

WORD COUNT

WHAT IS WORD COUNT? Publishers' word count requirements were set up back in the days of typewriters when Courier was the only option. Therefore, word counts are still based on the standards of umpteen years ago. Most publishers these days will accept manuscripts in any clear, easily readable font, but there is a lingering belief among certain authors that only Courier is acceptable for manuscripts. This is probably due to the fact that many romance authors begin by writing for Harlequin/Silhouette, and the word count for category romance is more strict than for longer single titles. In category—books written for a “series” or “line”—the author must stick to the word requirement of that particular line. (This is a matter of economy and the known length preferred by readers of that line.) Therefore, many category editors find it easier to judge the length of a book in the way they've always done: knowing exactly how many book pages a manuscript of, say, 300 pages in Courier at 250 words per page is going to translate into when it becomes a finished product.

In actuality, however, almost all editors and agents now accept Times New Roman since it is the “default” font on most personal computers. (Also, it saves a tree due to using less paper. Some, like my agent, even prefer submissions by e-mail.) I've also heard from various authors, via e-mail loops, that they use other fonts. The “must” is that the font be **easy for an editor to read**. I know one successful author who writes in TNR at 14 point instead of 12. IMPORTANT: Whatever font you decide to use (particularly if you are writing “category”), you will need to guesstimate how many pages your manuscript would have been if written in Courier, as this is the only way you will be able to accurately compare your word count to the publishers' specifications.

“But word count is the same in Courier as it is in TNR.”

Absolutely right, of course it is. But the publishers' traditional way of counting words takes “white space” into its calculations. A simple computer word count does not. So what's “white space”?

WHITE SPACE. Manuscripts are counted by page rather than computer word count

because authors write with varying amounts of “white space.” For example, I have a good deal of short repartee-like dialogue in my Regencies. This type of dialogue, requiring a paragraphing carriage return after only a few words, leaves a lot of white space on the page. It’s possible a page with a good deal of narrative might contain 300+ words, while a page with lots of short dialogue might be only a bit more than 200. Also, the traditional word count allows for the white space at the beginning and end of each chapter.

Example of the above: Since I work in TNR, a proportional type that gets more words to the page, I kept my first Regency to a computer count of 70,000, figuring by guess and by gosh that I had just about reached Signet’s maximum word count of 75,000 (Courier). I ended up having to cut 10 pages because that’s how much I was over the word limit. After that experience, I learned that 68,000 words was about the tops I could write for Signet to keep under their stated word count of 75,000.

So how do you write in TNR or other proportional font and not get caught having to cut ten or twenty pages from your manuscript?

First of all, get a firm grip on the traditional way of counting: **Courier 12 at 25 lines per page = 250 words** (even if you have only 100 words or as many as 300 on the page)

If you’re working in a proportional font instead of Courier, the most accurate way to find out how many traditional-count pages you have is to go to Edit, Select All and temporarily change the font to Courier. Do Ctrl+End and—presto—you’re at the end of your manuscript. Multiply the number of pages by 250, and you have your traditional word count. Select All again and return to your preferred font. 300 Courier pages X 250 = 75,000 words.

Or you can use Blair’s rule of thumb: Multiply your proportional type computer count by 1.1, and you’ll be close (although I’ve had mss that came out closer to 1.2). Warning: if you don’t make the effort to translate your computer word count to the traditional, you could end up submitting a book of 120,000 words to a publisher who only wants books of 90,000-100,000 words. And in today’s economy, you’re out of luck before the first read.

An added note on formatting:

1. 1" margins (can be larger, but *never* smaller)
2. Font must be 12 pt (or larger)
3. Double space (manuscript and synopsis)
4. Title and page number in header on every page
5. Do not use the word "page" in front of the page number.
6. Each chapter begins about 1/3 down the page
7. Indent ***all*** paragraphs 5 spaces.
8. Location & date lines (*London, 1810*) are usually italic and flush with the Left margin.
9. Do not use italics if writing in Courier as they don't show up well. Use an underline instead. Italics show up very well in TNR, so underlining isn't necessary.

Added Advice. Check the web site of any publisher or agent to whom you are planning to submit. A few die-hards still specify Courier, and you definitely want to give that editor or agent exactly what he or she prefers. (The only tricky thing about changing a TNR ms to Courier is changing the italics to underlines. It's really no big deal.)

E-Publishers. Since e-publishers are not confined by paper pages, the word count in e-publishing is almost moot, although a few specify "not over 120,000." In e-pub the computer word count is king. There *is* nothing else.

HAPPY COUNTING!

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