

Writing Tips from a Writing Judge

Dear teachers and students in 2018,

I have judged the prompted writing contests for the Fine Arts meet for a few years now. I competed in this contest 20+ years ago, and I won the national competition my senior year. It seemed like a good idea to emphasize a few key concepts that can help your writing stand out from the pack.

1) Be creative.

Try not to write the most obvious thing or the first thing that comes to mind. Every year there are two or three highly similar entries.

2) You are not unique in this contest, so how can your writing stand out?

Remember, you are competing against several other Christian school students who mostly have a similar approach to life as you. They are probably using the same curriculum and hearing the same chapel messages. This means you will have to try to stand out intentionally.

2b) So focus on unique elements:

Application. Perspective. Illustrations. Examples. Quotations you can remember. Beautiful and unique metaphors. Analogies. Observations from nature, your pets, your life experiences. Communicate a theological truth, if you think that's what's called for, with uniqueness and beauty and awe.

Poets: create emotion, longing, anticipation, joy, connections with the hearts of your readers. Don't aim for our eyes but our hearts. You could write about seas of flowers or anxious rivers. Which one gets to my heart? Which one stops at my eyes?

3) Beware of droning.

Poets, don't write rhyming essays. Take time to make it beautiful. The art is as important as the content. Go back through and replace all the dull words with sparkly ones.

Essayists, use imagery, color, and imagination; don't preach. Use transitions that prove a logical sequence between paragraphs.

All, try to show, not tell.

4) You don't have to take the thousand-foot view.

You can take your first outline, choose the very best paragraph idea (essay) or the very best image (poetry), then expand that best concept. Ditch the rest, and write about the very best concept. Explore a small space rather than rough-sketch a huge skyline.

For example: Don't write everything you can think of about teamwork, if that's the prompt. Write a nice essay on the third point that came to mind in your brainstorm, which might be listening. Divide listening into three pieces and direct all of your examples to teamwork.

5) You don't have to write theology, but if you do...

then please oh please mention Jesus Christ. He's the best. Peter called him the Author of Life!

Sometimes students will write about sin, rules, freedom, joy, heaven, and never mention Jesus! Read any given Pauline epistle and note how many times Paul mentions Jesus.

6) You are teenagers.

Teenagers shouldn't sound like 85 year old men. You know, no one ever writes an amusing essay. You could be the first! Be playful. Tease. Make me chuckle or laugh. Lighten up. It doesn't have to be heavy.

7) You are in school still.

You are neck-deep in stuff I have forgotten for a long time. Great books, funny lunch incidents, valuable lessons from sports coaches, beauty from art and music classes, intricacies from math, did-you-knows from chemistry and physics—please mine this stuff for gold.

8) Cliches

Don't let cliches ax-murder your writing. Hunt them down, arrest them, and bring them to justice. Buy some cliché goggles if you don't already have some. [See what I did there?]

8b) You MUST learn to recognize Christian cliches.

This should be part of your education.

9) Choose your audience.

If you are writing to church folk, then write something unique, challenging, and uplifting. Call me to action, to worship, to reflection. Avoid emotionalism and preaching though.

If you are writing to the general population, then you cannot use the Bible in an appeal to authority, certainly not at first. You must use popular cultural values—sports, music, books, movies, including lyrics, quotations, celebrity names, and specific incidents or events—and use them to establish a biblical worldview, just as Paul did on Mars Hill. (See what I did there? You're Christians, so I appealed to Paul's example.)

In fact, you can make up an audience — like the kids in your group project who don't ever try, a bunch of inmates in prison, the little old ladies in grandma's quilting club, your coworkers at Wendys. You may or may not need to address this audience overtly in your introduction.

10) Your poem doesn't have to be long to be good.

It just has to be good to be good.

11) You can practice with made-up prompts.

Ask your parents or teachers for a topic. Take a look at an old judging sheet to see the criteria as you evaluate your draft. Then try to improve it.

12) Do you know why this contest is a good thing?

You might think, no one is ever going to give me a prompt and then expect me to write about it. But when you get to college and are surprised at a challenge to your faith, or when a person you thought loved Jesus is starting to debate a certain long-held view, or when you are surprised to find out that you forgot to fully prepare a presentation at work (or that they switched the topic on you), or you are in a Bible study or coffee shop conversation and something comes up that could lead to a gospel conversation, you will be glad you have practiced spontaneous beautiful attention-arresting writing. In fact, you are more likely to face this kind of writing/speaking than any other.