

TWO BRADS OR THREE?

20 Ways to Better Your Chances Winning Screenplay Contests

By Elizabeth English

My poor beleaguered mailman, Robert, struggles through the snow up the hill to my house, lugging three huge white plastic US MAIL boxes of screenplays. He kicks at the door, my dog starts to bark wildly, Robert practically falls in the screen door, and the ninety-plus film festival entries come sliding off across the porch in a jumbled pile. Yes, folks; it's the October Monday after the final deadline for submitting entries to the Moondance International Film Festival.

There were two boxes on Saturday and a box a day, before that, for a week. Hundreds of screenplays to read and judge, and I have a big two months to catch up on registering all the submissions, the reading, the rating, the selection of 50 quarterfinalists, the sending them to the semifinalist judge. Then she has to read all 50, and judge them, then we select the 5 finalists and send those off to the judge in California, who has to read them and select the final winner by January 1st. Whew!

Send your submissions in early. Don't wait until the final deadline date! Your submission can be buried under a pile of hundreds or thousands at the bigger festivals and competitions. The readings could be hurried. Maybe the reader saw one sent in earlier and has decided that's his or her favorite. This didn't happen at Moondance, but it could happen in other contests.

Two words: Two brads. Brass brads, SOLID brass brads #6, not those short, wimpy brass-plate brads that let the script fall apart by page 60. Acco has them at Office Max & Office Depot. Try to find or special-order those little brass washers (to fit the #6 brads), too. They seriously hold the script together, even to the last page. Readers curl the script pages behind what they've read; they leave them overnight, half-read, to read next day. Your script is roughly handled, by three or four people. Make sure it stays together through all of that!

Covers: Use plain cover-stock or card-stock. Print only the script title and author name on the front. Any color is OK, but white, grey or tan are preferred and more professional looking. Do not bind your script in a highschool plastic binder or one with metal bars inside. Nothing else is acceptable but front and back card-stock covers.

Title Page: Have the first page of your submission be the title page. Print the title, author's name, info on copyright or WGA-registration, and the author's contact info: mailing address, phone number and e-mail address. If you change your address, phone number or e-mail address, please let the festival know this right away, so they can contact you if you win!

Do not write the title or your name on the binding side of the script. That makes the script look old and shopped-around. The festival readers or registration people will do that when they receive the entry.

A printed-out copy of the script from your computer looks a lot better than a copy-shop's or a Xeroxed, faded copy. Make sure it's nice, clear, and clean, with black ink. It's actually cheaper to print out a computer copy than it is to take it somewhere to be printed, in most cases.

Use COURIER 12-point font. Nothing else will do.

Do not try to cheat by doing a "loose" script to make your script look like 120-130 pages. Do not do a "tight" script, to try to make a too-long script look like 120-130 pages. If you have a 90-page script, that's fine. If you have a 150-page script, you need to do some editing. Check every page

of your submission, to make sure it's printed clearly, that the pages are in order, and none are missing.

Have someone who is an English-major read your script for typos, incorrect grammar (except in the dialog, if that's what you intend anyway), punctuation, spelling, syntax and other errors. You could offer to pay him or her a dollar for each error found (with which you agree). This will make you really edit in advance, like crazy, to save yourself the expense! Don't rely only on your spell-check program. Print out the script and read it in hard copy, and edit as you read. Use a red pen, so you can easily find the edits. Spend the time to correct the errors. Nothing makes an author look more lazy and unprofessional as lots of un-edited errors in your submission.

Format: use the standard script format found in books on the subject and in computer screenwriting programs. Don't customize it. Use correct, standard spacing between elements and in all four of the margins.

I would love to see the second page of your submission be the logline and mini-synopsis! Film festivals and prodco readers don't usually ask for this, or require it, but it would make reading the screenplay a lot easier and more enjoyable. Plus, if your logline is great, it induces the reader to put it at the TOP of his or her pile of must-reads-now.

An example: I got a script submission last year, entitled JENNY, THE RED-HEADED WHORE. I didn't want to read it. I didn't want to go to my entry-form files and read her logline and synopsis, based on that title. It went to the bottom of the pile to be read when I absolutely HAD to. Well, guess what? When I finally read the script, with much trepidation, it was one of the best scripts I'd ever read! This script was one of the five finalists (out of more than 300 entries) for Moondance. I convinced the author to change the title to THE VIRGINS, which she loved. I also received three scripts, all with the same title: STARSTRUCK. A page attached in the script, with the logline and mini-synop would have helped there, too.

Don't send in long resumes and lists of credits or info about your other festival wins with your entry forms and submission. It won't help you win. It won't (or shouldn't) influence the readers and judges, because each festival has a different criteria. (Film entrants should feel free, however, to do this)

Entry fees: Attach the check or money order with a paper clip to the front of the entry form. If it's a US festival or competition, make sure the funds are in US dollars. Don't just toss the entry fee into the bottom of the envelope. When sending a money-order, write your name on it, so we know who it's from. When sending a check from someone else, write your name on it, for the same reason.

Mailing: Use the simplest packaging form possible, one that's easy, and quick to open. Don't tape it together as if the contents were made of gold. Avoid the use of those envelopes that are full of grey fluffy stuff that gets all over desks and clothes and the floor when the reader has finally managed to slice it open. A script generally does not need padded envelopes.

Postage: Use enough postage to cover the cost of mailing. Most festivals and competitions will not pay the postage due, and your entry will probably be returned to you, un-opened.

Entry forms and release forms: Please fill them out CLEARLY in black ink. Sign them. Print them, rather than using fancy cursive writing in purple or pink ink. Make sure your e-mail address is clear. If you have a mix of zeros (0) and the letter O, make sure they can be read for what they are. Same with the letter I and 1, or L and lower-case l. They all look the same sometimes, so be clear, if you ever want to hear from the festival again. MAGOO0011III@aol.com is hard to figure out.

Remember to enclose the entry form, release form and entry fee with your script in the same envelope.

If you want a confirmation that your submission was received, please send (with your submission package) an attached post card with US postage (if entering a US competition). Write on the postcard: your name and address in the mail-to area, and on the back or in the message area, write: (name of festival) has received the screenplay (title of your entry) on this date_____.

Do not send an SASE (self-addressed, stamped envelope) with your submission if the festival or competition announces that they will not return any entries or submissions. You'll be wasting the postage.

Make sure your entire submission package is reader-friendly!

Every one of the above 20 suggestions are based on personal experience of mistakes former entrants made when submitting materials to Moondance or to other festivals and competitions.

As for the content of your screenplay; structure counts, usually. Have a clear Act I, II, and III. Try to hook the reader on the first page! Introduce all the main characters in the first five to ten pages and show the reader the who, what, where, when and why of your story. Notice that I said SHOW. Telling is not so good. Film is a visual medium and you should actually be writing a FILM, not a script.

Act II is the rest of the story, where you build on what you started, and it climaxes at the clear end of Act II. Act III should be five or ten (max) pages, where all loose ends are tied up and all conflicts are resolved.

Make sure you've defined your characters and have given them unique qualities special to them, so they are recognizable as individual people and have depth. Same with the dialog. Don't have every character speak the same. Or as you speak. Let the environment and ambiance of the settings be shown. Mention weather and seasons and time of day or night. Make sure your characters visibly REACT to each other, and to dialog spoken to them.

Have conflict, whether personal, local, national, or world-side...or even universal. Then resolve that conflict at the end.

Avoid too many clichés in characterizations, dialog, actions and reactions. Do something new and interesting. Avoid like the plague having your actors speak long lines of exposition! Actors and directors and the audience hate to hear a character verbally explaining what he or she is thinking, planning, worrying about, or is going to do, or did in the past. Show it, don't tell it!

Every word of dialog and every word of action and exposition in your screenplay must move the story forward toward its conclusion. Every scene must move the story forward. The screenplay should read like a good novel, and the reader should not want to put it down until the end.

Remember transitions. Each scene should flow into the next, logically, or be hinted at in a previous scene. Don't make the reader wonder where we are in this scene. Lead them into it. If your two characters will be going out for pizza in the next scene, or are going to rob a bank, hint at that in the previous scene(s). Set it up for the pay-off. You can have many set-ups and pay-offs, all moving the story forward and building toward the ending payoff, which resolves the conflict.

Write your dialog and scenes for specific actors you may have in mind, and imagine them reading your script to see if they'd like to play the parts. Give the stars and lead characters the best lines and the best action. Try to write memorable dialog and/or memorable action. The actors and the directors love it and this stuff sticks in the audiences' minds. Remember, somebody has to spend millions of dollars on your idea, if they like it. It has to make them a profit. Most studios and production companies are not only in the business of making movies; they're also in the business of making MONEY.

Don't write a director's script. Don't have scene numbers on the sluglines. Don't use CUT TO or DISSOLVE any more than you have to. No camera angles, unless it's vital. Try to keep the number of sluglines to 85-100 max. Each scene change costs production money.

And finally: The more professional and reader-friendly your entire submission package is, the better your chances are of winning a competition and of selling that screenplay. Remember, when entering a competition, if your script wins or is a finalist, or even a semifinalist, producers and agents will ask you for it, and the festival will want to be proud to have selected your screenplay!

Elizabeth is the founder and executive director of the *Moondance International Film Festival* and a produced playwright and screenwriter/director/producer and founder/director of *Mermaid7seas Productions*. Elizabeth has three films in development and pre-production at this time; one of which won the Greek Film Centre's 2001 competition and is due to start production in Greece.

(Originally from [/www.screentalk.biz/art028.htm](http://www.screentalk.biz/art028.htm))