

WRITING CONTESTS 101

Erika Dreifus
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Recommended Resources

- The Practicing Writer (<http://erikadreifus.com/newsletter>). This is my own free, monthly e-newsletter, which routinely shares information on writing contests for fiction, poetry, and creative nonfiction. Includes only contests that DO NOT charge entry fees AND that provide cash prizes/publication. Complemented by weekly “Monday Markets” posts on the Practicing Writing blog (<http://erikadreifus.com/blogs/practicing-writing>).
- Creative Writing Opportunities List (CRWROPPS-B) <https://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/CRWROPPS-B/info>. “This group posts calls for submissions and contest information for writers of poetry, fiction, and creative nonfiction.”
- FundsforWriters (<http://www.fundsforwriters.com/fundsforwriters/>). From the website: “Our most popular **free** newsletter. Originally designed for the serious writer, FundsforWriters provides markets that pay \$200 or 10 cents/word and up... Expect 15+ paying opportunities in the form of contests, grants, freelance markets, jobs, and publishers/agents.” At the same website, you can also learn about the “Total FundsforWriters” newsletter, a twice-monthly newsletter for which there is a subscription fee.
- Poets & Writers Writing Contests, Grants & Awards database (<http://www.pw.org/grants>). From the website: “The Writing Contests, Grants & Awards database includes details about the creative writing contests—including poetry contests, short story competitions, essay contests, awards for novels, and more—that we’ve published in *Poets & Writers Magazine* during the past year.”
- Winning Writers Newsletter (<http://bit.ly/1A8nI1a>). From the website: “Get timely news about the best free contests, contests that we sponsor, and great resources for writers. You’ll receive instant online access to The Best Free Literary Contests, now with over 200 detailed contest profiles.”
- Writing and Poetry Contests (<http://www.freelancewriting.com/writing-contests.php>).

CRAFT TIPS CULLED FROM CONTEST-JUDGING

By Erika Dreifus

As some of you may remember, my writing practice recently expanded when I was invited to judge a short fiction competition. I am very grateful to have been asked to take on this role, and I am eager to see the winning stories announced (which should happen at the beginning of October).

One of the most interesting aspects of reading the nearly two dozen finalist pieces that were forwarded to me was the opportunity to reflect, once again, on what makes a story "succeed." Since I was required to comment on each winning story - touching on why I'd selected it as well as offering some ideas on what might further improve it - I had ample reason to revisit some of the lessons I have absorbed over the years about the craft of fiction. And so, this month, I thought I'd share five tips on how to strengthen a story based on my recent immersion in an array of short fiction contest entries.

1. Give your story a title. A title can help pique a reader's attention and ease her transition into the story. (And from this judge's admittedly idiosyncratic viewpoint, it simply seems more appropriate to award a prize to a specific story rather than to "Untitled.")
2. Unless you have a specific purpose - such as writing a story *entirely* in direct dialogue - it's a good idea to vary the direct and indirect approaches. Incorporating direct dialogue provides an opportunity to render characters more distinct through their individual word choice, dialect, and cadence. Indirect dialogue can be especially useful for summarizing information that need not be presented word for word.
3. Again, unless you're seeking to attain a specific effect, vary sentence structure and sentence length. Same goes for paragraphs. Shake things up! Everything - words, sentences, paragraphs - is a tool in your writerly toolbox. Use it all to maximum effect!
4. In the case of the competition I judged, writers had the option to begin the story with a prompt that presented a first-person narrator-character looking into a mirror. Ordinarily, however, having a character look into a mirror and describe his or her eyes, hair, teeth, etc., is not a very useful technique. Unless, perhaps, you wish to heighten the sense of your character's narcissism (or self-criticism).
5. It's a rare successful story that is composed of a character's unsituated memories/ruminations.

And one last tip, although I know we all hear it all the time: proofread, proofread, and proofread again. You do not want a judge stopped mid-read by misplaced apostrophe marks. Now, go forth, write, and submit!

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