

Black & White Contest Judging Guidelines

Thanks for registering for our Black & White Short Story Contest!

Because you have taken that important first step, we want to reward your courage with this additional insight into our judging process, so you know what to expect, and perhaps tweak your submission a little more.

Your submission(s) will undergo an initial intake review based on the five awards up for grabs. Each award carries a maximum of 20 points during this intake phase in the hopes it scores at least 70 points. If it does not, you can either rework the piece for free, or simply request a refund. If you score over 70 points, the submission(s) will then be judged for a possible score of 100 points in each award category.

We are providing the following sample (and additional comments about the piece) so you can see what our editors will be looking for during both the intake phase and the final judging.

Silly Love Songs (sample submission)

Do you remember that time? It was still early in the night and the ten o'clock crowd had not made it out to the bar yet. You sat there on your stool, stuck to the floor, and listened to the bartender complain about his roommate eating the left over Chinese that he didn't even pay for.

In the background, you hear the softest voice a woman could ever have say in a rich, passionate whisper, "I'm glad you're here with me this Valentines." Heads turn and you face her profile as her lips descend upon another man, and their faces soon vanish like your next beer.

Comically, you call out, "Hey, eggroll! How about another round?" As the bartender steps down and pulls a five dollar bill from your pity party campaign fund, some poor soul plays Elvis on the Wurlitzer jukebox; the words too familiar to ignore, the acoustics too perfect to pass up, and your backbone a six pack thick.

Your Miller Longneck bottle transforms into a microphone and you cut away from the bar like two north poles trying to share a urinal. Elvis's voice beckons you over to his twenty-five cent mausoleum. The neon bubbles piping through the plastic tube as she looks up from the 45's that continue flipping over and over with a click and a clank.

Her green eyes watch with a smile and then her lips move to join yours like dueling hearts at a piano bar, *"For you have made my life complete, and I love you so...Love me tender, love me true, all my dreams fulfill. For my darling, I love you, and I always will..."*

"What's Valentines without the King?" she laughs glancing deeper into your bloodshot eyes.

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“My name is Mitch. What’s yours?” you ask leaning closer, taking in the strawberry fragrance of her long, blonde hair.

“My friends call me Hope,” she admits with a twitch of her nose.

“I don’t recall seeing you around here before,” you grin while digging out the spare change from the caverns of your blue jeans.

“That’s because you’ve been too busy with your girlfriend...and Elvis.”

“Love makes for a small orbit I guess,” you reply holding a palm full of pennies and lint.

“Where is she tonight?” she smiles as her eyes begin to survey the bar.

“Hit a meteor New Year’s Eve,” you smirk. “Had to abort the mission.”

“Didn’t seem to knock you off course if you still come here,” she beacons as her eyes return to meet yours again.

“Hoping she would wander in tonight. Pretty stupid, huh?” you confess.

“Pretty romantic, actually.” The jukebox begins to click and clank.

“What about you?” you pause. “Any astronauts in your life?”

“What life?” she laughs, “I’m here on Valentines, all alone, talking to a guy who sings off key into a bottle of domestic beer.”

“You didn’t answer my question,” you say without thinking.

“No, no astronauts. I’m one of those my-career-comes-first kind of woman,” she grins and turns toward the jukebox as another record loads.

Hush my darling, don’t fear my darling, the lion sleeps tonight...Hush my darling, don’t fear my darling, the lion sleeps tonight...

“Did you pick this one, too?” you ask joining her as she faces the tomb of forgotten loves.

“Only Wurlitzer in the neighborhood,” she says confidently. “Come on,” she tugs at your arm and pulls out a couple of wrinkled dollar bills. “Next round of heartbreak is on me.”

“Sure. How about I get you another drink?” you offer noticing your bottle is now empty.

“I’ll have what you’re having,” she invites.

“Two shots of self-pity coming up,” you laugh as she makes her way to the empty dance floor, waiting for you to return, which you do. Shots in one hand. Longnecks in the other. You offer them up and she takes one of each, winks and joins you as you take your shot.

The jukebox clicks over one last time and you both turn in anticipation, sharing one single breath as the melody begins to play, your hips begin to sway, and the air begins to fill with hope.

Some people want to fill the world with silly love songs.

What’s wrong with that? I’d like to know. So here I go, again...

The Athlete Award

Judges are looking for story elements that are masterfully portrayed with the slightest use of words (whit, not wit) as we firmly believe great writing adheres to the rule that less is often more.

For example, notice how the first paragraph in our sample ends in a very concise manner (*...that he didn't even pay for.*). Although the story could easily be made longer by including a paragraph or two that describes the exchange in greater detail, the element in the story is conveyed in a very precise and relatable manner.

Helpful Hint: Read through your submission and see if there is anything you can remove to tighten up your piece, or describe more succinctly to convey the message, the mood, or the meaning more precisely.

The Brain Award

Aside from looking for spelling, punctuation, and grammatical errors, judges award points based on the author's ability to demonstrate his or her skill as a wordsmith by adjusting the speed and the flow of the story.

For example, notice how frequently the sample uses the carefully crafted collection of words that forces the reader to naturally pause to absorb the moment (*...their faces soon vanish like your next beer; ...your backbone a six pack thick; ...flipping over and over with a click and a clank; ...joins you as you take your shot*).

Helpful Hint: Check your submission and see if you have places that give the reader a reason to naturally pause. They might be buried deeper in a paragraph and simply need to be repositioned for greater impact. Finding these buried moments of pause often is indicative of adjoining content that can be removed, reduced, or shifted to a new paragraph.

The Basket Case Award

Judges focus on the actual story for a sense of living in the moment. They will also evaluate the attention to detail regarding plot holes, continuity issues, and redundancy.

For example, notice how the sample provides a vivid sense of being in the bar by using images without ever having to overly describe them. Then there is the story where the reader quickly begins living in the moment and can imagine sitting at the bar and watching the flirtation unfold firsthand.

Helpful Hint: Reread your story not as the writer, but as the reader and be honest with yourself. Or, have someone read your submission and see if they feel transported into the story by the vivid details and the plot.

The Princess Award

Judges are going to evaluate the use of dialogue in your submission to gauge how natural it flows, how authentic it sounds, and how it advances the story overall. The fact is that people are prone to reveal things about themselves in the things they say, or don't say. So, we believe that reality should apply in both fiction and non-fiction.

For example, look at how much the reader can garner about the character Hope's interest and motives in Mitch from just a few lines of dialogue:

"That's because you've been too busy with your girlfriend...and Elvis."

"Love makes for a small orbit I guess," you reply holding a palm full of pennies and lint.

"Where is she tonight?" she smiles as her eyes begin to survey the bar.

"Hit a meteor New Year's Eve," you smirk. "Had to abort the mission."

"Didn't seem to knock you off course if you still come here," she beacons as her eyes return to meet yours again.

"Hoping she would wander in tonight. Pretty stupid, huh?" you confess.

"Pretty romantic, actually." The jukebox begins to click and clank.

Helpful Hint: Read your submission out loud, especially any dialogue. Does it flow naturally? Does it sound authentic? Does it advance the story?

The Criminal Award

Judging in this category is solely focused on the raw and revealing truth being shared in the story, regardless of it is fiction or non-fiction. What matters most is that your story has a message that will resonate with readers long after they have read your piece.

For example, the sample we provided speaks directly (in an indirect way) about falling in and out of relationships that a majority of readers will be able to understand, and even see that truth apply to their own lives.

Helpful Hint: Spend a few minutes and try to write a "tag line" for your story that conveys the value it contains. How would you describe the fundamental truth about your story to a prospective agent, publisher, or a room full of readers that came to hear you speak? Then read your story to make sure the piece rises to the challenge.