

Winning Entries

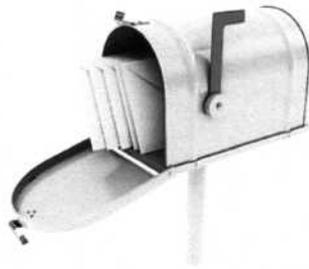
Making Your Mark
in Writing Contests



White County creative Writers

Searcy, Arkansas

2016



It's a moment to be savored--you put your hopes in the mailbox and flip up the red flag for the mail carrier. You've worked hard, polished your writing, and now its fate rests in the hands of a contest judge. Whether it's your first writing contest or your fiftieth, you will be wondering the same thing—how will your entry stack up against the competition?

SO WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

Your entry will first go to a contest coordinator who will ensure that you've enclosed the appropriate entry form and the contest fees. The cover sheet—which includes your name, contact information and the relevant contest information—will be separated from your entry. Both will be assigned the same number; the coordinator will keep the cover sheet, and then forward your entry to the contest judge. This ensures objectivity because the judge only sees your actual work—he or she does not know who wrote it.

Once the individual contest judges have made their selections, they notify the contest coordinator, giving that person the numbers already assigned to the entries. After that the coordinator matches the winning contest numbers back to the numbered cover pages with the author's name and information. Certificates for the winners are created and, if there are cash awards for the contest, checks are made out to the winning writers.

So—how do you increase your chances of winning a writing contest?



Guidelines

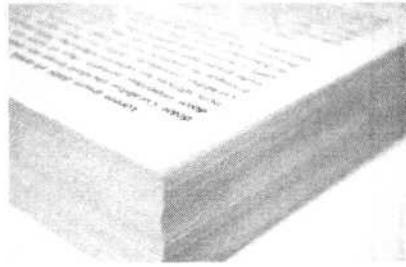
Contest guidelines work in your favor; they level the playing field to ensure that all entries are judged on merit alone. When each submission has the same formatting and submission requirements as all the rest, the only remaining difference among them will be the writing itself. Each contest will have its own set of rules, so it's important to familiarize yourself with them. It's even more important to follow them closely, because failure to follow guidelines is the first fatal flaw for contest entries.

Submissions that do not comply with contest rules are viewed as invalid. Individual judges may use their own discretion, but many will immediately disqualify such entries and discard them unread.

Guidelines are included wherever you find the contests you want to enter, whether it's printed media such as conference brochures, or online contests sponsored by publishers or other organizations. Not everyone will use the same guidelines, so familiarize yourself with the ones relevant to your chosen contest. Specifications may include header information such as the contest name and number, word count for prose or line count for poetry, or where—and how—pages are to be numbered. Assuming a cover sheet is required, the guidelines for it are every bit as important as those for the entry itself.

No writer—and no contest judge—wants to think that a well-developed, creative piece of writing is doomed from the beginning because of guideline failures, but disregard for the rules has the appearance of disrespect for the sponsoring organization, the judges and the other writing contestants who worked equally hard.

Contest judges are writers themselves, and when they receive their stack of entries from the contest coordinator, they respect the effort that has gone into every work they see. They have all been on the other side of that mailbox, wondering what the outcome might be, but now they see your work alongside that of many other hopefuls. A writer's perspective is of one work—his or her own. A judge's perspective is the entire array of entries, and the merits of your work must compete with all the rest. The ones that adhere to the guidelines immediately surpass all the ones that did not.



Format

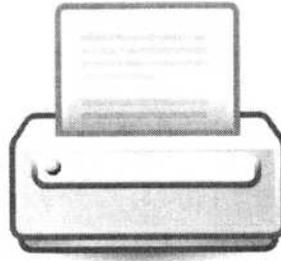
Formatting is not a one size fits all concept. Formatting rules will vary depending on the contest sponsor, but the preferred rules will be provided so you're clear on what is expected. The guidelines for formatting are every bit as critical as the ones for contest submission

Since formatting prescribes how your work is to be displayed on the page, it might be helpful to think of it in terms of the appearance of your work. Writing contests are competitions among authors, just as the 400 meter race in field and track is a completion among runners. Those who want to stand out in a race do so through speed rather than by distractions of clothes or footwear. Writers who want to stand out do so through their skill, rather than through anything that distracts from what is actually written on the page.

Regardless of the rules that may vary between contests, there are some standard expectations to keep in mind.

- Use the best quality white, 8½ X 11 inch paper available to you. Make sure is it 20 pound weight or higher; anything less than that looks unprofessional. And never use colored paper; the contest is to find the best writing, not the prettiest paper.
- Use a common, very readable, 12-point font. Your judge will be reading stacks of entries, and fonts with shadows and decorative curlicues, those that resemble handwriting or consist of all capital letters are difficult to read. Anything that slows your reader down shifts focus away from what you have written, and that weakens the impact of your entry.

- Do not print on both sides of the paper
- Double space for prose entries—things like short stories, essays and creative nonfiction. (That also applies to the spacing between paragraphs; turn off the extra line after each paragraph if that is the default setting in your word processing program.) Poetry should be single spaced.
- Use standard margins—the default margins in programs like Microsoft Word are fine.
- Use your Tab key for paragraph indentations to ensure consistency.
- No matter how good your handwriting is, never submit a handwritten piece.
- Don't decorate your entry with notes in the margin, little drawings, arrows or exclamation points. Your entry should be strictly professional.
- Pay attention to word count. If the maximum word count for an essay contest is 1500 words, you won't get extra credit for submitting something longer than that. Instead, you'll be disqualified for not sticking to the guidelines. The same concept applies to poetry; if your poem is 36 lines and the contest states a maximum of 24, then your entry will be disqualified.
- Never submit the only copy of your work—entries are not returned.
- Use your real name. If your name is John Smith and you want to publish under the pen name Juaquin Salvatore, that's fine, but don't use that for a contest entry.
- If you don't know how to create a proper header or footer using your word processing software, find out. You can find simple instructions online. Many contests do not allow stapling of pages, and headers and footers insure that if something happens—the pages get dropped, a fan blows them off the table—then your judge will be able to reassemble your entry in its entirety.



Content

You followed all the rules; your entry was properly submitted and correctly formatted, so now it has to compete with all the other submissions for that contest. When judges read through everything the first time, they generally sort entries into three piles: Yes, Maybe, and No. The No pile will be things that have failed in grand fashion. The Maybe pile contains those that combine both merit and problems. The Yes pile, obviously, is where you want to be, so what keeps you out of those other piles?

Regardless of the type of contest, judges look for original, creative entries that display mastery of technique and style. Subjectively, judges will either like or dislike content based on their personal preferences. Objectively, they are looking for mastery of a broad range of writing skills. Think of your entry as falling somewhere on a continuum of competence and creativity. Things in the Maybe pile are in the midrange; they display strength, but there is room for improvement. Entries in the Yes pile are the continuum's high achievers.

Depending on the number of entries for any given contest, judges will re-read the Maybe and Yes piles, often several times. They compare entries one against another, and then rank them by place: first, second, third and honorable mention. Many judges claim that one entry often stands out from the very beginning, rising to the top and remaining there. What can you do to make sure yours is the one they really notice?

- **Theme/Subject Matter:**

Is your submission appropriate to the contest? If the contest was for a childhood memory, is that what you submitted? Or did you provide a free verse poem when the contest called for one that rhymed? Look for keywords in the contest description, e.g. Victorian, humorous, lyric, unrhymed, mystery, etc.

- **Title:**

It's true—you never get a second chance to make a good first impression. Your title is the judge's first contact with your writing, so make it count. Relevant titles have something to do with what you've written about. Look beyond the ordinary to find the hook that will keep your reader interested. Titles convey subject matter, but they can also convey mood, intention and personality. Which of the following do you think a judge would find more interesting:

Bobby's Gift vs. Bobby Buys Nana the Moon

My Favorite Season vs. Autumn Through a Kitchen Window

The Last War vs. Strike Force Nine: The Battle for Almeron

- **First Sentence/First Paragraph:**

Beginnings, poorly handled, can be an ending for a writer hoping to do well in a contest. The last thing you want that first paragraph to do is make your judge sigh with boredom, so find essays or stories you like and examine what those writers have done to make you want to read the rest. Your first draft is the place to make all the mistakes a judge won't see, so don't get bogged down trying to write the perfect beginning before you write everything else. Subsequent drafts allow you to fine tune everything, and that's the time to upgrade a blah beginning into something with impact.

▪ **Grammar:**

Language and the ways we use it are evolving. Thanks to text messaging and social media we like to make our BFF LOL, and technology has added words that never existed before. Stodgy old acronyms—IBM, AWOL, NAFTA—have morphed into initialisms—LMAO, TTYL, LYLAS. Words are changing rapidly, but the rules of grammar are less flexible. Grammar is the language of literary folk, and contest judges expect writers to be able to speak that language fluently. Works with significant grammatical and punctuation errors are inevitably put in the No pile. If you have difficulty with grammar, you can make your writing stronger and more competitive. Every writer needs one good grammar book on their reference shelf, and there are free online courses available to help you. Don't underestimate the impact of poor grammar on your chances of winning a contest—one of the saddest things judges have to do is discard entries that are deeply meaningful, thoughtful, or delightful because of poor grammar.

▪ **Careful Writing:**

Attention to detail shows, and there a lot of things that trip up even experienced writers. Watch out for these:

- ❖ Don't rely on spell check. It may not catch the wor7ds that have a number in the middle, and their are a number of ways there checking can leave flaws in your writing.
- ❖ Don't rely on grammar check either. It will miss some mistakes while catching other "errors" that aren't mistakes at all.
- ❖ Use the "find" function to locate words you tend to overuse, such as: just, really, obviously, only, maybe, etc.
- ❖ Prune the prepositions, such as: of, for, to, from, etc. Long sentences are fine, but too many prepositions can make sentences awkward. If a sentence just isn't working, take a look at the way it is structured to see what can be improved.

- ❖ Verify your word choices. It's easy to slip and use the almost right word, so edit carefully. Your grammar reference should provide a comprehensive list of commonly mistaken words such as affect/effect, a while/awhile, imply/infer, etc.
- ❖ Watch out for typos. Nobody's perfect—you know the difference between to, too and two, but it's easy to slip and type the wrong one without realizing you've done it.
- ❖ Check your punctuation. It's helpful to do a line edit of your work to make sure periods, commas, quotation marks and all the rest are in their proper place. Exclamation points should be kept to a minimum.
- ❖ Be original. Clichés and metaphors are popularly used because they so succinctly express things that are true. Age before beauty. Poor as dirt. She's the apple of his eye, but he eats like a pig. Timeworn phrases plod through your writing, adding no freshness or originality—weed them out.
- ❖ Don't go on and on and on... Wordiness bogs writing down quickly, making it difficult and boring to read. Edit ruthlessly. Eliminating excess adverbs will make your writing tighter, and trimming long, descriptive passages down to what is really important will elevate your work above the competition.
- ❖ Watch your language. Swearing and other types of offensive words have no place in most writing contests, and a judge who is offended by scatological language is going to dismiss both you and your work. The same caution can be applied to subject matter. Unless stated otherwise in the contest information, assume your writing is expected to have a G or PG rating, just like the movies.
- ❖ Don't use dialect. Don't spell out nonsensical words and expect a judge to sit there and figure out what they mean. Not only is it distracting and difficult to read, it is insulting to the group of people you're writing about.



A Final Check

The contest deadline is approaching and you're anxious to get your entry in the mail. Well, who wouldn't be? You've poured everything you've got into writing, revising and proofreading your work. You've read the thing so many times your eyeballs itch, and it's the best you can make it. You're done—well, almost.

- **One more time:**

Read through the contest rules again. Yes—again. Check your header to make sure it meets the specifications—make sure the contest number is correct, and that the contest name you entered is identical to the one in the brochure. Is the word count or line count correct now that you're through with all your edits? Double check your page numbering to make sure it's in compliance with the rules, and reexamine your formatting—is it exactly what is required?

- **And once again:**

Proofread your work very carefully. If you have been able to set it aside a few days before you do this final check, you may catch errors that you hadn't noticed before. If you discover a typo or find that your printer failed to print the bottom half of page 3, you can correct it and send out a pristine copy. Every error you're able to catch is one the judge will never see.

- **Review your cover sheet:**

Make sure you have included all the information the contest requires so the contest coordinator will have your contact information when you win—now there's a happy thought.

- **Get everything together:**

Assemble your cover sheet and entry, your contest entry form and your check for the entry fee, if there is one. Put everything in an envelope to mail and ta-da! You're done.



And There It Goes...
Congratulations and good
luck!

A Word About Not Winning

It has happened to every writer who has ever entered a contest—sometimes your entry just won't make the cut. Even when you've done everything right, there will be times when all the awards are given to others. You're not alone in feeling discouraged when that happens—writing, like all forms of creativity, comes from a place deep within us, and rejection of our work feels like rejection of ourselves.

One of the most frustrating things about such losses is that we don't know why it happened, so we don't know how to fix it. An advantage of entering local and regional writing contests is that you have a good chance of obtaining feedback from the judge after the contest. If you don't know how to contact him or her directly, the sponsoring organization should be able to put you in touch. What you learn from a judge's critique can prove to be far more valuable to you than the cash awards given to someone else.

There will be times when your entry just didn't click with the judge somehow, because judging entries is highly subjective. If you tried on one of your friend's well-worn shoes, it wouldn't feel quite right. The size might be the same, but the shoes will be molded to contours unlike your own. Writing tastes are much the same—sometimes the shoe just doesn't fit. We all have a unique way of looking at things, and the perspective of a judge reading your entry may be different from your own.

It's helpful for writers, regardless of skill level, to have their writing critiqued. Objectivity about our own writing is difficult to come by, but others may see descriptions that aren't clear, characters that aren't in focus, or plots that muddle around without heading in a particular direction. Feedback is a form of continuing education—through it we recognize weaknesses, develop skills and strengthen our chances for the next contest we enter. Losing is disheartening, but it can often be the thing that teaches us how to win.

Sample Cover Sheet

(If you enter a lot of contests, it's a good idea to make a cover sheet template so you only need to enter the contest number, name, and the first line of the entry. It saves time when you're getting entries ready to mail, and it reduces the chance of typos when filling out the cover sheet information.)

Contest #: 1

Contest Name: Big Story Award

Title: My Big Story

First line: This is how it all began, blah, blah, furthermore and so forth, etc.

Jane Author

123 Writer Street

Anyplace, AR 72000

(501) 555-0000

myemail@whatever.com

Sample Title Page

My Big Story

This is how it all began, blah, blah, furthermore and so forth, etc. When I first met Mulligan blah, blah.....

- The header contains the contest number and the contest name on the left, and the word count (or line count, in the case of poetry) is on the right.
- The title begins about a third to one-half way down the first page—subsequent pages will be normal, with the print starting at the top, beneath the header.
- The footer contains the page number. It can be located on the left, right or in the middle of the page, depending on your preference. Placing it at the bottom of the page keeps the header from looking too cluttered.