



# Manuscript formatting and grammar essentials

*A practical guide for fiction writers (UK English)*

This quick guide covers the basic technical standards expected when you share work with agents and editors. This isn't about creativity or voice, it's about making sure your writing is easy to read, professional and taken seriously.

## 1. Standard manuscript layout (UK fiction)

Unless a submission specifically says otherwise, use the following:

- **Font:** Times New Roman
- **Font size:** 12pt
- **Line spacing:** Double-spaced throughout (including dialogue)
- **Margins:** 1 inch on all sides
- **Alignment:** Left-aligned (ragged right, not justified)
- **Paragraphs:** Indented, not separated by blank lines
- **Page numbers:** Top right corner
- **Chapters:** Start each chapter on a new page

## 2. Paragraphing basics

- **New speaker = new paragraph.** Always.
- Don't combine dialogue, action and internal thought from different characters in the same paragraph.
- Short paragraphs are fine — especially in dialogue-heavy or emotional scenes — but they should still be grammatically complete.
- **Scene breaks:** Use one clear, consistent method. This can be either a centred \*\*\* or a single blank line. Don't switch between styles.

## 3. Dialogue punctuation (UK English)

- Use **single quotation marks** for speech if UK.
- Punctuation goes **inside** the closing quotation marks.

*Correct:*

‘I don’t know where she is,’ he said.

*Incorrect:*

‘I don’t know where she is’, he said.

‘I don’t know where she is’ he said.

### **If the dialogue ends the sentence:**

*Correct:*

‘I don’t know where she is.’

*Incorrect:*

‘I don’t know where she is’.

### **If dialogue is followed by action (not a dialogue tag):**

Only verbs like *said*, *asked*, *whispered* can take a comma  
 Actions must be separated with a full stop

*Correct:*

‘I don’t know where she is.’ He turned away.

*Incorrect:*

‘I don’t know where she is’ He turned away.

‘I don’t know where she is’ he turned away.

‘I don’t know where she is’. He turned away.

## **4. Commas: when to use them (and when not to)**

Commas are one of the most common technical problems in manuscripts. They’re often used to control rhythm, when they should be doing grammatical work. These are the rules that matter most for fiction writers.

### **Do not use commas:**

#### **Between subject and verb**

*Incorrect:*

The woman at the end of the line, waits.

*Correct:*

The woman at the end of the line waits.

Rule: If you can remove the comma and the sentence still makes sense, it probably shouldn't be there.

### **Instead of full stops**

*Incorrect:*

She opened the door, the room was empty.

*Correct:*

She opened the door. The room was empty.

Or: She opened the door and the room was empty.

### **Before essential information**

If the information is needed to identify the noun, don't separate it.

*Incorrect:*

The sister, who lives in London, arrived late.

*Correct (if you only have one sister):*

The sister who lives in London arrived late.

### **Use commas:**

#### **After introductory clauses**

*Correct:*

When she finally looked up, the room had changed.

#### **To separate items in a list**

*Correct:*

She packed bread, fruit, notebooks and her phone.

#### **Around non-essential information**

If the sentence still works without the phrase, commas are correct.

*Correct:*

Her mother, who never raised her voice, stood silently.

### **Before conjunctions in compound sentences**

*Correct:*

She wanted to leave, but she stayed.

### **A quick comma sense-check**

If you're unsure, ask:

- Is this comma separating a subject from its verb? (If yes, remove it.)
- Is it replacing a full stop? (If yes, split the sentence.)
- Does the sentence still make sense without the comma? (If yes, you may not need it.)
- Is this an action, not a speech tag? (If yes, use a full stop.)
- If a sentence has **more than two commas**, stop and check it. It might mean the sentence is too long. Often the fix is one full stop, one conjunction or rimming the sentence slightly.

## **5. Thoughts, italics and consistency**

Choose **one system** and stick to it:

- Italics for direct thought *or*
- Free indirect style (thoughts blended into narration)

Avoid mixing both randomly. Consistency matters more than which option you choose.

## **6. Tense control**

- Decide your main tense and stick to it.
- Clearly anchor flashbacks before shifting tense.
- Watch for tense drift mid-paragraph. It's easy to miss but very noticeable to readers.