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about 1,800 words

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Proper Manuscript Format

by William Shunn

No one knows for certain how many good stories are passed over because the manuscripts containing them are formatted poorly, but it is certain that a properly formatted manuscript will be more eagerly read by an editor than a poorly formatted one. Here are a few suggestions.

First, use black ink on white paper only. Any other colors make your manuscript difficult to read, not to mention calling too much attention to the manuscript itself. The manuscript is a window onto your story. It should not obscure the story, but should be as transparent and unobtrusive as possible.

Your manuscript should look typed, not typeset. This is particularly important if you are composing your manuscript on a

computer, where the temptation to use fancy fonts can be great. Use a Courier font like this one; every printer you can buy comes with at least one version of it. Set the point size to 12, which prints at a pitch of ten characters per inch.

Courier is a monospaced font, which means that every character is exactly as wide as every other. Never submit a manuscript that uses a proportional font, which is one in which, for example, an "i" takes up less space than an "m" does. It is far easier for an editor to detect spelling errors in a monospaced font than in a proportional font, and your primary goal should be to make things as easy for the editor as possible. With a monospaced font, there will also be fewer characters on each line, which makes your lines easier for the editor to scan.

Leave nice wide margins all around the page. There should be at least an inch on each side--top, bottom, left, and right.

Always double-space between lines. Never submit a single-spaced manuscript. The editor needs room to make corrections between lines--but not too much room, so don't triple-space either.

Following the guidelines I've listed so far will mean you can't fit many words on a page--250 to 300 at the most. This will give your manuscript a higher page count, but don't fret about that. It may cost a little more to mail, but sending a manuscript that reads more quickly is worth the extra pennies. Psychologically, it's easier to read a lot of pages with fewer words on each than it is to read a few pages with lots of words

on each. To the editor, your story will feel like a faster read.

By the same token, print on only one side of the page.

Now, to the first page of your manuscript. Place your name, address, telephone number, and E-mail address in the upper left corner. If you belong to a professional writing organization, you may list your membership beneath this information, but only if it is relevant. If you belong to the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America, for instance, you would want to mention that when submitting to Asimov's or Realms of Fantasy, but it probably wouldn't cut much ice with the editors at The New Yorker or Cat Fancy.

In the upper right corner of the first page, place an approximate word count. Round to the nearest hundred words unless you're edging up into novella length, at which point rounding to the nearest 500 would be appropriate. The point of a word count is not to tell the editor exactly how many words there are in the manuscript, but rather how much space your story will take up in her magazine. If your word processing software doesn't give you a word count, you can estimate the total by counting the number of words on one page and multiplying by the number of pages in the manuscript.

Though many sources say you should, it is not necessary to place your Social Security number anywhere on your manuscript. If the publisher wants to know it, you'll be asked for it after your story is accepted. Otherwise, it's extraneous--and in fact presumptuous--information.

Place the title of your story about halfway down the first page. The editor needs all that empty space for writing notes to the typesetter and copy editor. Your title should be centered between the margins. Most writers type the title all in capitals, and you can too if you like.

One double space below your title, center your byline. This may seem like redundant information, since your name is already in the upper-left corner of the manuscript, but it is not. The name in the corner is the person to whom the publisher will make out the check. Your byline is the name that receives credit for the story when it appears in print. These are not necessarily the same. Perhaps your name is J. Scott Bronson but you publish fiction under the pseudonym Everett Stone. Perhaps you are a married woman publishing fiction under your maiden name. But even if the two names are the same, they must both still appear on your manuscript.

Begin the text of your manuscript two double spaces below your byline. The beginning of every paragraph in your manuscript, including the first, should be indented five spaces (one half inch) from the left margin. Do not place extra double spaces between paragraphs. The indentation is sufficient to indicate that a new paragraph has begun.

Place a header in the upper right corner of every subsequent page of your manuscript, but not the first. The header consists of the surname from your byline, one or two important words from the title of your story, and the current page number. Do not

place the header in the upper-left corner, because the editorial staff will often clip your manuscript in that corner as they work on it. The keyword and surname are important because sometimes unbound manuscripts happen to fall off editors' desks and become mixed up with other manuscripts. The header helps the editorial staff reassemble yours in the proper order.

Except for paragraph indentations, the left margin of your manuscript should be ruler-straight. The right margin, however, should be ragged, not justified. Right justification messes up the spaces between words and sentences and makes the manuscript more of a chore to read. This annoys the editor, and the cardinal rule of manuscript formatting, if you haven't guessed it by now, is to do everything in your power to avoid annoying the editor, who is a cantankerous person anyway, thanks to all the poorly formatted manuscripts that cross his desk.

If a word is too long to fit at the end of a line, then move the entire word to the beginning of the next line. Only if a phrase is normally hyphenated may you break it up at the end of a line. Thus, you must always place the word "antidisestablishmentarianism" on its own line, no matter how much empty space this leaves at the end of the line above. You may, however, break up a hyphenated phrase such as "jack-in-the-box" when it falls at the end of a line. This guideline is directed mainly toward typewriter users, but you computer users should pay attention, too. Never include a hyphen that you don't want showing up in the final printed version of your story.

Always place two spaces after any sentence-ending punctuation. "Always?" you ask. Always! Some people will tell you that two spaces aren't required these days, especially if you're submitting a manuscript to be typeset directly from a computer disk. Don't listen to these people. Unless you are Harlan Ellison, your editor is actually going to read your manuscript before sending it on to the typesetter, and her eye is accustomed to seeing two spaces at the end of every sentence. Anything else will annoy her, which should bring to mind the cardinal rule of manuscript formatting, as mentioned above.

In addition, put two spaces after every colon: like so. This convention helps the typesetter distinguish more easily between colons and semicolons.

If you intend a word or phrase to appear in italics for emphasis, indicate this in your manuscript by underlining. Never use actual italics. Italics in a typewritten manuscript just aren't as obvious to the eye as underlining is. If you're tempted to use italics anyway, remember that the ultimate goal is for your manuscript to look typewritten--and most typewriters lack an option for italics.

If you want to indicate em dashes--the punctuation that sets off a phrase like this one--in your manuscript, use two hyphens to do so. Do not place spaces around the em dash.

If you want a line break to appear in your story, then rather than leaving a blank line in your manuscript you should center the character "#" on a line of its own. Do this for every

line break, not just for ones that fall at the top or bottom of a page or might otherwise be ambiguous.

Finally, you don't need to make any overt indication that your story is over. This should be obvious both from the story itself and from the fact that there are no more words after a certain point. Do not place "#" or "30" or "The End" or anything of the sort at the end of the story. The exception comes when the last line of your story falls close to the bottom of the page. In this case, you may wish to write the word "end" by hand in blue ink in the bottom margin.

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While you'll find slight variations in the way different writers format their manuscripts, follow these guidelines and your work is guaranteed to come across as professional, at least to the casual eye. You'll have scored points with the editor right away, who, after rejecting that migraine-inducing green-on-yellow submission, will find the prospect of your crisp, clean, black-and-white manuscript as soothing as settling back with his pipe and slippers.

What the editor thinks after reading your manuscript is another matter, and a subject for a very different essay.