Submission

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Disclaimer:
Nothing is universal. Please use common sense. Don't be an idiot.

It seems that a lot of people are really baffled by submission guidelines. I don't understand this. I think submission guidelines are really straightforward and easy to understand and follow. Maybe it's because I was already in the system when I read my first set of submission guidelines, or maybe it's because my brain functions in a dimension filled only with submission guidelines.

The best advice I can give anyone about submission is: Don't be an idiot.

Ah, do we see a running theme? Here's another bit: Use your common sense.

Using your common sense means to begin your process of submitting by writing the book. Sorry, okay, begin your process of submission by kneeling—

Oops, wrong article.

Begin the process of submitting your work by deciding where to submit it. Let's talk only about publishing companies for the moment.

Go into a bookstore, or look on your bookshelves. Find the books that are the most like yours. I don't care that your book is a special snowflake. Decide which three or four authors have a similar tone, storyline, character, whatever. Who do you want to be compared to? You are writing epic fantasy, and you want to be compared to Holly Lisle, David Eddings, Robert Jordan, and Terry Goodkind.

Oh, you say to yourself. Three out of four of those authors are published by Tor Books. That makes Tor the number one on my list!

Next, you attend the internet. You type "Tor Books" into google.com. Interestingly enough, the very first hit is www.tor-forge.com! Who would have thought? You then click through to Tor.com, and look around. You have a *question* and it is probably a question others have asked, so you click *FAQ*. You read through it.

While the Tor website is going to be changing soon, I am going to quote from the current submission guidelines. The page says, "Address unsolicited science fiction and fantasy submissions to *Acquisitions Editor, Science Fiction & Fantasy*."

You think: Okay, I will email that person *right now*.

Then you realize: Ah, the website says, "Do not submit work on disk, tape, or other electronic media; do not submit work by email."

You think: Okay, but I will mail the whole thing. My book is a special snowflake! No one will ever be able to realize its genius without reading it in its entirety.

Then you realize: The website says, "Submit only the first three chapters of your book, and a synopsis of the entire book."

Does that mean we do not care that your book is a special snowflake? No, that means we think that, like readers in bookstores, if we can't read the first page and be pretty interested in your book, we're not going to read all the way to the end.

Let's skip me narrating the thought processes of this fictional epic fantasy writer, right to the part where I say: *Follow the submission guidelines.*

They are mostly simple and easy to read. Most publishing houses want the same thing: the *first* three chapters; a synopsis that is *under* five pages; a cover letter that tells us, in brief, what this package is; and an SASE so we can send you a letter—maybe it will say, "Send me more" or maybe it will say, "Sorry, not this time," but either way, you won't get a response if we don't get a letter.

Liz Gorinsky, an editor at Tor, has a lot of compassion for the writers who submit unsolicited projects. She's written something like three memos about the proper handling of unsolicited submissions, from how to open the envelopes and log the projects into the computer, to how to read the submissions so that one has the best understanding of the project. Seriously. And she never throws out a submission that doesn't exactly conform to the guidelines.

There is no one else in the entire world like Liz.

I repeat: There is no one else in the entire world like Liz.

So if you don't include an SASE, or you submit us an entire novel that has been comb-bound at Staples, and someone who isn't Liz opens the package, you have a 99.99% chance of being tossed in the trash for not knowing how to follow instructions, without us even taking a look at your project. *Seriously*.

Now you say, in a sort of whiny and obnoxious voice that I would be irritated by even if I weren't currently suffering coffee deprivation (a constant, unfortunate state in my world), "But, Aaaaaaanna, not everyone's submission guidelines are as easy to read as Tor's!"

To that I say, "Nonsense."

Harlequin's guidelines are one click away from www.eharlequin.com and organized by series. It is the same at Dorchester Publishing—one click away from www.dorchesterpub.com.

Penguin Group is a bit harder—you have to click on their site map, follow the link to "contact us" and then follow the link to "manuscript submissions"—and lo! It is so difficult to find their submission guidelines because they do not have any. They only accept *solicited* submissions and *agented* submissions. Sucks to be you; go find an agent or find a different publisher to submit to—or get thee to a conference and meet a Penguin Group editor. (There is, however, a link to the DAW submission guidelines, because DAW apparently accepts unsolicited submissions, unlike the other Penguin Group companies/imprints.)

This is not hard if you are willing to put in a little effort.

"But, Aaaaanna," you say, "how do we format our submissions? It is sooooo haaaaard."

Tosh.

All right, fine, doing a Google search for "formatting submissions" doesn't get you much on the first page. Lucky for you that most submission guidelines actually include a lot of detail regarding how each company wants its submission formatted. *Check first.*

SFWA.org says, "The bare-bones basics of manuscript preparation—double-spaced, right unjustified, margins of about an inch—really covers 99% of getting it right. Many aspiring writers can become a bit obsessive about the minutiae, as if submitting a letter-perfect manuscript format can supplement their stories' uncertain merits. A perfect manuscript will not save a poor story."

I cannot stress enough how true that is.

However, remember that if you do everything right but print your submission out in teal ink on pink paper, editors will toss it in the trash without even reading it—and probably curse your name as someone who doesn't care about recycling, since only white paper can be recycled.

If you cannot find any information in the submission guidelines about formatting, follow these rules:

- Courier New typeface, 12 point, black ink.
- Do *not* submit typewritten pages, there is no reason for it in this day and age.
- Underline your italics—do you know how hard on the eyes it is to read italicized Courier New?
- *However*, if you have already printed out your ms. and it's in Times New Roman 12-point, in black ink, with the italics italicized, don't stress out; you won't get rejected for your sins.
- *But* if your type is smaller than 12 point and in *any other typeface*, including Arial and Verdana and Helvetica and Caslon OpenFaced Tempeh Sandwich and Terminal and Lasha and Lucida Console, *you must fix it.*
- One inch margins all the way around.
- The header of every single page should have your last name, the title of the project, the page number, and, if you can fit it, your contact phone number, just in case. The header can be in Times New Roman 10 point if you want to get fancy.
- If you must, bind the pages with a rubber band. One rubber band. Do not use a leather thong or a purple ribbon or anything else. Use *one rubber band.* If your pages do not fit in one medium sized rubber band, you are sending too many pages. (*Don't send more than sixty pages*, even if the first sixty pages is only your first chapter. Use some common sense.)
- Include a letter-sized envelope (be nice, spend the extra money, and get the ones that self-seal), stamped and addressed so you can be sent a rejection or acceptance letter.
- Everything, including your synopsis, should be double-spaced. *Except for your cover letter*.
- Include a cover letter with *all* the information about the manuscript right there, for easy access and reference. No, really. Title, your name, your contact information, genre, blah blah blah. How To Write A Cover Letter is a different article for a different time.

If you want to be really really nice to the people opening envelopes, don't use one of those envelopes with ripped up pieces of paper as padding, and don't wrap it up with a lot of tape, and don't include confetti, and don't pack it in a box that needs a key to open the padlock—a key

which you sent separately, as part of your wooing campaign—which you do not realize only makes people angry with you for wasting our time and cluttering up our space.

Don't send your chapters in a box and don't send them covered with rocks and don't include a pair of stinky socks, and, above all, don't include choc-o-lates.

Actually, you can, in fact, include chocolates, if you really want to, but it won't get your ms. read any faster, and if you have the misfortune to send milk chocolate and have your ms. opened by an editor who only eats dark chocolate, s/he will be cranky. Unfortunately for you, bribes do not get your book published.

But you know what? I am not going to insult your intelligence, dear readers, by telling you that only the quality of your work will get your book published. We all know that's not true. We've all read crappy books by an author we know to be a Famous Person or Someone's Lover. Additionally, we've all read crappy books by complete unknowns.

Once I read a bad book and met the editor and realized the editor thought it was a good book. You know why? Because my taste is not the same as that editor's taste, and what I thought made the book absolutely terrible and stupid and ridiculous and not even worth my $7 so I actually returned it to B&N—well, that editor *loved.* Bought the book because of it, in fact. Related to it, convinced other people it was worthwhile, was entertained by it—

This is a business of hard freaking work, opinions, timing, and *luck.*

It is only luck that Author X is married to Nora Roberts's son and therefore gets a Nora Roberts blurb and the first novel is sold for a million dollars and published to great success.

It is only luck that your novel, which is seven times better than Author X's, gets an advance of $7500 and is published to *one* review.

It is only luck that your sister's novel, eight million times better than yours, is never published at all.

But a way that you can beat out bad luck is to start by following the rules. I know you hear about people getting published who don't follow the rules, but I have never heard about that. I mean, with the exception of Suzanne Brockmann I don't actually know of one single famous author who didn't start out by putting words to the page and reading the submission guidelines.

Doesn't that suck? Sorry to be such a downer. Life's a drag, go drink a milkshake.

And here's a bonus note on Courier New: Yes, many people find it difficult to read. Yes, it's kind of an annoying typeface. However:

- Copyeditors like it best despite its flaws because it is spaced out and allows much room for notes on the ms., and also there are fewer words to a page and therefore they get paid more. It is a truth universally acknowledged that copyeditors do not get paid enough and therefore anything we can do to allot more money for their usually much needed efforts is A Good Thing.

- Editors can fiddle with the electronic file once we've bought the ms. and make the typeface anything we want—perhaps your editor finds his or her best rhythm when reading a manuscript in eight point Terminal printed out single-spaced in two columns. Perhaps not. Either way, that is a highly private and personal decision best left to your editor.

The Content of Your Submission

I just want to remind you that the only secret handshake in this business is the quality of your work. The best way, the very best way, to catch an editor's attention is to write a really good book with really interesting sentences.

Once you're done with your manuscript, and your mom's read it, and your best friend's read it, and you've convinced one of your favorite fanfic readers to read it, and you've incorporated the suggestions they gave you that you were comfortable with... put the ms. down. You've got time. Take a few weeks. I know, it's hard, you want to send it out right away.

Don't bother. Once it gets to us, it'll sit for a month anyway.

Step away, have a drink in your own honor, make an obnoxious livejournal post, dance with your cat, watch some *Farscape*, do your laundry.

Go back two weeks to a month later and read your ms. again. Read bits of it out loud. Make sure it's really what you want to show the world. *Then* send it. (Or revise again, if you realize you're not actually telling the story you thought you were.)

Double check your grammar, your spelling, your punctuation. An error on page 14 is forgivable—an error on page 1 is not. Pick a spelling style (British English *or* American English *or* Canadian English) and make it consistent. Pick a punctuation style and stick with it. If you

always use two hyphens with a space on either end to indicate an em-dash, we'll totally get it—but be consistent. And if your story reads well and can be understood, precisely following Latinate grammar isn't always necessary. Casual is fine, but for the love of Glorificus, if you even *think* a sentence might not read properly, read it out loud or ask someone who knows of what they speak for advice. When in doubt, ask the internet.

Print out a checklist of what you should be including/doing, and follow it. That leaves no room for error!

Then you take your submission to the post office. Do not send your submission overnight. Do not send it two-day air. Do not send it UPS. Do not send it Fed Ex Ground. Do not spend that money, no matter how much you want to. Sending your ms. via any sort of express post is stupid. We do not read it any faster, and you have just wasted $15.

Author Scott Hungerford asked me an interesting question after having read this article.

> I've always wondered about this, after having a small publishing company sequester one of manuscripts for about two years. So, when an author submits full manuscript at the request of a publishing firm, and then the firm refuses to acknowledge the status of the manuscript even after repeated phone messages, letters, and emails, is there any recognized way of pulling the manuscript out from the publishing house? I know that once a company asks for the full ms, I know that you shouldn't send it anywhere else until you've received an official rejection. But if you can't get any notice of rejection, they won't up and buy the book, and they won't do anything but sit on the piece while "waiting for the right time", what is the right thing to do to get your ms out of solitary confinement?

In this article, I am talking *only* about unsolicited manuscripts. That means no one asked for it. If we didn't ask for it, we have no obligation to it—or you—and you're at the bottom of the pile.

If we asked for it, that's a whole different kettle (hopefully one big enough to make chips in). If someone asked for it, that means that person was interested for at least the time it took to write you a letter (or tell an assistant to write a letter). That immediately gives us a responsibility—one that we, granted, seem to shirk quite often. 'Cause we're *human.* And because even stuff we want to read has to take a backseat to writing editorial letters and attending meetings (and writing long Miss Know-It-All articles!).

For my own part, there are a lot of reasons why I sometimes ignore queries from authors re: the status of their ms.: I haven't read it yet and I feel guilty; I read it and I don't like it, but I can't quite figure out what I don't like about it; I read the first few chapters again and couldn't remember what I'd liked about it enough to actually read the rest, so now it's out with a reader who is doing some of the heavy lifting for me; sometimes I ignore queries from authors because I never received them. Spam filters *suck.*

Sometimes faxes don't get distributed, and no one should be faxing in a query about their requested ms. anyway.

It's not fair to take that out on the writer, but, hey, sometimes I try really hard and other times I just can't be bothered because I am too worried about my cat/my mother/my grandfather/what's happening on *Supernatural* next week/why Christian Kane hasn't called me to proclaim his undying love/how to get Nigella Lawson to go to lunch with me.

But. If it's been *years*—or another time you have deemed "too much time"—and every single attempt to contact the editor is being ignored, my suggestion is to send a letter via post that says, simply:

> Thanks for consideration of my manuscript, *The Robot Cheerleader Wars*. As it's been three years since submission, and I have not been able to contact you, nor have I received anything from your office, I'd like to officially withdraw my submission. I appreciate the time you've already spent, and hope we can one day work together on the right project.
>
> Best,
> Samantha Carter

It's really hard to write a letter like that without sounding snarky. Sincerity is a difficult thing to achieve in a situation like this. *Don't worry about it.* Unless you are going out of your way to be a passive aggressive jerk, no one is going to think less of you for it. Lots of editors *know they have problems replying to submissions in a timely manner*. It's not the sort of thing you can lie to yourself about, like my personal "problem" with coffee.

The short answer: pull it from submission. It doesn't matter if your letter pulling the submission is never acknowledged. You have officially discharged *your* obligation and everything from there on is fair game.