

Presenting Your Manuscript Like A Pro

By Linda Rohrbough

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One of the questions I hear from beginning writers implies more than simply how do you format a manuscript for submission. It's like there's some magic formula to make an agent or a publisher say, "Wow, let's just take this one and we'll read it later."

There is a bit of truth to this. In manuscript formatting there are ways to come off as someone who can deliver the goods.

One of the best works out there on this subject is a short, inexpensive piece written by PPW's own Pam McCutcheon and Bev Stover titled "The No-Brainer Guide to Manuscript Format." Variations abound. Some sources will say put your contact information in the upper left-hand corner of the title page and others will say put it at the lower right-hand corner. Does this make a great deal of difference? No. But omitting the title page or incomplete contact information (like no phone number) is a sure way to come off as an amateur.

An almost overwhelming temptation is to treat the manuscript like a college term paper and use the cool things word processing programs do. But glitzy formatting is another way to say, "I am so new at this."

Turning on widow and orphan control is glitzy. For those of you who don't know, widows are lines left by themselves at the top of a page and orphans are a single word left the same way. Word processors have a setting to prevent widows and orphans. On a manuscript, this has at least two ramifications. One is to reduce the word count. With one-inch margins and either Courier or Times Roman 12 point type double-spaced, you'll have 250 words to a page. If you use widow and orphan control, the word processor will introduce a page break early. In addition, characters invisible to you are inserted to tell the printer to start printing on the next page. Those characters will have to be removed when the manuscript is processed for publication.

Another common error is to use italics when you want words italicized. Pros use underlining, even though the word processor is capable of showing italics.

Remember, publishers and agents are in the business of publishing books. So they know paper and fonts and all the rest. And they see hundreds, if not thousands, of manuscripts every month. So if one comes in with stuff that's not standard, it sticks out. Onion skin paper, non-standard fonts, staples--all are marks of an amateur.

And since we're on the subject, let's talk about staples. New writers have nightmares about dropped manuscripts blown all over someone's office floor, pages lost, stepped on or worse. But if you are fortunate, your manuscript will be copied for distribution to everyone in an editorial meeting. A manuscript that's been stapled is tough to get through a copier. Pros put a rubber band around the manuscript or put it in a box. Each page is numbered and has the book's title and author's last name at the top. This way when pages get separated, they can be reunited.

Now, anyone who knows this business will tell you that, realistically, it'll be you fixing the errors I mentioned. Once your project is accepted, your agent or publisher will send you guidelines and you'll be expected to fix this stuff and do other things it would take too long to talk about here.

So why bother now? Want the bottom line? Here it is. A professional cowboy doesn't wear a clean hat or boots that are polished so you can see yourself in them. And the other cowboys know a pro when they see one.

Professional writers submit manuscripts in a way that communicates, "I know the business." They use the guidelines in the sidebar or the ones from the guide I mentioned earlier.

Are there exceptions? Sure. If Bob Redford calls the William Morris Agency asking them to take a look at your manuscript, you can probably send it along in a multi-colored flowered box on onion skin paper printed with 10 point Comic Sans font. Amid snickers, someone of importance will give it serious reading. But even if you have those kinds of connections, wouldn't you rather be taken seriously from the start?

So don't be the green horn.

Sidebar:

Manuscript Formatting Checklist

(This list is by no means complete, but it's a good start.)

1. One-inch margins all around.
2. Twelve-point Courier or Times New Roman font.
3. Paragraphs double-spaced, first line of paragraph indented 5 spaces, left justified only.
4. Twenty-pound bond paper.
5. No staples or bindings of any kind. Rubber bands are OK.
6. Title page included with book title, your name and genre centered and your contact information in one corner.
7. Each page header has book title/your name on the left and page number on the right.
8. Start chapters 1/3 of the way down the page. Chapter title in capital letters, then double-double space to first paragraph.
9. Indicate scene breaks with # or * * * on a single line (pick one, use consistently).
10. Use underlining rather than italics.
11. Manuscript submissions should include cover letter, title page, synopsis, manuscript, and SASE.

BIO

Linda Rohrbough has been writing about the computer industry since 1989 and has more than 5,000 articles and five books to her credit. Her work has been honored three times by the Computer Press Association. She has finished her first techno-thriller novel and is working on a second. E-mail Linda at Linda@PCbios.com or visit her website www.PCbios.com.