

How to do well in the STC Australia Chapter competition

Principle no. 1: State clearly what you controlled in the production of your entry. Make it no longer than two sentences and mark it clearly on your entry.

In our advice to judges we suggest they adhere to the following two principles:

- Judge the work the contributors actually did
- Judge how well the work does what it is intended to do

We do try to do this but it is not always easy. We don't always know what the contributors actually did and what they had control over. There is a space to submit this information on the entry form but we find often contributors fill this with lots of information which it is hard to keep in mind while looking through the entry. In fact, judges have complained about the wealth of information attached to each entry. It's much easier to keep in mind a few simple facts.

Principle no 2: State in two sentences or less why you chose to produce your entry in its current form. Indicate that you did consider what effect the final form would have on readers/viewers of your entry.

We tell our judges to grant awards of Distinguished, Excellence and Merit based on the following criteria:

Distinguished – no major flaws and few minor flaws, comments are confined to taste and style

Excellence - might contain a single major flaw or a few minor flaws, comments are confined to taste and style, and minor suggestions

Merit - contains a small number of major flaws (1-2) or several minor flaws

In practice, most people are used to starting with average and applauding anything that seems beyond average. I cannot speak for all the judges but in the groups in which I have judged, “standard” seems to approximate with Merit. We are reluctant to hand out Excellence and Distinguished awards without good reason and so judging often proceeds with either the award of Merit and then a search for reasons why an entry deserves better or a count of the number of flaws and then an evaluation as to whether they are major or minor.

In addition, though we try to consider the entry as a whole, it is hard not to be seduced by flashy graphics or beautiful design. If someone has gone to the effort of hiring graphic designers or top quality printers, then the impression is that the submitter believes in the quality of their entry and therefore, so does the judge. This will always be a problem, especially for printed material and artwork. This seems especially unfair if you or your company do not have the resources to hire graphic designers or top quality printers or if the type of work does not justify their hire (for example an in-house training manual or a scholarly article in a university publication).

There is no real solution to this but you can assist the judges by stating on your application form why you used the tools you did and produced your entry in its presented form. This will inform the judges as to why you chose to produce your entry in the specific form in which it is presented and help us understand that you considered carefully your choice of presentation format. It will also remind us that flashy isn't always good.

Principle no 3: Provide information on budget, time or resource restrictions.

Again, this should be limited to a few sentences only. This type of information helps judges understand why you have chosen not to use expensive graphics or formats. In particular, an entry that meets requirements and uses technical writing principles well and has been produced in a limited time, will often be well perceived.

Principle no 4: Take all aspects into account when creating your entry. Check your entry before submitting

Judges are asked to provide a critique of each competition entry. To do this we complete a form which is provided by the competition organisers in the US. The form assists us to evaluate each entry on the criteria considered most important for each category. These forms are constantly revised and are a useful starting point for assessing each entry. They are helpful in prompting the judges to consider all aspects of an entry. Important aspects considered are as follows:

Technical Publications – writing style, appropriate vocabulary for audience, organisation, handling of technical complexity, consistency, table of contents and index (if used), visual design and layout, suitability of graphics, appropriate presentation for audience

Online – definition of audience, appropriateness of presentation, writing style, consistency, organisation, navigational elements, effective use of graphics

Technical Art – purpose, content, visual appeal, presentation, use of media, technique, use of graphic elements and layout, quality of production

These then are the areas that you need to consider in preparing your entry for the competition. You could also indicate on your entry form what your principles were in writing and designing your entry. But remember, if the judges have too much to read, we won't be able to keep it all in mind. Best to let your adherence to correct principles of design and writing show in your entry.

Note that entries are not compared to other entries in the same category but only assessed against the judging criteria.

Principle no 5: Keep the descriptive portion of your entry form short and to the point.

When preparing your application form, remember that a few well-chosen descriptive sentences will stay in the judges' minds longer than lots of explanation.

(presented by Michelle Hallett, Australia Chapter President, at first Australia Chapter meeting, 28 April 2005 [held online])