

The CWA Debut Dagger Competition

Style Guide

This page addresses various issues to do with formatting and presentation.

There are a few official rules to do with presentation. Entries have to be typed and double-spaced, and formatted for A4 if submitted electronically. Pages must be numbered with the title of your story included on each page. Personal information must only appear on the Entry Form. Do not include a cover sheet. Ignoring these rules may disqualify the entry.

Beyond these, however, there are all sorts of presentational elements which won't disqualify you if you get them wrong, but will make it much easier for us to read and enjoy if you get them right.

Formatting and Layout

The best way to format text for fiction, used in just about every novel ever published, is as follows:

- Start new paragraphs with an indented first line.
- Don't use blank lines between consecutive paragraphs. They just break up the flow of the text.
- Do use blank lines to show breaks between scenes, or in the line of the narrative.
- Use a new paragraph each time a different character starts to speak.

Spelling

- Check your spelling meticulously. Mis-spellings break the reader's concentration; they also make your work look sloppy and amateurish. If you can't trust the author to spell properly, how can you trust the story they're telling?
- Beware malapropisms – a word can be spelled correctly and still be terribly wrong. Some examples from recent years include a particularly 'viscous murder', a 'burlesque policeman', and – in a supermarket – an 'isle of chips'. This is particularly easy to get caught out by if you rely solely on the computer's spell-checker.

Punctuation

Punctuation can be a bit of a minefield, and many of the rules are unclear. Three things in particular to beware of are:

- **Apostrophes:** It's a shame that many people can't put an apostrophe in its proper place. 'It's' is a contraction of 'it is'; 'its' shows that something belongs to 'it' (whatever 'it' may be). Apostrophes should never be used for plurals – no 'bag's of orange's.'
- **Quotation marks:** Always use quotation marks around speech. Standard British usage is to use the 'single quote', while standard American usage is to use the "double quote". Either is fine, as long as you're consistent.
- **Exclamation marks!** Try not to use exclamation marks. If a sentence is witty, funny or dramatic, the reader will notice anyway. If it's not, you won't make things better by drawing attention to it.