

How an Editor Reads, Rejects, and Chooses Your Short Story

An acquisitions editor has read thousands of stories... and has developed a Slushy-Sense for the most common mistakes that lead to hair-trigger rejection. Here, we'll look inside the mind of the editor for the thoughts they often have just before they hit the eject button on a story. Use this checklist to avoid an abrupt end to your story's prospects of publication:



1. “Know your craft.”

You’ve gotten great advice on writing dialogue, characters, plot, action, and other key disciplines of the craft in other RMFW workshops this weekend. Use it. Editors are hyper-sensitive about the fundamentals of writing craftsmanship.

2. “Did you read our submission guidelines?”

A little research goes a long way. If a publisher has specific guidelines about formatting, word count, file types, acceptable genres, or anything else, make sure you follow them. It also helps to read a few stories from the publisher’s archives—and if you’re using any notably different style elements (for example, using ‘single quotes’ for dialogue when the house style of your publisher calls for “double quotes,”) then adjusting your submission can only help your case.

3. “This story is going to take a lot of work...”

Your editor is not looking to polish a diamond in the rough. Even if you have a brilliant idea, if your story is riddled with errors, clunky language, or confusing sequences, you’ll probably miss the cut.

4. “I’m totally confused here.”

If your editor reads the first few pages and has no idea what she just read, that’s a problem. Read your story with fresh eyes—and, better yet, have a colleague or critique group read it for you. If a reader needs to go back over some or all of your story multiple times to understand what’s going on, then you run a real risk that your editor will lose patience with your writing.

5. “This feels cliché.”

A sense of predictability is pretty much guaranteed to make your editor’s eyelids droop, especially in the first few pages. If we feel like we’ve seen this character or plot before, we’ll tune out. Want to know a few common clichés to avoid? Check out the “Not *This* Again!” handout.

6. “Oh. How edgy.”

Time was when just introducing a shocking theme like body horror, gore, animal cruelty, or cannibalism would elicit gasps and swoons. Today’s readers—and especially slush readers—have seen it all. You *cannot* shock us. If your story jumps straight to the disturbing imagery without doing the real work of getting us to care why it’s happening, you’ll probably get dismissed in short order.



7. “What’s the point of this?”

Without a feeling that there’s some meaning behind a story, we’re likely to reject it. This isn’t about having a “moral.” Just ask yourself, why did you write this? Is that reason coming through? And if your reason is, “To get published!” then you may want to put a little more thought into the matter.

8. “Someone’s got an axe to grind.”

Having a reason for writing your story doesn’t mean your story is just a soapbox. A preachy story is usually a shallow one—the characters feel like sock puppets, the plot feels contrived to prove the author’s point, and the world feels flat. It doesn’t matter if your editor agrees with your burning issue or not. You still have to give us a good story.

9. “This isn’t a story!”

Hey, what if you told a story in the form of a shopping list? Or as an instruction manual for a time machine? Or wrote a brilliant set-up and never bothered with a resolution? Some authors, like Neil Gaiman, have a knack for this sort of thing. But most of the time, it comes across as a gimmick posing as a story.

10. “Get to the point.”

Long, chunky blocks of description that might be welcome in a novel are often tiresome in a short story. If you’ve taken a thousand words just to set up your tale, you’ve probably lost your editor’s attention. And if you start *in medias res* and then spend the next ten pages filling in your backstory, that’s really not any better.