

Tips for Contestants in the Steuber Prize for Excellence in First-Year Writing

Based on their reading of contest entries for a number of years, the Steuber Prize judges thought it might be useful to share with you tips to improve your chances of writing an excellent entry.

In General for All Submissions

- Read through your entry multiple times, revising not just for basic grammatical and stylistic problems, but developing ideas more fully. If the entry was previously for a class, follow through on any suggestions for improvement that your instructor may have given you in the grading process.
- Include a memorable title which conveys what the entry is about and piques the reader's interest.
- Prepare an effective introduction or opening line/s, as necessary for the entry's genre, which draw the reader into the work and a conclusion which provides closure and leaves a lasting impression.
- Write in a way to build ideas, argumentative pros and cons, characters, stories, etc., as necessary for the entry's genre.
- Include paragraphs which are unified, coherent, and fully developed with topic sentences (for academic and reflective entries).
- Use clear and helpful transitions throughout.
- Employ consistent and appropriate voice and tone.
- Compose sentences which are concise, efficient, and varied in structure.
- Use words that are specific enough to capture what you mean precisely and keep your diction free of word choice problems like unnecessary clichés, jargon, euphemism, needless abstraction, biased language, mixed metaphor, etc.
- Use correct spelling, punctuation, and grammar as well as standard idiomatic English and APA bibliographical citation format achieved through careful proofreading.

Problems That Could Disqualify Your Entry

- Including any identifying information, like your name, in the entry itself
- Submitting more than one entry or an entry longer than 10 pages/2,500 words
- Making repeated grammatical errors, which compromise your credibility as an excellent writer
- Submitting an entry which uses sources without proper citation
- Submitting an entry containing equations or illustrations (graphics, figures, tables, etc.)

For Academic Entries

- Include a clear, interesting thesis followed by a logical progression of ideas with enough evidence to support them.
- Adequately examine and rebut probable objections or opposition to your viewpoint if your paper is argumentative.
- Use evaluative criteria for selecting credible sources (i.e., are sources experts in the field, up to date, in-depth, from peer-reviewed scholarly rather than popular journals?).
- Accurately quote, paraphrase, and/or summarize sources and properly acknowledge them by using correct APA formatting for abbreviated in-text citations in your paper and complete bibliographical citations at the end of the paper labeled References (see the UW Writing Center website for particular reference formats at the following URL: <http://writing.wisc.edu/Handbook/DocAPA.html>).
- If you list multiple sources in your References section, don't depend on only one or a few of them in the paper itself. Show that you can synthesize information from multiple sources.
- Avoid overusing long quotations from sources, making sure your own ideas are not submerged.

For Reflective Entries

- Present and elaborate on a main point throughout.
- Provide sufficient, relevant, and specific details about and examples of your experience and demonstrate, with good insight, how it has affected your life in significant ways. Don't be too general.
- Watch out for shifting tenses. Likely, you'll be describing an experience in past tense, but you may need to shift tenses if you reflect on how it affects you currently or will affect you in the future.
- Avoid clichés since you are trying to convey how unique and important your particular experience is.

For Creative Entries

- Vary your vocabulary (e.g., not too many archaic, long, abstract, or uncommon words). Choose words carefully to convey meaning. Avoid prose or poetry that is consistently descriptive and/or full of clichés.
- For a story or a scene from a drama, work on developing characters with dimension, believable plot, and realistic dialogue.
- For poetry, work on developing a fresh concept and using figurative language, cadence, rhythmic beat, etc., to engage the reader's imagination and senses. Adhere to form if you are writing traditional verse. (Poems exceeding a page seldom improve with length.)