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## THE IMPORTANCE OF ENTERING CONTESTS



“The ultimate victory in competition is derived from the inner satisfaction of knowing that you have done your best and that you have gotten the most out of what you had to give.”

—Howard Cosell, *sports broadcaster*

Short fiction writing contests are the reason I’m now a published novelist. By attending conferences, entering contests, and working my way to awards, I improved my skills. But, because editors and agents also attend these conferences, hearing my name called several times for winning or placing in contests helps them recognize my abilities. Publishers know repeated wins or placements in contests mean you’ve learned the craft and are mastering the art of storytelling.

Like many of you, I sat down to write “The Great American Novel.” I had a desire to write, but to get published, I needed to learn how to produce a product publishers would accept.

There are many reasons for writers of all skill levels to enter writing contests. Beginning writers need the validation that contests give their work. You know you’re getting somewhere

when you go from no awards to your first Third Honorable Mention.

Experienced writers also need contests to stretch and grow, branching out from their comfortable writing genre from time to time. Creative contests can force experienced writers to stretch the boundaries of their creative minds. A fantastic contest description can provide that incentive—and you might even enjoy the process.

Short fiction contests help you learn to pack a punch in a limited number of words. I am a wordy first-draft writer. Because I know that, I initially write my stories without regard to a word limit.

When I have a completed first draft, I revise for setting, characterization, and plot, still without concern about word count. Then, I revise for the five senses. Do I have smells woven into the tale? Sights described? Sounds that add dimension and depth? Touch and taste by the characters? Will the readers feel the emotions in the story (fear, love, attachment, revulsion)?

Once I've told the story I need to tell, I turn my attention to the word count. If it's too long to enter the contest I've chosen, I save a digital copy of the long version to put away for possible later use. Then I start chopping away at the words.

I start with a critical look at my sentences and phrasing. During my first pass at word reduction, I choose stronger language. Sometimes, an entire phrase can be replaced with one fantastic word.

Here's one secret for you: I can't eliminate all my extra words at once. For me, word reduction works best by removing approximately one hundred words every time I read through it. By the time I've gone through it five or six times—that's a minimum—and cut five to six hundred words, I'm always pleasantly surprised by how much the trimming has improved the story.

## **Skills learned from contests**

Contests teach writers the skills necessary to sculpt a successful career. Abiding by a contest's rules teaches us to respect deadlines. This is the first charm to master. A deadline is a deadline. No excuses. No extensions. If we want a publishing contract or a position related to newspapers, magazines, and other periodicals, we must meet deadlines with our best work. You must engrave a deadline on your soul.

In addition to being on time, contests teach us how to conform to expectations. A contest's rules may require us to insert four or five words we would normally not use. Or require a mystery that doesn't have a dead body. Sometimes, they request a Western where there is no shootout. Why? That's the rules, and the why doesn't matter. (But it's usually to encourage outside-the-box creativity.)

These seemingly arbitrary requirements might initially frustrate you, but I encourage you to embrace the challenges. Such twists and turns teach us to flex our creativity in ways that might impress a judge. Editors, agents, and publishers may suggest a different approach to your story that enhances your overall product. The ability to accept these kinds of suggestions goes a long way toward improving your work and encouraging the possibility of getting published.

The ability to follow *all* the directions of a contest is imperative. You can't win a contest if they disqualify your entry for a rules violation. And at the point of disqualification, no sincerely crafted potion will change the judges' minds. There is no path to success as a published author if you disregard the submission guidelines of your desired publisher.

Besides, contests with creative twists can be inspiring. Dealing with these unusual aspects of a contest enhances our creativity, stretching our writing abilities and leveling up our skills.

Word limits teach us to use more expressive language.

Contests have taught me, a self-proclaimed wordy writer, how to live with this affliction. I've learned to allow my initial draft to have as many words as I want. Once drafted, I happily slice it to shreds. My process is to tell the story first, then self-edit. I don't want to interfere with the creative part of my writing while I'm getting the story down. Editing sharpens my work and reduces the redundancies inadvertently dotting my draft. We'll cover more about the value of editing in Chapters 18 and 19.

Regularly entering contests provides a realistic gauge of your improvement. The more you learn, the better your entries will do.

“Magic” trick: After each contest, study what worked and what didn't work as well for the judges. We all have had stories we love, but no judge has yet to see its merit. That's okay. Go on to something else and save your heart story for later. Not everything will appeal to all judges or your audience. Learn to have thick skin, continue to educate yourself about the craft of writing, and move on.

Contests that offer reviews from editors, publishers, or agents are a great opportunity. If you feel confident your skills will impress professionals, then send your submission. If a publisher or agent believes in your talent, you're closer to realizing your dreams. Many of these contests provide priceless feedback about your work. Entry fees vary, so you may have to limit the number of contests you enter. Choose those that offer you the best value for the entry fee, such as feedback from editors, agents, and publishers.

Most contests charge fees. Some fees are quite high. Considering the time commitment contest judges make, many of the costs are justified. For the writer striving for publication, the benefit of having your work evaluated by judges, publishers, and agents outweighs the costs.

Conferences that provide a publisher or agent as a speaker and include the opportunity for you to pitch your work to these experts should be part of your budget. In writing, “what you

know” is vital, but there’s no denying that “who you know” can be crucial to accomplishing your publishing dreams. Contests and conferences are an investment in your writing career.

One pre-emptive caution: Research any contest you are considering and avoid any type of scam related to the contest or publishing business. If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is.

When going through the feedback from contest judges, your initial reaction might be to resist their advice. After all, they don’t know your story as well as you do. Instead of raising your hackles, step back from that position of pride and consider that working publishers, editors, and agents know what is selling—and what is not.

Rather than dismissing their comments, try them. Make a copy of your original work to retain your brilliance, and then make changes according to the feedback you received.

After you’ve revised using your judges’ suggestions, submit the revamped work to your critique group or a trusted writer friend and get their feedback. In the end, it is up to you whether to accept *anyone’s* changes—editor, agent, or trusted friend—but I can vouch for my publisher and the editors provided by the publisher. Every suggestion they made improved my work. Instead of being labeled “hard to work with,” become known as a writer who is flexible enough to take coaching.

Another great way to strengthen your writing is by reading other published contest winners. *What did she do right? What can I learn from him? Ooo, look at what she did. I wonder how that would work for me?* Some organizations publish anthologies that include contest winners. Other groups highlight young writers’ contest winners, teachers’ organizations, and poet societies. Studying winners will help you know what a winning entry comprises and why their entry won.



**Takeaway One:** Writing contests teach you countless skills. They can help you develop your work to the point agents and/or publishers select it for publication.

**Takeaway Two:** Contests teach you to be coachable by agents and publishers, to conform to suggestions by experts, and to add creative twists to your work. You will also learn to respect word limits and develop a thick skin in reviews of your writing.

**Takeaway Three:** Contests validate your writing skills and provide proof of the level of your current skills. They show you where you can yet improve.

**Takeaway Four:** Impressing a publisher with your contest placements can help you get a publishing contract.

**Takeaway Five:** Find publications featuring contest winners and study them. Then, incorporate what you've learned into your work.