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OVER THE LAST FEW YEARS, SCREENPLAY COMPETITIONS HAVE PROLIFERATED. BESIDES THE OBVIOUS – THE CASH PRIZES – WHY SHOULD AMATEUR WRITERS CONSIDER ENTERING COMPETITIONS?

DON AND GEE NICHOLL

Q: WHO ARE DON AND GEE NICHOLL?

A: Don Nicholl was a British writer who was invited by Norman Lear to join the staff of the groundbreaking television series “All in the Family” early in its run. Don went on to produce “The Jeffersons” and then, leaving the Lear family, he became an executive producer of “Three’s Company” and its spin-offs. He died in 1980 with his name gracing hundreds of TV episodes.

Don’s widow, Gee, remembering the tough times they had endured at the beginning of their careers, established the Nicholl Fellowships in his memory, initially at Stanford University and then at the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. She and Don had often spoken about helping other writers, and she hoped that the fellowship would make the struggle a little easier for those just starting out.

Sadly, Gee Nicholl died unexpectedly in January 2009. All of us connected with the Nicholl Fellowships in Screenwriting miss her tremendously.

Q. HOW DO YOU PRONOUNCE ‘NICHOLL’?

A: It’s pronounced the same as “nickel.”

THE BASICS

Q: WHAT DO I NEED TO DO TO ENTER THE COMPETITION?

A: You need to submit an original feature film screenplay in PDF format, a completed online application form and an entry fee (amount varies depending on when you enter: \$48 by 11:59 PM March 3, \$63 by 11:59 PM April 3, \$88 by 11:59 PM May 3).

Full-time students at an accredited college/university are eligible for a discount on their entry fee in 2021. Indicate your status in the demographic section of your online application. The discount will be offered in the payment section.

Q. WHEN ARE THE APPLICATION FORMS AVAILABLE?

A: The online application typically becomes available in late January. The application period for the 2021 competition will close May 3.

Q. WHEN IS THE REGULAR ENTRY DEADLINE?

A: In 2021, the deadline is 11:59 p.m. Pacific Time on April 3. The late and final deadline is 11:59 p.m. Pacific Time on May 3.

Q. HOW DO I ENTER THE COMPETITION?

A: By accessing the Academy Nicholl Fellowships application materials online. Once you establish an account, you can complete an application form, upload a PDF version of your script and pay the entry fee.

Entrants from the previous year's competition are contacted by e-mail with a link to the Nicholl page when the competition opens (usually in January).

Q. CAN I ENTER BY MAIL BY SUBMITTING A PAPER COPY OF MY SCRIPT AND A PRINTED APPLICATION FORM?

A. No, you can only enter the competition online. We no longer provide printed application forms, nor do we accept screenplays by mail.

Q: IF I CREATED A NICHOLL ONLINE ACCOUNT IN A PREVIOUS YEAR, CAN I USE THAT SAME ACCOUNT TO ENTER THIS YEAR?

A: Yes. Once you create an online account, you can continue to use it in subsequent competitions; there is no need to create a new account.

Q: CAN I ENTER MORE THAN ONE SCRIPT INTO THE ACADEMY NICHOLL COMPETITION?

A: Yes, but each entrant is limited to three scripts per competition year. Each entry requires a separate online application form and entry fee. Under no circumstances may an entrant submit different versions or multiple copies of the same script. Doing so may result in all versions of the script being disqualified. Each writer, whether a sole author or member of a collaborative writing team, may enter no more than three scripts.

In other words, if Jane and John enter one script they wrote as a team, each of them may be connected to two more scripts, individually or as a team.

Q: CAN I ENTER MULTI-PART SCRIPTS?

A: No. If you have Great Story Part 1 that then continues into Great Story Part 2 as two scripts and you can't understand Great Story Part 2 without having read Great Story Part 1, then the scripts are not considered stand-alone and not eligible. The exception is if each part can be read as a separate, stand-alone screenplay.

Q: HOW CAN I PAY THE ENTRY FEE?

A: Entry fees can only be paid online with a credit or debit card.

Q: WHERE DOES THE ENTRY FEE MONEY GO?

A: Generally speaking, the entry fees go into a pool of funds to cover contest costs – administration, network and database expenses, printing – but one could look at it as covering first-round reading costs.

Q: WHAT ARE THE PRIZES?

A: Up to five \$35,000 fellowships are awarded to new screenwriters each year. From 1986 through 2020, 181 fellowships totaling \$4,750,000 have been awarded.

ONLINE APPLICATION PROCESS

Q: WHY CAN'T I FIND OUT MY SCRIPT'S STATUS IN THE COMPETITION ONLINE?

A: The only information current entrants can see is whether their script has been received by the Academy Nicholl Fellowships. Information about advancing or not advancing to the next round is sent to entrants by e-mail only.

Q: DO YOU HAVE ANY TIPS REGARDING THE ONLINE PROCESS?

A: Be ready prior to starting. Prepare a log line (a brief synopsis limited to 300 characters, including spaces) for your script before commencing. If you are part of a collaborative team, fill out the form jointly or make sure that whoever is filling out the form has the correct phone number and e-mail address for the partner. Once the entry fee is paid, the partner will receive a confirmation e-mail that requires him or her to verify the collaboration. The verification may be submitted after the entry deadline, but the entry will not be processed into the competition until this step is complete.

Read the rules before filling out the form. Follow the instructions. Please don't type in all caps or all lower case. Watch for typos. An error in your mailing address or e-mail address could cause our official correspondence to be misrouted or lost. Add nicholl@oscars.org to your e-mail address book. Be sure to print out and keep a copy of the application for your records at the end of the application process. If you did not, log back into your account, select the title on the left and then click the "Print" button.

Finally, try to apply early. On deadline days our system experiences the heaviest online traffic and has the greatest chance of system slowdowns.

Q: I JUST CREATED AN ONLINE ACCOUNT. WHY CAN'T I FIND THE APPLICATION?

A: It's probably because you've created that account between June and January, when Nicholl application forms are not available.

The Nicholl application is typically available from late January through the close of the competition. During that period, those with an online account can access a "Create Application" link upon log-in.

Q: WHAT DO I NEED TO UPLOAD A SCRIPT TO THE NICHOLL COMPETITION?

A: A computer (PC or Mac), an online account (if you have not already created one), a script in PDF format, and a credit or debit card to pay the entry fee.

Q: CAN I MAIL IN A CHECK OR MONEY ORDER AND THEN UPLOAD MY SCRIPT ONLINE?

A: No, you may not. Entrants must pay the entry fee by credit card or debit card through their online account at the Nicholl website, or the application will be considered incomplete.

The Nicholl online system will also accept some gift cards, which are typically purchased at banks, supermarkets and other establishments. An entrant could also use a friend's credit card (with permission, of course) to pay the entry fee.

Q: I DON'T HAVE A CREDIT CARD, IS THERE ANOTHER WAY FOR ME TO PAY?

A: The only way to enter is by filling out the online application and paying online, which requires a credit or debit card.

- If you have a debit card through your bank, try using that.
 - Borrow a friend's credit card and repay them.
-

Q: I PAID MY ENTRY FEE BY CREDIT CARD BUT THEN COULDN'T FIND AN ACADEMY NICHOLL FELLOWSHIPS CHARGE IN MY ACCOUNT? WAS MY CREDIT CARD PAYMENT NOT PROCESSED PROPERLY?

A. The Nicholl entry fee payment will appear in your credit card account as "ACADEMY FOUND NICHOLL" in the amount of the entry fee. The Copy for Your Records page in your Academy Nicholl account will also display the entry fee that you paid.

Q: HOW DO I TURN MY SCRIPT INTO A PDF FILE?

A: Most screenwriting and word processing software have an option to save your script as a PDF file. Consult your software manual for details. If your word processing or screenwriting program does not allow you to create a PDF document, you can convert your script to a PDF by downloading free PDF conversion software or by visiting a free PDF conversion site on the Web.

Q: WHY CAN'T I JUST USE A SCANNER TO CONVERT MY SCRIPT INTO A PDF FILE?

A: While we prefer the smaller file sizes associated with program-converted scripts, we will accept scanned scripts so long as the resulting PDF file is no larger than 1.0 MB. Be aware that office copiers and scanners often create PDF files in the 2.5 to 5.0 MB range.

Q: CAN I FILL OUT AN APPLICATION FORM ONLINE AND THEN MAIL A PRINTED COPY OF MY SCRIPT?

A: No, you may not. Mailed paper copies will be sent to recycling unread.

Q: IF I SUBMIT MY SCRIPT ONLINE AND THEN LATER HAVE A REVISED VERSION OR NEED TO MAKE A CORRECTION, CAN I SUBSTITUTE THE NEW DRAFT?

A: No. Once you have submitted your script, you are not allowed to substitute a new draft of that script. Entrants are also not allowed to submit different versions of a script in the same competition year. Make sure to review the PDF of your script to ensure that you have the correct draft before you upload it. If you make an error, the system will allow you to re-upload your script only if you have not yet paid the entry fee.

Q: I USED THE ONLINE APPLICATION FORM IN A PRIOR YEAR, BUT I CAN'T SEEM TO LOG IN TO MY ACCOUNT. ANY SUGGESTIONS?

A: Try using the e-mail address that you used in prior years to log in. In 2011, we switched to a new online system, so if your password was shorter than six or longer than 12 characters, you must create a new password. To do so, click "Forgot Password." You will be prompted to log in again to change your password. If you continue to have problems, e-mail us at nicholl@oscars.org, and we'll figure out a solution with you.

Q: WHAT SHOULD I DO IF I'M HAVING TROUBLE WITH THE ONLINE APPLICATION?

A: First, make sure you're submitting from a PC or a Mac computer. The online application is not optimized for mobile devices or tablets such as iPads.

Try using a different internet browser. If you're having trouble with Internet Explorer, try using Firefox or Google Chrome. If you're on a Mac and having trouble with Safari, try using Firefox or Chrome. Or vice versa.

Internet Explorer users will need version 8 or better for the online application to work properly. If the website appears to have stopped responding or you get an error message, close your browser window. Then open a new one and return to <https://nicholl.oscars.org>. Log in to your account, click on "Current Applications" and select the script title to pick up where you left off. Try checking our Facebook page for information regarding the status of the competition and the online application system: www.facebook.com/NichollFellowships. You could also try waiting a half hour or longer before logging back in to your account.

Do not wait until the last minute to submit your entry. We cannot guarantee you will be able to get through to the online application during the last six hours before the competition closes, when submission traffic is the heaviest.

Q: HOW DO I KNOW YOU'VE RECEIVED MY SCRIPT AND APPLICATION?

A: Once you reach the "Print Copy for your Records" page of the application, the script has been submitted to us for processing. To double-check this, log in to your Nicholl account and look on the left column under "Current Applications." Under the title of your script, it should read "submitted" (which means it's been received and awaits processing) or "confirmed" (it's been received and has been processed into the competition). If you see a charge on your card but do not see your entry, send an e-mail to nicholl@oscars.org as soon as possible.

ELIGIBILITY, ADAPTATIONS AND COLLABORATIONS

Q: WHO CAN ENTER THE COMPETITION?

A: Writers who write in English and who have not earned more than \$25,000 writing fictional work for film and/or television in their lifetimes are eligible. Payments received for work-for-hire, sales and options apply toward that limit.

The \$25,000 limit is cumulative over a writer's lifetime. For example, if a writer received a \$15,000 option for a screenplay and \$12,500 for polishing a shooting script, that writer would not be eligible for the Nicholl competition.

Q: WHAT ABOUT THE SALE OF MOVIE RIGHTS TO A BOOK OR PLAY?

A: If a writer received more than \$25,000 for the sale or option of the movie rights for a novel, short story, nonfiction book, play, etc., that writer would not be eligible for the Nicholl competition.

Q: DOES PRIZE MONEY FROM A SCREENWRITING COMPETITION COUNT TOWARDS THE \$25,000 LIMIT?

A: When the competition is sponsored by or directly affiliated with a production company or studio such as Disney, Nickelodeon or Amazon Studios, prize money would be considered earnings, and awards greater than \$25,000 would cause a writer to be ineligible for the Nicholl competition. In addition, if accepting the competition prize money attached a production company or producer to the winning script or to any new scripts written by the winning writer, then the award could also make the writer ineligible if the total exceeded \$25,000. For example, if a company hosting the competition awarded \$30,000 to the winning writer with expectations of developing the script for production, then that writer would not be eligible for the Nicholl competition.

Most competitions, however, offer prize money without any production or development strings and so would not affect a writer's Nicholl eligibility.

Q: CAN I WIN AN AMAZON STUDIOS CONTEST AND STILL ENTER THE ACADEMY NICHOLL FELLOWSHIPS COMPETITION?

A: Winning more than \$25,000 in various of the Amazon screenplay and screen story competitions makes the writer ineligible for the Nicholl competition. Amazon Studios is essentially a production company. Its business plan includes seeking and developing movie projects through different contests. We consider any money received from Amazon Studios to be earnings (no matter how Amazon defines options, sales, writing for hire, etc.).

Q. I HAVE EARNED MORE THAN \$25,000 AS A NOVELIST. AM I ELIGIBLE FOR THE COMPETITION?

A: As long as the movie rights to your novels (or to any produced or published work) have not been sold or optioned, you would remain eligible. Only film and television writing earnings count toward the \$25,000 limit.

Q: CAN COLLABORATIVE TEAMS ENTER THE COMPETITION?

A: Yes, if the team consists of exactly two writers who are equal partners in all aspects of the creation of the script. This means that collaborators must develop the story and write the screenplay together as equal partners from beginning to end.

When applying online, collaborators must follow the instructions for adding a collaborator to an entry. Once the entry fee is paid, the writing partner will receive a confirmation e-mail that requires the partner to verify the collaboration. The verification may be submitted after the entry deadline, but the entry will not be processed into the competition until this step is complete.

Q: DO COLLABORATIVE TEAMS PAY TWO ENTRY FEES?

A: No. There is one single entry fee whether the script is written by one writer or two.

Q: WHEN WOULD A SCRIPT WRITTEN BY TWO COLLABORATORS NOT BE ELIGIBLE FOR THE COMPETITION?

A: The script would not be eligible if the collaborators do not share equally in its creation. For example, if one collaborator contributes the story and the other executes the screenplay, the resulting script would not be eligible. Likewise, if one collaborator is the author of a novel and both collaborators write a screenplay based on it, the script would not be eligible. The contributions must be equal in every aspect.

Q: WHY ARE ADAPTATIONS NOT ELIGIBLE?

A: Adaptations of any work (other than your own) are not eligible. The intent of the program is to identify talented new screenwriters. One of the difficulties of evaluating adaptations in general is determining the screenwriter's contribution, especially if the source material is unfamiliar. As an extreme example, if the characters, dialogue, story and plot are taken in their entirety directly from a novel, the screenwriter's contribution may be little beyond formatting. Given the thousands of entries that we receive each year, it is simply not possible to compare the talent exhibited in a well-executed adaptation versus a well-executed original script. Even in a separate competition exclusively for adaptations, it would be difficult to evaluate entries, given the fact that the pool of source material is virtually unlimited.

Q: ARE ADAPTATIONS OF THE BIBLE OR A FAIRY TALE OR A WORK THAT IS IN THE PUBLIC DOMAIN ELIGIBLE?

A: No. Adaptations of any work (other than your own) are not eligible.

Q: CAN I ENTER A TOTALLY ORIGINAL SCREENPLAY FEATURING SHERLOCK HOLMES OR JAMES BOND, OR WRITE A NEW “STAR TREK” OR INDIANA JONES ADVENTURE?

A: No. Scripts featuring established fictional characters would be adaptations, and would therefore not be eligible.

Q: ARE HISTORICAL SCREENPLAYS OR SCRIPTS BASED ON ACTUAL EVENTS ELIGIBLE?

A: Yes, as long as the script is not derived from a single source – a book, an article, a diary, etc. Here’s a simple rule of thumb: Scripts based on research drawn from multiple sources are eligible; those based on a single source are not.

Q: I UNDERSTAND THAT ADAPTATIONS ARE NOT ELIGIBLE FOR THE COMPETITION, BUT CAN I ADAPT MY OWN NOVEL OR PLAY?

A: Yes. Adaptations of a writer’s own work are allowed.

Q: WHY ARE ADAPTATIONS OF A WRITER’S OWN WORK TREATED DIFFERENTLY?

A: Because those scripts are the work of one writer. The characters, the dialogue, the action, the story – all have been created by the writer and translated by him or her into a different form.

Q: ARE CITIZENS OF COUNTRIES OTHER THAN THE UNITED STATES ELIGIBLE?

A: Yes. Any writer who writes in English and who meets the other eligibility requirements can enter a script into the Nicholl competition.

Be aware that translated scripts are not eligible. To be eligible, scripts must have been written originally in English.

Q: COULD A MEMBER OF THE WRITERS GUILD OF AMERICA ENTER A SCRIPT INTO THE NICHOLL COMPETITION?

A: Yes, if the WGA member has not earned more than \$25,000 writing fictional work for film or television. The WGA member would remain eligible if he or she had earned more than \$25,000 as a newswriter or documentarian.

FORMAT AND PRESENTATION

Q: WHAT IS THE SCRIPT FORMAT STANDARD TO THE UNITED STATES MOTION PICTURE INDUSTRY?

A: While there is no precise format common to all scripts written by professional screenwriters working within the U.S. motion picture industry, there are certainly general standards. A script written by one professional writer will visually resemble that written by another professional writer. Producers, agents, development executives and readers recognize scripts written by professional writers as falling within an acceptable range of formatting conventions, despite slight variations in detail.

If you follow the format described in any number of screenwriting guides and textbooks, you should be in good shape. You may also find our screenplay format guide (<http://www.oscars.org/awards/nicholl/resources.html>) helpful.

In any event, scripts submitted to the Nicholl competition should be written in master scenes without shot designations. The scripts should not include scene numbers, which are typically found on shooting scripts.

The scripts should also not include extraneous material such as character lists, photographs or notes.

Q: DO YOU HAVE ANY SUGGESTIONS REGARDING THE PROPER FORMAT?

A: Courier (12-point, 10-pitch, nonproportional) is the industry standard font (“pica” on a typewriter). Do not type your script entirely in italics or use proportional or other stylized fonts.

Do not vary font sizes. The goal is a clean, legible submission. (The selective use of bold or italics is perfectly acceptable.)

The use of fonts other than Courier will not disqualify an entry, except if deemed to be intentional manipulation to shorten an entry to fit within the 160 page limit (e.g., using a font smaller than 12-point).

Watch out for typos as well as spelling, punctuation and grammatical errors. Proofread your script once, then proof it again. It might be a good idea to have another person proof your script as well.

Make certain that your pages are properly numbered and in the correct order. Check your PDF after conversion to confirm that every page of your screenplay was converted to PDF. It's hard to judge a script fairly when it's missing ten pages (or even one).

If you upload an incomplete script or the wrong script and pay the entry fee, you may not be able to submit a correct copy later nor will you receive a refund of your entry fee. So make sure your PDF file is complete and correct BEFORE submitting it.

Q: CAN I INCLUDE ART OR PHOTOGRAPHS IN MY SCREENPLAY?

A: Entrants should not include any extraneous material in their submissions. Extraneous material includes but isn't limited to log lines, genres, photographs, pictures, maps, character lists and descriptions, and notes to readers. Your script should stand on its own. Any extraneous material helping to "draw a picture" for the reader or to assist the reader in understanding tone, approach, background, characters, clues, etc. is not appropriate. All of this should be conveyed within the screenplay.

Incorporated notes – such as "All dialogue in italics is to be spoken in Russian." – are permissible.

Q: IS THERE AN ENTRY SCRIPT PAGE LENGTH MINIMUM OR MAXIMUM?

A: A script is eligible for entry in this competition if it is from 70 pages to 160 pages (excluding the title page). The suggested page count is 80 to 125 pages. Any scripts exceeding 125 pages may have their length counted against them.

If you have a 160+ screenplay, do not shrink the margins or shrink the line spacing or submit a script in tiny typeface (smaller than 12-point courier) to try to cheat a script into a reduced page count for submission into this competition. It will be disqualified.

Q: LIVING IN EUROPE, I ONLY HAVE ACCESS TO PAPER THAT IS LONGER THAN STANDARD AMERICAN PAPER. IS IT ACCEPTABLE TO SUBMIT A SCRIPT FORMATTED FOR EUROPEAN (A4) PAPER?

A: No, it is not. Your script should be formatted for “letter size” (8.5” x 11”) paper.

Q: SINCE THE RULES STATE THAT THE NAME OF THE WRITER SHOULD NOT BE INCLUDED ANYWHERE ON AN ENTRY SCRIPT, WOULD A SCRIPT BE DISQUALIFIED IF IT DOES?

A: No, but please submit a PDF version of your script without your name or other identifying information appearing on any page. Removing personal information from the script ensures a blind read, meaning the judges are unaware of the writers’ names and hometowns.

Q: HOW DO YOU TRACK MY SCRIPT IF MY NAME CAN’T BE ANYWHERE ON THE SCRIPT?

A: When scripts are initially received and processed electronically, we assign a number to each entry. Essentially, the assigned number replaces the entrant’s name and appears on any form or score sheet connected to the script.

Q: WHY DO YOU NEED A LOG LINE? WHO SEES IT? WILL IT BE USED TO JUDGE MY SCRIPT?

A: No, the log line – a brief synopsis – is not used in judging. Readers and judges do not see the log line anytime in the judging process. Those of us working in the Nicholl office use the log lines to match scripts with our readers’ interests and tastes. For instance, some readers enjoy romantic scripts but do not want to read gruesome violence. The log line often helps us distinguish these sorts of elements.

The log line also gives us a simple, direct means of distinguishing scripts without having to rely solely on the title. For instance, the title “Washington” could indicate a script about the first U.S. president, one that is set in the state or city, or one that makes a different connection altogether. The log line gives us the story line.

Be aware that a script will be disqualified if no log line is included on the application form. In other words, do not write just one word in the log line field.

Starting in 2013, with the writer's permission, we included log lines in the contact lists we distributed to industry at the end of the competition.

Q: I HAVE TROUBLE WRITING LOG LINES. IS THERE A MAGIC FORMULA?

A: Some resources have suggested various simple formulas, but the essential goal is to encapsulate the story in a single sentence. A log line will include the protagonist, antagonist and a significant conflict. It may also indicate setting, time period and overall tone (e.g., violent, romantic, comedic, horrific, etc.). Since you will have already included your script's title and genre on the application form, there is no need to repeat that information in a Nicholl application log line.

As examples, here are log lines from three produced Academy Nicholl-winning scripts:

Some years after his FBI agent wife was killed in a Ruby Ridge-like confrontation, a terrorist expert college professor finds himself drawn into a conspiracy orchestrated by his seemingly innocuous next door neighbors. ("Arlington Road")

After finding a reclusive famous novelist, a young African-American prodigy in writing and basketball struggles to develop his talents as a scholarship student at a prestigious NYC academy while encouraging the older man to rejoin the world. ("Finding Forrester")

In the midst of her parents' bitter estrangement, a talented high school poet seeks encouragement and possibly more from her apparently accomplished English teacher. ("Blue Car")

Here are log lines for two movie classics:

After his partner is murdered, a San Francisco private eye teams with a mysterious woman against international thieves in a desperate search for a legendary bejeweled falcon.

Just prior to WWII, a daredevil archaeologist must locate the biblical Ark of the Covenant to prevent the Nazis from unleashing its supernatural powers upon the world.

Q: WHAT HAPPENS TO SCRIPTS THAT AREN'T FORMATTED CORRECTLY?

A: We read them. We evaluate thousands of entries in a typical year, and correctly formatted scripts not only make a better initial impression, they are actually easier to read.

COMPETITION PROCESS AND TIMETABLE

Q: COULD YOU OFFER A TIMETABLE AS TO WHEN THINGS HAPPEN IN THE NICHOLL COMPETITION?

A: Here it is:

early January – Text for the new year’s application form is finalized.

late January – The online application process is opened to entrants. The application may only be accessed online at www.oscars.org/nicholl.

January to May 1 – Entries are accepted. In 2021, completed entries must be received via the online application by 11:59 p.m. on May 3.

about a week after entering – Entrants will be able to see that their entries have been processed by accessing their online accounts (look for “confirmed” under the title).

February to mid-July – The first round of judging is in progress.

late July / early August – All entrants are notified by e-mail as to whether their script advanced to the quarterfinal round.

late August – Semifinalists are notified by e-mail.

September –Finalists are notified and asked to submit supporting materials.

late September to early October – Fellowship recipients are notified and announced.

late October to early November – Nicholl fellows are honored at the Nicholl Awards Presentation.

Q: WHAT HAPPENS TO THE THOUSANDS OF ENTRIES? HOW DOES THE COMPETITION UNFOLD?

A: The first round of the Academy Nicholl competition begins with the receipt of the initial entries in January or February, continues over the next five to six months and concludes by late July. As entries are received, application information is confirmed in our database, and each script and application form are assigned matching numbers. Scripts are then distributed electronically to readers in small “stacks” for evaluation. Every few days, those readers exchange their completed stacks for new ones. During the peak reading period – from March through July – 600 to 900 scripts are judged each week.

Let’s use the most recent competition as an example. In 2020, 7,831 scripts were entered in the competition. All of those scripts were read twice. Over 1,000 scripts received three reads. After the third read, each script’s best two scores were tallied, and the 365 scripts with the highest scores advanced to the quarterfinal round.

Q: IF MY SCRIPT ADVANCES TO THE QUARTERFINALS, CAN I SUBMIT A NEW VERSION OF THAT SCRIPT?

A: No. Scripts are sent forward to judges before writers are notified of their status, and there simply isn't enough time in the schedule to allow several hundred writers the opportunity to submit new versions.

Q: WHAT HAPPENS TO SCRIPTS THAT DO NOT ADVANCE TO THE QUARTERFINAL ROUND?

A: PDF scripts submitted online are eventually deleted from the file server.

Q: WHO READS IN THE QUARTERFINAL ROUND?

A: Selected industry professionals read the scripts that make the quarterfinal round, at least two reads by two different judges for each script.

Q: WHO READS IN THE SEMIFINAL ROUND?

A: Academy members read the scripts that reach the semifinal round. The judges are drawn from a number of Academy branches, covering all aspects of the creative and production process. Each year, Academy member semifinal round judges include dozens of Academy Awards winners and nominees.

In 2020, 150 scripts advanced to the semifinal round, and each script was read by four Academy members. Ultimately, ten scores from the first, quarterfinal and semifinal rounds were compiled to determine the scripts that advanced to the finals.

Q: HOW MANY FINALISTS ARE THERE?

A: We typically select 10 finalists, occasionally fewer, twice we've selected 11, and in 2015 we selected 12. It's a matter of making a determination based on the judges' scores and comments.

Given our judging process, at least eight different people have to like a particular script for it to advance to the finals. How many times do eight people agree that a particular movie, let alone a screenplay, is wonderful? Not very often.

Q: ONCE FINALISTS HAVE BEEN IDENTIFIED, HOW ARE WINNERS DETERMINED?

A: The finalist scripts are forwarded to the [Academy Nicholl Committee](#). After reading the scripts and the supporting materials, the committee members gather for an often spirited two-to-three hour meeting to discuss the scripts and then cast their votes to select the fellowship recipients.

READERS, JUDGES AND JUDGING CRITERIA

Q: DOES THE ACADEMY HIRE READERS TO EVALUATE THE SCRIPTS?

A: The first-round readers and quarterfinal-round judges are paid. Although the pay is modest, the cost of reading exceeds the amount of money collected in entry fees.

We do not disclose competition readers' personal information.

Q: WHO ARE THE FIRST-ROUND READERS?

A: First-round readers and quarterfinal-round judges are all involved in the industry, but none of them are Academy members. We assemble a good mix of people. While many are writers, some of whom read to pay their bills, we also get a number of producers and development execs as well as those who work in other areas of development or production. The key attributes we look for are skill and experience in reading and evaluating scripts.

Actually, in terms of their age range and backgrounds (excluding industry connections), readers resemble Nicholl entrants.

Q. I UNDERSTAND THAT THE ACADEMY NICHOLL COMPETITION IS ONLY SEEKING DRAMAS. IS THAT TRUE?

A. No, it is not true. The goal of the Academy Nicholl Fellowships is to identify and encourage talented new writers, and it doesn't matter whether the writers submit comedies, thrillers, science fiction, horror or drama. See the list of genres of "Winning Scripts" below for confirmation.

The reason more dramas appear on various lists of Academy Nicholl entrants is that more dramas are entered into the competition each and every year.

Q: IN THE COMPETITION, DO GOOD SCRIPTS GET PASSED OVER?

A: Not intentionally, but there's no way around it. The whole reading enterprise is incredibly subjective. That's why every script is read at least twice in the first round. If the first reader just doesn't connect with a script, the second read gives the script another chance to find a champion. We hope that our readers aren't swayed by their personal tastes, but they're human, too.

To further the Academy's commitment to encouraging and valuing diversity in the industry, the Nicholl Fellowships Program takes measures to ensure that our selection process is as fair as possible and without bias.

Throughout the competition we direct scripts to readers who might have an affinity for them. We ask our readers about their genre likes and dislikes. If one says, "I love horror and science fiction," that reader will receive relatively more scripts in those genres. If another says, "I hate horror and science fiction but love historical dramas," that reader will receive more historical dramas and as few horror and science fiction scripts as possible.

By adding a second read for every script during the first round, we have eliminated the possibility of a good script being knocked out by a single reader.

WINNING SCRIPTS

Q: WHAT ARE THE GENRES OF THE SCRIPTS THAT HAVE WON THEIR WRITERS ACADEMY NICHOLL FELLOWSHIPS?

A: Genres of Nicholl Fellows' Entry Scripts (1989–2020)

action-adventure – 11
animated comedy – 1
comedy – 9
romantic comedy – 5
comedy-drama – 14
coming-of-age drama – 12
drama – 57

romantic drama-fantasy – 2
horror – 3
science fiction – 4
thriller / crime / caper – 23
war / terrorism – 12
Western – 3

Q: IF YOU WERE A WRITER ABOUT TO START A NEW SCRIPT THAT YOU WANTED TO ENTER IN THE ACADEMY NICHOLL COMPETITION, WHAT STORIES WOULD YOU CONSIDER?

A: In a way, story is everything, and at the same time the choice of a particular story doesn't really make a difference. There's a Graham Parker song title that probably applies here – "Passion Is No Ordinary Word." Beginning writers have to be passionate about their stories and their characters.

It doesn't matter whether you're writing about a disaster at sea, alien hunters, cops investigating a murder in 1950s L.A., or a uniquely personal tale drawn from your own experience. Love your story, know it inside and out, and be passionate about your characters and their problems. When you're connected to your material in this way, your energy and emotion will likely shine through to the reader. And that's the person you have to grab – whether in a contest or in an agent's office or in a big studio. If you really care about your story, maybe a reader will too.

Q: HOW MANY ACADEMY NICHOLL FELLOWSHIP-WINNING SCRIPTS HAVE BEEN PRODUCED?

A: Of the 181 scripts that have earned their writers fellowships from 1986 to 2020, 19 have been produced. Warren Taylor's "In the Dark" as "In the Eyes of a Stranger" (CBS-TV), Radha Bharadwaj's "Closet Land," Jim McGlynn's "Traveller," Mark Lowenthal's "Where the Elephant Sits," Myron Goble's "Down in the Delta," Ehren Kruger's "Arlington Road," Mike Rich's "Finding Forrester," Karen Moncrieff's "Blue Car," Deborah Pryor's "Briar Patch" (aka "Plain Dirty"), Jacob Estes's "Mean Creek," Dawn O'Leary's "Island of Brilliance" (as "Admissions"), Doug Atchison's "Akeelah and the Bee," Robert Edwards' "Land of the Blind," James Mottern's "Trucker," Bragi Schut's "Season of the Witch," Jason Micallef's "Butter," Destin Cretton's "Short Term 12," Geeta Malik's "Dinner With Friends" as "India Sweets and Spices" and Nikole Beckwith's "Stockholm, Pennsylvania."

Q: CAN I READ THE NICHOLL-WINNING SCRIPTS?

A: All of the Nicholl-winning scripts may be read at the Academy’s Margaret Herrick Library, whose core collection includes thousands of feature film screenplays.

Since the Academy does not hold the rights to any of these screenplays, it is not common practice to make them available online. However, with the permission of the writers, several of the Nicholl-winning scripts are available [here](#).

AFTER THE COMPETITION

Q: WHAT DO THE WINNERS WIN?

A: The winners receive \$35,000, spread over a one-year period. It’s distributed in five \$7,000 checks, paid quarterly – the first installment on day one and the second through fifth at the end of each quarter.

Q: CAN A WRITER WIN MORE THAN ONE FELLOWSHIP IN A YEAR?

A: Our rules state that you cannot hold another fellowship simultaneously. So if you accepted a Disney fellowship while you were a finalist in our competition, you’d be disqualified. (Having previously received a Disney fellowship would disqualify you on the basis of earnings.)

You also cannot win an Academy Nicholl Fellowship more than once.

Q: WHAT ARE WINNING WRITERS REQUIRED TO DO DURING THE FELLOWSHIP YEAR?

A: The intent of the Academy Nicholl Fellowships is to give fledgling writers the ability to take some time off from their “day jobs” so that they will have more time to write. We expect fellows to complete one script during their fellowship year, but we don’t really care whether they complete one or four – it’s important only that they write. That’s the goal.

Beyond writing a new script, there are no other requirements. Fellows are not required to move to Los Angeles. They are invited to join other fellows at monthly lunches but attendance is not required.

Q: WHAT HAPPENS IF A FELLOW SELLS A SCRIPT OR IS HIRED TO WRITE ONE DURING THE FELLOWSHIP YEAR?

A: That has happened on a number of occasions. Current fellows are free to sell scripts. In the case of a writing assignment, the fellow takes a leave of absence from the fellowship and returns only after completing the professional assignment. Fellows have up to three years from receipt of their first fellowship check in which to complete the fellowship requirements.

Q: COULD A FELLOW PARTICIPATE IN THE SUNDANCE LABS DURING THE FELLOWSHIP YEAR?

A: Yes.

Q: WHAT WOULD HAPPEN IF A FULL-TIME STUDENT WAS A WINNER OF THE COMPETITION?

A: That has happened on several occasions. A student winner would simply defer the beginning of the fellowship year until after the completion of his or her educational requirements. For instance, if we awarded a student an Academy Nicholl Fellowship in November, and the student was not slated to graduate until the following June, we would defer the start of the fellowship year until June.

Q: ARE THE NAMES OF THOSE WHO PLACE IN THE COMPETITION DISTRIBUTED TO PRODUCTION COMPANIES?

A: Each year, we compile contact lists of quarterfinalists, semifinalists and finalists that include each entrant's name, script title and genre. Additionally, at the discretion of the entrant, a contact phone number, e-mail address, and log line are included. We distribute the lists to producers, executives, agents, managers and others in the development community who know about the competition and contact the Academy to request them. We do not release home addresses – only phone numbers and e-mail addresses.

Q: ABOUT HOW MANY REQUESTS FOR THOSE LISTS DO YOU GET?

A: Each year, we distribute hundreds of copies of the lists, which seem to be passed along within the development community.

Q: DO THE LISTS GENERATE MANY INDUSTRY QUERIES?

A: Anecdotal evidence suggests that while some quarterfinalists receive up to a half-dozen contacts, others do not receive a single e-mail. Reaching the semifinals seems to generate more e-mails, and the finalists report considerably more contact. These industry queries come from agents, executives, managers and producers.

Q: IS THERE AN AWARDS CEREMONY?

A: Yes, since the competition's beginning in 1986, the new fellows have been introduced at an awards ceremony. In 2013, the presentation was expanded and shifted to the Academy's Samuel Goldwyn Theater in Beverly Hills so that more people, including Nicholl entrants and the public, would have an opportunity to attend. Event attendees include the winners and their guests, previous fellows, Academy Nicholl Committee members, Academy members who served as judges, invited members of the industry and press.

With the move to the 1,000-seat Goldwyn Theater, a live read of excerpts from the fellowship winning scripts by professional actors was added. For more details, pictures and videos from the Academy Nicholl Fellowships in Screenwriting Awards Presentations & Live Read, visit [here](#).

RESUBMISSIONS

Q: BECAUSE OF THE INHERENT SUBJECTIVITY OF THE JUDGING PROCESS, DO YOU THINK IT'S A GOOD IDEA TO RESUBMIT A SCRIPT THAT HASN'T ADVANCED IN PREVIOUS YEARS?

A: It's difficult to say "yes, keep sending in your script and your entry fee" when it may be a waste of money. On the other hand, good scripts have been passed over. Given the subjectivity of the process and the fact that we try to direct repeat scripts to different readers, scripts often fare differently in different years. In fact, on several occasions, writers have come back and have done better.

Q: WITH EXACTLY THE SAME SCRIPT?

A: Some scripts have been re-entered over and over again. One script reached either the quarter- or semifinals four years in a row. (By the way, the writer of that script won a fellowship in 1995)

with a different script.) A 1992 semifinalist won a fellowship with the same script in 1993; two previous semifinalists won with the same scripts in 1996.

Three past quarter- or semifinalists became winners in 1997. One of those writers had reached at least the quarterfinals with eight different scripts over the years. From 1998 through 2002, we had three writers reach the finals in consecutive years and win a fellowship the second time around. Two did it with the same script; the third won with a different script. Several writers who had not previously made it past the first round ended up winning in another year. In 2015, two of the fellowship-winning writers were past semifinalists with the same script while another twice was a quarterfinalist and once was a semifinalist all with different scripts than that which won. In 2016, two of the fellowship-winning writers were past semifinalists with the same script while two others won with scripts that previously did not advance.

So persistence and perseverance sometimes pays off.

AGE, SEX AND GEOGRAPHY

Q: WHAT IS THE AGE RANGE OF ACADEMY NICHOLL FELLOWSHIP WINNERS?

A: The youngest fellow was 21 when she entered the competition; the oldest was 66.

Q: WHAT IS THE AVERAGE AGE OF ACADEMY NICHOLL WINNERS?

A: Just over 36.

Q: HOW MANY WOMEN HAVE WON ACADEMY NICHOLL FELLOWSHIPS?

A: Sixty of the 181 fellowship winners have been women.

Q: HOW DOES THAT COMPARE WITH THE PERCENTAGE OF FEMALE ENTRANTS?

A: Since the beginning of the competition, about 32 percent of the entries have been submitted by women.

Q: WHERE DID THE VARIOUS ACADEMY NICHOLL WINNERS LIVE WHEN THEY ENTERED THE COMPETITION?

A: One-hundred and four of the 181 winners resided in California; 19 hailed from New York; 5 were from Virginia; 8 from Texas; 4 from Pennsylvania; 3 from Illinois and North Carolina; 2 from Minnesota, New Jersey, Oklahoma, Georgia, and Washington; and 1 each from Arizona, Connecticut, Florida, Hawaii, Iowa, Louisiana, Michigan, Mississippi, Missouri, Oregon, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Utah; as well as 3 each from Australia and the United Kingdom; 2 from Canada; and 1 each from Brazil, Japan, Malaysia, and South Africa.

Q: WHY SO MANY CALIFORNIANS?

A: Two reasons: first, over the years over 40 percent of all entrants have resided in California; second, talented writers who want to break into the movie industry are apt to relocate to California. The majority of California winners were born and raised outside of California.

Q: HOW DID FOREIGN ENTRANTS FARE DURING THE 2020 COMPETITION?

A: About 19% of the 2020 entries came from countries other than the U.S. Of the 365 entrants who advanced to the quarterfinals and beyond, 58 (about 15%) consisted of submissions from a foreign country or territory.

Q: HOW MANY NICHOLL FELLOWS RESIDED OUTSIDE THE U.S. WHEN THEY WON?

A: Three fellows, including two of the 2016 winners, were from Australia; three were from the United Kingdom; two resided in Canada; one lived in Japan; one was from South Africa; and one of the 2017 winners was from Brazil. One of the 2019 winners was from Malaysia.

SUBMITTING SCRIPTS TO AGENTS AND PRODUCERS DURING THE COMPETITION

Q: IS IT PERMISSIBLE TO SUBMIT A SCRIPT TO AGENTS AND PRODUCERS AFTER YOU'VE ENTERED IT IN THE ACADEMY NICHOLL COMPETITION?

A: Yes. Writers should continue any and all modes of marketing their scripts without regard to their status in the competition.

Q: WHAT WOULD HAPPEN IF A WRITER WERE TO SELL A SCRIPT DURING THE COMPETITION?

A: If a writer were paid more than \$25,000 during the competition, that writer would become ineligible. Given the typical slow pace of contract negotiations and writer payments, it would be possible for a writer to reach the Academy Nicholl quarterfinals, to sign a contract for the sale of a script, and to remain eligible for a fellowship, so long as he or she does not receive payment for the script during the competition.

Q: CAN SCRIPTS BE ENTERED IN THE NICHOLL AND OTHER COMPETITIONS SIMULTANEOUSLY?

A: Yes. However, you cannot hold the Academy Nicholl Fellowship while you hold another fellowship. Winning a competition in which you are hired to write or in which your script is essentially under an option arrangement would make you ineligible for the Academy Nicholl competition.

Q: CAN A WRITER WIN OR PLACE IN OTHER SCREENWRITING CONTESTS AND REMAIN ELIGIBLE FOR NICHOLL?

A: Yes. A writer can win or place in other screenwriting contests and remain eligible for the Academy Nicholl competition, particularly if prize money does not secure rights to the writer's script. If the prize money is contingent upon the winner signing an option or any other professional writing agreement, it will count toward the writer's \$25,000 earnings limit.

Q: WHEN WOULD WINNING A CONTEST MAKE A WRITER INELIGIBLE FOR THE ACADEMY NICHOLL COMPETITION?

A: Any contest that offers prize money of over \$25,000 that is contingent upon the winner signing an option or any other professional writing agreement would make a writer ineligible for the Academy Nicholl competition.

MISCELLANEOUS

Q: DO YOU PROVIDE READER COMMENTS TO ENTRANTS?

A: Since 2015, entrants have been able to purchase the option to view reader comments for the script. Depending on how far the script goes in the competition, comments may be from two to six different readers, up to and including the Quarterfinal round. These comments are released on the date specified in the online application, no earlier than after the first round notification emails have been sent.

These comments are not intended as comprehensive notes; they're just a peek at the reactions a reader has to the entry.

Purchase of comments is not required for entry; it is optional when you enter the competition. Comments can retroactively be purchased after submitting a screenplay up to the final deadline for entry. After the competition is closed to entries, comments will no longer be available for purchase.

Q: CAN I BUY JUST READER COMMENTS FOR MY SCRIPT?

A: Sorry, a script has to be entered into the competition in order to have the option of viewing reader comments. We are not offering a script notes service.

Q: CAN I BUY OR VIEW READER COMMENTS FOR A SUBMISSION FROM A PREVIOUS YEAR?

A: No. Reader comments are only accessible during the calendar year of the competition. Entrants who purchase them can print their comments on or before December 31st.

Q: HOW MANY SCRIPTS HAVE BEEN ENTERED INTO THE ACADEMY NICHOLL COMPETITION SINCE IT STARTED?

A: Through 2020 we've received more than 166,000 entries. Here's the breakdown by years:

1986 – 99 entries
1987 – 459 entries
1988 – 231 entries
1989 – 1,395 entries
1990 – 2,888 entries
1991 – 3,814 entries
1992 – 3,515 entries
1993 – 3,854 entries
1994 – 3,934 entries
1995 – 3,695 entries
1996 – 4,181 entries
1997 – 4,006 entries
1998 – 4,446 entries
1999 – 4,150 entries
2000 – 4,250 entries
2001 – 5,489 entries
2002 – 6,044 entries
2003 – 6,048 entries
2004 – 6,073 entries
2005 – 5,879 entries
2006 – 4,899 entries
2007 – 5,050 entries
2008 – 5,224 entries
2009 – 6,380 entries
2010 – 6,304 entries
2011 – 6,730 entries
2012 – 7,197 entries
2013 – 7,251 entries
2014 – 7,511 entries
2015 – 7,442 entries
2016 – 6,915 entries
2017 – 7,102 entries
2018 – 6,895 entries
2019 – 7,302 entries
2020 – 7,831 entries

WRITERS AND SCREENWRITING CONTESTS

Q: OVER THE LAST FEW YEARS, SCREENPLAY COMPETITIONS HAVE PROLIFERATED. BESIDES THE OBVIOUS - THE CASH PRIZES - WHY SHOULD AMATEUR WRITERS CONSIDER ENTERING COMPETITIONS?

First, a few words of advice: Don't enter screenplay competitions solely because you need the money. These competitions may seem like lotteries, with plenty of money to go around. But all of them, especially those that offer the largest prizes, are highly competitive. More than 99 percent of writers who enter contests will not receive a cash prize.

But there are a number of positive results that can arise from entering a competition:

Contests can serve as stepping-stones.

Winning writers, and occasionally runners-up, have used the "heat" generated by their contest victory or placement to jump-start their careers. Winners of the largest contests usually find an agent quickly (if they are not already represented). Their scripts are welcomed by major production companies and studios. If the writer so desires, this typically leads to meetings with countless development execs. Writers who have won major contests have often sold or optioned a script or been hired to write or rewrite a project within a year after winning. This often leads to other work or other sales.

Contest results can be added to a résumé or query letter.

Placing in a contest should certainly be mentioned in a query letter and added to a résumé when appropriate. While the mention of a victory or placement in an obscure contest will not guarantee positive responses from agents or producers, it can't hurt you. Mention of placement in major contests has often garnered writers reads at agencies and production companies.

Contests can serve as yardsticks.

While most contests do not offer any kind of written feedback on an entrant's script, the script's performance may serve as a good indicator of whether the script is ready for submission to Hollywood agents and producers. Reaching the second round of any contest suggests that something is going right. Reaching an advanced round of highly competitive contests may suggest that the script is meeting or is close to meeting professional standards. On the other hand, an early departure from one or several contests may suggest that the script isn't ready.

Contests can open doors and initiate professional contacts.

Since many contests use industry professionals as judges at advanced levels, it is possible to make contacts simply by advancing in a competition. Some contests provide lists of quarterfinalists, semifinalists and finalists to interested agents, producers and development execs. For a very few writers, these contacts have led directly to a career.

Contests provide deadlines.

Writers have been known to complete scripts when a deadline looms.