

Manuscript Preparation for Computer-based Publications

By James Loftus

Note: While this article focuses on writing for magazines and similar periodicals, these basic guidelines apply equally to writing book-length manuscripts. In either case, the objective is to put your creative thoughts into a form that both communicates to the reader and can be used effectively by those who will work with your manuscript.

Effective communication in print begins and ends with attention to detail. At some point you may be asked, or may decide that it would be advantageous to put your thoughts in writing and submit them to a magazine or similar publication. Help with what you say and how to say it are covered in many books. One aspect that is seldom covered, however, is the mechanics of preparing your article for print.

Whenever your writing will be processed by a third party, that is, someone outside your office or organization, the ease with which the end product can be made to match your expectations will be greatly affected by the format in which you present it. If you are submitting an unrequested article, making the editor's job easier can often be the difference between being considered for inclusion or being given an excuse about "not enough space in this issue."

If you regularly write articles or a column which is published in several magazines, it would, of course, be unreasonable to suggest that you modify your article's form for each one. On the other hand, the closer you come to the guidelines below, the easier it will be for each of the publications to deal with your manuscript. Even if you write for a single publication, it is still not helpful for you to try to typeset the article.

Preparing a manuscript for publication isn't difficult or mysterious. You might be amazed, though, at the number of professional writers who don't bother to pay attention to these few simple details. If you or your staff will do so, you will gain the advantage of being able to evaluate your article's content more objectively, and your materials will be significantly easier to edit and typeset when your writing is accepted for publication.

The Basic Rules

To start, you should realize that each publication has its own style which will be applied to your content. "Style," as it is used here, refers to the formatting applied to everything in the publication, and especially the typesetting specifications. You do not know what that style is, even if you have a copy of the magazine, so do not include formatting of any sort in your manuscript. The only exceptions (they are few) are noted below in [square brackets.] These basics assume that your article is being prepared as a computer file for delivery to the publication as an email attachment or on a floppy disk.

1. Microsoft Word is the default word processing application for creating your manuscript, since its output can be imported into almost any page make up program on PC or Macintosh platform computers. If you cannot use Microsoft Word, save your output as an RTF file or plain text file.

2. Set the paper size in your word processor to 8.5 x 11 inches, vertical (portrait) format.

3. Set your margins to 1 inch on all four sides.

[The 1.25-inch left and right default margins in Microsoft Word are also acceptable.]

4. Set the paragraph format to left alignment, no indents left or right, no spacing before or after the paragraph, and single line spacing. Leave the tabs at the default setting of .5 inch.

[If you are creating a table to present some of your information, you may want to set special tab values. Generally speaking, you should avoid using tables in the text of articles, and furnish them as separate components instead, as you would any illustrations furnished.]

5. Do not attempt to “typeset” your manuscript by using special fonts and sizes, drop caps, color, or illustrations. Likewise, do not furnish Pagemaker or Quark files as your manuscript. The publication will typeset your article in their own system, and what you furnish will only waste time when it has to be unformatted. Instead, furnish your manuscript in a standard typeface and a standard type size. Times New Roman at 12 point is the default.

6. Do not use all capitals for words, either in titles, subheads, or the body of your article. Ever.

[You can use them for initials, such as IBM or U.S.A. Be consistent in the use of periods.]

7. If you know the differences between and proper applications of the hyphen, en dash, and em dash, go ahead and put them in. Otherwise, restrain yourself to the hyphen and double hyphen. These can easily be replaced when the article is edited—if you are consistent in your usage.

8. Quotations always include the final punctuation of the quote: “I am hungry now,” said Timmy. Such punctuation is understood not to be part of the quote in normal usage, just as the comma is understood to be a period in the actual statement.

In the US, the initial quote is a double, with single quote marks used to quote within a quotation.

9. Italicize the complete names of books, plays, music albums and similar works. Abbreviated references to the work should not be italicized, however, the subtitle is not required for a title to be complete in this case: Her new book, *Running with Horses: Life on the Plains*, was as well received as had been her previous work, *Running with Fish: Life Underwater*. Horses contained many fewer illustrations than had *Running with Fish*, which diminished its appeal for the younger market.

Use italics for emphasis *very* sparingly.

10. Do not use bold text in the body of the manuscript. You can use it for the title or headline of

the article if you must, but do not use it for subheads.

11. Never use underlines.

12. An extra line of blank space between paragraphs is preferable to paragraph indents. Use two blank lines to set off a section, with or without a subhead.

13. Do not use double spaces between sentences. This is a leftover from typewriter days, and totally unnecessary with computers and in typeset materials. If you learned to type this way and cannot break the habit, use the Replace... function to convert the double spaces to single.

14. Only hyphenate when the word phrase requires it: “semi-independent,” for example. Do not hyphenate words at the ends of lines in your manuscript. When typeset, the lines will not break where they break in your manuscript, and all the hyphens you have inserted will have to be removed.

15. Not every font a publisher may use will have all the special characters you may have available on your computer. For this reason and for style, it is preferable to use three periods instead of the ellipsis character, use the simplified form of a fraction instead of a pi character fraction ($1/2$, not $\frac{1}{2}$), and not convert ordinals to superscripts (3rd, not 3rd). The correct form in a manuscript for a number with a fraction includes a hyphen to separate the components: 6-1/3, not 6 1/3. Spell out inches and feet, do not use the quotation mark. It’s not the same as the inch and foot marks.

If the default settings on your word processing software are set to use any of these, you can either reset them or create a blank document without these settings for preparing your manuscripts.

16. Eliminate unnecessary information where possible, unless your specific audience is likely to be unaware of it. Website addresses should not include the “http://” prefix, as it is now understood that this is a required part of the address, and most browsers will add it automatically. Do include the whole address, however, if it is not in the standard “www.” format (such as ftp.irs.gov) or is a site that does not use www., but leave off the final / mark. Include the punctuation required for the sentence, such as commas, ending period, or other punctuation. It is understood that these are not part of a web address. Although very long web addresses may cause awkward looking line breaks in your article, bear in mind that addresses cannot be hyphenated since the hyphen is a legal character in a web address.

It is unnecessary to include the “1-” when citing a phone number with area code, but if you will do so, be consistent.

Some Other Considerations

Preparing files for production is not properly the province of the writer—but content is. A good rule of thumb is that if your meaning is unclear when set in totally plain text, such as is obtained when using a simple editor like Windows Notepad, it will likewise be unclear when typeset. Using the typographical devices built into word processing programs to communicate your

meaning to the reader is a poor substitute for clear writing. A rewrite is strongly indicated.

The spelling checker is a useful tool, but a dumb one. It will OK “form” when you meant “from” and other embarrassing but technically correct spellings, and won’t catch omitted words or duplications at all. Do run the spell check, but also print out and proofread the manuscript yourself. [For this purpose only, you will want to reset the line spacing in the document to double instead of single.] Better still, have another person who is unfamiliar with the text proofread it. Don’t depend solely on the spelling checker (or an editor) to catch your mistakes.

The suggestions here will help you prepare your manuscript for final editing. If the publication to which it will be sent provides editing of submissions, you are done, unless you want more control over the final product. If no further editing is provided, or you want to make sure the reader understands what you mean, or to eliminate mistakes and inconsistencies in your work before submission, you may wish to consider professional editing.

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