leave you. A child of yours might die. You might get an incurable disease. You might lose your sanity.

The list is long. If you want more examples, read tomorrow's newspaper or the biblical book of Job or anything written in between. There are a LOT of ways that life can go wrong.

You have very little control over most of these potential disasters. You can take out life insurance, diversify your investments, refuse to invest emotional capital in your family, and get the best medical insurance, but none of these are going to eliminate all

your risk.

That's the bad news.

The good news is that you do have some control over your life. There is one point at which you have a whole lot of control.

You get to choose what your ideal life would be like.

I'm not saying that you get to choose whether you'll ever be able to live out that ideal life. But you do get to decide what your perfect life would be.

I like to talk about defining "your approximately perfect life." This just means figuring out what "your perfect life" would look like, but always remembering that very bad things can happen.

Here's the thing: What if none of those Very Bad Things happen? Or what if none of them happen in the next five years? Or the next fifty? Do you want to waste those five years or fifty years worrying about what might happen?

Isn't it better to make those years great? What would it look like for them to be great? What would it look like for them to be the best possible years?

A couple of years ago, when I began using the Simpleology web site to help me manage my life, I wrote down five things that would define "my approximately perfect life." These are my "Major Targets" (to use the Simpleology language.)

As I noted above, I'm all too aware of the fragility of life. It's possible that I won't ever reach all five of my Major Targets. But life is all about partial credit. Reaching even one of them would be great. Getting most of the way there on all five of them would be extraordinary.

The important thing is to know what your Major Targets are.

Why? Because defining those Major Targets gives you direction in life. They define what "success" means for you, personally. They tell you how to know if you're making progress or falling behind.

And furthermore, just defining your Major Targets helps you to achieve them.

Now be careful here. There is a lot of talk these days about how the universe wants to help you achieve your dreams and will deal you great good if you just WANT things.

I doubt that. Honestly, I don't think the universe cares one quantum bit about you. The universe is too

busy expanding and increasing its entropy and doing all sorts of other things that universes do. The universe just doesn't care about you.

But you care about you. The people you love care about you. That's why it's important to know what your Major Targets are -- to spell them out carefully.

Fact is, if you know what your Major Targets in life are, then you're going to take actions to reach them. You will, you opportunistic cuss! And the people you love will take actions to help you too, if only they know what your Major Targets are.

I like to review my own Major Targets every quarter to see if I'm making progress. It's now April, and a quarter of this year is history. So I spent a few minutes earlier this month to take stock.

One of my Major Targets can be measured precisely. I'm happy to say that I moved 5% of the way to that target in the first quarter of this year. That's pretty good progress! If I keep that up for another few years, I'll achieve that Major Target.

The other Major Targets on my list aren't so easy to measure, but I made very significant progress on one of them. I don't think I lost ground on any of the others.

What's your "approximately perfect life" look like? Have you made a list of the things you'd like to have or to achieve or to be that would make your life the one you want?

There are any number of tools to help you define your approximately perfect life. The tool I use isn't perfect (nothing is) but it works for me -- that pesky Simpleology web site:  
<http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com/links/s101.php>

Nothing happens unless you take action. But you can't take any meaningful action until you define your direction. And you'll never have direction until you know what your "approximately perfect life" would look like.

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### 3) Creating: Plot Pacing and Narrative Summary

If there's one thing that any writer is guaranteed to hear too many times, it's the dictum, "Show, Don't Tell."

There is a lot of truth to this rule of thumb. The purpose of fiction is to give the reader a Powerful

Emotional Experience. And the best way to give the reader a Powerful Emotional Experience is by "showing" the good parts, rather than "telling" them.

In recent columns, we've talked about this in some detail. At the points of highest action in the story, you ramp up the pace by spending more words, "showing" everything in brilliant, Technicolor, slow-motion detail.

But, um, what about the boring parts? Should you "show" those too? Some of my agent and editor friends have complained to me in recent years that the manuscripts they are seeing these days "show" too much.

Sometimes, it just plain makes sense to "tell," rather than "show."

The technical term for "telling" is Narrative Summary. In Narrative Summary, you summarize what happens, moving rapidly over time and sometimes distance. Narrative Summary is very efficient, but it isn't a good way to give your reader those emotional hits that every reader wants.

Narrative Summary can be either a good choice or a bad choice. The key question to ask is always, "What is the purpose of this passage?"

If the purpose of the passage is to give the reader some particular Powerful Emotional Experience, then "showing" is probably your best option.

But if the purpose of the passage is to set the stage or to give the reader some essential facts or to get a character across the town or across the country, then "telling" might be the better bet.

One of my favorite examples of "telling" is the opening of Book 1 in the Harry Potter series. The entire first page is all "telling." And it works.

Why does it work? Let's analyze it to see.

As I said above, the key question to ask is: What is the purpose of this passage?

In my view, the central problem early in the Harry Potter series is to get the reader to buy in to the concept that in this ordinary world of ours, there are people who are genetically capable of magic.

The natural question for the reader to ask is why nobody knows about these magical people. The reader needs to be led, step by step, to the conclusion that these magical folk are hiding out. That is the premise for the entire series. If you can't buy into this premise, then the story just won't work for you.

There is a second problem that needs to be solved. The

reader is going to wonder whether these genetically magical people might be the "bad guys." How can the reader be led to the conclusion that the magical folk are the "good guys?"

The solution is to introduce some exceptionally unsympathetic characters, the Dursley family, who are antagonistic to anything weird or magical. In the first chapter, Mr. Dursley sees a number of strange people ("weirdos") and some strange occurrences (owls in broad daylight). One of the weirdos even hugs Mr. Dursley and calls him a Muggle.

The Dursleys respond to this evidence by ignoring it.

The tactical problem is to present all this to the reader as quickly as possible, and then get on to the story. How to do that?

The solution is Narrative Summary, which is very efficient. Let's look at paragraph 1 of the story:

"Mr. and Mrs. Dursley, of number four, Privet Drive, were proud to say that they were perfectly normal, thank you very much. They were the last people you'd expect to be involved in anything strange or mysterious, because they just didn't hold with such nonsense."

Randy sez: In two sentences, we have a broad portrait of the Dursleys. They are "proud," which instantly makes them a bit unlikable. They are "perfectly normal" -- which is pretty unnatural. Most people are abnormal in some way or another.

Most importantly, the Dursleys have no sense of mystery. That is their big failing. Part of being human is to be curious, to be capable of awe, to be inspired by the mysterious. The Dursleys might just as well be robots.

Let's move on to paragraph 2:

"Mr. Dursley was the director of a firm called Grunnings, which made drills. He was a big, beefy man with hardly any neck, although he did have a very large moustache. Mrs. Dursley was thin and blonde and had nearly twice the usual amount of neck, which came in very useful as she spent so much of her time craning over garden fences, spying on the neighbors. The Dursleys had a small son called Dudley and in their opinion there was no finer boy anywhere."

Randy sez: Mr. Dursley sounds quintessentially boring. Mrs. Dursley sounds like a gossip. Dudley sounds like a brat.

Notice that we aren't "told" these things. We deduce them. We are "told" that Mr. Dursley is director of a drill company, and we deduce that he has a boring job.

We are "told" that Mrs. Dursley cranes her neck over fences, spying, and we deduce that she's a gossip. We are told that Dudley is considered the finest boy anywhere, and we deduce that he's as spoiled as last year's milk.

This is a key point in making Narrative Summary interesting -- tell the facts and let the reader make the value judgments. Readers prefer to make value judgments for themselves, rather than being told what to feel about the characters.

Now we come to paragraph 3, and this is the key to making this chapter succeed. Here are the first three sentences:

"The Dursleys had everything they wanted, but they also had a secret, and their greatest fear was that somebody would discover it. They didn't think they could bear it if anyone found out about the Potters. Mrs. Potter was Mrs. Dursley's sister, but they hadn't met for several years; in fact, Mrs. Dursley pretended she didn't have a sister, because her sister and her good-for-nothing husband were as unDursleyish as it was possible to be."

This sets the hook for the reader. Every reader is interested in secrets. Every reader is interested in fears.

When we learn that these wretched Dursleys have a secret fear, we must know it. When we learn that the Dursleys are ashamed of the Potters, we must hear more. When we learn that the Potters are the exact opposite of the Dursleys, we instantly like them, because we already dislike the Dursleys.

So there you have it. In just two and a half paragraphs of Narrative Summary, we are prepared to meet the "weirdo" Potters and to like them. We are prepared for them to be mysterious and different. We are even prepared to understand why they might conceal some of their oddities -- because of people like the Dursleys who hate anything mysterious or strange.

This sets the stage for solving the two problems I discussed above. As the first chapter unfolds, we learn that the Potters have been murdered, but their son Harry has mysteriously survived. And we see a number of "weirdos" who use magic as if it were perfectly natural.

By the end of the chapter, most readers have bought the premise of the story -- there is a hidden society of people with genetically magical abilities. One of those people, young Harry Potter, is extraordinary, even among these magical people. He ought to be dead, but he isn't. Harry is "the boy who lived." Therein lies something deep and mysterious. Why did Harry live?

And the story is launched.

If that isn't an effective use of Narrative Summary, then I don't know what is.

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#### 4) Marketing: Your Biggest Bang For The Buck

I had an insight recently about marketing. These days, most authors know that marketing is important. But if you talk to authors, they have a lot of anxiety over whether the marketing they're doing is effective or not.

All authors want to be as effective as possible in their marketing. All publishers want their authors to be as effective as possible in their marketing.

What do we mean by "effective?" That's very simple. Effective marketing is marketing that's worth the time, the energy, and the money that you put into it.

In the business world, people often talk about "return on investment," otherwise known as "ROI." There is a reasonably precise definition of ROI for a business. The higher your ROI, the better.

We authors can be almost as precise (but not quite) in defining our ROI for our marketing. We have three resources at our disposal -- our time, our energy, and our money.

The return on investment for your marketing time is the amount of money you earn divided by the time you put into your marketing. So if you earn \$100 for an hour's work, then your ROI is \$100 per hour. Not bad!

The return on investment for your marketing money is the amount of money you earn divided by the money you put into your marketing. So if you increase sales of your book by \$1000 by investing \$100 in marketing, then your ROI is 10.

It's not quite clear how to define an ROI for your energy. That's why I noted above that we can't be completely precise in defining ROI.

So now the "obvious" question any author might want to ask is this: How do you get the highest possible ROI for your marketing?

I can answer that very simply. There is a guaranteed, foolproof, absolute best answer to that question. If you want the highest possible ROI on your marketing, then you should . . .

DO NO MARKETING AT ALL.



This may seem absurd, but it is in fact obvious. If you do no marketing, your book will still sell some copies, so you'll earn some money for it. But your ROI for your marketing time will be an infinite number of dollars per hour and your ROI on your marketing money will also be infinite. (When you divide any positive number by zero, the answer is infinity.)

Of course, I'm cheating here. I'm counting the return from your COMBINED efforts of writing and marketing, but I'm only counting the investment of your marketing ALONE.

But I cheated to make a point. The point is that you can't separate your writing time from your marketing time. Time spent on marketing is time NOT spent writing. And vice versa.

So asking how to maximize your ROI on your marketing is asking the wrong question. The right question is how to maximize your ROI on your COMBINED efforts of writing and marketing.

Let's say that you have 40 hours per week to spend. You can spend all 40 hours on writing and 0 hours on marketing. Or you can spend 0 hours on writing and 40 hours on marketing. Or you can split the time any other way you want.

The problem you really want to solve is how best to split your time between the two.

It's a little more complicated because you can also choose to spend some money on marketing, or you can choose to not spend any at all.

How should you split your time and money best?

This may seem like it's a problem that can't be solved. I think there's a rational way to tackle the problem, though.

The first part of the solution is to figure out how much your writing time is worth. Let's say you can write a book in 1000 hours and you can expect to earn \$10,000 from the book. Then your writing time is worth \$10 per hour.

You may not know either of these numbers exactly. That's OK. You can still estimate them reasonably well. It's not that hard to put a guess on how much your writing time is worth.

The second question is how much money to put into your marketing. If you can put a dollar into marketing and know that it'll earn you more than a dollar of extra sales, then it makes sense to put that buck into marketing.

The third question is how much time to put into your marketing. If you put an hour into marketing, then that's an hour you DON'T have for writing, and therefore you've effectively "spent" your hourly wage for writing. So if your writing time is worth \$10, then an hour of marketing "costs" you ten bucks. You had better make sure that your hour of marketing will earn you back at least those ten dollars, or you're wasting time marketing.

There are two extra complications that make this a lot harder.

The first complication is that marketing efforts tend to be "front-loaded" whereas the results of marketing are "back-loaded." You have to pay for your marketing right up front, using either your time or your money. But the results might not show up right away. They might come months later. They might show up years later, as you slowly build your audience.

The second complication is that marketing efforts aren't easy to measure. How much value does a book-signing have? How much does writing a blog post earn you? What about a public speaking opportunity?

As we noted above, it's not that hard to estimate how much your writing time is worth. Estimate that now. Divide the number of hours it takes you to write a book by the amount of money you'll get for the book.

Once you have that number, you are simply going to have make intelligent guesses on the value of various marketing activities.

Suppose you have estimated that your writing time is worth \$50 per hour. Now, when you're asked to go to a booksigning, ask yourself if that booksigning will earn you \$50 for each hour of time you put into it. Likewise, when somebody asks you to do a radio interview. Ditto, when they ask you to speak.

Speaking is special, because generally you get paid to speak and you have a chance to sell your books at the back of the room. Is it any wonder that many of the most successful authors are also speakers? These people are getting a good ROI on their marketing time. (If you want to learn more about how to promote your books by speaking, check out the series of teleseminars that I did with professional speaker Mary Byers on this very topic.)

<http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com/info/mbyers>

What about blogging? Before you spend half an hour blogging, ask yourself if it will earn you at least \$25 in extra sales over your lifetime. If it will, then blog. If it won't, then don't.

This brings me to the latest fad in marketing -- Twitter. At a recent writing conference, I was asked to

be on a panel about internet marketing. It turned out that the other panelists were all avid Twitterers.

I have little doubt that Twittering can be a useful marketing activity, if you know what your marketing goal is. However, I wasn't convinced that any of the Twitterers on the panel knew what their goals were, nor did any of them have a plausible estimate of the ROI for Twittering.

My advice on Twittering is this: Know what you plan to accomplish and estimate how much value Twittering has. Then if it makes sense to Twitter, do so. If not, don't.

That is the same advice that I would give for any marketing activity.

What about you?

Do you know what your writing time is worth? If not, then figure it out now.

Do you have some sort of estimate of what your marketing time is worth? If not, then . . . why the heck are you doing it?

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#### 5) The Novelist's Eleventh Commandment

Ronald Reagan was famous for his "Eleventh Commandment for Republicans" -- Thou shalt not speak ill of a fellow Republican.

I've been thinking about that lately and I think it makes good sense for any community. So the Eleventh Commandment for Novelists is this:

"Thou shalt not speak ill of a fellow novelist."

The reason for this commandment is simple. As novelists, we are all in competition for a limited number of readers. Speaking ill of our fellow novelists carries an inherent conflict of interest. It looks tacky to criticize our competition.

I will readily confess that I've violated this Eleventh Commandment in the past. I teach fiction, and one thing any fiction teacher must do is to show examples of "how to do it" and also "how not to do it."

I have decided recently that there is a right way and a wrong way to do this, and I haven't always done it the right way. From here on in, I intend to do better.

I believe that the right attitude to take is this.

Every author has a particular goal in writing each passage of their novel. That goal sometimes violates those pesky "rules of writing" that we writing teachers love. It is certainly legitimate to show an example of how this or that author has violated the rules. But any such example should include a discussion of why the author might have chosen to violate the rule. And there is just no good reason to impugn that other novelist for making the decision he or she made.

I have not done so well with this Eleventh Commandment in the past. I will strive to do better in the future.

Let me be quick to say that I think the Eleventh Commandment applies only to novelists talking about other novelists. If a book reviewer wants to slam a novel, there's no conflict of interest in doing so. (Unless the book reviewer is also a novelist. There seems to be an inherent conflict of interest for a novelist to be a book reviewer.)

It's tacky and catty for a novelist to slam another novelist in public. It just is. I don't want to be tacky or catty. I just don't.

Will you join me in observing the Eleventh Commandment?

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#### 6) What's New At [AdvancedFictionWriting.com](http://AdvancedFictionWriting.com)

I recently posted the latest installment in my monthly humor column. This month's title is "Agent of Change," in which my plumber Sam has decided to hang up his shingle as a literary agent. Can you guess who he thinks his first client should be? Here's the link:  
[http://www.ChristianFictionOnlineMagazine.com/biz\\_rooney.html](http://www.ChristianFictionOnlineMagazine.com/biz_rooney.html)

I teach at roughly 4 to 6 writing conferences per year, depending on my schedule.

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:

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#### 7) Steal This E-zine!

This E-zine is free, and I personally guarantee it's worth at least 98604 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>

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#### 8) Reprint Rights

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Randy Ingermanson  
Publisher, Advanced Fiction Writing E-zine

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