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Script

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Final Draft

After spending years writing and rewriting your soon-to-be award-winning screenplay only to have everyone from your Uncle Phil to the guy at the Gas-n-Slp say, "You're never gonna make it in this town, kid. Get a real job," it's time for you to prove them wrong and take your script to the industry. That's where screenwriting contests come into play. They help aspiring screenwriters determine if their stories have the goods it takes to make it in Hollywood.

If you are looking for a contest with street cred and a whole lot of opportunities to offer the winner, the Final Draft, Inc. Big Break International Screenwriting Competition puts its winners face to face with Hollywood's elite dealmakers. "It's a tremendous opportunity for writers," says Blake Snyder, screenwriter and author of the popular *Save the Cat!* screenwriting book series. "It actually gives the writer access to professionals who are looking for talent and want to put people to work."

The top-three finalists receive over \$30,000 in cash and prizes, including travel to L.A. This might be enough to blow some starving writers away, but it's the industry meetings that are worth their weight in gold, says 2004 Big Break winner Ryland Grant. "Those meetings gave me a career. I have two movies shooting this year. I wouldn't be in this position if not for winning that contest."

Ryland's winning script, *Drive*, landed him an agent at CAA and a six-figure deal to write for an A-list actress and an Oscar-winning director. "The contest has a great reputation," he says. "People have heard of it hands down, and they expect certain quality of material." Before Big Break, Ryland circulated his script for almost three years but couldn't get the traction he needed to put the project in gear. "No one in this town wants to be the first person to say something's good," he says. "Big Break was the one to do that. They were driving the truck and everyone jumped on."

Julia Van Devellder, the 2005 first-prize winner, agrees. After her script *The Escape Artist* won the contest, she signed with Stars Agency in San Francisco. "Being able to put in any cover letter I send out that I was the winner of that contest definitely gives me more credibility than otherwise," she says. That credential got her hired to doctor a script, and eventually all three projects she had in the works were optioned. Winning the contest even opened the door for a previous project that had fallen by the wayside. "I had given up on it," she says of *Staying Afloat*, a dramedy about a small-time drug dealer who has a life-changing experience and becomes committed to building a community. "I was on to other things, but then I got a call from the woman who had optioned it before I won Big Break." It was five years later, but now Van Devellder had more clout, an agent, and was working in the industry. "She contacted me to re-option that script. It's a strange business out there. You never know who you're going to meet that might someday want to work with you."

In 2007, first-place winner Robert Frisbee had the same experience. In fact, if he hadn't been a Big Break finalist, he might not have landed his current representation, literally. Manager Brian Spink met Frisbee at the Final Draft, Inc. annual corporate event where the top-three

Big Break finalists are feted each year. Spink was one of the contest judges. The two chatted, got along well, and before long, Spink signed Frisbee with his management and production company Benderspink. From there, Frisbee was hired to

write a coming-of-age story, *Finding Ava*, for a local producer. Frisbee couldn't be more pleased with the outcome. "I have representation. I'm getting hired and paid to write," Frisbee says. "The contest gives you a whole new voice and a podium to be seen."



Brendan Foley has also been seen, all the way from Belfast, Northern Ireland, he says. The former journalist stood tall as one of the top-10 finalists in 2001. "Big Break is one of a handful of contests that gets you enough serious notice that [it's] worthwhile." The contest, he says, launched a career that's taken him from little indie flicks, like his prize-winning film *The Riddle*, to the upcoming war movie *Easter Sateen*, a big-budget action project backed by Marathon Pictures in L.A. Since the contest, Foley has also written two films, *Johnny Was* and *Bog Bodies*; a children's animation series for NBC, *Sheldor*; and a best-selling novel, *Under the Wire*, the story of a World War II POW who escapes captivity.

"Once it happens, you never look back. It's all about building on what you did to get there," says Foley. "Enter as many contests as you can and make sure one of those is Big Break."

The Final Draft, Inc. Big Break International Screenwriting Competition is now accepting screenplays. Since the year 2000, Big Break has awarded screenwriters over \$200,000 in cash and prizes. A panel of notable industry professionals conducts the final judging. The standard deadline is June 1, 2009 with a \$50 entry fee. The extended deadline is June 15, 2009; entry fee is \$65. For your big break, visit Finaldraft.com/bigbreak.

← Brendan Foley

Big Break