

Preparing Your Manuscript

Your words in our hands

You've spent months working on your book, and now you hope it's ready for publication. In fact almost every manuscript we receive requires some attention from an editor before it is in good enough shape to publish. Even the best submissions contain minor errors of spelling, punctuation or syntax (correct relationships between words), while many manuscripts need partial rewriting to make them read well.

Before we publish any book, we will correct the English and make sure the book reads coherently and is not confusing or repetitive. We will also check out and correct any errors of fact we notice, such as historical and political references. If your book is for private use only, say a family history, that may be enough. But if you wish to offer your book for sale, whether fact or fiction, we need to go a little further to ensure it does not disappoint the independent reader who is being invited to spend good money on it.

Before we can recommend your book to the book-buying public we will want to make sure that the story is coherently told, with a clear focus, and that the right events are dealt with in the right order. We will want the people and places in the story to be properly introduced and described. We'll highlight any omissions which will leave question marks in the reader's mind, and recommend the deletion of irrelevant or unnecessary detail.

Of course we are perfectly happy to sort all this out for you and turn your rough draft into a polished book, in collaboration with you – that's what we're here for - but it will save you time and money if your MS is in reasonably good shape before you send it to us.



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Planning your book

Plan your book in **chronological order**, at least initially. Start at the beginning and finish at the end. Any other approach will cause confusion for you in later revision, for your editor and eventually for your readers. It will also make it very easy to leave things out.

If there are two or three threads to your story – your career, home life and sporting success, for example – some relaxing of this rule will be necessary to avoid constantly switching between subjects. So you might devote a chapter or two to your first job, for example, followed by one on how you got to play tennis for your county, then on to a section about meeting your partner and getting married, before returning to how you left your job and set up your own business.

Once you have a completed MS you can start thinking about subtle devices such as starting the story at some key turning-point in the middle before going back to origins.

If you want people to buy your book, approach your story with a **positive attitude**. Life stories which read like one long grumble against injustice and ill fortune (however justified) will attract few readers. Focus on the happiness, the humour, the achievements (without boasting too much), the good friends you made, how you won through against adversity in the end.

Vary the pace. If you tell your story at the same speed all the way through, you will soon send the reader to sleep. Speed your way over the incidentals ('After three more weeks of dawn starts and greasy breakfasts I had had enough...') but then slow right down to deal with the key moments – 'He turned, one hand fingering the knife. I took a step back. My throat was dry. Somewhere in the distance, a bell rang...'

Simplify your story. If you recount the full story of your life, recording everything of passing interest that happened, it is not likely to make for a good read. That's because real life is messy and involves many side-turnings, blind alleys and random experiences which have no bearing on anything else. Be ruthless in leaving these out unless they are genuinely entertaining (funny stories are fine).

Avoid too much repetition. If you're describing events which happened several times in your life – starting a new job, winning a sporting event, hospital treatment – it gets tedious if you describe each one with the same level of detail. Focus on the key ones, gloss over the rest.



Writing the text

Not everyone has an ear for good, compelling prose, and no simple rulebook will enable you to write it. But we can help you to get some of the mechanics of your manuscript right before you send it to us. Here are some of the most common problems with manuscripts submitted to Memoirs, and how to deal with them.

First, relax! Avoid the temptation to sound important or long-winded, to take yourself too seriously or to show off your literary skills. If in doubt, simply **write as you would talk** initially, then sharpen the text into good English.

Vary **sentence length**. When all your sentences are about the same length, it makes for a very tedious read. Make sure you use a few short, punchy ones among the longer ones, particularly at the beginnings and ends of paragraphs, while avoiding anything that is so long it loses its way and leaves the reader gasping for breath.

Paragraph breaks. A new paragraph is suggested when there is a slight change of subject or direction, or a jump in time. Imagine the scene you're describing is being filmed. When the camera cuts to a different view or angle, that's often the equivalent of a new paragraph.

With both sentences and paragraphs, it helps to imagine reading the text aloud. Where would you pause for a couple of seconds? Where would you take a breath, or let your voice drop? Where would you speed up or slow down? This will tell you where the commas, colons and full stops should be.

Handling **direct speech** is something very few people can do well – in fact we often have to rewrite it. When you put words into a character's mouth, try to imagine how they would sound when spoken. People tend to speak in fragments, with pauses and repetition – they do not use well-constructed sentences, conditional clauses, unusual tenses or abbreviations. No one says 'I will telephone you at 9 am after speaking to our production manager', they say 'I'll call you in the morning when I've had a word with Tom'. Don't use direct speech to deal with a long factual argument or explanation – much better to say 'I/he explained that...'

Here's some advice on how to handle direct speech:

- Use inverted commas at the beginning and end of each quote. The closing one comes after the full stop.
- The most elegant way is to start with the opening few quoted words, then write 'said (name of character)', then resume quoting. Put '...said Fred' at the end of the quoted lines, not 'Fred said...(quote)' at the beginning. You do not need a comma at the end of the quoted words unless the speaker is actually 'saying' the comma.



- There are NO spaces after the opening quotation mark or before the closing one.
- Start a new paragraph each time the speaker changes. You do not have to add in 'said Fred' each time if you do this; the reader will know you are alternating the speakers.
- When you have a paragraph break in a very long quoted passage, put an opening quote mark at the start of the new para but do NOT put a closing quote mark at the end of the previous one – this is to show that the quotation will continue.

Introduce people and places at the right point. Explain who someone is the first time you mention them, and then do not repeat it. Full names and titles need only be given once (Dr Andrew Smith becomes Andrew or Dr Smith), except when people are reintroduced after an interval.

Give all your characters names (false ones if necessary), if they feature more than once. It may seem obvious, but we see many manuscripts in which eg 'Mike's sister' or 'the friend' are referred to repeatedly without being given names – very clumsy.

Don't tinker with descriptions. Once you have described someone's jet black hair, pot belly and Scots accent - job done. Don't gild the lily by trying to find more adjectives for the same things later.

Don't short-change the reader with picture-postcard descriptions. There is no point in telling us that the scenery was 'amazing' or the weather was 'terrible'. Why? How? Be specific.

Try to weave a personal viewpoint into descriptive passages to make them come to life. When you describe a building, for example, tell us how your character pushed the door open and what he saw when he looked around.

The passive voice is to be avoided in most cases. It is much better to say 'we decided to build a new factory' than 'it was decided to build a new factory'.

Wage war on gratuitous capitals. Many of the manuscripts we receive are full of nouns with unnecessary initial capitals, usually on the words the writer feels are important - director, doctor, solicitor, company, church, centre. These can take the editor a long time to correct! No noun needs a capital unless it is part of a title or name, eg 'the Parish Church of St Stephen is a very old church'.



Try to use inverted commas/quotation marks correctly. Many people seem to slap a pair of these on every time they come to a slightly unusual word or one that sounds vaguely like slang. In fact they are needed only when you are quoting a word from someone else's vocabulary - so you might say 'my daughter told me she was going to a 'rave' that night', but if your daughter were writing the book she would not use the inverted commas.

Words and phrases from a foreign language are usually italicised, at least on the first occasion, unless they are in familiar use.

Collective direct speech. It's surprising how often people write such statements as 'They said, 'We're going to the pub later, why don't you join us?'" People never speak with one voice, unless they are taking part in a church service or a military drill, so the speaker should always be an individual.

Confusion between tenses is very common among amateur authors – particularly the pluperfect. This is the 'double past', the tense to use when the event described was in the past at the time of description, eg 'he had told him not to do it'. Using the wrong tense isn't just a technical detail, it can confuse the meaning and may have the reader (and the editor) scratching their heads over your meaning.

Don't introduce extra spaces. Normally we use a single space between sentences. There are NO spaces around punctuation marks. Errors like this may seem trivial, but they can be very time-consuming to correct.

Punctuation diarrhoea – do not use two or more exclamation marks for emphasis, combine exclamation marks with question marks or use long trails of dots or gratuitous capitals – they have no verbal counterpart and are therefore meaningless. And again, very fiddly to correct. The trail of dots... (properly known as the ellipsis) is written as three dots with no space in front. It is used to indicate an unfinished statement and is not a substitute for a comma, semicolon etc. We prefer not to use full points after initials – eg we would write A J Smith. Plurals do not have apostrophes, including those of numbers and abbreviations – eg 1970s, MPs.

The harmless little comma seems to cause more trouble than any other punctuation mark. First, there is no firm rule in English that says you can't use one before 'and' or 'but' – it should be treated as a guideline. Sentences are often hobbled by slavish adherence to this rule, for example 'It appeared that our sales were declining rapidly and, with all the difficulties we were suffering...' Where you would pause for breath here? It would surely be after 'rapidly', not after 'and'. The 'pause for breath' rule is a useful guide in placing commas if you are unsure. In fact that sentence was better split into two and the 'and' got rid of altogether.



Beware the ambiguous pronoun – when you use him, her, them etc, is it clear who you're referring to? If not, repeat the name.

Numbers – there is no hard and fast rule, but with larger numbers and precise quantities we favour numerals, while with shorter numbers and those used in a more general sense we favour letters, so we would write 'our profit increased from 4% to 11%' but 'he kept over a hundred sheep'.

Please avoid using formatting other than setting paragraph indents and page numbers. Boxes, tables, graphic devices, indents, columns, bulleted lists etc give us major headaches and may have to be removed from the text and rekeyed. Text should be ranged left, not justified both sides – it is easier to read and edit.

Please do not enter 'hard' spaces by using the space bar, except at the ends of sentences – they are difficult to spot and correct and will usually come back to haunt us as odd line breaks and spaces which appear from nowhere at the typesetting stage. Use only the return key.

You're welcome to use headers and footers for your own reference on your text, but we will delete them in editing your text as we need to create our own at the typesetting stage.

If you have used material from other people's work you will need to acknowledge it by naming the source publication and the author, particularly in professional and technical books. It is the convention in publishing that you may quote 400 words from copyrighted text in a single extract without seeking permission, or 800 words in total.

Do not include images or graphics in the text – we will deal with these separately. All illustrations should be supplied separately and clearly numbered for reference, with captions in the main text or on a separate file cross-referred to the numbers (see submitting your manuscript).

Making changes and corrections

When we have completed the writing/editing of your manuscript, we will send it to you (usually as an emailed Word document) for approval and comment. We will often add notes of points which need your attention – for example missing information, contradictions or apparent errors.

Now is the time to read carefully through and check that we have correctly edited, adapted and interpreted your material. You are bound to have a few afterthoughts – material you want to add, delete or change. That's all fine, and there is no extra cost unless they are very substantial.



There are several ways of marking changes to the edited word document, but if you're working on a computer we suggest you mark the changed words by colouring the text (see the little box with a cap A underlined in red in the standard Word toolbar). Track Changes in Word is all very well, but it can get very messy if we need to edit what you have changed, and once we press 'accept changes' we can no longer see your revisions.

We strongly suggest you mark all your amendments in one go, then send us the completed, amended document. If you keep having afterthoughts and sending us further notes of amendments or additions, it becomes very easy to miss some of them.

When you receive your typeset text for the interior of the book (which we will also usually email), it should be exactly the same as the typescript you have approved. Nevertheless you should check that everything is present and correct. Please enter your changes on an author change sheet, which we will email to you. **We're happy to correct minor mistakes or typographical errors free of charge, but if you make changes or additions to your material at this stage it is likely to change the pagination and layout of the book, so extra charges will be incurred.**

Should you feel the need to add a substantial quantity of new material – pages rather than paragraphs – that's fine, but we will usually have to charge for the extra work of editing and typesetting it.



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