

Q&A with our SWA Contest Sponsor Judges



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Poetry: Silly vs. Southern Excellence



Susan Lindsley [long-time SWA member and award-winning author. She is known for her historical fiction and nonfiction based in Georgia's old south as well as for her poetry and nature writings], on what limericks are and why she loves writing them: **Limerick Award**

Limericks are a special form of poetry, designed to tickle the reader and/or jumble reality and life. Most are just plain fun.

Growing up with a mother who loved poetry and limericks was a delight. Those I learned from her are models of the format. For example:

There once was a lady from Niger
 Who smiled as she rode on a tiger;
 They returned from the ride
 With the lady inside
 And the smile on the face of the tiger.

If you read it aloud, you can easily catch the rhythm; that rhythm is a required aspect of a classic limerick. Break the rhythm and you do not have a limerick. For the writer, creating a limerick can be difficult because of this restriction on rhythm.

Note the syllables: Lines 1,2 and 5 contain nine beats; lines 3 and 4 contain 6.

For many writers, the rhyme is not a problem: AABBA. The beat, however, can be the major challenge.

Southeastern Writers held limerick contests for several years and these contests got me to loving the challenge.

One class assignment was to complete this line "There one time was an old Chevrolet truck."

At first glance, it has two problems: One is the pattern/rhythm is off. Also, it offers a bit of nasty for the reader to anticipate; but it also offers a challenge to rhyme with nice rather than nasty, and the reader, expecting the nasty, is surprised by the nice.

I wrote:

There once was an old Chevy truck
That was home to a goose and a duck.
They wanted to date
And even to mate
But neither one knew how to cluck*.

*For those who never raised chickens, geese and ducks quack, and hens (chickens) cluck.

On a trip to Ireland with the Decatur Civic Chorus, we dined in Limerick one noontime. That stop resulted in this:

A chorus from Georgia in Cork
Dined upon chicken and pork.
The waiter named Will
Said "Sing for your bill,"
And set about tuning his fork.

Perhaps my favorite is pure Okefenokee Swamp:

Deep in the South, an old 'gator
Saw a soprano and ate her.
His bass fairly rings
While soprano he sings
In solo duets in Decatur.



Take up the challenge and you'll discover the secrets of limericks and will hold them close to your heart as you read more and write more.

#

Jeff Newberry [current SWA board member, former faculty member, known for his poetry, on he's looking for in his: **Herbert Shippey Award for Excellence in Southern Poetry**

1. What are the top five mistakes you see authors make when writing a poem?

The biggest mistake that the neophyte poet makes is rhyme. There is nothing wrong with rhyme, per se, but so many new poets fall into a mechanical common meter with end-stopped perfect rhymes. This boring and trite approach to poetry makes it sound like a greeting card. Secondly, new poets often fall in love with centering their work. Unless you have a very specific reason for doing so, centering hurts a poem, as do strange typeface choices. Another big problem new poets have is that they're not familiar with poetry. If you're not reading poems, you're not writing them. And poets should be reading contemporary work published in the last two decades as much they are reading the classics and the masters. Another big problem I see is that too many neophyte poets see poetry as a vehicle for ideas. That's not the case. Poetry, Robert Frost says, begins in delight and ends in wisdom. Poetry lives in the concrete and specific, not the vague, the airy, or the idea-driven speculative territory too many fall into.

2. What are the top five things authors get right when writing a poem?

The right thing to do is write. And keep writing. That's what's important. As long as you're writing, you're learning.

3. Other than "addressing the Southeast in some broad way, either through subject matter or through style or through homage", do you have any other advice in writing a competitive poem for your contest? Or in other words, What specific things are you looking for when judging your contest entries?

I'd love to see free verse or loosely-metered lyric poems with artful rhyme, if any. I want to see poems that embrace specificity and reject obscurantism. I want poems that make me see the Southeast, a place I've known my entire life, with new eyes.

4. What is your favorite poem you've read and why?

Depending on the day, I have a lot of favorite poems. Right now, Robert Hayden's "Those Winter Sundays" pops to mind. An irregular sonnet, this poem does what so many good poems should do. It dwells in the concrete, the specific, and the sensory. The poem's central idea is explored not through airy speculation, but through images of sound, sight, hearing, taste, and smell. I love that poem so much. It's one of the few I have memorized.

5. Who is your favorite poet and why?

The best candidate for a favorite poet would be the late Irish writer Seamus Heaney. Heaney taught me how to write poems. Reading him, I found a grounded, wise voice steeped in the Northern Ireland of his childhood. I also found a genius-level imagination that could weave together strands of Irish folk tales, Greek and Roman myth, and contemporary political issues. Mostly, however, I read him and think, "I really wish that I'd written that." Or, perhaps more

correctly, “I really wish I could have written that.” I’m currently reading his just-released *Selected Letters*. His first book, *Death of a Naturalist*, is a must-read.

6. What important lesson did you learn as a budding author that made all the difference in writing engaging poetry that sells?

I don’t worry about selling. I write what I like to read, and if people like it, that’s great. There’s no money in poetry, but then again, there’s no poetry in money, Robert Graves once quipped.

7. Do you have any resources that you would recommend on the craft of writing poems?

So many great literary journals publish online. Read them regularly. Subscribe when you can. Poetry is a labor of love, and editing a journal—something I’ve done in the past—is absolutely a gift of your time and energy. The more readers, the better. Check out *StorySouth*, *The Greensboro Review*, *Sugar House Review*, *Apalachee Review*, and *Sweet* to get started. There are so many.

8. How important is the line length limit in your contest?

For me, anything more than fifty lines better work hard to keep my attention.

#

Up to 999-word stories:



Charlotte Henley Babb [former SWA board member, retired English Professor, and former faculty member, she is known for her speculative short stories and novels], on what she’s looking for in her: **Microcosm Award**

1. What are the top five mistakes you see authors make when writing a short story?

Especially with flash or microfiction, there's no story, just a glimpse of one. It's more of an event being described than a conflict resolved. Sometimes there's no clear point of view, which makes it more difficult to understand the conflict or how it is resolved. **In the stories I've read, writers often get five of ten things right but miss two or three.**

2. What are the top five things authors get right when writing a short story?

Most have a recognizable setting, reasonably good sentence structure/grammar, and a voice appropriate for the story genre. The character can be quirky, the setting unusual, or from an unusual point of view. These things set the story apart from others.

3. By what paragraph should the author introduce the main character along with their main flaw [that holds them back] and what they want?

In flash fiction, character, flaw, and desire should be at least hinted at in the first 100 words, regardless of paragraph structure. In longer stories, maybe the second or third paragraph, say 500 words.

4. By what paragraph/page should the genre used be clear?

Again, in flash fiction, paragraphs can be very short, but the first five sentences should make the content genre clear. Content genres tell what kind of story it is, rather than where a bookseller would shelve it.

5. By what paragraph/page should the author introduce the inciting incident?

The rule of thumb is that the inciting incident should be at about 10% of the story--that's at 100 words for a flash fiction story of 1000 words.

6. What is your favorite character in a short story you've read and why?

My favorite short story character is Granny Weatherwax in "The Sea and Little Fishes" by Terry Pratchett. Not a flash fiction story, the character is asked to behave more like other people, being "nice." She is a good person, but often stern, abrupt, and no-nonsense. Her attempts at being nice are complete failures, and she can't understand why, but in the end, she is herself, and the point is made to all.

7. What important lesson did you learn as a budding author that made all the difference in writing engaging fiction that sells?

I'm still working on marketing, which is a different issue than writing craft. I think the primary skill is learning to interact with the audience through social media, personal appearances, email, and other marketing, which is a completely different topic. If the audience likes me, they might like what I write. The writer must have an audience in mind. Even my best friends do not like the genres I write, preferring other things or non-fiction/self-improvement. So I write for people who like silliness, fairies, dragons, cats, and twisted pop culture references. Finding them can be a challenge, but when I do, they like my writing.

8. Do you have any resources that you would recommend on the craft of writing?

Holly Lisle's free, three-week class "How to Write Flash Fiction that Doesn't Suck" is a great resource. Her longer fiction and craft classes are reasonably priced and are supported by a forum of students in those classes.

9. How important is the word count limit in your contest?

Word count is critical: anything over 1,000 words will be unread. The title, of course, does not count. It is a flash fiction contest.

10. What specific things are you looking for when judging your contest entries?

I am looking for originality, perspective, resolution of conflict, and tight prose.

#

Up to 1000-word stories



Cappy Hall Rearick [former SWA president and faculty member, she is a syndicated humor columnist and known for Southern humor writing], on what she's looking for in her: **Cappy Award for Southern Humor**

What are the top five mistakes you see authors make when writing humor?

1. Forcing humor.
2. Long sentences.
3. Too much colloquial languaging.
4. Not being universal.
5. Bad title.

What are the top five things authors get right when writing humor?

By undoing any of the above Do Nots.

What specific things are you looking for when judging your contest entries?

I want to laugh or at least smile at the words.
 A good story with a humorous ending.
 A catchy title.
 Well-constructed story.

What is your favorite piece of humor you've read and why?

I have not read any recently written humor in a while.

Who is your favorite humor author and why?

My favorite humor writer is Anne George who wrote The Southern Sisters series. I write Southern humor, so I'm attracted to authors who do it well. Anne George died several years ago, but I read and re-read her work.

What important lesson did you learn as a budding author that made all the difference in writing humorous stories and anecdotes that sells?

I learned to keep it short and sweet and to exaggerate a normal happening.

Do you have any resources that you would recommend on the craft of writing humor?

If you want to write in the humor genre, read other writers and learn from them. They are out there ... look for them!

How important is the word count limit in your contest?

I have found that approximately 800 words makes for a good piece of humor. Anything over 1000 words too often gets tedious. And/or boring.

#

Jim Furry's Eye on the Page [current SWA president, he is an FBI agent turned writer], on what he's looking for in his: **Short Story Contest**

1. What are the top five mistakes you see authors make when writing a short story?

- In preparing to write for a contest, authors often do not carefully read and adhere to the contest requirements, which puts them at a disadvantage.
- Edits often miss grammatical errors, which also makes your submission less competitive.
- Forgetting to double-check the word count before submitting their work.
- In attempting to complete the submission within the word limit, many times the author will limit their character development.
- Sometimes the author's first paragraph does not provide a hook to keep the judges interested.

2. What are the top five things authors get right when writing a short story?

- Include in the first paragraph a hook to keep the reader interested.
- Include in the first paragraph clues to the genre of the story.

- Introduces the protagonist early in the story.
- Within the first hundred words include the first challenge to the protagonist.
- In a short story, the author who gets things right must be concise and on point with the characters and the plot.

3. By what paragraph should the author introduce the main character along with their main flaw [that holds them back] and what they want?

- See question #2 point 4.

4. By what paragraph/page should the genre used be clear?

- Depending on the length of the short story, as soon as possible. That helps the reader/judge get on board with the protagonist early and aligns them with the protagonist's journey.

5. By what paragraph/page should the author introduce the inciting incident?

- The inciting incident can be done on the first page; but to hit the reader between the eyes the author can begin the story with the inciting incident.

6. What is your favorite character in a short story you've read and why?

- Paul Scallen in "The Three-Ten to Yuma," by Elmore Leonard. I enjoyed it because I grew up watching, "Gunsmoke," and, "The Lone Ranger," TV shows, most of which had tons of fact action and suspense. This short story embodied a plot with rising-tension, lots of action, suspense, a great climax, and a happy ending along with a moral lesson. All of the elements of a great story were in plain sight; the good guys, the bad guys, and knowing the ending will come in a defined time – when the train arrives.

7. What important lesson did you learn as a budding author that made all the difference in writing engaging fiction that sells?

- I began writing with the self-delusion I knew how to write because writing had been important in my working career. The lesson I've learned is that writing FOR a reader is much different than writing for yourself or an employer. It is important to always learn from authors who are better than you, and to learn from as many other sources you can find such as the internet, writing organizations, and writing publications.

8. Do you have any resources that you would recommend on the craft of writing?

- The two best resources I would recommend is a membership in Southeastern Writers Association and a subscription to *Writer's Digest*, magazine.

9. How important is the word count limit in your contest?

- Very important as is all the other requirements written for the contest. A writing contest is not only a test of your ability to put together a story on paper which holds the judge's interest, but to also adhere to the rules of the game. The winner is the one who produces the best composition among all the contestants using the same standard. Yours may be the best by writing an additional two paragraphs at the end, but that would be unfair to all those who cut words throughout their entry to pare it down to the word limit.

10. What specific things are you looking for when judging your contest entries?

- As noted above, the first thing I check is the word count. The second thing is whether my prompts were used and if they were used properly. Then I reread the story to determine if it reads well, holds my attention, and if it tells a complete story. I'd like to say no matter what the content, I am completely objective, but I think some subjectivity has to enter into the judging because there have been some stories which I've just sat back after reading it and thought, "*Wow, that's a great story.*" So, write your best story within the rules, and make it one that the judge will put in the "wow," category.

#

Longer Short Stories [cap at 4,000 words vs 5,000]



Sandra Giles [former SWA board member and faculty member, she is a published author of a variety of speculative stories], on what she's looking for in her: **The Vega Award for Speculative Short Fiction**

1. What are the top five mistakes you see authors make in short stories?

- Story arc is off—the story doesn't start where it should, or the ending is rushed, or the overall structure doesn't enhance progression
- Things happening in the story don't have significant consequences, or problems are solved too fast
- The ratio of showing v. telling is off, which keeps the reader at arm's length
- Point of view doesn't work effectively. Omniscient as used in the story offers no particular benefit, or third person limited as used doesn't get us close to the character, or first person limited as used keeps us too much in the character's head
- Setting doesn't figure significantly into the story. Why does the story take place here? Why in this era?
- Important questions about story and character arc haven't been considered: Why now? Why today? Why are we seeing this particular line segment of this particular character's life?

Okay, that's six. With some overlapping. But I hope the list helps.

2. What are the top things authors get right?

The majority of stories coming across my desk have a concept that will work. In fact, I can't remember when someone submitted a completely unworkable concept. As long as they have that, they've got something they can work with.

3. By what paragraph should the author introduce the main character, along with their main driving forces (yearning and flaw)?

In a short story, this needs to come fast. In speculative fiction it's tempting to spend a lot of time establishing the world. But the most important aspects of the world and the main character should become apparent together, beginning right away. By most important aspects, I mean most important to the story that's being told here, not the whole background and context from the author's mind. Why now? Why today? Why this particular line segment?

4. By what paragraph/page should the genre be clear?

So much depends on context, so this is going to be a longer answer. The other day, I read a short story from the 2021 edition of *Best American Science Fiction and Fantasy*. The speculative aspects didn't come into play until just past the halfway mark. I kept reading because I have faith in the Best American series, and I have faith in Victoria Roth, who edited that edition. By the end of the story, I understood why the author wrote it that way, and I think the decision was quite effective. Now, if I had encountered the story somewhere else, where I didn't know the genre going in, would I have kept reading? Yes, because 1) I read a variety of genres, and 2) the character and voice captivated me from the get-go. But some readers are so particular about genre they'll put a story aside if it seems not to be what they want.

Then there's the question of submitting for publication. An editor needs to know up front if your story is going to fit their particular magazine or journal. They do not have time to read the whole thing first to see if it even fits.

For SWA's Vega Award, I will read all the submissions all the way through. If by the end of your story I'm left confused as to whether the story is speculative, that's a problem. Also, the speculative element(s) should be integral and not simply surface dressing.

5. By what paragraph/page should the author introduce the inciting incident?

If the story uses a Freytag's Pyramid structure, there will be an inciting incident, and it should come early. I won't dictate a page or paragraph because when writing starts to feel formulaic I lose interest. In a short story, the ball should get rolling very soon, and as a reader I should feel the potential for that ball to roll immediately.

Whether the story has a Freytag's Pyramid structure or not, the *writing* must immediately give me the feeling, from sentence one, that things are moving toward something important and interesting. It can't feel like it's dilly dallying. Sometimes an author will argue their opening does not dilly dally, but to the reader, it does.

I'm using the word *feel* a lot, but feel is fundamental to the experience of reading a story.

6. What is your favorite character in a short story?

There are so many, and they're favorites for so many different reasons. Recently, I read "When Robot and Crow Saved East St. Louis," by Annalee Newitz. The character Robot is memorable and loveable because he's, well, loveable. He's been programmed to act certain ways toward humans and therefore deliberates choices about his behavior, which thematically relates to the story's questions about what being human is, what consciousness is, what friendship is, what motivation is. So it's deeply interesting that he is loveable, since he has to process his way through all the interactions that happen. I could go on and on, but I won't. 😊

7. What important lesson did you learn as a budding author that made all the difference in writing engaging fiction that sells?

There's so much to unpack in this question. I'll try to be brief.

When I first began writing, I wrote what, in those days, was called "genre" fiction (example: thriller). But I didn't know how to write what was in my head. I went back to school to study creative writing and became immersed in the world of what, in those days, was called "literary" fiction (example: social realism). And it opened up oceans of new possibilities for my writing. These days, I deliberately keep a foot planted in each world, each helping my work in the other.

Younger generations of writers don't attach such judgement to those broad distinctions (genre vs. literary). I'm glad. The distinctions can be useful to navigate the world of publishing and marketing. If you want to play that game, you do have to play it. But don't shut yourself into any box that's not helpful.

For me, consideration of making a sale, or what have you, comes at the end of a story's process. As I'm writing, I see it as a work of art, using language to create. Once I've gotten it polished

enough to leave my desk, then I figure out what to do with it, which might include pursuing a sale, or publication in a more literary journal, or some other option. It depends what kind of thing the story turns out to be. Where its readers are.

So an up-front goal of “selling” doesn’t figure into my writing process, unless I’ve picked a certain magazine I’m trying to get into just as a challenge. Then it does, but just as a challenge.

8. What resources would you recommend on the craft of writing?

There are so many helpful ones. I just ordered *Fantasy Fiction: A Writer’s Guide and Anthology*, by Jennifer Pullen, which just came out this month. It’s highly recommended by a number of authors and teachers I follow. It might be waiting in my mailbox as I’m writing this!

But let me say this: there’s good and helpful advice—which we all need—then there’s harmful advice. It might be harmful because it’s poor quality, or it might affect you harmfully because of the way it’s delivered. Do judge the credibility and helpfulness of any teaching, advice, feedback, critique that comes your way. And do be aware what kinds of input you need at different stages in your writing process. Guard your process.

9. How important is the word count limit in your contest?

Word count for the Vega Award should not exceed the stated limit by more than 10-12%. Some editors and judges are extremely strict, for their own reasons. I have limits on my time, but I also want a nicely constructed story with an effective opening, middle, end.

10. What specific things are you looking for when judging your contest entries?

All of the qualities of great fiction ever described! Just kidding—that’s not a helpful answer.

I don’t know that I’ve ever read a PERFECT short story. I’ve certainly never written one. And there are so many elements involved in a good short story, it’s hard to balance them.

I’d rather read a somewhat rough gemstone than highly polished glass. I do appreciate firm control of technical elements, but that in itself is not enough. If there’s just not much to the idea or character or world, then technical flaws stand out and yell for attention. If the story is totally absorbing, technical flaws may hardly show up at all.

Ultimately, when I judge a contest, I look for *balance* and *overall effect*. I ask myself these questions: how well does the story balance the main elements of character, plot, setting, the writing itself, and so on? How successful is the overall effect? Is the story compelling enough the flaws are outweighed? Or are the flaws significant enough to snap the reader out of being absorbed? Will I remember this story a month from now?

#

“Jack Torrance” [judging under a pseudonym, he is an active member of the Apex-Writers and a valued writer friend of Amy Wethington. A retired cop, he is now free to work full-time on his

detective stories set in space. He picked this year's writing prompt and has graciously agreed to take over the judging of the Lighthouse Prompt Award], on what he is looking for in his: **The Lighthouse Prompt Award**

1. The top five mistakes I see authors make when writing a short story are (in no particular order):

- 1) cramming too many characters into a short body of work.
- 2) too many POV characters - when you only have a handful of words to use, don't use them bouncing from POV to POV, one is generally enough, two if you're a master of your craft.
- 3) too much backstory in the first few paragraphs - those precious paragraphs on the first page better draw the reader in, backstory should be woven into the short story carefully and only in moderation.
- 4) along similar lines, a slow, boring start to the story is tantamount to a slow, agonizing death - not every story has to start *in medias res*, but please try to hook your reader in the first page or two...the shorter the story, the less time you have to hook them.
- 5) too much world-building and not enough character-building - in a short story, while the setting is important, the character(s) are much more important than spending time building a world that has numerous races living on multiple continents, each with their own unique climate.
- 6) BONUS ADVICE: pay close attention to the word count, prompt (genre, action, character requirements, etc.), formatting, and the rest of the rules - playing fast and loose with the rules is a good way to lose points or get disqualified from most contests - in the pro markets, ignoring the rules will earn you a rejection.

2. The top five things authors get right when writing short stories are (again, in no particular order):

- 1) they're amazing hookers! - that's right, I said it, they hook the reader in the first paragraph...or at the very latest, within the first page.
- 2) they reveal the genre within the first few pages.
- 3) they fill the pages with action and dialogue, sprinkle in the backstory when necessary, and describe only what's necessary to the story about the setting/world - when I'm reading a short story and the author tells me about the pretty butterfly flitting around by the stream, but it doesn't have a single solitary thing to do with the story, I instantly get pulled out of the story - but when the author ties the setting description into the relevant plot in some way, I stay in that world and never miss a beat.
- 4) they build characters that I love, hate, or at least feel some strong emotion about - if I love (or love to hate) the main characters, I'm going to want...no, need to learn more about them - readers learn to "feel" something about the main characters based on their actions and dialogue and the way the rest of the "world" treats them.
- 5) they reveal the protagonist's mission/challenge/problem on the first page - then they successfully build the try/fail cycles (an appropriate number for the length of the work).

3. By what paragraph should the author introduce the main character along with their main flaw (that holds them back) and what they want?

This varies, depending on the length and genre of the story. Flash fiction or short stories under a thousand words - that info should be in the first couple of paragraphs. If you have five thousand words to work with, I still think the main character should be introduced in the early paragraphs - at least in the first five.

4. By what paragraph/page should the genre be clear?

As I said before, I like to know what I'm reading early on. In most short stories I like to see the genre revealed within the first few pages. I'm fine with knowing it's a mystery by page two or three but not finding out it's a thriller until page four or five (unless this is a very short/flash fiction piece in which case genre cue should come right away).

5. By what paragraph/page should the author introduce the inciting incident?

As early as the plot will allow. If you have roughly twenty pages to lay out a completed short story, but the inciting incident happens on page eighteen, why did you make the reader wade through all that fluff before getting to the point? In this case, I would say the inciting incident needs to be introduced by page two or three at the latest, so your reader has more time to "bond" with your main character.

6. What is your favorite character in a short story you've read and why?

Wow, this is a tough one. When I was young, H.G. Wells' Time Traveler was one of my favorites. He had the curiosity and drive of a young boy wanting to explore, and he just kept pushing and pushing...hundreds of thousands of years into the future! As I've gotten older, I've grown to love Agatha Christie's Belgian sleuth, Hercule Poirot. He's a funny little man, with lots of character. His methods of solving crime are not always realistic, but he helps me escape from reality. He doesn't play favorites (too much) and he's not afraid to go up against the biggest and baddest of the bunch.

7. What important lesson did you learn as a budding author that made all the difference in writing engaging fiction that sells?

There's no single lesson that will make you a fabulous writer. You must write often. You must read often. You must grow a thick skin and not be offended when someone says "oh, that's terrible, you need to scrap that whole chapter and do it this other way..." Get over your stage fright and send your work out to folks who aren't afraid to butcher it and send it back to you - invest in red ink pens. Take classes. If you don't have the money, check the internet, you'll be surprised how many videos you can find online for free...but please be careful, stick to reputable sources. Find videos with David Farland/Wolverton, Stephen King, Brandon Sanderson, or other successful writers from your particular genre.

8. Do you have any resources that you would recommend on the craft of writing?

I'm a big fan of David Farland's teachings, as well as those of Stephen King. If you can join a professional writing group, such as Farland's Apex Writers, you will have access to many resources not readily available to the general public. There are also pro-market submission opportunities available only to members of select professional writing groups (Apex Writers,

Wulf Moon's Wulfpack, etc.). The following are good resources to have on hand: Donald Maass' *The Emotional Craft of Fiction*, Mary Buckham's *Writing Active Hooks*, Stephen King's *On Writing*.

9. How important is the word count limit in your contest?

Very. Contests are fun. If you play your cards right, contests will help you become a published author (if you're not already). Most pro markets have rules about word counts, genre, formatting, profanity, gore, and on and on. If you don't follow their rules, your submissions won't be considered for publication. I feel the same respect for the rules should be observed in the contests you enter.

10. What specific things are you looking for when judging your contest entries?

First, make sure you're following the rules of the contest. Next, use your amazing imagination and come up with a great story idea. Then, build some strong characters (but not too many - this is a short story after all). Jump into the action. I like my stories to have a good beat. Just like with great music, I want to "feel" the beat of your story. I love witty dialogue, it doesn't have to be comedic, mind you, but at least make it good dialogue that draws me into the story. When you're finished with the story, read it through to find out what "takes you out of the story," and fix it. I don't want to be reading my way through your amazing action or dialogue only to hit a speed bump and get knocked completely out of your world. Have some try/fail cycles. It's your story so end it how you like but end it on a fail at your own risk! A good story can end on a fail if done correctly, but you don't want your reader to be left feeling like the story was never finished. That's like watching a movie that needed a sequel but never got one. Above all else, I'm looking for a great story that takes me to your world, has me running alongside your characters cheering them on (or shouting profanity at them), and leaving feeling satisfied.

Novel length awards: any genre



Buzz Bernard [former SWA president and faculty member. He is the multiple-award-winning author of thrillers and WWII historical fiction], on what he’s looking for in his: **The Hal Bernard Memorial Award for Novel**

I’m sure you’re aware that judging writing competitions is subjective. There are no hard and fast rules or standards. Each judge has his or her own guidelines. And each has his or her own likes and dislikes, expectations, and framework through which a novel is viewed.

You could certainly argue that you need to know how to structure a sentence and string together coherent paragraphs. But I think that’s probably a given if you feel competent enough to enter a piece of writing you’ve labored over for weeks or months into competition.

So the best I can do is give you what *I* look for when I’m evaluating contest entries. Let me also say, I’ve been doing this for a while for the Southeastern Writers Association. So I’ve reviewed a lot of writing.

I’ve also been asked to read the work of individual wannabe authors and critique what they’ve done. And I guess I also do it subconsciously whenever I read a book, especially if it’s by an author I’m not already familiar with.

Let me pause here and say, that I guess I do have a couple of rules I think writers should consider. Rule number one: there are no rules. Rule number two: tell a good story. Tell a good story? You bet. I once heard a literary agent say, “I can’t sell good writing. I can sell a good story.” So tell a good story, one that will grab me by the throat at the beginning and refuse to let me go. One that will force me to keep turning the pages even though it might be well past my beddy-bye, lights-out time.

Perhaps the biggest fault I see in a lot of manuscripts I read is that it takes “forever” to get into the story. I read a manuscript for a friend recently, his initial shot at crafting a novel. It turned out to be well done and interesting, but it took f—o—r—e—v—e—r to get into the meat of the tale. If I’d purchased the book for recreational reading, I would have given up on it after several chapters. My first comment to the author was, “Great story, my friend, but it starts on page 51, not page 1.”

Please, don’t bore me up front with the backstories of the main characters. Weave the details and descriptions about the protagonist and others into the story as it goes along. Don’t do a “data dump” on me before the story ever gets cranking.

I recently read an ARC—Advance Reader Copy, if you aren’t familiar with the term—by another friend who spent the first 50 pages of his book describing the background of a character who, it turned out, wasn’t even a major player in the novel. It left me wondering how that ever got past the editors. It also left me bored.

The old adage about writing thrillers is: Start at the point of action. Maybe that isn’t always practical. But when you’ve got only 10 pages to get *my* attention, you sure better let me know

who the main character is and what he or she is up against, or at least get me interested enough to know something's gonna go "boom" soon.

Oh, and don't worry about the fact I'm a thriller/WWII historical fiction writer. Anything genre can win in the competition I sponsor. It doesn't make any difference whether it's mystery, fantasy, sci-fi, romance, or thriller. Give me a compelling story with compelling characters and you'll be battling for a top spot.

Another thing I like to see in a work of fiction is lots of dialogue (preferably snappy). I love the use of "little" words instead of "big" ones (don't try to impress your readers with your vocabulary). And I prefer shorter sentences rather than long ones (although you must vary the length of your sentences so your readers won't fall into a trance).

Overall, I don't like to feel that I'm being *told* a story, I like to feel I'm *embedded* in it. I want to be right there with the protagonist, shoulder-to-shoulder, feeling their emotions, experiencing their environment, suffering through their defeats, and celebrating their victories.

And don't forget to proofread, proofread, proofread. Too many of the entries I've read get knocked out at first glance because of typos, sloppy grammar, echoes, and confusion over who or what various pronouns might be referring to.

Finally, a word about writing a synopsis. Illuminate only the main story/character in a synopsis. Don't bother with side stories and secondary characters. Identify the turning points, the big events. And please *tell me how the drama ends*. So many authors seem reluctant to include the conclusion of their story. **A synopsis isn't a blurb to attract readers.** It's a short summary of a novel for agents, publicists, and competition judges. It's not a pitch that's designed to leave you wondering how everything turns out. As a judge, I have to know.

Now, get busy, have some fun, and deliver a page-turner to me.

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Novel length awards: Mystery



Muriel Pritchett [current SWA board member and award-winning Georgia author of fiction for women, young adults, and middle-grade readers; will be assisted in judging by members of the Thursday Writers Critique Group], on what cozies are, a bit about their history, and what they are looking for in their: **Thursday Writers' Cozy Mystery Award**

The first full-length cozy mystery appeared in the 1930s, featuring Agatha Christie's Miss Marple. They are typically a light, fast-paced, easy read with comforting and predictable feeling for the reader. Cozy mystery series are very popular. Probably because the relatable protagonist is not a professional sleuth, but just happens to be at the center of every crime in every story.

Cozy mysteries, a sub-genre of crime fiction, are clean stories, may have romance without sex, all violence/murders take place offstage, the mystery solver is an amateur sleuth aided by supportive friends, the law enforcer (a sheriff, detective, police chief) is often perceived as bumbling or not as knowledgeable as the sleuth, contain clues and red herrings, have a distraction that leads the sleuth off the right path, usually involve a eureka moment that points toward the guilty party, and the crime and detection take place in a small, socially-intimate community like Cabot Cove, Maine (*Murder She Wrote*) or the Caribbean island of Saint Marie (*Death in Paradise*) or Kempleford, England (*Father Brown*) or Three Pines, Quebec, Canada (*Three Pines*).

Members of the Thursday Writers Critique Group will judge submissions based on Marketability, Employment of Hooks, Engaging Characters, Voice, Sense of Place, Pace of Story, and Plot Line.

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Lynn Hesse [SWA member, board member for the Atlanta Pen Women and Southern Sisters-in-Crime, retired law enforcement, and award-winning author of a crime series, a mystery, and a suspense novel], on what she's looking for in her: **Crime Fiction Contest**

1. What are the top five mistakes you see authors make on the first ten pages of a manuscript?

Some authors use a flowery, descriptive introductory paragraph that doesn't matter to the overall story, forget about using dialogue or write stilted dialogue, describe each new character in minute detail, and don't capture the main character's voice. The reader's emotional attachment to the story is critical.

2. What are the top five things authors get right on the first 10 pages of a manuscript?

Most authors set the tone, introduce the protagonist, throw in a hook, reveal conflict, and show an inciting incident.

3. By what page/paragraph should the author introduce the main character along with their main flaw [that holds them back] and what they want?

The main character should be introduced early on. Gradually, their main flaw and what they want is part of the fun reveal as the story unfolds and the reader discovers how and why they interact with others and make their choices.

4. By what page should the author introduce the inciting incident?

I recommend that within the first three pages, the writer lays the groundwork or reveals the inciting incident, but I can sustain my attention if the suspense builds for 10-20 pages. Then, I'm distracted.

5. What is your favorite character in a book you've read and why?

The battle-hardened Maisie Dobbs character in the Maisie Dobbs historical novel series set in the 1930s by Jacquelyn Winspear is a woman before her time with a perfect balance of intellect, ethical dedication to the craft of detection, guts, and intuition.

6. What important lesson did you learn as a budding author that made all the difference in writing engaging fiction that sells?

The definition of crime fiction is frequently misunderstood by the public and reviewers. I think an outstanding blurb is essential. Note: If you write traditional mysteries or cozies and are a woman, your career will be easier.

Take a playwriting class. It helps focus on dialogue to keep the plot moving.

7. Do you have any resources that you would recommend on the craft of writing?

Bird by Bird by Anne Lamott, On Writing, A Memoir of the Craft by Stephen King, and Writing Down the Bones by Natalie Goldberg can't be beaten, but trusting my own voice came from writing every day, reading others in my genre, and hearing inspiring authors like Walter Mosley speak about writing in different genres and encouraging others to do their own thing. Try writing a short story before tackling a novel.

8. Do you have any suggestions regarding pitches?

Start with a hook, show enthusiasm for your protagonist and plot, but don't try to tell the whole story. Comparing your work to another well-known author gives an agent a reasonable idea of your style.

9. Do you have any suggestions regarding the writing of a 1-page synopsis?

I boil down the story into three lines. You can use each sentence as the topic sentence in a

three-paragraph synopsis. The fourth paragraph should include the ending unless the publisher's guidelines specify otherwise.

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Mystery Novels: Cozies vs. Crime Fiction

Mystery – A story that frequently involves a mysterious death or a crime to be solved, though not always. The main character is often a detective who must consider a small group of suspects, each of whom must have a reasonable motive and opportunity for committing the crime. The detective eventually cracks the code by logical deduction from clues presented to the reader. Common elements: overt clues, hidden evidence, inference gaps, suspense, foreshadowing, red herrings. Mystery books include Agatha Christie's *And Then There Were None* and Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*. Mystery films include *Clue* (1985) and *The Usual Suspects* (1995). [Mystery genre definition -- NYC Midnight Short Story Competition]

6 Obligatory Scenes:

1. A scene where a crime is discovered.
2. A scene where the stakes become personal for your character and they commit.
3. A scene where your character learns what the antagonist wants and why.
4. A scene where your character comes to the wrong conclusion and all feels lost.
5. A scene where your character exposes the true criminal and unravels their plans.
6. A scene where readers learn whether justice has prevailed or not.

10 Crime Story Conventions

1. There's a crime with at least one victim that launches the investigation
2. The protagonist is intelligent and determined to solve the crime
3. There's an equally smart or crafty antagonist who is one step ahead
4. There is a closed circle of suspects, each with motive, means, and opportunity
5. There's a MacGuffin (or a very specific thing the antagonist wants)
6. A sidekick character who acts as a sounding board for the protagonist
7. There are clues and red herrings that help (or hurt) the investigation
8. There's a ticking clock by which the protagonist must solve the crime
9. There's a speech in praise of the antagonist that shows their brilliance
10. There's at least one shapeshifter character

[10 Conventions and 6 Obligatory Scenes -- Savannah Gilbo's website]

5 Considerations for Developing a Cozy Mystery

1. *Who's solving the Crime?* Since most cozy protagonists are amateur sleuths, the first step is to find an intriguing profession outside the realm of law enforcement that will hold the reader's attention, provide a solid basis for world building, and lead to the introduction of multiple characters—after all, we're eventually going to need suspects, right? From there, build an intriguing sleuth by starting with their flaws or problems.

2. *Who is the victim?* As noted earlier, the deceased must have a strong connection to the sleuth, but the next step in crafting a compelling victim is deciding how that person meets his end. Here's where we must maximize our creativity because the victim and his mode of death can be just as much of a reader draw as the sleuth. And as long as the murder is plausible and well-motivated, you're welcome to go as over-the-top as you please.

3. *Who wants the victim dead?* Decide the killer's method, opportunity, and motives before starting your draft. Even if you're a pantsner, this is essential because all decisions thereafter will stem from this baseline. You can decide the modus operandi before or after you know who the killer is, but be logical about the choice once a character is in place.

4. *Who are the suspects?* Once you have a killer, you'll need a group of suspects to help mask the murderer's identity. But how many suspects do you need? Three to five is a good range. Any less and the murderer becomes obvious; any more and you run the risk of confusing the audience. Create a broad range of people from those who obviously wanted the victim dead to someone who unwittingly stumbled upon the crime scene. Regardless of who these people are and what they do, make sure they all have a secret, crime related or otherwise. Secrets give each character motive to lie to the sleuth and add a fun layer of story problems that need solving prior to the murder's resolution. The suspects should also know each other so that correlations can be made and blame can be laid.

Final thought - A final thing to note about the killer in a cozy is that unlike suspense thrillers or mysteries with a harder edge, both the killer and the victim need to not only have standing in the community, but also their presence and eventual absence must have an emotional or psychological impact on the sleuth and the overall story. This goes right back to where we started, in that, the community connection and the story's overall environment become key. Endeavor to create a world that is large enough that each character's on and offstage life—work, school, marriage, et cetera—could conceivably play a role in the victim's.

[FROM LOU SCHLESINGER'S RESEARCH]