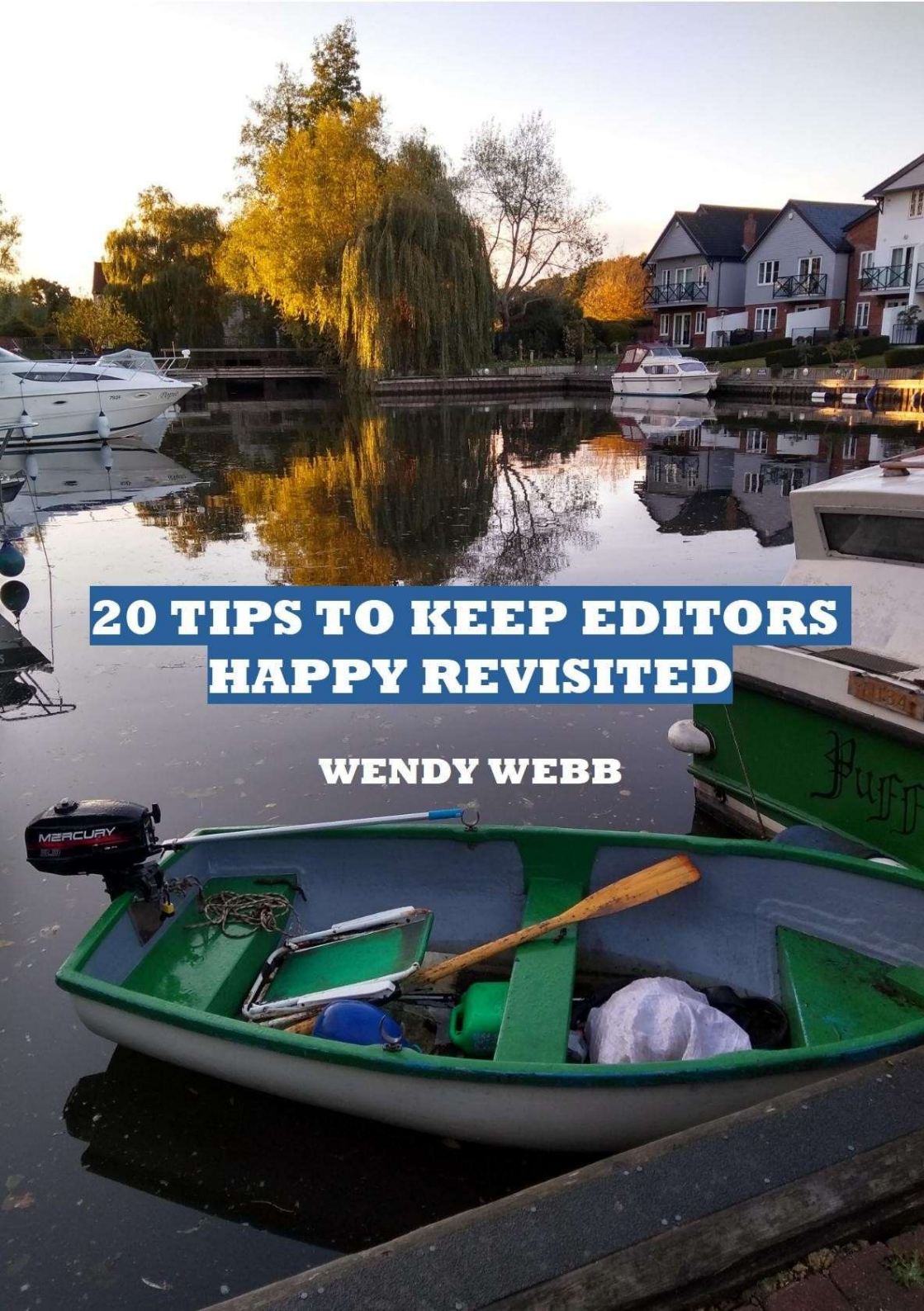

20 TIPS TO KEEP EDITORS HAPPY REVISITED

WENDY WEBB

Free Evaluation Edition from obooko.com

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1. Always enclose an SAE

If you write to women's magazines (or other national or local press) you may find your stamped addressed envelope is returned unused. However, the small press is precisely that – small. Whether you are entering competitions, sending an enquiry or submitting your work for publication, always enclose an SAE. Small press means small budget, small staff and an enormous amount of goodwill. If you don't send a stamped addressed envelope, then don't expect a reply. In case of doubt, editors who request an SAE do not generally mean a 'self addressed envelope', they mean one with a stamp on. If in doubt, think SSAE (stamped self addressed envelope).

Competitions usually give clear guidelines, including SAE for results and an extra SAE (or postcard) for acknowledgement. This is to help your records – you may not have won the competition because your letter failed to arrive. Some competitions do not send out results, they may appear in a magazine or Website instead – a postcard for acknowledgement is especially useful for these competitions.

2. Type, no indecipherable scribble

Editors are busy people, so are competition adjudicators, if your masterpiece is illegible it may also remain undiscovered. Since items for publications may be scanned onto the computer, your handwritten offering may be accidentally mislaid. Editors love to save time on typing; they are too busy trying to meet deadlines.

Writers should wax lyrical with their words, not their font size. If the editor needs to find a magnifying glass, or angle the paper more than once to read a fancy script, then your masterpiece may again remain undiscovered. It may also give the editor a headache – and if you want your work published then you must keep the editor happy and relaxed.

A few other tips: computers have a spell checker (but watch out for Americanisms), a thesaurus (so you can avoid repetition), even a Search and Replace feature. If all else fails, there's always the hard copy dictionary. If you are posting your work from a desert island (and don't have a palmtop, laptop or typewriter), then at least send your editor a fun postcard – making them laugh may prevent the dreaded headache while your work is facing them.

3. Layout of work

Although it is fascinating how many paper sizes are available to the more artistic (and concrete poetry is positively encouraged by a pc with a staggering range of formatting options), experimenting with your work in this way is not likely to impress many editors. Remember, editors avoid typing by scanning in your work. If you don't believe what a computer can do, just run a thesaurus check over your list of favourite names (or less favourite editors' names) – good for a laugh. The layout you have carefully created may look completely different in another font size, layout, tab positions, etc.

Wide margins always help when you are submitting your work. Single line spacing is usually requested for poems, double line spacing for many prose submissions. If in doubt, 1.5 spacing is very readable, especially if your font size is 12 point. Easy fonts include Times New Roman or Arial.

Editors often don't like staples (the pain of trying to find a staple extractor among all those submissions). If your work is held together with paper clips most editors will be happy – until the fan sends them flying across the room. If you have

not included a reference on every page (name, title, page number), your work may gain a new creative layout (page 10, page 3, page 7). Remember, the less work for your editor to sort, the more likely your work will be used.

To keep your document clearly readable and beautifully presented, always check your punctuation. Editing out commas, exclamation marks (screamers) and inverted commas (one apostrophe or two) is very time-consuming. It means your editor must read every word to correct your errors – life is too short. Editors like to skim text, it's much faster.

For a basic guide to punctuation (rules have changed nowadays), try Writers' Bookshop (Writers' News) for the latest books for writers. Modern journalistic style breaks a lot of older rules, particularly with abbreviations and titles.

4. Avoid lengthy correspondence

You may have the most delightful tale to tell, but if it is not relevant then save it for your next short story, poem or book. Your editor may be a sympathetic ear, but he/she will listen heartily if you keep within two brief paragraphs. If you waffle for three pages, then your crucial query on page four will remain unanswered.

Some editors are happy to receive queries by email, but many require submissions by 'snail mail'. Quantity (and layout and printing issues) will usually necessitate competition entries are sent by post– not to mention the required entry fee.

If you also write with a particularly spidery hand, then don't be surprised if the editor doesn't reach page two. Typed correspondence will keep your work clear and concise (you can always hit the delete key).

There are exceptions – when you have developed a rapport with your editor, then the personal touch may be welcome (provided your personal flourish is easy on the eye).

5. Always keep to deadlines

Don't waste time phoning or writing (lengthily) with your reasons for missing the crucial deadline. Most editors will give a few days grace (to allow for our dire postal system) – but why risk it? You might have sent in a potential prizewinner, but once entries have been sorted and despatched to the competition adjudicator it is too late.

Yesterday the editor may have had a space begging for your work, but if your submission to the magazine arrives late then don't be surprised if there's no room or copy has been sent to the printer's.

It is always wise to keep your own records, including the date that competition results will be sent out. Give editors time to sort and send out replies. You are free to submit your work elsewhere, provided you have carefully noted any restrictions on your prize-winning work or publication dates of your work in magazines or anthologies. Remember, some editors will publish work submitted to other magazines, but not concurrently. Acknowledgement of prior publication is a helpful courtesy.

6. Follow submission guidelines

Every editor is an individual. Each set of submission guidelines is different, from a handwritten scrawl by the editor to several pages of precise punctuation and general rules.

You can choose not to submit your work if the rules are too fussy. But behind every rule is a reason why that rule is important to your chosen editor. They receive hundreds of submissions and want to make life easier – the editor knows the foibles of their own hardware, software, grumpy postman, letters requiring signature, what will increase their stress levels and how many writers can follow every rule without complaint.

If you give your editor a headache, then they may just remember the most efficient filing system: each piece of paper crosses the desk once (and if in doubt, the best filing cabinet is the waste paper basket).

Avoid breaking the most sacrosanct rules: enclose an SAE and never forget to enclose your cheque (entry fee, subscriptions, orders).

Some editors fail to mention the most obvious rule – if you do not include your name and address then it may disappear into the black hole of ‘my editor doesn’t understand me (or even send a rejection letter)’.

7. Prompt payments and subscriptions

Most small press magazines are run on a shoestring. One missing stamp may not affect your budget, but multiply by a couple of hundred and all profit disappears. Many magazines are run for love not money, but running consistently at a loss (without arts or lottery funding) is likely to lead to the editor ceasing publication.

Small print runs (of magazines, books or competition anthologies) are not easy on the budget. The only thing keeping your preferred magazine in print is a decent number of subscribers. If, as a writer, you don't value the magazine enough to subscribe, then don't be surprised if it folds and you have one less outlet for your work.

Competition anthologies are bought by competitors, they are not usually available for sale in Waterstones or W H Smiths. If few people buy copies, then next year there may not be a publication for your work.

If you like a magazine especially, perhaps you will buy a subscription as a Christmas gift for a fellow writer.
Carefully check before you write the payee on a cheque, correspondence to sort out a cheque addressed wrongly also adds to overheads for a small magazine. Be careful at the start of a new year, sign your cheque and make sure the numerals match the amount in words (banks do not accept cheques where the amounts are obvious but inaccurate). A bouncing cheque is guaranteed to ensure the editor remembers your name.

8. Be nice to your editor – most of them are editing for fun!

Most editors are running a magazine as a hobby – it's meant to be fun. However, everyone has bad days and since the editor is probably working from home in their spare time, always value their time and space. If you complain to a company there may be a department of trained staff to deal with the problem, but the editor may only have the proverbial cat, husband or pincushion to kick after dealing with an irate writer.

Unsurprisingly, editors are usually writers themselves, so they have faced the same round of rejections, SAEs, annoying editors and unplaced entries in competitions. They may also have a glowing track record and years of experience – something worth tapping as a subscriber.
An editor's role is a very lonely one – so a Christmas card, a letter of appreciation, or just following submission guidelines can help to cheer them in their task.

9. Express your gratitude

Brief and positive comments about features of the magazine you enjoy are always helpful. The silent majority may be happy, but feedback will help to tweak the finer points.
If you receive a prize in a competition then it is always good to express thanks to your editor or competition organiser. The editor will remember your name and all the hard work may seem worthwhile. There is a lot of work involved in organising a competition, or publishing a magazine regularly and on time.

10. Remember early seasonal material

Lots of magazines like to include seasonal material, but bear in mind the publication deadline for each issue. You may not feel like writing about Christmas in June, but if you submit to quarterly magazines then you will have to plan far ahead.

If you really cannot face writing about snow when you're in the middle of a heat wave, you can store your vividly recorded material until next year and impress the editor with your efficiency.

There are many other types of seasonal materials, apart from Christmas and Easter -anniversaries of famous writers or artists, historical events, local festivals.

Just because everything has already been said before, writers still enjoy reading stories and poems in season.

11. Wise writers avoid editor's pet hates

Many editors will obligingly tell you what their pet hates are. Beware writing anything too controversial in the letters page of your first issue as a subscriber – everyone else will notice your misdemeanour and have a good laugh.

If you have read the submission guidelines, the letters pages and the editorial then you will have a fair idea what to avoid. Submitting work before you have read a single issue of the magazine is, at best, a hazardous occupation.

Before you shoot your editor down in flames, or other subscribers to the magazine, bear in mind that some welcome this approach and others – don't. Since editors may also be subscribers to other magazines, beware 'flaming' (another Internet phrase). Other subscribers may also have 'met' you in a previous magazine, writers are very gregarious in the small press.

Arguing with an editor can be self-defeating and can lead to the proverbial headache when your work next lands on their desk.

12. Listen carefully to editors' advice

Editors are permanently snowed under with work, few can manage more than a quick scribble all over your carefully presented masterpiece – it's hard to find clean notepaper under the weight of submissions.

Advice from editors can hurt. But it's usually kindly meant. They may not have time to think of precisely the best way to let you down gently. Let's face it – rejection is painful. But every writer papers the room with rejection slips and by then is probably delighted to receive a comps slip with sound advice from an editor.

You can always listen and then reject the advice – even classics have been rejected by one publisher and then become a bestseller. Editors have their own personal tastes and you can always look for another magazine of equal or greater quality that accepts your submission.

13. Editors don't always get it right – but neither do writers

You can usually find out from the editorial what type of work to submit. When an editor rejects your work it does not necessarily mean there is anything wrong with your submission. It may simply be a question of finding the right home for it.

If you have carefully checked your material, ensured that it is as perfect as it can be and followed any advice for improvement then you can relax and try another magazine for your work. Or you could put it on file for a few months and then look at it again with a fresh eye.

Editors are quite likely to make mistakes, but remember they are busy people. Your work may simply be the wrong size or shape for the space available, there may be enough poems or stories on a particular theme, and even a similar novel may have been recently submitted to your publisher. If you have written an article on a popular theme, the chances are that other writers will also have submitted the same theme – perhaps two weeks (or two months) earlier.

Keep your work on file – if you can organise by themes, or seasons, or any easily retrievable system, then your work may be useful in future or give you ideas for future work.

14. Recycling – envelopes and material

Don't throw away your work – one day (when you have writers' block) you will regret the lost ideas. Material may be edited again and submitted elsewhere.

Writers – and editors frequently recycle envelopes. However, bear in mind that your competition entry needs to be pristine when it reaches the adjudicator. If you have been too thorough in protecting your work from the vagaries of the postal system (tempting, I know), it may not be extracted from the envelope in one piece. Even pristine A4 envelope submissions may arrive in the hands of a storm-swept postman, or sent to the other end of the country for sorting. Some even detour to another continent before (hopefully) returning to their UK destination.

SAEs for reply, or return of work, should be large enough. DL is the standard business size envelope. C5 is a happy half size, which takes an A4 sheet folded once. C4 avoids folding, but any larger and the envelope will not fit without being chewed up on delivery through the letterbox. Reinforcement may keep it flat, but may push the stamp price into the higher rate.

15. Record keeping

There are occasions when competition organisers will respond admirably when you bewail the loss of your original work. It is never worth risking the loss of something irreplaceable – unless you have a photographic memory.

If you record the date you submitted your work, then you will not annoy an editor by chasing up work before the deadline. There have been publicly recorded episodes even of prizewinners having to shamefacedly admit to prior publication of their work. Since this may exclude some competition entries, where unpublished work is required in the rules, effective records will prevent the mistake of dual submissions.

However, editors who claim to keep everything on file following a competition do not make this matter easy. If you are in doubt about whether your work is on file for publication, you may write a brief query to the editor, clearly listing the titles, author and date submitted. You may also formally withdraw any submissions prior to publication, provided you give the editor sufficient notice. Then you are free to submit elsewhere and meet unpublished requirements.

16. Share your success

Even editors like to bask in reflected glory – your success is their success, since they have also recognised your worth.
A brief note of your prize-winning and publication efforts (competition, date, prize or title, publisher and price) will cheer your fellow writers and editor and may also provide you with some free publicity.
It will also inspire you to greater work and, perhaps, bigger success. It's worth a try anyway.

17. Letters to the Editor

Some editors positively encourage an active letters page, while others allow space for work but not comment. Every magazine has its own unique mix.

If you do submit to the letters page then keep to the point, say exactly what you intend to, and don't allow room for your editor to edit out your key comment. Short letters are usually included uncut.

Bear in mind that what you write today may look different when you read it in print three months later. It will look like wet ink to the other readers of the magazine.

Some magazines like to include every casual comment, subscription comments and other rough doodles – clearly stating 'not for publication' will help. However, if you write to the editor, don't be surprised if their editing includes your scribbled but humorous aside – or your less publishable thoughts.

Beware – editors publish submissions.

18. Keep to the point

This may be your single contact of the day, but writing your shopping list will not endear you with the editor. Keep to the point and the editor will act quickly – your work may reach the publishing file, or slot into the last available space in the magazine. Your work may be precisely the right size to fill the gap.

Think before you write – do you really need a reply. If you check a back issue of the magazine first, perhaps your answer is in the submission guidelines, the adverts, or checking the style of published work.

Some queries ask the editor to do the writer's job, to research facts, check addresses, or look up information readily available through the Small Press Guide, Writers' Handbook, Writers and Artists Yearbook, or similar publications.

19. Personal ID kit

Always include your name on your work. For competitions you may need to record your details on a separate sheet, including contact telephone number.

Some magazines will include a brief biography or list of where your work has been published. Keep it brief and be careful with mug shots – tiny black and white pictures may inspire no one.

An editor may notice you if you always include a personal identifier (without being ageist, sizeist, sexist it is difficult to give examples here) – some poets are known only by their initials and everyone knows who they mean. Your ID may be a simple flourish or picture on your letterhead, or the title of your published book.

Some writers use pseudonyms. If you write in one genre and then launch in a different form then you may have a reason to not confuse your readers. Others may wish to reinvent themselves and so publish under an alias. Always ensure your editor is not confused by your pseudonym and that they know

who has actually paid their subscription (or received a cheque in prize money).

However, it's hard enough to become established as a writer, so why add to the difficulty by writing under an assumed name?

20. Pleasing your editor – most of the time

It is usually a wise writer that pleases their editor – most of the time. If you make life easy for an editor, then you make it easier to get published in your chosen magazine.

Editors are generally nice people, even the grumpy, colourful, eccentric and weird ones, and they will be happy to help writers who make reasonable requests but don't take up too much time.

If you decide you don't get on with an editor, there is a simple solution – go elsewhere. There are plenty of other magazines and editors to choose between. Writers play different roles in different magazines. Each magazine plays a different role in the life of the writer. Find the mix that works for you, at the stage of writing that is best for you.

Writers want to be published; editors want to get on with editing. For most writers (including editors) the process should be hard work and a pleasure most of the time.

21. Where do I Begin?

There's a world out there, most of it online. Choose carefully, no rush. You will learn over time, to find the best place for your work. You will also learn by reading, training courses, life experience. Above all, remember, the rules have changed over the years. Words must be adapted to your audience. Text changes meanings: over time, in different cultures, in modern usage.

Remember, there's the world of AI – scary, inspirational? Whatever you do, follow the rules and the editors' foibles.

Once you have released your words, someone somewhere may turn your dove into a pigeon, a white elephant, a phoenix or a crocodile.

Titles and cover design – dressed to grab attention. But remember, there is no 21, because the readers expect 20 Tips.

Happy writing! And check for typos.

NOTE

These Tips have been online with Obooko since 2013.
Previously in print: Tips Pamphlet/2002.