

Magic Words

How to Enchant Judges
& Conjure Contest Wins

Ellen E. Withers



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*To writers who want to win contests and see their works published.
Never give up the dream. Never stop learning the craft.
You can do it.*

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INTRODUCTION

FINDING THE “MAGIC”

“The greatest gift one human being can give to another is the belief in their own potential.”

—*Professor Howard Suber*

All readers, and most writers, understand there is good magic in a well-written story. If a writer has the proper skills, hones them to perfection, and sprinkles just a little fairy dust over the whole concoction, readers can be transported into another world—a world where time often disappears and new horizons open.

I wrote this book to share some of what I’ve learned on my long and winding path to publication. I hope the information will shorten your journey to contest wins and publication by helping you reach your goals. With the mastering of many of these skills in contest entry and preparation, you’ll be well on your way to realizing your dream.

As a child, I was interested in literature and writing, like many of you. My mother even saved the “books” I created. But, whether it was God’s plan, my destiny, or simply meant to be, words and creative writing became a part of my life by a path through nonfiction, technical writing, and magazine editing.

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The fantastic education I received in these fields was priceless. It opened many opportunities for personal growth.

I wanted to create the magic of stories. I wanted to write mysteries.

Mysteries are like puzzles. And I love a good puzzle. Even my insurance career involved solving puzzles, such as, “How did this fire start?” and “How did this collision occur?” Start with the border—the basic idea that holds the story together. Separate all the like colors, the red herrings, the petty green jealousies, the moody blue characters. And then bring them all together, piece by piece, until you’ve produced an image of “whodunit” that snares the bad guy and keeps the reader riveted.

Over the years, I improved my skills by attending as many writers’ conferences as I could. I also joined the Pioneer Branch of the National League of American Pen Women, a professional organization for writers, artists, and songwriters. Through my association with the local Pen Women branch, I became a board member of the Arkansas Writers’ Conference, where I learned the ins and outs of putting on a conference. This provided many more clues, which I’ll share here, to creating the enchantment of the written word. In fact, I sowed the first seeds of becoming a published novelist at a writing conference (see more in Chapter Two, *The Importance of Conferences*). You can do that too.

Along the way, I learned a lot of tricks, spells, and writerly incantations that I incorporated into my writing. Writing may be a solitary endeavor, but getting published is quite the opposite. There is no doubt God had a hand in making my dream come true. He provided a “book village” of people, skilled and supportive, needed to make my first book a reality. It took a lot of work, prayers, and blessings by many people to accomplish this task.

But it also took sharing my writing with the publishing world through entering contests—lots of contests. Almost every contest, even if you don’t win, provides the valuable feedback needed to perfect your craft. As I wrote in a blog post for my

friend Shannon Taylor Vannatter’s website: “The first step to publication is to learn the craft. Figure out what makes a publishable manuscript, and then follow the guidelines. Embrace the fact that you will *always* need to be open to learning. Be an eager student. Immerse yourself in the knowledge and encouragement of those who lecture at writing conferences. I’m grateful to those writers, editors, agents, and publishers who shared their secrets.”

After many years of practicing, honing, and improving my writing through contests, conferences, and rear-in-chair dedication, an offer of publication came at the right moment—and it happened through a contest entry.

One day, when the timing was right, and my confidence was high, I took a leap of faith and entered my work in Scrivenings Press’s annual Novel Starts contest. That entry caught the publisher’s attention, which later led to a book contract.

But how did I craft my spell-binding, contest-winning entry? That’s what this book is about. Read on and prepare to learn.

I’m certain there’s a contest or two or three—or ten—out there with your name on them. So, faithful wizardly writer, come and learn the things I learned to amaze, enchant, and bemuse editors and contest judges—and *then* learn how to transform that information into contest wins and, hopefully, the opportunity to live your dream.