

Business of film



The Screenplay Contest Primer

Optimizing your
chances of winning

by Michael Barmish



Introduction

You've typed "The End...Fade Out" and finished your screenplay. Job well done! Of course, the question becomes, now what? The last thing you want to do is to put your script away "in a drawer" and never let it see the light of day. Chances are you don't have a relative who is a studio executive that can get your script onto the must-read pile. You may not live in LA, where every other person at Starbucks has a connection. And, even if you do live in LA, you're one of hundreds, if not thousands, trying to peddle their screenplay. What's a writer to do? One of the best routes to success is to enter your script in a screenplay contest. But which one is best? How do you maximize the opportunity by doing all the preparation to show your best work?

In addition to providing a complete list of the major screenwriting contests, this guide will explain the advantages of screenplay contests and how to develop a strategy to enter your screenplay into a contest that will maximize your script's potential and, with any luck, get you that industry exposure you need.

5 key advantages in entering -screenplay contests

Why enter a screenplay contest? With so many scripts by writers around the world, submitting your script to a contest offers several important benefits:

- 1. Recognition** - win or, depending on the contest, placing in the top group and your script, and you the writer, get immediate

recognition from the industry. This can lead to acquiring an agent and/or manager, getting important producer and studio meetings, meeting directors, and possibly getting your script produced or being offered a writer-for-hire position on another project.

2. Financial - no one is going to get rich off of contest prize money, but most contests do offer a cash prize. Every screenwriter's goal is to get paid for writing. Winning a cash prize is a start that can lead to what your true goal is, a career as a working screenwriter.

3. Feedback - some contests include important feedback from industry pros that you can use to write your next draft. The opportunity to receive valuable critique is immeasurable.

4. Niche scripts - When submitting scripts to producers and studios, it's all about

marketability. Scripts with less marketable appeal, such as small dramas, are as welcome as those that are more high concept.

5. Marketing - As in marketing yourself. Win or place highly in a respected contest and you have something to add to your CV besides the scripts you've written. This is especially true when looking for an agent and/or manager.

The top ten screenplay contests

There are lots of screenplay contests out there, but not all are equal. To maximize your budget and get valuable recognition, there are several contests that are the most respected in the industry.

1. Academy Nicholl Fellowship - no list would begin without this competition at the top. Win, or even place highly in this contest and the doors will open quickly. It's sponsored by the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences and is highly respected in the industry. To date, over \$4 million in prize money has been awarded. More importantly, winning the Fellowship was a career starter for writers such as Radha Bharadwaj's *Closet Land* and Doug Atchison's *Akeelah and the Bee*.



A major stipulation to entering this competition is that writers cannot have already earned more than \$25,000 writing for film and television.

2. Sundance Screenwriters Lab - more than just a contest, Sundance offers a 5-day retreat to work with and learn from professionals in the business. So not only

are you getting valuable feedback, but your script is nurtured in the lab.

3. Austin Film Festival - one of the oldest and most respected screenplay competitions, the contest is in conjunction with the film festival, which focuses on the screenwriter. Included in the prizes is reimbursement for expenses going to the festival, not to mention the valuable exposure at the festival with important producers attending.

4. ScreenCraft - a fast-growing screenplay competition which offers individual competitions for a list of genres including comedy, horror, sci-fi, TV pilots and even stage plays. This means your screenplay is up against those in the same genre rather than competing with all genres.

5. Final Draft Big Break - from the makers of Final Draft® software, this contest, now 20 years strong, has risen to the top tier of screenplay competitions by offering large

cash prizes, a trip to LA and meetings with major executives and agencies.

6. PAGE International - This contest was created by industry execs and agents to specifically find new talent. It has grown into a prestigious competition with one of the largest cash prizes - a \$25,000 Grand Prize. It also breaks the competition down by genre.

7. Slamdance - For over 20 years, the Slamdance Screenplay Competition has focused on emerging writing talent and, as a benefit, offers feedback to all entries, with an optional purchase of more comprehensive coverage. Categories are broken down into Short, Feature, Horror, and Original Teleplay.

8. Tracking Board Launch Pad - From one of the best resources for screenwriting, The Tracking Board's competition has garnered a great reputation among professionals in

the industry. The selection panel is made up of important experts in the industry and winning this contest will get you showcased in meetings with execs and agents.

9. Scriptapalooza - A very popular and well-respected competition for over 20 years that separates features and shorts scripts. Scriptapalooza does a lot of strong marketing throughout the year and its winners get heavily promoted. It offers a nice prize package to the winners, including \$10,000 in cash.

10. BlueCat - This competition is favored by those writing more independent-style scripts. It's also popular with international writers, as they have a special Fellini Award that goes to writers who live outside the U.S. that includes additional prize money. It offers competitions for features, shorts and TV pilots.

For UK and EU writers, some additional competitions to consider are:

- **BBC Writersroom** - from the BBC, this programme works with new and experienced writers for further development. Open to UK residents.
- **BAFTA Roccliffe New Writing Competition** - for film, television drama and comedy,, children's media scripts. Open to UK citizens and residents who have lived in the UK for at least 5 years.
- **Euroscript Screenwriting Competition** - open to anyone but is for treatments only.
- **Shore Scripts Feature Contest** - open to entries worldwide and promotes international writers. Judges include BAFTA award winners.

Before you enter

Before you consider entering a screenwriting contest, there are some steps you must take to optimize your script and your chances of winning or placing high.

First and foremost is to get valuable feedback on your screenplay. Find at least three to five people who will read your script and can give you objective feedback. This means your mother would not be one of these people, unless she is a professional script reader or an industry executive.

You need the most honest feedback and objective feedback you can get. The more professionally-related to writing, the better. This could include a director, a teacher or college professor you have a good relationship with, other people in the film industry and/or a professional critique service.



Since most of the screenplay contests are US based, it is advisable to register your screenplay with a service such as the WGA Registry or Library of Congress in the U.S. It'll make things much easier in case of a legal action. Both are open to international citizens. There are other services available as well, but these are the most widely used.

Critique services

They can be quite expensive, but is worth it as you will get studio-style coverage and gain insight into how much work you need to do on your script. Most services offer different packages from basic coverage--reading and notes, which is the most affordable to a comprehensive package that includes more in-depth coverage, such as inline page notes and a 2-hour Skype session.

And, if you can afford it, consider more than one to get a variety of coverage. If you are unfamiliar

with the services, it's okay to ask for some sample coverage to see what the quality of their coverage is, or look for recommendations on online boards, like Reddit, Done Deal Pro and Simply Scripts.

Once you get the coverage, be honest and objective about it. Remember, these are professionals who have or have had industry experience and know what the market wants and what producers and studios want. Often, these are the same people who, or have similar profiles to those who are judging many of the top-tier screenplay contests,

While you may not agree with everything, if you see certain patterns consistently throughout each critique, then you must consider it in a rewrite. If two or three people have the same comment or concern, chances are that a screenplay contest reader will as well. So, don't change your script based on everything that is

in the coverage, but consider the similarities between them.

Then, once you've assessed all the feedback, it's time to rewrite your script. It's imperative to do so before developing your strategy for entering any contests. If you can afford to, repeat the feedback process.



Tips for Non-English Native Writers:

If you are a non-native English writer and are submitting to contests, most of which are in the U.S., consider hiring a professional proofreader to make sure your story is easily read by English readers. Likewise, difficult names and locations may be a hindrance, so keep that in mind when naming characters and locations.

Developing your strategy

Competition is tough everywhere, especially for the screenwriter. Tens of thousands of screenplays are written every year and while, granted, most of them are mediocre at best, it's still a challenge for the screenwriter to wade through the clutter. Entering a screenplay contest is a guarantee that someone will read your script. So it's important to put your best foot forward. And developing a strategy is key.

| Budget.

The first thing you want to do in building your strategy is to create a budget to see how many contests you can afford to enter. They vary in price, but in general, the entry fees range between \$50 - \$100.

Even if you can afford to enter several or more contests, it's a good idea to start with two or three. Ideally, these would be contests that offer feedback along with your submission, either feedback that's included in the submission fee or ones that offer additional paid services. Take advantage of this. If you haven't been selected for the final round, you'll get a comprehensive explanation of what the weaknesses are in your screenplay and can rewrite accordingly before entering additional contests.



Screenplay contests usually allow you to enter the same script in subsequent contests. So there's no harm in entering one you highly value early, and entering again the next year if you don't win.

When considering the budget, also consider the benefit of entering a contest early. Most contests offer discount pricing if you submit by

an earlier date than the contest's deadline. By entering early, many contests offer early-entry pricing. This is part of your research, noting the important dates to enter.



Create your own calendar or spread sheet and note all the contests in which you are interested in entering. Then, record the submission dates and entry fees. Part of your strategy is to have your script ready for submission at the earliest date to take advantage of any discounts on offer.

| Research

Listed above are ten recommended screenplay competitions. However, there are more out there, some of which are genre specific. While winning a lesser contest may not get you the recognition that the major contests will, winning any contest still is a validation as to the quality of the script and as to you, as the writer.

A competition that only gets several hundred entries increases your odds against those that get thousands. Even with the majors, it's good to see what type of scripts have won in the past to see if there is a pattern and whether yours fits that pattern. But remember, originality is the most important thing. These contests are looking for unique voices telling compelling stories. That will make yours rise to the top.

Some festivals offer different categories and you can enter your script in different genre categories. This is something to take into consideration as it increases your chances of winning. Of course, this needs to be factored into the budget above.

| Use Professional Software

Formatting is important when submitting a screenplay as often contests are quite strict. This means conforming to standard lengths, element margins, font, etc. Professional

programmes like Final Draft®, or WriterDuet will take care of this. But there are plenty of free options where you can import your script and have it formatted correctly.

Also, make sure you proofread and spell check the script. Make it as easy for the reader to focus on the story and not your mistakes. Don't hand write anything or cross anything out. And don't include photos anywhere.

Finally, if you are in Europe and are submitting your screenplay to a U.S. based contest, change the pagination to US Letter and check to make sure your page count has not gone over the required limit. Then, save it as PDF, as that is the preferred format for most contests.

| Read the Rules

Each competition has its own set of rules, such as file formats, what information to include on a title page, etc. Don't waste money submitting

a script that will be rejected for a silly mistake. Also, read the applications form carefully and reread it after you've filled it in, but not yet submitted. Be sure everything is accurate. And always check any fine print. The competitions highlighted here are trustworthy. But with any submission, it's good to go over the fine print.

Consider the short version

While this is not always possible, writing a short version of your script is another strategy or a parallel route in building a track record for your project. This is especially true if you want to direct your script. Short script contests are cheaper than feature contests, allowing you to budget for more competitions. It also requires less writing (and rewriting) time because you

already have a solid base to start with and, should it win, you have a great promotion for your feature version screenplay.

There are four different ways to tackle the writing of a short film based on a feature film script:

- Adapt your entire story into a short story. This is probably the most difficult option and the hardest challenge.
- Extract a particular sequence of your feature film script, one with a proper arc – a beginning, a middle and an end – that could easily be turned into a short movie with little adaptation.
- Use some scenes created during your development, but omitted in your final draft. Read some previous drafts to find some good material to reutilise.
- Use the main character of your script and develop a totally different story for the short. The advantage is that you start with a strong character that you know particularly well.

Keys to remember

Here are the important things to remember when you consider entering a screenplay contest:

Contests can jump start your career by gaining you important recognition.

Some contests offer feedback, a great way to help you further develop your script.

Consider entering one or more of the main competitions, but don't discount smaller ones where your chances of winning are increased.

Make sure your script is primed for success. This means getting important feedback and rewriting your script, then making sure it is properly formatted.

Create a budget for how many contests you can afford to enter. Keep in mind the cost

of multiple genre submissions and extra feedback services.

Research important contest dates for early submission discounts.

Consider a short script version of your feature to create buzz around your feature script.

Conclusion

Entering a screenplay contest is an important step on your career path as a screenwriter. For a new writer, it's the difference between saying you are a screenwriter and being a screenwriter. You have something to show and are proud to do so. It's important that you choose the right contest at the right time to take full advantage. And if you don't win, don't give up. Enter another contest. You never know--you might hit the right one at the right time.



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