

Title:

Free Contests May Not Cost You Money, But They Can Still Cost You

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Summary:

If there's no entry fee, why not enter? If I don't win, I don't lose anything. Many a new writer has been burned by thinking this way. Free competitions may not cost you any money to enter, but they can still cost you.

The Big Beware: Are You Selling Your Rights by Entering?

Beware of competitions that have no entry fee but a statement saying they have the right to print your work, regardless of whether or not you win. In some cases, these competitions also take the c...

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Article Body:

If there's no entry fee, why not enter? If I don't win, I don't lose anything. Many a new writer has been burned by thinking this way. Free competitions may not cost you any money to enter, but they can still cost you.

The Big Beware: Are You Selling Your Rights by Entering?

Beware of competitions that have no entry fee but a statement saying they have the right to print your work, regardless of whether or not you win. In some cases, these competitions also take the copyright to your work. That means your story is no longer yours—whether or not you win.

To avoid getting burned, read the contest guidelines and make sure there is no statement that says anything like "all entries become the property of XXX" or "by entering, entrants grant permission for XXX to publish, edit, or sell the work."

Is Your Work Automatically Going to be Published?

Be careful of free competitions where entries are automatically published

online. If they're published online, that means you can't sell them as first rights anywhere else. Selling reprints isn't easy and you usually can't sell reprints for much.

For these competitions, your entry can become your only chance to sell the story. In these cases, it's often better just to try and sell it to a market. At least then, you get more than one chance.

The BIG Prize Money

Some competitions that require publishing rights to all entries have large prizes to attract people. But if a lot of people enter, that means your entry will have to be pretty good to win.

If you can write a story that will be better than 2000 others, it's quite possible you'd be able to sell it to a magazine for almost as much as the prize money. And that way, there's no risk to you.

And what if your story is almost good enough to win? You don't win and you risk a story that you could probably sell somewhere else. It's not worth the risk for a chance at the big prize.

Who is the Contest Benefiting?

Katrina's Story: When a "Highly Commended" is Your Loss

"I was really unhappy when a story I wrote got published online for no pay. It was published as one of the "Highly Commended" stories, with two stories published each month—none for any pay. Looking at the competition now, I think it was their way of getting free content. The first prize winner got paid \$200. Another 24 got paid nothing. The ezine got a year's worth of content for \$200. I got nothing for it." -Katrina, Creative Writer

Very few contests are run only for the benefit of writers. But even if the organizer gets something out of it, it still should be fair to writers. Think about what the organizer is gaining and ask yourself if they're taking advantage of writers.

The Impact on You

The judging of free competitions isn't always done so that the prize goes to the best work submitted. Some competitions are judged by people with no expertise in writing, some are judged by one person who simply picks their favorite, and some

just pick a winner almost at random.

The problem this can create is that you're entering competitions, not winning, and so assuming that you're not that great of a writer. This happened to Angela and it almost made her give up on writing.

"I started entering competitions as a way of testing to see if I had any talent. I entered about 40, didn't win any, and was about to give up writing. Then an experienced writer encouraged me just to start submitting to magazines. Since then, I have sold over half of the pieces I entered in competitions." -Angela, Poet & Writer

The lesson is to enter contests, but remember that even if the contest is being judged fairly, there is only one winner. Not winning does not mean that your work is not good, or that your work is not publishable. It just means that your entry wasn't the absolute best according to the judges of that particular contest.

The Final Call

Competitions do offer a great opportunity and can be a positive part of a writing career. But before you enter, read the terms and consider what you have to lose. If the contest terms are asking too much and giving too little, it's time to move on and find a better way to get your work out there.