

Judging Basics

Although any poet's major aim is to write poetry, writing is not the entire poetic experience. Poets should also read poetry (both their own and the poetry of others), critique poetry and judge poetry. These are all part of the learning experience that makes one a better poet. Critiquing poetry and judging poetry are two different processes. Critiquing involves evaluating a single poem for the purpose of improvement. Judging involves comparing poems to determine which are the best. If a contest contains only a few good poems, this becomes easier, but the judge still must determine a ranking for those poems. There must be some criteria to decide which is the first place poem, which is the second place poem, etc.

In the last two years, NFSPS has had a major thrust toward obtaining new judges who can bring fresh insight into their poetry contests, but many people are still reluctant to volunteer to judge a large contest with 100 to 300 poems. Part of this reluctance is due to the insecurity that some people have toward making decisions in general. When we make decisions for a poetry contest, we should prepare ourselves by studying the appropriate form and every poem should have a fair reading, but there is a point at which a decision must be made. I have known of judges who determined the ten best poems for their contest and then spent weeks moving them back and forth before submitting their decisions. Always consider judging to be a timed activity that should be completed within a limited number of days to be fair to the contest chairman, who must prepare certificates, and the treasurer who must issue checks. Be firm in your decisions once you have made them.

Since the difficulty with judging often involves those very good poems and how to rank them, I have devised a rating system for evaluating those poems. Your rating system may not be the same as mine, but you should definitely have one to help you make those difficult final decisions. I rate the poems on a scale of one to ten on each of the following criteria. This is my rating system, but it may not be yours, though yours would probably be similar:

(Note to editor: I have sent a copy of my original criteria sheet rather than listing them again here. They can be inserted in the article at this point.)

You can see how having a clear sense of what you are looking for can help you to become a better judge. I hope each of you will consider judging in the future and find it a rewarding experience.

Russell H. Strauss

What I Look for When I Judge a Poem

1. Originality. Is there something different and interesting about this poem or is it the same old thing we have seen many times before?
2. Cohesiveness. Does the poem hold together as a unit?
3. Figurative language. Are similes and metaphors used when appropriate? Are they fresh and not trite?
4. Appropriateness to form or topic. Does the poem stick to the rules for the type of poem being written? (Even free verse has rules.)
5. Clarity. Can you easily understand what the poem is saying?
6. Meaning. Does the poem seem to have a purpose? That purpose does not always have to be a serious one. Humor is a purpose. This does not mean that the poem should be moralistic or "preachy"
7. Correctness. Is the grammar, punctuation and spelling in the poem correct.? If the poem depends on factual information (i.e. scientific or historical facts, etc.) are those facts correct? Are words used in their correct meaning? Poets who care about their poems check these things carefully.
- 8 Beginning and endings Is the title interesting and appropriate? Do the opening lines lead us into the poem? Do the final lines bring the poem to an appropriate conclusion?