

BOOTCAMP FOR WRITERS: Getting (Your Manuscript) Into Shape

by Jenna Kernan

Welcome to boot camp, soldier. As your drill Sergeant, it's my job to give you new recruits essential survival information so that your manuscript doesn't come back at you like a bad MRE. There's lots to learn before your deployment so let's get started.

Soldiers need the right weapon and the correct ammo. You'll learn how to use your weapon later. For now, we'll stick to the basics, so try not to shoot a hole in your shoe. Manuscript Basics include: Formatting, Spelling, Grammar and Word Count.

If your formatting is wacky you'll stand out like a crossing guard during camouflage training. Exact formatting varies from house to house. Print publishers want you to start chapters one third of the way down the page, while many epublishers do not. So begin at the publisher's website to find out what you can. That may be little or nothing. So, standard format includes an easy to read font like Courier New or Times New Roman. The manuscript should be double spaced with a one inch margin all round. The header on page one should be single spaced and include your real name, address, phone, email on the right and on the left, the type of story you are submitting (for example: Regency, Contemporary, Paranormal) and the word count. Then move down the page about two inches and type the title again in the center of the page. Below that, also centered it should say Chapter One. Beneath that, justified to the left, an author might place a date or place, especially in a historical. The second page should have your name, the page number and the title. I like to put this all together on the right, so as not to interfere with the eye as it reads from left to right after turning the page. I also use a different font for the same reason. It looks like this: Kernan/SIERRA BRIDE/2. Assuming you get to the final page, authors generally hit the enter key about four times and then type THE END in capital letters. Feel free to open your favorite beverage after this to celebrate, unless you are just adding the correct formatting on an already completed manuscript. In that case, let me remind you, no drinking on duty, soldier.

Now about spelling. Just like when soldiers are practicing on the firing range, creativity is not appreciated in the arena of spelling. Read your work out loud. Have a friend or bunk mate read it as well. I've just started using TEXTALOUD, a software program that reads your text back to you. I bought Crystal and Mike (the voices) and they are not exactly human, but they do allow me to hear mistakes that I don't always see. Now, grammar is a different thing. It should be correct, to a point. In dialogue it is common to see fragments and grammar that is not Standard English, depending on how your character speaks. Also it is okay to use some fragments in the exposition. Read other authors to see when and why they do this.

Finally, a word about word-count. Some publishers want you to use the computer word count at the bottom left of most word programs. Others want you to calculate the count, to allow for white space in dialogue, etc. Figuring a one inch margin throughout and 25 lines per page, the method is to multiply 250 words per page times the number of pages. Let's say you use this equation and get 92,000. Your computer says you have 84,453. Don't write either of these numbers in the query or on the first page of the manuscript. One method is to round off numbers to the 83,453 becomes 84,000. Fine, great, but listen to your sergeant now, because this is life

and death. Know the word count of the line you are targeting. Let's say it's 82,000 and you are over by either 2,000 words or 10,000 words, depending on which count you use. Here is not a place for honesty. Name rank and serial number only. Or in this case, your story is exactly 82,000 words. If a publisher asks to see it you can do some editing. The point is, don't get an automatic rejection because your story is 20,000 words too long. Stay alive, soldier by giving the publisher what they asked for.

Okay, enough about weapons and ammo. Time to pack that footlocker with all the things you'll need when deployed. Outfit your story with these standard supplies: Hooks, Characters that are emphatic, but flawed and who grow and change over the course of the story. If you pack all that (with neatly folded corners and sharp creases) then you'll have much of what you'll need on maneuvers. Set them out on your bunk so we can take a look at those four items one by one.

Privates who don't want to stay privates forever would be wise not to begin their stories with their heroine sitting and thinking (this includes driving to the location where the story begins) or with a big block of backstory (or any backstory). Instead try something that works. The most common opening in novel and film is beginning in the heroine's ordinary world, but with an interesting problem or dilemma. Ordinary does NOT mean boring. She should have a problem right off the bat. This makes for an interesting opening and allows the reader to meet your protagonist and see what her ordinary life is like. An example: The Devil Wears Prada opens with Andrea transitioning from home to work for a job interview. By the time she walks into the dragon's den, we are rooting for her. Another common opening is to begin at the moment of change, with the encounter or problem that launches the protagonist in a new direction and out of their ordinary world. The up side of this is that you have a bang up opening. The movie Jaws does this by beginning with a shark attack. The bad news about this type of gripping opening is that the reader doesn't know the protagonist at all when you begin, which is why in Jaws, the next scene after the attack is the protagonist (Brody) in his ordinary world. Either way, open with conflict and action and open with the protagonist in trouble with some significant problem.

It is a great idea to open with this type of hook, but don't stop there. End paragraphs with hooks. End scenes with hooks and definitely end chapters with hooks. Hooks can be the introduction of an interesting problem, putting the protagonist in jeopardy (physical or emotional), introducing a looming deadline, foreshadowing an upcoming conflict that someone is dreading so the reader can anticipate it, introducing a question or secret that intrigues the reader enough that they read on to get the answer. Make sure you give it to them, but before you do, act like a veteran and introduce two more questions.

This all makes a good start but you're not ready to be dismissed just yet. You still need admirable characters who have the readers' empathy and who have flaws and who are willing to grow and change in the course of the story. And, no, you can't go to the supply sergeant and get a character like that requisitioned. You have to build one and if it's not moving when you are done, then you have to paint it. Her's Michael Hague's list of five characteristics of an empathetic character: She is the victim of undeserved misfortune (think Cinderella), She is in danger (think Snow White), she is likable, funny and/or loving. She is powerful (any wicked queen). She is funny. Now not every hero or heroine will be all of these characteristics, but it's important for a soldier to have a target to shoot for.

Remember that most common opening that I mentioned, the one that begins with a problem in the heroine's ordinary world? One reason it is so common and so popular is that this opening gives the author time to build empathy, using one or several of the characteristics from the list of five above. It also gives the opportunity to show a flaw or two. These flaws are what's keeping the protagonist from being a complete and happy individual ready to seize her happily-ever-after. By the story's end, these flaws have been eliminated because the protagonist has grown and changed by the events she has encountered during the story. This has made her become a better person, ready to be promoted.

Now before you line up for inspection and submit that manuscript to an editor, maybe you'd like to hear some of their complaints making these mistakes will likely lead to a form letter fired in your direction. Don't tease the editor with a cliffhanger that includes the words "if you want to find out how this ends you'll have to request the complete manuscript." Oh no they don't – and won't. Commanding officers do not take orders from privates. And another thing, get the format right, begin with action and make sure your writing evokes the five senses so that it is experienced by the reader. For a partial request sent the first three chapters in order and end with a hook. It is hard to believe but editors tell me some authors send chapters that are non-sequential.

All right, private, you're ready for deployment. So mail that manuscript and start another. Editors want writers to be able to continue to produce manuscripts in a timely fashion.

What do you mean you only have three chapters? You better drop and give me twenty---pages that is.

Here's hoping you earn your stripes in no time and get yourself assigned to a publisher. Just don't forget your old sergeant back at basic training.

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Your C.O. has no military experience, which is probably evident from the article.

Jenna Kernan writes fast-paced romantic adventures that will capture your heart. Her next release, **SIERRA BRIDE**, arrives in **August 2009**. In this story, the young widow of a notorious man is determined to keep her freedom, while a railroad baron who pursues her is just as determined to make her his mistress. But when she is implicated in a plot to destroy him, he must decide if he will listen to reason or follow his heart.

Her first paranormal, **DREAM STALKER**, arrives in **December 2009** with Silhouette Nocturne, about a Native American healer who thinks her escalating nightmares signal madness but the truth is far worse. Her dreams are real. She *is* being stalked by ghosts and only a savage man, who shape-shifts into a grizzly bear, can save her.

Jenna has twice been nominated for the Rita® and is a popular speaker. She keeps her website current with excerpts and monthly contests. Please visit her anytime at www.jennakernan.com.