

HOW TO WIN THE CONTEST

by Beth Proudfoot

As Director of the East of Eden Writers Conference, a contest winner, and a judge for several different writing contests, I'm often asked if I have specific advice for writers who are entering contests for the first time. Frankly, I'm so frustrated when I read many contest submissions that I am more than happy to share some practical tips for getting to the top of any judge's pile of manuscripts. I'm assuming you have an engaging story, with elegant prose. Many writers do. You're going to have to crawl over them to get to the winners podium. Don't shoot yourself in the foot before you even leave the blocks.

1. Follow directions.

Writers are creative people. We don't like to bow down to The Man. However, not following the directions for how to submit to a contest is the number one way we doom ourselves to failure before our manuscript is even out the door. Print out the directions. Check them off as you follow each one. Yes, they do ALL apply to you. Don't send twenty pages if the limit is ten. Don't use Courier font if they've specifically asked for Times New Roman. And, if you forget to include your contact information with your submission, or if you put it in the wrong place, like on your manuscript pages, your precious work of art is going to go in the recycle pile before the judges even see it.

2. Grammar counts.

I guarantee that if you have more than one obvious grammatical error on the first page, your work will go immediately to the bottom of the pile. And, if you have even one grammatical error in the whole submission, it could make the difference between a win and an honorable mention. All of us should have an excellent style book, which we refer to often. However, we often can't see little errors in our own work. Our brain just "reads" what we *meant* to say. Don't send out anything until it has been double-checked by a detail-oriented English major who thinks parsing sentences is a form of recreation.

3. Pay more attention to the beginning than to the end.

Many writers get hung up on the page limit. For some contests, where your entire article, short story or poem must conform to a word or page limit, this is can be a real issue. You'll have to work on editing your piece so that your beginning, middle and end fit the limit, which can be a challenge. In most cases, though, you'll find that a thorough edit for word-count significantly strengthens the prose.

If you're submitting the first fifteen pages of your novel, however, don't spend even a minute worrying about where the page limit cuts the story off. Your beginning is the important thing. Make that first page shine. I highly recommend *The First Five Pages*, by Noah Lukeman. Trust me, if your first paragraph engages the reader with an open invitation to adventure and each succeeding page makes him fall in love

with your characters, your setting and the problem the novel will investigate and solve, no judge is going to pay attention to the fact that your submission didn't take him or her to the end of your first chapter.

A correctly-formatted first page to a novel has only seven lines of text at the bottom, under the title. When I see a manuscript like this, I get ready for a good read. If, on the other hand, I see a title cramped at the very top, with a tiny font and one and a half spaces instead of two between the lines, I know I'm dealing with an amateur. Quality is mountains ahead over quantity. Less is more.

4. Send it through your critique group.

If you don't belong to a good critique group, find one. If you can't find one, start one. You're writing for other people. If more than one member of your critique group doesn't understand the third sentence on the second page, can't see the flower arbor you describe on the third page, or thinks your character's dialogue is too over-the-top, then the judges of the contest will probably agree. Personally, I belong to three critique groups, and I don't send anything out until they all say it's ready. (This article, which I had to get out in a hurry, is an exception. Please forgive any errors – and I know you'll find some!)

5. Let it go.

Remember that contests are, by nature, subjective. You have a responsibility for making your work the best it can be. After that, fate is going to have to be allowed to take over. You have no control over the tastes of the judges or the committee mentality which can sometimes eliminate the most creative works. Treat your manuscript like your college student: give it a little pat good-bye at the post office, wish it well, and trust that it can manage on its own. If it doesn't succeed this time, it doesn't mean that you're a lousy writer. It only means that the timing was not right...or it needs another pass to make it perfect before you send it out again. Real writers have an intimate relationship with rejection and failure. To be a member of the club, you have to earn a few scars. You have to send it out. You have to take the risk. And you have to keep writing, keep submitting, until you get it right and the stars align.

Good luck!

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