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about 900 words

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Proper Manuscript Formatting... *for Workshops*

by William Shunn

This sample manuscript exists online as a model for how to format manuscripts for professional submissions. Your Professor came across it, and the following is a version slightly modified for submissions to college-level creative writing workshops. The essence is the same with some gentle changes.

No one knows for certain how many good short stories are passed over because the manuscripts containing them are formatted poorly, but it is certain that a properly formatted manuscript will be more eagerly read by an editor than a poorly formatted one. Here are a few suggestions. First, use black type on white paper only. Print on only one

side of the page. For easy readability, limit your choice of font to either Courier or Times New Roman. Set font size to 12 points. Use nice wide margins all around your pages. There should be one-inch margins all around. Always double-space between lines. Never submit a single-spaced manuscript. Workshop participants need room to make suggestions, corrections, and other typographical marks between lines.

Now, to the first page of your manuscript. For professional submissions, place your name, address, telephone number, and e-mail address in the upper left corner. If you belong to a professional writing organization, you may list your membership beneath this information. For this class, however, you will only need to put your name, the course name and number, and the date of submission. In the upper right corner of the first page, place an approximate word count, and round to the nearest hundred words. Place the title of your story one third to one half of the way down the first page. Professional editors need all that empty space for writing notes to the typesetter and copy editor. Your title should be centered on the page—there is no need for quotation marks or underlining since the title is your own creation. One double space below your title, center your byline. This may seem like redundant information, since your name is already in the upper-left corner of the manuscript, but it's not. The name in the corner is the person to whom the publisher will make out the check. The byline is the name that receives credit for the story when it appears in print. These are not necessarily the same. Begin the text of your manuscript two double spaces below your byline. The first line of every paragraph in your manuscript, including this first paragraph, should be indented five spaces. Do not place extra line spaces between paragraphs, as is the common practice in blogs and other online writing. Place a page header in the upper right corner of every

page of your manuscript. This header consists of your real surname, one or two important words from the title of your story, and the current page number.

Except for paragraph indentations, the left margin of your manuscript should be ruler-straight. The right margin, however, should be ragged, not justified. Right justification messes up the spaces between words and sentences and makes the manuscript more of a chore to read. Put two spaces after the end of every sentence, and also put two spaces after every colon. This helps make the separations between sentences more apparent, and helps editors more easily distinguish periods from commas and colons from semicolons. With the dominance of computers, this practice is changing, and it is more common now to see only one space between sentences, but I am old-school, so put two spaces after your periods.

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

"Dialog should be enclosed in quotation marks," she said. "And tag lines should be concise and unobtrusive."

"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."

If you want a line break to appear in your story, then rather than leaving a blank line you should center the character “#” on a line by itself. Do this for every line break, not just for ones that fall at the top or bottom of a page. As you edit and revise your

manuscript prior to submission, those breaks can move around, and word processors often hide blank lines that come at the start or end of a page. You don't want your scene breaks rendered invisible to your editor.

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While you'll find certain variations in the way different writers format their manuscripts, no one departs very far from these standards. But always check a market's submission guidelines before sending your work. If their guidelines differ from these, follow theirs. At the very least, these suggestions will guarantee your work looks professional. How the story itself comes across is an entirely separate matter--and that part's all up to you. Best of luck!