

Virtual CSI: DNA Writing Contest Guidelines

Mysteries have long been fashionable entertainment and now the television schedule is crowded with crime scene investigation shows that combine this literary genre with advanced scientific procedures. A mixture of real science and mock drama makes *CSI: DNA* the most popular offering of the New Mexico Tech summer high-school mini-course program. Recently, funding was obtained to create a virtual CSI:DNA that will allow anyone with an internet connection to learn about DNA forensics, although the principle audience will be high-school students.

The Internet site will consist of three parts: a training program that the student must complete satisfactorily, a crime scene presented in 3D where the student can log observations, and choose and tag evidence for subsequent analysis, and a virtual crime lab that will allow the student to process DNA evidence related to the crime. The purpose of the writing contest is to provide the context for the crime scenes used: who did what to whom and why. What evidence is required to solve the crime?

The stories must involve one of two potential crime scenes. The first is the Fidel Student Union Center on the New Mexico Tech campus. The victim is found on the atrium floor and has apparently died from a fall from the third floor balcony. What does circumstantial evidence indicate about the cause of death? Were there any witnesses, and what did they see? DNA evidence can be collected from soda cans, fingernails, etc. Your goal is to write a plausible scenario regarding the circumstances of the crime (did the deceased just have an argument with their boyfriend/girlfriend?), and develop a logical set of clues that will lead to a resolution to the mystery.

The second potential scene is a forensic DNA lab, in which a forensic scientist is found dead, clutching a pipettor containing a tiny bit of DNA from a case.

Photographs of the actual "crime" scenes are available on the CSI: DNA web site: <http://infohost.nmt.edu/~biology/CSIWeb/> (where you found these Guidelines).

The drama must include objects that can contain DNA evidence that will be tested to solve the crime. Objects that contain bodily fluids (blood, saliva, urine, or fecal matter) and that can lead to solving the crime must be incorporated into the story. For example, DNA can be extracted from stamps or an envelope that was licked. Discarded sunflower seeds at the crime scene might indicate who was present at the time of the crime, or they might be unrelated. It is not necessary to include the results of DNA analysis, just items that can be tested. DNA testing results will be assigned as appropriate to individuals and evidence in the story. For examples of DNA results, consult the CSI:DNA site <http://infohost.nmt.edu/~biology/CSIWeb/>. For an example of an appropriate style of writing, check out the crime dossiers series by Dennis Wheatley (such as Murder off Miami (1936) and Who Killed Robert Prentice? (1937)). These books were reissued in

the 1980s and are available in the used book market. Stories must be appropriate for high-school students.

Submission Guidelines:

Format: You may submit a story for either crime scene venues, but only one submission per author. Each story should be no more than 2000 words, including an ending that resolves the mystery. Format should be double-spaced on 8-1/2 x 11 pages, at least one-inch margins all around. Include the coversheet available on the CSI: DNA website: <http://infohost.nmt.edu/~biology/CSIWeb/>. All contest entries must be postmarked by June 1, 2009. Electronic submissions will not be accepted. Mail your entry to:

CSI: DNA Writing Contest
Dr. Rebecca Reiss
Biology Department
Jones Annex
New Mexico Tech
801 Leroy Pl.
Socorro, NM 87801

Deadlines and Judging:

Winners will be announced in July, 2009. Judges will be selected from the faculty and staff of New Mexico Tech University. Judges' decisions are final. All rights to winning entries will be retained by New Mexico Tech.

Prizes:

Prizes will be awarded in three categories of writers: High school students, college students, and non-student amateur and professional writers. First prize in each category is \$100, second prize is \$50, and third prize is \$25.

Help:

For additional information, contact David Medcalf by e-mail: dmedcalf@nmt.edu. Put "CSI: DNA" somewhere in the subject line.