

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 it 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.

Please note that the length of your manuscript will make a big difference to the cost of producing your book. Editing a 100,000 word manuscript will take four times as long as editing one of only 25,000. Long books are also more expensive to print, bind and post, so you are likely to make less profit on each copy sold.



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Planning your book

Plan and write your story 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 (us) and eventually for your readers. It will also make it very easy to leave things out. 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 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.

Make up your mind what kind of book you're writing. One of the commonest problems with books submitted to Memoirs is that they cross genres – a horror story which contains passages of light comedy, a personal memoir which combines rose-tinted memories of a country childhood with an account of a meteoric career in insurance broking. This is fine if you're publishing the book for personal reasons, but if you're hoping to sell it to people who don't know you, your book needs to be all of a piece.

Similarly, keep to the **central theme** of your book. If your story is about how you spent ten years with nomads in Siberia, don't tell us all about your tour of the sights of Europe on the way home – it will just come across as an anti-climax.

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).

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 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...')

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 clever, 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 point of view, 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 breaks, 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 ‘He explained that...’

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

- Use inverted commas (speech marks) at the beginning and end of each quote. If the whole sentence is in quotes, the closing one comes after the full stop. When you have a paragraph break in a long speech, 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 is continuing.
- Start a new paragraph each time the speaker changes, but don’t start a new one if the same speaker is continuing, unless (as above) it’s a very long speech.
- Many amateur writers of fiction seem to feel readers will know who is speaking without being told. Not so - we often see passages in which it is difficult or impossible to identify the speakers. You should label each quoted statement with a ‘said Fred’, ‘added Jim’ etc, except in a long two-part dialogue where it’s obvious the speakers are alternating.
- Resist the temptation to try endless substitutions for ‘said’, such as ‘confirmed’ or ‘stated’, just to avoid repetition. It’s ugly and unnecessary.
- Put the ‘said Fred’ etc in after the first quoted sentence or phrase – don’t leave it until the end of a long statement. For example, “Let’s go” said Fred. “We can always come back tomorrow and...”
- There should be no spaces after the opening quotation mark or before the closing one.
- If the quote ends in a full stop, exclamation mark or question mark, there should be no full stop after the closing quotation mark.



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 short-change the reader with picture-postcard adjectives. 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, don't sound like a guidebook - 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.

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.

Use exclamation marks only after exclamations and short, sudden statements such as ‘He’s behind you!’”, not just to show that a statement is odd or amusing.

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.

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.

Pictures and other illustrative material

Factual books are usually improved by the inclusion of pictures, whether they are photographs old or new, paintings, drawings, diagrams or old documents. Illustrations add to the interest and impact of the book, but they also add to the cost, so it's best to be selective.

If you are taking photos for your book, shoot them at high resolution. Graphics, tables, diagrams etc should be supplied as separate files. If you are preparing your own, you may wish to send us one or two samples for us to check before you go any further, in case we cannot use them as they stand. Bear in mind that when a drawing or graphic is reduced to fit the page of a book, fine detail may disappear or become illegible. Detailed maps, family trees etc may not be reproducible at the size of a book page.

Do not include images or graphics in the text file you send – 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').

Do I need people's permission to put them in my book?

We are often asked if an author can write about other people and their actions without getting into trouble. From the legal point of view, you should have nothing to worry about as long as you don't risk contravening the laws of libel, professional confidentiality and state secrecy. However, we suggest you assume that anything you say about a person may get back to that person or their friends and relations, and consider whether they might feel offended, compromised or embarrassed. If in doubt, you should change names and other details so they cannot be identified.



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Finally...

If you are going to show your manuscript to someone else – a friend with literary skills, or a family member for example - please do so **before you send it to us for editing!** This will save you time, money and possible embarrassment when well-meaning friends try to put their stamp on the book after most of the work has been done.



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