

How to Win at Writing Competitions, Even When You Don't Place

by Kory Wells
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What we'll talk about today

- The advantages of submitting to contests
- The disadvantages of submitting to contests
- How to identify quality contests and avoid scams
- How to decide which contests are for you
- How to prepare a submission
- What to do when you win
- What to do when you don't win



Before you enter a contest,
remember...

“To be an artist is to fail, as
no other dares fail...”

– Samuel Beckett



Why enter? Even if you don't win...

- Motivation/deadline
- Lose your fear of submitting work to “public”
- Opportunities to learn – from the competitions' entries, perhaps from feedback
- Forces you to get a nearly done piece done
- Your entry fee may support a journal or organization which needs the support



Why enter? Even if you don't win...

- You may still get a publication opportunity
- Contests can **SOMETIMES** be a faster way and a different path for feedback than the regular submissions process at some journals
- You're keeping up with the writing scene – of your community, state, region or nation, depending on your level



Why enter? If you place...

- Build your resume – “award-winning writer”
- Build your confidence
- Get emotional boost
- Get publicity
- Opportunity to publish
- Opportunity to read/attend conference/network
- May attract agent/editor
- May win some \$\$\$



Why enter? If you don't place...

- May get discouraged
- May “gamble” away more of your money (in entry fees, postal costs) than you intend
- May get “off track” from what you really need to be writing
- Must keep in mind judging subjectivity and the parameters of the contest (like the number and quality of entries)– a piece can win one contest and not place in a dozen others!



Why enter? Other thoughts...

- Best-selling authors don't mention contests?
- You aren't building a relationship with editors?
- Even if you win, you will still lose money?
- You should focus on publishing, not contests?



Finding contests

- Creative Writers Opportunities List
[http://groups.yahoo.com/
group/CRWROPPS-B/](http://groups.yahoo.com/group/CRWROPPS-B/)
- *Poets & Writers Magazine*
- State writers organizations
- Bios/credits of regional writers you admire



Be an informed contestant!

Watch for...

- Poetry.com scam – you pay them for the anthology your fantastic poetry will appear in
- Contests linked to agency representation with sizable editing fee
- Contests linked to companies who may then solicit you to self-publish
- See www.sfwa.org/Beware/contests.html for good article



The right contests for you...

- Is it for your genre (novel, short story, poetry, creative nonfiction) and subgenre (sci-fi, fantasy, mystery, etc.)
- Are guidelines clear?
- How often does this organization have contests?
- Who has won before?
- Who is the judge?
- Is it “blind” judging? Do they ask for no name on manuscript?



The right contests for you...

- Is the fee reasonable?
- Do you get anything (like feedback, or a journal subscription or issue) for your fee?
- Can you read past winning entries?
- Research past winners – do you like their writing?
- What kind of prize money? Publication, “finalist” distinctions, other opportunities?
- Move from local to regional to national.



Read those guidelines!

- Postmark deadline or arrival deadline?
- Cover sheet or entry form (cover **letter** not usually necessary)
- Your check, if there's a fee
- SASE
- Correct number of copies
- Your name on manuscript - or not - per guidelines



Read those guidelines!

- Pay attention to line length/ word or page count limits
- Multiple entries in one envelope may NOT be okay
- Are simultaneous submissions okay?
- Is it okay if entry has been previously published or won a prize?



Your manuscript may be **immediately** rejected unless

- It's in standard format – 12 pt. Times New Roman, double-spaced if prose
- It's free of typos and grammatical errors
- It has a good, strong opening

Of course, it needs to be good all the way through! Have a writing buddy or mentor read it! And remember to keep track of your submission!



What to do when you win

- Tell somebody! Tell everybody!
- Contest publicity
- Your own publicity
- Add to your resume – and to cover letter when you submit the piece elsewhere
- Consider if you want to run it in another contest



What to do when you don't win

- Chin up!
- Is there anything to learn?
Can you read winning entries, did you get any feedback?
- Remember that tastes do vary
- Improve your piece if you can
- Send it back out!



As you put that next entry in the mail, remember...

“We do not write to be understood; we write in order to understand.”

– C. Day Lewis,
The Poet's Task

