

Notes & Queries Fresh Ink Prize

Judging Rubric (100 Points)

Purpose of the Prize

The Notes & Queries Fresh Ink Prize was created to support emerging greeting card businesses as they transition from one stage of growth to the next. While exceptional creativity is essential, this prize is not solely about identifying the most talented artist or designer. It is about recognizing a creative business that demonstrates strong design, professional execution, commercial promise, and a clear vision for growth.

The winning entrant should show that they have built a compelling foundation and that the £5,000 award will meaningfully help accelerate the next chapter of their business.

Eligibility Requirements

To be eligible for the Notes & Queries Fresh Ink Prize, applicants must:

- Be an artist, illustrator, designer, or greeting card publisher based in the United Kingdom.
- Have been operating their greeting card business for **less than five years** as of the submission deadline.
- Submit a portfolio consisting of at least 24 greeting card designs.
- Provide a minimum of 20 physical samples of each range or collection being presented.
- ***Submit a brief business plan and a statement describing how the prize funds would be used.***

The Fresh Ink Prize is specifically intended to support **early-stage creative businesses** that have established a strong foundation and are poised for growth with additional support and industry recognition.

Only the applicants that meet all of these requirements will be forwarded to the N&Q Fresh Ink Review Panel Board for review

1. Creative Excellence & Originality (25 Points)

Does the work stand out?

Judges should consider:

- Originality of concept and voice
- Distinctive artistic style

- Strength of illustration, typography, and design
- Emotional impact, humor, sentiment, or storytelling
- Ability to create cards that feel fresh, memorable, and authentic
- Consistency of creative vision across the portfolio

Score: 1–25

2. Product Quality & Presentation (20 Points)

Is the product professionally executed?

Judges should consider:

- Print quality
- Color reproduction and consistency
- Paper stock and finishing choices
- Packaging and presentation
- Attention to detail
- Overall professionalism of the collection
- Quality and consistency across all submitted products

Score: 1–20

3. Range Development & Brand Cohesion (15 Points)

Has the creator developed a thoughtful collection rather than a handful of good cards?

Judges should consider:

- Breadth of product offering
- Strength of individual collections or ranges
- Consistency across products
- Clear brand identity and point of view
- Balance of occasion, everyday, seasonal, or specialty categories
- Potential to expand and scale the range over time

Score: 1–15

4. Market Appeal & Retail Readiness (15 Points)

Would retailers be excited—and able—to stock this line?

Judges should consider:

- Customer appeal
- Market positioning
- Clarity of target audience
- Price-point awareness
- Shelf presence and visual impact
- Potential for retail success
- Packaging and merchandising considerations (?)
- Presence of required retail information, including:
 - Country of origin
 - Scannable barcode (UPC/EAN)
 - Product identification and labeling

Guiding Question:

If I discovered this line today, would it be ready—or nearly ready—to place on my shop floor?

Score: 1–15

5. Business Vision & Growth Potential (15 Points)

Can this business successfully take the next step?

Applicants must submit a brief business plan outlining:

- The current stage of their business
- Years in operation (must be fewer than five years)
- Key challenges they are facing
- Growth opportunities they have identified
- Goals for the next 12–24 months

Judges should consider:

- Clarity of vision
- Realistic growth strategy
- Understanding of the marketplace
- Ability to identify opportunities and challenges
- Potential for sustainable business development
- Evidence of entrepreneurial thinking

Score: 1–15

6. Impact of the Award (10 Points)

Will the £5,000 make a meaningful difference?

Applicants must provide a statement describing how they would use the award funds.

Judges should consider:

- Specificity of the proposal
- Practicality and realism
- Potential impact on business growth
- Likelihood that the investment will accelerate development
- Alignment between the applicant's goals and the proposed use of funds

Examples may include:

- New product development
- Trade show participation
- Inventory investment
- Website improvements
- Marketing initiatives
- Equipment purchases
- Packaging upgrades
- Expansion into new markets
- New Employee

Score: 1–10

Tie-Breaking Consideration

In the event of a tie, judges should ask:

Which business is most likely to experience meaningful and measurable growth as a direct result of receiving this award?

The purpose of the Fresh Ink Prize is not simply to reward achievement. It is to help an emerging creative business successfully move from one stage of growth to the next.

Judge's Guiding Principle

When reviewing submissions, judges should remember:

The Notes & Queries Fresh Ink Prize exists to celebrate exceptional creativity while investing in the future of the greeting card industry. The winning entrant should demonstrate outstanding design, professional execution, commercial promise, and a clear plan for how this support will help transform potential into progress.

The ideal winner is not necessarily the largest business, nor the most established. It is the business that combines creativity, professionalism, and growth potential—and for whom this investment can serve as a meaningful catalyst for the future.

Importantly, this prize is reserved for businesses that have been operating for less than five years and are at a pivotal stage in their development, where financial support, industry recognition, and retailer feedback can help unlock their next phase of growth.