

Creating a creative writing program and competition

By Prue Bon

Snapshot

Prue Bon generously shares her schools highly successful micro stories creative writing competition offering a model that can be replicated and great tips and prompt ideas to get your school started.

Good things come in small packages.

That was the inspiration for the Micro Stories Creative Writing Competition. Start small and build up.

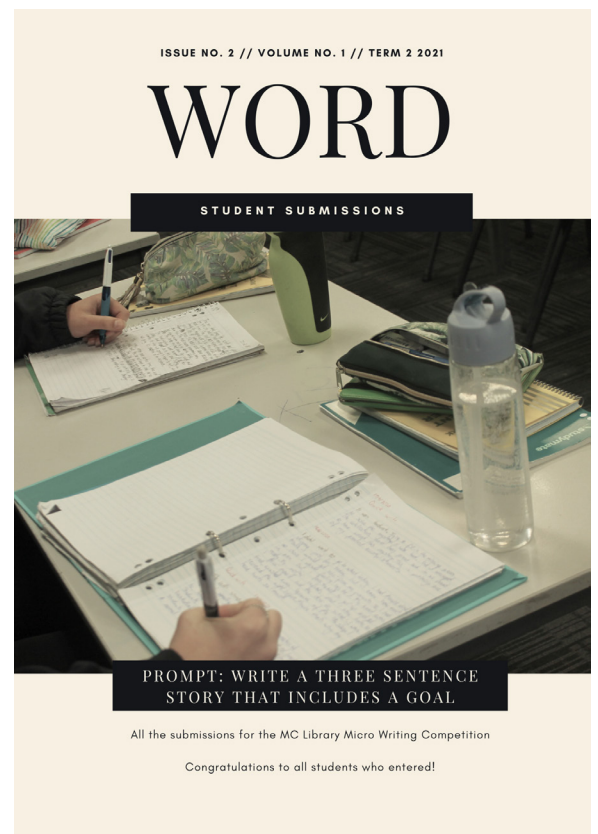
With a collection of students who were both reluctant readers and writers, the challenges that faced the library in encouraging students to contribute to a writing competition were initially immense.

Conversations with leadership, and English teachers, had raised the idea of publishing more student writing in an attempt to encourage them to write more. Questions were directed at the library as to how they might be able to support this. However, with a limited budget, a lot of creativity was required in promoting and publishing the stories that we hoped would be submitted.

While book club students were busy creating bunting from weeded novels to decorate the library with, the idea of printing short stories onto the bunting was floated. Suddenly, there was a solution to creative publishing of student work.

The stories needed to remain small, however, in order to fit on the bunting. And so, the idea of a competition around writing micro fiction was formed.

The first prompt was to write a story in 21 words, which was inspired by the year 2021, the year that the project first began. The competition was communicated through the range of channels available to us – the school newsletter, Compass





feed and posters in prominent places. English teachers were encouraged to use one lesson to teach some of the finer points of writing micro fiction and give students the time to create a story that could be submitted.

The beginning was slow, and there were only 18 submissions (in a school of 1100 students) for the first prompt. Persistence proved to be our greatest ally. The library published a new prompt during week two of every term, and submissions were due by the end of week four of that same term. The prompts stayed vague enough that they allowed students to write about anything, but also had prescriptive word limits. The short length of stories worked on two levels: to support the short submission time, and to fit onto the bunting.

By the end of the Term 4 competition, we received 62 entries, including several from staff. The number of entries continued to grow into the following year and with the support of the English team, one lesson at the beginning of every term was dedicated to writing a possible submission.

Winning stories were published in the school newsletter, providing students with the opportunity to see their work gain a wider audience. All submissions were 'published' on the bunting in the library and also in a digital magazine (created through Canva) which was catalogued through the library collection and available to all staff and students. Student feedback demonstrated that the micro aspect and short submission time was a motivating factor in participation. Students also shared that the wide publication of their work gave them purpose for their writing, particularly the bunting that decorated the library space, because they were able to 'see' their writing whenever they visited.

The program continued to grow until it became embedded within the library programs, and it helped to encourage all students to believe in their own writing abilities.

Putting the strategy into place:

There were two key factors in the success of this particular program at our school:

1. Support from staff
2. Consistency

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Step 1: Collaboration with Curriculum Teams

Collaborating with your English team should be the first step in getting a similar program up and running. Being able to gain insight into the creative writing units that are being taught will provide inspiration for the types of prompts that the competition can use.

Many Victorian Government schools are now going down the route of a 'framework' for their creative writing units, in line with recent changes to VCE study designs, which can be a useful starting place for the library. By working within the same framework of ideas, students will already have inspiration for the content of their pieces. However, even just being able to connect prompts to the curriculum is helpful. Knowing which Ancient civilisations are being taught in junior History classes, or the sports being played in P.E, can all lead to creative prompts that target a particular interest for students.

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Submissions to creative writing competitions also often require much encouragement; many students do not feel that they are 'good enough' writers to enter, and by having the support of the teachers within your school, the library can lean on them for extra encouragement and promotion within their classroom. We found that the sport prompt saw many submissions from students who didn't normally consider themselves 'writers', but they were interested in the topic and the P.E teachers cheered their students towards submitting.

Step 2: Deadlines and Prompts

The next step is to determine deadlines. We went with a prompt release in week two of each term, with submissions due by the end of week four of the same term. This decision was based around assessment and reporting deadlines: for most students, they weren't working on assessment tasks this early in the term and therefore were able to devote time to writing for pleasure. The short submission deadline enabled students to stay focussed on the task, but also helped support the library staff who were judging and then publishing the submissions. The week four submission deadline gave the library team three – four weeks

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to complete judging, publish the stories on the bunting and create the digital magazine before the end of the term. In the final week of term, a celebration was held to confer the winners and acknowledge all submissions.

These deadlines also enabled us to be consistent, especially across terms that vary in length. By term three of the first year, students were beginning to recognise the pattern of dates and we often had students waiting for the release of the prompt.

(We were late one term, and it was encouraging to see students expressing their dissatisfaction with this!)

All prompts for the year were determined at the beginning of each year. Whilst the first year of the competition saw the library team develop the prompts, we quickly recognised that having input from all curriculum teams would be helpful. In the second year of the program, library staff met with curriculum team leaders at the beginning of the year to brainstorm ideas and develop prompts that were inclusive of all curriculum areas.

Step 3: Promotion

Promoting the competition through all available channels is important, in order to not only get the information out there, but to also gain support from other staff and parents. Schools have access to an immense number of digital platforms these days, including newsletters, Instagram and facebook pages, Compass (or similar LMS), and Teams. Hang posters everywhere students gather – coordinator offices, toilets, canteen, hallways and other noticeboards. We also designed a smaller version of the poster for teachers to include in their powerpoints and lesson plans.

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Step 4: Judging

As part of the initial planning, it's a good idea to develop some criteria for the judges. This will ensure some consistency regardless of who the judge is, but also prevents any future challenges, particularly if several students often win (which may happen if you don't have large numbers of submissions to begin with).

The rubric doesn't need to be overly complicated. Consideration of how the piece meets the prompt, use of language, and appropriate grammar and spelling are some starting points. Keeping the criteria simple will help if you have judges who are not writers – having a 'special' guest judge every now and then continues to support and build the program.

Add a "judging" meeting to your program's schedule each term, no more than a week after the final submission date. This means that the judges need to meet the deadlines and prevents all the 'other' things getting in the way. Even if there are only a few submissions to begin with, staying accountable to the deadlines helps with the consistency of the program.

Prizes can be organised at this time, particularly if you want to 'personalise' the prize a little bit. We used Paperblanks journals as our main prizes (because writers can never have too many journals) which allowed us to present a journal that we felt might resonate with each individual



write a micro story and enter the MC Library creative writing competition!

prompt:
write a story in exactly 21 words

entries close: march 1

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winner. However, book packs and beautiful pens were also popular prizes among our writers!

Step 5: Publication

When students have a purpose and an audience for their writing, they tend to write more. Knowing that their work will be published provides them with extra motivation to polish their pieces, but it also gives them something tangible to include in their own individual portfolios.

Publish winning stories in the school newsletter and other digital platforms (another advantage of the micro-fiction aspect). We printed all submissions and placed them on bunting that we

hung around the library. We also created a digital magazine with all entries each term, and were able to add it to the digital collection for borrowing. A handful of copies were printed for use during Open Nights, but the digital magazine allowed us to keep costs down.

Step 6: Acknowledge your wins

There are two components to this. The first is to acknowledge the winners of the competition, and all the writers who enter. While the program was in its beginning stages, we held a small ceremony in the library and invited all the writers who submitted a story, along with Leadership and other selected staff. As it began to grow, the winners were acknowledged at whole school assemblies, although we still continued to hold the smaller ceremonies to confer the prizes. We also created certificates of acknowledgement for all students who submitted.

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The second component was probably the most important, and it was to remember (especially in the early stages) that every submission to the competition was a win for the program. Even though the first iteration had only 18 submissions, it was still 18 students who had gone to the effort to write something that they had the courage to submit for judging. And in speaking to those first 18 students, we realised that good things come in small packages.

Some prompt ideas for 2024

- Write a story in exactly 24 words.
- Create a story in less than 50 words that uses the words 'ball', 'win' and 'competition'.
- In less than 70 words, what happens when an archaeologist finds a mummy?
- In six sentences, write the story of a life cycle.
- What does the hammer say to the wood in exactly 56 words.

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