

A Pep Talk from a Contest Queen

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Are you one of the many writers who is reluctant to enter contests? Are you shy about having people read and judge your writing? That's natural, but if your goal is publication, when you succeed you'll have thousands of people reading and judging. (Now there's an intimidating thought.!) So, start out small. Enter a contest. There are all sorts of great benefits:

- You'll get feedback. Of course you won't like some of it, and some may even seem stupid (more on that below). However, most judges really want to help you improve your work, and much of the feedback will be useful. And when you get the positive feedback, the perfect scores, it's an incredible validation.
- If an editor or agent judges the final round, you may get a request to submit a full manuscript. Perhaps even from a publishing house that doesn't typically accept unsolicited, unagented submissions.
- A judge may be so impressed that she offers to recommend you to her editor or agent.
- If you final or win in an RWA Chapter contest, your name will be published in *Romance Writers Report* (an industry magazine that editors and agents as well as writers/readers peruse) and possibly other places such as Chapter websites. Slowly, you'll begin to make a name for yourself as a skilled professional. You'll also have a great credential to add to your queries and pitches. And you'll have a certificate to put up on the wall of your office, to encourage you on the bad days.
- If you're treating your writing expenses as tax deductions, contest entries are one way of proving you are seriously pursuing a career as a writer.

Have I persuaded you yet? If so, how do you decide which contest(s) to enter? It's an individual decision and some of the factors that may be relevant to you include: what an entry consists of (e.g., a love scene or the same material as a Golden Heart entry), whether feedback is provided, who judges the final round, the prestige of the contest (ask around on your loops), the cost, and whether you submit and are judged in paper or electronic format.

Now, let's say you entered a contest and didn't final. Your feedback sheets arrive in the mail. What do you do with them? Read them, react emotionally because you won't be able to help it, then put them away for a while, particularly if there's some negative feedback. Then take them out again and read them objectively. If you have a critique group or partner, share the feedback and discuss it. See which comments resonate with you as being pointers for improving your manuscript. And then get back to the computer and revise.

And don't forget to thank the judges. Even if you disagree with their comments, they took time out of their busy lives to extend you the professional courtesy of judging your entry. Having

judged numerous contests myself, I know that judging a single entry can take anywhere from an hour to a full day. Be a professional yourself, and extend your thanks.

And when you're published yourself, be generous about volunteering to judge!

©Susan Lyons. Susan Lyons writes sexy romance that's passionate, heartwarming and fun. She is published by Kensington, Berkley, Harlequin, The Wild Rose Press, and Freya's Bower. As an unpublished author, she finaled in numerous contests, including the 2005 Golden Heart. Now that she's published, she's still a contest junkie, and her books have won the Booksellers Best Award, the Golden Quill, the Aspen Gold, the Lories and the More Than Magic. Visit her website at www.susanlyons.ca.