



Writing Tip # 1: Create Your Own Custom Template in Word

I promised a long time ago to share whatever I learn about the writing/self-publishing process. Trouble is, I still have A LOT to learn, not to mention that my list of things that don't work is a lot longer than my list of things that do. But as I sat down to start writing the other day, I noticed something that I wish I would've thought of a lot sooner. Instead of diving right into my new book idea while it was fresh in my mind, I found myself trying to remember the formatting that I needed to set up in Word first. Trust me, you'll save yourself a giant headache by formatting your document ahead of time. And by creating your own custom template, you can skip both the headache and losing your new story idea.

I kept my custom template as simple as possible. Later, after the piece is finished, I'll save multiple copies and tailor each one to the specific requirements of each platform I publish on.

To create a template, open up a blank document in Word. The first thing I change are the paragraph settings. I use first line indents for my paragraphs (as opposed to block paragraphs). You shouldn't use spaces or tabs at the beginning of each paragraph because it won't translate correctly into ebook formats. To set up first line indents, click the small arrow in the bottom right corner of the "Paragraph" group on the ribbon at the top of your blank document, and a small box will pop up. Change "Special" to "First Line." Now, set "By" to .3" (.5" works just fine, too). Under "Spacing," change "After" to 0 because this separation between paragraphs isn't needed when first line indents are used. The last thing I do in this box is set "Line Spacing" to "1.5 lines." Click "OK" and the box will close. From the ribbon on the blank document, you can change the font to the theme and size you prefer. (I use 12 point Times New Roman.) Now the basic formatting is set up, but here's something really important: Word has an underlying default

for paragraph settings and font. What this means is that you need to make your changes in one more place. If you don't, things may not appear the way you want on some e-readers. All you have to do is click on the small arrow in the bottom right corner of the "Styles" group on the ribbon. In the box that pops up, click on the paragraph symbol next to "Normal" (this is the style you automatically use most of the time). Choose "Modify" and then click on "Format" on the bottom left of the box. Choose "Paragraph" (the box that appears should be familiar) and make your choices again. Click "OK," which will bring you back to the "Modify Style" box. Update your font settings before clicking "OK."

Another handy thing to do with styles is to make a "New Style" you can use for centering. Since we just set a first line indent, that's going to be automatically included even when you click the "Center" button on the ribbon. Instead, click on the arrow in the "Styles" group again. Choose "New Style" at the bottom of the box that pops up. You can name your new style (I call it "Centered"). Then press the "Center" button right below the font. Next, click "Format" and then "Paragraph." This time, change "Special" to "None." Save it and it will appear in the "Styles" group on the ribbon. Now you can just click it whenever you want to center and then go back to "Normal" when you're done.

I learned most of what I know about formatting from Mark Coker's *Smashwords Style Guide*. You can download it for free: <https://www.smashwords.com/books/view/52>. If you're going to self-publish, I highly recommend it. It seems very overwhelming (believe me), but just go through it slowly, piece by piece, because he really knows what he's talking about. You'll find a lot more in-depth advice on formatting than what I've shared here, especially if you prefer a different layout such as block paragraphs. You'll also want to research the requirements of each publishing platform you plan on using. And templates don't just have to be for writing a novel—they'll save you time on any type of document you create on a regular basis. Once you get your document specific to your needs, all you have to do is save it as a Word Template. To do this, do a "Save As" and change the file type to "Word Template," which is a ".dotx" file type. And that's it—now you can just open up your custom template and get down to writing!