William Shunn
School's Name
School's Address
City, State Zip
format@shunn.net

about 1,500 words

Proper Manuscript Format

by Bill Shunn

No one knows how many good stories are passed over because the manuscripts containing them are poorly formatted. We can be certain, however, that editors will more eagerly read a cleanly formatted manuscript than a cluttered and clumsy one. Here are a few suggestions for giving your manuscript that critical leg up on the competition.

Start with a fresh white page, no color, no decorations. Set one-inch margins all around--left, right, top, and bottom. This is the default for most word processors, but you might want to recheck your settings just to be safe.

Use black type only, since other colors can make your work difficult to read. Set your font size to 12 points. For the

font itself choose something standard and easily readable, like Times New Roman. Avoid sans-serif fonts, and stay far away from anything flashy or unusual. You want to wow the editor with your content, not your font choice. (Some writers, myself included, still prefer Courier New, a monospaced font that resembles typewriter output. You can use that too if you like, but it's probably on its way out, at least in fiction circles.)

Place your contact information in the upper-left corner of the first page, including your legal name, address, phone number, and email. Add your preferred pronouns if you like. List any professional writing affiliations next, but only when relevant. If you belong to the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America, for instance, you should say so on submissions to Asimov's or Analog, but your membership might not cut much ice with editors at The New Yorker or Cat Fancy.

In the upper-right corner of the first page, place an approximate word count. Get this number from your word processor, then round to the nearest hundred. (This manuscript, for example, is 1,470 words in length, which rounds to 1,500.) If you're edging into novella territory, round to the nearest 500. The point of a word count is not to tell your editor the exact length of the manuscript, but approximately how much space your story will take up in the publication.

Though many sources say you should, it is not necessary to place your Social Security number or any other tax ID on your manuscript. If your story is accepted, the publisher will ask

for it in your contract. Until then, this is extraneous (and in fact presumptuous) information.

Place the full title of your story a third to halfway down the first page, centered on its own line. (The editor may use that empty space to make notes for the production team.) Double-space once down and center your byline below the title. Your byline indicates the name that gets credit for the story when it's published. This is not necessarily the same as your legal name up top, which is the one that will be printed (we hope) on your check. It could be a pen name, or a variation on your legal name. Even if the two names are identical, each must appear in its appointed slot.

Double-space two more times down, and that's where you'll start the actual text of your story. As a matter of fact, you should set your line spacing to double from here forward, because the full text of your story should be double-spaced. Text reads more quickly when it has room to breathe, but more importantly the editor needs room between the lines to mark up your manuscript with her trusty blue pencil. (This is the case even with electronic manuscripts, which can be marked up with a stylus on a tablet screen.)

The first line of every paragraph should be indented one half-inch from the left margin. Do not place extra line spaces between paragraphs, as is the common practice in online writing. First-line indentation is sufficient to indicate that a new paragraph has begun. (You can set the paragraph formatting in

your word processor to handle indentation for you. This will also make things easier for the production team when they're preparing your story for publication.)

The text of your story should be left-aligned. This means that, except for paragraph indentations, the left margin of your manuscript should be ruler-straight, while the right margin remains ragged. Full justification, in which both margins are straight, is a typesetting style for finished copy, not for manuscripts on submission.

Now that we're moving past the front page, this is a good time to create the header that should appear on every subsequent page of your manuscript. This header consists of the surname from your byline, one or two keywords from the title of your story, and the page number. It belongs in the upper-right corner for ready visibility. With your cursor on the second page, open your word processor's header/footer feature. Place your header text flush right, and be sure to specify that the header itself should not appear on the first page.

That covers most of the high-level aspects of manuscript formatting. Let's zoom down to the sentence level now. Standard practice today is to put only one space between sentences. Back in the typewriter era, two spaces was the standard, but those days have flown. For those of you still in the two-space habit, you might consider doing a quick search-and-replace before sending off your story, if only to save the production team that extra step when preparing it for publication.

To emphasize a specific word or phrase in your manuscript, do so with *italics.* It used to be the practice to <u>underline</u> for emphasis, but that's because there was no option for italics on most typewriters. Some publications may still prefer to see underlining since it stands out a little better on a screen, but those would be the minority. Consult submission guidelines if there's any doubt, and choose italics in the absence of other instructions.

If you want to indicate an em dash--the punctuation that sets off this phrase--simply type two hyphens. Most word processors will convert the two hyphens to a dash automatically. (Courier users might want to turn off this particular feature of autocorrect, since in monospaced fonts a dash is difficult to distinguish from a lone hyphen.) There's no need to put spaces around the dash.

"A lot of people ask me about dialog," I told an editor friend of mine recently. "Do you have any suggestions?"

"Dialog should be enclosed in quotation marks," she said. "Some writers get away with doing it differently, but they're rare exceptions."

"Isn't it also the usual practice to start a new paragraph when the speaker changes?" I asked.

"Yes, it is. That helps the reader keep track of who's speaking even when speech tags are omitted."

Speaking of which, you should have the "smart quotes" feature turned on in your word processor. This converts double

and single quotation marks alike to the appropriate curly version, either opening or closing, as you type. This too will be a tremendous help to the production team, but be aware that smart quotes don't always work perfectly. Watch especially for words with leading apostrophes, since autocorrect'll convert 'em incorrectly to opening single quotes.

If you want a scene break to appear in your story, center the symbol "#" on a line by itself. Don't just leave the line blank. As you edit and revise your manuscript prior to submission, those breaks can shift up or down, and word processors often hide blank lines that fall at the top or bottom of a page. You don't want your editor skipping over your scene breaks because they accidentally vanished.

Finally, though you don't need to make any explicit indication that your story is over, some writers choose to center the word "END" after the last line of text. This can prevent ambiguity when your closing words fall near the bottom of the page.

That's all there is to it. Now you're ready to submit that story! Or are you? This is a good time to read through it at least once more, checking carefully for typos. One or two errors won't earn you an automatic rejection, but you'll make a better impression if your first few pages are as clean as possible.

And if you're planning to mail a hard copy, remember to use plain white paper and print on only one side of the page.

#

While you'll find some variation in the ways different writers format their manuscripts, no one departs far from what I've outlined above. Still, you should always check a market's submission guidelines before sending your work. If their rules differ from these, follow theirs.

At the very least, these suggestions will guarantee your work looks professional when it arrives. How the story itself comes across is an entirely separate matter--and that part's all up to you. Knock 'em dead!

Copyright © 1993, 2001, 2003, 2010, 2020 by William Shunn. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/). You are free to copy, distribute, and display the work *for non-commercial purposes only,* so long as you credit the original author and do not alter, transform, or build upon the content and its formatting in any way. All other rights reserved. Find the definitive version of this work at https://format.ms/classic. Direct all inquiries to format@shunn.net. (Note that you should not include a copyright notice in your own manuscript submissions.)