A winner? Not likely. You are much more likely to be a loser. How big depends on you. Americans lose more than $40 billion per year to sweepstakes scams, according to William Arnold, a professor of communication who directs the gerontology program at Arizona State University.

Arnold studies direct marketing pieces and plays. The elderly and infirm are popular targets. Many are victimized. Arnold often testifies before Congress on sweepstakes issues. He also holds regular workshops in partnership with the Federal Trade Commission, the American Association of Retired People, the U.S. Postal Service, and the U.S. Department of Justice.

“According to the FBI data, almost 55 percent of people who have been victims of scams are over the age of 55,” Arnold says. “Known scams claim as much as $60 billion per year. But as many as 85 of every 100 scams go unreported because people simply don’t want to admit that they’ve been suckered.”

Arnold says that elderly people fall victim to sweepstakes scams for several reasons. First, trips and cash prizes can be especially appealing to people on fixed incomes. Second, envelopes marked “You’re a winner!” and those containing “checks,” can easily mislead those who have trouble reading small type print. Third, people who are alone and lonely tend to welcome mail and repeat phone calls—even if those callers are marketers.

Many publishers use direct mail responsibly to increase circulation and obtain renewals. But others use sweepstake mailers to dupe people into buying books, magazines, and other merchandise.

“Eyesight and cognitive functioning are part of the problem,” Arnold says. “You’re a winner! messages are simple, easy to read, and usually printed in very large, bold, contrasting type. They stand out. However, the qualifying data, phrases such as if you play, if you are selected, and no purchase necessary are normally printed in small type and buried deep within long, wordy messages.

“The readability level, or index, of these parts of the message are more complex, harder to understand,” Arnold says.
Even if you just affix one sticker and return one mailer, you’ve taken the first step toward being scammed.”

Champ or Chump?

Sweepstakes scammers and the perpetrators of direct mail fraud schemes are hungry for victims. Unfortunately, there are plenty of people willing and ready to become patsies. Most are done in by their own greed or their innocent inability to comprehend messages that are deliberately concocted to confuse and mislead.

ASU’s William Arnold studies those confusing messages. He offers specific bits of advice on protecting elderly targets of direct mail scams:

First, talk with elderly parents about potential direct mail fraud. If they will not confide in you, find a friend to whom they will listen.

Place stickers on their telephones that say “Warning! This might be a fraud call.”

Be on the lookout for multiple checkbook or credit card entries, or a sudden influx of low quality merchandise.

Realize that younger people are also potential victims of direct mail scams. If you find that you really cannot resist the urge to affix a 33-cent stamp or two to a sweepstakes entry, Arnold suggests that you mail the packets to his ASU group.

The ASU researchers collect all types of direct mail sweepstakes material. They analyze messages and techniques being used on specific age groups.

Arnold would welcome thousands of additional direct mail pieces, including those targeted at younger people and other demographic groups. For more information, contact him directly at 480.965.5559.

— LINDSEY MICHAELS