



## MANUSCRIPT IMMACULATE

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Early in my writing experience I attended a Writers' Festival where one of Australia's best-known writers answered a question about self-editing. He said that he aimed to send a perfect manuscript which will not need any alterations or improvements - not even the addition or deletion of a comma. He referred to perfection in both story and presentation. Greatly impressed, I resolved to emulate this attitude.

### **The manuscript deluge**

In the last ten years publishers have reported that they are constantly deluged with manuscripts. This means that acceptance is becoming more and more difficult to achieve. Two major changes are responsible for this.

Firstly, computerisation. Until I bought my first computer in 1985, I spent a large amount of time retyping, both to improve manuscripts and to replace those damaged in the mail. Now, in the digital age, it is easy to 'churn out' hundreds of printed pages.

Secondly, there has been a huge growth in the number of writing classes. Everyone is encouraged to be creative. We all know we can paint; we all know we can write. This wonderful flowering results in an increase in the number of manuscripts sent to publishers (if not in the number of exhibitions of paintings!).

At the same time, many publishers have reduced the number of in-house editors. They send manuscripts to freelancers who are paid at an hourly rate, so manuscripts which need heavy editing are a financial burden. While 'near-enough' in regard to quality has never been good enough, acceptance is getting more competitive.

In the early eighties, when I was new to writing, I heard a writer say that she didn't fuss about sending a perfect manuscript. 'That's what the editors are for,' she said. That attitude won't do today. A publisher will only tolerate a less-than-perfect manuscript if the story is outstanding and the writer shows huge potential for the future. 'Rough' manuscripts are evidence of a lack of professionalism.

### **Perfectionism**

Some of us are 'fuss-pots' - striving for perfection comes naturally to us - so I was delighted when a publisher once told me, after reading a long manuscript, that it was immaculate. He requested few changes to it. I still work hard on my editing, hoping to achieve it again!

### **Fail-safe editing**

Those who are not 'fuss-pots' - much more balanced people, I'm sure - need to give special attention to the final edit. While a spell-check is useful, we all know that the human brain is more efficient. Perhaps my fail-safe method may be helpful.

#### **\* Cool off**

Many writers say they leave their work for at least a month 'to cool', and come back to it. This works for me. Later on, after a fresh look, many improvements seem obvious.



\* **Hard copy**

While I am fairly skilful at picking up mistakes on the screen, I find that I do a better job when editing hard copy, so I always print the manuscript for the final edit.

\* **Read aloud**

The final edit is a read-aloud job - reading slowly enough to find errors. (If you are a skip-reader you will have missed the double use of a word in the last sentence.)

Reading aloud also helps in finding the mistakes which slip in during earlier edits. For example, when you change one sentence in a paragraph it may affect the whole paragraph - perhaps the tense. Or perhaps it is now unclear who is speaking to whom.

(Recently I made a rule for myself: every time I make a change in the early edits, I read the whole paragraph. It is well worthwhile because there are fewer mistakes to pick up in the last edit.)

**Final suggestion**

If you are a new writer concerned about presenting a perfect manuscript, you know whether you had a good grounding in the basic rules of English expression, grammar and spelling. If you have any doubt, ask someone whose opinion you value to read and criticise your manuscript or enlist a manuscript editing service.

'Perfection is the child of Time,' wrote the English Bishop Joseph Hall in 1625. It is a splendid epithet for the task of editing. We all hate giving the time to it, but we must.

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