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2,083 words

“Manuscript Format Example”

by David M. Fitzpatrick

Joe and Mary looked around, dazed. “Where are we?” Mary whispered.

“I’m not sure,” said Joe. “I think… I think we’re in a story.”

Mary’s round face grew pale as her green eyes widened. “Wait a minute… you mean in a fictional story? Like a novel or something?”

Joe got to his feet and dusted his faded blue jeans off, looking around the page as he did. “I assume it isn’t fiction, since you and I know we’re real, but we’re definitely in a document of some kind—perhaps one created in a word processing program like Microsoft Word and exported to Adobe’s PDF format.”

“My God!” Mary cried, struggling clumsily to her feet, her auburn hair swishing about her face. “Do you know what you’re saying?”

“I do. I believe we’re part of a writing course. By the looks of things, the document was originally an RTF.”

“That’s Rich Text Format,” Mary said, nodding. “But why not use Microsoft Word? It’s practically universal nowadays.”

“Most editors will accept Word, but some won’t, with good reason,” Joe said. “Word documents can contain macros that can do malicious things. They can wipe out files or even format a hard drive. Viruses sometimes hide in Word documents as macros and can do some nasty things. And ODF is still in its infancy.”

“Ah, I see—but RTFs are safe, and the writer can always change it to a Word doc if the editor insists on it.”

Joe looked around the white page, studying the formatting closely. “Well, it looks like everything’s in order. If we have to be trapped in a document, at least we’re trapped in one that follows proper manuscript format. Check out those margins. One inch all the way around. The indent looks fine—and the header on each page, except for the first, is correct.”

“I thought the header was supposed to be flushed right,” Mary said, scrunching her brow. “In this document, it’s centered.”

“Some editors want it that way, but the idea is to have three key things at the top of every page after page one,” Joe said. He pointed up at the header at the top of this page. “The first two things are the title of the work and the author’s name. That way, if pages get separated, they can be easily reunited.”

“I get it,” Mary said, her eyes gleaming with excitement. “And the page number is so when the editor drops the manuscript all over the floor, he can easily reassemble it.”

“More or less.”

Mary squinted as she looked at the words, dancing across the page in double-spaced paragraphs. “But I thought the text had to be in the Courier font.”

“Some editors demand it, but most will settle for Times or Times New Roman. That and Courier are found on any computer. The thing is, don’t use fancy fonts; the font should be easy to read. Courier and Times are the standards because they’re much easier on the eyes, especially for editors who spend all day reading. That can be even more important if an editor is reading a computer screen as opposed to printed pages. I’ve heard that there are many editors who will flatly refuse to read a manuscript that doesn’t conform to this format.”

“From what I hear, that’s the rule,” Mary said. “I suppose it’s easy enough to get used to using, and once you do, it’s like second nature.”

“I would guess the best thing for a writer to do would be to have a template file that has everything all set up and ready,” Joe said. “That way, when a new story of article or other piece comes to mind, he can sit down, load in the template, save it as the new document name, and start writing. No going through the hassle of reformatting later.”

Mary yawned. “Wow, all this being trapped in a document has me sleepy.”

“Me too. What say we get some rest? Maybe if we bide our time, the document will end and we can get back to the real world.”

“I hope so.”

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Time passed, but there was no end to the document. Everything was a field of white, with Times New Roman font all over the place in proper manuscript format. Mary was fuming around all four corners of the standard-sized paper by then.

“It’s not that I don’t want to be part of helping others learn manuscript format,” she said. “It’s just that I have a life outside this document, you know.”

“We appear to have little choice at the moment,” Joe said. “In the meantime, I was just

checking out the first page again. I was noting the information at the top of the page. The writer’s name, address, telephone number, email address, copyright notice, and word count. I’ve heard that not having those things can be another automatic deal-breaker—that if an editor doesn’t see those things on page one at the top left, he likely won’t even read the manuscript.”

“Isn’t the word count supposed to be in the upper-right-hand corner of page one?” Mary asked.

“Generally, but I think the idea is to have it on page one somewhere,” Joe said. “And unlike the old days, don’t include your Social Security Number on page one anymore. Identity theft is a big thing lately.”

“I heard the word count should be exact, but don’t some editors say ‘approximate?’”

“That hearkens back to the old days, too. It used to be that you counted the words on an average page and multiplied by your total number of pages to get your approximate word count.”

“But with word processors, it’s easy to get an exact word count,” Mary said. “Of course, it will also count things like those pound signs you see all alone on lines to indicate scene breaks.”

“A few words here and there won’t make a difference,” Joe said. “Editors who want submissions inside a certain range of words want to know they’re reading something they can use. Hey, about those pound signs: I’ve heard they can be centered or flushed left. But I thought scene breaks were always indicated by three spaced asterisks centered.”

“I know the answer to this one,” Mary said proudly. “First, you can’t just leave a blank line, because if it happens at the top or bottom of a page, it can get confusing because the reader won’t know there was a scene break. Second, three asterisks are used only if, in final publication layout, the scene break does, in fact, happen at the top or bottom of a page.”

“You’re right,” Joe conceded. “I suppose the pound sign is just a placeholder to let the editor and layout folks know that a scene break happens there.”

Mary checked her watch. “Well, this is all a lot of fun, but when do we get out of here?”

“I’m beginning to suspect we don’t,” Joe said. “I think we’re… actually not real.”

“What are you saying?” Mary cried. “That can’t be right!”

“But it is right!” Joe yelled back. “Just accept it! And stop crying!”

“Listen, enough with the underlining, already,” Mary said. “I know that’s how manuscript format indicates italics—a throwback to the days of typesetting and all—but there’s such a thing as too much of that.”

“You’re right; I’m sorry,” Joe said. “Underlining indicates italics, yes, but it should be used sparingly. Well-written dialogue should convey the emphasis without all the underlining. Too much underlining, italicizing, or boldfacing gives a ‘checkerboard effect’ on the page. It’s very distracting to the reader and it looks dreadful.”

Mary slumped back down on the page and exhaled in frustration. “I’m tired of living in this 12-point, double-line-spaced world. And look at the single character space after the ends of sentences. That’s nothing like the two spaces after the end of a sentence we learned in typing class way back in high school.”

“No need for that any longer. Word processors and desktop publishing programs take care of proper spacing, particularly with block-justified layouts—you know, when the text lines up evenly on the right side of the page.”

Mary looked at the right side of this page, her mouth hanging open in surprise. “I hadn’t noticed, but this document has a ragged right margin. Why not block-justify it? That looks neater.”

“In final layout for publication, sure. But not in manuscript format. The editor needs to see everything properly spaced. Block justification inserts extra spaces and partial spaces to spread out lines and even up the margins. The page layout guys don’t want to see that.”

“I guess I can understand that,” Mary said. “Well, hey—I’m going to take another nap. Wake me up if anything exciting happens.”

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Joe woke her as soon as something exciting happened. “I just realized something!”

“What is it?” Mary was still groggy from her nap, and rubbed the sleep from her eyes. “Are we getting out of here?”

“Sadly, no. But check out the front page. After the word count, the writer should have listed the rights he’s offering. Usually it’s First North American Serial Rights.”

“I heard that was becoming out of fashion,” she said. “After all, the writer owns his copyright and the editor needs to secure rights before publication anyway. You know, anything a writer writes, either putting it on paper or typing it on a computer, is automatically copyrighted. But if the work isn’t filed with the Copyright Office at the Library of Congress, anyone can steal your work!”

“Hold on, now, that isn’t true,” Joe said. “Nobody can <u>ever</u> legally steal your work. If someone does, and you haven’t filed with the Copyright Office, you can still sue them to make them stop. However, without a filing with the Copyright Office, you can’t get a court to award you damages.”

“I stand corrected,” she said with a smile. “I was only getting one side of the story.”

“And speaking of one side, if this document is printed, it should always be on one side of the paper,” Joe said. “Some printers will automatically print on both sides, but no editor wants to

see a two-sided print job. Editors will be red-inking the copy and the ink can bleed through, and even the text on the other side can be visible. One-sided printing makes for cleaner copy.”

“So does the type of paper used. I heard that 20-pound paper is best.”

“If you’re submitting printing copy, 20-pound is the minimum; 24-pound is better,” Joe said. “But another major factor is the paper’s brightness. Cheap copy paper may have just a 90 brightness, which isn’t a very bright finish. Paper with a 96 or higher brightness is much better. It costs more, but for making a good impression with your writing, it’s much nicer.”

“I suppose you’d use the same for query letters and cover letters,” Mary mused.

Joe threw his hands up as if in defense, and laughed. “Wait a minute, that’s another document entirely! Let’s focus on getting out of this one first!”

They shared a laugh and got comfortable on the page again. They were each lost in their thoughts for some time before Mary said tentatively. “Hey… what do you think about ending a document?”

“What do you mean?”

“You know… how do you make sure the editor knows the story is over with? I mean, if it ended at the bottom of the page, he might think he’s missing a page.”

“If it’s a long document, you can always use ‘Page X of Z pages’ in the header, where ‘X’ is the current page and ‘Z’ is the total number of pages,” Joe suggested. “But if you’re concerned about an ambiguous ending, you can always use THE END or just END at the end of the story, a few blank lines down from the last line.”

“You never see books like that anymore.”

“No, you don’t, but it’s okay in a submitted manuscript. You can also use the old journalists’ bit, putting a -30- at the end. Some editors get annoyed by it, though. I have no idea

why. Anything to signify the end of the story seems fine to me.”

“I think I see something coming now,” Mary said excitedly, pointing to the bottom of the page. “Look! There it is! Does this mean we get out of the story?”

“I don’t think so,” Joe said grimly. “Remember, we aren’t real.”

THE END