If you don't follow the rules, you don't get to play in the sandbox

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Today I read my new issue of *RWR* (that, for those of you not in the know, is the *Romance Writers Report*, the official magazine of RWA, sent to all RWA members monthly).

There are some great articles in it this month, but what caught my attention was a letter to the editor about the rules of the Golden Heart contest—RWA's annual contest for unpublished writers.

Apparently someone has been disqualified (with her entry fee forfeited) because she single-spaced her synopsis, which goes against submission rules. And the letter to the editor very politely informed RWA that "compassion and common sense are needed in the application of rules, especially when the 'rule breaking' is of such a minor nature."

Normally, I am not really one for rules. I tend to break them all the time, as my co-workers and friends can tell you. It's a failing of mine.

But, see, I almost wrote an article today about the things in submitted work that piss me off, and the number one thing is something I didn't even mention.

I really hate it when people don't format their manuscripts properly.

Formatting manuscripts is important. I know it seems kind of stupid, but most (not all, but most) editors can feel the rhythm of how a book will read in *book* form from the *manuscript*—if the ms. is formatted properly. If it's got about one inch margins, and the typeface is a serif font (Times New Roman, Courier New), and the lines double-spaced. A lot of books that seem to have poor pacing in manuscript form to people who aren't publishing professionals have *great* pacing in book form. Sentences that can seem too long in manuscript form can be the perfect length (or too short!) in book form.

Plus, properly formatted manuscripts are not difficult to read—we're used to it, they're done in print-font (as opposed to screen fonts, like Verdana or Arial), and they're easy on the eyes.

I personally don't care if a *synopsis* is single-spaced or double-spaced, since I hardly ever read them anyway (shh, I can hear some of you screaming in pain)—but you know what? When a submission is in Arial or 10-point font, I don't usually read it. I just toss it out and send a form rejection. You know why?

Because if a writer cannot be arsed to follow the simple guidelines on how to submit their work, I cannot be arsed to read it.

There are a million other writers out there, just as good—if not better—than the writer I am rejecting, and they will all follow the guidelines.

Writers who follow the guidelines cannot always be trusted the way this implies—but I think that a willingness to follow the guidelines displays a willingness to be a team player. Those writers know that I spend a lot of time reading submissions, and that if they respect my time, I will respect their efforts. At least, I *think* that's the unspoken communication! One can never be sure!

On one hand, I sympathize with the writer whose $50 entrance fee was kept by RWA while the writer's work was disqualified.

On the other hand, welcome to the business of publishing. You might think your violation is minor—maybe you didn't bother to enclose an SASE because you enclosed your email address; maybe you printed out your ms. in Arial; maybe you single-spaced your synopsis instead of double-spacing—but if the guidelines/rules ask for something, there's probably a reason.

The letter notes that the penalty for breaking the rule seems too extreme—to keep the $50? When RWA is supposed to be about love and support? But the person who broke the rule, firstly, *knew* that this is the penalty for breaking the rules—and, secondly, has used up time and resources that cost money.

(*Everything* costs money. Everything costs *something*, even love and support.)

I am totally a rule breaker. And my first instinct is to agree with the letter—that's kind of harsh.

Yet sometimes harsh is what's necessary. This is why people should double check their work and take their time and be careful and all that jazz. It sucks that the entrant made a mistake, but sometimes people make mistakes. Learn from it and move on. $50 is a high price to pay to learn to read the rules carefully and remember to double-space the body of your synopsis, but, you know, that poor woman is never going to forget again.