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approximately 3,000 words

Proper Manuscript Form
by Roger MacBride Allen

This brief essay offers a few general notes on proper manuscript format. Always print your copy so it conforms to these standards. When it comes time to ship your copy out to an editor or publisher, it will then be in the industry's standard format. Slight variants are acceptable, but stay close to the standard. Non-standard formatting simply makes the editor's job harder.

The standards are as follows: approximately one-inch (2.5 cm) margins on all sides of the page. Your last name, a "slug" to identify the story, and the page number should appear along the top of each page. Double-space throughout. Indent five spaces, or tab or indent one half inch (1.25 cm), for each new paragraph. Do not put a blank line between paragraphs. Start the story

half-way down the first page, using the top half to include your name, address, phone number, and the approximate word-length of the story. "Approximately 3000 words," not "3,198 words." It won't be 3,198 by the time the editor gets done anyway.

In the days before identity-theft became the national sport, writers included their Social Security Numbers (ie. SSN 123-45-6789) alongside their addresses. These days, I would not advise it. The editor who wants to pay you can ask for it at time of payment.

Set the right margin as ragged, not justified.

Do not rewrite your prose or adjust your layout to fix widows or orphans. A widow is one word by itself on the end of a paragraph. (As in the one-word last line of the first paragraph of this essay, and the word "payment" two paragraphs up.) An orphan is a widow or partial line kicked over to the next page, so that only one or two words appear on the next page's first line. (The word "font" on the first line of the next page is an orphan.) Widows and orphans tend to get lost on the page. However, all the possible fixes for widows and orphans (basically, inserting extra lines and spaces) tend to cause problems later on, especially if the publisher sets type from your text file.

Use a Courier 10-pitch (10/char-inch, aka "pica") fixed-width font. Avoid proportionally-spaced fonts. In a proportional font, such as Times Roman, different letters have different widths. In Courier, the typeface in this essay, the "i" and the "m" are the same width. Not so with a proportional

font.

However, times change and accepted practice evolve. The use of Times or Times Roman is becoming acceptable for manuscript submission. However, Times Roman was designed for legibility in a narrow justified column, such as in a newspaper. It is much harder to read on a full-width ragged-right page. Reading 300 pages of Times Roman can be hard on the eyes. I strongly believe a fixed-width font is easier to read and edit on a properly formatted letter-sized page.

If you must use a proportional font, don't use an oddball one. Keep it boring. And keep it serified. San-serif fonts are intended for use in headlines and such, not for body type. They are hard on the eyes. If you don't know the difference between serified and san-serif, you should. Look it up.

Also be aware that there are variations in all these fonts. Courier is different from **Courier New**. Furthermore, the font you have on your computer will likely not match exactly what is on the editor's computer, and what you have on your screen might not be exactly what your printer kicks out. Use very standard fonts if you do an electronic submission, and, before making a print submission, do a test page comparing your printer's version of, say, Courier and **Courier New**, to see which is easier to read coming from your printer.

Use standard white 8 1/2 X 11 paper (A4 size in places that go metric), and only use one side of the page. Print in black only -- do not use colored type or colored paper.

Be sure to turn off any auto-hyphenation and automatic widow

and orphan protection features on your word processor.

Those are the basic standards. I know that some editors will accept manuscripts printed in Times-Roman with half-inch margins -- sometimes. But they don't like it, and it isn't the standard industry practice. Why annoy them?

Do not use boldface or italic or 94 typefaces in the body of your text. Underlining is used by typesetters to indicate italic, so underline anything you feel should be in italic. Otherwise, use only normal face. The one possible exception is long sections of type intended for italic. Page after page of underlined text is hard on the eyes. If you have long sections meant to be italic, you might consider going ahead and setting your own italic, or leaving the type alone, and marking off the text by hand in the margin, noting that it should be set in ital.

Remember, the average magazine only uses two typefaces in body text -- normal or roman, and *italic*. If you use nineteen typefaces to indicate who's speaking or what mood the speaker is in, the magazine won't be able to duplicate it. (Magazines sometimes use boldface in body text, but **it usually looks weird.**) If you wish, you can use bold for titles and ALL CAPS FOR EMPHASIS IN PLACE OF BOLDFACE in the body of the story.

The occasional typographical error is acceptable, as are neat hand corrections of such goofs. (Be sure to double space so as to leave room for such corrections.) Don't reprint an entire page for one minor error. You've probably missed a bunch of other errors anyway. No one can adequately proofread his or her own stuff. Besides, even if each page you submit is utterly

perfect, the editor will scribble all over the manuscript for other reasons anyway. Aim for very, very, good -- not perfect. As some ancient Chinese philosopher said: "If I were to seek perfection, my book would never be done." On the other hand, the number of mistakes and corrections on the previous page probably crosses the line. That page, I would reprint. When reprinting, be sure to allow for any changes in text flow. (In other words, check to see if the corrected page ends with the same word as your messed-up page.)

It is usually acceptable to use a different font for the running head, as this helps distinguish it from the body text. Use a nice boring san-serif font like **Arial** or **Helvetica**.

In this essay, with the exception of this paragraph, there are -- or at least should be -- be two spaces after the end of each sentence. There is only one space after each sentence in this paragraph. Up until recently, two spaces was preferred in order to improve legibility. Nowadays, it is not considered necessary. In fact, many modern word processors are set up so as to prevent you from using two spaces at all, unless you switch that default off.

A few notes on the perils of desktop publishing. It is now possible to send some very sexy page layouts to an editor. Do not do it. Anything other than a standard page will merely annoy your editor. His or her entire operation is based on dealing with standard pages as herein described. For the most part, he or she will not be able to use your fancy page borders, initial drop caps, or other frippery. Don't waste your time and the

editor's on design work that can never get into print anyway.

In short, magazine publishers are in the word business. Send them clean, unadorned, readable words and nothing else.

Book publishers likewise want words. It is highly unlikely that the publisher will want to use your page layout, so don't set one up.

Do not use typographic symbols. Use only 'single' and "double" "straight quotes" such as the ones in this sentence. Do not use "typographic quotation marks," sometimes called 'curly quotes' such as the one used in this sentence. Likewise use a single hyphen - for an en-dash, and two dashes -- for an em-dash. Some people prefer double hyphens without spacing--like this. Either is okay.

The style rules described and depicted in this essay are also suitable for book manuscripts with the following changes:

Make up a title page, including your book title, subtitle, your name as it should appear in the book, and the word count.

If you are submitting sample chapters of a completed manuscript, report the total word count for the book, and clearly label it as such. There is not much point in including a word count for a uncompleted manuscript.

Also include the following personal information: your name, address, email address, and phone numbers. If you are represented by an agent, include full information regarding your agent as well. Once again, these days, I'd advise against including your SSN, unless you want to share it with the outsourced-to-Jamaica typesetting department (and no, I'm not

making up the bit about Jamaica).

Start each chapter half-way down the page. The book title should also appear on this first page of the actual manuscript, but nowhere else -- not at the beginning of each chapter, not in the running heads along the top of each page, nowhere. Editors like to change titles. Don't make your editor change it on 300 pages. The first page of the first chapter (or prelude, introduction, etc. preceding the first chapter) should also include all the other information listed on the title page. The idea here is to avoid trouble if when they lose the title page.

Each following chapter should start half-way down the page, but you do not need your personal data to begin each chapter. Simply include the chapter number and chapter title (if you use chapter titles) on centered lines half-way down the page.

The running head in a book manuscript should include your last name, the chapter number (not the chapter title, for the same reason as not including book titles) and the cumulative page number for the book.

Providing chapter numbers in the head makes it far easier to keep track of where you are in a manuscript -- and much easier to put things back together when the inevitable happens and the damned thing is dropped on the floor. However, do not number chapter two of your book as II-1, II-2, etc. If chapter one ends on page 36, chapter two should start on 37.

Once again, there's a reason here -- the editor needs to know how many pages there are in the whole book, not how many are in each of 43 chapters. Editors hate nothing more than chapter-

numbered manuscripts. Don't force your editor to get out an adding machine.

A header line in a book should look something like this:

Always indicate a scene break with something more than a mere blank line. If, in some later draft (or in print) your scene break falls on a page break, it will become invisible, and thus confuse the reader who will wonder about the sudden jump in time and/or space. Use a single or triple or quintuple line of asterisks or pound signs or some such, thusly:

* * * * *

What and how many symbols you use doesn't matter. Avoid symbols that have meaning in the context of your work (no percent signs in a math book), use the same method of indicating scene breaks throughout, and don't get all involved in elaborate designs or dingbats.

A side note on the above: made good and damn sure that such scene breaks are clearly marked in your story or book when it is printed. Failure to indicate a scene break caused a significant muddle in one passage of one of my earlier books. Since then, I haven't messed around or been polite when the book designer tried to delete such -- and I have been especially insistent when the scene break landed on a page break.

If you are in a situation where you are expecting to submit multiple drafts, you might consider a footer line that includes

the date of your draft, so that pages of the May 5 and June 3 drafts are easily distinguished. Don't use your word processor's "live date" or "dynamic date" or whatever function. Just type in the date yourself. Otherwise, when you open the June 3 draft on July 4, the computer will helpfully update the date and cause endless confusion. Check with your editor before doing anything like date stamping. Some will find it useful. Others will find it maddening.

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As regards synopses, essentially all of the above rules obtain, with one minor exception. **Boldface** is acceptable to set off chapter heads, first mentions of character names, etc. A synopsis is not intended for publication, and by its nature is a more awkward form of communication than a novel. A editor will want to move through it quickly. For these reasons, any minor assistance, such as boldfacing, that you can provide to highlight the key facts is useful. Just incidentally, remember that the plot summary of a synopsis is generally best told in the present tense.

Minor variants on most of these rules are acceptable, if you lay out your pages with these goals in mind:

- * To provide the editor with a manuscript that looks enough like all the other manuscripts he or she has seen over the years so that his or her experience can serve as a guide to the length of your work.

- * To provide the editor with a legible manuscript that can be dropped on the floor, shuffled together with some other stack

of papers, and then quickly and accurately reassembled.

* To provide an editor with a manuscript that can be easily navigated. Therefore make sure each page provides the vital information needed to keep pages and chapters straight: author name, chapter number, page number. Don't clutter the header with information that might get changed anyway -- like the title.

* To make it easy for the editor to contact you and/or your agent when questions come up. If he or she has your manuscript, he or she is going to need your address or phone number sooner or later. Make sure it is in two places: title page and first page of copy.

* To offer enough room in the margins and between the lines for marginal notations, corrections, and typesetting marks. DO NOT SINGLE SPACE. DOUBLE SPACE ONLY. (Notice how I keep repeating that point? Take the hint.) This is the most important reason for using a standard page style.

When using standard pages, an estimate of 200 to 250 words a page is very close. Call the first and last pages both half pages, making this manuscript 12 pages long. $12 \times 250 = 3,000$ words. Actual count using the word counting system in my program: 3,327 words. Close enough. (By the way, in my experience, no two word-counting programs produce the same results.)

Packaging notes: Use removable fasteners (i.e. paper clips) and not permanent ones (i.e. staples). Don't put your manuscript in a three-ring binder or a slip-clip binder. As always, there is a dull practical reason for this rule -- a editor needs to spread your pages out and lay them flat to write on them. If

they publish your words, at some point they will have to scan or photocopy your pages. Try photocopying on, or writing marginal notes on, pages that have been stapled together, or try marking in the left margin of a manuscript in a binder and you will see how annoying staples and binders can be. Pulling out staples and wrestling with binders won't make your editor happy.

Just in case you do need to reformat for the rare publisher who wants everything in Helvetica with quarter-inch margins, use paragraph styles, sometimes called style sheets, etc. That way, instead of having to change each and every font, margin, indent, etc. by hand, you can just change each style once, and have all paragraphs marked in that style changed in one swell foop.

This is the age of the computer, where it is too damned easy to fix things. If you have an existing text file in your computer that DOESN'T follow the rules in this essay -- reformat it and crank out a fresh copy that follows them. Paper is cheap.

Finally, some thoughts in re: electronic submission. Many publishers now accept (or even prefer) to receive submissions as computer files, via disk or via email. Make doubly sure you are following the publisher's rules as regards file format, media type, page and paragraph format, etc. Be sure you that the house in question does in fact accepts manuscripts via computer file, and be sure to send the file to the right street or email address. You don't want your manuscript submission to be treated like spam.

A few years back, the accepted wisdom was never to send anyone your manuscript via email, as many computer viruses were

spread that way. For the moment, that problem is more or less under control, but the situation could change again. Be on the safe side: run an anti-virus check against your file before you send it. You don't want to be the jerk that infects your editor's computer. (And run a virus check on any files the editor sends back!)

In a new development, some editors, at least, are doing initial reading of manuscripts on ebook readers or on computer screens. To accommodate the needed file conversion in such cases, keep your files very standard.

I sometimes submit in two complementary electronic formats: First, an Acrobat PDF file for the editor to print out if he or she wishes. A PDF will exactly preserve page layout, so that page breaks, hyphenation, etc. will be the same on all copies. That way you and your editor will literally be on the same page. Most word processors these days will "print" to a PDF file -- or else you can use any of a jillion free or cheap programs or printer drivers or web services that can generate a PDF. Second, I also send an RTF (Rich Text Format) file that can be edited. RTF files can be imported by virtually every modern word processor.

With both files on his or her computer, your editor can direct you to page 33, line six, word four in the PDF, and can edit (or format-convert, or set type) from the RTF. Once again, check before you submit this way. Do it the way they want it done -- not the way that makes sense to you.

One other thing: I hereby make explicit what has been implicit throughout this essay: Use a computer to produce your

submission.

Previous versions of this essay at least allowed for the possibility of a writer who was still using a typewriter. That's all over, as dead and gone as the quill pen scratching on foolscap, (whatever that is). Publishing is a business, an industry, and it has its industry standards. It took a decade or two longer than it should have, but every step of the publishing process is now based on the assumption that everything will be done via computer. Go ahead and bang on your Underwood or scribble on yellow legal pads (as many working writers do) for your first draft, but the draft submitted to an editor must be typed on a computer.

Mark the end of your manuscript with (30) (the old newspaper end-indicator) or "end" or "The End" or some such. Don't give them the chance to think a page might be missing.

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