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Entering and Winning Writing Contests

By Pamela White

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Visit any writing message board and you'll read discussion threads on contests and competitions for writers. The messages run the gamut of those who have been scammed to those who rave about contests. So where does the truth lie? For as many contests for writers there are out there, there are as many truths.

Before you run away from the opportunities offered by many legitimate writing contests, read the following eleven tips on choosing, winning and benefitting from writing contests.

1. Visit the websites listed below under resources. Many offer comments on writing contests which can help you decide which ones are for you, and which ones are to avoid. Do an internet search on the publication, business or person running the contest. While not answering all your questions, this type of search can help you cross off questionable contests.
2. If a contest is free to enter, you have nothing to lose, but still read the fine print. There are contests that claim rights to any winning stories, or even all submissions. For contests with an entry fee, decide if the prize money justifies the fee. For example, would you pay \$15 entry fee for a poetry contest where the winner received \$35 as the prize?

Entering and Winning Writing Contests

Would you pay a fee if the prize was publication, or a book?

3. Still unsure about a publication or business that is running an writing contest? E-mail the publisher or owner and ask for references. Visit the contest's website and track down former winners. Again, this is not a guarantee of anything, but if a former winner says he lost all rights to his story and was never paid, or on the other hand, if the winner raves about the cash prizes

and personal note from the literary agent/contest judge, you have a better idea of how you are likely to be treated in each case.

4. Read the rules carefully to make sure that a prize will be awarded no matter how many entries are received. If there is a minimum amount of entries (say the editor just wants to bring in entry fees equal to the cash awarded), make sure that the contest's rules state the fees will be refunded if the competition cannot be completed.

5. Want to increase your odds of winning? Find a relatively new publication or contest. Each year a contest is held builds on the previous year's publicity. The second annual contest of a fiction magazine will likely draw less entries than one that's been publicized for ten years.

6. Another way to hedge your bets is to follow the contest's rules. Know the word limit, way to submit, how to pay the entry fee and when winners will be announced. Do not think your story will be so special that the judges will overlook your sloppy formatting, lack of fee or 4000 extra words.

7. Read the list of judges. This could be as important as (and more exciting than) reading the contest rules. Will a magazine editor be judging your work? Maybe you'll catch the eye of a book editor, literary agent, novelist or publisher. If the judge list is great, and you don't win a prize,

Entering and Winning Writing Contests

you can still hope to hear from one of the judges asking you to submit to his magazine, or from a publisher asking if you have a novel in the works. For example, the kinds of judges you might wish to have reading your work can be found at Futures Mysterious Anthology Magazine which lists its judges online: <http://www.fmam.biz/contests.html#judges> .

8. Organize your work to be ready to enter contests. New contests pop up daily online. If you have your stories, essays, poems and book proposals organized, you can quickly pull one from your files of articles. Some contests accept previously published pieces, so know where your reprints are too.

9. Keep close tabs on what contests are coming up. Writer's Digest Writers Markets has a section listing writing contests. The Writer magazine has a markets section in each issue that includes contests. Futures Mysterious Anthology Magazine, which offers large cash prizes, and ByLine Magazine, which pays extra (beyond the nice cash prizes) to publish winning stories, list their upcoming contests in each issue. Write down the URL's listed below so you can plan a weekly foray online to find new competitions that meet your writing and personality.

10. Write fiction and want to add a win to your publishing credits? Know the periodicals and reviews that have writing contests. Read what they publish so you'll know what to submit to the contests. Glimmer Train has an annual new writers contest for those who've not yet been published in the short story genre. They are so organized for this and their other contests that they accept entries and the fee online, and send e-mail reminders to subscribers and writers when new contest deadlines are looming.

11. Take advantage of business tax deductions. Entry fees can be listed on your Schedule C (assuming you are a sole proprietorship) as a business expense, so keep track of entry fees you've

paid. Any cash prizes, though, are not considered business income, but must be listed under "Other Income" on your 1040.

Resources to Help You Find and Win Contests:

Information on Contests

<http://www.windpub.com/literary.scams/>

<http://www.writersweekly.com/phpBB2> – has a Whispers and Warnings Board

<http://www.sfwa.org/Beware/contests.html>

<http://www.absolutewrite.com> – click on Water Cooler at top of page to go to both a Bewares message board and a message board of paying opportunities including contests.

Contest listings:

<http://www.fmam.biz>

<http://www.glimmertrain.com>

<http://www.food-writing.com>

<http://www.writing-word.com/contests/index.shtml>

<http://www.bulwer-lytton.com/>

<http://www.writersdigest.com/contests>

<http://www.poewar.com>

<http://www.directory.ansme.com/arts/5566127.html>

<http://www.ByLinemag.com/contests.asp>

Pamela White is the editor and publisher of "Food Writing," an online newsletter which is running its first contest right now. She writes on writing, food, parenting, nutrition and life in general from her haunted home in northern New York amid the bustle of three children, her husband, five cats and one dog. Visit her at <http://www.food-writing.com>.

How to Evaluate Writing Contests: Six Starter Questions

By Dr. Erika Dreifus

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At some point in your writing career you will probably encounter the possibility of entering writing contests. As you peruse writing newsletters and magazines, at any rate, you'll almost inevitably find listings of competitions; you may very well begin to wonder how to decide whether a given contest is "right" for you and your poetry or prose. Here are six "starter" questions you can ask yourself to initiate that process of evaluation:

Entering and Winning Writing Contests

1. Do you recognize the press, university, writing center, magazine, literary review, etc. that is sponsoring the contest? Do your writing friends and teachers know about it? (A number of Internet boards post warnings about "scam" contests—it can't hurt to check those out.) Is the administering organization one you'd be happy to have publish your work?
2. Does the competition post the names of past winners (and the titles of their winning works)? Can you locate the published stories, poems, essays, or books?
3. Is an award guaranteed? Some contests stipulate that an award may not be given in a particular year; this may not be appreciated when fees have been collected; you may choose not to hand over a fee to such a contest.
4. What does the rest of the fine print say? Have you given over rights to your work simply by submitting it? Such details are often included in that tiny type. Read it carefully.
5. Is judging "blind"—are you asked to submit a manuscript without any identifying material on it?
6. If a fee is charged, does it seem "worthwhile" considering the potential prize? For example, a \$25 entry fee for a possible \$100 prize might not seem as alluring as a \$25 fee (or less) for a \$500 (or more) prize.

Considering these questions should set you on the way to thinking more critically about the contest process, and they'll assist you as you navigate the many listings and advertisements you'll find the more time you spend investigating opportunities to develop your writing career.

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About the Author: Dr. Erika Dreifus is a writer and writing instructor in Massachusetts. She edits the free monthly newsletter, "The Practicing Writer," and is the author of "The Practicing Writer's Guide to No-Cost Literary Contests and Competitions." Visit her website at <http://www.practicing-writer.com>.



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