

INPUT GUIDE

So You Want To Write for the Star Fleet Universe, Eh?

By Randy O. Green

So, you think you want to write for the *Star Fleet Universe*, eh? Perhaps I can interest you in a flogging as well? Or a lifetime subscription to one of those rags that carries the latest scoop on Britney? Still interested? OK, I'll assume it's not a case of momentary insanity causing this desire, like it was for me when I first started writing fiction for ADB, but rather a sincere desire to contribute to the *SFU*. To that end, here is a list of things that you might find helpful if you want to accomplish this task.

Notes by SVC: Randy is one of our best and most prolific writers, and we always look forward to a new story from him. He submitted this article to share his thoughts on writing for the SFU with other prospective writers. I have left his text intact (well, mostly) and have added a few comments so other writers can learn from his views.

1. Check your ego at the door. SVC, SPP, and indeed, everyone at Amarillo Design Bureau, are very busy people. As they should be, since they are relying on ADB to provide them with a comfortable living in their pursuit of the American Dream. They do not have time to mollycoddle anyone and will let you know very shortly and in no uncertain terms whether your story is up to *Star Fleet Universe* standards. Be ready to take a brutally honest review of your work. That's the bad news. The good news is, once you get past the first bashing of your story, they will prod you to fix it and resubmit it. Usually, they are much gentler the second time around, and if you persevere, you have a very good chance of getting your material published.

Note by SVC: Well ... I don't like to think of my reviews as deliberately brutal, but for someone who spent a lot of time on a story, being told what's wrong with it can range from annoying to frustrating to humiliating. Remember, I write for the SFU myself and Steve Petrick has ripped my own stories apart in ways more devastating than any outside writer ever had to face, so I can grasp that anything other than "Fine, we'll print it as is" can be kind of upsetting.

I do have to plead guilty to being busy. There is always more to do that should be done than I can get done. As I write these words, I remember (in some shame) that there are two stories printed out and laying in the back seat of Leanna's car that I took home yesterday and forgot to read last night. I know how annoying it can be to send in a story and wait weeks for me to read it.

It can be maddening when you send in a story that catches me in "just the right mood" and I read, edit, and format it that day (despite your story not being on my schedule) and then Petrick gets ahold of it and the work of fixing his issues doesn't strike me as fun so your story sits in the file for weeks.

2. Research, research, research. Really, writing for the *Star Fleet Universe* is no different from writing for any other fictional universe. Respect that. If you were writing for *SG-1* or *Battlestar Galactica*, for example, you would (if you wanted to get published) have to spend some serious time checking sources like watching the episodes of the season you wanted to set the story in, or checking the printed sourcebooks for weapon specs. If you want your *Star Fleet Universe* story to have a chance to be published,

make sure you research everything that you can get your hands on that might have a bearing on the story. This will save you the inevitable "email of doom" where you get lambasted for not checking your source material. My first story languished in various formats (mainly paper, as it was years before us poor folks could get a computer) for a dozen years until I finally got off my duff and put it on a PC. I never bothered to check to see if the rules had changed over that time frame. When I submitted it, needless to say, the reply I got from SVC was scorching. But as noted earlier, he urged me to resubmit. So, I did the right thing. I researched what had changed, I bought all the pertinent rulebooks, and I rewrote my story. Then I resubmitted it and, amazingly enough, it got accepted.

Notes by SVC: Research is important, vital even, but mistakes come in all shapes and sizes, and I make them myself often enough. Sometimes, when a "historical mistake" is minor, I just fix it and move on. Say you pick a ship name off of the list and didn't notice that a published scenario says that ship was destroyed the year before. I will just pick another ship name (and might or might not remember to tell you about that).

However, some historical mistakes destroy stories. The timeline (available on the website) is a key document. Make sure that the year (or a more precise date) you picked for your story is a year when the two enemies are actually enemies and the technology used in your story actually exists.

3. Don't quit your day job. While it is incredibly cool to see your name in *Captain's Log* for example, you can't live on cool. (Well, some people think I do, but that is just a misconception I encourage.) Normally, writers for some of the better known publications like *Science Fiction and Fantasy*, can expect to get about five cents a word. Fiction for the *Star Fleet Universe* will usually net you between one point two five and one point five cents a word (note how I spelled all that out). That means that the hourly rate for a slow-witted, slow-typing writer like myself, who can usually do about three hundred words an hour is pretty darn low. But because of the day job, I don't really worry about the pay anyway. It is a privilege to see my stuff in print. Besides, I've submitted a lot of stuff to e-zines and the like where the pay averages less than a half a cent a word. The moral of the story is, if you're not Stephen King, don't expect Stephen King rates. After all, there is only one "King".

Note by SVC: The "wargame" industry is a poverty-stricken one. ADB pays fairly high rates compared to other game companies, but all game companies pay fairly low rates compared to science fiction magazines. Well, the ones that print "fan fiction" pay about what wargame magazines pay.

Just remember. I could quit designing games and go back to work as an engineer and make three times as much money as I make now. I accepted the lower pay because I get to do what I find fun. Having sacrificed two-thirds of my earning power to publish wargames, don't expect me to "share the wealth" that goes with wargaming because there isn't any.

4. Get organized. This goes hand in hand with the research idea. Once you've done all the research you think you need, you will inevitably find yourself trying to remember something that you read when you get to that part of the story to write. Where are those rank structures for the Federation? Where is that chart for converting *Star Fleet* speeds to fiction warp speeds? Or what year was the Seltorian CA introduced into service? I usually photocopy everything that I need for a story, (ranks, SSDs, race descriptions, ship descriptions, etc.) and place them in protective sheets inside a binder. That way if I come to a sticking point, I don't have to spend hours paging through the old *Captain's Logs* or the various rulebooks hunting for an obscure reference. It will probably also help if you build at least a general outline. This will keep you pointed in the right direction, yet leave room for those

spontaneous “scenes” that I guarantee will pop out of your fertile imagination.

Note by SVC: We really need to publish the Star Fleet Universe Encyclopedia just to make life easier for writers. For now, we're trying very hard to make the key data available on the website. The timeline and ship name lists are there already. If you make a mistake on a naval rank (say, not remembering that Kzintis don't have a "lieutenant commander") we'll just fix it for you. Feel free to ask us to steer you to the research data you need.

5. Sleep is overrated. Since you need a day job to support yourself, and you more than likely have a family, you will probably have to give up something if you want to get your story finished. I've noted that families tend to get a bit “edgy” if you ignore them for several days, and your company will get the same way if you stay at home to work on your story. But usually no one will begrudge you the hours between 10:00 PM and 1:30 AM. Usually.

Note by SVC: I'm way too old to work all night like I once did, but sometimes when I have an inspired moment I do work until 3am or so, and pay for it the next day. But then, I own the company and what is anybody going to say if I show up late or take a nap in the afternoon? You probably don't have that advantage. Take care of your health and remember that nothing you will ever write for SFU is worth a fight with your spouse or getting fired from a job. What you could do is write for the honor and glory and give the paycheck to your spouse to make up for the time you took away from the family to write.

6. Obey the rules. Read the rules. Live the rules. This is a complicated gaming system, and the closer you can stick to the rules, the higher the probability of getting your story published. In other words, if your story does not follow the rules, SPP will crucify you, I mean catch the mistakes, and you will have to rewrite it anyway. Save yourself some heartache (and a lambasting, because no one likes to be lambasted, not often anyway,) and follow the rules.

Note by SVC: I know your pain. Petrick does that to my stories all the time, and I have the scars from his green pen in the palms of my hands and the soles of my feet to prove it. He won't let me get away with anything. Not only must your story not violate the game rules by doing something impossible, you must have your characters act like the game rules are the way their universe works (because they are). Things (such as tactics) must make sense within the rules.

7. There is more than one game. Try to be familiar with all of the SFU gaming systems. While that may seem a tall order, you will need to do it. For example, while Kaufman's Retrograde is a well-known tactic in Star Fleet Battles, it does not work in Federation Commander. If you want to pigeonhole your story to just one gaming system, fine. But you just cut your chances of being published substantially.

Note by SVC: I have to apologize here. We knew when we changed that SFB rule to FC we would have fiction problems. Try to write around it or just don't do things that work differently.

8. Persevere. Lack of time is probably your biggest enemy. It is mine. But try to commit to writing at least a paragraph every night when you start a story. You'll find that those paragraphs will add up over a couple of months. Sooner or later, you'll be able to free up a big block of time which will allow you to progress substantially on your opus. At that time, you'll be glad you did all those little paragraphs.

Note by SVC: Amen, brother Randy. I get stuck writing Captain's Log stories far more often than I like. I would rather write a story when I feel a story inside me trying to get out than to

sit down and say "I have scheduled the time from 1 to 3pm today to write something brilliant about Scout Wanekla climbing through the access tunnels of the ship." When I have to be creative, I force myself to be creative, but I don't like doing that. Even so, it's hard to get finished if you don't write at least something at least every other day.

9. Use a spellchecker. Most of us, for better or worse, are stuck with Microsoft Word. I often start a story in Corel WordPerfect and then add all the SFU-specific words to that dictionary. This has helped me catch misspelled alien names more times than I care to admit. Then, when I finish, I'll export it to Word and look for anything else that I might have missed. While that may seem like overkill, it has saved me much embarrassment. You will still have to export it to a plain text file afterward, but at least it will have gone through a spell-checking process and you should have ninety-nine percent of the errors out of the document by then. Plain text is ugly, but necessary for the Macs of ADB to assimilate your work. [I will never understand how SVC can tell that something was italicized (*thoughts*, for example) in the original document, when the formatting was stripped off by the exportation to plain text.]

Note by SVC: I consistently forgive (easily and without gripes) people who can write good stories but cannot spell or punctuate. I can fix the spelling in a good story. I can fix the punctuation in a good story. I cannot fix a bad story. You should take pride in your work. You should send in a story when you are happy with it, whether that includes checking the spelling or not. I have never rejected a story for a misspelled word. It always annoyed the hell out of me in Freshman Composition to be told I'm a brilliant writer but I'm getting a C on this week's essay because of one misspelled word (ten points!) and one misplaced comma (another ten points!). I really don't care if your story has a misspelled word or two, but if every other line has a misspelled word it's a lot less fun to read. File formats sometimes work, or not. Please avoid using style sheets and hanging indents, but I can pretty much figure anything else out. Every computer is different; try sending me one page in various formats and I will tell you what format to use. I get files from some writers that work fine and from other writers I get documents I have to Email to myself to strip out hidden codes the writer didn't even know his software was including. In processing this article, I had to manually change things (Randy's files turned every apostrophe into a comma), and when I finished with it, the file crashed my computer when I put into PageMaker, but it was worth fixing. The only positive way to avoid these issues is to boil the text down to pure text and then rebuild the bold and italics, which isn't really that much of a problem.

10. Use the resources on the BBS and website. There is a Writer's Group under StarFleetGames.com/discus: Captain's Log: New Fiction: Star Fleet Battles Writers' Group that can usually answer any of your fiction questions within a few hours. There is also a very good link at starfleetgames.com/input-guide/index.shtml that will answer a lot of questions if you take the time to RESEARCH it. Use the style sheets that ADB has provided. It will help you immensely in your quest to be published.

Note by SVC: Feel free to ask me or Petrick to any questions about history, style, or anything else. Feel free to suggest any resource documents we could add to the website.

Hopefully, these tips can help you get past that final hurdle, and become one of the proud contributors to that constantly evolving, living, breathing organism we all know and love, the Star Fleet Universe.

Note by SVC: I don't think it will ever be possible to put everything about writing for SFU into one document, but Randy has provided potential writers with a wealth of information, much of which has never been in previous Input Guides.