

Writers of the Future (suggested) Formatting

Times New Roman, twelve (12) point font.

I'm a firm believer in starting a story with a distinctive first sentence. An attention grabbing sentence that promises the reader they're in for a ride. Shouldn't that ride be easy for the judges to read?

Now, let me be the first (or maybe fifth) person to suggest you visit <https://www.shunn.net/format/story/> That is in many ways the definitive example of how to properly format your MS (manuscript). However, I'm offering some additions that are WotF specific.

This first page should have 12 or 13 lines of story.

Thus the title, **In Bold**, should be half-way down the page, also in TNR 12 pt.

Make sure the approximate word count is in the upper right. I recommend rounding up or down to the nearest 100.

Make sure your name, address, phone number, and e-mail are **NOT** in the upper left. Nor in the header or footer. The story will be disqualified unread even if your last name is in the footer next to the page count.

Speaking of, do add page numbers to the footer. If the software you use gives you fits about numbering the first page, either it calls it 0 or won't let you erase the 1. Don't worry about it. Write on.

The judges are looking for awesome stories, not scrutinizing how the first page is numbered. Does the story have numbers and are they sequential? Yes? Great.

Next, as Shunn says, 1" (one inch) margins all around. Top, bottom, left, and right. You could do 1.5" on the right. This is a throwback to paper submissions when an editor needed extra space to write notes. In an electronic world, that need is gone, but the legacy remains (I prefer 1.5" to give the effect of faster page reading).

Double space between each line. This is important. No one wants to read walls of text. Do not double space between paragraphs. If your word processor creates an extra half space between paragraphs and you absolutely can't figure out how to not do that, don't worry about it. Write on. If you've got single spaced lines with double space between paragraphs, fix it.

As we near the bottom of page two, this is a good time to check if you've gotten your speculative element into the story. Things like ghosts or Greek gods or Santa are speculative. Though they are familiar – thus your story will need to be more unique than the ground you trod – they are spec. Stories set in the future, on other planets, or an anthropomorphized anything are also qualifying spec. Farms are not. I learned this the hard way. Spec on page 5, preceded by three pages on a regular farm. *Rejection*.

I've heard the expression to "hang a lantern", meaning to shine an authorial light on something. You may use this if the true nature of your speculative element isn't revealed in full until, say, page five. Hang a lantern before page three.

The same could be said for the story's main conflict. More on that in a future tip.

Regarding dialog, the best practice is to use smart quotes and change paragraphs for each speaker.

"What about conversations when one speaker is off screen?" you ask.

That's for italics.

"Then back to quotation marks for the on-screen speaker?"

Yes.

Italics is best for mental dialog as well. Though you don't need to combine mental italics with "he/she thought" tags. For years, authors underlined to indicate italics but those days are gone, even if you prefer Courier New (an acceptable submission font).

A scene break in a short story is best represented by a single, centered hash tag.

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Sometimes people use chapters instead. Scene breaks are a better choice. Chapters are for novels. As are prologues. Seriously.

The End can be written many ways, as long as there's something to indicate the story is over, you're golden.

See what I did there?

END