

12 Simple Tips for Entering Screenplay Contests

By Melissa L. Pilgrim

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Your script is done! Congratulations— but now what do you *do* with it? Well, if you're a screenwriter who doesn't happen to have an uncle who is the president of a major studio— or even *knows* the president— then what better way to let your work get noticed than to enter it in a world-wide screenwriting contest where it can get industry recognition? It's what I did as an unknown writer to help land an agent and break into the business, and more and more writers are figuring out that it's a good way for them to do it as well.

In fact, everyone is trying contests now, from the serious film student to the nurse who's "secretly" writing the next big romantic comedy on her off hours. And although that's what these contests are for, they are also becoming a very *profitable* way for some companies to find a few good stories to develop amongst the thousands of hopeful attempts sent in. And after reading hundreds of those attempts as a judge in two different contests over the past several years, I have compiled these twelve simple tips for writers to keep in mind before they sign all those hefty submission checks that tend to go along with entering many of these contests. I hope they will help you get to the final round and not get passed on early on just from not appearing professional straight out of the envelope.

1. *Follow the guidelines for submission for each contest.* This sounds obvious, but apparently it isn't because a number of the guidelines are disregarded on a regular basis. The three main mistakes made include:

- a) *Page Length:* Make sure that the script is not longer or shorter than the requested page length.
- b) *Format:* The script should be written in standard screenwriting format, not like a novel, sitcom, or stage play. If you do not know what standard screenwriting format looks like, find out. There are many good books and writing programs available to teach you.
- c) *Do not include the author's name on the title page.* Don't worry, the scripts are usually numbered and then read anonymously and no script has ever been mixed up with someone else's as far as I know, so assume that yours won't be either.

2. *Do not send the original copy of the script.* Also make sure that all the pages are included in the copy that you are sending in, and that it is copied on one side only. (Most judges recycle the scripts that don't win, so the environment is considered.)

3. *Bind the script with standard card stock in either white or black only and use two, not three, brass fasteners with washers to hold it together.* Do not spend extra time and money making it look like a spiral notebook or a classic bound leather edition of the world's greatest work. It will only stand out as looking "amateur" instead of impressing anyone. Trust me.

4. *Do not include any threats, statements, or warnings that your script is registered and cannot be stolen by the judge who is about to read it.* Not only is this perceived as rude, it also isn't the smartest way to make a first impression on the person who is about to decide if your script goes

any further than their own living room. A professional writer would *always* copyright his or her material before sending it anywhere anyway, so most judges "assume" it is registered before they even open the first page. Many contests will also have you sign a release form— which is a standard legal agreement that all studios have people sign before reading any material not submitted by an agent or entertainment lawyer— so you cannot easily prove your idea was stolen anyway. But believe it or not, most stories can be found to have elements of other stories in them dating all the way back to Homer's work. So unless it's "really" original, relax and know that the judge's intention is *not* to steal your idea.

5. *Know who your intended viewing audience for your script is and make sure the contest is looking for that type of project.* Many contests do not want documentaries, TV movie-of-the-week stories, feature-length versions of well-known TV shows, true stories of current news events, or adaptations of best-selling books because legally they would have to have the rights to those kinds of things before they even start to produce them. And frankly, if it really is that great of an idea for a story, it's probably already in development with the original people involved by the time you've sent it in anyway.

6. *Do not include sheet music or tapes with sound effects, musical scores, or songs to be included in the soundtrack.* These contests look for writers, not composers or Foley artists.

7. *Do not include pictures or drawings of set designs, how the characters should look, or use storyboards within your script to explain what things should look like onscreen.* Again, these contests are looking for writers. If you can't describe things using words, then maybe you should consider directing instead of writing.

8. *Use spell check.*

9. *Make sure your story has a main plot.* Jerry Seinfeld can do two hours of a film (presumably) about "nothing" using only subplots and endless chatter to keep it interesting if *he* wants to, but the rest of us usually need a clear main storyline to make it work.

10. *This is a big one... before you even send your script in, have at least five people who are not related to you in any way read it and give you honest feedback.* Pay attention to their comments objectively. If all agree that the "yellow-sweater-wearing lady" is completely unnecessary, she probably is. Don't worry if you have to revise it two, three, or even *twenty* times before people say it's great— or even good. Most professional screenwriters would never let their own mothers read their first drafts, let alone their agents! And remember— if Shakespeare's plays can be adapted and changed as much as they have been in the last 400 years, yours can too. But don't get discouraged, no matter how many times you have to rewrite it. Always keep in mind that writing *is* revising— it's part of the process.

11. *Let the contest officials contact you about how your script is doing.* Most companies send letters to let you know if your script went on to the next level or not after each round is judged which can take *months*— so be patient. The only exception to this is in the rare case that your script gets bought during the contest. If this happens, contact them so the script can be pulled from the competition if the rules dictate that it should be so another writer will have a chance to

win. (Oh, and congratulations!) However, if you do not hear anything from the officials after several months and you then start to receive flyers announcing their *next* year's contest, assume your script did not go on or win anything.

12. *Have fun and good luck!*

ABOUT THIS AUTHOR: Melissa L. Pilgrim is a freelance writer and editor who's had 16 plays produced around the country, 4 screenplays optioned, 1 TV series optioned, and has been hired to write for various film and TV production companies including Martin Sheen's *ESP Productions* at Warner Brothers Studios. She is the author of *Animal Motions*, a children's picture book, and has edited over a dozen books for authors in both fiction and non-fiction. Her two passions in life are writing and helping others realize their writing dreams. Visit www.YourWritingMuse.com for more information.