

## **Ask the Book Doctor: About Sits vs. Sets, Magazine Submission Format, and How to Become a Writer**

Q: Once in a while the word “sits” comes up in our [southern city] writers group, and another member (in her seventies) and I (at eighty-three years) always wonder what is right. When she and I were growing up, the word “sets” was used for an object, not “sits,” as it seems to be used these days. An example is this: A potted plant sits on the windowsill. In my day and age, it would have been this: A potted plant sets on the window sill. Could you please straighten us out once and for all?

A: I've found that southerners more than others confuse the two words “sit” and “set.” I hope the following sets the record straight:

Set means the following:

1. place something: “Please set the flowers on the table.”
2. cause somebody to be something: “After a hearing, the judge set the prisoner free.”
3. cause something to begin doing something: “His smile set my heart at ease.”
4. apply fire: “The camper set fire to his refuse.”
5. concentrate mind: “He set his mind to finding an answer.”
6. arrange something for use: “Hunters set traps in the woods.”

The definitions go on, but to sum up, “set” usually shows action that is done to something (a direct object).

Sit means the following:

1. rest with weight on buttocks: “The children always sit in the same places.”
2. be placed: “The trash still sat where we left it.”

Again, the word has other definitions as well, but unlike “set,” “sit” does not, indeed cannot, take a direct object. We cannot sit something down; we must set something down.

In the example of “A potted plant sits on the windowsill,” the verb “sits” is correct. If you wanted to show the action being done TO something, the correct verb would be “set,” as in this example: “I set the potted plant on the windowsill.”

By the way, using “set” for “sit” in a character’s dialogue would be a great way to show that the character is from the South.

Q: I’ve heard magazine editors hate it if writers leave an extra space between paragraphs. Is this true? What about writing competitions? Any difference there?

A: What you have heard is true. Look at any magazine that has been professionally produced, and you’ll see that it has no extra space between paragraphs except to break for a subhead or a complete change in subject matter. In addition, magazine articles have only one space after periods, not two, so get into the one-space-after-a-period habit.

Why do magazine editors want you to follow their format? They don't want to have to reformat all the files they receive. In the old days when writers submitted articles on paper, extra spacing was not an issue, because a typesetter took the typed copy and keyed the words into the typesetting equipment. Today editors want your file ready to flow into their design program with as few keystrokes as possible. For that reason, it is always best to send articles to a magazine in such a way that no one has to delete extra spaces between paragraphs or after periods. We're talking about standard manuscript format, and using it shows that the writer is a professional. The same holds true for writing competitions.

Note that this guideline does not necessarily apply to whether the file should be single-spaced or double-spaced, because changing the line spacing is a simple process. To learn whether a magazine or competition wants to receive single-spaced or double-spaced files, find and follow the submission guidelines.

Q: The following question arrived by e-mail and is intentionally left unedited:

whats your opinion about someone analyze all things around him , usually searching for trunth , scientific facts , research any case confront , has high imagination , always contemplate , endure social & world problems as his was the responsible for solving it , has photographic memory , live his own live as serial episode , all his wishes & principles hope to be done , moreover usually try to prove his view for hisself & others , has the ability to write coversation between two persons for more than one hundred pages , daydreaming all the time, imagine seeing this by making stories in his mind

my question all people around me touch that suggest me that I may me a good writer , or story writer

but I need your opinion as you an experts , are the above behaviours can qualify me or intuitive behaviours for a writer or artist ?

A: The analytical behaviors outlined in your note indicate an excellent start on the path to visual or literary arts, but it takes much more than intuition or inclinations to become a writer.

A person with good balance but no practice cannot hop on a bike and win a marathon. First that person must practice many hours, days, months, and years, to learn the skills and nuances of mounting the bike, pedaling, steering, cornering, braking, and dismounting. The person must also build stamina, muscle, and skills, before being able to perform at peak level.

The same principle holds true for the arts. People who want to become writers must hone their skills in grammar, punctuation, syntax, and spelling. They must learn about writing clear, compelling copy and believable dialogue; building characters; creating and sustaining a plot; maintaining tension and conflict; and much more.

I'm concerned about the low level of clarity, grammar, spelling, punctuation, and even typing in the note I received, so I have serious concerns that the person who wrote that note has not yet developed the basic skills necessary to become a good writer. If you want to become a writer to take advantage of your great analytical skills, the next step is to acquire and hone the skills you will need as a writer. Seek classes in grammar, punctuation, typing, and creative writing. Learn to develop an eagle eye for errors. Join writing groups, read books on writing, write, and get feedback on your writing. Practice, practice, practice, and you will see progress toward your goal.

*What's your question about writing or publishing? Bobbie Christmas, book doctor, author of Write In Style (Union Square Publishing), and owner of Zebra Communications, will answer your questions, too. Send them to [Bobbie@zebraeditor.com](mailto:Bobbie@zebraeditor.com). Read more "Ask the Book Doctor" questions and answers at [www.zebraeditor.com](http://www.zebraeditor.com).*