

Working Title: Five Steps To A Fee-Free Contest Model

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As a writer, finding fee-free contests is a joy. The Dogfish Head Poetry Book Prize was one of my favorites, a rare example that closed just last year after a generous 20-year run. The prize, sponsored by the ubiquitous Delaware-based brewery, came with two cases of extra hoppy beers, a reading with the lively locals inside the Dogfish Head Pub, and \$500—all without a submission fee.

The Dogfish Head Poetry Book Prize was an inspiration for our own prizes at [Raleigh Review](#). But our ultimate push for a fee-free model was a personal one.

Like many in our world, I came from a difficult upbringing. Food and shelter, let alone books, were scarce for me at times, so I have empathy for those struggling to make ends meet. At Raleigh Review, we want to be accessible to all writers, no matter their demographic. And with a fee-free model for our contests and prizes, we can do just that.

For editors of magazines wishing to move to a fee-free submission model, below are the steps we took at Raleigh Review, where I serve as publisher. Rather than giving you a one-size-fits-all list of rules, consider this a guide for how we tested fee-free and made it work for us. Hopefully, there are insights you can apply to your own literary magazine.

Step 1: Remove expectations

Writers expect to pay fees for contests and prizes. Challenging that expectation has had positive results for us.

Instead of requiring submitters to pay a fee, we give folks the option: make a fee-free submission, or pay via tip jar. The fee-free option is available to those who can't pay the fee for one reason or another. And we're not very interested in the reason: We don't ask questions, and we don't require any kind of proof. For those who do pay via tip jar, we don't keep notes or scores or report any data, other than the raw statistics.

Although only about 20% of submitters are kicking in the fee via the tip jar voluntarily, overall submission numbers for our contests are up 500%. This means

two things: We're making up for our financial shortfalls thanks to the generosity of poets and writers tipping what they can, and we have five times the number of submissions to wade through. We depend entirely on unsolicited submissions, so this is a good problem for us to have.

Step 2: Take stock of your contests and goals

Raleigh Review runs three contests across multiple genres. All our contests are after the same goal—to add to the artistry and creativity of our magazine.

- **Our flash fiction prize** is open every year, accepting fee-free submissions only (tip jar optional). While the higher volume of submissions created by the new model results in more work, we're thankful—this contest typically pays for itself, and is on track to do so once again this year.
- **Our poetry book prize** is open during even-numbered years. We've recently gone from a single poem prize to a full book prize that will be printed and bound, thanks to our partnership with Fernwood Press in Oregon. The prize-winning book will also be available and distributed throughout the world via Ingram.
- **Our multi-genre prize**—in which we invite submissions from writers who work in multiple disciplines, including visual art—is such a rare call that we usually don't receive enough submissions to cover the prize winnings. Our multi-genre prize is open every odd year.

So far, our fee-free model has worked well for us for our flash fiction prize. It's worked so well, in fact, that here's an inside scoop: We plan to also offer a model of voluntary fees or fee-free options onward throughout our entire poetry book prize window and our multi-genre prize as well.

Step 3: Get creative with your budget

Since revenue is modest for our prizes—never promised nor expected—our overhead is also modest. That means we have to get a little creative when it comes to budgeting.

For our prizes, we prioritize judges who know us and get how we operate. With true artists and prize winners on our staff and board, we have no need to hire outside judges for our prizes.

For marketing, we look at our extra back issues as beautiful fine art that also serves as our marketing supplies. Plus, giving away back issues while tabling events saves us from sales tax nexus nightmares that we just do not want, especially when traveling out of state.

For advertising, we no longer pay to get our contests out there. Instead, we utilize sites like CLMP, which allows us, as members, to advertise for free on their site. We also rely on features on Chill Subs, Duotrope's Digest, Lit Mag News, and more. With what would have been money spent on advertising in other magazines, we launched [The Fool's World](#), a travel literary magazine that costs less to run annually than a single newspaper ad. Thanks to our team of Gen-Zers, The Fool's World can be found nationally in 50 bookshops and several university libraries.

Step 4: Question your assumptions

While writers have certain expectations around fees and submitting, editors and staff have their own assumptions about the process, too. While we hashed out our potential process for fee-free contests, we pondered:

Is asking for a required fee taking on more importance than the number of submissions? Not to us. We must have the submissions. No art, no magazine.

Is it possible to test the fee-free model? We chose Duosuma as our testing ground. It is a sleek system that the literary community is embracing more with every submission period. For submissions that come in without a fee, the fees on our side are next to nothing.

Is receiving the fee an expectation, or can it be an unexpected surprise?

Surprises are always better. Ultimately, we seek a healthy submission process that is fair.

Step 5: Analyze your results

The Raleigh Review team agrees that it feels good when writers trust us with their work. And having tested a fee-free system for the last year, we also agree that when the fee comes in the form of a voluntary tip, it just makes us feel that much better. And because our highly seasoned editorial team can't see which submitters included a tip, there's no way to corrupt our process.

In conclusion, moving to a fee-free model (tip jar optional) has worked for us at Raleigh Review, helping us make up our financial shortfalls, boosting our submission numbers, and, at the end of the day, making this work feel that much more rewarding. Of course, staying agile and being proactive certainly help as well. But at Raleigh Review, adaptation is crucial: Very little fuels resourcefulness and know-how better than not having any other options.

With that understanding, we will continue to build on our innovations, honoring what we need and what our writers need as well.

Rob Greene is the founder and publisher of Raleigh Review, where the overall mission states a belief that “empathy allows us to see through the eyes of our neighbors, whether across the street or across the globe.” Born in Mississippi County in Arkansas, Greene has relocated over 46 times. He received his Ph.D. from University of Birmingham [England], and both his BSc in Microbiology and his MFA from NC State University, where he was fully funded and taught introduction to poetry workshops as a graduate student. He has recent poems in Best New Poets, Poem-A-Day via The Academy of American Poets, One Art, and one in San Pedro River Review. His essays most recently appeared in Valparaiso Poetry Review and in Cleaver Magazine. Greene currently mentors the editorial team at The Fool’s World, a new travel magazine. After working for over 38 years, Greene retired from teaching full-time in 2025 to focus on his writing and magazine work.