Entering Writing Competitions is Fun

Winning a competition, or even just achieving a 'place', has most of us walking on air for days. *Yes, I can do it. My work's out there.* Even if we don't win, the process of preparing a story for a competition focuses the mind, prompting us to iron out all those little bits that don't look quite right now we come to think about it, to hone our grammar and spelling, and to cut the piece down ruthlessly to the required word count. In some competitions (most ACW competitions, for instance), judges' critiques are available for an additional fee.

Where To Find Out About Competitions?
- Read creative writing magazines, such as *Writers' Forum, Writing* and *Mslexia,* which print classified 'calls for submissions' on their back pages. (*Mslexia* is the most comprehensive.)
- Use Google to search for **writing competitions**.
- Search Twitter for **#writingcontests**
- Look for competitions on **https://duotrope.com/,** the writers' resource which lists all calls for submissions (although they do charge for their services and their focus is American outlets).
- Visit sites which list competitions, like these below:
  https://www.christopherfielden.com/
  http://www.prizemagic.co.uk/html/writing_comps.htm
  https://www.dystopianstories.com/writing-competitions-contests/
  Writer Patsy Collins' blog Words about writing and writing about words provides useful tip-offs for free competitions.

How Much Is It?
Entering competitions can become expensive, so we have to choose our competitions carefully, balancing high profile ones like the Bridport Prize alongside those run by writing websites and writing circles. Free competitions generally attract more entries than chargeable ones – because they are free. Entry fee is no guide to status: some free competitions, like the yearly *Writers and Artists Yearbook Competitions*, are very prestigious. (ACW members may enter ACW competitions free, but non-members pay £2 for one entry and £3 for two.)

Themed or Non-Themed?
Just seen a competition with the theme *Werewolves in Essex with pink ears*? Themed competitions, especially the bizarre ones, by their very nature attract fewer entries, so chances of winning are enhanced. When writing for a themed competition, ensure you hit the theme head on, in the first few sentences, but try to avoid the obvious story, which the judges will read over and over again. Not a good idea to be too subtle, either. If the theme is **dogs**, you are unlikely to win with a story about an organisation with the acronym D.O.G.

Checking Suitability of Story for Competition
When submitting a story to a magazine or ezine, we read previous issues and try to get a feel of what the editors are looking for, but competition judges are often appointed for one competition only, so reading last year's first-placed entry is only partially helpful. We need to work out the underlying philosophy behind the magazine or publisher. For Mslexia, it's feminism, and promoting women writers. In ACW competitions, we often (but not always) request a Christian slant.

What Makes a Competition Winner?
What constitutes any good story? Good characterisation and tight plot. A few twists, perhaps. Attention to spelling and grammar. Same as for other submissions.

The Nitty Gritty - Entry Requirements
Follow the entry requirements to the letter. When entering a competition, I check them off as I'm preparing my entry, then double-check them when I'm ready to submit.

- Name – The author's name must **not** appear anywhere on the script.
- Deadlines – Attempting to enter a competition late gives the impression of being disorganised and unprofessional, and electronic submission forms may be disabled immediately after the deadline. However, if just an hour or so late with an email entry, it's worth writing to the competition manager and apologising profusely. This sometimes works.
- Word count – Entries over the word limit will be disqualified automatically. Always check whether the word count includes the title; if nothing is mentioned about the title, assume it is included. When considering submitting significantly under the word limit, think carefully, as the judges will be looking for works of approximately the length stipulated.
- Correct format – Usually .doc or .docx, is asked for. It is unreasonable to expect competition managers to convert files (even though this is technically possible). If you can't save into the required format, contact the competition manager first and ask his/her advice.
- Font – Always respect fonts and font size requirements. If no font or font size is stipulated, use a font which is straightforward and easy to read, like Arial 12pt. If asked for a non-proportional font, use Courier New 12pt.
- Margins – Use wide margins (4cm plus on left hand side), always.
- Spacing – Double-line spacing is the usual way to display typescript… unless entry guidelines require something else, or you are copying and pasting into a submission form window.
- Indentation – Display the first line of the first paragraph at the margin and indent the first line of all following paragraphs right by about 1cm… unless told otherwise.
- Number pages - Always number pages, in the header or footer.

- <u>Headers and Footers</u> – Follow all instructions regarding what to include in headers and footers. If there are no instructions, display the title of the piece and the competition name (and year, as in *Bridport Prize 2018*) in the header and page numbers in the footer.
- <u>Check that your name doesn't appear anywhere on your script… again.</u>
- <u>Cover Sheet</u> – If required, add a cover sheet, containing title of story and word count, your contact details… and your name. If submitting by email, this information may go into the body of an email.

<u>How to Submit</u>
How to submit will be included in the entry requirements. Do it their way, always.
- **Postally** (rarer and rarer nowadays). If we are submitting postally, fasten pages with paper clips (not staples) and put them in an envelope big enough to avoid folding them, with a covering letter. Even though we would *never* re-use a typescript, include a stamped addressed envelope for the competition organisers to return it in the event of rejection. This helps us keep tabs of what we have and have not placed, and it's accepted practice.
- **In body of email** (because some competition managers believe that they will receive malware disguised as competition entries). When doing it this way, we may choose not to double-line space and our margins will go out the window – but, if that's what they want, they can deal with it.
- **As attachment to email** (more common, as competition managers understand cybersecurity better). The easiest method!
- Through an **online form** (through a submission manager, such as *Submittable*). Sometimes the form prompts you to insert an attachment and sometimes to paste into a submission window. If the latter, again, our formatting will disappear… but we're just following their instructions.

Finally, we should always keep a record of what we've submitted and to which competition, with the date of submission and competition closing date. Use Word, Excel or Access (or equivalents in other office suites) to record entries.

Good luck with competition entries. And if there's anything readers would like to share, please email competitions@christianwriters.org.uk

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