

Paterson's Seven Steps to Excalibur Gold

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1. Let the work be your guide, young Jedi.

First you have to decide what to enter. If you start by reviewing the categories and trying to think of what fits into them, you will find yourself limited. But if you start by thinking about the best work you did last year, you can always find a way to fit it into a category.

2. And your point is?

As you identify the cases you'll enter, you have to focus on the projects that really accomplished something. It can be tempting to think of the ones where you used a fun or creative communication tool, but you won't have a shot if your creativity didn't lead to tangible results.

3. We may be living in a material world, but most judges ain't material girls ... or boys.

The judges are in a hurry, so they will browse your supporting materials but generally they won't read them in much detail. The case study is what will decide your fate. If something is important, make sure you deal with it in your case study. Then include enough supporting materials to make your entry look thorough and detailed.

Think of it this way: the judges will form a judgment on the basis of your case study. Then they'll look to your supporting materials to confirm their initial judgment. If they've decided they love your case study, don't give them a reason to change their minds by not including sufficient supporting materials.

4. Outlines. They're not just for chalk anymore.

It's not easy to remember all the details of something you worked on a year ago. If you just start writing, you'll find yourself omitting important chunks of information. But if you use the judging criteria as an outlining tool, you will give focus and clarity to your case study.

5. Tell us a story, O wise one.

Take it from someone who has been a judge: for pure entertainment value, some award entries rival a root canal. So set your entry apart by telling a story. Engage the reader in a narrative where you're the protagonist fighting some challenge or working some miracle. Put the judges on your side!

6. Sweat the small stuff.

As communicators, we should be held to a high standard of visual and textual integrity. Make sure the entry is appealing to the eye, using appropriate spacing, typefaces, headings and layout. And be assured that misspellings, poor grammar and sloppy writing will be held against you, even if they're (their? there?) not part of the official scoring.

7. Find a reviewer who's even more clueless than you.

The judges won't be familiar with all the ins and outs of your project. So you'll want to guard against information gaps as well as jargon. To help you avoid making assumptions about how much the judges know, give your draft to someone for review – and make sure it's someone who doesn't know a lot of details about the case.

And remember ... you can't score from the sidelines!