Most first time writers get inspired with an idea and rush to their computer to get it down before it is lost. While that is okay under the influence of inspiration, if the person is serious about writing they need to take time to understand the industry's expectations. When that Great American Novel is finished the industry expects a clean manuscript and a synopsis submitted with a professional cover letter.

In the interest of marketing a manuscript to a publisher, a beginning writer needs to understand the tools of the trade. Besides the ability to write a marketable story, a writer needs to learn to use their software like a professional. Some people may argue that statement, but I reject a fair share of manuscripts because they are a mess and would be far too time consuming to clean it up enough to bring to market. I might spend the extra time if the story is great, but it is rare that a beginning writer writes a great story for their debut work.

MS Word and Corel Wordperfect are the two word processing software formats that Cactus Rain Publishing accepts. Most people use Word, so let's look at the ribbon menu for Word.
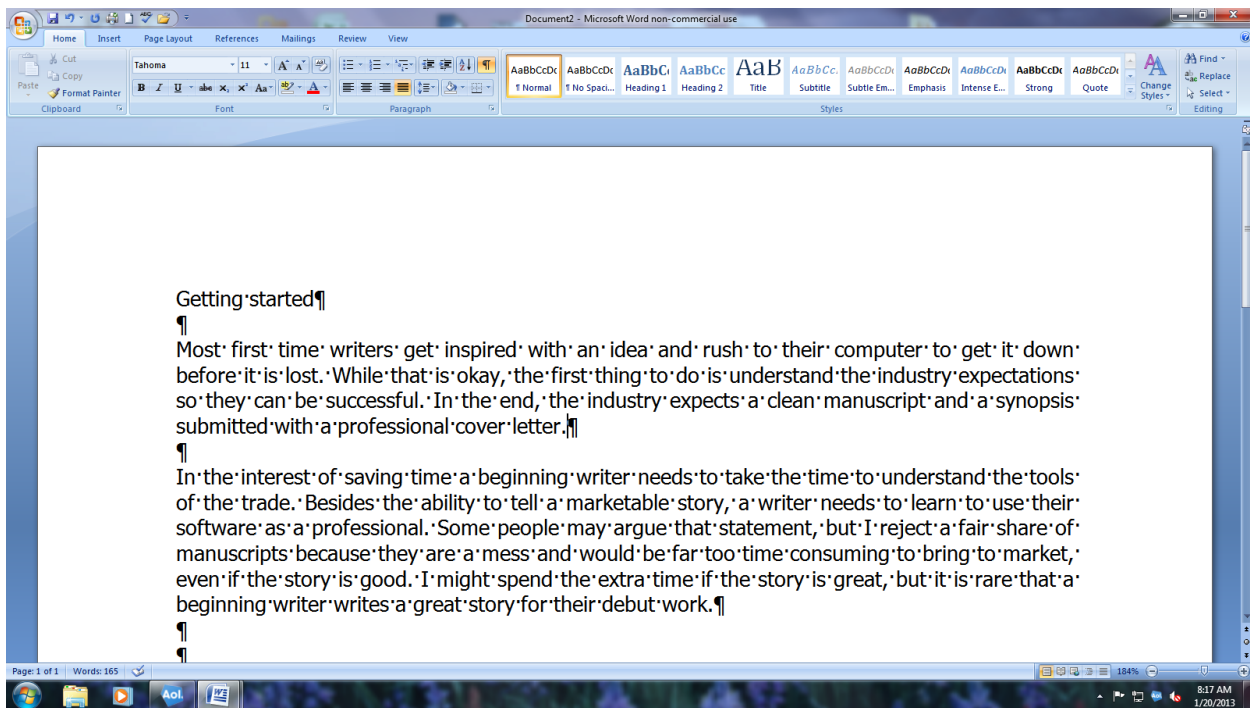

In the screen shot above the font is set to Tahoma, a non-surf font, and the size is 11 point. Toward the middle of the ribbon is the "show/hide" button highlighted in yellow. With that feature engaged, the basic codes appear in the text as above. The codes are always present even when hidden.

It has been my experience that people who learned to type on a typewriter often apply typewriter rules to writing on the computer. Above, the mark behind "Getting Started" and again on the line below it signals that the "enter" key was pressed and the line ends there. Otherwise, the software will automatically advance the type to the end of the line and continue to the next line.

With a typewriter, the return has to be pressed or the leaver (remember those on the manual typewriters?) has to be moved to advance the paper to the next line to continue typing. More people than I expected to do it, type to the end of the line and press the enter key. That looks lovely on the screen until a word is removed or added, thus moving the text so that the former end of the line has moved. With the enter code in the middle of the paragraph (at the former end of the line), the software begins a new line at that point.

In the screen shot below the enter key was used at the end of each row in the first paragraph. The words in red were added, which moved the text. Notice how the line breaks on line three.

The second paragraph shows what happens when words are added (in red) and the enter key was not used until the end of the paragraph. The text shifts to accommodate the new words. The same thing will happen in both paragraphs if words are removed. Adding and removing words happens as the draft is revised. This causes a frustrating mess. The mess gets worse as each revision generation occurs.
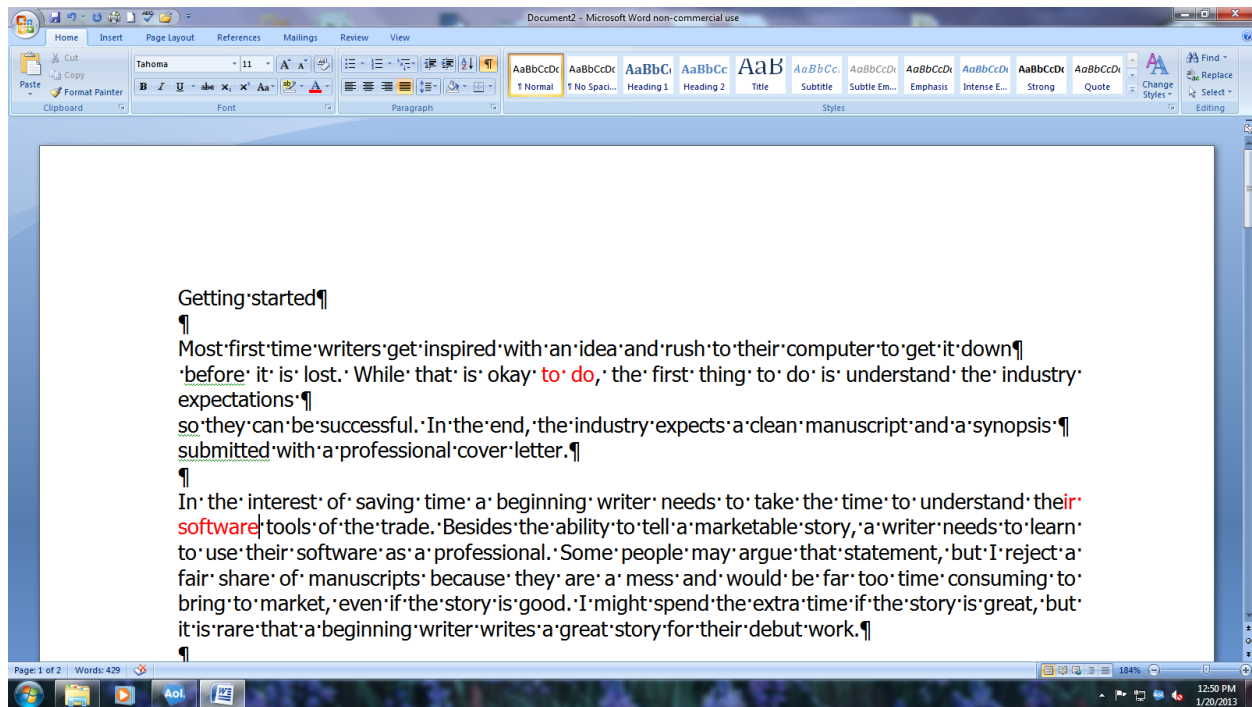
The other code that is visible is the dots between words. Those are spaces. There NEVER is two spaces together in a manuscript. In letter writing there are two spaces between sentences. There is one space between sentences in a manuscript. Someone has to remove the extra spaces a careless writer inserts. That someone should be the writer.

Paragraph layout is simple. The first paragraph in a chapter is NOT indented. All of the rest of the paragraphs are indented with no blank lines between paragraphs in fiction writing. The format is different in non-fiction writing, depending on the type of non-fiction work it is. Paragraphs are indented with the tab key. The tab key must be reset to represent three spaces, not five. Use the help function, the question mark in a circle under the close window button to learn how to reset the tab value to three spaces.

One other formatting function needed is the page break. That function is located in the insert tab and is placed after the last line of each chapter, creating a new page for the beginning of the next chapter. This functions like the line break, keeping the text correctly placed when lines or paragraphs are added or deleted during revisions.

Obviously, all of this can be corrected after the manuscript draft is finished, but it is much easier and less time consuming to be aware of the ramifications of not knowing the rules of the trade. The best thing to do is go across the ribbon and learn what each item does on each of the tabs. Learning to properly use the software is the first step to creating a clean manuscript.