

Getting Short Fiction Published

Schedule description: Do you write short stories? Learn how a writer goes about getting a short story published. How to find markets, what "first rights" mean, why it's so hard.

@Sprite - Babel Con: 15 January 2022, 9am Pacific, noon ET, 5pm GMT

Greetings, all! I'm Sprite, and I've been playing text-based rpgs since 2011. I've also spent a good deal of that time writing fiction *With Intent To Publish*. I'm currently a player on three non-Trek Nova-format sims and I GM a fourth. Recently I've been playing pbp forum-based DnD. I'm a graduate of Taos Toolbox and I was a slush reader for Strange Horizons online magazine for a year. My published fiction credits include five short stories.

I'll start with an Info-dump of resource links, then discuss the following topics:

- Where to find short fiction markets
- Submitting a short story to a fiction market
 - The cover letter
 - What happens after a short story is submitted
 - Other considerations when submitting
- Conventional Advice
- Sprite's Advice

I will try to answer topic-related questions as I go, and then answer other questions at the end.

INFODUMP OF LINKS AHEAD!

Where to find short fiction markets

Ralan - clunky and old, but still useful <https://www.ralan.com/>

Duotrope - subscription \$50/year <https://duotrope.com/>

SFWA Market Report - <https://www.sfw.org/2022/01/06/sfw-market-report-january-2022/>

The Grinder - Free & excellent resource <https://thegrinder.diabolicalplots.com/>

Submitting a short story to a fiction market

Standard Manuscript Format: <https://www.shunn.net/format/>

Cover Letter: <http://www.kittywumpus.net/blog/2012/11/29/your-cover-letter-a-basic-template/>

First Rights and selling a story

Editor Neil Clarke explains the term "First Rights" <http://neil-clarke.com/first-rights/>

The Business of Writing

Writer Beware <https://www.sfw.org/other-resources/for-authors/writer-beware/>

Model Contracts <https://www.sfw.org/member-links/committees/contracts-committee/>

Dream Foundry seminars (many free/donation) <https://dreamfoundry.org/dream-foundry-seminar-series/>

Locus magazine - Industry News and Announcements: <https://locusmag.com/>

Sources for Short Stories to Read

Levar Burton Reads (audio) <https://www.levarburtonpodcast.com/>

A blog of short fiction recommendations & reviews
<https://thirteenlizardsinaspacesuit.substack.com/>

Nebula Awards 2020 <https://nebulas.sfgwa.org/award-year/2020/>

Nebula Award 2021 Reading List <https://www.sfgwa.org/forum/reading/4-shortstory/>

Hugo Awards 2021 winners <http://www.thehugoawards.org/hugo-history/2021-hugo-awards/>

Other Useful Resources for short-story writers seeking publication

Strange Horizons Magazine's list of cliché stories (from 2012)
<http://strangehorizons.com/submit/fiction-submission-guidelines/stories-weve-seen-too-often/>

Turkey City Lexicon - a list of terms to describe SciFi & Fantasy prose (problems especially)
<https://www.sfgwa.org/2009/06/18/turkey-city-lexicon-a-primer-for-sf-workshops/>

Blog posts about critiquing fiction

<http://cascadewriters.com/milford-style-workshopping/>

<http://candleinsunshine.com/musings/how-to-critique/>

<https://aedeng.wordpress.com/2020/06/12/critique-considerations/>

<https://quillinhandwriting.wordpress.com/2019/06/14/the-four-pillars-of-critique/>

<http://www.kittywumpus.net/blog/2014/01/31/how-to-critique-best-practices-for-workshopping/>

Dream Foundry youtube channel

https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC8jDna_LNiWUbJ254-dymVg/videos

Check out this Dream Foundry vid in particular: The Short Story Submission Landscape

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9_bba4V9y5g

Dream Foundry's online convention, 8-10 April 2022: <https://flights-of-foundry.org/>

DISCUSSION

Where to find short fiction markets

The Grinder <https://thegrinder.diabolicalplots.com/> is quite well known, and it's free (operates on donations). There you can search for a market for your story (by genre, length, average response time, pay rate, and more) and you can create a free account to keep track of your story submissions and add your data to the wealth of crowd-sourced information about submission

statuses (for rejectomancy). You can sign up for a newsletter with (among other things) news about what markets are opening and closing. It has been estimated that submission data for pro markets on The Grinder represents about a quarter of all submissions.

Duotrope is similar to Grinder (Grinder was based on it). Subscribers (\$50 per year) get a weekly newsletter similar to the Grinder's, but that also includes *themed* market submission deadlines (useful if you are interested in writing for anthologies). Raylan has been around for ages (and the site looks like it) and it is also free.

To zero-in on pro-paying publications, Ralan and the SFWA market report are good sources.

Social media can be a place to learn about short fiction markets with currently open submission calls. One example on Facebook Groups is "OPEN CALL: SCIENCE FICTION, FANTASY & PULP MARKETS." Also writer discussion forums, and of course Twitter.

Paying Markets are categorized as Pro (>0.05 USD/word), Semi-Pro (between 0.01 and 0.04 USD/word), and Token (<0.01 USD/word). Royalties-only is Token. There are numerous non-paying markets. Savvy writers do not submit to fiction markets that charge a reading fee and/or require writers to purchase the product before submitting, as such markets tend to be disreputable.

Beware of contests, if there's an entry fee it's probably a scam. Read a contest's rules carefully. Some contest rules contain "rights grab" clauses (for example, indefinite exclusivity for all submissions whether or not they won, or the right to publish runner-up stories without payment to the author).

Full or associate membership in the Science Fiction Writers of America (SFWA) requires an author or game-writer to qualify based on sales. SFWA currently defines a qualifying professional short-story market as paying 0.08 USD/word. A list can be found here: <https://www.sfwaworld.org/about/join-us/sfwaworld-membership-requirements/>

Submitting a short story to a fiction market

Read the submission guidelines on the publication's website *very carefully* and **follow those directions exactly**.

Editors will often specify Standard Manuscript Format <https://www.shunn.net/format/>. This is an industry standard convention that specifies formatting elements such as font type and size (12 pt, times new roman or courier), heading on the first and subsequent pages, double-spaced, half-inch paragraph indent (via formatting, *never* with spaces or Tab key) and more.

Many markets use a submission portal, but some use email - usually with a particular format for the subject line.

Some markets read "blind" and ask you to remove your name and all identifying information from the document.

might be read by other slush readers, and it gets passed to the editor(s) who make the final decision to reject or accept the story and offer a contract. Rewrite requests are rare, but always very clear.

Pro-paying markets often publish only one per hundreds of stories submitted to them. Your story is competing with stories written by professional authors with numerous publishing credits. Most stories get rejected. Sometimes the editor might include a personal note about why they rejected the story (known as a personal rejection), but usually not (a form rejection).

Editors are extremely busy. Most of them don't get paid. Slush readers are usually volunteers. The reality is that many editors stop reading if they are not hooked within the first few paragraphs, because they are simply inundated with submissions.

Never reply to a rejection letter, that is considered extremely rude and unprofessional. Not even to say thank you. Especially not to yell at them.

Rejection is *extremely* common, and it's not fun! Many short story writers plan ahead for which market to send a story to next. As soon as they get a rejection, they send the story right back out to another market.

If your story is accepted, the editor will send you a publishing contract to sign and send back. Read it carefully and compare it with SFWA model contracts. Many markets post their sample contract on their website.

Other considerations when submitting

Check your work *very carefully* for spelling, grammar, homonyms, and incorrect words. Read it out loud, or listen to it with a text-to-speech app. Reading aloud catches grammatical mistakes, overused words, unintentionally rhyming words, and more.

If you plan to sell publication rights to your story ***Do NOT post it online*** - not on your blog, and not on your sim's website. Putting it online uses up the *First English World Rights* to your story. Usually, when a market "buys" your short story, it is paying you for the right to publish your story *first*. If it's been on the internet (even if you've since taken it down), it's already been published and would be considered a "reprint." Read more about first rights here <http://neil-clarke.com/first-rights/>

First rights are related to, but different from, copyright. You can read about literary copyright here <http://www.sfw.org/other-resources/for-authors/writer-beware/copyright/>

Conventional Advice (served with a dash of salt)

The conventional wisdom about how an individual can improve their writing has three parts:

- Read
- Write
- Feedback - give and receive

Read. Read widely. Read what you aspire to write. If you want to improve your chances of writing short fiction that sells, read a lot of short fiction that has sold. Read the online magazines you are submitting to.

Write. It's the old adage about writing a million words. Many of us simmers are well on our way. Write solo posts. Write short stories. Journal. *Just write.*

Feedback/critique. Find some writing partners who also aspire to get their short fiction published, and trade critiques. Giving a friend thoughtful and respectful feedback on their story is a fabulous learning experience. Listening with an open mind to constructive criticism can help all of us improve our writing. Several blog posts outlining different approaches to critique are linked in the infodump.

Sprite's Advice for pursuing publication (served with a heaping cup of salt)

Remember that if you get a rejection, all that means is the editor has decided not to publish your story, *that's it*. There are many reasons for an editor to make that decision that have nothing to do with the quality of your work. Most important, remember that *YOU personally are not being rejected*.

Recruit a writing cheerleader. A significant other, a best friend, a parent. Someone who enthusiastically reads your work and will always give you encouraging feedback.

Seriously, do recruit some friends to give you their best honest feedback on your stories. When you ask a reader for feedback, be clear about the kind feedback you want. Is this the first chapter of a novel, and you only want to know if the main character is likeable? Or if your steampunk setting makes sense? Is this a rough first draft, and you'd like your reader to ignore the tense and spelling errors, and only comment on their general impression of the concept? Or do you think your short story is ready to submit to *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, and you want merciless feedback? Ask for what you want! In general, to make the best use of my critique partners' time, I don't send a story to them until I feel that I've thoroughly edited it to the best of my ability. I have also learned a great deal from reading other writers' work and giving my feedback.

Read some books about writing (there are many good ones out there). Take a writing class (also a great place to meet future critique partners).

Be prepared for a lot of rejection. Competition in the short-fiction market is intense. Also, short story markets close all the time, some are crowd-funded but most of them are projects paid for out of the editors' pockets. So even if you get a contract, the market might close before it publishes your work.

Try not to obsess too much about the status of your story while it's under consideration by an editor. Put that energy into writing another story... or write a sim post.

Sprite's totally biased and opinionated advice for simmers seeking publication

I respectfully suggest developing an awareness of certain frequently used conventions of text-based roleplay prose that (IMHO) don't work well in stand-alone fiction.

For Example...

Point of view switching between characters. In stand-alone fiction, usually there is *one* point of view for (at least) an entire scene.

In simming, it is common for writers to describe their character's eyes as almost separate from the character's body, as if the eyes are capable of independent action. This is something we really don't see in published fiction (although, in a science fiction, fantasy, or horror story, eyeballs *might* pop out of a person's head and move around on their own.)

"The Burly detective syndrome" is a term out of the Turkey City Lexicon (<https://www.sfw.org/2009/06/18/turkey-city-lexicon-a-primer-for-sf-workshops/>). This is where, instead of using the character's name or pronoun to describe themselves, a description is substituted (the Vulcan science officer, the red-haired woman, the dark-skinned warrior, the scar-faced girl). This may be done intentionally in roleplay as a reminder of an important detail about the character that other players may have forgotten. In published fiction, told from one character's point of view, only details the point-of-view character would notice in the moment would usually be described. Using descriptive euphemisms just to avoid repeating a proper name or pronoun can confuse a fiction reader, or bump the reader out of the story.

We've all heard the old adage, *show don't tell*. In fiction we can show a character's emotions and actions, which allows the reader to interpret and react - resulting in better immersion in the story. Just telling what the character feels reduces the impact and disengages the reader. In my simming experience, not all players pay attention to what is *shown*, so I have a tendency to do both, *show* - describe facial and body movements - AND *tell* - label the emotion. That is a habit I've picked up from simming that sneaks into my short fiction - that I need to remember to edit out.

CONCLUSION

Well, those are the basics of submitting short fiction for publication, in my experience. Writing With Intent to Publish is not for everybody. I personally have found that, when the play-by-post RPGs I play are active, and my co-players are reasonable and engaged in the writing collaborative narrative, simming is much more fun.

ANTICIPATED QUESTIONS

How to get a tie-in fiction gig? - I have no *personal* experience, but I have friends and acquaintances who've done this. A tie-in novel (also writing for video games and table-top games) is known as Work Made For Hire. The author **gives up ALL rights**. It generally pays well because the author does not own the book/game's copyright (although usually the contract will specify some royalties. Unless the franchise was bought by Disney, notorious for screwing creators out of contract royalties).

To get a gig writing a tie-in novel in a well-known franchise

- A) write an original novel
- B) get an agent and get the novel published
- C) publish several more original novels
- D) develop a reputation for writing excellent novels, *fast*
- E) have your agent contact the franchise and tell them you want to write a tie-in novel
- F) if the franchise gives the go-ahead for a proposal, write and submit a plot outline
- G) Only *after* you have a signed contract, write the tie-in novel

Traditional Novel-publishing - is beyond the scope of this presentation. Very simply (except the actual process is NOT really at all simple):

- A) write the novel,
- B) query literary agents and get one to represent you,
- C) your agent sells your novel to a publishing house, and gets a percentage of the sale.

Self-publishing - the author takes complete responsibility for all aspects of publication, and if successful, gets all of the rewards. I have not done this, but based on a number of conversations with people who have, if I personally was going to self publish a novel, I would ...

1. write the novel
2. finish writing the novel, seriously
3. get several critique partners to read the novel and give me feedback
4. edit the novel to the best of my ability
5. hire a professional editor (someone I know or comes recommended)
6. re-edit the novel
7. hire someone to convert the novel to Amazon format for a professional result
8. publish the novel

Self-publishing on Amazon - tools and instructions are supplied on the site, I think (I have not done this.)

Small Press - there are many small presses that do wonderful work professionally editing and publishing anthologies and novels. Usually, the author is expected/required to do their own publicity. For authors with a social media following, this can work well.

Vanity Press Warning - If a publisher asks a writer to pay for editing, purchase a certain number of copies, or really if the publisher asks the author to pay them any money at all, that is a huge

warning flag. It's likely NOT a real publishing house, it's a scam press or a vanity press. See the SFWA Writer Beware blog: <https://www.sfwawriter.com/other-resources/for-authors/writer-beware/>

Books about writing Sprite recommends

Just about any book about writing commercial fiction that 'clicks' with you.

"The 10% Solution" by Ken Rand (about self-editing)

"Beginnings, Middles & Ends (Elements of Fiction Writing)" by Nancy Kress

"On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft" by Stephen King (both an auto-biography and a book about writing)

"Writing the Other" by Nisi Shawl and Cynthia Ward (writing about people different from oneself)

Online Classes for Writers

<https://www.clarionwest.org/type/online/>

<http://www.kittywumpus.net/blog/academy/>

<https://www.writespacehouston.org/creative-writing.html>

Examples of Rights an author can sell to their work

- World Rights – rights in all languages throughout the world.
- World Rights in English – all English language rights throughout the world
- First English Rights – usually what a magazine wants, they get to publish first
- Second English Rights – often for an anthology reprint
- North American Rights – US, Canada, and their territories
- English and Common Wealth Rights – UK and territories
- Audio Rights
- Foreign Language Rights – all languages other than English.