

Philip Athans
2001 Odyssey Drive
The Shire, IL 12345
inquiries@athansassociates.com

1620 words
©2019 Philip Athans

Proper Manuscript Format

by

Philip Athans

This is not a short story, but an example of proper manuscript format, revised on the last day of April, 2019. If you follow these rules precisely, you will, at the very least, get an editor or agent to *start* reading your manuscript. If you get the slightest bit “creative” in your presentation, you’re much, much more likely to have your story rejected out of hand than you will be to wow your reader with your mad typesetting skills. At this point in the game, they just want to read the story. Leave all your creativity for your story, *none* for the presentation!

Any manuscript begins with the basic page format, which is the default in every word processing program I’ve ever used—don’t fiddle with it. For writers there is only one size paper, which is letter size (8½” x 11”) in portrait orientation. There is only one choice of color of ink, and that choice is black. Likewise, there is only one color of paper:

white. You do not have to invest in fancy paper—whatever cheap letter sized white printer paper you can find is perfectly fine. Most likely, you will be emailing your manuscript anyway, in either .docx or .doc format. Some agents might ask for a .pdf or .rtf—do what a specific agent asks, for that specific agent. But .docx is the current standard.

The font you're reading now is 12-point Times New Roman, which is the only font you will ever have to use. It used to be that *Courier* was okay, but really not anymore. There are no points for pretending you used a typewriter.

Never use a sans serif font like *Arial* or *Helvetica*, or **any** decorative *font* for any reason, and not only because you can now see what they can do to your line spacing, but they are difficult to read for more than a few words at a time. I have no idea who chose *Calibri* as a default font for Microsoft Word, but that person made a bad decision.

The only size you ever need is 12-point, which is what you're reading right now. This is true even in your titles. Do not create some sort of title presentation, and for the love of all that's holy, *do not* send in your own cover art. They will laugh at you. I know it sounds mean, but they will. Every time.

The first thing you probably noticed is some information running along the top of the first page. There you will see the author's name, address, and email address (the mailing address is actually optional, as is a phone number) on the left side, and the number of words and a copyright statement on the right side. This is single spaced, but only this. There is no header or page number on the first page—set that in format/document: “Different first page.” You won't know the number of words until you're done, so you can leave that blank to start. Microsoft Word and other word

processing programs count words for you. It's fine to use that count, and okay to round that to the nearest ten words for shorter pieces or the nearest hundred for stories over, say, five thousand words.

The title of the story and your name are the only things, for the most part at least, that should be centered. You'll notice that the rest of the text is set flush left, with the hyphenation turned off. Paragraphs begin with a half-inch indent. Do not put an empty line between paragraphs.

If you want to use italics, *go ahead and just set them as italics*. It's no longer necessary to use coding like [BI/] [/EI]—unless your publisher asks for it, but pretty much no one will. There's some controversy as to whether or not you italicize punctuation following an italicized *word*, like I just did with the comma after “word.” I'm a little Old School in regards to stuff like that, so I do it. The same is true with other text formatting like **bold** or SMALL CAPS.

Now you're just writing. Keep going like this, paragraph after paragraph. If you want to change scene—a shift in time and/or place and/or point-of-view—use some kind of obvious sign. When you print your story, or someone else re-formats it then prints it, a single empty line is easy to miss. This is a good, simple, basic scene break: three asterisks, centered, with a blank line before and after.

* * *

Ah ha! A new scene has started!

If you're writing a novel, insert a manual page break between chapters. Make sure that's a page break, not a section break. Like this:

Chapter 2

I like four lines—visible with non-printing characters on as four little blue paragraph symbols (¶)—at the top of the page, to give a decent visual cue that a new chapter is starting. Again, resist the urge to design some fancy chapter start. Just the word Chapter and a number is perfectly fine. I went ahead and centered it, too, but even that isn't strictly necessary. Then leave a blank line and get back to writing. There is no need to remove the indent from the first line in a new chapter.

By now you've also noticed that the text is double spaced. This allows room for editors to make notations. Granted, with modern computing technology and easy inline annotation this may not seem necessary anymore, but if you end up with lots of edits and longer comments, the page can crowd up quickly with tracked changes so there is good reason to keep each page from starting out too dense.

A few other things... The ellipses in the last sentence are not three periods but the symbol... followed by a space, but with no space before the last word. That will tend to keep the ellipsis together with the sentence it's ending rather than starting the next line. You can place that symbol using option+; or set your preferences to auto-replace three periods as you type.

The em-dash in the first paragraph of our Chapter 2 is a proper em-dash, not two hyphens. An em-dash is so named because it's the same width as a lowercase m in that

typeface. You can find it in your insert/symbol menu and set a hot key for it, or you can set up an auto-replace to change two hyphens to an em-dash automatically. Note that there is no space before or after the dash—like I just did there.

Speaking of spaces, contrary to what your old typing teacher may have told you, do not use two spaces after punctuation. There should never be more than one space in a row anywhere in your manuscript, and watch out for spaces before or after paragraph marks or tabs. This can play havoc with your formatting if/when someone else gets the file and it can give typesetters fits. If you turn on the invisibles/non-printing characters on your computer you can see all this stuff. I advise you to do that. I always do everything with the invisibles on, but you can certainly leave them off if they distract you while you're writing then turn them back on for revision and formatting.

For instance, have you ever noticed that while you're typing along, and you have your indents set, some lines misbehave?

They seem determined to start at the far left margin, like this?

That's because the line that ends with misbehave? actually ends with a manual line break, not a paragraph mark, and the auto indents are only set up to follow a paragraph mark. This is easy to do, since holding the shift key while you hit return will drop in a manual line break. So just be careful there. If you have your non-printing characters on you can easily see the difference between a paragraph (¶) and a manual line break (↵).

Try to avoid big sections of italics or other formatted type. Your readers will get that there's something like a first-person interlude in the middle of the story, especially if it's set apart by scene breaks, but paragraph after paragraph of italics is hard to read.

Never switch to a new font, either. If it doesn't make sense in context, rewrite it until it does.

You may have noticed the header on the second and subsequent pages. This is simply formatted: author's last name/title/page number, set flush right on the top of every page. You can set the header in 11- or 10-point type to de-emphasize it a bit, as I've done here.

In a manuscript like this, you don't have to worry about typesetting problems like widows and orphans. Just let the thing flow from paragraph to paragraph, page to page.

Avoid using styles, which rarely translate properly from computer to computer and can be incredibly difficult to strip out when it comes time to send your manuscript to typesetting. The simpler you keep your file, the better.

Make sure you're using proper punctuation. "That's especially true with dialog," the instructor said. "Improper punctuation screams, 'I don't know what I'm doing.' And you don't want to scream that."

Note that I do have my "smart quotes" turned on.

At the end of your story you should type [END], which I like to set in small caps, inside brackets, flush right. Do this even though it will not appear in the published book. This simply assures your reader that you intended to end the story there—there are no missing pages.

[END]