

Hear it from the Judges



It is usually the little details that make the difference between runner-up and winning entries. Learning to see things and be mindful of opportunities to improve are skills that must be developed all on their own.

In order to help students in this, here are some tips gathered from past judges to help you hone your skills, make your entry stand out among the hundreds, or perhaps just give it that final tweak that could make the difference in the final round!

The number one tip for each category is to take some time and examine works by great artists/writers in the field you are working. Read poems. This will be the biggest help to you as you develop your skills.

Note: these are mainly just tips, not necessarily requirements, for an entry.

What do judges look for in a winning poem?

- A rich impression of the world. Poetry can take the simple and make it profound and it can make the reader see things and think of things in a way he never has before. One of the distinguishing characteristics of a poet is the richness with which he sees and communicates reality so it becomes extraordinary.
- A rigorous attention to forms and language. Read other pieces of poetry in the required form before starting your poem. See how the great poets used the forms to their benefit rather than confinement. Practice expanding your vocabulary as well and learning new ways to say what you mean. Then once you have written it, read the poem out loud and listen. Does it flow and does it sound good to the ear? The judges will be looking for this as well.
- An honest perspective of something or someone. You want to read it and think, this is real life, this is true. It should have something meaningful to say that will bring new perspective.

What makes one poem really stand out in the judging?

- Judges like poems that use the theme in a surprising or clever way; that adheres to the form required; and that maintains a clean presentation.
- Judges also like poems that show a good amount of thought put into it. Don't be content with the first ideas that you come up with. Write those ideas down, but keep working and searching for ways to make your poem better until you are satisfied that it is the best it could be.
- A good poem will display an artistry with the language. This goes beyond just putting a bunch of words together that rhyme. And don't just try to convey a thought that would work with a paragraph and stick it in poetic form. Pick words that are going to convey what you want to get across and convey it beautifully.

What might be an immediate turnoff for a judge?

- If it does not follow the form or theme. A little flexibility within the form is often allowed in poetry but there must be a compelling, obvious reason for it. Part of the difficulty of poetry is adhering to the forms; but that is also part of its beauty and strength. If you break from the form, you risk having a judge discard your poem. Pay attention to how many syllables are in a line. Don't try to finish a sentence in a line if it messes up the form. Try different ways of writing it until it

says what you want in the correct form. Don't be afraid to completely re-work the arrangement of your poem.

- An overly didactic poem that focuses less on the beauty and construction of the poem and more on the theme. You need both form and content. Trying to get a point across is not bad, but if the point becomes more important than the beauty of the poem itself, the poem often suffers. Work on being artful, beautiful, and unique in your subject matter *and* the way you present it.
- Obvious rhyming. Don't just put down the first convenient rhyme that comes to mind. For example, in a poem about God, simply rhyming "love" with "above" will not get you many points. Stretch your mind and come up with some new ideas.
- Unoriginal religious poetry. Sometimes students think that if they write about religious or biblical things, they will get extra points. Yet, the opposite is often true. When you write about God, it is often scrutinized even more because of the subject matter. Now this is not meant to discourage you from tackling such important topics, but if that is what you choose to write about, be extra careful to avoid the trite and obvious.