

The Resurrection of Sherlock Holmes

One Person's Experience With a Sherlock Holmes Essay Contest for Seventh Graders

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This past year, Watson's Tin Box of Ellicott City held a Sherlock Holmes Essay Contest for Seventh Graders that reached approximately 400 public and home schooled students. The contest was a success because of a lot of work and a lot of luck. While every locale offers different advantages and challenges, the necessary (but not sufficient) ingredient for success may be determination. This may serve as a primer for others who are interested, or it may serve as simply a chronicle of the ups and downs of a year-long effort to introduce children to Sherlock Holmes. As I often say to young people, hopefully, they will feel the desire sometime in their lives to return to Holmes and hear him say, "The game is afoot."

The Idea

Although *The Hound* was on my daughter's seventh and eighth grade suggested summer reading list, none of the children in her school chose to read it. I thought that we needed to do something about that, and the idea came to me of holding an essay contest for middle-schoolers. My concept was that they would read a Sherlockian short story and write essays as part of a competition. We would judge the essays and give prizes. My initial idea was that we would do it through the local public school system here in Howard County, Maryland. However, I did not personally have any contacts in the public school system.

The Commitment

I carefully planned the contest - both politically within my local Scion Society and with potential outside partners. I decided that in order to sell the concept, I had to project two characteristics of the contest.

- I started from the point that this was going to happen one way or another - a lot of hubris for someone who didn't know what he was doing. However, I had to project that it was going to happen even if I was going to do it and advertise it myself.
- I decided early on that no potential partner would be interested in doing this if it meant that it was going to cost either money or time. Therefore, I had to be willing to fund the entire project if I could not find alternative funding. That is quite a risk, and even with the contributions we did receive, it is costing me about \$200. It might have cost me \$6,000, as I will explain below. I had to be willing to fund whatever it cost. The amount that it cost me would determine if we would ever do it again.

Support from the Scion

In December of 2004, I discussed the idea with the Gasogene of my local Scion Society, Watson's Tin Box of Ellicott City. I promised him that not a penny would come out of the Tin Box treasury (affectionately called "Watson's Tin Can"). *Luckily*, he was all for it. In February of 2005, I formally proposed the contest to the Tin Box at our monthly dinner and asked for a vote to sponsor the contest. I anticipated that the contest would be held during the following academic year (2004-2005), since I suspected that it would take at least six months to organize it. The Tin Box voted unanimously to support the contest.

Nearly all of the Tin Boxers wanted to be on the Essay Contest Committee. Before the Committee met, I began doing research on the types of essays that middle school students learn to write. We held a Committee meeting and decided that, as critical thinking has always been a facet of the Sherlockian world, the essays should be analytical essays. While we enjoyed debating what story the essays should involve, I pushed hard for having the children read *The Speckled Band*, since that has consistently been rated the favorite story in all surveys taken since 1946 and because it did not mention cocaine. The Committee, kindly but rather reluctantly, acceded to my bullying. We also decided to develop a booklet for the contest that includes the story (which is in the public domain), acknowledgements, pre-reading activities, post-reading activities, a glossary of British terms used in the story, tips on writing essays, recommended essay questions, and a contest entry form. (I had found on the internet that similar contests always required a formal entry form be stapled to the entry - and it was a good idea.) Of course, we concurred that no student would be charged for the booklet.

We decided that the First Prize Winner would receive a \$50 gift card to a local bookstore. (During the planning of the contest, Steve Clarkson, one of the founders of the Tin Box and a mentor to many young Sherlockians became critically ill with cancer. Before Steve eventually passed away, we were pleased to tell him that the Tin Box decided to call the First Prize "The Clarkson Prize" in his honor.) In addition, s/he would receive a certificate from Watson's Tin Box and have his/her essay published in the next publication of the Tin Box's sporadic collection of essays, quizzes, and verse called *Irene's Cabinet*. The Second and Third Prize Winners would receive \$25 gift cards to a local bookstore and certificates from Watson's Tin Box. By the end of the Committee meeting, the basic approach to the contest had been designed.

Support from the Library

I hoped that one of the Tin Boxers might have an entre into the School System, something I did not have. *Luckily*, a Tin Box member (Jacquelynn Morris) works for the local Public Library, and she approached the Library Associate Director to determine the Library's interest in collaborating on the project. Jacquelynn emerged to become the Committee's Co-Chair and has done a remarkable job coordinating the joint activities with the Library from day one. She is still providing this necessary role, and much of the success of the contest is due to her efforts.

The Library responded that they were very interested and asked for details about the contest. I described what the committee had decided thus far and wrote that I hoped that it could be done in collaboration with both the Library and the School System. *Luckily*, without asking me, the Library representatives invited the Middle School Reading Specialist for the Howard County Public Schools to join in a planning meeting between the Library, Jacquelynn, and me. At the meeting, I said that the contest would occur whether or not they decided to collaborate with us, but that it would be so much better if they agreed to partner. I let them know that it would not cost them anything to participate. The Library representatives could not have been more enthusiastic. We decided that the contest should target seventh graders and that the essays should be around five paragraphs long, the typical format for analytical essays for that age group. The Library said on the spot that it would collaborate on the essay project, making participation available to private and

home-schooled children if the School System makes it available to public school students. If the School System did not choose to participate, the Library would make it available for all students.

Proposal for the School System

The representative of the School System was more reserved about participating. She told me that I had to develop a proposal for the School System. If the proposal was approved, they would make participation optional for the seventh grade English teachers. I said that I would be happy to develop the proposal, and I asked what it had to include. She told me that it should include a full description of the contest and the Tin Box, and it had to include a "rubric." I had about a month to submit the proposal, and I promised them that I would get it in on time.

Not having the slightest idea what a rubric was, I searched the web and found that a rubric is a matrix of the criteria we will use to judge the essays. Current educational doctrine requires rubrics to assure that the grading of essays will be standardized and so that the students know what the criteria will be. I searched the web for sample rubrics and emailed my daughter's 8th grade English teacher (at a private school, not in Howard County), explained the essay contest, and simply asked her if she had a favorite website that had good sample rubrics. *Luckily*, she became very enthusiastic about the contest and became very involved, even though her school would not be participating. I explained our idea of putting together a booklet for the contest, and, *luckily*, she jumped right in. She reviewed our work, made many suggestions for the booklet, drafted a number of pre-reading and post-reading questions, and ended up writing the rubric. She also convinced me that seventh graders needed us to provide specific essay questions, rather than letting them choose their own topics. She proposed some draft questions, and we added a few. We were very appreciative of her contributions and made her a co-author of the booklet.

Back to the Scion

I must say here that the Gasogenes [Presidents] of Watson's Tin Box (the office holder changes annually) gave me total freedom in speaking for the Scion. I am a past Gasogene myself, and I appreciate such freedom. I never had to clear anything with the Scion leadership before speaking for them. Don't underestimate the value of this.

In addition to fully embracing the essay contest, the Library requested that the Tin Box perform an Evening of Sherlock Holmes within a couple of months. We put on a terrific program that solidified the Library's support for the Tin Box. Unfortunately, while it attracted a number of adults, only a few students came.

Working with the Teachers

Meanwhile, I developed the proposal for the school system. The school system approved the proposal and assigned us a Coordinator. I had to impress him with our determination and high quality. He asked for a draft copy of the contest booklet and a short description of the contest that he could email to all the seventh Grade English teachers in order to gauge their interest, as participation in the contest is voluntary

for the teachers. He gave me a week to complete the prototype booklet. *Luckily*, a Tin Box member (Beth Austin) is quite expert at desktop publishing (and has edited and published *Irene's Cabinet*) and could provide me with a PDF prototype version of the booklet we had developed. We emailed it to the Coordinator along with the summary, and he forwarded them to the teachers as promised. *Luckily*, at least one teacher responded VERY enthusiastically right away. This impressed the Coordinator, and we had an additional supporter.

He set up a meeting about the contest at the August pre-academic year organizational conferences that the teachers attend. Interested teachers had to choose between our meeting and other meetings that were occurring simultaneously. I thought that if one or two teachers showed up, the contest would be a success.

To my surprise, 27 teachers attended. Some said that they were representing others as well, so we estimated that we had 30 interested teachers. *Luckily*, the contest coincided with a new academic requirement that the seventh grade curriculum include learning to write an analytical essay. As we had developed the rubric for the contest and had pre- and post-reading activities, the teachers said that we had done much of their work for them. The Coordinator for the School System had told me that he wanted the Tin Box (not the School System) to provide every student with the booklet - which would have cost about \$6,000. *Luckily*, the teachers said emphatically that this was not a good idea, and that they didn't even know how many students they had yet in each class (though they knew that it would be between 25 - 30). They directed me to send them each two copies of the booklet, not in booklet form, but in easily reproducible form. They would then choose what material from the booklet they wanted to duplicate for their classes. I quickly calculated that this would cost us about \$500 (including the cost of the copies we had to supply to the library). Though I was prepared to foot the entire \$6,000 if I had to, I was only prepared to do it once. I told the teachers that their decision just determined that this could be an annual event.

I asked the teachers in which part of the academic year they preferred the contest occur. They had no preference, so I suggested that the kick-off for the contest be January 6th (in honor of Holmes' birthday). They heartily agreed. Having set the beginning of the contest, we chose March 5th as the date by which all essays must be received by the Tin Box. The winners would be announced on or about April 6th, which is the date on which Baring-Gould and others have determined that *The Speckled Band* occurred. The Library had requested that the prizes be awarded at another Evening of Sherlock Holmes program that the Tin Box would hold at the Library at the end of the contest. The Library also asked us to hold a program in January at the beginning of the contest to help kick it off.

Each teacher who chose to have his/her class participate would forward to the Tin Box the top two essays from each of his/her classes. Home-schooled children submitting essays through the Library would forward the essay directly to the Tin Box. If a private school teacher uses it with his/her entire class, s/he would forward to us their top two essays. Children who submit an essay through the School System compete along with private and home-schooled children. The Tin Box's committee would review all of the essays we receive, grade them according to the rubric, and choose the First, Second, and Third Prize winners.

At that point, we thought that we could have between 750 - 2,700 kids participating in the contest, depending on how many of their classes the teachers have participate [30 classes X 25 (actually, 25-30) students per class = 750; if each teacher has three classes participate (and each class has 30 students rather than 25), that is 2,700 students]; plus, we did not know how many home school and private school students would participate through the Library.

The teachers requested that we provide them with the booklets by October 1st, so that they would have time to reproduce them. We had to make at least 60 copies of the booklet in easily reproducible form for the teachers and 100 copies of the booklet for the Library to distribute among their branches. We also printed up personal copies for our partners and collaborators. The Library also agreed to post the booklet in PDF format on its website. We had printed five copies of the prototype booklet and estimated that it would cost \$1.80 each. In all, we printed 221 copies of the booklet in one form or another. When all expenses were included (photocopy, postage, prizes certificates, etc.) we estimated that the cost of the contest was about \$600 (it cost approximately \$850 as explained below). As this is the first year of the contest, I have already determined that we can reduce costs in future years, essentially by printing fewer booklets and taking advantage of opportunities that have been offered for free photocopying.

Seeking a Sponsor

However, before we did any of the photocopying, we had to resolve if we would have a financial sponsor so that we could give it credit in the acknowledgements. *Luckily*, one of the teachers who attended the August teacher conference meeting gave me the name of the Community Liaison at the local Barnes & Noble Booksellers. When I telephoned Barnes & Noble, I told her the budget was about \$600 and asked her if Barnes & Noble would cover it. She stated that she did not know if Barnes & Noble would do any more than donate gift cards. I asked her if she could find out if they would be willing to fund the entire cost, and she agreed to ask. I told her that I hoped that we could forge a long-term relationship with them and that we would acknowledge Barnes & Noble in the booklet and at every opportunity we had. I then called the local Borders Books, Music, & Café and made the same pitch. Borders wanted a formal proposal. I developed one and submitted it the same day. Borders told me I would hear in a week. A week went by and I didn't hear from either of them. I called Borders, and their Community Liaison told me that they had decided not to participate. *Luckily*, I then received a telephone call from Barnes & Noble telling me that they would contribute \$500 and that I had to submit a proposal. I faxed it to her the same day. The next day she told me that it was the best proposal they ever received and that they were (1) going to keep it on file as an example for others and (2) try to budget it for the following year, as well.

Getting It All Together

As you can see, there was a lot of luck involved. No doubt some of it was fueled by my and other Tin Boxers' enthusiasm. However, there were a lot of people who decided to go to bat for us (the Tin Boxers, the Library folks, the Reading Coordinator, my daughter's English teacher, the Barnes & Noble Community Liaison), and we WERE very lucky that they got on board. Believe me, as a consultant, I have been in a lot of

situations where the stars are not aligning, and I can tell the difference between the two situations.

It was all pretty exciting. It has been a lot of work, but it was very gratifying that it seemed to be going so well. It seems like the contest was charmed. When I mailed the packages with the booklets to the teachers, the postage for each packet was \$2.21. I had to laugh. (I should also state that I never sent a form letter. I always used “mail merge” to send personally-addressed letters to each of the teachers to establish the Tin Box’s credibility.)

The Essay Contest

Soon after January 6th, we held the kick-off program at the Library. It was a fabulous program put on by the Tin Boxers. Unfortunately, again, very few kids showed up. Most of the people in the audience were adults.

The Library put a PDF version of the contest booklet on its website. They also sent letters to the home school organizations and all of the private schools located in our county and put an advertisement for the contest in their library publication that lists events. They also distributed a press release about the contest. We distributed copies of the booklet to each of the library branches for distribution.

However, we had no feedback on whether the teachers who showed up at the August meeting were actually using the contest in their lesson plans. Furthermore, we had no confirmation that the home school organizations had distributed the letter about the contest to home school parents. I found the email addresses of a few of the teachers on the school websites and sent them a short email asking if they received their packets and if they were still interested in participating. Each of the teachers responded that they did, indeed, intend to have their classes participate.

However, by March 5th, we had received only about a dozen essays. Needless to say, we were quite disappointed. Half of the essays were from public school students, and half were from home school students. Shortly before March 5th, I received an email from one of the teachers saying that many of her colleagues fell behind in their lesson plans and could not get to the essay in time to participate in the contest.

The Tin Box Contest Committee met to determine who would read the essays and to plan the final Library program at which we gave out the awards. With so few essays, we only needed two of the Committee members to judge them. We made photocopies of the essays, and both judges read them all and separately scored them according to the rubric. We then compared our findings and narrowed the choices down to three. We then re-read the three essays and discussed the order of the winners. We agreed to the choices of the First, Second, and Third prize winners. The Committee had also decided to give Honorable Mention Certificates to the students who did not win one of the top three prizes. Based on the essays we received, we estimated at that point that we had reached 100 kids.

We announced the winners by a letter to each of the entrants on March 29th, and we had the Library program at which we gave the awards and certificates on April 14th. This time, the room was packed with kids, and it was very gratifying. Some of the

kids had gone on to read the entire Canon. In addition to conveying the prizes and Honorable Mention certificates to the students, we also gave Certificates of Appreciation to our partners at the Library, School System, and Barnes & Noble.

Follow Up Survey

I then sent an evaluation survey to the 30 teachers represented at the August meeting and asked nine questions about whether they had their classes read the story, whether they sent in their essays, whether they would participate the following year, etc. The surveys included self addressed, stamped envelopes to encourage responses.

Seven completed surveys were returned (23%). The seven surveys responded as follows:

- 16 classes read *The Adventure of the Speckled Band*. [This does not count the class(es) of one teacher who submitted essays but did not respond to the survey.]
- 324 children were in these classes. [This also does not count the class(es) of one teacher who submitted essays but did not respond to the survey.]
- Four of the seven responding teachers had the students read the story and write essays but did not submit essays as part of the essay contest. Two of the teachers did submit essays. One teacher did not have his class read the story.
- The reason why teachers did not submit essays was that they fell behind in their lesson plans and had the students read the story after the contest had ended. One teacher who taught a special education class also thought that the essays were not of high enough quality to be competitive.
- The one teacher who did not have his class read the story explained that he had a pre-existing lesson plan on writing essays and chose to use that.
- It was unanimous that *The Speckled Band* was a good choice for teaching the students how to analyze a short story and write an essay.
- All of the teachers who had their students read the story found the “booklet” that the Tin Box developed in conjunction with the contest useful.
- All of the teachers who had their students read the story stated that they are interested in having their next year’s class read the Speckled Band and write analytical essays.
- Four of the teachers suggested that the Contest could be improved by holding it later in the academic year. One teacher suggested having the materials available at the beginning of the school year.

Conclusions & Costs

In all, the Tin Box finds the comments to be very positive and constructive. Based on these responses and the other information we have gleaned, we now estimate that approximately 400 students read *The Speckled Band* as a result of the contest. The number might be higher (since only seven teachers responded to the survey), but we have no evidence on which to make any such claims. We are quite happy with that impact for the first year.

The cost of the contest was somewhat higher than we anticipated. One reason was a costly error in our acknowledgements in the already printed booklets that necessitated that the covers be replaced. Another reason is because a generous Tin Box member contributed a copy of the Complete Sherlock Holmes for each of the winners, and I have added that to the cost of the contest. In all, the contest cost approximately \$850.

| Vendor | Purpose | | Expense |
|---------|---------------------|--------------|-------------------------------|
| Staples | Photocopy | \$ 19 | 5 Prototype Booklets |
| Staples | Photocopy | \$ 195 | 154 Booklets |
| Staples | Binding | \$ 39 | Booklets |
| | | | 62 Straight (non-Booklet) |
| Staples | Photocopy | \$ 196 | versions for teachers |
| Staples | Binder Clips | \$ 3 | |
| USPS | Postage | \$ 60 | Mailing to Teachers |
| Staples | Photocopy | \$ 81 | Cover error |
| B&N | Gift Cards | \$ 100 | Awards |
| B&N | Complete Adventures | \$ 60 | Awards |
| Staples | Certificate Frames | \$ 65 | Awards |
| USPS | Postage | \$ 4 | Notice of winners to Entrants |
| USPS | Followup Survey | <u>\$ 22</u> | Postage |
| Total | | \$ 844 | |

I purposely did not ask Tin Box members to contribute to the costs of the contest. In order to get the contest off the ground, I had committed personally to deficit fund the contest. I did not commit anyone else, and I did not want anyone to feel pressured to contribute and resent holding the contest. Nevertheless, several generous Tin Boxers made contributions to help defray the cost.

We did give Barnes & Noble credit at every opportunity. We mentioned that they were funding the costs of the contest in letters, press releases, and any time we were asked to speak about the contest. It is important to the long term health of the contest that we keep the sponsors happy.

THE SECOND ANNUAL CONTEST

What We Have Learned

Yes, we are doing it again. Both the Library and the School System continue to be enthusiastic partners.

We believe that we can reduce costs in the future. We learned that we need not print as many booklets, as we know that most of the home schooled children obtained their copies off of the Library website. We also will attempt to obtain the teachers' email addresses so that we can communicate with them by email rather than by the post. Lastly, after the booklets had been printed, we received offers of some free

photocopying.

The Tin Box has modified the following year's contest to comply with the suggestions made by the teachers. Changes include:

- There will be no Kick-off date. Essays may be submitted any time during the academic year up until the deadline.
- The date by which essays are due will be extended to early May.
- The essays may be of any length.
- The School System has asked us to change the rubric to be the same as that used by the School System.
- The Tin Box will make it clearer that the teachers should send the top two essays in each of his/her classes. There appears to have been some confusion about this.

We are working with the Library to improve the integration of the essay contest with other Library activities (and, hopefully, improve kids' attendance at the Library programs), such as:

- The Library has been advertising the programs we have held there as "Teen Programs." It will try advertising the programs as Family Programs in an attempt to boost attendance.
- The Library will include the Contest and the Programs in the A+ Catalogue, a catalogue that advertises school-related programs.
- Watson's Tin Box will design and print "posters" advertising the Programs that will be posted in all of the Library branches.
- The Library will advertise the programs through the PTA.
- The Tin Box is considering developing an "Interview with Sherlock Holmes" video (with a child interviewer) that could be broadcast on the school system's television system. There could be a graphic that would state the dates, times, and locations of upcoming programs that could be modified for each program, so the "ad" could be used over and over again.
- The Tin Box should get some of the teachers who participate in the essay contest to do some of the "selling" of Library programs.
- The Library will coordinate the "Book Club for Kids" with the next January Evening with Sherlock Holmes Program.
- The Tin Box could try to engage a local celebrity as a speaker at the Program and advertise that s/he will be there.

We have submitted a proposal for the Second Annual Sherlock Holmes Essay Contest to the School System, and it has been approved. Some of my Committee members have lobbied to use a different story. However, I had to get the proposal into the School System before we could make any changes. I have suggested that if the Committee wants to use a different story, it needs to begin the process a year in advance because it requires nearly a total rewrite of the contest booklet.

Once the School System approved the contest for another year, we submitted a proposal to Barnes & Noble for continued funding and hope that they will approve it.

Summary

If you attempt to replicate this program, please realize that:

- It is a heck of a lot of work.
- It requires commitment and enthusiasm. You must be a salesperson for the contest.
- It requires time. The less work a potential partner has to do the higher the likelihood that you will sell them on the concept.
- It requires a personal commitment to fund the project. I accepted that personal responsibility myself, but I recognize that it can be done differently. Just realize that you have a better chance of selling the concept to a potential partner if it will not cost the partner any money.
- It requires a leader of your Scion Society who will give you total freedom (or at least great leeway) in speaking for the Scion. In my case, I never had to clear anything with the Scion leadership before speaking for them. Don't underestimate the value of this.
- It requires a wonderful and flexible Committee to help run the contest. Mine is wonderful, and I recognize that they deferred to me on several issues. I appreciate that. They were always willing to come up with ideas or augment programs to make them better. They worked hard whenever they needed to.
- It requires a lot of luck. I have tried to highlight each of the critical points at which luck contributed greatly to the success of the contest. Without the luck, it might not have happened.

Please see the set of copies of the documents mentioned above, such as the proposal to the school system, potential funders, letters to the home school organizations, etc. Feel free to use these as templates for your own contest.