

Submitting Short Fiction

Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Genre
Edition

[Holly Lyn Walrath](#)



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If you want to make a successful career as an author of genre fiction, one of the best places to start is the short story. As [Neil Gaiman](#) says, "Short stories are wonderful places because you can go out and around the universe and still be back by teatime — at least by teatime on Friday." Many bestselling authors got their start writing short fiction and publishing in magazines.

What follows is a step-by-step guide for writers of science fiction, fantasy, or other non-realism genres of short fiction. This is part of a series of articles for new writers who've never sent their work out before. While everyone's process is different, I hope these tips and tricks can be a starting point for you to figure out your submissions process and start getting your work into the world.

1. Finish the Story

I was writing fiction, but not finishing fiction.

— *Elizabeth Moon*

Okay, I know it sounds pretty simple. But the truth is many writers fail in their submissions because they didn't complete the story. A piece of short fiction needs a lot of bones to hold it up — it needs a satisfying ending, a compelling voice, and a structure that's unique. But the biggest thing it needs is to be *complete*.

What is a finished story?

A story is finished when you feel it's ready to get out into the world. You may just be exhausted by it, completely tired of looking at it. Or, you may feel completely nervous

about sending it out except for the fact that you've gotten a lot of feedback and your critique partners feel the story is finished. Every writer approaches this differently.

As an editor, a story is complete for me when there's nothing stopping me in my tracks. The "stopping point" could be a lot of things — it could mean grammar or spelling. It could be a confusing line that makes me pause and wonder what the author means. It could be an ending that falls flat or a beginning that doesn't draw me in.

Editors read hundreds of stories a day. Neil Clarke, the editor of *Clarkesworld*, one of the best SFF mags in the business, reads over [1200 stories in an average month](#). Your story needs to grab the editor and keep them reading, or you'll never stand out in the slush pile (a term used to describe the current submissions in the queue at a journal).

An experienced slush-pile reader doesn't need more than a few seconds to see if a story has potential. You don't need to eat all of a rotten egg to determine that it's rotten.

— Gardner Dozois

A finished story has been through critique or been read by a trusted writer friend (not a family member or someone who loves your work, but someone who is not emotionally invested in the work) or a freelance editor. It's been through the drafting, revising, and critique phase. It's ready to go out in the world and be seen.

How do I know when a story is ready?

"I'd say learn to do the heart-rending thing of turning a critical eye upon your developing work. When you have managed to get a chunk of words on paper, those are clay, not art. You then have to sculpt them into a final draft. Be prepared to alter, delete and rewrite until it's as good as you can make it at that point in your artistic development. Then do the scary thing of showing your work to the world; workshop your writing, submit your stories to editors."

— Nalo Hopkinson

You may not know this, not in the satisfying, deep-in-your-bones kind of way. The truth is, *you shouldn't sit too long on stories or spend too much time revising them.* They will lose any punch they might have had if you overpolish them. The best kinds of stories are a little imperfect — by which I mean the reader doesn't want to be *shown* how hard the writer worked on them. They should feel natural and have a bit of life about them.

I'll describe it this way. If you look at your story and think "I've done my best here, and I can't do any more," then it's done. **Send it out.** Now. Not tomorrow, not next week. Right now.

Because someone out there needs to read your work, and they need it today, not in a year, or when you finally feel you are ready. It's a bit like having a kid — you're never going to be fully ready emotionally, but you can still editor-proof the heck of out that story.

2. Format Your Manuscript

"First forget inspiration. Habit is more dependable. Habit will sustain you whether you're inspired or not. Habit will help you finish and polish your stories. Inspiration won't. Habit is persistence in practice."

— Octavia Butler, in Bloodchild and Other Stories

If you're writing for science fiction and fantasy magazines and journals, you'll want to become an expert in something called [Standard Manuscript Format](#). This is the accepted standard of formatting a manuscript for

short stories used by 99% of magazines.

Thankfully for you, the wonderful William Shunn has provided a primer on his website which also includes tips on formatting for novels! Standard Manuscript Format should include:

- 12-point Courier or Times New Roman font
- 1" margins
- Double spacing
- Your name, MS title, and page # in upper right header
- Your name, address, phone, and email in upper left corner of the first page of your manuscript, followed by any memberships/affiliations.
- The word count on the first page

There are many more details about formatting on Shunn's website. Learn it, know it, love it. Also, you'll notice I suggest formatting a manuscript as an early step, not later on (i.e. right before submitting.) This is because I find if you have to stop and format a manuscript, **you'll get distracted and forget to submit.** The key here is to make formatting part of your habit. The story is done, the final polish is to format.

Some publications will have different formatting rules, such as asking for anonymized submissions. For this, just remove your name and contact info but keep all other formatting the same. **Always check the guidelines to**

see how the magazine wants your manuscript formatted.

The average number of stories rejected because of improper formatting is [around 6%, and 10% for not following the guidelines](#). It would be a shame to join that number with a story you worked hard on.

3. Research Publications

If we knew what it was we were doing, it would not be called research, would it?

— *Albert Einstein*

Okay. You've written this gorgeous, mind-blowing story, and now you're ready to send it out.

But where?

Choosing where to send your story is a subtle art. Here are a few things to think about:

- **Does my story fit a certain audience?** (Children, teens, LGBTQIA+)
- **Does my story fit certain themes?** (Many anthologies are themed, and magazines often host "theme" issues. These can range from the simple,

“Dragons” to the more ephemeral, “Bodies and Borders.” Make a short list of possible themes in your story. This is also a great revision technique to help you understand your work better.)

- **What are my dream publications?** (Submit to those first.)
- **Who publishes work I like to read?**

Other factors include word count (some markets don't take stories under 1,000 words or over 5,000 words, for example) and pay (I suggest submitting to paying markets first).

Great resources abound for researching publications and calls for submissions. Check out [SFWA's membership guidelines](#) for a list of pro-paying markets. [The Submission Grinder](#) lets you search its database of publications for free, with lots of great options like searching by name/pay/word count (They also have a stellar e-mail newsletter). [Ralan](#) is another great site that lists pro/semi-pro/anthology markets. Check out the [Hugo Awards](#) and [Nebula Awards](#) and look at where recent winning stories were published. These are just a few of the resources out there, I recommend trying them out and finding which ones you like.

Evaluating a Magazine's Quality & Fit

I want to say that my caveat is *quality* is highly subjective. What you enjoy in a magazine may be different than the

next person. But here are a few basic things to look for:

- Check the publication's website. Has it been updated recently? Are the guidelines clear about payment and response time? Do you recognize any of the names they've published? How's the visual aesthetic? (I usually steer clear of magazines that look like their website was last updated in the 90s, with the exception of a few major mags that seem to have stuck with that vibe for continuity.)
- Read a few stories. Each publication has its own vibe. If YOU don't like the work they publish, it's unlikely they'll like your work in return.
- It's useful to get on Twitter/Facebook and look at a publication's feed: Are they posting regularly? Do they engage with readers and authors? Follow the editors of the publication if you want, but do so politely. (Don't contact editors randomly and ask what they're looking for!)
- Look at your favorite author's publication credits. Who do you like to read? Where are they getting published? It may feel daunting to think of putting your own work on that level, but your story deserves it.
- Does the journal have a hard sell list? This is a list of content/subject matter that the journal won't necessarily reject but will rarely accept. (For a great example of this, see [Clarkesworld's](#) submissions.)

Tiering Submissions

It's useful to create a list of your "top tier" publications. These may be magazines that pay extremely well, like [Terraform](#), which pays a whopping \$.20/word, or magazines that regularly perform well in awards like [Uncanny Magazine](#). These are your "send to first" publications. Then, you can make a second or even third tier of places to send after you've hit your top contenders. Tiering helps make your life easier — you send one story out and when it gets back to you, send it to the next place on your list that's open.

Here is my list of top-tier publications:

- [Clarkesworld Magazine](#)
- [Fantasy & Science Fiction \(F&SF\)](#)
- [Uncanny Magazine](#)
- [Asimov's](#)
- [Analog](#)
- [Interzone](#)
- [Daily Science Fiction \(Flash\)](#)
- [Flash Fiction Online \(Flash\)](#)
- [Strange Horizons](#)
- [Escape Artists Podcasts](#)
- [Lightspeed](#)
- [Fireside](#)
- [Apex Magazine](#)

This is just my own personal list. It changes based on

which magazines are open for submissions and as new markets appear.

4. Create a Cover Letter — And Don't Overdo It

Do not give them a reason to doubt your ability before they've even seen your story. Let the work speak for itself.

— [Christie Yant](#)

In everywhere but the science fiction and fantasy world, a cover letter is a place to boast, brag, and ballast yourself. But when submitting your work to magazines, it should serve as a simple tool for providing information.

Your cover letter SHOULD include:

- Your name, address, email address, and phone number (although editors rarely use this last anymore.)
- The name of your story and word count.
- Your “pro” publications, if any, in a short bio. This can include awards, if they are relevant.
- Relevant personal experience that's central to the story. If it's an own voices story, or you are writing a

story about astronauts and you are, indeed, an astronaut yourself.

THAT'S IT. Nothing more, nothing less. Address your letter to the editor of the publication by name, if that information is available. Otherwise, "Dear Editors" is fine. If you've met the editor recently, it's okay to say something like, "Thanks for chatting with me at x event..." but most editors might not even read that.

Your cover letter should absolutely not include any of the following:

- A summary of the story
- Boasts about how you've followed the guidelines perfectly
- Irrelevant information or wordy screeds about why you wrote the story
- Too many publication credits

Alex Shvartsman has a fantastic [guide to cover letters](#) over on his website if you're looking for further guidance.

Here is a sample cover letter:

Dear Editor Name,

Please see attached my story, "Title." This piece is x,xxx words. My work has appeared in x, x, and x publication. I won the x year award for x.

Thank you for your consideration,

Writing a Bio

Writing a bio for the purposes of a genre submission is quite easy. The point is just to say, "here's what I've written."

The format should be: "My writing has appeared in x, x, and x publication. I'm a recipient of x award. I attended x workshop."

But there's also a second bio for the purposes of publication. That bio can list your achievements, past publications, where you live, and your education. Here are a few of my favorites from successful authors:

Brooke Bolander is the nymph stage of a foul-mouthed cicada that only emerges from the earth once every thirty years. A finalist for the Hugo, Nebula, Sturgeon, and Locus awards, her work has previously been featured in *Lightspeed*, *Strange Horizons*, *Nightmare*, and *The Year's Best Science Fiction and Fantasy 2016*. She currently resides in New York with her partner, her pets, and a scuttling army of house centipedes she refers to as her "cupboard panthers."

Amal El-Mohtar has received the Locus Award, been a Nebula Award finalist for her short fiction, and won the Rhysling Award for poetry three times. She is the author of *The Honey Month*, a collection of poetry and prose

written to the taste of twenty-eight different kinds of honey, and contributes criticism to *NPR Books* and the *LA Times*. Her fiction has most recently appeared in *Strange Horizons*, *Lightspeed*, *Uncanny Magazine*, and *The Starlit Wood* anthology from Saga Press. She lives in Ottawa with her spouse and two cats. Find her online at amalemohtar.com, or on Twitter [@tithenai](https://twitter.com/tithenai).

Sofia Samatar is the author of the novels *A Stranger in Olondria* and *The Winged Histories*. Her work has received the John W. Campbell Award, the William L. Crawford Award, the British Fantasy Award, and the World Fantasy Award.

Carmen Maria Machado's debut short story collection, *Her Body and Other Parties*, is forthcoming from Graywolf Press. She is a fiction writer, critic, and essayist whose work has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Granta*, *Best American Science Fiction & Fantasy*, *Best Horror of the Year*, and elsewhere. She is a graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop and the Clarion Science Fiction & Fantasy Writers' Workshop, and lives in Philadelphia with her partner.

You can see that these bios range from short to wordy, from fun to professional. In the world of science fiction and fantasy, it's much more accepted to include some spice and vim in your bio, so don't be afraid to experiment and be funny.

5. Follow the Guidelines

The easiest way to irritate an editor is to not follow the guidelines. Most publications will list these under “submissions” on their website. Read the guidelines! Then, follow them. Easy peasy, right?

If you’re new to this, you may need some guidance in what guidelines mean. **Here are the guidelines for the venerable magazine of [Fantasy & Science Fiction \(F&SF\)](#), broken down:**

We have no formula for fiction. We are looking for stories that will appeal to science fiction and fantasy readers. The SF element may be slight, but it should be present. *(These are pretty broad content guidelines. Some publications may have themed issues or want specific topics. Basically, this is saying, please send us genre work of all types, not realism.)*

We prefer character-oriented stories. *(This is a phrase most publications use to mean they like more emotion-based stories and less “hard” SF. It doesn’t mean they won’t accept more science-focused stories, it just means they like there to be a strong emotional element.)*

We receive a lot of fantasy fiction, but never enough science fiction or humor. *(Duly noted! You can still send fantasy, but you’ll have more luck with SF)*

Do not query for fiction; submit the entire manuscript. *(This means you should not send a "pitch" or query letter asking if the editors will want a story about x or y. Just send the story.)*

We publish fiction up to 25,000 words in length. Please read the magazine before submitting. A sample copy (print edition) is available for \$7.00 in the US and \$17.50 elsewhere (to NJ address below). *(All basic guidelines for word count and how to get a reading copy.)*

We do not accept simultaneous submissions. *(This means they don't want you to send your one story to several publications. Send them one story and wait until they reject it until you submit it elsewhere.)*

Please prepare your submission according to standard guidelines, which you can find here: www.sfwaworld.com/2008/11/manuscript-preparation/ . *(Most publications will provide specifications for how they want manuscripts formatted.)*

If you're mailing your manuscript, put your name on each page, and enclose a self-addressed, stamped envelope. Writers are encouraged to submit their work electronically. *(I know from the editor's Twitter that it takes him longer to read mail submissions. This shows that if you can, you should go with what the editor prefers.)*

We prefer not to see more than one submission from a

writer at a time. *(Send one story, not multiple stories at once.)*

Allow 8 weeks for a response. *(Don't bother them with emails asking what the status of your manuscript submission is until after this date. This is also called the "response rate" or "turnaround time." If you haven't heard back by this time, you can send a polite email or "query" asking about your submission's status.)*

Payment is 7–12 cents per word on acceptance. We buy first North American and foreign serial rights and an option on anthology rights. All other rights are retained by the author. *(Note payment terms for your tier list. These are standard terms for rights. Copyrights are a whole different article, but if you'd like a primer check out [this website](#).)*

Send story submissions to C.C. Finlay — Editor, The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction, P.O. Box 8420, Surprise, AZ 85374. You can submit stories to him online at ccfinlay.moksha.io/publication/fsf. *(There's an online portal where you can submit your manuscript and check it's status, so use that, don't just email the story to the editor.)*

6. Decide on a Submission Tracking System

There are a thousand and one ways to track submissions,

and it's quite easy to get carried away with them. My absolute #1 favorite method for SFF writers is [The Submission Grinder](#). It allows you to enter your story title, when you sent it, and any other relevant notes like word count/genre.

But wait! You're probably thinking, "Why do I need to track a story if I'm only sending it to one place at a time?"

Well, my dear new writer, there may come a day when you have SEVERAL stories to track. In fact, if you're doing this writing thing well, you should have at any point several stories that could feasibly be publication-ready. So, a tracker is a great system for following the multiple stories you have out at any given time.

As with any writing advice, this is dependent on your own personal style. I know writers who send out one story only at a time until it is published, and then they start on the next one. I know writers who have any number of stories, up to ten or twenty or even thirty out on submission at once. Do what works for you and do it well.

There are other methods that work well for submission tracking too. Here are some I've used or seen others use to success:

1. Create a [submission tracking spreadsheet](#). Customize as needed.
2. Use a simple Word document. Type the details of each submission and add to it as you go.

3. Use a notebook and a pen. Cross out stories with notes from rejections as you go.
4. Throw stories into the void and then weep. (Just kidding. This is not a good method. The void has been known to steal stories and submit them under its own pseudonym.)

I've even seen writers who exchange submissions. They give their work to another writer to submit and they return the favor with that person's stories! There's no wrong way to track submissions. Just remember to track them so you don't accidentally break guidelines.



Image for post

Above is a sample of my current stories on submission

The above image is a snapshot from my current grinder

submissions, with titles scrubbed out. I won't go into too much detail, but you can see it includes the date, the current status (yellow means it's getting close to when that publication will normally reject a story, red means it might be past their average response time), and info on how many days the story has been held versus the average.

It can be a lot of fun to track submission details and data but just remember not to get too carried away. The focus of your time should be on writing and revision!

Thoughts on Submission Volume

If you write a lot, you may have a huge backlog of stories. This means you'll be sending more out. If you're keen on getting published and eventually making a career of writing, I'd say you should send out things as much as you can. Submissions are a numbers game.

For example, here is my rate of **submissions vs. acceptance** on Duotrope:



My submission numbers in the past year

These numbers are inflated because I send out a lot of poetry, which is a whole different beast. Look at **fiction** specifically. In the past 12 months, I sent out 100 submissions. Only 7.5% of those were accepted. Yet, this is still higher than the average acceptance ratio on Duotrope. I can tell you those 100 submissions are only a small quotient of the stories I write in a year. That's because I tend to write in larger volumes. But my rate would be higher if I wrote less, but spent more time on those stories.

I know writers who aim for 100 or 200 rejections a year, while there are others who send out a smaller number and have a higher acceptance rate. So much of this is *personal to you and your volume*.

I will say your odds for acceptances go up the more you submit and the more you write. It makes sense because you're growing at the skills of being a writer. I don't mean you have to write 100 stories a year, but that the more time you spend on your craft the more you will grow and get better. So you could be working on only 10 stories a year, but those 10 stories end up teaching you just as much as the person who wrote 100.

Think about your goals as a writer. Does submitting serve those goals? How much do you need to be submitting to achieve them? What can you reasonably expect out of yourself? Your own process should be the guiding light here.

At this point in the process, you may be wondering: Is this even worth the work? Yes, submitting is hard. Writing is hard. Rejection sucks. But the end goal — getting your work into the hands of readers — is very satisfying. You will have moments where you can't deal with submissions, heck, I've had *months* where I don't submit, some people have *years*.

In the end, the most you can do is write the best story possible, then send it to the best publication for that story. How you get there is up to you.

7. Don't Self-Reject

"We who make stories know that we tell lies for a living. But they are good lies that say true things, and we owe it to our readers to build them as best we can. Because somewhere out there is someone who needs that story. Someone who will grow up with a different landscape, who without that story will be a different person. And who with that story may have hope, or wisdom, or kindness, or comfort. And that is why we write."

I am going to tell you something important now. **Your voice matters.** Your story matters. You matter. You are literally made up of matter — the stuff that drives the universe.

So if you for a second think you're not worthy, I want to tell you how much that breaks my heart.

Every writer starts out with a story they want to tell. That story is shaped by who we are as people, what we care about, the people in our lives, our own histories and myths wrapped up in this strange skinsuit we call human. When we write, we transmit a universe of ideas out to other humans. And sometimes, they really really need them. Like in a life or death way.

Have you ever read something that changed your life? Or made you see the world in a new way?

That's why what we do as writers matters. We're a lifeline for seekers and dreamers. So when you self-reject, you break that tether.

Self-rejection is the act of saying, "I'm not good enough." It's not sending a story out to a theme issue because you think it won't be "enough," even when the call fits the story. It's seeing others succeed and feeling deflated or jealous, so you stop sending your own work out. It's worrying an editor won't value your work or will ask you to

change it, so you don't send it.

The discussion around self-rejection has focused on marginalized writers, for the most part. The world has taught marginalized people their voices don't matter, and that is devastating. There is no easy solution to the paradigm we live in where the most vulnerable voices are not heard. Many editors in SFF are trying very hard to reach those writers and change this. Author and poet Rose Lemberg wrote a stellar [essay](#) about this topic on Patreon I suggest you read if you struggle with self-rejection. It breaks down why this happens and how to combat it in your submissions process.

I also see *new* writers struggling a great deal with self-rejection. Many writers start out writing for themselves. After a while, they begin to feel they can share their work with others and they get involved in workshops or critique groups. Forming a community can be a fantastic way to battle self-rejection. When you hear an established author say, "I was afraid to send this story out," or "I didn't know how it would be received," you realize every writer struggles in some way with these worries.

I cannot tell you whether a story will get accepted. I cannot tell you whether you'll reach success, that ambiguous, flighty dream. But I can tell you, you are not alone. **I believe the act of submitting your work can be transformative.** By putting your words in someone else's hands, you are made vulnerable but very often that

person is made stronger. So it matters that you get your words out in the world. They are needed.

Create it. Send it. Create more. It is hard. It is painful. It is scary.

Acceptance is never guaranteed and might be harder to obtain. But — we need these voices. We need our own voices. Don't self-reject.

— [Rose Lemberg](#)

8. Go Do Something Else

Okay. You've polished, primped, and perfected your manuscript. You've formatted it to the guidelines. You've sent it off to your favorite publication.

Now what?

I suggest you go take a nap. Go for a walk. Ride a bike. Start a new book. Meet a friend for coffee. Now, after you've done something else, literally anything else, your mind has sufficiently relaxed from the near-panic state it entered while you were hitting "send" on that submission.

Now, go write another story.

The best cure for rejectomancy malaise is to write something new. Resist the urge to check your submission tracker or the submissions portal. Do not stalk the editor on Twitter. Do not second-guess yourself and rewrite the story! Go do something else.

I've found that many successful authors excel at one thing: Forgetting to worry. They send work off and then they go write the next thing, and this is how one builds a career in short fiction. Successful authors are always juggling at least three things at once.

That's because the reality of publishing is that it's slow. Like, excruciatingly slow. The average turnaround time at most markets is 90+ days. For SFF markets, this number is much lower. If you submit to Clarkesworld, you may expect a response within days, sometimes hours. But if you sit around waiting, you will likely begin to worry. And that worry will gnaw at you until you have to open your manuscript, just to see that it still exists. And then you'll begin to get anxious and start rereading the manuscript that you know you worked hard on. Then you'll find one teeny-weeny, insubstantial typo and you'll think, "I have to withdraw now!"

Trust me, it's easier to just go do something else!

(In the event that you really do want to withdraw something, like say you realize your story has a glaring error, you can. But editors notoriously HATE this, so

please be careful with your submissions. Double and triple check them so you don't have to get to this point. Don't submit work that isn't truly ready.)

9. Be Prepared for a Lot of Rejection, and Some Acceptances

If you give up at the first rejection or the first bad review, you will never make it in publishing.

— Jane Yolen

If you're going to submit your work, you're going to get rejected. Let me put that another way:

You will fail.

But what matters is *how* you fail. This is going to get hokey before it gets wise. Failure is a necessary part of writing and submissions. You were with me up there when I showed you my acceptance rate, right? Well, that means that every other story I sent was rejected.

I have received 353 rejections in my time as a short story writer. 112 of those were personal (They had notes on why they liked my story) or "please send us something again!" rejections. That's a whole lot of rejection.

But let me back up. Maybe we need to establish what a rejection IS first. A rejection is a “no” from the publication you submitted to. Many publications use “tiered” rejections, which means that they send a standard, form letter to most writers who submit and are rejected. Then, they send a more personal letter to writers whose work they enjoyed.

Here are the rejection letters for Clarkesworld, tiered:

Standard

Thank you for the opportunity to read “ — .”

Unfortunately, your story isn’t quite what we’re looking for right now. Each month, we receive hundreds of submissions and while I may like many of them, I can only publish twelve of them per year.

In the past, we’ve provided detailed feedback on our rejections, but I’m afraid that due to time considerations, we’re no longer able to offer that service. I appreciate your interest in Clarkesworld Magazine and hope that you’ll keep us in mind in the future.

Take care,

Neil Clarke

Publisher/Editor

Clarkesworld Magazine

Higher Tier

Thank you for the opportunity to read “ — ”

Unfortunately, your story was close, but not quite what we’re looking for right now. Each month, we receive hundreds of submissions and while I may like many of them, I can only publish twelve of them per year.

I appreciate your interest in Clarkesworld Magazine and hope that you’ll send us another story soon.

Take care,

Neil Clarke

Publisher/Editor

Clarkesworld Magazine

(These are taken from the [Rejection Wiki website](#), a fantastic resource for submitters.)

Neil Clarke says on his website that something like ~3% of people receive the “higher tier” rejection. So pay close attention to your rejection letters. Even a small change in wording can mean that you were very close to the top of the slush pile. Track which publications like your work, but don’t be too worried if you don’t get a lot of personal responses right away. It takes time to build relationships with editors. As you get better, they will notice that in your submissions.

Revise & Resubmit

Sometimes, you will receive what is called an R&R or Revise & Resubmit. This is when a publication likes your

piece but feels it's not quite ready for publication. The editor will send you an email with feedback, sometimes from other members of the editorial team, asking you to make revisions and then resubmit the piece.

This can vary greatly by publication. There are some editors who feel that they only want to accept pieces that they feel need no changes. But the best editors are the ones who are willing to work with writers to achieve the best story possible.

If you receive an R&R, these are some things to consider:

- Sit on the revisions for a few days. (Let the editor know you're considering the edits and then take a break.)
- Re-read your piece and think about the suggested changes. Do they fit your goals for the story? Do the changes make it a better story?
- Ask a friend or critique partner to read the edits. It helps to have an outside perspective.
- Ask questions. Editors are happy to give more insight if something in their edits doesn't quite add up.
- It's okay to push back. If you don't agree with an edit, explain to the editor why. This is a conversation with give and take.
- It's okay to say no. This can be heartbreaking. Yes, publishing a story would be really great! But if the edits don't fit your vision for the work, ultimately it's your name on the piece.

Dealing with Rejection

There are days when I could care less that I got a rejection letter. I'll mark it in my tracker, archive the email into a folder, and then send the story out again. But some stories are special to me and it hurts when they get rejected. Some days I feel exhausted by the whole process above, the work involved in submitting, and the mere fact that I am a small drop of water in a big pond.

On those days, I often treat myself to a frozen yogurt.

Everyone has their own process for dealing.

Commiserating on Twitter is a common pastime. However you push past the rejection blues, it's just important that you keep going. Writing is about perseverance. No one is going to submit that story again for you. Processes are just that — a way to keep yourself organized and motivated. But they don't fix the internal struggle of "Am I good enough?" and "Will I ever get an acceptance?"

There were whole years where I was submitting and getting no acceptances. I kept telling myself, "If I just get one pro acceptance, I'll be happy." I kept sending work out, writing new stories, trying to stay focused and motivated. I went to local writing events and talked to other writers. I listened to podcasts and read books about writing. I threw myself into it hardcore. I got more and more personal responses and hold requests. I just needed that one acceptance, if I could get that, I'd be happy.

Then, dear reader, I did.

The Elusive Acceptance

Before I get into the question of “Now what?” I’d like to break down the process of what happens after you get an acceptance.

1. An editor will send you an email saying your piece has been accepted. Here is a sample email showing what that might look like:

Dear (Name)

Thank you for submitting to x magazine! We were moved by “TITLE” and would like to publish it in an upcoming issue. Please contact us to let us know if this work is still available to us. We hope to add your work to our magazine.

Warmly,

Editor Name

2. The email will likely include steps for what you need to do next. Sometimes this involves sending a new or updated bio. Sometimes they will ask you to send a headshot/photo. Often, there will be a contract to sign. (I am planning a separate article on contracts for short fiction. If you’re interested in seeing a model contract, [SFWA has a good example.](#)) The editor may ask for your Paypal info or address to send payment.

3. The email will hopefully include a planned date of publication. If not, it's fine to ask the editor when they think the story might come out. If there are changes to the production schedule, the editor will let you know.

4. The editor may provide you with suggested edits for your piece. Generally, after you receive an acceptance, the edits made will be small. But there are editors who tend to lean toward making line edits that can be substantial. When you receive edits on a piece that's planned for publication, read them carefully. Make sure that you agree with the edits. It's perfectly fine to push back on them if you're not sure or you have questions.

5. The story will go live online or else appear in print! Woohoo! Victory whiskey ensues! (Or cake.)

6. You will, hopefully, get paid. Most publications send out payment either on publication or up to 30 days afterward. If this isn't clear in the acceptance email, it's fine to ask the editor. The lovely thing about writing for genre publications is that most of them pay (versus "literary" mags which rarely pay at all and often charge submission fees.)

Now What?

It's a fantastic feeling to get an acceptance. You may find yourself dancing around the room like a circus bear. After the contract has been signed and you've told all your

friends, you may find yourself thinking, “Now what?” By which I mean, the first acceptance is the best one. It’s the one that you’ll look back on fondly for years, even if it wasn’t your dream market, and feel a bit of sweet nostalgia for. But afterward, you may find yourself wondering what to do next.

The goal here is not one acceptance. If you want to make your short fiction something worthwhile, to be successful, to have people know your work, one acceptance is never enough. It’s a stepping stone to the next acceptance, and the one after that, and the one after that.

Promote Your Story

One way to boost your work as a short story writer in the genre community is to market your stories. Here is a short list of tips for marketing your work:

1. Put a link to the story on your website. (You have a website, right dear new writer?) If it’s a print story, try to link to where people can buy that issue.
2. Shout it to the rooftops on Twitter, Facebook, and other social media platforms.
3. Create a blog post about how you got the idea for your story.
4. Share your story again when award season comes in January.
5. Send your story to reprint markets (some journals

will accept previously published works.) This is a great way to get your story in front of a new audience.

10. Don't be a Jerk

Another day, another profanity-laced email (with veiled threat) in response to a rejection letter.

Filed for future reference.

#EditingLife

— [Neil Clarke, Editor of Clarkesworld, on Twitter](#)

Look, I know rejection is hard. It sucks when you've put a lot of work into a thing and then you get this form letter that feels...almost callous. It's so short and it just says in plain terms, "no." No matter how kind the rejection, the truth is it's still a rejection.

But you have to look at the other side. Editors receive so many submissions a day, they cannot give a personal reply to everyone. A form reply is not a personal *attack* on your work. *Reading is subjective*. Editors are human beings who sift through hundreds of stories a day. They may be tired, hungry, or just in a bad mood. They might

be in the mood for a story that's uplifting or has a bit of bite to it, or maybe a mournful, haunting tale. As a writer, it's really difficult to come to grips with the fact that an editor's response to your work depends on their mood, tastes, and personal interests.

The next editor who reads your story may love it. Getting acceptances is mercurial — it's like you're trying to find the perfect person to adopt your story. You wouldn't want it to be in the hands of someone who doesn't love it as much as you. Not only do you need to write a good story, but it has to find the right editor who will love it and care for it.

Despite all of the harsh truths of publishing, **it's never okay to be a jerk.** Your momma's golden rule applies here. Treat editors as you'd like them to treat you. Be nice to them. Be polite, be professional. If you think they won't tell other editors or remember your name just because it's email, trust me, you are mistaken. The SFF community is small. Writers talk to each other, and editors talk to each other.

This article has mostly focused on Things You Should Do to get your work published. But just in case you need more clarity, here is a list of things you should never do while submitting your short fiction:

- Don't submit a story that's not ready.
- Don't submit a genre the publication does not

publish.

- Don't be annoying — don't email a publication several times to ask about your submission or bother the editor on Twitter.
- Don't harass editors. Don't stalk them or follow them around at cons.
- Don't respond to rejections, just don't do it. (You don't need to say "thanks anyway," either. Editors are busy. No reply is necessary.)
- Don't ignore the guidelines (if a publication says "no simultaneous submissions" then you need to be courteous and follow those rules.)
- For the love of Pete, I cannot believe I have to say this, Do Not Send Dick Pics. [You will be publicly shamed.](#)
- Don't send stories that include hate speech, images (most SFF publications don't take work that includes images anyhow), child molestation, explicit rape, explicit sex (unless it's an erotica publication), excessive violence, bestiality, necrophilia, animal harm, racist, sexist, or other harmful stories. **Really, no one wants to read that.**

We all make mistakes sometimes. If you've done one of the above by accident or unintentionally, the simplest fix is a well-worded apology. But doing these things intentionally only leads to the dark side. There are so many other writers out there and they all want your spot. But **writing is not a competition.** If you are hard to work

with, some nicer, more professional writer will come along. So it's just easier to be kind.

That's it! This article is meant to be a primer on submissions for new writers, so if you have additional thoughts or questions, leave them in the responses and I'll update as I go. These thoughts are gathered from my experience as a writer and freelance editor, so they may vary based on different publications. Best of luck to you, submitters of strange things!

The unread story is not a story; it is little black marks on wood pulp. The reader, reading it, makes it live: a live thing, a story.

— Ursula K. Le Guin