How to Prepare Your Manuscript File for Editing



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Introduction

Preparing your script well for editing is one of the best (and most helpful) things you can do as an author to ease practical transition into collaborative work.

It saves time all round, and the good news is: it actually saves you money!

The cleaner your file is for your editor, the less (chargeable) time they have to spend working on it before they start the really important job: reading your words.

This guide gives top tips to make your manuscript file box fresh, and ready to hit the ground running.

Use the right program

Editors use Microsoft Word. The reason is that it's the communication industry's standard program for this purpose: it's powerful, accessible, and its files convert easily into design and typesetting programs.

Editors also use Word because we're able to take advantage of specialist program add-ons that:

- analyse the text
- reduce time spent on rote mechanical tasks
- help us check for key elements, such as consistency

– all of which free us up to focus on your writing.

In Word we can access the text directly, logging the edits with Track Changes switched on, so you can see everything that's been done during your review.

What we can't do is edit PDF files with any real degree of functional efficiency. There is an 'edit' facility but it's pretty basic, and we can't run the tools mentioned above to assist us.

Working in PDF often means correcting via manual insertions, deletions and virtual sticky notes. This means the designer or typesetter has to take those corrections into the laid-out pages at their end, duplicating effort unnecessarily.

Generally, PDF is used for proofreading after the text has been professionally laid out. Put simply, it just isn't the right format for complex textual work.

If you're writing in Google Docs, Scrivener or another program, do export your file to Word (or another compatible wordprocessing program such as OpenOffice, if you don't have Microsoft Office).

Don’t hit two spaces after a full stop

Debate continues to rage among writers on this issue: some insist on having that extra space prised out of their cold, dead hands! But like it or not, things have moved on technically since typewriting days.

Originally, two spaces were needed to indicate a new sentence, due to the physical key spacing on a typewriter. Modern design and wordprocessing only need one, and all professionally published content replaces two as standard.

Running a global search and replace to weed out any stray extra spaces is always a good basic task to do.

Format your text

Here’s the ideal way to present your text:

- Double-spaced, with good margins
- Select a suitable font size: 12pt is usually a safe option
- Don’t vary font size for elements such as tables, references or subsidiary content – keep it consistent
- Select an easy font to read on-screen, such as Arial or Calibri
- Avoid ‘wacky’ fonts, and don’t mix them: it’s fine just to use one font throughout.

You'll notice that the font I've chosen for this guide, Lato, is nice and easy to read.

Selecting a clear font helps both you and your editor to work comfortably with your file.

Don't design your script

This is a trap that many authors fall into, especially if they're used to presenting formal documents or reports.

Designing the text in Word to make it look beautiful and pristine, like it would when laid out for print, doesn't work for editing or the technical production process.

The important thing to note here, is that the way the text appears on the page in Word does not translate directly to the same layout in InDesign (the program that designers and typesetters use).

All of the fancy elements that make a document look fantastic in Word need to be removed for editing and typesetting – so it's best just to leave them out.

As a typesetter said to me once: 'All we really want is words and spaces: we can do the rest.'

Use the right tools in Word

Here are some things you can easily do in your file to present it super-efficiently.

Text boxes

Avoid them: the reason is that they can move randomly out of position on the page in Word if not anchored, and are separate from the body text.

If you'd like to put text in a box, just type your content and enclose it by using the *Border* facility instead.

Don't add shading – it isn't necessary for editing purposes, and creates more formatting that needs to be removed for design.

Tables

Use the *Table* function in Word: please avoid hitting tabs to create columns, as these create a hot mess of indents, and misalign the text!

If you've already done this, use the *Convert Tabs to Table* facility to revert it to a table. By far the best way is simply to use the *Table* facility from scratch, then input your text or data in the respective cells.

It's also a good idea to avoid importing tables from another program into Word as pictures.

The reason is that these are flat images: they can't be accessed to edit, so your editor would need to ask you to create a table in Word or another wordprocessing program, and re-send it.

Page breaks

Avoid hitting the return key repeatedly to get to the next page: this causes a swathe of unnecessary hidden characters that need to be removed.

Instead, just hit *Ctrl* + *Enter* to get to the next page.

Paragraph indents

To keep a script clean and readable, often it's best just to paragraph with no indents and a line space between them.

If you do wish to indent new paragraphs, avoid hitting the space bar several times, or tabbing from the margin. Again, these need to be stripped out because they create unwanted characters in the file.

Instead, apply the *Indent* facility in Word to create a consistent indent for the paragraphs.

Paragraph returns

Beware of the 'soft return': this is often done

unconsciously by hitting *Shift* + *Enter*. It doesn't break paragraphs properly, affecting text alignment.

Just allow the text to flow from the current line to the next, and hit *Enter* (hard return) to move on to the next paragraph.

(And whatever you do, please don't hit *Enter* at the end of every line. This is a hangover from typewriting days: trust me when I say editors have encountered it, and it causes major work to eliminate!)

Keep the table of contents simple

If you're comfortable using Word Styles, you might have tagged your headings as Heading 1, 2, 3, etc.

This is a nifty way of navigating your script and checking for structure; you can also generate a table of contents automatically from these headings.

The main thing here is not to include every heading: this can create a list that's too long.

If you're writing a structured book or document, often a contents list to two levels of heading – section/chapter title (Heading 1) and main subhead (Heading 2) – is sufficient.

Contents page numbering isn't necessary for a book manuscript: as mentioned previously, layout in Word doesn't translate directly to InDesign, so this has no direct utility. It can be comfortably left out.

Run a spellcheck – but don't consider it gospel

Finally, do run a spellcheck on your file, just to weed out any stray typos or inadvertent errors.

It's worth mentioning that Word is reasonable at spotting these, but it's also plagued by odd suggestions and recognition error, generating false positives.

It also decides that certain expressions are 'grammar errors', when they're actually deliberate stylistic choices you've made as an author. It takes no account of tone or conscious 'rule breaks' that serve narrative.

The same goes for writing checkers such as ProWritingAid, Grammarly and Hemingway. They're artificial intelligence, operate via natural language parsing and algorithms – they also deliver odd suggestions and false positives.

They're useful, but by no means a real substitute for a knowledgeable and experienced human eye.

If you're happy and confident with Word, fantastic – by all means use it to the best of your ability, as that will really polish your file.

If not, don't worry: the key to all of this is not to complicate things!

If you've found the advice in this booklet useful and would like more information or assistance with your project, contact me:



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