

# BEATING THE ODDS

Neil MacDonald explores your chances of winning a writing competition

What are your odds of winning a writing competition? Millions to one? As likely as winning the lottery? The simple answer to this question is, of course, it depends on which writing competition you're talking about. I'm going to talk here about short story contests, but the same principles apply to comps for novels, poems and plays.

If you enter a small local competition with 100 entries and 10 places on the shortlist, then all things being equal (more on this later), you have a 10 per cent chance of making the list and one chance in a hundred of winning.

If, on the other hand, you enter a big international competition like the Bridport Prize, you are competing with around 6000 other writers for 13 shortlist places. This gives you a 0.22 per cent chance of placing and two in 10,000 of winning.

The table opposite lists numbers for some well-known and less well-known contests. The chances of placing range over 20-fold from lowest (the Bridport) to the second highest (the Yeovil) and 100-fold to the highest (the Scottish Association of Writers Westerwood short story comp).

Three health warnings about the stats. First, the data quality for the number of entries is variable, since competitions often don't publish precise figures. Several contests, including the Exeter Prize and the Nottingham Writers Club, declined to provide data. In some cases, approximate figures are available, indicated by a 'c'. My sources for all the numbers appear at the end



of the article. The Bristol, the Bath, the Commonwealth, the Jane Austen, the Magic Oxygen, the National Association of Writers' Groups, the Sci-Fi London, the Scottish Association of Writers, the Yeovil and the Willesden Herald provided the exact total of entrants, but even approximate numbers indicate the general range of probabilities.

Second, even where the figures are accurate, they will only be true for one year. For example, the NAWG story comp receives an average of 358 submissions, but in 2016 there were 426. Submissions to the Commonwealth prize in the Europe/Canada region have risen from 369 in 2012 to 777 in 2017.

**Tips for improving odds** The raw statistics show the chances of winning if all things are equal, but obviously, many of the submissions will be

sub-standard, which means you can improve your odds.

Sue Emms ([www.writing-world.com/contests/judge.shtml](http://www.writing-world.com/contests/judge.shtml)) judged a contest that attracted 300 entries, of which only 26 met her minimum standards. Cathy Bryant ([www.writerscookbook.com/writing-competition-myths](http://www.writerscookbook.com/writing-competition-myths)) won an international competition that had 20 authors – and hers was the only one to follow the guidelines correctly!

You can significantly increase your chances of winning by:

- Following the comp's rules about length, theme, format, etc
- Following the principles of good storytelling
- Editing and polishing carefully

The bigger the contest, the less likely it is that your competitors will fail to follow these basic rules. Once you get to the *Sunday Times* EFG (the

richest prize in the short story universe), runners up include writers like Hilary Mantel.

The skill areas above are covered extensively elsewhere in this mag, but there are some comp-specific things that may tilt the scales in your favour. They are mostly about putting yourself in the judges' shoes.

- Submit early. The judges often start reading as soon as the contest opens. Most entries will come in during the closing stages of the contest. By that stage the judges won't give each entry as much attention.
- Think carefully about your angle, especially in themed contests. You want your story to stand out for its originality. Don't go with your first idea – it's likely that same thought has occurred to lots of others. By the time the judges have sifted out the longlist, it won't necessarily be the best entry that wins, as Alex Keegan

Competition	Entry fee	First prize	Past winners published?	Multiple entry?	No. entries	Places	Prob of placing
Bridport Short Story	Free	£5000	Yes	Yes	c 6,000	13	0.22 %
Mslxia Short Story	£10	£2000	Yes	Yes	c 2000	6	0.30 %
Writers & Artists Yearbook	Free	Course	Website	No	2108	10	0.47 %
Costa Short Story	Free	£3000	Website	No	c 1200	6	0.50 %
Jane Austen Short Story	£5	£1000	No	?	281	2	0.71 %
Commonwealth Short Story	Free	£2500	Yes	No	607 (Eur/Can)	6 (Eur/Can)	0.99 %
UK Short Story Competition	£6	£1000	Yes	Yes	2700	30	1.11 %
NAWG Members Short Story	Free	Trophy	Yes	No	358	4	1.12 %
Sunday Times EFG	Free	£30,000	Website	No	c 1200	14	1.17 %
Magic Oxygen Literary Prize	£5	£1000	Yes	Yes	c 800	10	1.25 %
Galley Beggar Press Short Story	£10	£1000	Maybe	Yes	c 600	10	1.67 %
Sci-Fi London 48 Hour Flash	Free	£500	Website	Yes	418	7	1.67 %
Bristol Short Story Prize	£8	£1000	Yes	Yes	2160	40	1.85 %
Willesden Herald Short Story	£7.50	£300	Yes	No	381	10	2.62 %
Bath Short Story Award	£8	£1000	Yes	Yes	1100	49	4.45 %
Yeovil Literary Prize	£7	Kudos	No	No	404	20	4.95 %
Scot Assn Writers Westerwood	£5	£50	No	Yes	21	5	23.81 %

It may help to analyse past winners but don't overdo this

points out ([www.writerswrite.com/journal/mar98/short-story-competitions-increasing-your-chances-of-winning-3984](http://www.writerswrite.com/journal/mar98/short-story-competitions-increasing-your-chances-of-winning-3984)). It will be the story whose difference from the perfection of the other 99 wakes them from their temporary state of word-blindness where each story merges into the next.

- It may help to analyse past winners and the preferences of the current judges, but don't overdo this and produce a machine piece – be true to your own ideas.
- If the rules allow, enter two or three stories. Suddenly your odds have improved from one in 100 to three in 100.

**Which comp to enter?** The table above provides the data to help you decide. If your objective is to win a comp, any comp, you should select one with fewer entrants and more places in the longlist. If you want big money, choose the

contests with the large prizes. If you're trying to build your literary reputation, you should go for the more prestigious contests. If you want to get published, select a contest that publishes the shortlist.

You can pick your best fit of favourable odds, prizes and kudos. This magazine lists these prizes and many more writing comps every month in the Competitive Edge pages.

If you win a prestigious international literary contest such as the Bridport, the Costa or the *Sunday Times*, your reputation is made. Publishers and agents will be climbing over each other to get to you. But your odds of winning these are very low. Some of the more local comps, such as the Bath and the Yeovil, though smaller, have a great reputation and offer much higher chances of securing a place.

The website of the Yeovil Prize provides impressive confirmation that agents and publishers pay attention to their results ([www.yeovilprize.co.uk/successes.html](http://www.yeovilprize.co.uk/successes.html)). Two Yeovil novel and short-story winners and 12 shortlisted competitors between 2006 and 2016 went on to secure agents and/or publication deals.

One detail there wasn't room for in our table: the Magic

Oxygen Literary Prize plants a tree in Kenya for every entry, allowing you to help the planet as you compete.

**Comps or magazines?** The odds of achieving a place in one of these contests compares favourably with those of being published in a prestigious literary magazine, and many of the comps publish anthologies of the shortlist.

*Glimmer Train*, *Threepenny Review* and *Granta* all have acceptance rates of around 0.22 per cent. *Readers' Digest* and *Tin House* publish around 0.5 per cent of stories submitted; *Interzone* publishes about 1.6 per cent. *The Maine Review* accepts 4.8 per cent of submissions.

Of course, there are mags with much higher acceptance rates. *Down in the Dirt* takes almost half the stories it receives and *Scarlet Leaf*, 87.8 per cent. But then there are also comps with fewer entries and therefore higher odds of winning.

Putting those stats into perspective, in the UK your chance of dying in a car accident is 0.5 per cent, of being killed by lightning 0.022 per cent, and of winning the National Lottery jackpot just 0.000007 per cent.

- Sources for number of entrants**
- Bridport Short Story: <http://teresa-stenson.blogspot.co.uk/2010/05/brief-bits-and-bridport-advice.html>
  - Mslxia Short Story: <http://amandaosthuizen.com/mslexia-shortlist/>
  - Writers & Artists: <https://www.writersandartists.co.uk/2017/03/short-story-competition-2017-winner-revealed>
  - Costa Short Story: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/jan/18/costa-short-story-prize-reveals-identities-of-anonymised-finalists>
  - Jane Austen Short Story: <http://janeausten200.co.uk/short-story-competition-%E2%80%93-winners-announced>
  - Commonwealth Short Story: data supplied by Commonwealth Writers
  - UK Short Story: blog now removed
  - National Association of Writers' Groups (NAWG): *The Write Path 2016*, foreword to competition anthology
  - Sunday Times EFG: <http://www.thebookseller.com/news/bret-anthony-johnston-wins-sunday-times-efg-short-story-award-543031>
  - Magic Oxygen Literary Prize: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NTKICmG5rHw>
  - Galley Beggar Press: <http://paulmcveigh.blogspot.co.uk/2016/07/galley-beggar-press-short-story-prize.html>
  - Sci-Fi-London 48 Hour Flash: <https://twitter.com/hashtag/sf148hrflash?lang=en>
  - Bristol Short Story Prize: <http://www.bbk.ac.uk/news/birkbeck-creative-writing-student-wins-2016-bristol-short-story-prize>
  - Willesden Herald: <http://newshortstories.com/wordpress/short-list-for-the-2014-short-story-competition/>
  - Bath Short Story Award: <https://www.bathshortstoryaward.org/category/news/>
  - Yeovil Literary Prize: [http://www.yeovilprize.co.uk/P2016\\_Results.html](http://www.yeovilprize.co.uk/P2016_Results.html)
  - SAW: direct contact.