

HOW TO LOSE

A SCREENWRITING CONTEST

By Staton Rabin



If your script is great, I'll choose it as one of the finalists or "winners" of the contests I judge. But how, you might wonder, do I determine which scripts are great—and how do you know it will be yours?

I'm sure every screenplay competition judge uses his or her own criteria for judging which scripts should be selected as the best of each crop. But if you want to win screenwriting contests, especially the ones that really matter, you need to understand how the process is the same as submitting a script to film producers or agents—and how it differs.

Individual screenplay competition judges often read many dozens of scripts per contest over a very short period of time. This means that if your script doesn't "grab" the reader almost immediately, or at least show significant potential that it will improve in the remaining pages, it will be tossed on the "reject" pile. Yes, this is also somewhat true when you submit your script to film producers and agencies. But when story analysts work for producers, agents or individual screenwriters, they must read your entire script and probably will have to write a synopsis of it. When reading scripts for contests, these professional "readers" only have to compare your script to the others in the contest and see where yours ranks relative to them. They are not obligated to read your whole script since they are (for most contests) not working for you, the writer,

but rather for the sponsors of the contest. They have a clearly and narrowly defined mission. Contest judges are not looking for good scripts that could be good movies. They are looking for the best scripts of those submitted to them.

At whatever point it becomes, in the opinion of the contest judges, certain that your script is not as good as others that have been submitted to them, your script will not be a finalist—even if it is a good script.

Does this mean your script gets short shrift? Absolutely not. Qualified contest judges are working story analysts who may evaluate hundreds of scripts a year for top Hollywood film companies. They have proven that they have the ability to spot good scripts—often, within the first few pages—and you can be certain that if you have written a great one, it will not escape their notice. Screenplay analysts and contest judges are not like book editors unless you hire them as consultants to help you fix your screenplay. They are not in business to help writers improve their work or "give you a chance" and be patient if your script starts off slowly and improves as it goes along. It is your job as a screenwriter to hold the contest judge's interest from page one, word one. This doesn't mean you need a car to explode in your first shot. It just means you have to write very, very well right from the start—gate.

HOW I JUDGE SCREENPLAYS

Being a screenplay contest judge takes practice, like any other job. Even experienced script analysts must come up with a workable method of judging huge numbers of scripts over a very short period of time when evaluating them for contests. Although my methods of doing this are my own, they probably differ little from those of other screenplay competition judges. All contest judges must come up with a way to evaluate, as objectively as possible, a large number of scripts in a short period of time, compare them to each other and then rank them to choose the finalists or winners.

Let's say I'm told that of the dozens of scripts I've been sent to evaluate for a contest, I need to pick five finalists or winners. Does this mean I never send back six? No. If I truly think there's a "tie" and a script simply must be included among the finalists or winners, I will expand the list. But I try to follow the instructions.

First, I compare every script I read to a hypothetical "perfect" script and call that script a "10" on a scale of 10. Of course, I never have read, nor do I ever expect to read, a perfect script. But this gives me an objective basis on which to judge the contest scripts I read. If I merely judged each script against the previous one, this would result in a constantly "moving target," and it would rapidly become impossible to tell where the scripts rank relative to others in

the group. I rate each script on a decimal system, like Olympic ice skaters (though in a time when there has been a lot of hanky-panky going on among Olympic ice skating judges, perhaps that's a poor analogy ...). If I rated scripts only in whole numbers (5, 6, 7, etc.), I'd rapidly find myself with far too many scripts having the same rating, so I would have no way to compare them. Instead I rate them in tenths of a point, and sometimes even resort to hundredths to help me distinguish one from another. I rate any script of average quality as a "5.0," and most scripts, of course, fall into the average category or within shouting distance of it.

I also take notes about the script's concept and any comments I might have, positive or negative, that will remind me later what I thought of it and that I can use in my report should it prove to be one of the finalists or winners. I also rank the script against the other scripts I've read for the contest—which means I keep track of which are the five best.

I read as much of each script as I need in order to be certain of where it falls in the rankings and whether it ranks above or below the top five. If it ranks below the top five, it goes in the "reject" pile. In all cases, I read well beyond the point at which I am certain the script ranks below the top five. I do this not because it's necessary (although some contest sponsors require judges to read at least one-third of each script), but mostly as a courtesy to the writer and to make absolutely certain I wasn't wrong in my assessment. I also set a few scripts aside that are "borderline," which I may want to reevaluate later.

IS THE READER'S PERSONAL TASTE A FACTOR IN JUDGING?

Many writers wonder whether a reader's personal taste will determine which scripts win or lose in contests. Is it a subjective or objective process? The answer is both, of course. Speaking only for myself, I pride myself on the lengths to which I go to maintain my "subjective objectivity."

Very few story analysts work for film producers or agencies who want only one type or genre of script. We are trained to look for great scripts—period. I may have personal preferences, and they may somewhat influence my choices when I am having to choose between two scripts of equal quality for one coveted position in a contest.

However, I have chosen as finalists in contests scripts of every imaginable genre, from romantic comedy to horror to suspense. If you've written a great script, a contest judge is not going to overlook this simply because it is in a genre that doesn't personally appeal to him/her.

I view the judging of screenplays as a mostly objective process when it is done by qualified, experienced story analysts. This doesn't mean that all good story analysts will like the same scripts, but it does mean that a GREAT script will be recognized as such by any qualified analyst. There are very, very few great scripts in this world, as anyone who works in the film business will tell you. Recently, I judged a screenwriting contest and selected as one of the finalists a script that I later learned finished in the top 10 of the Nicholl Competition. As you may know, the Nicholl is probably the most prestigious screenplay competition in the world and gets many thousands of submissions each year. Yet the same script I picked out of the 80 I was given for the relatively small contest I was judging (the contest as a whole had hundreds, presumably) was also selected out of thousands to place highly in the Nicholl competition. The script won neither competition, but at least this shows you that two professional script analysts who don't know each other had similar ideas about what makes a great script.

Does this mean that this script fit some "Hollywood" ideal for a commercial script? Not necessarily, and in this case, not at all. It just means that any good analyst knows a great script when he/she sees one. It should be noted, however, that in my view all great screenplays are "commercial"—or at least salable to somebody, somewhere. They may not attract huge crowds in movie theaters, but they will find buyers, or at minimum the writer will find good representation sooner or later.

Here are some things you should know if you want to avoid losing screenplay contests:

GOOD IS NOT GOOD ENOUGH

The level of excellence among the scripts submitted to screenplay contests is getting higher and higher. Everyone and his brother (or sister), it seems, is writing a screenplay. Even the famous screenwriter Charlie Kaufman (*Being John Malkovich*, *Adaptation*) has a fictional brother, Donald,



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There may be some contests that you can win without having a great script. However, the downside of winning or being a finalist in a contest like that is that winning it, let alone being a finalist, won't do your career any good. You want to enter only those contests that will benefit you to win.

who is an aspiring screenwriter (see *Adaptation* and you'll see what I mean). The dream of writing "the great American novel" has been replaced by the dream of writing a Hollywood blockbuster, and film schools are churning out screenwriting majors by the thousands.

What does this mean for you as a screenwriter who wants to submit work to contests? Being good is simply not good enough anymore. I read lots of good scripts for contests that end up on the reject pile. Sometimes, they are very good and still end up there. It's a shame their writers won't know how close they came to being finalists, but they won't. One can only hope that they don't give up—and try to get even better. Only great scripts will be finalists in any contest I judge—and the winner, in most cases, will be almost off-the-scale in terms of its excellence. If you've written a script that is merely good, don't bother submitting it to one of the better contests. However, merely "good" isn't a bad start for a novice screenwriter; and if you lose a screenwriting contest, that doesn't necessarily mean your script was bad.

There may be some contests that you can win without having a great script. However, the downside of winning or being a finalist in a contest like that is that winning it, let alone being a finalist, won't do your career any good. You want to enter only those contests that will benefit you to win. This means there are very few contests worth entering. Nicholl, Austin, Disney, Chesterfield and *scr(i)pt*, of course, are a few of the worthwhile ones.

Keep in mind that every screenplay contest judge starts to form an opinion about which scripts will be judged the finalists even after reading only a few scripts. They understand that this initial "list" is only tentative

and will probably be revised many times as they read more and more scripts. In the end, it's possible none of the scripts originally chosen as finalists may actually end up as finalists in that reader's estimation once they get to the bottom of the pile. These finalists may even be judged again against the results of other readers' stacks of scripts.

Once a reader has an idea of which scripts in his or her batch are "favorites," it will be difficult for you to knock those finalists off their pedestals. You will have to be that much better than your closest competition in order to unseat your rivals. This is another reason why your contest script can't be merely "good"—it has to be great.

A NOTE ABOUT GENRES

Here are some common mistakes I see in scripts of specific genres entered in screenwriting contests:

HORROR: If you write a horror movie, you'd better be familiar with the current state of the art and the history of the genre. It is all too easy to write a perfectly competent horror script that is in no way original or different from other recent films. Your knock-off of *The Blair Witch Project* or *I Know What You Did Last Summer* is not going to impress anyone, even if it is slickly executed. Part of each screenplay contest judge's job to know what's already been produced in every genre—and what's in development. The more specific the genre you are writing for, the more original you must be in your approach to writing your script.

When writing a horror film, you must be an expert on the films that came before, and also do something new; or you will never be able to sell your script or win a contest. And keep in mind: If your horror script isn't genuinely scary, even to the contest judge reading it, it's not a successful screenplay.

SUSPENSE/THRILLER: Much of the advice I gave above regarding horror movies applies to thrillers: Before writing, you must be familiar with the genre and know what's "been done." I read too many "detective" scripts that are like slow-paced episodes of TV cop shows from the 1970s. This simply won't work to hold a modern film audience's interest on the big screen. "Just the facts, ma'am," no-nonsense detectives with wooden personalities who don't have a distinctive style or story arc of their own won't wash anymore. Also, these films must have a real sense of danger—the hero must

be in jeopardy. Make sure you know how police, lawyers, judges, forensic people or any of the other participants in your story do their jobs in real life. If you're not a lawyer, a cop or coroner by profession, you will really have to learn how these professionals do their work if you want to write a convincing murder mystery. If you're writing a story about international espionage, you'd better know the difference between Interpol and the CIA.

HIGH-CONCEPT SCRIPTS: Depending upon who is sponsoring the screenplay contest, high-concept stories won't necessarily win you as many brownie points as they would when these scripts are submitted to producers or agents. More than any other aspect of the business, screenplay contests are looking for well-executed scripts, regardless of how flashy (or not) their concept is. "Commercial" is all well and good, but it is not the primary motivation of screenplay contest judges to find the most commercial script they can among the entrants.

In Hollywood, it's possible somebody might buy your high-concept script if it has a terrific, unique idea at its core—even if the execution is shaky (though, you'd be foolish to count on this). They might acquire your script and hire somebody else to rewrite it. But contests are only interested in finding well-executed scripts, regardless of how "catchy" the idea sounds on paper. This means that if you come up with a high-concept (i.e., very commercial) idea for a movie, you'd better be the best one to execute it. Passion is what makes great scripts. If you're passionate about your idea, great. But if you aren't and have chosen the idea merely because it is a "commercial" concept, this is unlikely to get you very far in a contest. Write from the heart.

ROMANTIC COMEDY: In romantic comedy, how the characters meet and get together and the obstacles standing in the way of their relationship are the be-all and end-all—along with how funny the script is, of course. It isn't easy to come up with something original enough within the basic framework of nearly all films in this genre (boy meets girl, boy gets girl, boy loses girl, boy gets girl again, etc.) to catch a reader's attention. You will have to work very hard to come up with a new premise, terrifically clever obstacles, great humor, appealing characters and charmingly original love scenes if you hope to win a contest with a script in this genre.

COMEDY: When writing a comedy, being amusing isn't enough. The script must have the reader rolling on the floor laughing, or it's unlikely to end up as one of the finalists. If your script doesn't have any "heart"—and of a sort that seems organic to the characters and situation rather than merely "grafted-on"—it's unlikely to impress a contest judge. Comedy writing is among the rarest of talents, which is why TV sitcom writers are paid so much money.

SCIENCE FICTION/FANTASY: Quite simply, I have never read a good script in this genre written by an amateur. The reason most writers of sci-fi or fantasy fail is that they write derivative material. From "warp speed" to space pods, from emotionally wooden ship's officers who order underlings to "lower shields" or arm themselves against attacks from "The Federation," to heroes who fight their enemies with laser swords, every sci-fi script I've read borrows far too many elements from films like *Star Wars*. These screenwriters have forgotten that, many years ago, a writer in a "galaxy far, far away" invented all this space lingo—and now it's their job to invent a lexicon and worlds all their own. Too often, when these amateur writers of space operas come up with something new, it is so opaque that it's impossible for the reader to understand.

Remember that sci-fi is about people, not hardware nor weird aliens. The best sci-fi has always been an indirect commentary or satire on life on a planet with which most of us are familiar: Earth.

As with horror movies and murder/detective movies, know the history of the genre, both in print and on the screen, before writing a sci-fi movie. But this doesn't mean borrowing language or situations from previous films. It means starting over, creating new worlds with new and clearly-defined "rules"—then sticking to those rules throughout—and above all, making us care about the people in your movie. When writing sci-fi, one must have (or acquire) a good knowledge of science—both what exists now and what is expected to be possible in the future.

Fantasy is even harder to write than sci-fi. The films in this genre that work best are rooted strongly in current reality and have elements of fantasy stemming from this reality. *E.T.* is an example: a lonely little boy on Earth meets a lonely space alien who comes to our planet. They help each other and find mutual friendship.

Like *E.T.*, *Harry Potter* successfully blends reality and fantasy: the "muggle" and magical worlds. *The Lord of the Rings* movies were exceptions to the rule that films set entirely in fantasy worlds tend to be unpopular. Why? These movies began as well-loved, classic novels with which much of the world was already familiar.

It is extremely difficult to write a film about gnomes or elves, unicorns or mermaids and fully immerse us in this world, establish the "rules" that exist in it and make us care about the story and characters. Too often, writers of this sort of *Dungeons & Dragons* film fantasy create highly derivative works rather than inventing something new and original.

A NOTE ABOUT FORMAT AND ACTION LINES: The quickest way to turn off a screenplay contest judge is with shoddy screenplay format—or poorly written action lines (descriptions of action, introduction of characters, etc.). For advice on how to write action lines successfully, see my article from *scr(i)pt* Vol. 8 No. 6, "Our Intrepid Hero (And Other Disasters in Screenplay Descriptions)." For format instructions, consult recent books on the subject and read the *Dr. Format* column in *scr(i)pt*.

BIAS

If your script reveals a rabid personal bias on your part rather than merely your characters'—against any race, religion, sex or sexual orientation—keep in mind that the reader who is judging your screenplay may belong to that group or be offended by your prejudices. This is a legitimate issue to consider, both from an ethical and practical standpoint.

The average quality of contest scripts I have read have been exceedingly high, and I have had to give a "pass" to many good scripts with regret. Here's hoping your next screenplay competition script that crosses my desk is truly great and doesn't end up on my "reject" pile. (i)

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