

Manuscript Preparation – Introduction

by Vonda N. McIntyre

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Thanks to Gordon Van Gelder, Ellen Datlow, Stanley Schmidt, & Sheila Williams for advice. Other comments welcome.

Useful websites:

Science Fiction & Fantasy Writers of America www.sfw.org

SFWA Bulletin Professional journal: www.sfw.org/bulletin

Writer Beware Anti-scam site: www.sfw.org/beware

Yog's Law: www.sff.net/people/yog

Asimov's guidelines: www.asimovs.com/info/guidelines.shtml

Analog's guidelines:
www.analogsf.com/information/submissions.shtml

F&SF's guidelines: www.sfsite.com/fsf/glines.htm

Realms of Fantasy's guidelines:
www.rofmagazine.com/pages/guidelines

Locus SF/F Newsletter: www.locusmag.com

Clarion West Writers Workshop (Seattle) www.clarionwest.org

Clarion (San Diego) <http://clarion.ucsd.edu/>

SFF Net Discussions, writer newsgroups: www.sff.net

Association of Authors' Representatives www.aar-online.org

Basement Full of Books www.sff.net/bfob

"Pitfalls of SF/F" www.vondanmcintyre.com/pitfalls.html

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About 1900 words

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This handout describes an acceptable format for a manuscript submitted in hard copy to a science fiction or fantasy publication. For electronic submissions (and for other genres, particularly nonfiction) the format may be quite different.

This is a classic, indeed venerable, format, deliberately reproducing the look of a good typewriter, generally recognized as safe and professional. However, publishing is changing at a rapid rate, so the first advice I offer is to look up the submission guidelines for the publication you're considering and follow them slavishly. (See the Introduction for links to some guidelines.)

However, if you use a typewriter, be aware that most

editors will ask for word processing file for stories they purchase. Many publications are no longer set up to key in and typeset manuscripts. They may make exceptions for good stories; they may not; they may charge for retyping.

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The appearance of your manuscript is your introduction to an editor. Editors are used to reading manuscripts with a certain look that they recognize as professional. You can present yourself professionally, or you can present yourself as a novice who cares nothing for the editor's eyesight.

All the rules and suggestions I offer have reasons (which are mentioned). They apply to paper manuscripts, not necessarily to electronic files.

That said, don't obsess about the truly trivial details of manuscript presentation. No reasonable editor is going to reject a good story because it's typed with two spaces after each period instead of one, or vice-versa.

When your story is ready to send out, the rule is "print on one side of the page, double-space, at least one-inch margins." Choose double-space for your paragraph formatting and don't put extra line spaces between paragraphs. Do not use 1.5 spacing to save paper; it's very difficult to read. Indent each paragraph's first line by at least a half-inch. Do not justify the right margin or try to even out the right margin by hyphenating words.

Bad examples appear below:

Wrong: This paragraph is 1.5 spaced and is separated from the next paragraph by too much space. This paragraph is 1.5 spaced. This paragraph is 1.5 spaced.

Wrong: This paragraph is single-spaced, justified, and has no paragraph indentation. This paragraph is single-spaced, justified, and has no paragraph indentation. This paragraph is single-spaced, justified, and has no paragraph indentation.

Use standard typesetters' marks, such as underlining to indicate italics. Use 12-point Courier or a similar monospaced serif font. By coincidence, 12-point Courier is the same size as 10-pitch Courier (also known as pica type) and 10 point is the same size as 12 pitch (elite type). If you use a typewriter, pica type is preferable to elite type.

The subject of proportional fonts is controversial. I recommend against them. Yes, they are prettier. But they were designed for publication, not for manuscripts. You mix typesetting and manuscript format at your peril. One problem is that you can fit many more proportional characters onto a six-inch line of manuscript — so many more that the eye cannot take the line in at a glance. Especially if the text is single-spaced, the manuscript will be difficult to read, like this. When's the last time you saw a book printed in single columns on 8.5x11" paper? Never, that's when, because it's unreadable.

The editor and the production department may not appreciate your attempt at typesetting. Among other things, it can interfere with the production department's ability to calculate the space a story will fill in a magazine -- an important factor that the editor may consider.

Begin with the cover page. Though it is technically optional, it offers some protection against random coffee stains, and it may be kept and filed if the editor buys your

story. Most cover pages follow one of two forms: they are identical to the first page of the story, leaving off the text, or the author's name and address and the approximate word count are transposed to the lower half of the page.

A manuscript with a cover page must still use manuscript style on the first page of the text proper.

On Page 1 of the story, the author's name and address should appear on the upper left-hand corner. You may also include your email address and/or phone number.

Your address is the only place in your manuscript that should be single-spaced.

In the upper right-hand corner show the word count, to the nearest hundred words. Most publications pay by the word. Several different methods exist for computing the number of words; your word processor's method will generally suffice. Some publishers have their own methods, and in my experience they often end up with a higher word count than the author does.

Many writers' handbooks advise putting "First North American Serial Rights Offered" in the upper right-hand corner of Page 1. I disagree, especially these days when so many publications are web-based. It is up to you and your good judgment whether to accept an offer. (Selling "all rights forever in the entire" is not generally considered good judgment.)

It is possible for new writers to negotiate agreements without an agent, and short story contracts tend to be brief and straightforward. Furthermore, it's difficult to get an agent to submit short stories in the sf/f market. Do your homework on contracts -- the SFWA website has good information -- be civil, and ask for reasonable changes. Most editors are also reasonable. If they aren't -- are you sure you want to work with them?

After your name and address, space down half the page. (The editor needs blank space for instructions to the typesetter.) Center the title and use standard capitalization rules. Don't use ALL CAPS, or underlining, or **bold-face**, or a larger type face, or "scare quotes." (You may use quotation marks if the title is a quotation.)

Type your byline one double-space beneath the story title. The name in the upper left-hand corner will get the money; the name beneath the title -- your byline -- will get the recognition. The byline is the name, or pseudonym, the story will be published under. If the names are identical they still should appear in both places.

Double-space the text. That is to say, separate lines of text with a blank line, as in this handout. Double-space is a standard word-processor setting. You'll make your life much easier if you learn to use styles and formatting within your word processor.

Second and subsequent pages should all be identified and numbered, in case the pages are separated in an editorial office. Your last name, the title (if it is short), or a word or phrase from the title are acceptable identifiers. The page number is essential. Put the information in the top right corner of each manuscript page after Page 1. Some formats recommend the top left corner; this is also acceptable.

A note about copyright: copyright is automatic. Registering the copyright with the U.S. Copyright Office gives the author an added measure of protection and is usually done for the author by the publisher. (Check your contract. If the contract calls for the publisher to end up owning your copyright, my advice is to think again about the publisher.) However, it is not necessary to add a copyright notice to the manuscript, and certainly not to every page; nor is it necessary to warn the editor not to steal your story. Legitimate editors are not in the business of stealing stories from new writers. They're in the business of publishing good stories, and what better way than to find a new writer who will write more stories?

A note about legitimate publishing: A good rule to remember is Yog's Law: "Money always flows toward the writer." To protect yourself against scam publishers, use the resources of the SFWA website and Writer Beware.

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For scene breaks, indicate a one-line space with the pound sign on a line by itself, as above (or centered).

When you print out your manuscript, use decent-quality opaque white paper. Print on one side of the page.

Proofread your finished manuscript carefully. It is your job to be sure the spelling and grammar are correct. An occasional typo does not mean the whole page must be reprinted, though there's a good deal to be said for having the same text in the hard copy as in the computer file.

Neat corrections (in black; blue does not photocopy well) have been, traditionally, acceptable, but I suspect that is changing. The "three corrections per page" allowance is a legacy of typewriter days.

Writers who do not have access to a computer will find that a corrected manuscript with quite a lot of cut-and-paste work will look fine when photocopied, and a photocopy is an acceptable submission.

Always keep a copy, and/or backups! Typewriter users: Keep your original; submit a photocopy.

New writers occasionally test whether the story has been read all the way through. This is not a good idea. It will only irritate the editor.

Don't bind or staple your finished manuscript. Use a paperclip for a short manuscript, a box for a long one.

Protect the short-story manuscript with a sheet of cardboard or slip it inside a manila folder. Send it flat (even a short folded manuscript must be beaten with a stick before it will lie flat enough to read) in a manila envelope.

Enclose another manila envelope, addressed and stamped, for your manuscript's return, or include an addressed, stamped business-sized envelope (SASE) with a disposable manuscript. Don't substitute a postcard for an envelope, as most editors receive so many submissions that they must reply by form letter.

Do not expect the editor to reject your manuscript by email. Many will not. It's your responsibility to make it possible for the editor to reach you; that includes paying the postage.

It's extremely bad manners to submit a story to an editor's email address unless you're asked to do so.

If your editor asks you to email the story, do your best to send it in the format and document type the editor requests. Electronic format may have no relation at all to the recommendations I offer here.

Be cautious of public on-line publication of your work. Some paying print markets consider that electronic publication uses up first publication rights. Display websites are not known for kicking off new writers' careers.

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A cover letter is optional, unless the editor requests one. It may be kept and filed. The letter should be short and to the point. It must not beg or threaten the editor and it should not explain the story. You may tactfully mention any encouragement the editor has given you in the past. If an editor has asked for revisions, say so, but don't claim it if it didn't happen. If your background pertains to the subject of the story, mention it; however, if you have done your research properly you should not apologize for lacking a degree in a field related to your story.

If your story comes back, don't despair. Don't analyze the reject slip. It means exactly what it usually says: the story was not suitable for the magazine at that time. The next editor may find it suitable. It is neither necessary nor intelligent to tell the next editor that the story has been rejected by a previous editor, or to write an outraged letter to the editor who rejected your story.

Be certain the manuscript is clean and has all its pages, or print out a new copy. Send it out again.

Persistence is a key to success. Good luck!

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