

*Let your stories, poetry, and nonfiction shine!*

# Preparing Your Manuscript for Submission

Vanessa MacLaren-Wray

Rinconada Book Fair, 2026!



An aerial photograph showing the edge of the ocean where white, frothy waves are crashing onto a golden-brown sandy beach. The water is a deep greenish-blue, and the sand is a warm, light brown color. The waves are moving from the top left towards the bottom right of the frame.

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# Quick!

- What we can cover in 15 minutes:
  - preparation matters!
  - submission guidelines
  - Standard manuscript format
- What we don't have time to cover fully:
  - cover letters
  - synopses
  - what to do after submitting
  - what to do when your piece is
    - X declined
    - ✓ accepted



# About your presenter

## Vanessa MacLaren-Wray



Inside scoop:  
Authors love to  
hate their own  
headshots.

But, oh, my,  
do we love  
our books'  
covers!

- Books: *All That Was Asked*, *Shadows of Insurrection*, *Flames of Attrition*, and *The Smugglers*
- Short fiction: “Parrish Blue,” “Coke Machine,” “Heart’s Delight” (in *Fault Zone: Reverse*), and “The True Son”
- Poetry: featured in *The Magazine of Speculative Poetry*, *Hadrosaur Tales*, and *Fault Zone: Detachment*
- Engineer, writer, and editor for white papers and specialized technical reports in the electric power industry
- Off-and-on slush reader for Dragon Gems, Water Dragon Publishing’s short fiction program.
- Editor in Chief for CWC-SF Peninsula’s *Fault Zone: Faultless?*
- Supporting editor for CWC-South Bay Writers’ upcoming anthology



(Cover art for *The Smugglers* by Niki Lenhart, others by Kelley York.)

# Your “magic bullet”: Preparation

## Your To-Do List

- ✓ Research!  
Read about the publisher, magazine, or agent and learn what types of works they publish. [Writer Beware](#) can help you spot sketchy markets and scam operations.
- ✓ Study their particular submissions process.
- ✓ Ask yourself:
  - Is this story or poem in a genre they accept?
  - Is this piece the right length?
  - Have I formatted the document the way they want to see it?
- ✓ FOLLOW the submission guidelines

*When in doubt, ask!*

*You would be surprised how many hopeful submitters skip one or even all of these simple steps.*

## Your Not-To-Do List

- ⊘ Submit a piece in a genre or style or with content that the guidelines define as unacceptable.
- ⊘ Submit a piece significantly outside the specified lengths.
- ⊘ Submit a manuscript that does not meet the stated formatting requirements.
- ⊘ Submit a manuscript using a method or system other than the one specified.
- ⊘ Misspell the name of the agent or editor or misgender them. Unsure? Try “Dear Firstname Lastname:”

*Why trip yourself up by ignoring current norms in publishing, such as modern social protocols?*

# Those Submission Guidelines ...

Every market, every agent has their own stated *requirements* for how they want to see your work.

These guidelines tell you:

- What kinds of stories, poetry, or nonfiction pieces they are looking for
- What your manuscript should look like
- What system or method to use for submission
- What to put in your cover letter

Some use electronic submissions *systems*—online forms—rather than current “traditional” submission *methods*.

- **systems:** Submittable, Moksha, custom web page
- **methods:** email, snail-mail (*very very rare*), schmoozing an editor or agent at a convention

Special requirements for non-fiction work

- Long-form nonfiction may require a **book proposal**, including a marketing plan
- Short-form nonfiction may call for a query or **pitch** letter rather than a submission

## Submission Requirements

Your story:

- should be approximately 2,000 – 10,000 words in length.
- should be fantasy or science fiction (or at least contain fantastical elements).
- should not contain erotica, or excessive violence or gore.
- can be part of an ongoing series you might be writing.
- can have been previously published (with proof that you hold the current publishing rights).
- may be submitted simultaneously to other markets (but please let us know).

Please submit only one story per submission and only one story per month.

Include the following in your cover letter/email:

- Title of your story
- Your real name
- Your physical mail address
- Your preferred email address
- Story genre
- Approximate word count
- Synopsis

## Story Submission Guidelines

**ALERT: Please don't submit stories longer than 1,500 words.** Daily Science Fiction (DSF) is a market accepting speculative fiction stories from 100 to 1,500 words in length. By this we mean science fiction, fantasy, slipstream, etc. We will consider flash series--three or more flash tales built around a common theme. If you are submitting a flash series, please note that it is a series in your cover letter and at the top of the submitted text in the submission box. Each story does need to stand on its own.

We do not accept reprints. Unfortunately, if you have placed a story on your website, where it is open and available to the multiple billion people who have access to the internet, that constitutes publication. We're sorry. No, we don't accept self-published works.

Please don't submit the same story to us and any other venue at the same time. Please don't send us more than one story. Don't send us another until we send you a response.

"If it's not in  
standard format,  
it doesn't get  
read."  
-Acquisitions  
Editor



# The Format Question

## Manuscript Formats

Send us your complete, finished manuscripts in digital (.DOCX, .RTF, or .ODT) format to [dragongems \(at\) waterdragonpublishing.com](mailto:dragongems@waterdragonpublishing.com). Please use a standard manuscript format. If you're not sure what one is, [here's a good source](#).

Presenting your manuscript in a *standard*, easily readable format is a critical step towards being taken seriously as a professional author. The appearance of your manuscript shows your skill and attitude—and demonstrates your respect for the editor, the readers, and your craft.

Lucky for you, acceptable standard formats are super-easy to find. A widely-accepted template is Shunn: <https://www.shunn.net/format/story/>

I have developed set of up-to-date templates you can use for stories, poems, novels, or multi-part works. You can find those here:

<https://cometarytales.com/resources/>

*Translation: standard is good; save your creativity for your story or poem.*

## **KISS aka The Boring Basics**

- Font: Times New Roman
- Size: twelve point
- Prose? DOUBLE-space  
Poetry? SINGLE-space
- Layout: One-inch margins
- Include on Page 1:
  - your real name
  - contact info
  - word count (poetry: lines)
  - genre

# Essential page elements:

## FIRST PAGE

Vanessa MacLaren-Wray  
12345 Waybeyond Place  
The Sticks, CA 95555  
1-(444) 555-1234  
vanessa@cometarytales.com

Your **real name** goes here, with your real contact info.

Science Fiction  
Novel  
approximately 95,000 words

Check submission guidelines for their preferences on personal info.

Your **pseudonym** (if any) goes here. **AND ONLY HERE.**

The Unremembered King, Book I:  
Shadows of Insurrection  
by  
Vanessa MacLaren-Wray

## PAGE HEADERS

Tag each page with your name or pseudonym, at least part of your title, and the **PAGE NUMBER**.

MacLaren-Wray / Shadows of Insurrection / 12

Tymon talked while I calculated. “Right, a doorway to the Outer Realm, where they do their magicking. And yes, he asked for you.”

Most people believe the shamans’ humbug. I thought I’d taught Tymon better. “Shamans say a great deal and prove none of it. What’s my father need with a whole troop? One man can look at nothing as well as ten.”

Use any simple header style, but **DO NOT FORGET THE PAGE NUMBER**.

*The Light of Distant Stars*

*Radecki - 2*

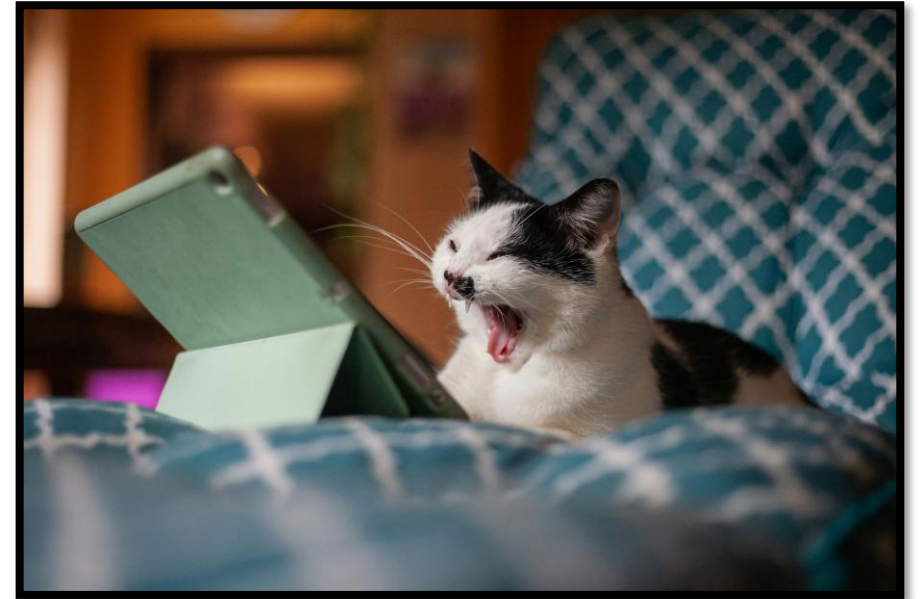
A faint chime sounded on his desk. It was muted, letting him know that he could choose to

Heads up: learn how to save your manuscript in all the formats you might need.  
When you submit, use only **one** of the accepted file formats.

# Watch out for these faux pas:

Or: “How to send your submission straight to the Reject folder.”

- ❌ Fancy fonts (or, worse, color) attempting to make a manuscript “stand out”
- ❌ Line spacing, font size, or margins manipulated to make a story or poem seem longer or shorter
- ❌ Extra paragraph breaks used to push chapters to start on a new page
- ❌ The whole manuscript formatted in layout as if ready for publication
- ❌ Any required information missing from the document
- ❌ Manuscript sent in a file format that was not called for in the guidelines
- ❌ No manuscript at all; just a link to a Google docs file



# Before You Hit “Send” or “Submit”

## Here’s your essentials list:

- ✓ Give your attachments recognizable, helpful file names: “Finch-Hatten – My Girl Scout Story – Creative Nonfiction Submission.docx”
- ✓ Double-check that your story’s title is the same in your cover letter, the manuscript, and the file name.
- ✓ Verify that you have included/attached all of the required information or documents with your submission.
- ✓ Double-check that you addressed the submission to the correct person.
- ✓ Spell-check and grammar-check **all** of your documents, including your email content.

## And, please, just don’t:

- ⊘ Include the submission in the body of the email— **UNLESS** the submission requirements *specifically* say to do so.
- ⊘ Give your attachments arcane or oddly-revealing names, such as “Draft463.docx”
- ⊘ “Submit” a story or supporting materials by giving a link to a cloud document such as a Google Docs file
- ⊘ Forget to include the attachments.

### Handy tip:

For emailed submissions, send a test email to yourself so you can verify that the text looks as you expect and that the attachments work with your email system.



# Quick notes: The dreaded cover letter

Think of the cover letter is just a letter of introduction, for you and for your story or poem.

- While cover letters are usually requested, they are often read after the submission, or may not be read at all. (Keep in mind: a query letter is completely different!)
- For an email submission, your email message functions as your cover letter instead of sending a separate document.

Submission requirements will usually address cover letters—if so, give them what they ask for. There are distinct differences in cover letters for long-form and short-form submissions.

- Long-form will usually be looking for an efficient statement on length and genre, a couple of comparative titles for reference, a brief author bio, and a ‘pitch’ for the story. All on one virtual page.
- Short form will usually want no more than ‘please consider my story x,’ *maybe* a mention of one to three prior publications, and a nice ‘thank you for your time and consideration.’

If the editor you’re submitting to handles multiple calls for submissions—for example, my publisher manages five imprints and a short fiction program and also often has calls out for anthologies—be sure to note in your cover letter (and email subject line) just which thing you’re submitting to! Don’t make the editor guess where you want your story to be considered. They don’t have time for that.

# Quick notes:

## Oh, no, the even more dreaded\* synopsis!

For *novels*, most markets and agents will require a synopsis (summary) of the entire work.

In this context, they are *not* looking for a pitch or a teaser, such as you might put into a query letter. They want to see a complete detailing of the core character's story arc from start to finish, all spoilers included. On one page, single-spaced. Yes, really.

Your goal is to prove you can tell a whole story.

Sure, it's hard. In a way, that's one reason they want it: to see if you are willing to tackle something difficult.

Take a deep breath. Maybe three deep breaths. You can do this. You really can!

**Rarely**, a *short story market* will ask for a brief summary in the cover letter. Watch for the keywords and read their requirements carefully.

# Quick notes: After you've sent your submission

## Remember to:

- ✓ Pay attention to your inbox.
- ✓ Be courteous and professional.
- ✓ Be respectful of timeframes.
  - If a market states they try to respond within  $X$  days, don't ask on Day  $X+1$  why you haven't received a response.
  - For novels, it is not at all uncommon for it to take 6-12 months before you hear back from an agent or publisher.
  - Silence does not mean "no". Be patient.

## Resist the temptation to:

- ⊘ Take a decline ("rejection") personally
- ⊘ Treat a decline as an invitation for debate.
  - ✓ Accept the feedback (if any is provided, but most often it won't be) and move on.
  - ✓ Understand that not every story is a fit for every market or the timing for a market.
- ⊘ Make the agent or editor have to follow up with you to get a response to an acceptance. (This really happens!)

# Quick notes: And in the end ...

## IF YOUR STORY IS ACCEPTED

- ✓ Celebrate!
- ✓ Read your publishing agreement
- ✓ Negotiate, if appropriate, reasonably, respectfully, and in a timely fashion
- ✓ Respond promptly to communications
- ✓ When given editorial comments
  - Remember it's about helping your story improve
  - Discuss changes you're not comfortable with
  - Complete revisions on time
- ✓ When asked to review proofs (aka galleys)
  - Focus on typos and minor errors
  - Resist the temptation to make substantive changes
  - Return your proof reviews promptly

## IF YOUR STORY IS NOT ACCEPTED

- If you receive feedback with a decline
  - ✓ Consider it friendly advice
  - ✓ There's no need to respond
  - ✓ Incorporate the advice in your next revision
- Keep writing and submit again
  - ✓ Send your story (revised, as appropriate) to the next target on your list
  - ✓ If you received feedback, put that publication, agent, or publisher at the top of your list for the *next* story or poem, not for a revision of this one

# Vanessa MacLaren-Wray

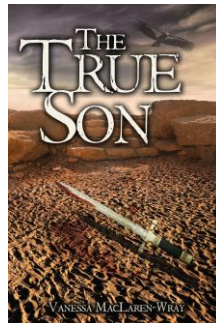
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Instagram

My newsletter is *Messages from the Oort Cloud*.  
[Subscribe!](#)

My email: [vmacwray@cometarytales.com](mailto:vmacwray@cometarytales.com)

A copy of these slides is under the [Resources](#)  
[tab on my website](#).



## Paper Angel Press and its SFF imprint, Water Dragon Publishing

All the things, including novel submissions and  
short story programs:

[paperangelpress.com](http://paperangelpress.com)  
[waterdragonpublishing.com](http://waterdragonpublishing.com)

The podcast I appear on regularly:

**Small Publishing in a Big Universe**  
[spbu-podcast.com](http://spbu-podcast.com)

# Thank You!

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