

HOW TO WIN

A SCREENWRITING CONTEST

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Why should you enter a screenwriting contest?

Getting your screenplay noticed by Hollywood can sometimes feel like an impossible task. Many agents and managers do not accept unsolicited queries. If you don't live in Los Angeles it's hard to meet people who can get your scripts in the hands of decision makers. Screenwriting contests give up-and-coming screenwriters the chance to have their work evaluated by industry professionals who know what types of scripts the entertainment industry is looking for. Winning a contest or even just placing in one can open multiple doors, and even kick start a Hollywood career. Many professional screenwriters first came to the attention of Hollywood through winning screenwriting contests. Evan Daugherty's screenplay, *Shrapnel*, won first place in 2008's Script Pipeline Contest, and helped him secure an agent and a manager. In 2010 Daugherty's script *Snow White and the Huntsman* sold for \$3.2 million, and *Shrapnel* was eventually made into the movie *Killing Season* starring John Travolta and Robert De Niro. If it wasn't for his contest win, Daugherty's talent may have gone unnoticed.

Which screenwriting contests should you enter?

There are many screenwriting contests out there but not all of them are created equal. There are a handful of contests that stand out as the most respected and trusted within the industry, with the results to back it up. A screenwriting contest is only as good as its success stories, which should show that the contest winners have gone on to be repped by managers and agencies, and have their screenplays optioned or sold.

Here are five well-known and respected screenwriting contests:

Academy Nicholl Fellowship

Sponsored by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, The Nicholl Fellowships are one of the most prestigious screenwriting prizes an amateur screenwriter can hope to win. Previous winners whose screenwriting careers were launched by the Nicholl include Michael Werwie (*Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil, and Vile*), Bragi F. Schut (*Season of the Witch*), Ehren Kruger (*Transformers*) and Michael A. Rich (*Finding Forrester*).

www.oscars.org/nicholl

Austin Film Festival Screenwriting Competition

The Austin Film Festival is devoted entirely to the art and craft of screenwriting. Writers who win and place in their screenwriting contest not only gain valuable industry exposure but are also offered discounted rates to attend the festival itself, a yearly can't miss event where you can rub shoulders with screenwriters like Shane Black (*Lethal Weapon*, *The Long Kiss Goodnight*), Nicole Perlman (*Guardians of the Galaxy*), Kenneth Lonergan (*Manchester by the Sea*) and Andrew Kevin Walker (*Se7en*).

www.austinfilmfestival.com

Final Draft Big Break Screenwriting Contest

If you've already written your first screenplay you are probably very familiar with Final Draft, the number-one selling screenwriting software on the planet. Used by both aspiring writers and professionals alike, Final Draft formats your screenplay to entertainment industry standards so you can focus on what you do best - writing. The Final Draft Big Break Screenwriting Contest is one of the most respected in the biz, with past winners going on to be repped by big agencies and managers and see their scripts optioned and sold.

www.finaldraft.com

PAGE International Screenwriting Awards

PAGE was founded in 2003 and has gone on to be one of the longest-running and most celebrated screenwriting contests you can enter. PAGE offers a large cash prize of \$25,000 and allows you to order Judges' Feedback on your script so you can find out how readers reacted to your contest entry. PAGE also boasts having over 100 of its winners' screenplays actually made into movies.

www.pageawards.com

Screencraft

Screencraft is notable for offering multiple different contests that you can enter depending on the genre of your script. These contests have judges who specialize in different genres, like Horror, Sci-Fi and Action. Screencraft also offers a contest for Short Film scripts, an often overlooked category.

www.screencraft.org

It should also be noted that there are other online services that while strictly speaking are not contests can result in your screenplay receiving massive exposure.

The Black List is an online screenplay network where you can upload your screenplay for a monthly hosting fee and make it available for immediate download by over 3,000 registered industry professionals. They also offer an evaluation service where you can pay for industry readers to critique your screenplay, with the highest rated scripts then being circulated to industry professionals. The Black List is also well known for publishing a list of Hollywood's 'most liked' screenplays each year.

www.blcklst.com

Inktip is a website where you can pay to host your screenplay in a database available to registered film producers. Over 300 movies have been made from screenplays that producers found on Inktip.

www.inktip.com.

What happens to my screenplay after I enter a screenwriting contest?

Once you have entered a screenwriting contest, your screenplay will first land in the hands of a contest reader. A contest reader is the first line of defense against a screenplay that doesn't make the grade. Contest readers come from different parts of the industry. They can be professional screenwriters who have had their screenplays produced, or professional readers who have read screenplays for studios, production companies, agents and managers. They will read all the screenplays submitted to a screenwriting contest and decide which ones are the best and should proceed into the final judging round.

Here are some tips from an anonymous Final Draft Big Break contest reader:



"I'm a professional screenwriter who has sold screenplays to companies like Universal, Fox, Disney, Comedy Central and the USA Network. When I read scripts for Big Break I look for an original voice, quick and concise pacing, and a lack of cliches both in terms of the story and dialogue. I find that many up and coming screenwriters don't pay enough attention to making their dialogue as good as it can be. Most of the dialogue I read is very forced and stilted and doesn't sound the way that people speak. I'm also looking for a central character that an audience can connect with, and a journey you want to go on with them. There should also be an awareness of the marketplace. The writer should know what kind of screenplays are currently selling, the kind of movies that are getting made, and show they have applied their own unique voice to something that has a chance of being made into a movie."

What happens after my script makes it past the contest reader?

If you are fortunate enough to make it through the readers, your script will then go on to the judges. The best and most reputable screenwriting contests will be judged by industry professionals who can recognize what makes a good screenplay and help get your screenwriting career to the next level. These professionals could include agents, managers, producers and other successful screenwriters. Most screenwriting contests will feature details about who their judges are on their website, and will list the various clients and projects these professionals are associated with. The more high profile and recognizable professionals and talent associated with a screenwriting contest, the more that contest will be worthy of spending your hard-earned entry-fee.

Though judges may have differing personal tastes about the types of screenplays that appeal to them, there are some common elements they will all be looking for. They want to find a screenplay that is professionally written and has a chance to succeed in a crowded marketplace. They will also be looking for writers with a strong voice that shows potential for long-term development.

The Final Draft Big Break Screenwriting Contest is judged by a selection of high profile agents, producers and managers from such companies as Bellevue Productions, Good Fear, Circle of Confusion, ICM, Lee Stobby Entertainment, Kailey Marsh Media, and Madhouse Entertainment.

Here is some advice on contests from literary manager and Big Break judge Jeff Portnoy of Bellevue Productions:



"The first way we find clients is scouting for and signing clients coming out of all of the screenwriting fellowships and competitions. So, Final Draft's Big Break, Nicholl Fellowships, Austin Film Festival Screenwriting Competition, Page Awards, the list goes on and on. We're always looking at those winners and the scripts that win and place in those competitions. Sometimes we'll actually serve as judges and we'll get an early look at the scripts. Sometimes we'll just read scripts that win first place after the competition. That's a primary way we find new clients."



Jeff goes on to give the following advice to screenwriters looking for their big break:

"I would advise them to enter their material into as many of those contests that I just spoke about, so they can get vetted before they reach out to me or any other manager or agent. So, if you're reading this, what you need to do is write the best piece of material you can and put it in every single competition or festival or fellowship. Keep trying to build a set of talking points or bullet points that show you've been vetted and your work has been approved and vetted by people in the industry."

How can I make my script stand out from the crowd?

Some new screenwriters think that to make their screenplay stand out they need to 'think outside the box.' This might mean making your script look as 'flashy' as possible by inserting lots of pictures, using different fonts and generally discarding all the 'rules' that screenwriters should adhere to when formatting their screenplay. Most contest readers are immune to this sort of blatant attention grabbing, and may assume that you are playing with the formatting because your story doesn't have the strength to stand on its own. The key to having your screenplay stand apart from the pack is to have a **UNIQUE VOICE**. The difference between you and every other screenwriter out there is that no one has had your experiences or sees the world exactly as you do. Hollywood is excited by new voices who give them something they haven't seen before. The average executive reads hundreds, sometimes thousands of screenplays a year, and they're all looking for the next 'big thing' that excites them. This doesn't mean you need to completely reinvent the wheel. By applying your unique perspective to a well-trodden genre, such as a sci fi, comedy or film noir, you show not only that you have a strong, distinctive voice, but that you also know the rules of what makes a story work.



Manager and Big Break Judge Kailey Marsh has this advice to new writers:

"The biggest things that a writer should be doing is writing, reading and watching... Only write scripts that you are passionate about. It will show through in your writing."

What should I do before I hit the 'submit' button?

Almost every screenwriting contest has a set of rules that must be adhered to, otherwise you risk having your script disqualified. These rules may cover such areas as:

Title page information

Most screenwriting contests will ask you to limit the information on your title page to the title of your screenplay only. This is so all screenplays are read fairly and honestly by the contest judges, regardless of who has written them. Some contests like Final Draft's Big Break ask you to remove the cover page entirely.

Page count

It is expected that your screenplay will adhere to industry standards regarding page count. The majority of screenplays are 80-120 pages long. Many contests will not accept material that they consider either too long or too short by commercial Hollywood standards.

Eligibility

Do you already have an agent or a manager? Have you sold a screenplay in the past? If so then it's possible some screenplay contests may not consider you eligible to enter. These contests are geared towards finding new, unrepresented voices, and your previous success with screenwriting may disqualify you from entering.

Region

Some contests are only open to certain countries or regions. For example, the BBC Writersroom program is only open to residents of the UK and Republic of Ireland. Check that your residency meets the eligibility criteria.

It's important to remember that every screenwriting contest will have its own unique set of rules. It is dangerous to assume that all contests will ask the same of their contestants. Always check that your screenplay fulfills the contest guidelines before hitting that 'send' button.

So I've won/placed in a screenwriting contest - now what?

Congratulations! You've managed to make it through the readers and judges, and now your screenplay has emerged victorious. So what exactly happens now? Firstly, celebrate! You've achieved something momentous. Winning or placing in a contest is no easy feat. It's important to take the time to recognize the accomplishment. Screenwriting is a long, sometimes arduous road, and every victory along the way should be given its due. So pat yourself on the back and enjoy all the praise that's coming your way!

After you've savored the moment, it's time to get back to business. It's important to make sure you maximize every opportunity a screenwriting contest win will give you. If you've won a meeting with a potential manager or agent, make sure you act as professionally as possible. People in the entertainment industry are like everyone else - they prefer to work with people they can get along with, and if you are seen as difficult, it can stop your career dead in its tracks, no matter how great of a writer you may be. Agents and managers also recognize that screenwriting isn't a race, it's a marathon. They'll want to know what other material you have, what projects you're interested in writing, what passions drive you on a personal level. Finally, they'll want to know that you're in this for the long haul, that you won't give up when the going gets tough. Screenwriting is a tough business, but if you have the strength, passion and voice, it's the kind of business where dreams are made.

Daniel Bonjour, who shared the 2016 Big Break Grand Prize with his co-writer GW Freund, had this to say about his contest experience:



"When we found out that our feature film was the grand prize winner, I remember thinking 'this will be great in helping us pitch our script.' The prizes were great and the awards ceremony was surreal, but I honestly thought that at the end of the day, it would simply be a very strong conversation starter. While that definitely is the case (everyone in the industry recognizes the contest), I seriously underestimated what Final Draft had in store for us. They made sure we met people at every level of the industry connected to writing. Agents, managers, studio heads – everyone. Some of these meetings are purely informative, but lots are there to build lasting relationships. We knew which were which because we were literally coached on what to expect beforehand. I cannot stress enough how much everyone at Final Draft wants this to effectively change your careers. This contest was the first time I actually felt like a writer, and now I can't shake the feeling."

So go forth, writers! Power up your Final Draft and pen that masterpiece that only you can write. You may be the next hot up-and-coming screenwriter we all read about in the trades, and when you make it big, we hope you'll remember us!