Guide to Setting out Prose Fiction

If you want to know how to set out text in a work of prose fiction, your best bet is to study some published examples.

Generally speaking, however, here are some guidelines to set you on the right track:

1. Before you start typing out your story, or once you have a draft to work with, you’ll need to set the line and paragraph spacing. The spacing between lines and paragraphs should be even – I suggest 1.5 spacing. While in Word, format line spacing by clicking on the Paragraph tab along the top. You should adjust the line spacing before and after paragraphs, and between lines, as shown here:

![Paragraph spacing settings](image)
2. At the top of the first page, write the Title of your story, with your name underneath. Using a slightly larger font for the title, and italics for your name, helps distinguish these headings from the main text, and looks quite stylish (see attached example).

3. Use a basic font, such as Arial or Times New Roman, in size 12 point.

4. Inserting page numbers at the bottom right hand side of the page is a good idea, especially if you are submitting a hard copy (lest any pages become detached) or requiring feedback (so a marker or editor can refer to pages and paragraphs).

5. Use indented paragraphs. This is the Australian publishing standard way of formatting prose fiction. That said, be aware that the first paragraph of a story, or a new section or new chapter, is typically NOT indented. Again, see the attached example.

6. For dialogue, get into the habit of using single quotation marks. This is the Australian publishing standard. For other conventions to do with setting out dialogue, see the Study Guide for Week 3.

7. Section breaks are a blank space (of about one to two lines) used to separate sections of a story or chapter. Section breaks usually indicate a significant shift in time, setting, or POV. If unsure if or how to use a section break, ask someone who might know, or study some published stories to see how they are used.

8. Generally, in prose fiction, numbers 0-100 are written as words (e.g. three, twenty-five). Larger numbers may be written using numerals (e.g. 150, 7500). One exception is when writing the time, where numerals are preferable (e.g. I woke at 5.30am).

9. Always proofread carefully. By all means use the computer’s spell check function, but do not rely upon it exclusively (and be sure to set it to Australian English).

10. It’s always better to print a copy of your story and to read it in hard copy (you’ll be surprised what you pick up that gets overlooked on the screen). Try to read your work aloud, and/or ask someone else to read it aloud. Lines or phrases that make the reader stumble, or fall short of breath, often need revising.

See the attached example, to get a sense for what correctly laid out prose fiction should look like...
Room Service

Rosanne Hawke

I’m in love with my room service man. Every morning he brings me coffee; sometimes hot cross buns if it’s Easter, or continental breakfast. Often times he stays and reads to me. Some mornings we read our own books. He leaves his current one on the table at the other side of the bed.

You may ask how long this has been going on. I’ve always known him, it seems. During the Gulf War it all started: he being my own personal ‘room service’ man. I never used to drink coffee but he changed my whole life. I used to listen to Voice of America every morning since there was the threat of evacuation; I liked to be pre-warned.

He had all this good coffee you see, and wouldn’t be able to take it with him. He used to keep it just for Sundays as it couldn’t be bought in Pakistan. But since the war he made it in the kitchen every time he was there and brought me some too; said it was lonely drinking coffee by himself.

Before he started making coffee for me I never realised how good it could be. It soothed my nerves possibly, sitting there in bed, listening to the latest reports of the war. But more than that, it was the communion together, the sharing, the prayer. I think even if I hated the taste I would still have drunk it to keep him with me after we’d made love.

We used to joke about it – I mean – what would happen if my ‘husband’ came home. He was often in the villages and the kids were in boarding school in the Himalayas. I’d giggle. ‘I’ll introduce you as “room service”.’

‘In my jocks?’ And he’d mock me.

Guess that’s what he was then and still is, in a way: my room service man, but he’s so much more. He may not have lots of university degrees. I’d studied with earnest young uni men. They were brilliant in an angry way, but once they started on the subject of why things are, they were as stupid as anyone else. I respect someone for knowing who they are, someone who believes in eternity. It means more in the long
run than a PhD. My room service man knows who he is and now I know who I am too. I’d never give that up; I don’t care what anyone says.

I suppose the intimacy and secrecy couldn’t last forever. One weekend the kids were home from school but my room service man didn’t see why he should stop bringing me coffee.

‘But it’s our secret,’ I wailed. ‘And they’ll want some too.’

‘I’ve left theirs in the kitchen,’ he replied. ‘We can still have our special time.’ He kissed me then, deeply, his coffee still in his hand.

At that very moment, my son walked in, right up to the bed. He sniffed. ‘Coffee,’ he stated unnecessarily. ‘What’s the big occasion? It’s only Saturday.’ He narrowed his eyes. ‘And why were you two kissing like that?’

My room service man put his coffee by the bed. ‘Son, when you get older you too will find many ways to keep passion aflame.’ Then he took my hand as he sat by me. I’ll always remember the look in his eyes: the one of ‘I’ll love you no matter what happens’.

We could hear our son in the next room taking coffee to his sister. ‘You oughta see Mum and Dad. They’re acting like they’ve just met and fallen in love.’

‘Weird.’

‘Yeah, but kinda nice.’