

Writer's Workshop Guidelines

Manuscript formatting for writers' workshops

By John Dalmas

Read and Heed this

The critiquing pros want to see manuscripts formatted the way editors want them. Editors have format requirements for practical reasons, having to do with handling, editing, layout, preparing copy for typesetting, and not losing track of pages in circumstances which can get hectic and confusing. If you can't bring yourself to follow manuscript format, don't waste your time and the publisher's, and in this case the critiquer's, by sending your manuscript in a format you like better. I for one will toss it. Just as an editor would, unless you enclose a suitable SASE to return it in. She/he is highly unlikely to read it. I'm not telling you this to be ornery. It's simply something you need to know. If you don't care whether or not the editor will read what you submit, why should I read it? You can create a file for your own reading copy, and in that file, format it any way you'd like. But the submission copy needs to be standard. And that's what you'll be held to in this workshop; you might as well get used to it.

What is needed

Use ordinary 20-lb white typing or copy paper, 8.5" x 11".

Leave 1-inch margins on both sides and the bottom of the page. Set the first manuscript line 1 inch below the header. And double space. Double space. Double space. Not one and a half. Not triple. And 1 inch means 1 inch. There are reasons. Some word-processing programs may be reluctant to let you do this. Some programmers think all word-processing documents are business letters. They aren't familiar with the needs of editors, layout people and typesetters. If your system is reluctant, sneak up on it. Set your spacing to give you 25 lines of text per full page.

Each manuscript page needs a header, including your name, a key identifying word from the title, and the page number. Set the header down 0.5" from the top.

Indent the first line of each paragraph. Don't leave extra space between paragraphs. Do leave extra space, with a lb sign (#) between sections.

Double space. That doesn't mean one and a half. It doesn't mean triple.

Use an equal-spacing font, like Courier, where each symbol occupies the same space on the line. Make it 10 spaces to the inch, what is called 10-pitch. If your word-processing system doesn't let you select pitch, then select "12-point type." It's not, really, but for equal-space fonts that's modern computereze for 10-point. (Thanks, Microsoft.)

Do not use a decorative font. Do not use Times Roman or the like, which assigns different spaces for different letters. There are practical reasons for this; ask me at a convention sometime, and I'll explain. But the most important practical reason is, editors don't accept them.

To indicate a word or line to be set in italic, underline.

You can, if you'd like, use actual italic to indicate passages you think should be set in a font different than the rest of the text.

Leave two spaces after periods. I know that it says not to in Windows for Idiots, etc. Its author misinformed his readers on this; apparently he hadn't worked as a typesetter. And even where manuscripts are downloaded from disks, a typesetter will keyboard the editors changes, etc. And the copy editor will edit on paper, so the changes can be recognized and evaluated against the author's delivered work.

I realize I already specified the paper; but let me restate: Do not use glossy paper, or pastel paper, or legal-size paper. (You'd be surprised at some of the paper, and especially some of the formatting, that gets submitted to workshops.)

In general, a workshop sets an upper limit in the number of words a submission may contain. Heed this.

Oh. And did I mention double-spacing?