Manuscript Preparation — Introduction

by Vonda N. McIntyre

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Useful addresses and URLs:

SFWA   http://www.sfwa.org/
                               e-mail: execdir@sfwa.org
                    Links, writers' resources, scam information

<u>SFWA Bulletin</u>   Professional journal
                          http://www.sfwa.org/bulletin/

<u>Locus</u>   SF/F Newsletter
                           http://www.locusmag.com/

Clarion   6-week intensive summer
c/o Mary Sheridan   writing workshop
112 Olds Hall   Scholarships available
Michigan State University   http://www.msu.edu/~clarion/
East Lansing, MI 48824-1047
517-355-9598

Clarion West   6-week intensive summer
340 Fifteenth Ave. E. #350   writing workshop
Seattle WA 98112   Scholarships available
206-322-9083   http://www.clarionwest.org/

SFF Net   http://www.sff.net/
                                              Discussions

Assoc. of Authors' Reps   http://www.aar-online.org/

Basement Full of Books   http://www.sff.net/bfob/
        (books available by mail directly from their authors)

"Pitfalls of SF and Fantasy" http://www.sff.net/people/Vonda/

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About 1700 words

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

This is a classic format, 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.

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 look like a rank amateur who cares nothing for the editor's eyesight.

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

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 spaces between paragraphs. Do not use 1.5 spacing to save paper; it's very difficult to read. Do not put extra spaces between paragraphs. Indent each paragraph's first line by at least a half-inch.

Bad examples appear below:

Wrong: This paragraph is 1.5 spaced and is separated from the previous paragraph by too many line spaces. This paragraph is 1.5 spaced. This paragraph is 1.5 spaced. This paragraph is 1.5 spaced. This paragraph is 1.5 spaced.

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

Use decent-quality opaque white paper. Use standard typesetters' marks, such as <u>underlining</u> to indicate italics. Use 12-point Courier or a similar monospaced serif font. (If you use a typewriter, pica type is preferable to elite.)

Do not justify the right margin or try to even out the right margin by hyphenating words.

The subject of proportional fonts is controversial. I recommend against them. Yes, they are prettier. But they were designed for publication, not for manuscripts. 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, and the manuscript will be difficult to read, like this.

The editor and the production department may not appreciate it. 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.

In short, you cannot go wrong with a plain, even old-fashioned, manuscript.

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. 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 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, but 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. 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 <u>is</u> possible for new writers to negotiate agreements without an agent. Furthermore, it's difficult to get an agent to submit short stories in the sf/f market. Do your homework on contracts -- see information at http://www.sfwa.org/ -- and be professional and civil about your questions. Most publishers are 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. Do <u>not</u> use ALL CAPS, or <u>underlining</u>,

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. The byline is the name, or pseudonym, the

story will be published under.)

Double-space the text. That is to say, separate lines

of text with a blank line, as in this handout.

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." You can find a more detailed explanation at

Http://www.sff.net/people/yog/. To protect yourself against

scam publishers, use the resources of the SFWA website,

http://www.sfwa.org/

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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).

Proofread your finished manuscript carefully. It <u>is</u>

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) are, traditionally, acceptable. Once you get to three

corrections on a single page, however, you should consider

reprinting. You should not be able to read the crossed-out

word; that's distracting. 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.

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. You may enclose another manila envelope, addressed and stamped, for your manuscript's return, or you may include an addressed, stamped business-sized envelope with a disposable manuscript. 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 send a story to an editor's email address unless you're asked to do so.

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

Be cautious of public on-line publication of your work. Some paying print markets consider that electronic

publication uses up first publication rights.

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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 your background pertains to the subject of the story, mention it; however, if you have done your research properly you should not 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, 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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