

CONTEST ADVICE

Note: The helpful hints below also work for editors and agents!

Contests are an excellent way to get feedback, particularly on your first efforts. For every inexperienced judge there's going to be one like me, who's written a slew of romances and judged hundreds of entries—authors who really want to help and take the time to write informed critiques of your work. One of my most treasured notes was from an author who said the other two judges gave her a higher score, but she learned the most from what I told her.

If you are at the stage in your writing when you are entering solely to win and get read by a NY editor or agent, great. You probably don't need to read the nuts & bolts advice below, but it couldn't hurt to scan it to see if there's something you've overlooked.

What I look for when judging contest:

Admittedly, inexperienced judges aren't going to "get" all the points below. That's why most contests have a list of questions for the judges to answer. (And, yes, some of the questions are too restrictive, too judgmental. That's why I prefer contests where I can just write a critique.) But when I analyzed what I look for in an entry, this is what I came up with, pretty much in order of importance:

1. **Voice.** There is nothing more important than an author's overall style, the ability to draw the reader in, put language together so it tells the story clearly and intriguingly. Voice is that certain something that captures attention, that distinguishes one good author's words from another, equally good, author's words. It's what makes an author special.

2. **Who, What, Where, When & Why.** You will lose your reader on the very first pages of your manuscript if the reader can't understand what is going on. You've got to get the basic facts in there. (See my comments under Synopsis in "Common Errors" below.)

3. **Characterization.** You need to create a hero and heroine who rise above cardboard cutouts. Colorful secondary characters as well. Let the reader see who they are both physically and mentally. Make us like them. Hate them. Laugh at them. Fear them. Don't draw them like a three-year-old's stick figures. Paint a vivid picture. Aim for being the Rembrandt of romance writing.

4. **Flavor of the Period or Locale.** Writing "1815" at the top of your manuscript doesn't magically transform your characters to the early 19th c. Or any other era you choose to use for a setting. You need to immerse yourself in that period, really develop a feeling for the look, manners, and mores of the time. Yes, of course, we have to modify our language somewhat so readers aren't going, "Huh?" But make a genuine effort to get your details right. Regency-era readers are particularly picky about this. In general, when you use a term a reader might not know, find a way to get in an explanation. Although a well-written book will triumph over many errors, it's professionally embarrassing when readers point out your mistakes. One so-called romance author made a triumphant debut, only to discover that she had made so many errors about the Regency period that her publisher actually had to revise and re-publish her novel! And most of us don't have the kind of influence that gets reprints! Our book, and uncontracted future books, would simply hit the editor's trash basket with a loud thump.

The above also applies to Contemporary stories. Example: If you've lived in the big city all your life, don't set your book in the rural south unless you've done a great deal of research. Even then, it might not be enough. Some cultures are tough to depict unless you've actually lived there. My mother, for example, was a very well known author of books for children and teens. She was famous for the thoroughness of her research. But when she wrote a story with a gypsy background, no editor would touch it. They felt she couldn't possibly know enough about gypsy culture to make the book authentic. So when writing Contemporary, always remember there are no shades of decades to cover your mistakes. *Write what you know* is always good advice.

Readers want to be transported into another world - whether it's romance, mystery, or a

thriller. Almost as much as they want to identify with the hero and heroine, they want to be swallowed up in an atmosphere different from their daily lives. They want to feel they're really *there*. So make your story vivid enough, authentic enough, to drag them right into the thick of it. Simple example: If you're writing in any time period up to the mid-19th c., keep in mind the nights were DARK. Candlelight, even lantern light, doesn't illuminate all that much. It's creepy! Or maybe sexy, depending on your point of view.

5. **Keep the story moving.** Stay on point. Don't digress into Aunt Tilly's tea party last week in East Oshkosh. Make every word count, in both dialogue and narration. When you go back and edit a chapter, you should be surprised how far your characters have moved forward in just that one chapter.

6. **Dialogue.** Keep it *natural*. What would your character really say in that situation? Keep it essential. No chit-chat that doesn't move the story forward. Try for non-cliché, clever, creative, snappy, dramatic, angst . . . whatever. But never bland, never unnecessary.

7. **Narration.** Don't write a story that's nothing but talking heads. Readers want to be able to picture your story. They need descriptions of people, descriptions of settings, descriptions of action. All the details that add color to your book. And, above all, they want introspection. They want to see into the hero's and heroine's heads. They want to see thoughts, vulnerabilities. They want to empathize, care about your characters. It's your job to make them do exactly that.

8. **Keep it simple.** It may be vulgar, but KISS is a good point to remember. (That's Keep It Simple, Stupid.) Long convoluted sentences are among the things that killed the traditional Regency market. The flow of language might have been marvelous, but modern readers don't seem to want to deal with it, however poetic. We're in an age of Less is More. Make your sentences clear and precise. And even to those of us who loved the older style, there's no doubt that the more drama you want to

pack into a scene, the shorter the sentences should be. In different words, short sentences and sentence fragments have *impact*. Don't hesitate to use them.

9. **Grammar and Spelling.** Although I mark every error, I seldom take off any points for presentation—only when the author obviously never used the spell checker nor made any effort to proofread. But keep in mind that most editors were English majors in college, and you want them to enjoy your story, not be distracted by your grammatical errors. Hence, the next section below.

Advice on Common Contest Errors:

Note: the single most important point below is #6 - Synopses.

1. Edit and proofread your manuscript before you send it. It's amazing how many times I've had to judge manuscripts with blatant errors that anyone would have caught if they'd only bothered to read their entry before putting it in the mail.
2. Read the contest submission rules carefully and follow them. Contests are much fussier than editors and agents, but it's good preparation for general submissions. New authors have enough strikes against them without submitting a manuscript that looks unprofessional.
3. Never fool with the margins to get more into your contest submission. Everyone, from judges to editors, really hates margins less than 1". And, besides, it's cheating. If you really work at it, as we all have had to do, you can find places to refine your manuscript, delete extraneous words, etc., until you can squeeze what has to be said into the contest's page requirements.
4. Do not submit a contest entry that stops in the middle of a sentence. Stop at the end of the previous sentence or the previous paragraph. If, say, there's only room for two or three pages of Chapter 3 in an entry, omit Ch. 3 altogether. Don't leave your judge with the "blahs" as he/she turns the page and finds . . . nothing. Believe me, your judge has had plenty of time to evaluate your writing

in the pages before that.

5. I tend to think contests make too much of “hooks.” Nonetheless, most do, and if you can come up with one at the end of your submission, by all means do so. They’re also a good idea for the end of whatever number of chapters an editor or agent is willing to read. What’s a hook? It’s a “leave the reader up in the air” page turner. Something that catches the attention and makes the reader eager to keep reading. Periodic chapter-end hooks throughout a manuscript are always a good idea (not every chapter, but a good number).

6. **SYNOPSIS.** Strangely enough, my experience as a contest judge has shown that most people can write a synopsis with some degree of efficiency. The problem comes when the author doesn’t put the necessary Who, What, Where, When & Why into the *manuscript*. They write the synopsis, then think, “Fine, I don’t have to do it again.” **Wrong!**

Please note: The reader never sees the synopsis. **Therefore, everything you want the reader to know must be in the pages of the manuscript.** That’s why I always read the synopsis last. I approach the book exactly as a reader would - knowing nothing. So many times I start reading a book, and I’m totally at sea about what is going on. The author has assumed I knew all that was in the synopsis and hasn’t included a single clue in the book itself. Readers want to be able to understand who people are, where they are, why they’re there, etc. Explain. Clarify. Justify. Paint a complete picture. Don’t put the information readers need in the synopsis and forget about it. Repeat: ***A reader never sees the synopsis.***

7. Read widely in romance before trying to write it. Incredibly, some people submit contest entries in a style that has nothing to do with today’s romance genre. Do your homework. Read, read, read. Although the romance genre is becoming more and more diverse, it does not include stories that read like biographies, or

an ancient storyteller's tale, or a detective novel from the 1930s. Be aware. Don't waste your time writing something that has no chance of finding a market. I've even judged entries that read like a college prank, sort of a Playboy version of how a so-called author thought a romance should read.

8. **Format.** Please use standard manuscript format (see my *Word Count* article). And never attempt to imitate "book" format. That's an amateur mistake you don't want to make.

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Final Bit of Advice. Never give up. Suck up the mistakes and the criticisms and keep going. To make money with your writing, you're going to have to do the classic amount of suffering for your art. Faint heart ne'er got a check in the mail. Determination and resilience are key qualities. Keep trying. ***Never give up!***