



November 2013

Are writing contests worth the trouble?

Have you been thinking of entering a writing contest? Here are some things to consider:

1) What is the entry fee? What is the fee going towards?

Most writing contests request an entry fee, usually to pay an honorarium for the judges and to help cover the expenses of running the contest. Some contests, however, charge large entry fees without much return. Before writing that cheque, make sure the contest is being run by a reputable organization. Many scammers have lined their own pockets by taking advantage of the enthusiasm of new writers.



2) Who are the organizers, sponsors, and judges?

Are the organizers well known in the industry? Even if you aren't familiar with the contest, perhaps there is a judge on the jury from whom you would love to receive feedback. You should be able to find information about the individuals involved in the About Us section of the contest's website. If you aren't satisfied with the information supplied on the website, email the organizers. No reputable organization would shy away from answering questions about their background.

3) How will this contest help your career?

Would winning this contest look good on your resume? Is it a well-known contest? Is entering this contest worth your time and money? If your piece is published as part of the contest, do you want this particular piece to be considered "previously published"?

Writing contests can be a great way for a new writer to get her foot in the door. However, always take some time to weigh the pros and cons before sending payment.

Writing fiction: Plot vs. character

In fiction, concentrating solely on plot or character is unlikely. They generally work together. You have interesting characters whose problems, conflicts, and desires move



the plot along. And you are telling a story concerning people who act or who are acted upon.



Well-written characters are multidimensional, neither entirely virtuous nor entirely evil.

Stereotypes don't make for good fiction, and you should aim for some complexity even in minor characters. No one has only one personality trait, so try to write your characters as real people first. For the purposes of fiction, of course, you can exaggerate particular traits or characteristics, but not to the exclusion of all else.

If the characters are the muscles of your story, the plot is the bones. It is the way in which the premise of the story is expanded: What happened? How? Why? In simple terms, the plot is the course through which characters overcome obstacles to achieve their goals. Alternatively, a plot sets up a conflict and examines the process of its resolution (or failure to be resolved). The ending must not, however, be obvious to the reader from the beginning or there is no point in reading the story! At the same time, it cannot come out of the blue, supported by nothing that came before. A "surprise" ending that relies on the writer misleading the reader entirely is a cheat.

The following list of possible conflicts can be a useful tool for devising a plot. Set your main character against

- himself/herself;
- another/others;
- nature/the supernatural;
- society;
- a machine; or
- God.

At the end of the classic list of plot conflicts is also God Against Everybody. Your protagonist and antagonist(s) can act alone or as part of a group.

Finally, when writing fiction, don't be afraid to borrow from life. Writers have always taken daily events and used them to teach, to speculate, and to fantasize. They bring art to the imitation of life.



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