

How to Win the DC Shorts Screenplay Contest

By Joe Flood

DC Shorts is a different kind of screenwriting competition. What makes it unique is that the winner receives \$2,000 toward turning their script into a film. The film also automatically gets in into the following year's DC Shorts Film Festival.

This alone makes it worth the time of any aspiring writer. However, even if you don't win the competition, it's a worthwhile entry fee – all scripts receive feedback from judges. And if your screenplay is a finalist, you get to watch it being performed by actors, in front of a live audience in Washington, DC.

As a screenplay judge for the DC Shorts Screenplay Competition, and as a screenwriter myself, I'm going to tell you exactly how to win this contest.

I hate to say it but the rules are important. They exist because we want great short films that can be produced in DC, ones that audiences will stand up and cheer for.

Most important rule – less than fifteen pages. A script fewer than ten pages would be even better.

As stated on the DC Shorts web site, "Scripts are scored by each judge for strength of plot, originality, writing proficiency, ability to be produced on a budget of less than \$10K, ability to be successfully read, performed, and understood by a live audience, and other values."

Your script will be judged by each one of the criteria listed above. What do we mean by them?

Strength of Plot – Story is conflict. With less than fifteen pages to work with, you must introduce your main character and their dilemma immediately. We don't have time to get to know them – we must discover their problem in the first couple of pages. Then you must figure out a way to resolve it.

Originality – Everyone knows what happens in a romantic comedy, how the characters meet cute and are destined for one another. What's your twist on this familiar genre?

Writing Proficiency – DC Shorts screenplay contest judges are writers themselves. Don't annoy them with clichés, with bland lines of dialogue, with overwritten descriptions. And certainly don't include typos, misspellings or other mistakes.

Ability to Be Produced – We're talking low-budget. No special effects. No explosions. One or two simple locations, like a coffee shop or a bedroom. No crowd scenes or exotic costumes. Keep it simple and let your story do the work.

Ability to Be Successfully Read and Performed – Finalists get a table-read in front of an audience, who picks the winner. Write dialogue that actors want to perform, that audiences will thrill to hear. I suggest reading it aloud yourself or with friends. Act it out and see how it plays.

Other Factors – Judging is, by its nature, subjective. We read a lot of scripts so, above all, we want things in correct screenplay format. Extreme violence or sex may put off some judges. Stories that are racist, misogynist, homophobic or badly written certainly will. And it's called DC Shorts, so we have a preference for scripts set in Washington.

What doesn't matter is... who you are. Judging is blind. We don't know who wrote what. Anyone can win this contest.

You can do it.