



Writing Basics

By
Michael McCollum



Every book on writing has a chapter where they discuss the basics of writing. Everyone knows them, except, of course, the people who haven't learned them yet. They are instructions to allow beginners to avoid elementary mistakes. So, before we go on to the more esoteric points of the craft, and in order not to disrupt a great tradition, let's discuss the fundamentals of writing.

Fundamental #1: Who Are You Going To Sell Your Masterpiece To After You Finish Writing It?

As I tried to explain in the last chapter, writing is less an avocation than a malady that strikes without warning and often persists for life. It begins when otherwise balanced people wake up one morning and suddenly decide that they are going to become writers. Worse, they expect strangers to actually pay them money for what they write. No amount of advice from family or friends, no discouraging statistics can dissuade them. The only thing one can do for the poor soul is hope that someday the malady will run its course.

The victim will often sit down in front of a typewriter or computer screen and pound away with enthusiasm, doing this into the wee hours of the morning, often oblivious to the fact that what they are engaged in a lonely, boring, repetitive task. Where before they seemed indifferent to grammar and spelling, they will now ponder the placement of commas for hours. They start looking through the catalogues of nearby colleges, searching for creative writing courses.

Yet, despite enthusiasm for their new hobby, neophyte writers often forget to ask themselves a simple question: "Once I've written my masterpiece, who is going to buy it?"

Most people, and many professional writers, have an overly romantic view of what it means to be a writer. We tend to view our craft as being more sophisticated than selling groceries or cleaning out clogged pipes. And it is this mystique that tends to hide the important fact that writing is a business.

Writers produce a product, namely organized collections of words that we call short stories, novelettes, novellas, novels, articles, or just plain books. However, it is not enough for a writer merely to produce the words, someone must publish them. Not surprisingly, we call people who do this "publishers."

Publishers employ editors, whose job it is to take the words and modify them to make them attractive to the reading public. Once adjusted for maximum commercial value, the words are then run through a printing press to produce numerous copies of the final version of the work. These copies are the end product that the publisher offers for sale. Whether book or magazine, the publisher expects to receive more money for his product than what he originally paid the writer. And the writer is not the only expense a publisher must cover. There is also the cost of paper, ink, electricity, the salaries of the publisher's employees, distribution, storage, and advertising. Then, of course, there are the profits the publisher expects to make from his efforts.

It is often a revelation to new writers that everyone in the publication process expects to make money off the writer's words. Publishers make their money by coaxing the reading public to part with funds that would otherwise go for beer, movies, or eating out. And ultimately, the writer's words must compete with these other sources of entertainment. (Yes, draining a six pack qualifies as entertainment.)

The problem with relying on the public for funding is that they are notoriously fickle. The craze that sweeps the nation one month may be as dead as Julius Caesar the next. Remember the pet rock? When public taste changes quickly, we call it a fashion or a fad. However, public tastes can also change slowly.

There was a time when nobody read books because few people could read anything. Those were the centuries when the strolling minstrels and traveling storytellers occupied the writer's ecological niche. The invention of the printing press put an end to troubadours and brought about a general increase in literacy. Once books became cheap enough, the common people read books.

Books reigned supreme for 500 years because they were the only form of personal entertainment in existence. (Everyone who snickered at that statement should get his or her dirty minds out of the gutter and back on the subject.) The twentieth century, however, has seen the invention of several technologies that have challenged books as the supreme purveyor of information and source of vicarious adventure. First came movies, then television, and finally, VCRs. With each new invention, the reading public has found another way to spend the money they would originally have used to purchase books. And in so doing, each new invention has brought with it a reduction in the number of book buyers – as a percentage of the total population, if not in absolute terms.

It sometimes seems as though the fraternity of readers has become an exclusive club. We all know people who haven't read a book since they graduated from college, and who never will. When they read magazines, mostly they just look at the pictures. There is a joke that encapsulates this problem much better than I can. "Do you know why people who read *People Magazine* never read anything else? Their lips get tired!"

This ever shrinking percentage of the population who buy books for edification or pleasure has had a profound effect on the writing community. In many fields, the audience for particular brands of writing has fallen below the level at which that type of writing can be published profitably. If you specialize in writing poetry or short fiction (westerns, detective stories, or science fiction) you know what I mean. It isn't that there aren't readers who like to read these things, it's just that their numbers have dropped to the level where publishers can't make money publishing them.

In the past 50 years, much genre fiction has gone the way of the dodo bird. Mysteries have largely died as a short fiction form, as have westerns. True, you can still

sell mysteries to *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* or *Alfred Hitchcock Magazine*, or westerns to *Louis L'Amour Magazine*, but by and large, there is very little short fiction being published commercially. Science fiction magazines have been sick for a long time, and many of them appear to be losing out to new technologies. *Omni* has become an electronic magazine on the World Wide Web and *Amazing* recently ceased publication, possibly for good. Of the old standards, only *Analog*, *Isaac Asimov's*, and *Fantasy and Science Fiction* are left, with a few new magazines such as *Aboriginal* having been added to the mix.

So what is a writer who specializes in short fiction to do? There are plenty of small and literary magazines that still publish shorter works, but most have circulations in the few hundreds to the few thousands. Needless to say, a circulation of 600 does not allow the publisher to pay top dollar to the writers. In fact, the publisher usually pays in complimentary copies, if he pays at all.

Each time a magazine folds or a publisher stops publishing a particular genre, then writers lose a market where they can be paid for their work. Sooner or later, some number of writers will be out of business because they have no outlet for their output.

So, what do you do if you like to write poetry, or western short stories, or short mysteries? You write them for your own pleasure, you compete for the few dozen publishing slots available each year, you let your family and friends read them, you form reading clubs with other would-be writers to pass around your various works. What you don't do, in all likelihood, is make any money.

So if the writing bug has bitten you, ask yourself a simple question: Can I sell my work after I write it? Is there someone out there who specializes in gay/lesbian cowboy sea stories (for example)? If no publisher happens to have a gay/lesbian cowboy sea story imprint, then no matter how well your G/LCSS turns out, you aren't going to be able to sell it.

Wouldn't it be nice to know that going in rather than after spending a year writing the damned thing?

Fundamental #2: How Do I Figure Out Who Will Buy My Work?

That, it turns out, is the easy part. There is a publication that accounts for a significant percentage of a bookstore's sales year after year. It's a big, thick book called *Writer's Market*. In it you will find tips for writing, articles by professional writers, and most importantly, a nearly exhaustive compendium of every writing market publishing in the English language. It comes out yearly and is priced reasonably for a hard cover book. You can also find it in your local library. Study it carefully!

Before you put a year into writing the gay/lesbian cowboy sea story discussed above, make sure you can find a G/LCSS publisher. Please note that it doesn't count if you can find gay/lesbian, cowboy, and sea story publishers. All three specialties must be represented by a single publisher in a single book line for it to be a viable market.

Writer's Market will tell you the publisher, what they publish, what their requirements are, how much they pay, how long it takes for them to report back to you (usually with a rejection letter), and who you should contact when you want to sell them something. Nor is *Writer's Market* the only resource on who to sell your writing to. That particular publication has a lot of competitors. In fact, it sometimes seems that books on

"Where To Sell Your Writing" sell more copies than all of the output from neophyte writers combined. Specialized markets (such as science fiction) also have specialized books that report similar information.

What you will find if you delve into *Writer's Market* is that there is a much larger market for novels than for shorter fiction, that non-fiction is very popular, that computer books are booming, and poets need not apply outside of academia. Romance novels are always a good place to be if you are a writer, but you have to be female to write romance (or have a female pseudonym). Science fiction continues to plod on year after year, while westerns and mysteries are very nearly extinct. Self-help books are popular, but you have to have credentials. For instance, no one is going to buy a diet book unless the author can append the magic abbreviation *Dr.* in front of his or her name. Computer books are very popular, especially if you can name them " ... For Dummies." (Note: That last statement was meant to illustrate a point. Actually adding "For Dummies" to the name of your book is the fastest way to get sued known to man. That particular title series is owned by IDG Publishing, the purveyors of the For *Dummies* books.)

Fundamental # 3: So What Do I do if I Discover Someone Is Actually Publishing That Which I Am Writing?

Simple. You write! Once you have written, you need to submit your finished product to the market you have previously identified. There are simple rules for submitting manuscripts to publishers, rules that must be followed properly.

In *Writer's Market* you will find cryptic entries such as "Query First," or "No Unsolicited Manuscripts," or "Agented Manuscripts Only." These mean, respectively: 1) Write us a letter and ask us if we might be interested in your idea, 2) Don't call us, we'll call you – NOT, and 3) If you haven't got an agent to submit your stuff to us, forget it.

Do not violate these rules!

I know that what you have written is the greatest thing ever put on paper and if the editors will just look at it, they'll know it's great and pay you a million dollars for it. Unfortunately, if they receive a manuscript in violation of the rules, they *won't* look at it. They'll just pop it in the self-addressed-stamped-envelope (SASE) and return it unread. So why waste your postage? More importantly, why waste your time?

Which brings us to another important rule. Always, always, *always* include an envelope for returning your manuscript to you with sufficient postage affixed so that your poor orphan can come home after it is rejected. Nothing irritates an editor more than being stuck with manuscripts that don't have return postage. In fact, when you consider the number of manuscripts a publisher receives in a month, you will understand that paying to return rejects to the writers is a fast way to go broke.

Fundamental # 4: I Know the Publisher Receives A Lot of Manuscripts. How Do I Make Mine Stand Out?

It is a truism in advertising that in order to sell a product, you must distinguish it from all the competing products. Think of how much Ford spends each year to distinguish the Ford Taurus from the Mercury Sable, when in fact, *they are exactly the same car!* Obviously, the same should apply to manuscripts, right?

Well, yes and no.

A writer must indeed distinguish his product from that of all his competitors. He does this by the simple expedient of writing a better story than they do. Name recognition among writers involves having a long track record of ever more successful works to your credit. You don't have to be an industry insider to observe this process. Just look at the covers of the books in your local bookstore. New and untried writers have books where the writer's name is in medium size type and the title of the book is in relatively larger type. However, the largest part of the cover is devoted to the cover illustration, which, hopefully, accurately reflects the contents. (One of my covers had a red background with violet lettering for the text. I found it interesting that the color combination guaranteed that you couldn't read my name from more than four feet away).

As a writer becomes more successful, the writer's name begins to be featured more prominently. Often a writer's name will be larger than the title. This is the case for Robert Ludlum, Steven King, and Tom Clancy.

Then, when an author becomes very big, his name covers the front of his books, driving the title toward the bottom where it can't be read when the books are stacked one behind another on the bookstore shelves. The sure sign that an author is a big success is when you see books by other writers imprinted with his name: *Passion Play*, in the tradition of **TOM CLANCY**, by **JOE JONES**.

"Good advice," you say, "but I don't have a track record. How do I personalize my manuscripts so they will stand out in the slush pile?"

Simple answer: You don't!

It is a problem faced by every young writer. They think if they just draw a daisy in the corner of each of their pages, or stamp a red heart on the front, or print it in a curlicue font on yellow paper, that it will stand out and the editors will notice it. They're right. It will stand out as the work of an amateur and will be dropped into the SASE unread.

If you are going to be a serious writer, you must produce serious manuscripts. This means that you must follow the standard rules for manuscript format. These are:

- 1. Use very black ink on very white paper.**
- 2. Print in a readable font: 10 point or 12 point — the latter is better because it is easier to read. And in case you are planning on writing your manuscript out longhand, don't bother. All manuscripts must be typed.**
- 3. Leave large margins all around. One-inch top, bottom, right, and left are usual.**
- 4. Short works don't require a title page. Long works do.**
- 5. Place your name and address in the upper left-hand corner of the first page.**
- 6. Place the word count in the upper right hand corner of the first page.**
- 7. Skip a few lines and give the title of the work centered on its own line. Skip a line, type "by", then skip down and type your name or pseudonym. (This is for short fiction. For longer works, put the title and your name in the middle of the title page).**

- 8. Print your work double-spaced and on one side of the paper. Use "ragged right" formatting rather than "justified."**
- 9. Make sure that every page has the name of the work, your name, and a page number on it. This is a precaution in case your manuscript is dropped on the floor of the editorial office.**
- 10. When you reach the end, skip a line and then type "The End." Sometimes it isn't obvious when a writer has finished.**
- 11. Above all, don't do anything non-standard to draw attention to your manuscript. The quality of your writing will draw all the attention you need.**

Why such a paper wasting format with its large margins, double-spacing, and one-side-only printing? Because that particular format is easy to read and leaves plenty of white space for the editor to scribble in. Not that he will do so during the first read through, but if he actually buys your work, then there will be plenty of editing before the work sees publication.

Standard manuscript format is designed to protect the sight of editors. And no matter how good you think your writing is, there are few editors who will think it good enough to go blind for you. This is the reason why they object to reading purple ink on yellow paper, or printing that fades in and out, or text too small to read.

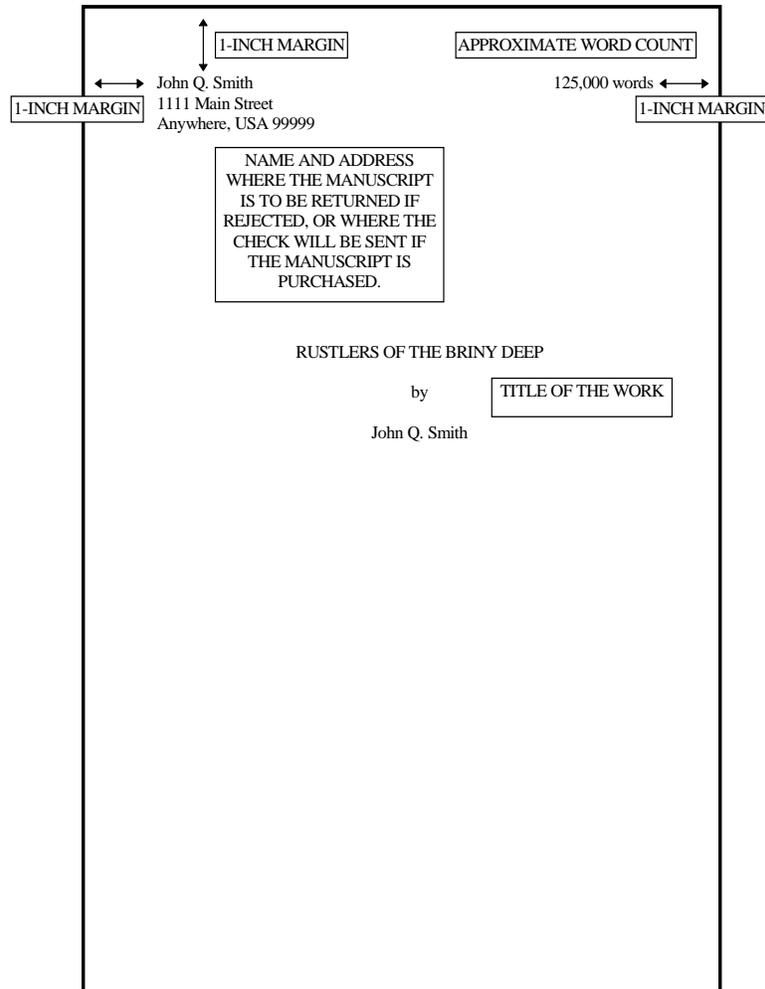
What about proportional versus fixed spacing? The traditional form is for fixed spacing. This is because all writing prior to the invention of the personal computer was via typewriter and typewriters are fixed space machines. It also helps the editor and typesetter, who have a need to know whether there are one or two spaces between each of the words.

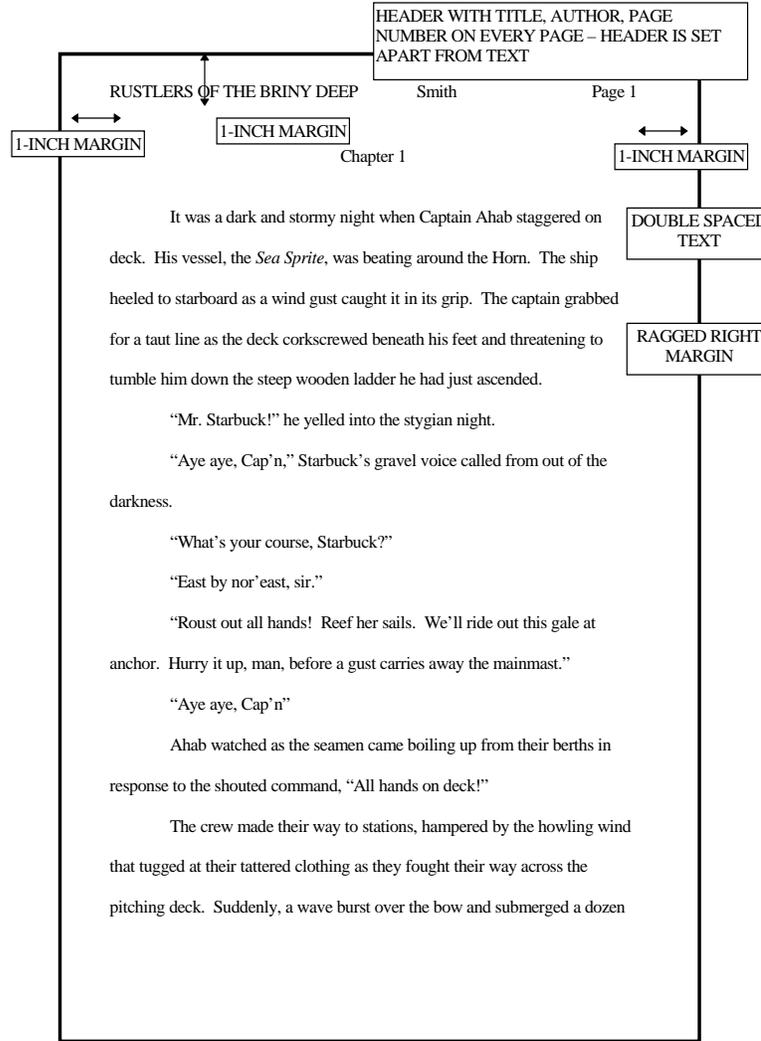
However, in this one area, I advocate a slight deviation from standard practice. During the publication process for each of my novels I noticed that the typeset version reads better than the typewritten manuscript. For this reason I like sending my manuscripts in 12 point Times New Roman, a proportionally spaced font (the same font you are looking at now). I figure that if they like the work and want a fixed space manuscript after the sale, I can always print out a copy in that format.

I also print on bright, heavy (20-lb.) paper. Having very white paper and very black printing makes the editor's job easier and it doesn't hurt to have them feeling kindly toward you when they are contemplating buying your work. It also portrays an aura of professionalism that is well worth the extra cost in paper and postage.

As in every profession there are plenty of other rules. There are so many rules, in fact, that no one knows all of them. I hope to cover as many as I can in future articles. However, these are the basics and if you pay attention to them, they will make your transition from neophyte to published author smoother. A good-looking manuscript will not guarantee a sale, but it won't detract from one either.

Just remember that writing is a business in which all participants expect to make money. The editors actually *want* to buy your story, novel, or article. They need material to publish if they are going to make money. Help them out by writing something good. And remember, they will more likely recognize that you are the talent they have been looking for if you follow a few basic rules with your submission.





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Michael McCollum, Proprietor
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We have book length versions of both Writers' Workshop series, "The Art of Writing, Volumes I and II" and "The Art of Science Fiction, Volumes I and II" in both electronic and hard copy formats.

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NOVELS

1. Life Probe - ^{US}\$4.50

The Makers searched for the secret to faster-than-light travel for 100,000 years. Their chosen instruments were the Life Probes, which they launched in every direction to seek out advanced civilizations among the stars. One such machine searching for intelligent life encounters 21st century Earth. It isn't sure that it has found any...

2. Procyon's Promise - ^{US}\$4.50

Three hundred years after humanity made its deal with the Life Probe to search out the secret of faster-than-light travel, the descendants of the original expedition return to Earth in a starship. They find a world that has forgotten the ancient contract. No matter. The colonists have overcome far greater obstacles in their single-minded drive to redeem a promise made before any of them were born...

3. Antares Dawn - US\$4.50

When the super giant star Antares exploded in 2512, the human colony on Alta found their pathway to the stars gone, isolating them from the rest of human space for more than a century. Then one day, a powerful warship materialized in the system without warning. Alarmed by the sudden appearance of such a behemoth, the commanders of the Altan Space Navy dispatched one of their most powerful ships to investigate. What ASNS Discovery finds when they finally catch the intruder is a battered hulk manned by a dead crew.

That is disturbing news for the Altans. For the dead battleship could easily have defeated the whole of the Altan navy. If it could find Alta, then so could whomever it was that beat it. Something must be done...

4. Antares Passage - US\$4.50

After more than a century of isolation, the paths between stars are again open and the people of Alta in contact with their sister colony on Sandar. The opening of the foldlines has not been the unmixed blessing the Altans had supposed, however.

For the reestablishment of interstellar travel has brought with it news of the Ryall, an alien race whose goal is the extermination of humanity. If they are to avoid defeat at the hands of the aliens, Alta must seek out the military might of Earth. However, to reach Earth requires them to dive into the heart of a supernova.

5. Antares Victory – First Time in Print – US\$7.00

After a century of warfare, humanity finally discovered the Achilles heel of the Ryall, their xenophobic reptilian foe. Spica – Alpha Virginis – is the key star system in enemy space. It is the hub through which all Ryall starships must pass, and if humanity can only capture and hold it, they will strangle the Ryall war machine and end their threat to humankind forever.

It all seemed so simple in the computer simulations: Advance by stealth, attack without warning, strike swiftly with overwhelming power. Unfortunately, conquering the Ryall proves the easy part. With the key to victory in hand, Richard and Bethany Drake discover that they must also conquer human nature if they are to bring down the alien foe ...

6. Thunderstrike! - US\$6.00

The new comet found near Jupiter was an incredible treasure trove of water ice and rock. Immediately, the water-starved Luna Republic and the Sierra Corporation, a leader in asteroid mining, were squabbling over rights to the new resource. However, all thoughts of profit and fame were abandoned when a scientific expedition discovered that the comet's trajectory placed it on a collision course with Earth!

As scientists struggled to find a way to alter the comet's course, world leaders tried desperately to restrain mass panic, and two lovers quarreled over the direction the comet was to take, all Earth waited to see if humanity had any future at all...

7. The Clouds of Saturn - US\$4.50

When the sun flared out of control and boiled Earth's oceans, humanity took refuge in a place that few would have predicted. In the greatest migration in history, the entire human race took up residence among the towering clouds and deep clear-air canyons of Saturn's upper atmosphere. Having survived the traitor star, they returned to the all-too-human tradition of internecine strife. The new city-states of Saturn began to resemble those of ancient Greece, with one group of cities taking on the role of militaristic Sparta...

8. The Sails of Tau Ceti – US\$4.50

Starhopper was humanity's first interstellar probe. It was designed to search for intelligent life beyond the solar system. Before it could be launched, however, intelligent life found Earth. The discovery of an alien light sail inbound at the edge of the solar system generated considerable excitement in scientific circles. With the interstellar probe nearing completion, it gave scientists the opportunity to launch an expedition to meet the aliens while they were still in space. The second surprise came when *Starhopper's* crew boarded the alien craft. They found beings that, despite their alien physiques, were surprisingly compatible with humans. That two species so similar could have evolved a mere twelve light years from one another seemed too coincidental to be true.

One human being soon discovered that coincidence had nothing to do with it...

9. Gibraltar Earth – First Time in Print — \$6.00

It is the 24th Century and humanity is just gaining a toehold out among the stars. Stellar Survey Starship *Magellan* is exploring the New Eden system when they encounter two alien spacecraft. When the encounter is over, the score is one human scout ship and one alien aggressor destroyed. In exploring the wreck of the second alien ship, spacers discover a survivor with a fantastic story.

The alien comes from a million-star Galactic Empire ruled over by a mysterious race known as the Broa. These overlords are the masters of this region of the galaxy and they allow no competitors. This news presents Earth's rulers with a problem. As yet, the Broa are ignorant of humanity's existence. Does the human race retreat to its one small world, quaking in fear that the Broa will eventually discover Earth? Or do they take a more aggressive approach?

Whatever they do, they must do it quickly! Time is running out for the human race...

10. Gibraltar Sun – First Time in Print — \$7.00

The expedition to the Crab Nebula has returned to Earth and the news is not good. Out among the stars, a million systems have fallen under Broan domination, the fate awaiting Earth should the Broa ever learn of its existence. The problem would seem to allow but three responses: submit meekly to slavery, fight and risk extermination, or hide and pray the Broa remain ignorant of humankind for at least a few more generations. Are the hairless apes of Sol III finally faced with a problem for which there is no acceptable solution?

While politicians argue, Mark Rykand and Lisa Arden risk everything to spy on the all-powerful enemy that is beginning to wonder at the appearance of mysterious bipeds in their midst...

11. Gridlock and Other Stories - US\$4.50

Where would you visit if you invented a time machine, but could not steer it? What if you went out for a six-pack of beer and never came back? If you think nuclear power is dangerous, you should try black holes as an energy source — or even scarier, solar energy! Visit the many worlds of Michael McCollum. I guarantee that you will be surprised!

Non-Fiction Books

12. The Art of Writing, Volume I - US\$10.00

Have you missed any of the articles in the Art of Writing Series? No problem. The first sixteen articles (October, 1996-December, 1997) have been collected into a book-length work of more than 72,000 words. Now you can learn about character, conflict, plot, pacing, dialogue, and the business of writing, all in one document.

13. The Art of Writing, Volume II - US\$10.00

This collection covers the Art of Writing articles published during 1998. The book is 62,000 words in length and builds on the foundation of knowledge provided by Volume I of this popular series.

14. The Art of Science Fiction, Volume I - US\$10.00

Have you missed any of the articles in the Art of Science Fiction Series? No problem. The first sixteen articles (October, 1996-December, 1997) have been collected into a book-length work of more than 70,000 words. Learn about science fiction techniques and technologies, including starships, time machines, and rocket propulsion. Tour the Solar System and learn astronomy from the science fiction writer's viewpoint. We don't care where the stars appear in the terrestrial sky. We want to know their true positions in space. If you are planning to write an interstellar romance, brushing up on your astronomy may be just what you need.

15. The Art of Science Fiction, Volume II - US\$10.00

This collection covers the *Art of Science Fiction* articles published during 1998. The book is 67,000 words in length and builds on the foundation of knowledge provided by Volume I of this popular series.

16. The Astrogator's Handbook – Expanded Edition and Deluxe Editions

The Astrogator's Handbook has been very popular on Sci Fi – Arizona. The handbook has star maps that show science fiction writers where the stars are located in space rather than where they are located in Earth's sky. Because of the popularity, we are expanding the handbook to show nine times as much space and more than ten times as many stars. The expanded handbook includes the positions of 3500 stars as viewed from Polaris on 63 maps. This handbook is a useful resource for every science fiction writer and will appeal to anyone with an interest in astronomy.

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