

## Formatting

### Sources

Information in this handout comes from collected Sisters in Crime posts and private e-mails; from a workshop presented by Calgary, Alberta literacy teachers on why certain formats improve readability, and from *The Computer is Not a Typewriter* (also published as *The Mac is not a Typewriter*) by Robin Williams, a California computer and graphic arts teacher, not the late comedian by the same name.

The two suggestions at the end, related to alternate word counts, are credited to their authors, and used with their permission.

## Formatting

### Formatting Rule #1:

The publisher rules. Whatever format or word count method the publisher requires for a purchased manuscript is the one the author must use. The delivered and accepted manuscript (the D&A) will follow the rules of the publishing house that has accepted it.

- If you are writing for submission to a specific publisher, check their web site or phone them to ask about format requirements. If they have them, follow them.
- Unless they have given specific guidelines to the contrary, agents/publishers don't care what font you use, as long as it's readable, and has white space around the text itself. (More on fonts later.)

### Formatting Rule #2:

Most of us write without having sold the manuscript. All manuscripts go through two stages: being submitted for consideration and the delivered and accepted manuscript (the D&A), which is the last version the author approves before it goes to the typesetter. The format for manuscripts submitted for consideration is up to the author, unless the agent/publisher has specific requirements. (See Rule #1)

### Current Industry Standards—Page Formats—Electronic and paper submissions

- 1" margins all around. Headers and Footers begin at 0.5"
- Set computer to create 0.5" indents at the beginning of each paragraph. Never use tabs to create paragraph indents.
- Some publishers want the first paragraph in each chapter to have no indent; others want every paragraph to be indented the same way.
- Double-space everything, even those things, like quotes, which will be single-spaced in the final work.
- Long quotes should be indented on both left and right sides. I use 0.5" indents, but this is the author's choice. It should be big enough to show there is a difference, but small enough to allow for a reasonable number of words per line.
- Left justification.
- No additional points before or after a paragraph. In Word, go to Format—Paragraph—

Spacing and enter 0 points before and after the paragraph.

- Header: Name of manuscript only, same font as manuscript. Right justified. Including the author's name is optional. If it's done, the format should be Author's Last Name/Name of Manuscript. Many competitions require that the author's name be omitted, so if you choose to include the author's name for some submissions, create another file with manuscript name only in the header. That way you'll have a file ready to go either way.
- Footer: page number on each page, except maybe page 1, same font as the manuscript. Centered. Continuous numbering throughout. If Chapter 9 ends on page 120, Chapter 10 begins on page 121, non on 10-1.
- Forced page break between chapters so that each chapter starts on a new page.

#### Current Industry Standards: paper submissions

- 8.5" x 11" white bond paper (you might be able to get away with a slight off-white, but it's tricky)
- Ink jet, laser printer, or commercial printing. Single sided. Clean copy.
- No holes, binding, covers, etc. Ship the manuscript in a box just big enough to hold it or in a thick, padded envelope, perhaps with rubber bands around it.
- Page order exactly as you'd want it in the book. Use forced pagination so that each section begins on a new page. Not all submissions have all of these parts.
  - Cover page: title; author; if using a pen name, real name writing as pen name; contact information; if you have an agent representation, name and contact information for the agent
  - Introduction
  - Acknowledgements
  - Dedication
  - Text
  - Endnotes
  - Glossary
  - References
  - Style Sheet (More about these later)
  - Author's biography

#### Current Industry Standards: electronic submissions

- Use the program and device required by the agent/publisher.
- All material in a single file, in the order described above for paper submissions.

## Fonts

Unless the agent/publisher requests a particular font, they are the author's choice and governed by one principle: the manuscript should be as easy to read as possible.

- 12-point was once the absolute standard, but there is now about a 70/30 split, with 70% of publishers preferring/requiring 12-point font and the other 30% preferring/requiring 11-point font.
- Chapter titles: go up 2 points from text, so for 12-point text, use 14 points for chapter titles; for 11-point text, use 13 points for chapter titles.
- A proportional font preferred. (See Proportional Fonts and White Rivers)
- Font should be serif (one with little hooks on the letters: Times New Roman or Courier) rather than a sans-serif (one without little hooks: Arial, Helvetica, or Geneva) because the hooks actually help the eye flow from one word to the next.

## Proportional Fonts and White Rivers

Courier and New Courier are non-proportional fonts. That means is that every letter is allotted the same amount of space. Times New Roman, a proportional font, assigns different amount of spaces to each letter, depending on if the letter is skinny or round.

Imagine the word "miles" spelled out in wooden children's blocks.

- If spelled with Courier blocks, all 5 blocks are exactly the same size; let's say 1" each. So the Courier "miles" takes up 5 inches.
- If spelled with Times New Roman blocks, there are three sizes: 1" for the "m," 0.75" for "e" and "s," and .5" for skinny "i" and "l." "Miles" in TNR blocks takes up 3.5 inches.

This is what happens in miniature on your page. A proportional type can simply fit in more words to the page and proportional fonts are easier to read because they adjust the surrounding white space so the eye glides over the words.

	Proportional font	Non-proportional font
Skinny word	lilt	lilt
Round word	morose	morose

Note how, when a non-proportional font is used, a skinny word like "lilt" already has a lot of internal space built into it, and a round word, "morose," has very little built-in space. The eye constantly adjusts to compensate for different amounts of white space in each word. Way back in the typewriter era, the only way typists had to indicate the end of a sentence was to intentionally create a large, consistent white space, hence, two spaces after each period.

The choice of a proportional or non-proportional fonts affects spaces after periods, too.

With proportional fonts, like Times New Roman, the computer makes the white space adjusted for the eye. When the person using a word processor types a period at the end of a sentence, the computer automatically enlarges the space after that period by a teeny-tiny bit. So if you put two spaces after a sentence when using a proportional font, you're really getting about two-and-a-half spaces. This creates white rivers, which stop the eye and decrease the readability of a document.

This is the reason that the new standard is one space after each sentence period.

If you find it really tough to break the two space habit, go ahead and use them, then, when you're finished with the document, go a global search and replace all double spaces with single spaces.

## Stop using the computer as if it were a typewriter

Back in the typewriter days, the only way to break up lines of text was to do it manually, that is, manually create columns, use a tab to start a paragraph, roll a new page into the carriage to start a new chapter. There were also a very limited number of style changes that could be made, so an artificial set of rules sprang up that were governed by the limits of the machine rather than by the readability of the document produced.

Enter the computer and word processing software. The average home computer offers an unlimited number of choices, but unfortunately many people are stuck in typewriter mode.

The problem is that using typewriter features such as underlining to indicate italics, tabs to start paragraphs, returns instead of clean page breaks, and section breaks drive typesetters bonkers, especially now that many manuscripts are submitted electronically. The first thing that the typesetters have to do is remove all of these author-inserted directions from the 300+ page text, and reformat the manuscript. Here are the 10 worst typewriter habits:

### Stop using all capitals

Using all capitals for words is the single worst offender for decreasing easy readability. People use word shapes to help them read. Look at the two titles below

A TALE OF TWO CITIES BY CHARLES DICKENS

A Tale of Two Cities by Charles Dickens

Both are in Times New Roman font. The first example is all capitals, 12 point font. In this one, the eye has no variation clues. All of the words are the same, top and bottom. The second example is a combination of capital and lowercase letters, 14point font. The difference in letter height, which gives shapes to the individual words, helps the reader along.

### Use font size for emphasis

- In fiction, if you want to emphasize titles and headings, change the font size instead of typing in all capitals. For some reason, using 2 point increases, or multiples of the original number seem to appeal to the human eye. A 12-point font for the text works well with a 14-point header, or if you need really big text, use 24- or 36- points (both multiples of 12).
- In non-fiction, using a different font for things like titles and headers also seems to work. You might use a 12-point serif font (Example: Times New Roman) for the text and 12- or 14-point non-serif font (Example: Arial) for the titles and headers. If you choose to use different fonts, limit yourself to two: one for the text and one for the titles and headers.

### Use automatic page formatting features

- Set the computer to automatically indent the first line of a paragraph, usually 0.5 inches from the margins. Never use a tab to start a paragraph. Since my publisher likes the first paragraph of a chapter not indented, I've set up two paragraph formats, one with an indent and one without.
- Always use a page break to move from one chapter to another, even if the last line of text in the previous chapter comes down to the very bottom of a page.
- A section break is not \* \* \* \* or similar marks used to change scenes or points of view. Those are fine to use. They should be centered, with no extra spacing above or below.
- A true section break is a way to sneak in formatting. For example, running a list of six names individually down the length of a page—particularly with double-spaced lines—leaves very few words and lots of white space. Authors are tempted to create a section and list the names in 3 columns of 2 names each because it looks better. Until it gets to the typesetter. After the typesetter removes the author-induced formatting, the section is likely to look more like free-form poetry. (See Style Sheet below)
- Leaving widows and orphans on the page is a hold-over from typewriter days. There's a myth out there that you must leave these features turned on in order to get a full 250 words per page. The 250-word page no longer exists because of proportional fonts. Many editors feel the manuscript has a more professional look with widows and orphans turned off.
  - A *widow* is the last line of a paragraph, all alone by itself at the top of a page. It's a left-over from the paragraph on the previous page.
  - An *orphan* is the first line of a paragraph, all alone by itself at the bottom of a page. You will find the rest of the paragraph on the following page.
  - Most word processing programs let you turn widows and orphans off or on. If widows and orphans are turned off, the program will automatically break the page so all of the paragraph is on one page, which affects the word count of individual pages, but not the total word count in the document. In Word, Format—Paragraph—Line and Page Breaks—Check Widow and Orphan Control.
- Stop underlining of words to indicate that italics are to be used. If the word is in italics, use italics, if it is to be bolded, bold it. Use bold sparingly.

- Set the computer to insert automatic en and em dashes and ellipses. There are four types of horizontal marks
  - The hyphen (-) used for compound words, compound names, or to hyphenate a very long word. Depending on the dictionary you are using and if it is American spelling or British/Canadian spelling the rules for compound names are different. Pick one and be consistent. Do not hyphenate long words. (See below why doing that drives typesetters crazy.)
  - The en dash (-- if using a typewriter or – if using a computer) used to separate dates or ranges. John Smith, 1684–1723 or Please pull files Carnivorous–Carrot.
  - The em dash (--- if using a typewriter or — if using a computer) used to indicate a person interrupts their own speech or to insert additional information. “How did you—never mind.” or I was no great shakes at navigation—I was once lost in a Walmart parking lot for twenty minutes—but that was what GPS was for.
  - The ellipse (. . . if using a typewriter or ... if using a computer) used to indicate one person interrupting another person.  
“I never knew ...”  
“You never knew a lot of things, baby.”
  - Additional spaces are never used before and after hyphens. Publishers have different rules about if a space goes before and after the en or em dash. If you don’t know what your eventual publisher wants, pick one and be consistent. Spaces are always used before the ellipse.
- In fiction, spell out all numbers. The old rule of spelling out numbers up to ten, then use numerals after that no longer is universally true. Numbers are one area where publishers may have definite instructions in their style sheets, so you may have to change this after you are accepted for publication, and know your publisher’s guidelines.
- Exceptions to the above number rule is when a character looks at written numbers or when numbers are part of a recognized name. Examples:
  - I looked at her card. *Cynthia Gammon; 325-58th Street*. Pretty high class neighborhood for a girl barely out of technical school.
  - I picked up cigarettes and a Diet Coke at the 7-11.
- Stay away from weird fonts. Yes, *Party LET* has a certain joy about it, and **Cooper Black** conveys a dark soberness, but fancy fonts drive editors crazy.

## Consider a style sheet

Consider submitted a style sheet with your manuscript. A style sheet is instructions for the editor and typesetter about what is supposed to look different and the way words and abbreviations are to be spelled. Here are some headings that can be used in style sheets:

### Changes from the main font:

This is where I would say things like: On page 75, there are a list of six names. Arrange the names in three columns so that there are two lines of three names each.

### Ways of speaking used to define characters:

Mention places where characters speak in a certain way to indicate, for example, being drunk, or characters who use regional accents or dialects.

### Copyrights:

Mention any quoted material and state if it is public domain or, if copyrighted, give the name and address of the person or company from whom you have secured copyright permission.

### Abbreviations:

Especially important if using a unique vocabulary. I use a lot of military abbreviations, some with periods and some without, and I want them reproduced exactly as I've typed them.

### Dates:

Probably needed only if the characters use dates in a special way, as my ex-solders do when speaking of something that happened in the military.

### Character Names:

Helps the proof-reader spot places where your find-and-replace might not have worked. I had a character named Sheriff Royston in half the book and Sheriff Royton in the other half. By looking at the style sheet, the typesetter could figure out that Royston was the correct name.

Also, I changed a minor character's name on the last rewrite. If I missed any places where Grace was now supposed to be Gloria, the typesetter will see that Gloria is listed on the list of names, but Grace is not.

### Intentional Spellings:

Same principles as character names. I list place names, vocabulary which might not be familiar, and foreign words. Because one of my characters is a nurse, I also list any medical terminology used.

## Word Counts

Another myth out there is that the gold standard—in fact the only standard—is exactly 250 words per page. This may be true for a limited number of publishers, but in fact, what editors really want a good guess to get an estimate of the finished book size, to know whether they are dealing, for example, in the ball park of 50,000 or 80,000 word for a particular submission.

Every submission goes through a complex editing process before the delivered and accepted manuscript (the D&A) is finished. The word length of the original submission will be different from the D & A manuscript.

When the typesetter gets the D & A manuscript, he/she will use a completely different formula for counting words, because she/he has to account for what takes up space. Six characters plus a space = a typesetter's word. To a typesetter, the indent at the beginning of each paragraph counts as a word. "Block" is one word, but "antihistamine" is two to three words. A short line of dialog, like "Come on." counts for ten words because that's the average for filling a line. Fortunately, as authors, we can let the typesetters do their jobs and concentrate on doing ours.

Many editors will accept either a random sample of pages (usually 5% of the manuscript), with the words actually counted or the automatic computer count as a basis of determining how long a manuscript is. Unfortunately, we are stuck with contests, and publishing houses who haven't figured out that the computer is not a typewriter. If a contest states you must have 1" margins and exactly 250 words per page, here are a couple of bits of information that might help achieve these requirements:

- Changing from a proportional to a non-proportional font may change your word count per page by as much as a hundred words. You've already read the explanation about why: the amount of white space surrounding each letter.
- To get around this difference when your manuscript is in a proportional font and a contest or editor demands exactly 250 words per page, fiddle with the font size. For a quick fix, try 13 point type, instead of 12. If your word processor permits decimal units and you want to be really, really picky, experiment with decimal numbers between 13 and 14 until you hit on the perfect combination for 250 words per page.
- Thanks to Pat Browning for pointing out that in Word, to get an exact one-inch bottom margin, you have to set the file to 0.9 instead of 1. This is because the computer measures the margin from the bottom of the descenders: letters like g-j-p-q-y that drop below the line, rather than the smooth bottom of all the other lines. The difference is about 5/32 or 0.156" or probably not enough to see with the naked eye. Use either 1.0" or 0.9", whatever makes you happier. Even contest judges aren't going to be measuring with a ruler, I hope.

- One page of a screenplay in Courier/12 point equals one minute of stage or film action, so for now, if you're a screen writer, you may be stuck with using the Courier font. One day some bright writer, who wasn't even born when the rest of us were using typewriters, will figure out how many pages in Times New Roman makes one minute of movie time. When moviemakers can fix the new dimensions in their heads, my guess is Courier will become purely optional and not necessarily preferred.

## Word Count Alternatives

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Long ago, I learned a long version of how to count words by hand. These days the shortcut, of course, is to let the computer do it for me. In the first 50 pages of the book I'm working on, in Courier New 12, it counted 10,600 words, so an average of 212 per page. That's partly because the book is divided into chapters, the first one of which starts maybe 1/4 page down from the top, and the last one of which can end anywhere on the page. It's also because when we write dialogue, especially, many lines are short.

The long way is to count a number of full lines, say 10 or so, and average the number of words you use per line. Then count only the number of lines per page that reach to the middle of the page, even if they don't go past the middle, and multiply that number by your average word count per line. Ignore the lines that don't reach the middle. Counting just two pages that way, I came up with 253 words on one and 187 on another. Back in the days of typewriters, I became quick at looking at a page and estimating it as 250, 200, or 150.

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Another way to count words is to take ten pages, find the longest line on each page and count the characters, including spaces on that line and divide by 6, the typesetter's word. This gives you the number of typesetter words per line. You can then average that for the ten selected long lines and you'll have your average line length. Multiply that by the number of lines on your page and then by the number of pages and you have the total words for the manuscript. You can do a shortcut by highlighting the longest line and choosing the word count function in MS Word. One of the values it reports is the number of characters including spaces, which saves you having to count the characters. Using a non-proportional font such as Courier is a faster shortcut since you know every line will have the same number of characters.

I think people sometimes get confused over the different methods because they are counting different words. The typesetter's word—6 characters including spaces—was intended to set a standard for word length to estimate the amount of area a body of text will cover. What we commonly mean by word, however, is a unit of meaning bounded by spaces. The latter is what the computer word count measures.

When I report the length of a manuscript to an editor, I use the typesetter word count, because what the publisher wants to know is how much area the text will cover. I use the computer word count to get a quick index of white space in the manuscript. We all know white space is good, right? The typesetter word count tells me the area and the computer count tells me how much of it is covered by recognizable words. Then I divide the computer count by the typesetter count.

**Example:**

The manuscript I just finished covers 381 pages in 12-point Courier, 25 lines per page, ten words per line or 95,250 words. The MS Word count function gives me 73,423 words. Dividing the second number by the first gives .77 or 23% white space. A previous draft of the same manuscript had 12,000 more words and only 20% white space, so I think I did a good job of tightening up. It reads better, too.