

Improve Your Odds of Winning a Screenplay Contest

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While not an all-inclusive list, these are purported to be some of the most important elements to be aware of when submitting your screenplay to a competition.

Competition readers suggest actually making a pass on your screenplay for each of these elements before submitting. Failure to do so could easily cause your screenplay not to move on to successive rounds let alone winning or becoming a finalist.

It's also assumed that you already have a good working knowledge of screenwriting since you're contemplating entering a competition. Having said that, if there is anything listed here you don't understand, we highly recommend performing a few searches in Google to obtain more clarity as these are just simple tips to increase your odds of winning or becoming a finalist.

Submit Only What the Competition Specifically Asks For: All too often, screenplay competition readers are inundated with "extras" not required. Things like a synopsis, a treatment, character bios, and even concept art. Always follow the screenplay competition's submission guidelines to the letter. Remember the old saying in screenwriting, "Less is more?" The same holds true when it comes to following the submission rules and guidelines. Only submit that which is being asked for.

For Screenplay Competitions, 12-Point Courier is Always the Preferred Font, Even for the Title Page: Screenplay competitions are not the place to be experimenting with different fonts, plain and simple. Always use some version of 12-Point Courier. Some are a little darker than others but 12-Point Courier is definitely the standard when it comes to contests. A special note to mention here is that some readers have been known to toss the screenplay simply because the title page wasn't written in 12-Point Courier.

Never Cheat on Margins or Font Size: Readers know their screenplays. After all, they read a lot of them and most adhere to submission guidelines so when one comes across their desk or laptop that cheats, it sticks out like a sore thumb. True, some screenwriting software provides the ability to "cheat" but that doesn't mean you should exercise that ability... Especially in a screenwriting competition where cheating is always going to be illegal and considered, "breaking the rules." Another special note to mention is using demo or trial software that prints a "DEMO" watermark on every page of your screenplay. Either purchase [Final Draft](#) or use a screenwriting program that doesn't create a demo watermark.

Use CAPS Only When Appropriate: You always want the read of your screenplay to flow. Inappropriate use of CAPS takes the reader out of your story and every time a reader is taken out of a story, it's that much harder to get back into it. Some readers never do get back into it and toss the screenplay. Set a character's name in CAPS the first time we see them in the screenplay. This same rule applies to minor characters as well. Sounds no longer need to be set in CAPS.

Grammar, Sentence Structure, Punctuation, and Homonyms: Don't mix tenses. Give the most important visual information first, details after. Always proofread to insure apostrophes are grammatically correct. Proofread for homonyms like, their – they're, your – you're,

bare – bear, etc. as built-in spell checkers can't tell the difference unless they're misspelled.

Cut All Camera Direction: Camera direction and movement like pan, dolly, tracking shot, close-up, etc. has no place in a screenplay submitted to a competition. Don't try to do the work of the director, cinematographer, or editor. Again, elements like this take the reader out of the story.

Use of CUT TO, CONTINUED, and MORE: No longer needed for dialogue breaking across pages and again, slows the story down. Most screenwriting software eliminates dialogue breaking across pages so be sure to learn how to use it.

Story: You want to give your reader an emotional experience. Your characters need to get through seemingly insurmountable obstacles in order to get what they want and achieve their goals. Don't be easy on them or allow them to be passive and get what they want too easily. Your character's goals need to resonate with the reader enough to put themselves in your character's shoes and feel the same tension and emotion your character is going through. For your story to gain momentum, your seemingly insurmountable obstacles should increase in difficulty, forcing your character to take greater risks every step of the way. Always make sure the stakes are high enough or your reader isn't going to care. There always needs to be consequences... Either emotional, physical, or both. Your climax should always take place when your character must decide to take one final action representing their ultimate risk where there is absolutely no going back. Your reader needs to believe this was the only course of action your character could have taken. Three story elements to use in order to help your reader to achieve an emotional experience, are set-ups, pay-offs, and reversals. Set-ups begin or are set up early in your story, while pay-offs occur much later hence, paid off. Reversals are events or pieces of information that take the story in a new, unexpected direction. The best reversals are those that surprise both your character and your reader.

Scenes: Always consider when and where each of your scenes start. This is especially true with your story's very first scene. The general rule of thumb is to start your scene as late in the scene as possible. In other words, unless there's something important happening on the walk or the drive to a character's home. why show it? Just start the scene with your character pounding on the other character's door.

Scene Description and Action: Description portrays action, location, and character. Never use description to tell a reader what your character is thinking or feeling. Action depicts any movement, event, or physical activity taking place in your screenplay. Avoid using "we see" or "we hear." Simply describe what happens as it is happening. In other words, instead of, "We see a kid on a skateboard roll by," keep it simple by describing it simply, "A kid on a skateboard rolls by." Avoid overwriting. Description and action should be terse and concise stating only what is necessary to give your reader the correct visual of what's taking place. Never repeat any information already included in your scene heading or slugline. Always choose the perfect verb for your character's current action. Choosing the perfect verb relays your character's current emotion and state of mind without actually telling us something that can't be shot with a camera. Keep description and action paragraphs down to four lines or less. White space is always your friend. Avoid mentioning props in a location unless they have both a role and are critical to your story. Description lines should create a visual in your reader's mind as well as set both the mood and tone of your story.

Flashbacks: Use flashbacks only when necessary for your reader to be specifically clued in on something that did actually happen in the past. Using flashbacks for back story and exposition should

be completely avoided.

Theme: Whether you discover your theme during the writing or know what you want your theme to be before you start writing, be sure your competition screenplay has a very clear theme. Many contest readers agree that most screenplays they read for the competition aren't really about anything at all. Without a clear theme, conflicts seem weak, emotion muted because there is no context in which the reader can form enough of an opinion and buy into your story. Make sure you know what your theme is and then design your story so as to create both argument for your theme and the counterpoint to that argument, making your counterpoint just as strong as your argument. This way, the overall theme will be clear to your readers.

Characters: Keep descriptions brief and specific i.e., no more than 2-3 lines but within those 2-3 lines be sure to really give us a good feel for that character. Know your character's world, inside and out and give your reader an interesting and unique vision, including a glimpse of your character's world view or overall attitude. Character descriptions are the one area of your screenplay where you're allowed to briefly delve into your character's thoughts and opinions. Always design characters for maximum contrast, allowing potential for plausible conflict. Main characters should always change based on the events of your story. Supporting characters don't have to change but they certainly can change. Either way, make sure your main character's change or character arc supports your story's overall theme.

Dialogue: One huge mistake to avoid when it comes to dialogue is including too much exposition and backstory early in the script. Many beginning screenwriters fall prey to this technique in order to set up their story. It's always best to drip feed backstory and exposition via dialogue throughout the entire screenplay. Allow your reader to invest in your main character before revealing too many past events or explanations as to why they've done what they done. Never have your characters explain via dialogue why they do what they do. Just make them do it. It's always best to reveal your character's motivation through their choice of action. As a general rule, characters should only discuss events that occurred prior to where their story begins in your screenplay and then only if knowing that information is important to your current story. Use subtext in your character's dialogue by avoiding having your characters use dialogue that's too "on-the-nose." On-the-nose dialogue is when characters say exactly what they mean. Most people never say exactly what they mean and neither should your characters. Subtext should simply indicate possible truths which then allow your reader to read between the lines on their own. Avoid having all your characters sound alike. In other words, if a reader were to cover the character's name above the dialogue and read it, they should immediately know who's dialogue that is. People do not sound alike and neither should any of your characters. Never write out accents or dialects. Rather, simply indicate either in a parenthetical or description that the character speaks in a specific way. There is no better way to take your reader out of your story than for them to try and read dialogue written as dialect or accent. Unless it's an actual trait, avoid having your character do any philosophizing or preaching. Use parentheticals sparingly when it comes to relaying a character's attitude or current state of mind. A character's attitude or current state of mind should be obvious from the actual dialogue but when it's not, then and only then should you use a parenthetical. Never use a parenthetical to convey action. That's what action lines are for. Be careful of having your characters talk to themselves and never have them talking about things the reader is seeing as they read through the screenplay. Show don't tell.

Once again, just to reiterate... Make a pass on your screenplay for each one of these tips. If there's a tip here you don't quite understand? Perform a few searches on Google for more clarification.

Screenplay Development Notes at The Writers Store

At a Glance

- Screenplay analysis from experienced readers
- Provides specific points of action to improve your script and take it to a saleable level
- Receive a comprehensive package reflective of current Industry-standard practices

"As a professional screenwriter, I rarely, if ever, receive the kind of extensive feedback offered in these notes. The detail and scrutiny are well appreciated. I also teach graduate level screenwriting, and in the past, have not known how to respond when students have asked about submitting their work for this kind of critique. I will now feel confident in sharing my very positive experience and will not be reticent in suggesting that your service may prove very helpful."— **Jeanne Rosenberg** (Screenwriter, *The Black Stallion*, *White Fang*)



