

How I Write Sujit Saraf



FREDERIC NEZMA

could render Schrodinger's equation with an elegance that would have made Erwin weep. So I wrote everything using Latex, typing `\noindent` and `\setcounter{page}` and `\thispagestyle{empty}`... Word and the world have now passed Latex by, but I cling to it as to an old fountain-pen.

Unfortunately, Emacs is silent on what – `{\it what}` in Latex – to write, unlike Word, which has a lot to say about spelling and grammar and will soon offer to write the whole book for you. So I usually stop after typing `\begin{document}` and stare at the grey Emacs background (which, let me tell you, is pleasant to look at). Then I open another Emacs and calculate the semi-major axis and eccentricity for a sun-synchronous low-earth orbit satellite. My coffee now paid for (ah, you thought I was living off my writing?), I write the day's quota, delete some lines (`ctrl-k`), type `\end{document}`, compile it, debug it, convert a dvi file to postscript and then pdf, and it is ready for my agent.

I write in Starbucks on weekend afternoons, at a table marked 'please offer this seat to our handicapped patrons'. I know what you are thinking, but that is the only surface large enough to hold my laptop, notes, elbows and thoughts.

'Measure what is measurable, and make measurable what is not so,' said Galileo. So I determine the lengths of my chapters in advance, fix the pace for each and calculate how many words each day will keep to a given schedule. Chapter 2 is always written after chapter 1 and followed by chapter 3. When I type 'The End' (I always do, makes me feel good), the novel is indeed complete. The zeroth law of thermodynamics precedes the first law, and I could not imagine it otherwise.

Seated at the forbidden table, I open the Emacs editor on my computer and type `\chapter{name}`. I specify the indentation – `\parindent 0.5cm` – and space between paragraphs – `\parskip 0.6cm` – and push my text down – `\vspace{1in}`... If you belong to the cognoscenti, you know that these are commands used by a typesetting software called Latex. In the twentieth century, when typing in Microsoft Word required prestidigital gymnastics, Latex

I know this happy equilibrium between low-earth orbits and down-to-earth writing cannot last. The written word now exists solely in Microsoft Word. My editor (the human, not the software) asked me if I could provide a Word version of my novel. The drinks at Starbucks keep getting weirder ('one triple-venti vanilla low-fat caramel machiado no whip') and their coffee machines now look like nuclear reactors. Some day, those anti-globalisation protesters will surely shatter every Starbuckian window. I will then take the bold step (`{\bf}` in Latex, click B in Word) of writing at home in Word. I will save my novel (`ctrl-x s` in Emacs, click the diskette in Word)... but I must stop now. Someone needs my table – `ctrl-x s`, followed by `ctrl-x ctrl-c`.

NASA rocket scientist Sujit Saraf is the author of 'The Peacock Throne', published by Sceptre. He will be talking about his book at Asia House, 63 New Cavendish St, W1 (020 7307 5439) on Monday February 12 from 6.30pm