

Judging Article Competitions

For this installment in its occasional series of interviews, Science Editor talked with Elaine A Richman about her experience as a judge in article competitions. Richman, who recently joined the Science Editor editorial board, is a freelance editor and writer in Baltimore. Suggestions of interviews for Science Editor can be submitted to Barbara Gastel at b-gastel@tamu.edu.

How long have you been helping to evaluate entries in article competitions? In what competitions have you done so?

Like many editors, I've been critiquing manuscripts for the better part of my life—in high school and throughout college and graduate school, and then professionally. It isn't a big step to judge entries in major competitions. The first major competition I judged, 6 years ago, was for the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) Science Journalism Awards, sponsored by the Whitaker Foundation. Since then, I've judged entries for the publication awards for the Council for the Advancement and Support of Education (CASE) and for the National Magazine Awards. The CASE Awards are for outstanding university communications. The National Magazine Awards, from the American Society of Magazine Editors (ASME) and Columbia University, are for articles in large commercial magazines. You'd be surprised at how many entries for the National Magazine Awards concern science and medicine.

How did you come to do such judging?

The first invitation to judge came after I'd made an offer to help. Most volunteer organizations are interested in having members take a larger role and are pleased when someone steps forward to offer his or her time. I had been reviewing books for AAAS's *Science Books & Films* when I heard about the Science Journalism Awards. I contacted the organizer and, after establishing credentials, was invited to participate. Next thing I knew, a big box

of magazine articles arrived at my office. It takes many nights and weekends to read all the articles that are assigned to you.

In brief, what does the evaluation process consist of?

Each competition is different. Usually, you and a "reading partner" read the same assigned entries in advance of the judging event. When you finally meet face to face, at the judging event, you decide on which entries to recommend as possible winners. These are then read by another set of reading partners, and so on, until the field of possible winners has been narrowed to a handful of the strongest candidates. The whole group votes on the finalists. There is always a lot of animated discussion.

In your experience, what do the judges look for in entries?

There are usually dozens of entries for a judge to read, so the winner has to stand out in the crowd. We've all experienced that moment of discovery when we know that something is right, and I think this is what judges are looking for. That said, I should point out that judges are given instructions about the selection process. ASME, for example, provides judges with a packet of instructions to ensure that the process is fair and consistent. And an experienced leader guides the reviewing and rating process. Judges evaluate the quality of the writing, of course, and how well the entry fulfills the mission of the publication. Will it be engaging, interesting, enlightening, important, and entertaining to the publication's readership?

In particular, what tends to make the winning science articles stand out?

Good writing, no matter what the topic.

What tends to destroy an article's chances?

I'm very glad you asked, because many editors make the same mistake. They complicate their entry by sending a little something extra. An entry is judged on the merits of the entire submission, and

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any weakness kicks it out of the winner's circle. For example, one editor submitted a series of three articles about neurologic disorders as one entry. How likely is it that all three articles will be outstanding? Not very. One article was terrific, but it was eliminated from competition because of the other two. Had the stronger article been submitted alone, it would have been elevated to the next stage and perhaps won the competition. In other words, editors should send their strongest entry and let it stand alone.

In what ways, if any, does evaluating entries resemble science editing? How does it differ?

As a science editor, I'm always delighted and surprised when a very good manuscript—one that needs minimal editing—arrives for publication. In contrast, when you judge a competition, you are reading only the best of the best. Someone else has already done the editing, so you have the privilege of sitting back to just read and read and read.

What have you learned from evaluating entries that could help

science editors?

When you submit an entry for a competition, read the competition guidelines carefully. If you are sending copies rather than originals, the copies should be as good and clean as possible. Length of the entry can make a difference. Judges often admire short entries (one or two pages), but these rarely stand up well next to a longer entry that is also good. Articles that are very long can be a problem too, unless the quality holds up throughout. Well-executed graphics and sidebars add to an entry. Too many graphics and sidebars distract. Select an entry that is, first and foremost, well written and important to the readership of the publication.

What other insights, if any, would you like to share?

Judging competitions is a great way for editors to identify trends, pick up new ideas, and spend stimulating hours with colleagues. The broad cross-section of entries submitted to any one competition is a chance to learn what's happening in other fields. Topics of entries can range from missile shields to tofu recipes to investment strategies to colon cancer. Expect to be stimulated and inspired!