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Dear Fellow Writer

I hope life is treating you well and that you are happy and stress-free!

In this issue we look at an old chestnut: whether to use the active or the passive voice in fiction. There are good arguments for both but ultimately it's about pace, personal style and appropriateness.

Our featured professional is Robert N Stephenson, a preeminent literary agent based in Adelaide Australia. His plain-speaking, no-nonsense style has brought success to his numerous clients including Tony Shillitoe and Kurt Von Trojan. We're privileged to receive his views on "Getting an Agent." Enjoy.

Active or Passive? It's all in The Voice.

Show don't tell. Show don't tell. Show don't tell.

It's drummed into you, over and over. It's such an accepted wisdom amongst writers that the truth of it is never questioned. So why do best selling writers continually ignore this one cardinal rule?

Good fiction is immediate. You must drag your reader into the story and don't give them a chance to let go - or break the fictive dream.

Using a "passive voice" is often seen as somehow less immediate. Compare the following two scenes:

"Peter was riding his bike down the steep hill road. The chain got caught in his trousers and he fell off, hurting himself."

Hmm, perhaps a little bland - how about:

"Down the steep hill road, Peter rode his bike. Without warning, the chain caught in his trousers. His right leg slammed hard against the back wheel. The bike careened sideways for a split second and quickly overturned. Peter hit the ground, slid against the tarmac, grazing the skin from his

hands and face..."

Obviously, the second is more graphic. The technique of removing qualifiers like "was" and "got" forces the reader (and the writer!) to see the scene in a different way. Generalities become specifics. Passive becomes active. This is good when you want to create exciting and engaging prose.

But what if that's not your intention?

What if you have two 'action' scenes you want to get across, one in the past, one in the present? Is it still appropriate to use an active voice - for both? Take a look at this:

"Bob sneered at the big man with the knife. His mind considered the possibilities. Attack. Back away. Turn and run. No, never. Bob would not be broken. Since the accident, he was too strong for that.

Metal screeched as Bob forced the cutter into the car door. Orange sparks filled the night air. "Not long now," he muttered as he caught sight of Annabel's frightened face behind the windscreen.

The worst happened. Bob's grip slipped and the cutter's blade bounced off the glass, shattering it. Annabel howled as slivers and shards blew into the car. The baby in her arms wailed. His baby.

Bob lurched forward. With both hands, he caught the big man's wrist, whose eyes enlarged with surprise. Bob twisted and the big man yelped. He dropped the knife and Bob kicked it away before he let the big man go and jumped back."

Confusing, isn't it? You have two equally immediate pieces of action, both vying for your attention. In this case it might be better to put some distance on the prior event so that it's still THERE, in Bob's consciousness, but not actually being played out.

In many novels, good authors spend time giving the reader "back-story". This is information that's used to set the scene before the action starts. It's not a sin to do this. Sometimes it's important for pace. For example:

"Father Duncan was a bad man. It was common knowledge amongst his parishioners. His drinking was legendary, as was his foul tongue. Dirk stood at the bar and watched him, wondering whether the other stories were true - the ones whispered by the adults, behind his back.

"What you looking at?" the priest growled and Dirk's gaze hardened. "Never seen a priest take a drink before?"

The first paragraph appears to break the rules - it's all telling. But this is a totally acceptable technique in this context. It's a kind of shorthand - it would take several pages to get the same information across if you stopped the action to show it in real time.

So don't always believe those purists and writing teachers that say, "Show don't tell."

Too MUCH showing and you can lose depth and originality - and end up with the equivalent of TV melodrama. Good literary fiction has always had a liberal dash of telling, even in a 'passive' voice.

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Getting an Agent - An Insider's Report

Robert N Stephenson, Literary Agent

These days, it's far easier to catch the common cold than it is to obtain a suitable agent to represent your work to publishers. All the top agents are closed up - zipped tight - not reading new stuff at all.

Ah! But you have heard about writer X whose first book sold for a squillion dollars through one of the best agents in the biz. How did this happen?

Well it happens in a number of ways. The most common is that an editor saw the work, made an offer to the author who then ran to an agent with the contract, who signed the author and negotiated the deal. Hence, new author added to agents' list. It's always easier to get an agent when you have a contract in your hand.

Another way is through referrals. Remember, in this business it pays to have contacts throughout the industry. What can happen is that someone connected to the industry reads the unpublished author's work, they like it and tell someone else about it, soon agent B wants a look. Ta da! New author added to the closed list of big agent B.

For most writers landing big agent B is near impossible. You submit your query to a few dozen agents, one answers with, "Send me more," you send more and then a polite form-letter saying, "No thanks" lands in your letterbox three months later (and that's a fast reply). Does this sound familiar to you?

Then how DO you get an agent? As an agent who does still look at new writers - increasingly fewer as the weeks go by - I need to be startled by the whole approach to the writing business as well as by the work submitted.

For me, and just about every agent worth his salt, the submitted manuscript needs to drip professionalism while the actual writing has to be better than is currently on the bookstore shelves. There is no point writing as well as published author X, because unlike you, published author X is selling thousands of books while you are unknown. The book you submit to the agent has to be BETTER.

In my years as an agent I have seen some remarkable submissions and some of the poorest writing possible arrive on my desk. I have seen Harry Potter clones, retellings of The Lord of The Rings and bad Stephen King stylists.

These efforts will not influence the agent, they definitely will not influence the publishers - all this stuff has been done before and done many, many times over. As an author you need to strive for freshness in the story you are telling - there are no new ideas, but you can still be fresh with your approach, clever with your writing.

So, the old adage of 'show me something I haven't seen before' still stands true today. Research your market, read extensively in your genre and ensure you are not submitting another clone of what is already out in the market place. Readers are not dumb, and genre readers are amongst the most intelligent readers of all literature - agents know this, publishers know this and now YOU know it. Before sending something to an agent, any agent, be sure that what you are sending them is blindingly brilliant.

Many of the 'lower' agents, myself included, will take on an author whose work is good, but might need some direction. Again, this is getting rare as the whole publishing industry grows tighter each year. Knowing this perhaps still offers some hope to the new writer and all is not lost.

Some simple advice:

When writing a query letter to the agent be short and direct at all times. No full-page explanations of the book, or that you have a cat named Boris, or that you have had a story in the online magazine Xerox. The agent isn't interested.

Open the letter with, "I am a first time author," don't play out the letter and then drop this in on the last line, as this can really p*ss an agent off. If you are willing to mislead them now, they may think you could do it later. Be honest from the outset - it always works in your favor.

So, the letter explains you publishing history, the genre of your novel, a very brief outline of the novel's content - one short paragraph. Include all contact details including a self addressed and stamped envelope.

The actual chapter submission with synopsis (only a two page synopsis at all times) needs to be of the highest professional manner: double-spaced, easy to read font in 12 point, wide margins etc.

Querying after submission. Don't even think about it until 3 months have passed and then do it via mail, not email, again including return post. It is also good at this time to put any additional credits you might have obtained on the query letter. This shows you are not sitting back and waiting but are actively working.

Don't send out the queries, chapters etc without first sending the book to publishers that are still open to unsolicited material. Remember, it is easier to get an agent with a contract in your hand. Why get an agent after you have the contract? Because they can negotiate a far better deal than you will be able to.

Once the book is out, the letters and samples have been sent, get down to work on the next book. Agents sign authors AND individual books, so if you have a ready body of work behind you, the potential for representation becomes stronger.

Good luck (believe me, it takes a lot of luck in this business) and good writing.

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http://www.altair-australia.com

Contact Robert if you have any queries and are serious about your work. If you follow the advice he sets out above, he'll be happy to try and help you. Be brief if you phone or email him though - he's a very busy man!!!

I hope you've enjoyed this newsletter and also

learned some valuable information on your quest
for writing success.

Best wishes and keep writing

Rob@easywaytowrite.com

Your Success is My Concern

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The Easy Way to Write Short Stories

<http://easywaytowrite.com/compdetails.html>

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The Easy Way to Write Romance Ecourse

<http://easywaytowrite.com/romance.html>

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Make Money Writing - The Easy Way

<http://www.howtobeaninternetguru.com>

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Sell More Books - Learn How to Spin

<http://www.easywaytowrite.com/Spin.html>

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