



City of Rockingham

Creative Writing Competition 2021 Judges' Report



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While it is not possible for the Competition judges to provide specific feedback on individual entries, the 'tips for writers' below has been compiled in response to the body of entries received, to provide practical suggestions that will help guide writers in their ongoing writing journeys and future competition entries.

Tips for writers

- A story or poem doesn't have to be about world-shattering events. Writing about so-called 'ordinary' experiences - the everyday and familiar - can be the basis for a memorable story. The success of a story isn't dependent on its subject matter, but on using language in evocative ways, and sustaining the reader's interest.
- Try beginning with a word or a sentence, and don't worry about where a story or poem might be heading, or end up. Just write, and enjoy the process of encountering the unexpected.
- Write without inhibition: don't be critical of your writing, just get it down onto the page. Then, leave your draft for at least a day, re-read it and find ways to improve it. Make sure you read your work aloud: you will hear inadvertent repetitions; whether the sounds of words and the rhythms of sentences achieve the effect you intended; you will hear unnecessary words, sentences, even entire paragraphs or stanzas; and you will hear whether the pace of a story or poem is what you intended.
- An upper limit of 2,000 words does not mean that entries should use all 2,000 words. It is what you do with the words that counts.
- Conversely, consider if your story idea is appropriate for the word count and format. If the plot requires extensive world-building, a maximum 2,000 word short story may not be the best vehicle for your idea. Ask yourself if the complexity of the story you wish to tell is better suited to a novella or novel. Also, 2,000 words may not be enough if the plot explores particular traumas that would benefit from nuance and greater exploration; it takes great skill to handle significant trauma within this word limit.
- Writers are to be reminded of the benefits of restraint. In short fiction, every line should matter – that is, it should contribute and be relevant to the overall piece. Not everything you know about your characters or setting or plot needs to be given to the reader – some things can stay in your head while still informing how you write the piece.
- Try not to fall back on clichés. Instead, think carefully about more interesting and imaginative ways to express ideas.
- Writers of poetry are strongly encouraged to write free verse rather than rhyming poetry. Most of the rhyming poems submitted to the competition sacrificed the sense to the rhyme, or relied on clichés reminiscent of Hallmarks greetings cards.
- For short story writers: focus on moments in time, instead of merely listing a series of events.
- Don't overwrite: that is, don't slather on the adjectives, adverbs and unnecessarily complex language. The aim of creative writing is not to display one's vocabulary but to communicate experiences in engaging and powerful ways.
- Remember that mental events - what happens inside a character's head - can be as important in a story as the use of external events.

- A story doesn't have to end in closure: questions answered, problems solved. In fact, the most memorable stories often use open-ended conclusions, in which the reader doesn't know what will happen next; ambiguous conclusions, which invite the reader to see more than one meaning; ambivalent conclusions, which leave the reader with mixed feelings; alternative conclusions.
- Don't lecture or condescend to the reader, and don't spell out your meanings. Respect the reader's intelligence by allowing them to work out possible meanings for themselves.
- Change can be as simple as a shift in one's routine, something new, something unexpected, something out of place. The change, the difference, can create tension worth exploring, compelling the reader to read on.
- Choice of Point of View matters. Understand what the narrator does or does not – can or cannot – know if the story is narrated in your chosen POV. Consider the psychic closeness or distance of first or third person, respectively, and what serves your piece best. Employing second person POV requires skill to achieve a particular purpose or effect.
- Having someone else read your work can greatly help in identifying what you are too close to see. Feedback is valuable and part of the creative process. The reader's suggested solution may not always work or be the answer, but in them identifying something is not quite right, you then have the opportunity to think about how you could strengthen the piece so that it achieves your intended vision.