

Learning from Others' Mistakes



Over the last ten years, I have read and evaluated more than 100,000 stories for *Chicken Soup for the Soul* books, with nearly a third of that number taking place within the last ten months. For this reason, I believe myself to be an expert in what makes a great anthology story.

For every ten stories submitted to *Chicken Soup* for consideration, one or two will make it through the first cut. Hence, it's important that your story submission avoids the most common mistakes made by hopeful submitters:

- 1) Story is not in first person: Make sure your story is written in first person. For example, first person would be, "I took my family to the zoo and we saw the flamingos," not "She took her family to the zoo and they saw the flamingos." Write as you would tell your personal story, in your voice.
- 2) Don't give away the surprise: This applies to both the title and the first few paragraphs of your story. More than half of the stories I read tell the reader what is going to happen. Why should the reader continue on with the story if they know what happens in the end? If you must make a reference, then tease your reader. Keep them intrigued to keep reading. But don't give it away. Prime examples: if your story is about your horse dying, don't use the title "The Day My Horse Died." Or if your story is about winning a contest, don't put in your lead, "I can't believe I won the contest" then go on to tell how you won. Boring.
- 3) Listing many names: This could be a deal breaker. In most cases, *Chicken Soup* must get

Continued on page two



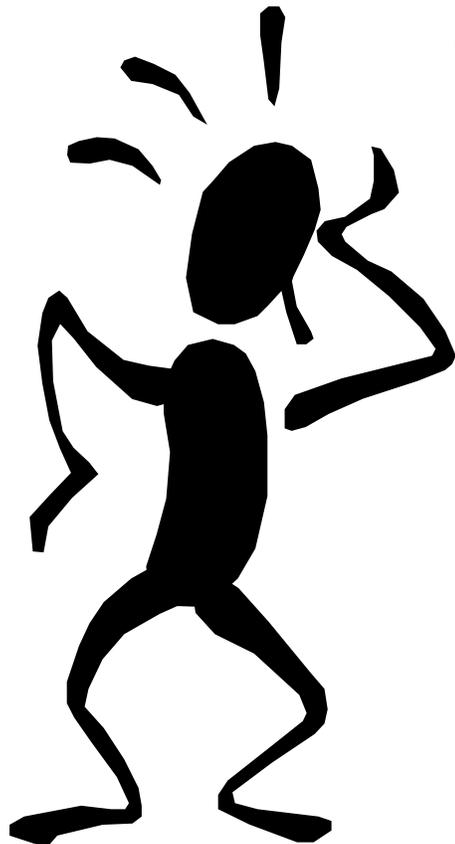
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Continued from page one

permission releases for those mentioned by name or reference (i.e., my mom, my neighbor) in a story. You would not believe how many stories list unessential people by name; it's a riot to see how many names can make one story. Needless to say, those stories are cut. Only use names of people if they are important to your story.

- 4) Too much dialog: Many stories are filled with endless dialog. While it's great to include dialog to personalize your story, it also needs to drive your story. But the key here is to remember that all books are held to page count, and in a Chicken book, dialog is displayed as a new line/paragraph for each person speaking and not included in a single large paragraph. For this reason, lots of dialog will fill up lots of pages very quickly. In most cases, this is not a luxury a publisher can accommodate.
- 5) Not staying on point and/or giving unnecessary detail: Nothing will kill your story faster than a good ramble. Keep on point; this will drive your story to the end and keep the reader's attention. The other mistake is giving unnecessary detail; if the information is in for color or for fun, make sure the extra verbiage is pertinent.



- 6) Story is too long: Stories are to be 1,200 words or less. Believe it or not, about a third of the stories received far exceed this maximum word count. Unfortunately, most are cut without even being read. A good editing rule of thumb comes from mystery writer Stephen King: after creating your story, cut ten percent of it. This will force you to tighten your words, thus strengthening your message and making the story a more enjoyable read.
- 7) Story is too preachy or belittling: This mistake happens all too often, as the submitter will "preach" on and on at the ending about what the reader should have learned in the story. If the submitter did a great job telling his/her story, then there's no need to explain what the lesson should have been. Another mistake is that the submitter will act as an expert, talking down to readers. When writing your story, treat your readers as intelligent people who can draw conclusions and lessons on their own.

Continued on page three

Learning from Others' Mistakes

Continued from page two

- 8) Story is not G-rated: This is *Chicken Soup for the Soul*, plain and simple. No swear words! No sexual references! No double innuendos! Keep it G-rated.
- 9) Song lyrics: Due to copyright issues, avoid song lyrics at all costs. Even song titles are taboo: if the title is longer than five words, copyright issues are rampant. Granted, older songs that are no longer under copyright protection could be deemed okay to use, but if Chicken can't ascertain that the copyright has indeed expired, they will pass on the story.
- 10) Anonymous submissions: Every story in *Chicken Soup* has the submitter's byline (name) at the end of their story. They will not use an anonymous reference.

It's wise to learn from the mistakes of others. Let the above ring in your mind and your heart when penning your next *Chicken Soup* story—if you avoid all the above pitfalls, and you have a tightly written story with a strong message, the editors at *Chicken* will be more inclined to read your submission.



—Dahlynn

Yikes!

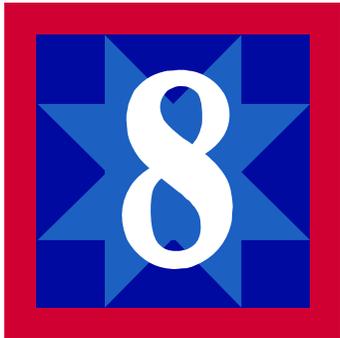


Here are eight important “issues” to think about when submitting a story to *Chicken Soup for the Soul*:

1. Complete all of the contact information in the fields. Many regular contributors assume that *Chicken* already has their contact info, which is sometimes not the case. Play it safe and complete every field on their submission database form.
2. NO ALL CAPS! Do not submit your entire story (or complete the database information) using all capital letters. It's hard to read and very frustrating to rekey if the story is selected.
3. When pasting your story into the text box, be sure your original is single spaced. And don't use hard returns (hitting the “enter” key) to go to the next line. Both of these style issues, especially if the story is double-spaced by way of hard returns, are difficult to read and even more frustrating to reformat.

Continued on page four

Yikes!



4. Don't submit your story using a letter-style format (i.e., Dear Mary, Dear God, Dear Diary)
5. When talking about a parent figure or like person, only capitalize when that figure is a proper noun. For example, "My Dad helped me with my homework" is incorrect. It should be "My dad helped me with my homework." If you must keep "Dad" capitalized in that sentence, then simply remove the word "My." Rule: if you use the word "my" in front of a general noun like dad, mom, grandmother, etc., don't cap the reference!
6. Apostrophe usage when it comes to dates: When using a multiple-year reference in a sentence, don't use an apostrophe (i.e., 1840s is correct, not 1840's). When omitting a portion of the number when citing a year, it should look like this: '90s. No apostrophe needed between the year and the letter "s."
7. Do not submit your social security number in the text box! Yes, this still happens.
8. Use only one space between sentences. The "two space rule" is old school and hasn't been used in over twenty years.

This just in from Writer's Digest!

Popular Fiction Awards

Entry Deadline: Monday, November 02, 2009

A Short Story Competition: Compete and Win in All Five Categories!

- Romance
- Mystery/Crime Fiction
- Science Fiction/Fantasy
- Thriller/Suspense
- Horror

Grand prize: \$2,500 cash, \$100 worth of Writer's Digest Books and the 2010 Novel & Short Story Writer's Market.

Go to www.WritersDigest.com to learn more and enter!

HOT STUFF! HOT STUFF! HOT STUFF! HOT STUFF! HOT STUFF!



Cup of Comfort

www.CupofComfort.com

For Couples: Deadline: October 20, 2009 **Deadline Extended!**

For Golfers: Deadline: December 15, 2009

Announcing Cup's Readers' Choice Competition

From the folks at Cup of Comfort: "In Fall 2010, we will be publishing a special volume: *A Cup of Comfort: Readers' Choice Edition!* This collection will feature stories that you, the *Cup of Comfort* community, have selected as the strongest of the submissions! From now until January 15th, 2010, you will be able to enter your story for a contest fee of only \$10.99! Your story can be about anything you want—as long as it fits the uplifting *Cup of Comfort* spirit. At the close of voting period, the publishers will select ten finalists that will appear on CupofComfort.com in March 2010 to be voted on by you, your friends, your family – anyone who has registered for the site! At the close of the voting period, the four stories that received the most votes will be declared the winners!"

To learn about the grand prize and submit your story, go to www.CupofComfort.com and click on the tab that says "Readers' Choice." Good luck!

Chicken Soup for the Soul

www.ChickenSoup.com

Endurance Sports: Deadline: September 30, 2009

Dieting and Fitness: Deadline: September 30, 2009

Mothers and Daughters: Deadline: December 31, 2009

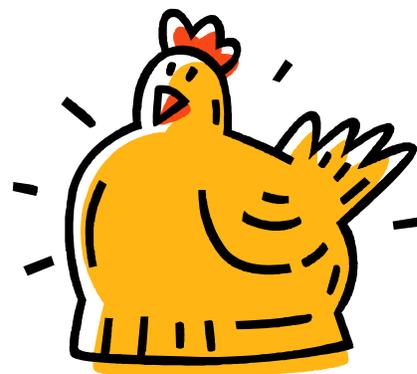
Christmas and Holidays: Deadline: January 15, 2010

Grandmothers: Deadline: March 31, 2010

Grieving and Recovery: Deadline: March 31, 2010

Grieving and Recovery for Dog Owners: Deadline: March 31, 2010

Grieving and Recovery for Cat Owners: Deadline: March 31, 2010



Go for it! Get published! 