

**NOTE NEW ADDRESS: Weird Tales®, 9710 Traville Gateway Drive #234, Rockville MD 20850-7408
weirdtales @ comcast.net**

Weird Tales® Guidelines:

Some of what follows may be terribly basic to you — but will be new to someone else. And some of what you already know (especially in matters of format) may be wrong, and you may have been irritating various editors for years by — for example — using italics with on-paper manuscripts instead of underlining as you should, or even (*gasp*) leaving your snail-mail address off the first page of manuscripts. In these guidelines, we have to tell beginners things that *you* already know. So:

There are only three **RULES** for writing:

You must **(1)** put your work before someone who might buy it; **(2)** in a format the editor can read, the copy-editor can edit, & the compositor can set into type; then **(3)** seize and hold your editor's and your readers' interest and attention.

All else is merely commentary.

RULE ONE: Put you work before someone who might buy it. We call your attention to the chorus in the opening song of *The Music Man*, sung to the beat of railroad car wheels on jointed track: "But ya gotta know the territory!" The classic way to discover who might buy your work is to read what a potential buyer is publishing, decide you can do better, and then do so. This is how Mr. Robert A. Heinlein got his start; you can do so yourself. A writer should write; let editors reject. Editors will not reject you. At worst, they reject pieces of paper that someone typed on. At best, they send money!

Buy a copy of *Weird Tales®* from a bookstore or from 9710 Traville Gateway Drive #234, Rockville MD 20850-7408 for \$5.95 (check or money order) by mail in the U.S.A. and possessions; \$7.00 by mail to Canada, \$10.00 by first class mail elsewhere.) Then send us stories like the ones we've been publishing — only better! If we also think they're better, we'll buy them and send money.

Please keep in mind our magazine's title. We almost never buy a story or a poem which lacks significant fantasy content; we hardly ever buy science fiction which lacks supernatural elements; we never buy stories in which the weird elements turn out to be nothing but a dream. But this leaves room for an extraordinary range of fiction — and poetry: Robert E. Howard's Conan the Cimmerian and modern swordplay-&-sorcery were born in *Weird Tales*. H.P. Lovecraft's Cthulhu Mythos, Miskatonic University and all, are welcome to our pages, as are stories set in fantasy-worlds of your own invention.

We're looking for the best in fantasy-based horror, heroic fantasy, and exotic mood pieces, plus the occasional "odd" story that won't fit anywhere else. We want to please our readers with superior writing and to surprise them with new ideas. To this end, we will *occasionally* buy a story in which the eldritch vampire waiting to pounce surprises our reader by not being a vampire at all, or in which a centaur straight out of classical mythology who runs off with the viewpoint character's nubile daughter has an entirely non-supernatural basis. We almost never use material already published on paper in the United States (if in doubt, ask). We will not willingly read material being seen at the same time by other editors.

A 20,000-word story is usually the longest we use, but we can and will go longer for exceptionally good ones. Most stories we buy are shorter than 8,000 words. We may serialize novellas in two parts; we do not yet serialize novels. We have no minimum length. Short-short stories (less than 1,000 words or so) are very hard to write, but they are very easy to sell.

WT does use humor, but the humor should touch on fantasy or horror themes. We find that humor works best when structured like other fiction, with high points and low, tension and relief, building to a climax and (usually) a very quick anticlimax or none at all. Beware of trying to make every line screamingly funny.

Remember that printed fantasy stories (and science fiction, for that matter) are usually years — even decades — ahead of movie and TV versions of the same themes. Especially beware of building a story (*any* kind of story) on current newspaper headlines, which may well be forgotten by the time the story could be printed. As an example: spousal and child abuse, and school-yard shootings are real-life problems, yes — but they're perhaps too familiar to our readers to work as fiction just now.

We never buy a story gathering dust in your files; when in doubt, send it out. Again, leave rejecting to us!

We try to respond within a few weeks. At best, we may respond overnight; all too often, we fall behind. If you haven't heard with — say — ten weeks, best ask. Things do go astray in the mails and (we blush to admit) in our sometimes chaotic office.

For more commentary on Rule One, including themes we tend to avoid, see the fourth section of these Guidelines

RULE TWO: You must put your story into a format the editor can read, the copy-editor can edit, & the compositor can set into type. Manuscripts too far removed from standard format won't be read at all by *any* editor.

"But," you may argue, "I already know all that stuff." Want to bet? Been using 10- or 11-point type instead of 12? Do you put your address on the first page of *every* manuscript and every cover letter? Are you still putting your social security number on manuscripts? Keep in mind that the folk who write word-processor programs are under the delusion that they know manuscript format. In fact, they do not; and their programs' default settings are wrong; so, Just In Case, let's go over the basics.

Ordinary white paper, 8.5 by 11 inches (or European A-4 size). One side only. Double line space *everything* except your address block on the first page. Indent first line of *every* paragraph five spaces *including all paragraphs of dialog*. Do NOT put extra line space between paragraphs unless you want to show a scene change or a time shift; then, you *must* put in extra blank lines. (You may have to fight with your word processor over this point.) Ragged (that is, non-justified) right margins throughout. Do *not* hyphenate to make lines less ragged. Underline to call for italics; don't use *italic* or *script* or ALL CAPITAL type in manuscripts.

Return envelope, with postage affixed; either a 9 x 12 envelope for the whole manuscript, or a business-letter-sized envelope for just the editor's comments.

Complete name-&-address block, with e-mail address (if any), but withOUT social security number, upper LEFT corner, first page. Identify every page after the first in the upper RIGHT corner like this:

J.Q.Writer/StoryTitle/page 00.

Common mistakes that even professionals make include type size that is smaller than twelve point (check the settings on your computer; this size corresponds to what, on a typewriter, is called “pica” type). Most printers and word-processors default to a smaller size; don’t let them get away with doing so!

Do not set line spacing too tight; there should be no more than 26 or 27 evenly spaced lines per page.

Do not let the printer cartridge or copy machine run low on ink. Check all pages of your final copy; all text, machine-printed or typed, should be a clean, clear black!

And have we mentioned putting your address block on the first page? We have? You’d be surprised how many otherwise sensible writers forget to do so, making it hard for editors to send money!

There is more commentary on Rule Two in the fifth section of these Guidelines.

RULE THREE: You must seize, then hold, your readers’ and your editor’s interest and attention, then repay the readers’ time and the editor’s money by having something to say and sharing it with them . . .

. . . and the Awful Truth of the matter is (as Rear Admiral Pinney once put it) “If you don’t get the reader’s attention in the first paragraph, the rest of your message is lost.” This applies even more to fiction than to U.S. Navy correspondence; you **MUST** capture the reader’s attention on the first page (or better, in the first few words).

This isn’t easy to do well — but if anyone told you than successful writing is easy, he lied in his fangs!

Neither cover letters nor innovative format works; what catches the editor’s attention is your choice of words and punctuation, and the order in which you put them down on paper. If you don’t have a cover letter in the way, if your format is utterly standard, then the *only* thing for the editor to notice is what words you chose. If you choose the right ones — like these examples below — you’ve got him!

“The coupe with the fishhooks welded to the fender shouldered up over the curb like the nose of a nightmare.”

— or —

“A hissing noise, slightly musical, like Death sharpening his scythe, came from a room at night, dark but for a single candle.”

— or —

“The Gibbelins eat, as is well known, nothing less good than man.”

(Of course, then you must come up with a second line that isn’t a let-down after the first, and so on. But if anyone told you that writing is easy — ooops, we mentioned that already, didn’t we? The first quote above, Fritz Leiber: “Coming Attraction.” The next two, Lord Dunsany: “The Cause” and “The Hoard of the Gibbelins.”)

Titles help too. As Harlan Ellison pointed out, a title like “The Box” just lies there, but “Dead by Morning” almost forces an editor to read the first few pages.

Unless there is an overwhelming reason not to do so, it’s almost always a Very Good Idea to make it clear to the edi-

tor — and eventually, to the reader — where and when the story is happening, who is the viewpoint character (who is the writer asking the reader to BE, as the story unfolds on the pages), and that character’s gender.

In short stories (and *Weird Tales*® is essentially a short-story magazine), the protagonist (often but not always the viewpoint character) should appear on stage in the first few pages, as should his or her principal problem. Coping with that problem (or at least trying to) then drives the story’s main plot.

Next, you must hold the editor’s (and eventually, the readers’) attention, steering the narrow strait between explaining too much and too little: too much exposition, and editor and readers get bored; too little and they get confused and give up in disgust. What usually works is to slip in data as they become needed to keep the editor and the readers going, all the while reminding yourself that they don’t have to know what’s not immediately relevant to what’s happening on stage. Easy? not really; telling you otherwise, would be lying in our fangs.

The last section of these Guidelines goes into these points in more detail.

COMMENTARY ON RULE ONE:

Parents, siblings, spouses, offspring, teachers, and friends don’t count; neither do closets or desk drawers. You simply *must* send your story to editors (one editor at a time). Again: editors do not reject people, nor can they predict careers. At worst, editors reject sheets of paper; at best, editors send money. The only opinion that really counts is that of one who might pay to publish your story.

Read your target publications. See what kinds of stories they use. Ask for guidelines, always including a return envelope (with postage affixed) for the reply.

In the short-story market, it is almost always better to send a complete manuscript rather than a “would you like to see?” letter. If you fear that a particular market might not be open for submissions at all, write to the editor and ask if it’s open now; and if it’s not open, when will it be, with a post card (addressed to you, with postage affixed) for the editor’s reply.

How does the “who might buy it” part of the Rule apply to *Weird Tales*®?

We write an individual letter whenever we have the time to do so. In return, we expect that your submission is not now being seen by any other editor (that is, no simultaneous submissions), and we hope you will not get *too* upset if we tell you why *we* don’t want to use it. Ours is only one opinion, but it *is* possible for us to be right, and our comments might help you to do better with your next story. (Some writers have told us our comments did help them get started on successful careers.)

Again: editors reject pieces of paper; editors should not and cannot reject *you*. We pay about 3 cents per word on publication. Remember, it is our job to reject those pieces of paper, not yours. When in doubt, send your story to someone who might send you money. As John W. Campbell, by far the best fantasy or science fiction magazine editor once put it, “Don’t you dare edit *my* magazine.” Your task is to write stories so good that we cannot reject them.

Problems we see much too often:

Format so far removed from professional standards

that we did not or could not read a story at all.

Awkward writing, using not-quite-right words, using too many modifiers (there isn't an adverb built that is as effective as the exactly right verb!), or failing to stay in a chosen viewpoint character for the duration of a scene.

Stories that won't catch anyone's attention by the end of the first page because they bog down with exposition and backfill from the beginning.

Stories which have no supernatural or fantasy references at all, or which have too little. Yet some of our most memorable stories have been about apparently supernatural elements that turn out to have a non-supernatural explanation; we don't use many like that, but will run a few such stories to surprise our readers who otherwise will expect *every* ghost or vampire to be "real."

Stories with characters so repulsive we cannot bring ourselves to *care* whether or not they get eaten alive on stage.

Stories which try to make up for uninteresting content by "going for the gross-out," as by using shock-value instead of real story-telling and innovation.

Stories with disappointing endings, or whose resolution is too obvious too soon (some as early as half-way through the first sentence!), or that do not resolve at all. We don't object to corpses nor to tragic endings, but protagonists who exist only to wallow in mundane woes and then succumb into a puddle of futility upon encountering the supernatural really don't belong in *Weird Tales*®. Your protagonists must at least TRY to cope, and must try to change SOMETHING, even if the outcome is tragic. Stories whose only point is that the world is a dreadful, dreadful place tell our readers what they already know; people read *Weird Tales*® to escape everyday futility, not to be splattered with more.

Mere description of a horror is not as effective as telling a *story* about people trying to cope with one, successfully or not. Believable, often sympathetic *people* make horror stories scary; but standard-issue, cardboard villains rented by the yard from Central Casting and who come to a (usually predictable) bad end do not.

The pseudo-Medieval never-never land, overrun with generic swords-persons, wizards, and dragons has been sword-played (and ensorcelled) into the ground by now. But *your* imaginary-world setting, characters, and plot elements can be fresh, and new, and therefore *interesting*. Look at real histories; get a feel for just how complex the pre-industrial world was. Don't base your characters or your magic from a role-playing game; invent your own.

Although there's nothing inherently wrong with stories about classical vampires, deals with the Devil, formalities of the Hereafter, and people eating people (or vice versa), our readers have already read stories based on these ideas. If you wrap a story around an old, familiar idea, then add something new and different! A story seldom surprises readers if all it does is reveal, as a "surprise" ending, that the protagonist is a vampire, or that he just noticed he's been dead since page 2.

Please remember that *Weird Tales* is a *fiction* magazine; the Real Inside Truth About The Occult belongs elsewhere, as do real-life ghost sightings and *anything* about airborne crockery and/or abductions by extraterrestrials.

COMMENTARY ON RULE TWO:

Ursula Le Guin, in her *The Language of the Night*, writes: "Your story may begin in longhand on the backs of old

shopping lists; but when it goes to an editor, it should be typed, double-spaced, on one side of the paper only, with generous margins — especially the left-hand one — and not too many grotty corrections per page.

"Your name and its name and the page number should be on the top [right corner] of every single page; and when you mail it to the editor it should have enclosed with it a stamped, self-addressed envelope."

Typed (or **machine-printed**) means just that. If you use ribbons, have a supply of new ones on hand; change to a new ink cartridge (or a new ribbon) as soon as the print goes grey or shows streaks. When you make a xerographic copy, make sure that all pages are copied clearly. The printing must be **black**, not grey. But do not overdo that; be sure no letter looks like a black blob. The typesetter must follow copy to the letter. To do this, he must be able to read, without guessing, every letter on every page. Manuscripts in *italic*, script, or ALL-CAPITAL-LETTER typefaces are Not Acceptable.

Modern computers offer an astonishing variety of type-faces and type-sizes. Keep in mind, however, that editors are not asking you to typeset your stories; we merely want to see which words you picked, which punctuation you picked, and the order that you put them on paper. We strongly prefer what's called a "mono-spaced" font, like Courier. Never change typefaces within your manuscript; if you want the editor to make such a change, say so in a penciled, marginal note. AVOID typefaces that confuse "l," "I," and "1," or the comma ",", with the period "." Do **NOT** use type that is smaller than 12 point, which is a size that should give you about 10 or so letters, spaces, and punctuation marks per horizontal inch of text.

Double-spaced means double-LINE-spaced: leaving a full, blank line after every typed line; it does not mean putting extra space between words! On a printer, set line spacing to 24 points; on a typewriter, set the line-feed control to advance the paper two full lines at a time. Either should give you about 26 or 27 lines of text per page, in addition to the author/title/page-number in the upper right corner. Do NOT reduce the line spacing ANYwhere in the manuscript.

Indent every paragraph five spaces, *including all paragraphs of dialog*. (And remember that it is customary to start a new paragraph wherever one character stops speaking and another starts.) Leave extra space between paragraphs where and only where you want to mark a shift in scene or a lapse of time.

On one side of the paper, which should be white, 8.5 by 11 inches (or European A-4), inexpensive 16 or 20 pound bond. Do NOT use "erasable" paper, which costs more, smears easily, and which we editors hate.

With generous margins, about an inch, all the way around. Margins much larger than one inch waste paper and postage. If you use a word processor, check its manual, and then turn OFF the right-justification *and* the hyphenation; do NOT let it suppress "widows & orphans" (that is, do NOT let the word-processing program keep the first line of a paragraph from appearing at the end of a page nor keep the last line of a paragraph from appearing at the top of a page). Do NOT break words at the end of lines. Editors (all editors!) prefer ragged right margins with even spacing between words, and we prefer the same number of lines on every page but the first and the last.

Keep in mind that the people who write word-processing programs do not have the remotest idea what proper manuscript format is.

And not too many grotty corrections per page. Neither editors nor compositors are grading for neatness; we don't demand letter-perfect-the-first-time typing. We *do* object to erasures. If you use a typewriter, **XXX**-out or line out your deletions, and type or legibly hand-print any corrections above the place each is to be inserted. If you are using a word-processor and printer, proofread, proofread, and proofread again before you print the submission copy. Watch out for mistakes that spell-check programs are blind to, like "it's" for "its," "breath" for "breathe," "hoard" for "horde," and all the many possible mistakes involving "lie" and "lay."

Identify your story. Type (or machine-print) your full real name **and your address** (don't make it hard for people to send you money!) at the upper left-hand corner of the first page, an inch inside the top and left edges of the page. If you use a cover letter, put your address on that too.

At one time, it was customary to put your social security number on your manuscript. That's true no longer; identity theft makes doing so unwise. But when an editor sends you a contract to buy your story, she will almost certainly ask for your social security number then, and you will have to supply it. (Remember: the purpose of a social security number is to track payments for income tax purposes; if you want to get paid, you'll have to supply it then — but not before.)

Your story's title (*your* responsibility; editors don't buy nameless stories) goes about a quarter of the way down the first page, with your name (or your pen name, if you use one) directly under that title. (Two suggestions: Avoid cutesy pen names; your own real name, especially an unusual one, is far better. And there's little excuse for hiding your gender by using initials instead of your first and middle names. But if a well-known writer has the same name as yours, you should change yours in some way, such as spelling out your middle name instead of an initial, or the like.) Use paper clips, NOT staples, to hold manuscripts together.

Pages sometimes do go astray in an editor's office. Therefore, a glance at *any* page in the manuscript should reveal the story title, its author, and the page number. So: type or print your last name (plus initials if your name is a common one), a word or two from the title, and the page number on the upper *right*-hand corner of every page, starting with page 2, like: **XmasCarol/Dickens/pagg 26**, or **Cujo/S. King/7**. (If you use a separate title page, page numbering starts with the first page of text.)

And when you mail it to the editor, it should have enclosed with it a stamped, self-addressed envelope.

We say, "You must punctuate, paragraph, and indent carefully and correctly."

"How about in dialog?" you ask.

"Especially in dialog," we say. "If in doubt, you must look up how to do it properly. Note that when two or more consecutive paragraphs are

Editors much prefer a new, 9-by-12-inch, NON-clasp envelope to carry the story to the editor, with a second envelope of the same size, folded once, paper-clipped to the back of the manuscript. (Neither the Post Office nor editors like clasps, those brass things that stick through holes in envelope flaps, and which eagerly cut editors' and postmen's fingers. Non-clasp envelopes are cheaper, too.)

Please do not use envelopes larger than 9 by 12. Address the return envelope to yourself. Both the outgoing and return envelopes should be addressed by printer or typewriter; if the envelope won't fit, type or print addresses on labels.

Please *affix* U.S. postage stamps (foreign postage is useless to us, and you do us no favors by sending loose stamps!); do NOT use padded envelopes, binders, or stiffeners; do NOT use registered or certified mail, because these make editors go to the post office and stand in line, which makes them grumpy and eager to reject your works. Your *only* protection against loss is to keep a good copy of anything you send out. Need U.S. postage? See below.

The more standard your format, the less editors are distracted from what is really important: *the story itself*. Manuscript format is not a place to innovate.

To find out how long the story is, do not actually count the words. Instead, take an average-length, mid-paragraph line. Count the letters and spaces and punctuation in that line (with 12-point mono-space printer or pica typewriter type, this will be around 60; if it's much larger, you are using type that is too small). Divide by six. Multiply by lines per page. Multiply that product by pages (correcting for partly blank pages at beginning and end). Put this "word" count in the upper right corner of the first page.

Call for *italics* by underlining; do NOT use an italic typeface in the manuscript itself; do NOT use the e-mail convention of putting one underline before and one after the "underlined" word.

Distinguish between the hyphen, which pulls words together, as in "mother-in-law" and the dash — which should appear like this -- with a space before and a space after — and which pushes words apart. Do not ask for long sections of a story to be set in italics, because italic type is less readable than uptight (roman) type; we editors have other ways to set off long passages, and will do so if you remind us with a pencilled note in the margin.

Proofread: Spell-check programs do NOT catch errors like "its" for "it's" and "breath" for "breathe." *You're* responsible for proofreading *your* manuscripts. Did you catch all three errors in this and the preceding sentences? Finding one error tends to hide the one next to it!

spoken by the same speaker, all have quote marks at the beginning, but only the last has quote marks at the end.

“Also,” we suddenly, excitedly expostulate unto thee, “when you’re writing dialog, do not reach for substitutes for ‘say’ or ‘said,’ as we did in this paragraph, nor hang unnecessary adverbs on ‘say.’ Doing so will soon get silly; worse, it distracts from the story. Notice how we punctuated and capitalized all through this conversation.”

You look puzzled. “Can I identify the speaker without using ‘said’ or a synonym for ‘said’?”

“You just did.” We smile reassuringly. “Just don’t overdo it. Identify the speaker often enough that the reader always knows who is speaking. Don’t let pronouns run wild, as in: ‘He saw him look at him.’ Since ‘ten foot long sticks’ can mean ‘ten sticks each one foot long’ or ‘sticks ten feet long,’ use commas or hyphens (‘ten, foot-long sticks’ or ‘ten-foot-long sticks’) to tell the reader which.”

“I see.”

This is a good place to discuss — and try to stamp out — what’s politely called “elegant variation” and casually called “said-book-ism.” Fowler, in *Modern English Usage* and Strunk & White, in *The Elements of Style*, inveigh against the practice. Note that we did *not* write “called” and then “termed” in the previous sentence, as many would be tempted to do. The Awful Truth of the Matter, as John Brunner once pointed out, is that English has no synonyms; instead, it has many, many words that mean *almost* the same thing. For various reasons we don’t understand, because we used to have the same urges, writers feel they shouldn’t repeat the same noun, adjective, or verb in the same sentence, and sometimes not on the same page.

Thus, a writer might refer to a character in a story as “John,” then as “Mr. Doe,” then as “the tall blond” [a blond is a man; a blonde is a woman], then as “the young man,” leaving the reader unsure whether there is one person on stage or four. You may *occasionally* toss in a descriptive word or phrase, especially if the tall, blond, young Mr. John Doe has been off-stage for a few pages, but don’t use that description to avoid picking one way to refer to him and sticking to it.

The reason “elegant variation” is also called “said-book-ism” is that there used to be books of substitutes for common words like “said” — including spoke, told, sighed, murmured, growled, snarled — and going on to explain, expostulate, expound, and even ejaculate (a

word which, in the 1920s and earlier, didn’t have the erotic connotations it does now). In fact, a simple “said” is almost invisible; its substitutes call attention to themselves and away from *what* is being said in the story. There are exceptions:

“Good morning,” he snarled.

— or —

“The Sun is blowing up!” she screamed.

In the first of these, *how* he is speaking is in contrast with his choice of words: ‘snarled’ is necessary to show that contrast. In the second, the impact of her words seems to demand ‘screamed.’ Using ‘said’ in that case would give the reader the impression, in spite of the exclamation point, that she was speaking in a normal tone of voice.

And, as in the sample dialog above, one can avoid “said” in an occasional paragraph containing what someone is saying by including in that paragraph a sentence with the speaker’s name as the subject of a verb which tells what the speaker is doing: smiling, standing up, or the like. Do note the difference in punctuation between:

“Good morning.” John stood up.

— and —

“Good morning,” John said.

While we’re at it, no matter how Politically Correct you may want to be, “they” is not an acceptable substitute for “he” or for “she” or for the awkward “he or she.” Use that last expression only if you really need to emphasize that

the antecedent may be a person of either gender; otherwise, default to the genderless pronoun “one” or reword the sentence. Note further that a specific person, Mr. Doe, perhaps, is a chairman, not a chairperson, chair-being, or chair-entity unless you are trying (perhaps too hard) to be funny.

Cover letter? No more than one page long, and only if you really want to; remember that editors don’t buy cover letters; they buy stories. Don’t spoil the suspense with a synopsis. While some editors ask for a detailed bibliography or resume, we think these data are better supplied when asked for. You might cite one or two sales to markets more prestigious than our own (do mention if you’ve sold something to *The New Yorker*. Don’t mention having sold something to *The Bee-Keeper’s Gazette* unless your story involves bees and you want to establish your apiarian expertise); then get out of the way and let the story sell itself.

However, if the editor’s seen the story before, a cover letter is necessary, to remind her what she said about the story before and to tell her exactly what you’ve done about her suggestions. Use a cover letter to explain anything unusual about the rights offered — for example, if the story is part of a novel to be published by [insert name] on [insert date]. Put your typed name and address, and your story’s title on every cover letter. We think that if you don’t *need* a cover letter, omit it.

If it’s cheaper to send a disposable copy (and it usually is), mark the manuscript “disposable” so the editor can throw it away if she doesn’t buy it. Provide a business-letter-sized return envelope, what stationers call a number 10 envelope (NOT a postcard!), with letter-postage affixed, for the editor’s reply.

If you are sending us stories from outside the U.S., remember that only U.S. stamps can be used for return postage.

Since international postage is so expensive, we strongly recommend that you send a disposable manuscript (so marked) and a return envelope at least 10 by 22 centimeters in size, for the editor’s reply. You can send International Postal Reply Coupons to pay for the return postage; each is worth about U.S. \$0.84 to us. To send a one-ounce (28 gram) letter to Canada costs us U.S. \$0.63; to an overseas address, U.S. \$0.84. Reply Coupons cost you a lot, but you can buy U.S. postage by sending a postal money order, payable in U.S. funds, to cover the cost of 10 stamps or more, to Postmaster, Rockville MD 20850, U.S.A. (or to the Postmaster of any other U.S. city). Include your own address. Explain what stamps you want, and how many of each.

When a reply envelope is to be mailed in the U.S. for delivery to another country, put the name of that country at the end of the last line of the address.

Submissions to us must be on paper in the format described above, NOT on disk and NOT by e-mail. Unless an editor announces otherwise, assume this is so for all publications. An editor who buys your story will almost certainly want to know if you can supply it by disk — and if so, which word processor and which kind of computer: PC, Apple, or MacIntosh — or by e-mail. Put these data on the manuscript’s first page. (We use a PC, XyWrite, Quark, and Ventura; we can also cope with Word, plain-text, and .rtf formats.)

Again: format is not the place to innovate; do not divert

the editor’s attention from the *story!* Instead, your format should be as invisible as possible.

COMMENTARY ON RULE THREE:

Rudyard Kipling wrote:

“There are nine and sixty ways
“of constructing tribal lays,
“and every single one of them is right!”

Here are some suggestions for constructing tribal lays and other stories, but what’s important is the result — your selling something *interesting* to our magazine.

The archetypical plot consists of a

Situation (the protagonist meets a problem),
Complication (the problem makes the protagonist do something about it in a series of actions/reactions of rising intensity),

Climax (the protagonist must solve the problem or be broken by it),

Resolution (the problem unwinds, the protagonist succeeds or fails),

and an **Anticlimax** (left-overs are carted off or explained away). Many (but not all) stories follow this pattern.

And the *Interesting* archetypical plot is almost always built around a problem so important to the viewpoint character (the person that the writer is asking the reader to *be* as he reads) that the resolution (or at worst, the attempt to resolve the problem) leaves the character significantly changed in some believable way. People don’t change very often; usually, as they age, they merely become more so. Something that important to a character in a story should be so interesting to him that the something — and its resolution — will be interesting to reader as well!

One of those nine and sixty ways to construct your story is based on suggestions from the science-fiction writer and teacher, James Gunn:

Begin with an idea: What would happen if . . . ? and then work out its logical, believable consequences.

Create a background, colorful enough to hold interest; but don’t overwhelm the story. Remember background is BACKground; write a story, not a gazetteer nor a history text.

Select characters who will best dramatize the conflict you’ve plotted. Observe *real* people, and model your cast on them. Show them in action from the start; show their characters by what they say and do. Write a story, not a set of resumes.

Pick the best viewpoint for telling *this* story (almost always the most important decision made when writing fiction). Put the reader so firmly into that viewpoint that as he reads, he *is* that character. Do not pull the reader out of a viewpoint character to describe what he looks like or to present his biography. Get *on* with the *story*. If your protagonist’s appearance is important to him, he’ll think about it or act on it soon enough, *showing* the reader that facet of character without *telling* the reader about it; if it’s not that important, get on with the story.

While a writer can use expository, omniscient passages to move a story forward over the boring spots “. . . after three days of cromping through the Forests of Futility towards the Hamlet of Hobgoblins, Garth and his sidekick

arrived . . ." — But *starting* a story thus is usually fatal. Eventually, and the sooner the better, you must put your reader on stage, into a viewpoint character, *seeing* what he (or she) sees, *remembering* what Winnifred the Wicked had warned them about, feeling the breeze on his face, hearing a twig snap, wondering if that was just a twig, turning his head as something spectral — you get the idea.

Begin your story where and when things become *interesting*. Homer began the *Iliad* right in the middle of a war ("Sing, Goddess, of the anger of Achilles . . .") and Homer sings to us still! Backtrack to explanation or flashback only when it's so relevant to the story that the viewpoint character and the reader, still *being* that character, remember what happened before this story began. You'll be surprised how few flashbacks you *really* need!

Write in scenes, dramatizing everything possible. In every scene, put your characters — and readers — firmly into the time and place of that scene. Appeal to the senses — go beyond how things look, go on to the sound and smell and *feel* of the setting. But don't overdo it; omit everything that doesn't advance the story.

Don't lecture; exposition is all dead matter. Avoid clichés like the plague! Learning to avoid triteness in word and phrase AND in ideas, plots, characters, and backgrounds is easily half of becoming a good writer.

Mark Twain wrote, in his famous essay, "Fenimore Cooper's Literary Offenses," that:

01. A tale shall accomplish something and arrive somewhere.
02. The episodes of a tale shall be necessary parts of the tale, and shall help to develop it.
03. The personages in a tale shall be alive, except in the case of corpses, and always the reader shall be able to tell the corpses from the others.
04. The personages in a tale, both dead and alive, shall exhibit a sufficient excuse for being there.
05. When the personages of a tale deal in conversation, the talk shall sound like human talk, and be talk such as human beings would be likely to talk in the given circumstances, and have a discoverable meaning, also a discoverable purpose, and a show of relevancy, and remain in the neighborhood of the subject in hand, and be interesting to the reader, and help out the tale, and stop when the people cannot think of anything more to say.
06. When the author describes the character of a personage in his tale, the conduct and conversation of that personage shall justify said description.
07. When a personage talks like an illustrated, gilt-edged, tree-calf, hand-tooled, seven-dollar Friendship's Offering in the beginning of a paragraph, he shall not talk like a Negro minstrel in the end of it.
08. Crass stupidities shall not be played upon the reader by either the author or the people in the tale.
09. The personages of a tale shall confine themselves to possibilities and let miracles alone; or, if they venture a miracle, the author must so plausibly set it forth as to make it look possible and reasonable.
10. The author shall make the reader feel a deep interest in the personages of his tale and in their fate; and shall make the reader love the good people in the tale and hate the bad ones.

11. The characters in a tale shall be so clearly defined that the reader can tell beforehand what each will do in a given emergency.
12. The author shall *say* what he is proposing to say, not merely come near it.
13. He shall use the right word, not its second cousin.
14. He shall eschew surplusage.
15. He shall not omit necessary details.
16. He shall avoid slovenliness of form.
17. He shall use good grammar.
18. He shall employ a simple, straightforward style.

Elsewhere, he wrote: "The difference between the right word and the almost-right word is the difference between the lightning and the lightning bug." Also: "Truth is stranger than fiction, because fiction is obliged to stick to possibilities. Truth isn't."

But these are just commentary, not **Rules**.

SUMMING UP:

Most manuscripts rejected by any fiction editor are rejected for one or more of these flaws:

Text that is too hard to read comfortably.

Lack of a clear, consistent point of view.

Failure to establish the characters' identity and the setting, in both time and place, early in the story.

Too much exposition and too little narration, especially at the beginning.

Characters who don't even *try* to cope with their problems (*your* protagonists should *protag!*).

Plots that fail to resolve (tragically, happily, or otherwise) their problems or conflicts, but just present them. Plots which have neither problems nor conflicts. Plots based on ideas so old and tired that the ending is obvious half-way down page 1. Plots that cheat readers by holding back information for a "surprise" ending.

Writing so flowery and so filled with sesquipedalian circumlocutions that the basic story is lost under too many adjectives, adverbs, and not-quite-right words. Writing which *feels* as if the author were being paid by the word (well, you *are*, but don't let the readers notice *that*). Writing too murky or opaque to decipher and decode. Writing so filled with errors in spelling, punctuation, and grammar that no editor wants to wade through the mess.

SOMETHING YOU *MUST* READ:

The Elements of Style by Strunk and White, third edition, published by Macmillan, is widely available from good bookstores in hard covers and soft. Absolutely essential. Get hold of a copy, and you better believe it!

SOMETHING WE'D *LIKE* FOR YOU TO READ:

On Writing Science Fiction: The Editors Strike Back! by Scithers, Schweitzer, and Ford — we wrote it, so of course we recommend it. In it, we discuss fantasy as well as science fiction; you may order a copy from Wildside Press, 9710 Traville Gateway Drive #234, Rockville MD 20850-7408, for \$19.50, postpaid.

There are dark spaces in the world..

...but there shouldn't
be any on your
bookshelf.



YES! Send me back issues of
Weird Tales for just \$5.95 each!

(Postage: \$2 per order U.S., \$4 foreign)

- #340 — stories by Jay Lake, Tanith Lee, Sarah Hoyt, Holly Phillips and more
- #339 — stories by Charles L. Harness, Stephen Dedman, Gregory Frost and more
- #335 — stories by Michael Bishop and Tanith Lee; interview with Terry Pratchett
- #328 — stories by Ian Watson, Stephen Woodworth, Donald Barr Kirtley and more
- Worlds of Fantasy & Horror #1* — stories by Joyce Carol Oates, Ramsey Campbell, Morgan Llywelyn and more

YES! Send me a six-issue
subscription to *Weird Tales* for just \$24!

Payment is by: Check (enclosed) Money order Visa/Mastercard/Amex

Name _____

Address _____ City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Credit card number _____ Exp. ____/____/____

Signature _____ Email address _____

Mail to: **Wildside Press, 9710 Traville Gateway Drive #234, Rockville MD 20850-7408**

...or order online at wildsidepress.com