

A PARTIAL GUIDE TO WINNING AWARDS

**How to Avoid the
10 MOST COMMON MISTAKES
Made By Award Entrants**

Liz Rivers





Why This Book?

This eBook has been produced to help every person whose responsibility it is to write an award entry on behalf of their boss, their business or their employer.

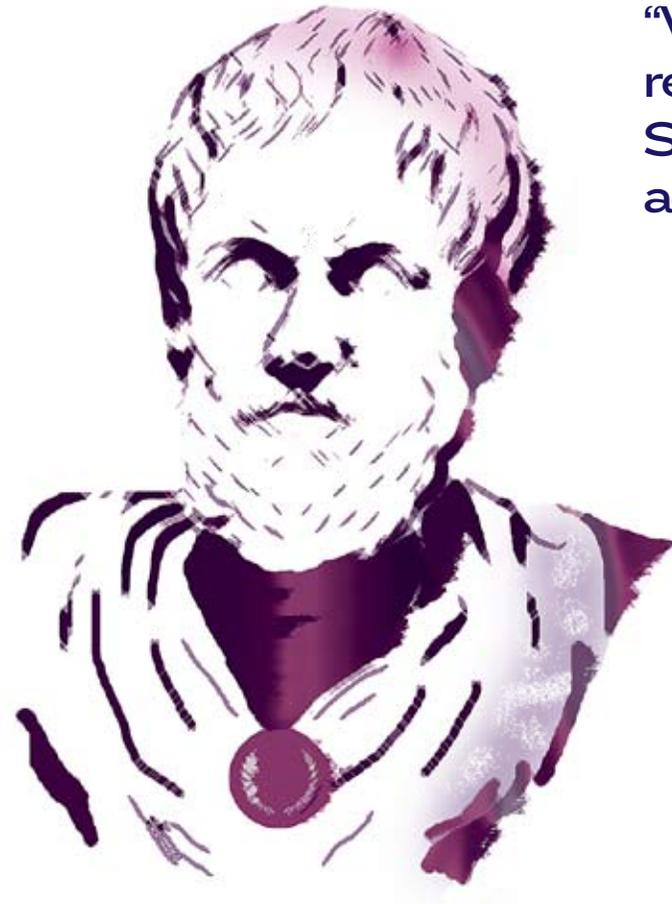
If you're a PA, an EA, a marketing assistant or a small-to-medium business manager, this Guide will help you win more awards.

You'll walk away after reading this short insight with knowledge that professional award submission writers possess. Now you'll know what they know, you'll be better prepared to compete with the best.

This Guide is your secret weapon to winning awards!

Liz Rivers

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“We are what we repeatedly do. Success then is not an act, but a habit.”

Aristotle

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Liz thanks Wayne Fleming for the fabulous cartoon illustration of her. Check out Wayne's work at www.waynefleming-illustrator.com



Who is Liz Rivers?



Liz is an excellence awards specialist. With more than 25 years' awards expertise, she is the founding Director of Awards Absolute – a company dedicated to providing solutions and answers for everyone who wants to host or win an award.

Awards Absolute achieves between 85% and 90% success on behalf of clients and this eBook:

- Outlines what Liz has discovered about the most common mistakes made when entering awards.
- Gives examples of mistakes made so you really understand what NOT to do.
- Gives you practical tips on how to avoid making those same mistakes.

Read on to take your next step towards the winner's podium.



Mistake Number 1

Would you get a physician's prescription filled and then take the pills before reading how many to take, when to take them or whether you need to eat before taking them?

Of course not! Why? Because it could be disastrous to your health, deadly even, if you take the wrong number of pills at the wrong time or under the wrong conditions.

The same is true for award entries. If you don't make sure you understand what is being asked of you then the "health" of your awards will suffer.

It seems obvious when I say it like this, but the NUMBER ONE mistake by award nominees is that they fail to read the criteria.

And it's not just about reading the criteria – it's about exploring it and analysing it so you understand exactly what is being asked of you.

Let me show you a classic example of what can happen when you don't take the time to understand, to comprehend, the criteria. This nominee – let's call her Casey - has entered an

award that will be granted to an individual. Here's an excerpt from Casey's submission:

Question: "Outline what you did in 2022 to embrace innovation."

Casey's answer: "Company X is the most innovative in our industry, and constantly embracing positive change is key to my role. For example, I point colleagues in the direction of our company's Wiki site. This is a great new one-stop-shop to access online training webinars and information resources."

In this instance, the nominee has made the most basic comprehension mistake possible. This is an award that will be granted to an individual, not a company or organisation. So the judges wanted to know about Casey, not Company X.





Solution Number 1

So what should Casey have done?

She should have made sure that she understood the criteria. And by this, I don't just mean read it. I mean pull it apart. Examine every word to look for clues that explain exactly what the judges want to see.

One way to achieve this is to underline the important words. So let's have a look at the question again.

"Outline what you did in 2022 to embrace innovation."

I would underline the following words: Outline what you did in 2022 to embrace innovation.

The word "outline" tells us that the judges want details. They don't want just a list or a passing reference to your activities.

"You" clearly says that the answer should be all about the nominee. Don't waste your words talking about your employer. This is one of those occasions when it truly is all about you!

"In 2022" seems so self-explanatory. Don't ignore stated timeframes. If judges detect that your answer does not correlate to that timeframe, then they will score you zero. Nil. Nothing. Zippo.

The words "embrace" and "innovation" are very important in this sentence because they can be interpreted in more than one way. This is because some people take a very narrow definition of "innovation" to simply mean technology.

However, the Oxford Dictionary (which is still the most widely used English language dictionary in the world) defines "innovation" as "A *new method, idea, product, etc.*" So, using a broad definition, the words "embrace innovation" come to mean "use or benefit from any new *method, idea, product, etc.*".



Solution Number 1

There is also an inference when the word “innovation” is used. It implies that the innovation should be innovative. In other words, the new method, idea, product, etc should be *advanced* and *original* in some way.

So what are the judges asking for? They want to see details of where, during the year 2022, the nominating individual used or benefited from new methods, new ideas, new products etc that were advanced and original.

Looking at this analysis, we now see that Casey’s example of telling colleagues that they should use the company’s Wiki site does not address the criteria.

Lesson learned: Read the criteria carefully and analyse what judges are really asking.



Mistake Number 2



Do you remember FANBOYS? It was a 2009 movie set 10 years' earlier in which a bunch of nerdish friends took their dying buddy on a wacky road trip to George Lucas' Skywalker Ranch so he could see *Star Wars Episode I - The Phantom Menace*. The movie developed a bit of a cult following for a while.

And as geeky as that sounds, my FANBOYS is even geekier. It stands for F (for), A (and), N (nor), B (but), O (or), Y (yet) and S (so). These are the seven coordinating conjunctions – words that connect other words, phrases and clauses.

Sorry for the grammar lesson, but these boring little words are the culprit behind the second most common mistake made by award entrants. They are responsible for nominees failing to answer every part of every question.

How does this happen? Well, imagine that you have been asked to answer the following question: “Demonstrate through a career and life achievement timeline how you have worked towards continual improvement and excellence.”

So let's do our underlining again.

“Demonstrate through a career and life achievement timeline how you have worked towards continual improvement and excellence.”

It becomes clear that the judges want to learn about both your career and your personal achievements. The word “and” plays a large part here. This conjunction tells us that there are at least two things that we must address. However, this becomes more complicated when we see a second “and”.



Solution Number 2

So what exactly do the judges want to see in your answer?

Consider the below:

- Demonstrate through a career timeline how you have worked towards continual improvement.
- Demonstrate through a career timeline how you have worked towards excellence.
- Demonstrate through a life achievement timeline how you have worked towards continual improvement.
- Demonstrate through a life achievement timeline how you have worked towards excellence.

Each of these phrases forms part of what the judges want to see in your answer. Failing to include a response to any one of the four sentences means that you have not fully addressed the criteria in this instance.

Always look for one of the FANBOYS words as each is a signal that the question has more than one part.

Another equally common mistake resulting from not reading the criteria carefully enough is a failure to recognise plurality. Here I go again being a grammar geek.

When I talk about plurality in this context I don't mean "plurality voting" where a decision in a multi-member judging panel is decided without a unanimous vote. (It's no wonder we all sometimes are challenged by English.)

The plurality that I'm writing about here simply means the state of being more than one.

Consider this short awards question: "Provide examples of your marketing initiatives in the qualifying period."



Solution Number 2

So how many examples should you provide?

Definitely more than one. Otherwise judges will assume one of two things:

1. That you were careless and did not read the criteria carefully, or
2. You only undertook one marketing initiative in the qualifying period.

Under either scenario, your chances of winning are very slim.

I recommend that you include as many short examples as you can. Write each succinctly and in an entertaining way.

We recently came across awards that asked nominees to: “Provide an example of key achievements and or customer service solutions which you are most proud of during the qualifying period.” Oh dear, this has contradictory information.

The word “example” tells us that judges want only one example, and yet plural forms of the words “achievements” and “solutions”.

What should you do when you believe that the criterion is contradictory or unclear? Write a polite email to the awards host or Awards Manager asking for clarification. Do not say that they have made a mistake. Rather, say that you’re confused and ask for their advice on how you should proceed.

Don’t be afraid that this will make you stand out. You’re correct – you will stand out, and for all the best reasons. In the same way that asking questions at the conclusion of a job interview tells the interview panel that you’re interested in the position being offered and the organisation offering it, your email to the awards host or Manager will show that you have taken the time to really carefully read the criteria and want to win.

Lesson learned:
Answer every part of every question.



Mistake Number 3

After Pink turned up on stage in a nude body suit at the 2012 Grammy Awards, the Grammy's issued a Wardrobe Advisory that informed performers that it was unacceptable to show off their buttocks, genitals or, in the case of women, breasts while on stage.

These guidelines were strictly enforced, just like the guidelines spelled out by awards hosts.

For example, as a nominee you might be told to:

- Upload files smaller than 3 meg.
- Avoid profanity.
- Use only white backgrounds in your submission.
- Refrain from contacting judges or face disqualification.
- Keep all answers short and relevant.
- Obtain sign-off by the CEO.
- Agree to attend the awards night, or
- Write no more than 500 words – or 250 words – or 30 double-spaced A4 pages of text that is less than 12 point.

It doesn't matter what examples I list. The point is that every awards program has rules, guidelines or conditions. As a nominee, you must abide by each and every demand made by the judges and awards hosts.

I've deliberately placed the word or length limitation bullet at the end of this list because it is critically important. While many online awards management software warns you when you've written more words than allowed, not all systems have this feature and some awards still accept your submissions as a Word document or PDF.





Solution Number 3

So how many words should you write?

Let's assume that you are a small wearable technology designer entering the Stevies Awards. The criterion asks you to "Tell the story about this nominated product or service (up to 500 words). Describe its function, features, benefits, and sales to date."

So, from previously, you've learned to underline important words and look for FANBOYS so you answer every part of the question. So you might underline story, product, 500 words, describe, function, features, benefits, sales.

This award says you can answer in up to 500 words, so you must not write 1,000 words or even 501 words. Some awards hosts will disqualify you for writing more words than the maximum allowed. Even if that does not happen, many judges will mark you down for not abiding by the rules because they believe that you have attempted to take an unfair advantage by writing more than you're allowed.

If the guidelines say that the limit is 1 page for an answer, then don't be tempted to use a very small type size to fit in more text. Judges usually volunteer their time and invest many hours reading submissions. They get tired and their eyes get sore. So they will not thank you for making their job harder by writing in tiny text. In truth, they'll often mark you down for it.

Here is an excerpt from written feedback from one judge to a nominee that demonstrates this point: *"This submission outlines a business that operates from the premise that it really is 'the best'. However, you provided far more material than the Guidelines dictate is allowed and in this respect you did not abide by the terms of the awards. In addition, the Guidelines state that you can only provide up to 15 pages of supporting documentation. You have been penalised for not abiding by these Awards guidelines. This is a shame as it cost you this award."*



Solution Number 3

So you know not to go over the limit, but how far under the limit can you go?

I have a general rule – never go less than 10% under it.

So if the rules dictate 500 words, then write between 450 and 500 words. If the guidelines say you must, for example, not submit more than 30 pages then submit between 27 and 30.

Why? Because hosts who operate credible awards have done their homework. They know that the question they've asked will require somewhere near the word or length limit to answer the criterion fully. If you can write an answer in 200 words for a question that has a 500-word limit, then there is a very high probability that you have not fully addressed the criteria.

Lesson learned: Don't include irrelevant information or flowery writing.



Mistake Number 4

A while back while I was taking my dog for her daily afternoon beach walk the cutest little Kelpie X ran up to play. My dog and this young pup ran around and around me and the other dog's owner in an ever-tightening circle.



I asked how old was the kelpie, and was astounded when the owner answered “Twelve weeks”. I was stunned. Shocked into silence, actually. You see, parvovirus is a big dog killer where I live and pups cannot be fully vaccinated until they are older than this puppy. So this owner was putting this little dog at grave risk by having it on a public beach where many other dogs run around.

I stood there on the beach thinking “Surely this woman knows that she is putting her puppy at risk? How could she not know?”

This is an example of what psychologists and economists call *the Curse of Knowledge*.

Put simply, people who possess information – any information – struggle to remember what it was like before they were in possession of that knowledge. And it seems that the more people know about a subject then the harder it becomes for them to remember that not everyone shares their knowledge.

How is this relevant to you and your award entries?

As the person producing an awards entry, it is your job to give judges a good understanding of you or your organisation by explaining your products and services, systems and processes, and achievements. There is so much you could write about. But be aware!



Solution Number 4

Lesson learned:
Recognize that judges will never know as much about the nominee as you do.

Entrants very often fail to recognize that they've been blinded by the Curse of Knowledge. They write all about the nominee and associated achievements without considering the information from the perspective of the judges. The result? Judges end up confused and frustrated – and score such entries poorly.

So how do you avoid the Curse of Knowledge?

The answer is to take steps so that you do not underestimate how much knowledge the judges' already possess about the nominee (regardless of whether this is a person, organisation, product or service).

Here are three tips:

1. Be aware of this Curse. I know that sounds very basic, but keeping this in mind will help you in determining what to write.
2. Before writing your submission, ask for help from someone who doesn't know anything about the person, product or service that is at the core of the award entry. Then, using the criteria as a guide and speaking in plain English, attempt to answer the criteria. Whenever the person asks a question, you know that they have not understood your explanation and you need to simplify it.
3. Illustrate difficult concepts with examples. Examples are just stories – and told well, stories are extremely powerful tools.



Mistake Number 5

Do you know the difference between the World Wide Web and the cloud? How about between the internet or the web? And what's the difference between tethering and hotspots?

I've used these examples because it is highly probable that you have heard and used every one of these terms (and you may even know the difference between them). They demonstrate the challenge of using technical terms in an award submission. Would you be able to use each term in its correct context?

Imagine if you used one of these terms in the wrong context, but the judges have greater knowledge than you about such things and became confused due to your statement. This is one good reason why technical terminology should be avoided when writing criterion responses.

The above example covers technical terms that we commonly use. Now imagine what could happen if you include terminology that is specific to your industry or profession. Judges could become very frustrated and struggle to comprehend your submission. You don't want this to occur, because their frustration is often reflected in the score that they give you.

For the same reason, acronyms should not be used.





Solution Number 5

What should you do when technical terms, jargon or acronyms cannot be avoided?

The answer is simple - include an explanation in plain English the first time that you use that terminology.

Where you'll be referring to something with a long name numerous times, then write its name out in full in the first instance. For example, let's say you were writing an entry about the American Society of Agricultural Consultants. The first time the society is mentioned you may write "Founded in 1963, the American Society of Agricultural Consultants (ASAC) is a non-profit organization". Thereafter, you can simply refer to it by the acronym ASAC.

Oh, by the way, there is no difference between the cloud and the World Wide Web. One is simply "old terminology" and the other is new. The internet is all the equipment used to access and manage the web, while the web is the information itself. Tethering usually refers to sharing one internet connection between two devices using a USB, Wi-Fi or Bluetooth. When that tethering is achieved via Wi-Fi, it can be called a hotspot.

Lesson learned: Avoid technical jargon and unexplained acronyms.



Mistake Number 6

“Social engineers from across the globe face unique challenges and circumstances in their own nation and region, but we have one thing in common. That is a responsibility to the communities in which we operate.”

So what?

This is the way one person chose to start their awards entry. What did you learn about the nominee from reading this? That’s right – nothing. It’s rubbish. This is what is called a Motherhood Statement.

Motherhood Statements are expansive, sweeping claims or declarations that are so generic as to be meaningless. They contain very little substance, and therefore typically cannot be disputed.

Take heed... Judges hate Motherhood Statements.

Why? Because they simply fill up the page with words and say nothing, add no value, and provide no insights. They are worthless in helping judges understand more about the nominee’s achievements or philosophy or processes. This is why I call them “duh declarations”.





Solution Number 6

How do you make sure that you stay clear of Motherhood Statements?

By employing a well-known marketing tool called “The So What?” test.

This is a question that you should ask yourself at the conclusion of each paragraph that you write. It will help you identify where you’ve just used words, rather than added value. By “value” I mean where you have helped the judges gain a better understanding of the nominee in some way.

Don’t be offended or frustrated by my suggestion. We’re all prone to making Motherhood Statements sometimes – it’s a by-product of our thought processes. We know that we want to explain how $A + B = C$, but in trying to do so we make valueless statements because our mind is wrangling with the best way to explain this equation.

Lesson learned: Ask “So what?” to make sure that every paragraph in your submission adds to the judges’ knowledge.



Mistake Number 7

“We are the most successful company in our industry.” “We have had our most successful year to date.” “By focusing on innovation, BloopBu has not only weathered the storm, but we have achieved inspiring results.” “I am the most popular salesperson in Shepparton.”

Each of these statements sounds impressive. They infer success. However, each of these was made as a stand-alone statement without any supporting documentation, data or statistics to substantiate the claims.

This is another very common mistake that can spell the difference between remaining seated throughout the awards presentation or storming the stage when your name is called out as the winner.

I’m not suggesting that you don't make these statements if they're true. In fact, you should be telling judges that you're very successful, have had the best year to date, are highly profitable, and such. They want to know this type of information.





Solution Number 7

How do you get judges to give you a high score for making bold claims?

The answer: By substantiating your claims. It's that simple - judges want to see proof.

So make statements that can be quantified and then provide the proof (numbers, dollars, examples) that support your claims. Wherever possible, use more than one statistic to prove the point.

So let's say you have included the statement: *"We have had our most successful year to date"*. You might then choose five or six of the following to prove that this statement is true - net sales increase, rise in profit percentage, increased ratio of return or repeat customers, decrease in staff turnover, increase in the average sale, and so.

Where data is not available, look for other types of proof. Testimonials from customers and suppliers are great to use in these tricky instances.

Lesson learned:

Wherever you make a claim of success or achievement, substantiate it with data, statistics or examples.



Mistake Number 8

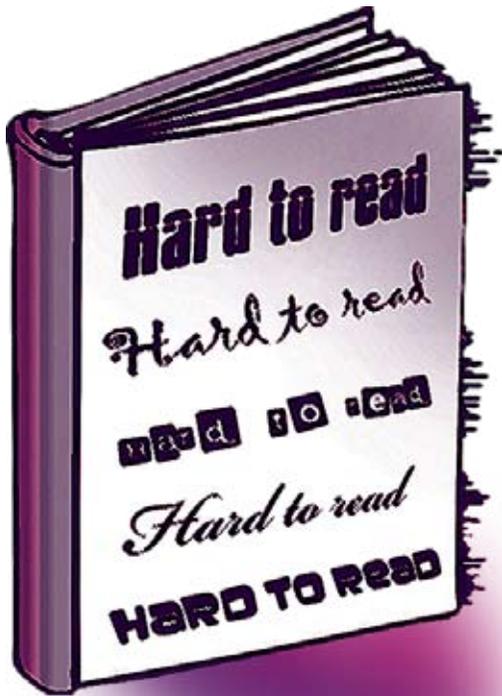
A few years ago Harvard Business Review published an article that stirred up the awards sector. Research by Professor Daniel Oppenheimer, Associate Professor of Psychology and Public Affairs at Princeton University, concluded that students better recalled what they'd read when it was printed in smaller, less readable type.

I was asked numerous times: "So Liz, why do you suggest that award entrants use an easy-to-read type?"

Let's look at this research in context for a minute. This research was conducted with students who had little choice but to read the text that they were assigned. I'm unsure how long the articles were that the two groups of students were given, but I suspect that they weren't very long.

That's a very different scenario to the one we're interested in here. Judges are not forced to read your submission. If you make it too hard for them, then there is a very real chance that they'll skip over or skim read your entry. So if you use a hard-to-read font or words, some judges might recall more things from the parts that they did read, but fewer judges might choose to read the submission in totality.

The truth is that your awards entry should be as easy to read and as visually appealing as possible.





Solution Number 8

How do you make your submission easy and enjoyable to read?

Here's a few tips:

- Use bullet points to highlight key accomplishments.
- If the submission requires that you upload a document (rather than fill out a “form” online) then leave lots of white space on each page.
- Make the submission visually entertaining by including a band of color or coloured dots or a pattern of repetitive symbols.
- Place colorful graphs to demonstrate complicated relationships, and make sure the graphs are large enough to read, and include a scale and appropriate axis headings.
- Use photographs – and make sure they're not fuzzy or too small.

- Place complicated tables or illustrations or long lists in an Appendix at the back of the entry and refer to it in the main text so judges know to go looking for it at the appropriate time.

While it is true that a “pretty” awards submission will have a positive psychological impact on the judges, groovy design and images are no substitute for faultless information though.

So if you have only limited hours to complete your entry, then concentrate on the information rather than the presentation.

Lesson learned: Make your entry as visually entertaining and as easy-to-read as possible.



Mistake Number 9

Some while back my partner's 10-year-old nephew was staying with us for a few nights. A die-hard dinosaur fan, he begged to watch Jurassic Park (for about the 34th time). Movie over, he crawled onto the floor and began roaring, gnashing teeth and claspng legs with claw-like hands whenever someone passed.

I asked him how long he could play like this. An hour? Sure. Two hours? Maybe. A day or a week? *"Oh no way, it would be too hard to be something I'm not for that long."* Ok, so this 10-year-old has worked it out, and yet I see so many award entrants who don't seem to grasp this reality.

The truth is that it is very hard to be somebody that you're not, and then continue with this fable well into the future. Yet that is what many award nominees do. They fail to realize that, while judges are looking for evidence of great nominees, the people or person behind the business is equally important.

Judges want to get to know you a bit through the pages of your submission. They want to gain insight into the type of person you are – your values and your passions. They want to be confident that the person who walks onto stage to accept the award is going to be a great ambassador for the program.





Solution Number 9

How do you show judges the person behind the award entry?

Share stories with them.

Make your entry come alive with anecdotes about your successes and your failures, and then outline what you learned by these outcomes. Judges will never score you down for being honest enough to say “I failed, and I learned this and this from that experience”. However, they might score poorly if they finish reading your entry and still feel that they don’t know you – that you’ve been “evasive” by not sharing a written portrait of yourself.

Lesson learned: Be yourself and proudly tell your story.



Mistake Number 10

The Hubble Telescope, Pioneer 10's flight to Jupiter, the world's first re-usable space craft, the first space station, and of course man's first walk on the moon are among NASA's greatest feats. Yet just one typo may have resulted in one of their most spectacular fiascos.

For 11 years from 1951 NASA scientists worked frenetically towards the launch of Mariner 1. Designed to fly to Venus, less than two minutes after take-off on 22 July 1962 the craft exploded. The most probable reason for the rocket's self-destruction is that someone failed to type an over bar – a hyphen above a letter – into the code for the rocket's guidance system.

Failure to carefully proofread a line of text, symbols and numerals resulted in a disaster that cost \$80 million (equating \$635 million today).

OK, so failing to proofread your award entry will not have such a disastrous impact, but it could stop you from winning that sought-after trophy. How? Because judges view submissions with typos and obvious errors as proof that you either rushed to submit it on time or didn't care enough.

Judges think to themselves "Well, if this entrant didn't care enough to make sure that this entry is presented in the best light, then what type of business do they run? What type of person are they?" In short, the answer is that typos and silly errors tell judges that you are the type of person who does not deserve to win their award.





Solution Number 10

How do you make sure that there are no mistakes?

I recommend three steps.

Step 1: Finish writing the entry, then put it aside for a day or two before reading it yourself slowly and carefully.

Step 2: Ask another person (preferably one who does not know the nominee in detail) to check your entry for errors. At the same time, ask them to confirm that they understand it and that the criterion has been met.

Step 3: After making the changes from Step 1 and 2, read the submission backwards. That's right - backwards! Start at the bottom of the last page and read every word. Work your way towards the front. You will pick up errors because your brain is not used to reading backwards so it cannot make "assumptions" about the words that appear.

Lesson learned:
Proofread, proofread
and then proofread.



Scream to the World, but...

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Liz Rivers



Liz Rivers

The hints and tips in this book will prove that the golden goose is not just a fairy tale. You deserve to hold the golden egg - to win prestigious awards, and I hope that my insights will help you.