

Manuscript Preparation - Introduction

by Vonda N. McIntyre

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Comments welcome.

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Gila Queen's Guide to Markets [Comprehensive market info](http://www.pacifier.com/~alecwest/gila/)
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(books available by mail directly from their authors)

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About 1800 words

Manuscript Preparation

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This handout describes an acceptable format for submitting a manuscript to a science fiction or fantasy market. For other genres, particularly nonfiction, the requirements may be quite different.

For an sf/f short story or novel, your submission copy should closely resemble this handout. The appearance of your manuscript is your introduction to an editor. You can present yourself professionally, or you can look like a rank amateur who cares nothing for the editor or the editor's eyesight. All the rules and suggestions I offer have reasons (which are mentioned in parentheses).

When you are ready to print a fair copy of your story, use

good quality opaque white paper. If you use a typewriter, be sure the print is clean and the ribbon is dark. If you use a computer, you should still use standard manuscript style and typesetters' marks, such as underlining to indicate italics. If you have a choice of type sizes, pica (10 characters to the inch) is much more readable than elite (12 characters to the inch, like this). Don't get points and pitch confused. This is easy, because by awkward coincidence, 10 pitch and 12 point monospaced type faces are the same size. So are 12 pitch and 10 point. Use the larger size. If you have a choice of type faces, a serif typeface is preferable to sans-serif, and a plain typeface is essential. Rococo typefaces, such as *script* or *italic*, are anathema. Even if you have a state-of-the-art color laser printer that will produce typeset camera-ready copy in proportional **Old English SHADOWED boldface**, you must avoid the temptation to use any of these options. They will mark you as an amateur, a novice, or both.

Editors are used to reading manuscripts that are typed, double-spaced, on one side of the paper, with a monospaced typewriter typeface such as Courier, and margins of an inch to an inch and a half all around. Do not justify the right margin or try to even out the right margin by hyphenating words. Under no circumstances should you fall to the temptation of using a proportional font such as Times Roman. Yes, it's prettier. You still shouldn't use it. You can fit many more characters onto a six-inch line of manuscript using Times Roman - so many more, in fact, that the eye cannot take the line in at a glance, and the manuscript will be difficult to read, like this. The editor will not appreciate it. (Any typographical

trick you add will interfere with, among other things, the production department's ability to figure out the length of the finished book or the space a story will fill in a magazine -- an important factor that the editor may consider.) In short, you cannot go wrong with a plain, even old-fashioned, manuscript.

Begin with the cover page. Though it is optional, it offers some protection against random coffee stains, and it may be kept and filed if the editor buys your story. A manuscript with a cover page is not, however, exempt from manuscript style on the first page of the text proper. 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.

On Page 1 of the story, the author's name and address (telephone number or email address optional) should appear on the upper left-hand corner. This is the only place in your manuscript that may be single-spaced, even if you include extensive quotations in the text. In the upper right-hand corner show the approximate word count, to the nearest hundred words. Count two or three average pages and estimate: it is not necessary to count every word of the story. Round off word counts, including computer word counts, to the nearest hundred words. Several different methods exist for computing the number of words in a manuscript; most publishers will apply their own formula. More often than not, the publisher's word count, based on the amount of space a story will fill, ends up higher than the writer's. (The word count determines

how much you'll be paid for a short story, in most markets.)

Many writers' handbooks advise putting "First North American Serial Rights Offered" in the upper right-hand corner. This is not advisable. Different markets buy different rights, and it is up to you and your good judgment whether to accept an offer or not. (Selling "all rights forever in the entire universe" is not generally considered good judgment.) It is possible for new writers to negotiate agreements without an agent. Furthermore, it's difficult, if not impossible, to get an agent to submit short stories in the sf/f market. Do your homework on contracts -- see information at <http://www.sfw.org/> -- be professional and civil about your questions.

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. Do not 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.) If you do any of these things you will give a copyeditor an opportunity to put a blue pencil to your manuscript -- something to be avoided.

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. It is the name, or pseudonym, the story will be published under.)

Double-space the text of the body of the story. That is to say, separate each line of text from the next with a blank line, as

in this handout. (Do not put two spaces between each word, as in this sentence.) Computers permit all manner of hard to read spacings. Avoid them.

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 all acceptable. The page number is essential. Put the information in the top right corner of each manuscript page after Page 1.

It is not necessary to copyright your story: copyright is automatic. If you do choose to formally copyright your story, 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. 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?

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

Proofread your finished manuscript carefully. Yes, 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. Neat ^{Corrections}  (in black; blue does not photocopy well) are acceptable. Once you get to three corrections on a single page, however, you should consider retyping. One should not be able to

read the crossed-out word; that's distracting. An acceptable correction is shown in this paragraph. White-out and cover-up tape are valuable tools for writers who do not have access to word processing by computer. 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, always, always keep a copy! Better yet, keep your original and submit clean photocopies.

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. As a new copy of a manuscript often costs less than return postage, some writers enclose an SASE ("self-addressed stamped envelope": a business-sized envelope addressed to you) for the editor's response, and request that the editor discard a rejected manuscript. Some editors prefer a disposable manuscript. Most editors who don't object to your sending more than one story at a time do prefer that you submit each manuscript in a separate envelope. If you want your manuscript back, enclose another manila envelope bearing your name and address and sufficient first-class (not book rate) return postage.

Never submit a story to an editor's electronic-mail address, unless you've been asked to do so. The likely fate for such a story is that the editor will delete it without reading it, and

chalk you up as having no manners.

If your editor asks you to submit your story via electronic means, do your best to send it in the format the editor requests. Electronic format may have no relation at all to the recommendations I offer here.

Be cautious of informal on-line publication of your work. Some paying print markets consider that any on-line publication has used up the first publication rights.

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A cover letter is optional, unless the editor requests one. Like the cover page, it may be filed when an editor buys your story. 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 your background pertains specifically to the subject of the story, mention it; however, if you have done your research properly you should not find it necessary to apologize for not having 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 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. Don't 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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