

Creative Writing: The Short Story

Submitting Your Work

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Matching Up Your Work

Once you're sure the manuscript is where you want it, it's time to prepare for sending it off. Now you need to match it up with potential publishers. Be sure to match up the important things editors will use to qualify your story, regardless of whether you're a great writer.

Genres

The story must match the publication's genres. If the magazine publishes fantasy and horror only, and your story is science fiction, the magazine is not the right market for your story. Sending an SF tale to that magazine is not only a colossal waste of your time, but it's also a colossal waste of the editor's time.

Some publications may work strictly with subgenres, which can further limit you. A magazine may publish SF, but if your story is a hard sci-fi tale and the magazine only wants space opera, near-future sociological situations, and alien visitations, they aren't likely going to want to see your story.

Word Count

The story must match the publication's word count range. If the magazine only accepts stories to 8,000 words and your story is 15,000, the magazine is not the right market for your story. If the story is barely outside the range – say, 8,200 – it may be appropriate to query the editor first; however, it's always a good idea to proofread the story and see if there are 200 words that just don't need to be there anyway.

Editor Preferences

Some editors like certain stories while others do not. You may find two magazines that specialize in sword and sorcery fiction and yours is such a tale; but Magazine #1 may specifically want classic sword and sorcery with knights and wizards and dragons and dungeons, while Magazine #2 might want completely original twists while still sticking to the sword and sorcery ideal. Be sure your story falls within the preferences of the editors!

“Red Light” Stories

Many editors have typical plots, characters, and story ideas they have seen too many times before and they virtually won't ever look at others like it. Not that there can't be exceptions, but it's generally a good idea to check out the guidelines to a publication and ensure your story isn't what an editor might consider “old hat” – and, indeed, what some editors might consider “old hat” might be perfectly fine to others. An editor who has seen too many vampire stories may flatly not care to see any more vampire stories at all; likewise, a magazine that publishes *only* vampire stories is likely to look at any vampire tale you send them (but will probably be very discriminating as to the nature of the tale as they see far more vampire stories than others).

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The Cover Letter

The cover letter is a standard accompaniment to a sent manuscript. There are a few editors who don't want to see cover letters; most require them; and some don't care much either way. If, however, your work has been requested or commissioned, or an editor has asked to see it for any reason, then a cover letter is necessary so he knows this is the piece he is expecting. At any rate, you should get into the habit of doing them regardless.

The key thing to remember about cover letters is: keep them brief. Don't ramble on incessantly. Editors don't care about the letter, they care about the story; but most like a summation of important information. Check out StoryAids for cover letter templates.

First, open up the letter just like any business letter: date at the top center, your name, address, telephone number, and email flushed left, the editor's contact info under that, and the salutation (Dear Mr. Editorname:). Following that, here is what you should indicate in your cover letter, with worded examples following:

The story's title. Follow this with the specific genre and perhaps an extremely brief one-liner about the story -- but don't ramble on about the story; don't give away details, don't tell how wonderful it is, and, if you can't keep it extremely brief and follow the above rules, don't include it at all.

- Enclosed, please find the story "Eating Fried Stones in July" for your consideration. This is a contemporary fantasy about a young boy's foray into a magic he disbelieves.
- Enclosed is my story "Solar Trek" for your review. This is a near-future SF tale set on Europa.
- The story "Who Needs to Breathe Fire?" is enclosed for your consideration. This is a sword & sorcery story about a dragon's desire to become human.
- For your review, please find my story, "Midnight Snack with Icebox Zombies," a supernatural horror story set in the fridge.

Multiple submissions. If you are sending in more than one story (and only do this if the editor allows it), sum them up in the opening line and really abbreviate any summations.

- Enclosed, please find the following stories for your consideration: "Solar Trek" (near-future SF); "Who Needs to Breathe Fire?" (S&S); and "Big Green Toad" (horror).

A brief bio. Don't ramble on about everything you've ever done; it's acceptable to briefly mention the last few writing credits to your name. If you've been published a lot, you can get away with listing a little bit more.

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- My recent work has appeared in *Magasaurus* and *Ultrazine*.
- My most recent fiction was in the February issue of *Superpublication*.
- My newest story will be appearing in the forthcoming issue of *Speculationism*.
- My fiction has appeared in *Magasaurus*, *Ultrazine*, *Superpublication*, and *Speculationism*, and an upcoming story will appear in *Juggernaut Science-Fantasy*.

Simultaneous submissions. If the story is under consideration elsewhere (and if it is, you shouldn't be sending it to publications who don't accept simultaneous submissions), let the editor know. Editors don't want to get excited about a story only to find someone else just bought it (which is why many publications refuse to consider simultaneous submissions).

- This story has also been submitted to *Megafiction* magazine.

Disposable? Indicate whether the manuscript is disposable. We highly recommend you make your manuscripts disposable. For starters, sending along postage to have it mailed back to you would likely cost a lot more than buying extra paper and printer ink. Also, if you're submitting multiple stories, either make them all disposable or none disposable to make it easier on the editor; he won't have to juggle things around.

- This manuscript is disposable.

E-reply? Some editors (more every day) are happy to respond to you via email instead of snail mail. Let the editor know if he is welcome to do this.

- You are welcome to respond to the email address at the top of the page.

E-submission? If you are snail-mailing your story, but are able to send it later via email or on a disk, let the editor know that you can do this. It's a good idea to let him know what document formats you can send, although bear in mind that RTF is universal. See our Electronic Documents primer.

At the end, close your letter thanking the editor, such as, "Thank you for your time and consideration." And you're done!

Once your story is ready, pack it up and send it off.

Envelope. If your story is no more than 5-10 pages, including your cover letter, you're okay to tri-fold it and send it in a regular #10 envelope. More than that requires a large mailing envelope (9x12).

Postage. BE ABSOLUTELY SURE to affix enough postage to get the package there! This is vital! Editors do not want to receive your manuscript with postage due! This is annoyingly unprofessional, overly presumptuous, and just plain rude. Even if you didn't intend to be unprofessional, presumptuous, or rude, you will have succeeded in being all three. It isn't the editor's responsibility to pay for your postage!

SASE. A SASE is a Self-Addressed Stamped Envelope, and it's just what it sounds like: an envelope that you've addressed TO YOURSELF and applied enough postage to get it from the editor's location to you. It is this envelope the editor will use to send you back a rejection. It is vital to include a SASE! Like the postage issue above, it is unprofessional, presumptuous, and rude to NOT include a SASE; it isn't the editor's responsibility to pay postage out of his own pocket just to tell you he isn't going to publish your piece! If you're in the United States and sending to an editor in the United States, a self-addressed envelope with one first-class stamp should do it. If you don't send a SASE, you won't receive a response--

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moreover, an editor may well simply throw your story away out of disgust that you failed to observe the most basic of professional rules in this business.

IRCs. International Reply Coupons are needed if you're sending a submission to an editor outside your country. This is a huge problem with Americans sending subs to Canadian publications; the Americans affix U.S. postage to their SASEs, which is of absolutely no use at all to someone sending a letter to you from Canada.

Want your story returned? If you want the editor to return your story to you if he chooses not to use it, a first class stamp won't do it. Whatever you paid to send the story is what you need to include for postage. If the story had to be sent in a 9x12 mailer, enclosed a self-addressed, stamped 9x12 mailer! It's a good idea to not request stories be returned; it's cheaper and easier to print new ones. Yes, I know, not environmentally-friendly, but using paper for any reason at all really isn't in the first place. Let the editor recycle it.

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Waiting and Monitoring

Once sent, you're into the waiting game. Editors usually post their response times, which could be days, weeks, or months. Know this in advance! In the meantime, if the editor doesn't accept simultaneous submissions of the same story to multiple publications), don't submit it elsewhere.

Checking status. It is perfectly acceptable and professional to check on the status of a submission once the editor's response time has been surpassed. If an editor says his response time is 4-6 weeks, after Week #6, you're okay to check. The best way to do this is with an email or snail-mailed query--DO NOT CALL unless the editor says you can! Email or send something like "I sent my story, 'Elephant Wizards,' to you for consideration six weeks ago. I haven't heard a response, and just wanted to check in." Be forewarned: some editors aren't very professional. All stories should be read and you should be contacted within the editor's time frame; if he can't do it, he should change his response times. However, sometimes things happen--editors get busy, bogged down with more subs than expected, etc. Give him a chance, but at the same it's not very professional for any editor to insist you don't submit anywhere else yet hang on to your story for six months.

Withdrawing. If you feel you've waited long enough, or if the story you've submitted has been accepted elsewhere, send or email the other editor a withdrawal notice, such as:

- I would respectfully like to withdraw my story "Mandibles of the Purple Deities" from consideration.

It's a good idea to do this while sending another story in its place, so you can then say:

- Enclosed you'll find another story in which you may be interested. "Super Martian Zappers" (5,100 words) is a near-future science-fiction tale.

That way, you've done the professional thing by formally withdrawing your story, and in case he really liked you and your writing, you've given him something else to chew on.

Tracking. Develop a method to track your story. I use a database, but even a text file with all your stories listed works. Note where you've submitted each story, and whether you're waiting on an editor's response. You can also note whether the editor in question allows simultaneous submission (most don't). If you're really enterprising, you'll list under each story publications by category; I use the following:

- **Planning On** for magazines whose criteria the story meets, and to whom I plan to send eventually. This is good for advance planning; when it's rejected by a magazine, I can see which magazine is next on the list.
- **Waiting For** for the magazine or magazines to which I have sent the story and from whom I am waiting for a response. Adding dates when stories are sent, and the magazines' response times, helps gauge at a glance if it looks like I should contact the magazine, or even give up on that 'zine.
- **Rejected By** for any magazines who have rejected the story already. If rejections come with suggestions, advice, or other notes, I add those in here for future reference. If I begin to see a trend--i.e., most rejections are for the same reason--I may choose to alter the story.

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- **Sold To** for magazines that have purchased the story. I then add notes about how long they have exclusive rights. This helps so I know when the story is eligible for reprinting elsewhere.

As I said, even if you just use a simple text file or a word processing document, it's easy to track everything. Below is an example of three entries for stories in a simple text file to track it:

Story: "Mystical Moons" (fantasy, 8,000 words)

Planning On: Supermagazine, Speculation Station, Moon Goddess

Waiting For: Megalithic Magic (sent 1/25/2006, average response time 4-6 weeks)

Rejected By: Galvanized Horror Tales ("too much 'magic fantasy' and not enough horror")

Sold To: N/A

Story: "Walking with Centaurans" (sci-fi, 4,600 words)

Planning On: SFX, Science Fiction Marvel Magazine, Star Heroes, Spiral Galaxy

Waiting For: Googolplex (allows simultaneous subs), Infinite Multiverse (allows simultaneous subs)

Rejected By: Worldfall ("nicely written, but we want hard SF")

Sold To: N/A

Story: "Blood of Ages Past" (horror - vampire, 9,500 words)

Planning On: Nibbles and Bites, The Impaler, Daymare, Vampire Chronicles, Black Sun

Waiting For: Invited In

Rejected By: Invited In ("we do contemporary vampire tales; this is historical")

Sold To: Daymare (FNASR reverted on publication)

With any word processor, you can easily dress up your tracking so it's eye-catching and eye-pleasing, and allows you to find points easier with colors, boldface type, and italics.