

Tips for editing your submission to the 2018 Stories of Life Competition

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1. **Tell just one story!** When you do not stick to one main storyline or incident, your story will lose focus. Many writers cannot resist trying to fit in other aspects of their life story that are not directly related to the main narrative line. Do not introduce characters, events or facts that do not contribute directly to the main storyline. You might need to tell us that Uncle Cecil was the one who showed up with the dog you were given for your 10th birthday, but you do not need to tell us that he had cancer, is no longer married to your aunt, or used to play SANFL, etc. unless this information is important to the main story.

Remedy: Identify the main story you are telling and ask yourself whether each incident, person or bit of information you are thinking of including is vital to that story.

2. **Know when to stop!** A common mistake writers make is to add a paragraph or two of obvious explanation (often very spiritual) after what would have been a very good and powerful natural ending to the story. It is important to know when your story has finished. Readers like to work out the main point or lesson for themselves. If the story is well-written, this will not be a problem. If you need to add a paragraph or two to explain, for instance, that the point of the story is that God is faithful and never forgets us, then you have probably not written the story well enough, or in the right way.

Remedy: Stop your story at the end and let the reader work out the obvious message to be learned from it. If you have shown the reader what happened, you do not need to also tell them what it means.

3. **Don't try too hard!** Overwriting can be the death of a good story. Beware of excessive use of adjectives and adverbs as well as descriptive phrases and sentences where these do not contribute to the story or the setting. Aim for concision of language. Ask yourself what each word and phrase is doing in the story. If the answer is 'nothing', take it out.

Remedy: Edit heavily. Ask of each word what it is doing in the sentence. Keep in mind that the quality of your story can be judged by the quality of your scrap heap. Do not be afraid to throw out a favourite line or phrase if it is not doing anything in the story.

4. **Be Christian, not religious!** Avoid excessive use of religious jargon. Some people write about coming to faith using terms and phrases that would have been incomprehensible to them at the time of the encounter they are describing. Others tend to use terms and phrases that are clearly common in their own particular church or tradition, but which most other Christians would find unclear or unfamiliar. Some of this may be unavoidable, depending on your theme, but when there is too much of it, it becomes a distraction. Write so that the ordinary person will know what you are talking about. Don't tell them you were 'saved' or 'filled by the Spirit' or 'experienced the healing power of Jesus' or experienced 'Eucharistic rapture.' Simply describe what happened to you using language that anyone can understand. This will make your story more accessible and more effective.

Remedy: Look at what you have written and the language used and ask: Would family and friends who are not Christian, or those not active in my own church scene, understand these words and phrases? If the answer is 'no, they probably would not,' then find a way to say it differently.

5. **Proof-reading is next to godliness!** No matter how good you think you were at English Grammar in school, you need to have one or two good readers (at a minimum) read your story and suggest corrections. Obvious typos, spelling mistakes, incorrect punctuation and the like will detract from an otherwise compelling story.

Remedy: Don't send in your story until you have had it carefully proof-read. Let your friends spot your typos and misspellings, not the judges.

6. **Submit your story!** At some point you have to stop rewriting and editing and send in your story. One of the keys to good editing is to know when to stop. There will always be an improvement that could possibly be made, or a comma to add or delete. Do not let your efforts to produce a well-written story prevent you from sending in the best story you are able to produce in the time you have to do it. Too many good stories are left setting on a shelf at home or on a computer file because the writer was worried it was not good enough, or convinced that it still needs work. It doesn't hurt anything to send the story off and see how others respond. You may be surprised at how your story speaks to others.

Remedy: Just send us the story!