

How to Make a Short Film

**indie
films
foundation**



Gary Parker
and Bruce May

PRACTICAL LESSONS
IN FILMMAKING



How to Make a Short Film

Written by seasoned professionals with a lifetime of experience in video production and filmmaking. *How to Make a Short Film*, is full of insights into the practical side of filmmaking. The key to making a good film remains the same as it was with storytelling from the beginning of time. Start with a good story. Then apply the practices described in this book for scripting, shooting, and editing your film. When you polish off the skills you acquire by making your own films, you will discover the joy of filmmaking. It is a joy that once acquired, will never leave you, and it can lead to a long and successful career in film, television, or corporate video production.

We believe that filmmaking is best learned by doing it. That is the basis for our school, the Indie Films Foundation Film School, where we teach online practical lessons in filmmaking, online and in our studios, where we also produce feature films, television shows and documentary films. In line with our philosophy, this book is written to help give you a jump start in the ways and means of filmmaking.

For more information about our school, go to <https://iffschool.com>

How to Make a Short Film

**Practical Lessons in
Filmmaking**

**By Gary Parker and
Bruce May**





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Introduction

Making films is not easy. Most successful filmmakers spend years becoming expert in the art and science of filmmaking. While your own career in video, film and television will likely follow the paths of many others working in the field, there are short cuts that can help accelerate

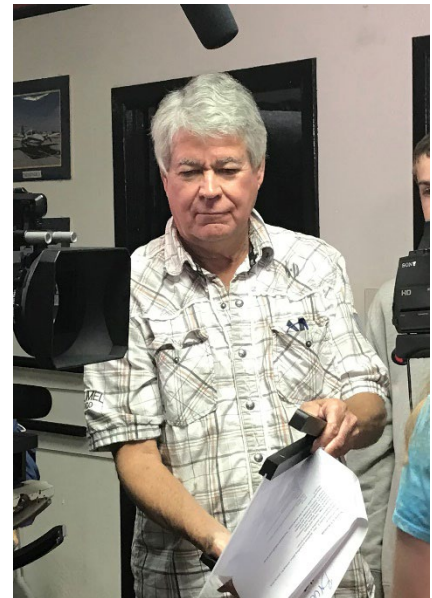


Gary Parker, Co-founder

your progress. Steven Spielberg got a head start that helped propel his career far ahead of many other want-to-be filmmakers when he started filming his own, home-made movies as a teenager, shooting his friends playing war. Most of the important lessons of filmmaking are best learned by doing it. Practical lessons in filmmaking are the best lessons of all. Indeed, you can go to a film school and still learn most of what you need to know only after you go to work in the industry, learning the craft on the job. Many great film makers never even go to school, having grown up in the business, beginning as child stars. That is

why we believe that filmmaking is best learned by doing it. That is the basis for our school, the Indie Films Foundation Film School, where we teach practical lessons in filmmaking. In line with our philosophy, this book is written to help give you a jump start on the ways and means of filmmaking.

Filmmaking is an extension of the oldest art form in human history: storytelling. Humans have been telling stories as long as we have been human. For centuries, people gathered around campfires, listening to the stories of their tribes, as elders passed on the history and culture of their people, and young men and women shared their own experiences, becoming grounded in the values and views of their society. This tradition continues to this day, only now the campfires have been replaced with movie theaters, televisions, computers screens and smart phones.



Bruce May, Co-founder

Technology has become more sophisticated and at the same time, easier to use, opening up the art of storytelling to a much larger audience of content creators. Today, you can film a

movie on your smart phone, edit it, and distribute it all from your own home. The democratization of the science of filmmaking has made it possible for anyone to make a film today. However, the art of filmmaking requires a little more effort. This book is designed to provide you with a quick guide on how to make a good short film. With a little practice, you can even make a great film. The focus in this book is on short films, about ten to twenty minutes long. Short films can be shorter. You can tell a story in less than thirty seconds. On Vine, storytelling has been reduced to six seconds! We prefer slightly longer formats.

If you follow the practical lessons described in this book, you will find it easier to make good films. The key to making a good film remains the same as it was with storytelling from the beginning of time. Start with a good story. Then apply the practices described for scripting, shooting, and editing your film. When you polish off the skills you acquire making your own films, you will discover the joy of filmmaking. It is a joy that once acquired, will never leave you, and hopefully, lead you on to a long and successful career in video, film, or television.

If you complete a short film, please consider placing it in the Indie Films Foundation Film Festival. The IFF Film Festival is a yearlong event, where we showcase student films online, where you can receive feedback from your peers, and participate in the conversation in social media, giving and receiving advice from fellow amateur filmmakers. You can also use the IFF Film Festival to help promote your film to a larger audience. Go to IFF Online Film Festival to learn more and submit your film for review. The IFF Film Festival holds an in-person event each year, where monthly finalists compete in multiple categories, have their films screened in front of a live audience, and win awards for their films.

A Special Thanks to Our Film Students

This guide to making short films was inspired by our first Summer Film Class, filmed at our studios in Conroe, Texas in the summer of 2021. We went into that project intent on proving our theory that the best way to teach filmmaking was by making films. We had no idea how right we were. To our surprise, the project was a far greater success than we could have imagined! We taught by doing, mentoring our students through every step of the process, from creating a storyline, to writing the script, filming during four, long Saturdays, instructing each student one scene at a time, how to be the Director, how to be the DP (Director of Photography), how to light a scene, how to manage the sound recording, how to act in front of the camera, and finally, how to edit the film. The class was a mix of teenagers and adults that all had one thing in common: a desire to make films.



Most of the adults had some experience working on films or working in video production, but in most cases, their experience was somewhat limited. The teenagers were mostly involved learning about videography or filmmaking in their schools. Virtually no one, with one or two exceptions, had any acting experience. This didn't exactly bode well for our expectations, but those expectations were completely blown away by how this film crew and cast performed. The result was a well-made student film, worthy of the effort. We want to thank all the students who participated in the class and the hard work and conscientious effort they made in creating the best little, short film possible under the time and budget constraints we had placed on them.

You can see our students in the production stills included in this book.

We want to offer a special thanks to Tracy Brandon and Martha Red for all the admin/production work they did behind the scenes to make this project a success.

The IFF 2021 Summer Film Class

Anna King

Charles O'Bryant

Chrissie Hargrove

Cinnamon Auld

Georgiana Lewis

Isaac Allen

Karaline Cartagena Edwards

Kaylie Pasket

Martha Red

Santiago Acosta

Shandon Fumbanks

Shawn Gourley

Sophie Brandon

Susan Branton

Talynn LaBeau

Tracy Brandon

Zachary Joplin

About the Authors

Gary Parker

A lifetime in Film and Television

Gary has worked for over forty years as a Producer, Director, Photographer, and Editor, producing award winning documentaries and feature films. He has also done freelance work for the major television networks including ABC, NBC and CBS as well as for the BBC, ESPN, BBC, HBO, and Lifetime. His documentary films have won multiple awards. They tell compelling stories about people, places and events that provide insights into the lives of ordinary people doing amazing things.

Gary began his career in Houston over 40 years ago at the Texas Medical Center, shooting and editing shows like the Dr. Red Duke Health minute, a nationwide syndicated program. He also worked at the ABC affiliate station in Houston and the NBC news network. He then moved to Washington, D.C., where he owned and managed the second largest independent television and radio news bureau, serving over 150 stations worldwide. In 1989, Gary returned to his home in Texas where he founded Quannah Productions, a full-service video production company where he continued producing programming, experimenting with new formats in the early days of online television. Today, Gary continues to operate Quannah Productions and he also manages KBQT, Channel 21 in Houston, branded Preview 21, reaching over two million people in the Greater Houston area.

Feature Films

Shattered Lives – Director – Co-Producer (in pre-production)

Invaded – Associate Producer

Border Cross – Director of Photography / Editor

A Little Christmas Business - Director of Photography / Editor / Associate Producer

Return of Vengeance - Director of Photography / Editor / Associate Producer

Back Stabber - Director of Photography / Editor / Associate Producer

Texas Triangle - Director of Photography / Editor / Associate Producer

Burned Soul - Director of Photography / Editor / Associate Producer

The Meadows - Director of Photography / Editor

Telly Awards - Documentary Films

"The Only Guarantee" Documentary; Producer / Director

"When Seconds Count" Feature Director / Editor

"In Between Dances" Documentary Producer / Director / DP / Editor

"Dead End Diner" Feature Producer / Director / Editor

"Slice of Life" Feature DP / Editor

"Spirit of 66" Documentary Director / DP / Editor

"Carousels" Documentary Director / DP / Editor

Bruce May

A Passion for Writing and Producing

Bruce May has been working in media and television for over 25 years. His first introduction to the industry was through Quanah Productions, where he worked closely with Gary Parker for several years. He then moved on, working nationally in the online television industry, providing pioneering technology solutions to major industry players. In 2010, Bruce returned to his roots, when he began producing and hosting shows in online radio and television, working with his old friend and colleague, Gary Parker at Quanah Productions. He produces and hosts his own television show, Growth Solutions, where he interviews business experts in best practices and emerging technologies. He also produces Sustainable Resilience with David Dodd, a show dedicated to creating more resilient economies worldwide. He has written multiple projects and books over the years, including the screenplay for Shattered Lives, the movie, and Tin pre-production now by Indie Films Foundation.

Television Production

Business Insights - 2012 to 2015. Host /producer

Growth Solutions - 2018 to 2020. Host /producer

Sustainable Resilience, with David Dodd - 2018 to 2020. Producer

The Production House - 2020 to 2021. Co-host / co-producer

Film Projects

Dreaming of Tokyo, Film Script. Written by Bruce May based on a story by Gary Parker.

Shattered Lives, Film Script. Written by Bruce May, based on a story by Gary Parker and Bruce May.

The White Suit, Film Script. Written by Bruce May, based on a true story.

Books

How to Make a Short Film (2022)

Media Brand Marketing (2017)

The Content Graph (2017)

The Content Marketing Revolution (2015)

Digital Marketing for Entrepreneurs (2019)

Digital Marketing Study Guide (2019)

Selling in the Digital Age (2019)

Transcendence: Spirit in the Age of Science (2011)

The Self Delusion (2013)

Searching for the Light (2015)

Transcendence and Liberation (2016)

The Mystic Christ (2019)

Imagine (2020)

The Big Idea

(Personal Insights from Bruce May)

Every great film begins with a big idea. *Indian Jones and the Temple of Doom* is about an adventure loving archeologist that chases after the greatest historical finds in the world, fighting off evil doers along the way. *Harry Potter* is about a young adolescent growing up in a fantasy world of wizards and magic while on an epic journey to discover the truth about himself and fulfill his destiny as an extraordinary wizard with perfectly ordinary ambitions and human desires. *Saving Private Ryan* is about an English teacher on a mission to save another soldier and survive World War II so he can return home to his wife and family. The film explores the horror of war and the inability to escape the outcome that helps wake up the audience not only to the horrors of war, but to the compelling humanity revealed on the battlefield. These movies, indeed, all movies, share one thing in common. They all have a big idea that defines what they are about, one that captures our imaginations and pulls us into their world. They move us, they make us feel something powerful, and they reveal the truth about what it means to be a human being, living in a world that can be both kind and frightening. Great movies lift us up and make us feel good or terrify us and leave us feeling excited to have escaped back into our own lives, and sometimes, they reveal truths about life that make us better people for having seen what we might otherwise ignore.



There is no single formula for writing a good story but here is another secret about storytelling that you probably haven't thought about. You have already been doing it all your life. Anytime you stop in a hallway and share an experience with your friends, or tell someone about something you did, you are practicing the art of storytelling. You have been a student of it all your life. While you are sitting in class, taking your second algebra course, or in a company workshop, learning about compliance protocols, you may be learning something brand new, but when it comes to filmmaking, you have been studying it since you were old enough to watch your first Disney movie. Think about what this means. For your entire life, you have been watching the masters of filmmaking practice their art, right before your eyes.

There is no better trained audience in all the world than those of us who have been watching movies all our lives. Many of us have been exposed to the entire history of filmmaking, just by watching films on TV. It is an amazing art form, one that has taken the basic principles of storytelling and lifted it to new heights of performance and visual display. So, if you have a love for film and you have seen films from every decade, you already know what makes a great film. You are a consummate critic. You don't even have to think about it. You know immediately the difference between a good film and a bad one. All you have to do is apply your well-trained critical eye to your own work to polish it off.

There are some unique things that make a screenplay different from other forms of storytelling. A film is not like a novel, which has to describe places and people in words. A film is not like a stage play, which has to grab and hold the attention of the audience with outstanding stage performances, with little help from the backgrounds and sets. And it is not like the ancient form of storytelling around the campfire where the storyteller had to hold the audience spellbound by the sound of their voice and the images they conjured up as flames leaped into the air. All these forms of storytelling have their weaknesses and their strengths. Films cannot explore the deep thoughts and emotions of their characters in the way a novelist can. Films cannot deliver the excitement of a performer on stage, reaching out to a live audience with a



commanding voice and powerful stage presence. Yet, films can draw audiences into a world in a way that no other form of storytelling can ever match. Films can showcase a fantasy world of wizards and dragons, a gritty battlefield from ages past, or a futuristic world of science fiction marvels, all because of the magic of visual arts. Moreover, it can draw an audience in with the intimate details of a character portrayed by a great actor, revealing deep emotions in well framed shots and tight close ups. And a film can grab our emotions and take us on a journey that soars through the world of ideas that we have never imagined. Films can inform, educate, persuade,

and offer insights into our world and our own, personal life. They can fill us with hope, wisdom, and most importantly of all, they can leave us feeling all the better for having watched them.

In the end, all stories tell us something about ourselves and the very human world in which we live. Even a simple tale can be full of wisdom and powerful emotions that leave us feeling moved, changed or a little wiser. This is as true for a low budget short film as it is for a multimillion-dollar blockbuster. So, focus on the tale if you want to make a great short film. There are some basic rules for writing a good script. Follow these to make sure your screenplay works as it should. Every story has a beginning, a middle and an end. This may sound simplistic, but there are certain things that need to happen in each of these three stages. Here is how we cover these in our screen writing course. Below is the summary of all three. We will examine each of these in turn.

- **The Beginning**
 - Capture the attention of the audience [The Hook]
 - Set up the theme
 - Establish the conflict
 - The Big Event (1st main plot point)
- **The Middle**
 - Develop the conflict
 - Increase the tension with a roller coaster ride of emotions
 - The Crisis (2nd main plot point)
- **The End**
 - Resolve the conflict (final main plot point)
 - Provide emotional fulfillment for the audience
 - Tie up loose ends
 - Fulfill the theme



The Beginning

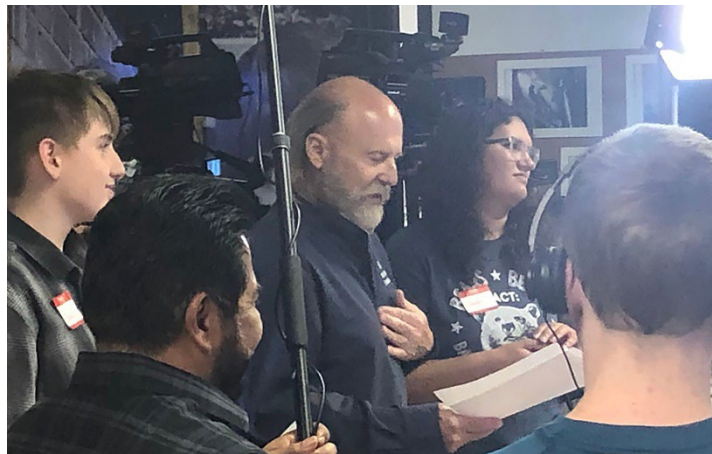
- Capture the attention of the audience [The Hook]
- Set up the theme
- Establish the conflict
- The Big Event (1st main plot point)

All great stories capture the attention of the audience almost immediately. This can happen very quickly, in just a few seconds. It usually introduces the main character dealing with a situation that helps define who he or she is, and it establishes the place and time of the story. For a short film, this can be very simple. For example, if your character is a check-out clerk, you may show her behind the register, dealing with a difficult customer or arguing with her boss.

Theme is an important aspect of great storytelling. Certain genres have built in themes and many genres share these in common. For example, social conflict, personal insecurity, failure vs. achievement, good vs. evil in fantasy, horror, or just about any other genre, the list is endless. Whatever your story, it should have at least a basic theme. Even if you have not intentionally written it into the script, most stories have a theme which is defined simply by the situation in which you put your characters. Identify this for yourself, then rewrite your story to play it up. This one step can improve almost any screenplay.

All stories are about conflict. We are not necessarily talking about physical conflict, although that is possible, as with war movies. Here, conflict can mean the conflict between the existing situation and the resolution of that situation. Something has to happen to the main character, something that creates a conflict, either internal or external. They must be put into a situation that requires that they do something to resolve this conflict. It might be about how they feel about themselves. It might be about how they feel about someone else. It might be about how their community, friends or family feels about them. The resolution changes either the character or their standing in the eyes of others. In other words, the main character either has to die, become transformed, change the attitudes of others, or change their attitude about themselves.

The Big Event is the first main plot point out of three. The final plot point is the resolution of the conflict, at the end of the film. The middle plot point signals a change in the course of the story, where the main character is on the final path to the resolution. The Big Event gets the main character off the couch as they say. He or she has to address the conflict in some way. In the *Lord of the Rings*, Frodo has to leave the shire to return the ring so it can be destroyed. In *Casablanca*, Ilsa Lund (Ingrid Bergman) walks into Rick's Bar (Humphrey Bogart) creating a conflict between these two characters based on their backstories which we learn about as we watch the film. In *Back to the Future*, Marty McFly (Michael J. Fox) is transported in time back to 1955 by accident where he discovers that he has to get his parents to fall in love, or he will cease to exist.



For a short film, the beginning can move much faster than in a full-length feature film. All these elements, up to and including the Big Event, can come in a few minutes. For example, in our imaginary film about the clerk at the check-out stand, the Big Event could come when her boss walks up and fires her for being late or accusing her of being lazy.

The Middle

- Develop the conflict
- Increase the tension with a roller coaster ride of emotions
- The Crisis (2nd main plot point)

In the middle, the conflict develops, using specific scenes to focus on different aspects of the conflict. This sets up a roller coaster ride of emotions that pull the audience into the story. While these may seem frustrating to watch, as the conflict only worsens, each scene is useful for either developing a character or for setting up plot twists (or both). These also increase the tension and help get the audience more interested in the final outcome.



The end of the middle comes with the second main plot point. This is usually referred to as the crisis, and it helps guide the story into the final resolution. In *Casablanca*, Rick arranges for Ilsa to fly to America with him – but it is a ruse to help Ilsa escape with her husband. In *Back to the Future*, Marty is running out of time to escape back to the future, and he has to get his father to man-up and fend off the bully who is attacking his mother.

For a short film, again, the elements in the middle can move much faster than in a full-length feature film. The conflict can be developed in two or three short scenes, filmed in the same location, featuring only a couple of extra characters. In our imaginary film about the store clerk, she might talk to a co-worker as she gathers her things and share an experience that explains how she feels about the situation. Perhaps she is lazy and knows she needs to change, or perhaps she is not lazy and is just the victim of an arrogant boss.

In a short film, the crisis should come very quickly, after only a few scenes. With our store clerk, she may find the courage to confront her boss and defend herself as being a hard worker, or she may decide that she needs to find another job, one that she loves and is naturally good at.

The End

- Resolve the conflict (final main plot point)
- Provide emotional fulfillment for the audience
- Tie up loose ends
- Fulfill the theme

The end is where the conflict is resolved. This is the final main plot point. In feature length films, it occurs only after many scenes, following plot twists that slowly draw the audience deeper into the story. In a short film, this must come much sooner, but if you keep the middle short and to the point, the end will appear when it should, only a minute or two before resolution is resolved. The conflict resolution plays the same role in both full-length feature films and short films. The resolution provides emotional fulfillment for the audience. For the main character, this may be good or bad. The main character might feel happy or sad about the resolution, or even wind-up dead. The point is that the emotional fulfillment for the audience is different than it is for the main character. The audience may empathize with the main character and feel their feelings, but the audience has their own emotional reaction, and they fully feel it when the conflict is resolved.

In *Casablanca*, Rick gets everyone to meet at the airport then pulls a gun on the police chief and forces him to let Ilsa escape with her husband. Then he shoots Strasser, the German officer when he arrives to arrest Lisa's husband. Although Rick has just lost the love of his life, watching her fly away with her husband, he feels good about himself having rediscovered his lost patriotism, and gained a certain wisdom about love, life, and the meaning of happiness. In *Back to the Future*, Marty returns to the present, where he finds that everything had more or less returned to normal, except now his parents have been transformed because of his actions, into the kind of parents he always wanted and could look up to.

Again, in a short film, the resolution need only take a minute or two. Our store clerk may confront her boss and break him down, forcing him into a tearful confession of his own shortcomings... and perhaps even an apology. Short films are not less emotional or enlightening, simply because they are short. A great ending will always move an audience, a reaction that puts the seal of approval on any film.

For more insights into writing your screenplay, see our last chapter, *Advice on Screenwriting*.

Pre-Production

(Personal Insights from Bruce May)

Once you have written a compelling story and formatted it as a screenplay, you are ready to do all the work required before you start filming. It is a lot more work than you might imagine. You have to cast the actors, arrange for all the sets and locations, create a shooting schedule, organize the cast and crew so they know when and where they need to be, and assemble all the equipment, props, and costumes so you will be ready on the first day of shooting. This is the job of a producer, and it is an unthankful job. Producers don't become producers for the glamor of the job. They become producers because they like the money. If you are shooting your own short film, you take on the role of the producer, not because you expect to make any money, but because someone has to do it.¹

You also have to make sure that you are on the same page as the director, who has the vision for how your film should be made. If you are both the director and producer this is easy. All you have to do is



talk to yourself. Actually, for independent filmmaking, this is common since a director can't make a film without a producer and if you can't find one, then you have to do it yourself. If you are lucky enough to have someone else volunteer to be the producer, then the director and the producer have their own pre-production issues and they must work together to address the practical realities of making your film. The list of things you have to deal with include:

- Casting the film
- Finding locations to film
- Acquiring the right equipment for the film
- Finding the right props and costumes
- Agreeing on the shooting schedule
- Organizing the cast and crew for the filming

¹ It is possible to find distribution opportunities on streaming platforms where you can actually make money, but most short films are produced for the opportunity to advance a career and break into the industry.

- Agreeing on a budget

If you are doing both jobs yourself, you risk making too many assumptions about equipment, costs, and time because you don't have another person to act as a sounding board for all your planning. In that case, you can assemble an informal advisory committee made up of cast and crew members who can listen to and critique your pre-production planning. These meetings can be priceless for a director/producer team (either two people acting together or one person doing it all). These meetings also help solidify the film team, making it far more likely that they show up when needed and help ensure the success of your project.

Casting

Casting can be a challenge for short film makers, particularly if you are working with little or no budget. Friends and family can help fill in, but for real talent you should look to your school or the local indie film community for help. If you are in a school that has a drama department, you may find all the talent you need right there. The indie film community is also a great resource of talent. Many aspiring actors struggle to find enough work to fill out their portfolio so they can break into the business. This is true for anyone trying to make it in the film and television industry, but it is also true in any major city for actors who are just trying to get work with local modeling agencies.

Get involved with your local indie film industry through any organizations that operate where you live. Check with local art councils to find out what is active in your area. You can also check with your local Chamber of Commerce and Convention and Visitors Bureau. Both organizations are well connected in their own communities and know about almost everything that is going on when it comes to other organizations of any kind. A



common practice among serious indie filmmakers is to share time and expertise with each other. In other words, help other people make their films and they will be more willing to help you make yours. If you have key technical skill, like filming or editing, you will be in high demand from other filmmakers, so trade your time and skill wisely. Be aware, in states that have strong film related unions, you may be restricted in what you can and cannot do.

Become familiar with the rules in your state. You can check with your state's film commission to find out all the rules under which you can operate.

Once connected to your local indie film community, finding actors who will work for free will become much easier for you. Casting is a skill. If you have not done much, rely on your common sense about people to help guide you. If someone reads well for a part, they will probably do a good job. It is important that you have a clear idea in your own mind about how a character should come across on screen. Do your best to explain your expectations to actors trying out for a role. Always be nice to anyone who tries out, regardless of how bad they may be. Remember, they may be starting their career too. It's an age-old adage in the business: *Be nice to everyone on the way up, because you don't know who you will meet on the way down!* If you discover that an actor is not right for the part once you start shooting, you can always make changes. This can be awkward and unpleasant, but it is part of the job of a producer. If an actor can't deliver the performance you need to make the film work, the director and the producer must decide if the film is viable. If it is, carry on as best you can. If not, explain to the actor why it is not working out. You don't have to be insulting. Just explain why it isn't working but try to be positive. Otherwise, you can always blame it on a casting mistake.

Locations

Short films usually have to rely on free locations. That is why it is always easier to write stories that take place in homes, offices or outdoors. These locations are the easiest to gain access to. When filming in public spaces, be sure that you have the proper permissions. You can check with the local community leaders to obtain permission. If you have a local film commission, they can help you with this.

If your film requires a special location, like a jail, or an exotic resort, you may have to fake it. That's o.k. The film business is all about faking it. Think of creative ways to shoot a scene using closeups and only modest props or backgrounds. Then purchase online footage to set up a scene opening. You would be amazed at how well an audience will buy into a scene with a beautiful stock footage open, followed by a character standing next to a palm tree in your neighbor's front yard. Creative filmmaking is all



about making these kinds of creative choices that save the budget. It is ultimately the job of the producer to manage these costs, but a producer can often achieve that end by working closely with a director to come up with a creative solution.

If you live in an area that has resort property, you can get a lot of mileage out of using people's homes, not for their houses, but for their views, of lake property, ocean views, or mountain vistas. Again, be creative in your thinking and leverage local resources. If you can't find a suitable location, you may have to really fake it, and build a simple set. For example, you don't need a real prison to set up a cot against a warehouse wall to simulate a jail cell. As for the rest of it, we will leave it to your creative imagination to solve these problems.

Equipment

Independent filmmakers usually invest their own money and acquire a lot of standard equipment on their own. Video cameras are so good now that you do not have to spend a lot of money to get good footage. Even high-end smart phones can produce amazing shots. Be aware that you still need to follow best practices when it comes to shooting. We cover that in the chapter on Directing. You can also buy a small light kit that will cover most common lighting situations. See the chapters on lighting and sound for more details.

If there are special needs for equipment that you do not have, you can always rent almost anything you need. Most large cities have video rental companies that can provide you with various cranes, lights, and other special equipment. You may have to make a trip to the nearest large city to find a good rental company, but if it is that important to your film, consider making the extra investment in time and money and make the trip.



Props and Costumes

Most indie films are about everyday people, making costumes a simple matter of having your cast open their closets to find the appropriate attire. Unless you are shooting vintage soldiers or ancient Romans, this is usually not a challenge. If you do have a scene that requires something more exotic, check with local museums. They are not likely to loan you their own costumes, but they will probably know who in your community might have what you need.

Simple, everyday props are generally not difficult to find. More exotic items can prove to be a challenge. Again, rely on local communities and historical organizations that may put on special events. They may help you find resources that you didn't know existed. The better connected to your local community the better.

Shooting Schedule

The shooting schedule is the most important thing you will create for your film, equal to or even more important than the script. The two documents are closely related and together, they will define everything that happens during production. A shooting schedule must take into consideration the locations where you will shoot, the time involved in getting everyone there, the amount of time it will take to shoot individual scenes, and the specific actors who must be present (as well as any special equipment that must be delivered).

To begin, the producer and the director should sit down together and work out the most efficient means for shooting the film. This will not be in chronological order. Very rarely is any film shot in the order it is written. A single location may appear in multiple places in the script but obviously, it is best to shoot all these scenes at the same time. An exception would be if



there are some special effects or makeup required. If for example, there is a zombie apocalypse at the end of the film, you would want to shoot those scenes at the same time, limiting the effort required to make up the actors. This would be true even if it required that you return to one or more locations a second time during the shooting schedule.

Once you work out those issues, you can organize the shooting schedule and work out who needs to be at what location, on what day and time. A common challenge when actually shooting can occur when someone has a conflict and can't show up. In some cases, you may have to juggle your schedule around these kinds of conflicts. Allowing for down days included in the schedule, can give you the time you need to make adjustments when you are in the middle of making your film. Give yourself, your cast and crew more time than what you expect so you can make these kinds of adjustments if necessary. There is nothing more frustrating than having to shoot two extra days at the end of your schedule only to find out the main character just went on a two-week vacation.

Once the producer and the director are confident the shooting schedule is reasonable and flexible enough to work even when stressed, you should create one more document which

you can share with the cast. This is a list of scenes with locations, days and times listed for each actor in the film. This kind of scene list helps actors be on time when and where they need to be and avoids the costly expense of having to wait for someone to show up. That is a worst-case scenario that you want to avoid at all costs.

Organizing the Shoot

Once you have your script, shooting schedule and actor's scene lists in hand, it is time to call a meeting with all hands-on deck. This will be your first pre-production meeting with all the cast and crew. Polish off your leadership skills and cover all the issues you have worked out concerning the schedule, roles, time, and budget limitations. It is important that you get your



cast and crew behind you, providing a commitment to support you and the film with whatever it takes to get it done. This is fundamental to the nature of the business and since you will be working with people who are not professionals trained in industry best practices, it is incumbent on you to set the ground rules for the production and manage expectations for their behavior on and off the set, so they can be where you need them at the right time. You should also cover best practices for being on a set for both the cast and the crew. *See the chapter on Directing for more information.*

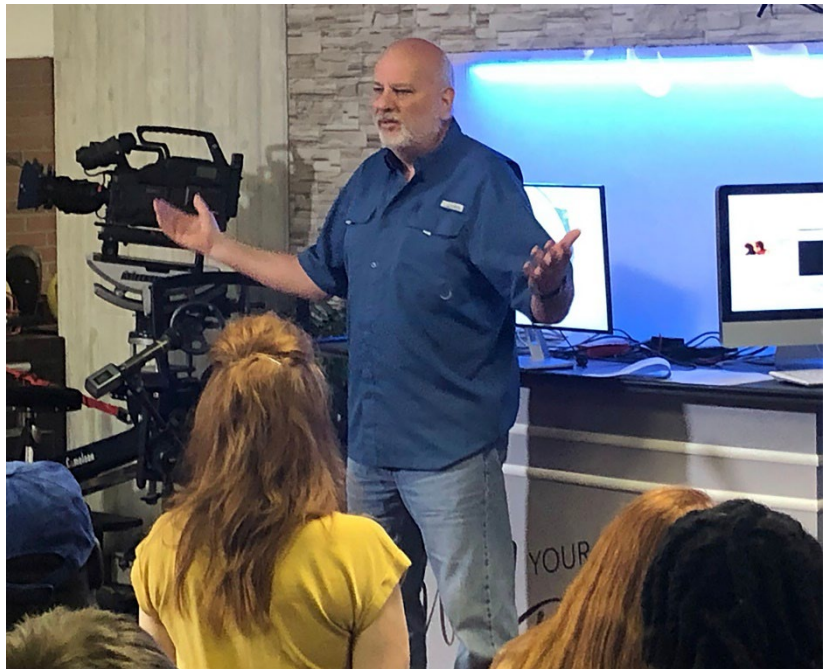
At the end of this meeting, you want everyone to feel upbeat about the project, happy to be a part of your film, and excited about the prospects of completing the film, hopefully on time and on budget. This first meeting with all the cast and crew is your only chance to get them on board, feeling like they are an important part of your team, and that the outcome is valuable to

them personally. Say so, explicitly, and thank them for all they are going to do for you. In the end, even on a low or no budget short film, every project is ultimately a win-win for everybody. Everyone should benefit by moving their career a little farther down the road. If anyone is just in it for the fun, that's o.k. too. Just make sure that you actually make it fun for them. That is great leadership in action.

Establishing a Budget

The budget is the thing that gets most people groaning, usually because it is so limited. It is the job of the director, working closely with the producer, to make sure a project is even doable in the first place. Under budget and under time will doom any film, big ones, and little ones alike. If you are working with little or no budget, you will have to work extra hard to make it work. Use all the tips we have already provided to create a budget that will work for you.

Most short films are self-funded, meaning that any hard costs that have to be covered come out of the filmmakers' pocket. So, expect to spend more than you think. And have enough money in the bank to cover them, or enough credit cards to carry the debt. If you do a good job creating a realistic budget and you successfully rely on free resources, you can bring a film in on budget and that is the goal of every good producer. If the film you want to make requires financial resources outside your limits, you can turn to other sources for funding. These include film grants and small business loans. There are online crowd funding sites that support art projects and some specifically for film projects. If you use these, follow their rules and guidelines closely.



You can also solicit funding from friends and family, but do not promise anything in return. Promising a return on an investment puts you in the sights of the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) because that amounts to selling stock in a business venture. Needless to say, that is far beyond the scope of most short filmmakers, and it is something that rarely turns out well.

Making a film cheaply does not mean you have to make a cheap film. Be smart about how you manage costs. Find locations where you can shoot for free, like the homes of friends and family, small businesses that can benefit from the free publicity, and in public places where you can get permission to film for free. Be creative about creating simple sets that create the idea of the place you want to be, and not the place itself. Get props from your friends, by borrowing items from small businesses or local, community organizations. If you have to spend money, do so at a local thrift shop or resale store. Be creative in thinking about how you can create special effects without spending any money. You don't have to build a spaceship to simulate one in the woods at night with a few well-placed lights. Take that same approach with every scene in your film. Ironically, this often creates the best effect anyway. Think about the opening scenes of E.T.

Lighting

(Personal Insights from Gary Parker)

If you observe how light changes throughout the day, you can become more aware of the wide range of lighting effects that mother nature creates. From glorious sunrises to intense bright summer days, and moody winters to spectacular sunsets that fill the western skies with amazing color stretching across the entire horizon, natural light can transform an ordinary world into an extraordinary one.

Natural light can also affect our emotions. Why is it harder to get up on a cold rainy day than a bright sunny morning? Why can we go from feeling bored and restless to suddenly feeling excited by a beautiful sunset? Light can transform how an audience reacts emotionally to a film, making them happy or sad, joyful, or thoughtful. Light can also impact an audience in more subtle ways. It can be used to set the mood and style of a film. At the same time, sound too can help manipulate human emotions, and create powerful cinematic effects. Imagine a beautiful, sunny



beach with the sound of waves rolling gently onto shore, or an intense battlefield under glaring sunlight, filled with the sounds of tanks and constant gunfire that increases in pace and volume. If you want your short film to look more like a major motion picture, create a plan to focus on the effects of light and sound that you can use to enhance the style and mood of your picture. Bring in a head lighting technician if you can (called a Gaffer) along with someone experienced in sound technology and develop a plan to manage light and sound throughout your film.

Lighting and sound can easily be neglected when making a short film. Even in feature length films, poor lighting and sound can destroy what would otherwise be a great movie. At the same time, they can also turn a film into a masterpiece. Even if you don't have any budget you

can still make your film look like a million dollars by planning your lighting themes. Kevin Costner is one of the most talented people working in Hollywood. Working as a producer, director, and of course, as an actor, he has created some of the greatest movies in the history of film.

Having native American ancestry, it is no surprise my favorite Costner movie is *Dances with Wolves*, which won twelve Academy Awards, including Best Picture, Best Director, Best Adapted Screenplay, Best Film Editing, Best Cinematography, Best Original Score and Best Sound Mixing. It is also one of only three Westerns to win the Oscar for Best Picture (the other two are *Cimarron* [1931] and *Unforgiven* [1992]). Costner produced, directed, and acted in the lead role, all to perfection. As you can see by the awards it won, Costner did just about everything to perfection in this film, and it serves as a touchstone for excellence, after which anyone can model their own work.



The Cinematography stands out in *Dances with Wolves*, creating an inspirational mood, a magical sense that life is somehow worth living in spite of the extreme challenges endured by Lieutenant John Dunbar as he is transformed by Native American culture, struggling to build a life after being nearly killed in the Civil War. Amazingly, the original budget for this film was only twelve million, a paltry sum for a major motion picture. Costner shot most of the film outdoors, in the wide-open American planes. He utilized the golden hour, the time right before sunset, when the sun is low in the sky, and everything is bathed in the warm colors of the darkening sunlight. This trick is available to anyone, and for low budget film makers, it costs absolutely nothing!

Working with Light

Without going into great technical detail, there are a few basics that you need to know about lighting. The most common light sources used in film are 1) natural light, from the sun; 2) tungsten light (the powerful lights used on movie sets from the very beginning of the industry; 3) incandescent (most commonly used in lamps, prior to LEDs); and 4) LED lighting. All four of these can be used along or in combination. There is also fluorescent lighting, but unless you buy fluorescent tubes that have been color corrected to match one of the other light sources, it

generally doesn't work well. Fluorescent lighting found in offices should be avoided if at all possible because flesh tones don't look well in this kind of light.

Light color changes from warm red, to yellow, and then to blue, as the temperature rating increases. That's right, higher temperature lights tend to be bluer. That may seem backwards to you, but remember from science class, the blue part of the flame is the hottest! So incandescent is the warmest light, followed by tungsten, then natural sunlight. LEDs can be purchased at specific temperature levels so they can match any of the other three light sources. LEDs also have the advantage of being dimmable, making it easy to adjust light levels on the set.

It is possible to use any of these light sources in any combination, which we will touch on in the following best practices. Unless otherwise stated, the following examples will use only one type of light source, but you can combine multiple sources. Just remember that the color temperature should match the scene you are trying to create. Outdoor scenes should use (or



look like) natural sunlight, unless of course you want to shoot on a cloudy day, which would be much cooler. Indoors, you would typically simulate a mix of window light (sunlight) and indoor, incandescent lighting. If you are shooting in an office setting, fluorescent lighting is acceptable, but you need to color correct

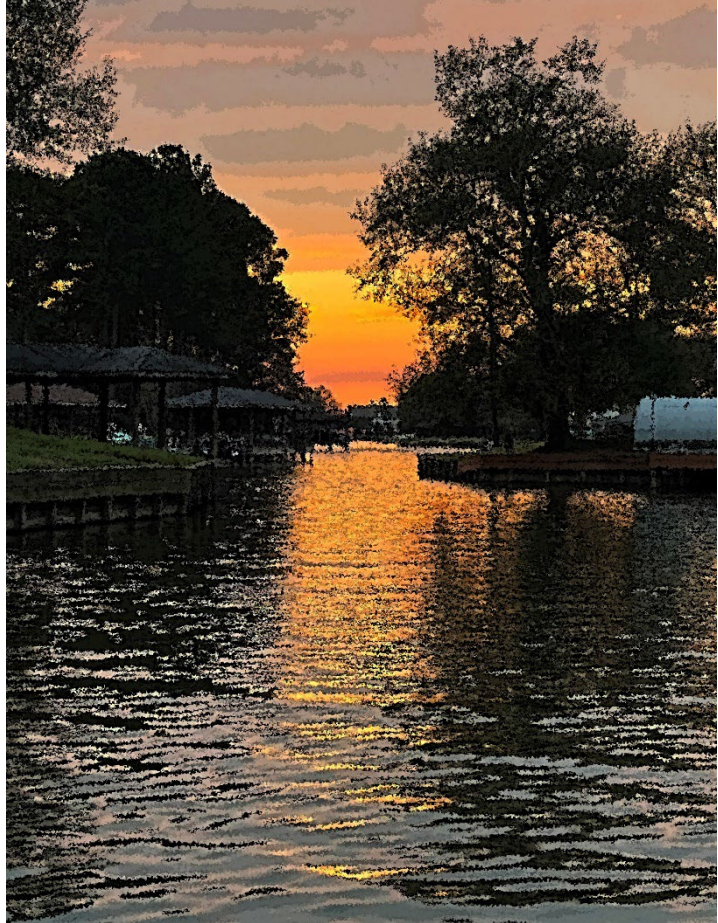
for it, if possible, by using additional light sources. If you have windows in the scene, natural sunlight can help correct for awkward color effects.

First time filmmakers often shoot their films indoors, relying on an inexpensive light kit, often using a softbox to spread even light across the room. This is a common technique used in television news to simplify lighting on a set so everything and every person is always in good light. The problem is that doing this creates flat light across the set, making everything seem uniform and frankly, about as boring as a news set! Natural light, used effectively, can give you a wide range of effects, from the warm glow of late afternoon, to the intense, midday sun. Use natural light to bring your film to life when shooting outdoors. Inside, window light, diffused with a reflector can be a powerful tool for creative photography. Control the boundaries of this light and manage the location and position of the actors to the window and the angle of the sunlight to modify the effect you are trying to create. The size and location of windows can restrict how

large a room you can light, but mixing natural light with light modifiers, like softboxes, umbrellas, and reflectors will give you a lot more control over the lighting effects that you are creating.

The Golden Hour

Because natural lighting can be such a powerful tool in your bag of lighting tricks, research your locations to explore the impact of sunlight throughout the day before you begin production. Local geography can have a big impact on what is and isn't possible. Alaska has dramatic golden light in the winter, but that might be a bit too cold, not to mention, too far away for you. In Texas, the vast West Texas plains are only a few hours' drive away from most cities in the Eastern half of the state. Costner shot *Dancing with Wolves* farther north in the great Western plain, but West Texas is part of that same geography. If you want to utilize the golden hour, arrive in the early afternoon for rehearsal and have your entire cast and crew ready to roll when the time is right. You only have little more than an hour to shoot, so you will want to capture as much footage as you possibly can. Plan ahead on how you want to shoot your scenes to maximize the opportunity to capture this magical light. Block out your scenes ahead of time and prime your crew to work quickly, before the sun sets, making good use of every second you have to shoot.



Pay close attention to your camera exposures because they will be changing constantly until dark. The scene will quickly fall apart if one actor is exposed to one light level, and the person they are talking to is in a different light temperature and level. Take production stills with your cell phone so you can quickly check from the last scene to the next scene, because you won't want to waste precious time to playback what you just shot. ISO (a measure of the ability of film to shoot at a specific brightness range) will vary more when shooting late in the day, so you will have to correct your exposure almost continuously during the golden hour.

Shooting Outside During the Day

Shooting at high noon creates dark shadows that don't look good, creating harsh shadows and deep eye sockets which are very unflattering. Unless you are trying to create a dramatic effect on purpose, avoid shooting at high noon. Switch to shooting scenes in the shade (or indoors) between an hour before and an hour after noon. Strong sunlight between 9:00 and 11:00 in the morning or between 1:00 and 3:00 in the afternoon creates more manageable shadows. Even then, shadows can always present challenges when shooting outdoors. Pay close attention to how shadows appear on screen, particularly when actors are moving across a scene or into a building. Medium and closeup shots can help overcome these challenges when used with additional, tungsten or LED lighting to fill in shadows. Wide shots should be carefully composed to avoid problems with shadows when shooting outside during the day.

Be sure to check the weather report for the day of your shoot. Clouds can make a huge difference in how your shoot turns out. Beautiful high clouds on the horizon always make a sunset but lower grey clouds create flat, even lighting that can make a scene look dull and defeat the whole reason for shooting outside during the day. These challenges cannot always be avoided. Sometimes you can deal with this by shooting a scene using closeups, then come back and shoot it again with medium and wide shots when the cloud cover changes. This is where the practical aspects of filmmaking will require that you make hard choices and compromise as necessary to complete your film on time and on budget.

Shooting Outdoors at Night

Here's something fun to try if you need a totally different look from golden hour. Use the blue hour! Blue hour is the thirty minutes immediately following the sun clearing the horizon. There will be about a half hour of light you can use before darkness prevents you from shooting without artificial lighting. It is a much cooler light temperature so it can be used as a night shot with enough detail to see the scene. If you are shooting on city streets, use existing streetlight to provide basic light to your scene, and supplement it with additional light. You can bounce cool LED lights off walls to help provide additional lighting. For closeups you can cheat with almost any type of light but be careful that the color temperature doesn't look like daylight.



Film Noir became popular with detective movies in the thirties, and it defined a whole new way to film in black and white, with harsh shadows and high contrast scenes. This approach was used both indoors and outside at night, to create a distinctive style for this whole genre. It is simulated even today, in movies like *Blade Runner*, where the lighting is very dark and moody. Be creative in defining a style for your short film, then achieve the effects you want with the creative use of light.

Shooting indoors during the Day

Three-Point Lighting

Two-point Lighting uses only two lights, a key light, and a fill, to illuminate faces more attractively than with soft lighting found in news studios. Everything we can say about two-point lighting applies to three-point lighting, which simply adds a third light to light up the background. Three-point lighting is widely used as a basic strategy when shooting indoors. Even if simulating a night scene, most gaffers will start with a basic three-point strategy and then supplement, if necessary, with additional lights. These strategies can go off in a thousand directions using multiple schemes, but we will describe the basic set up.



Three-point lighting consists of a key light which is your main light for the scene. Your next light is a fill light, and it is designed to fill in the shadows and blank spaces created by your key light. Together they create a three-dimensional view of your subject giving it shape and size. The third light is the background light which can be used to backlight your subject with a gentle halo to separate them from the background, and again create depth and a 3D feel for your subject

and scenery. A background light placed up high and in back of an actor can create highlights that make them appear more attractive, or even dream like.

The key light, when used to light a person, is generally set 45 degrees off the front of the subject and 45 degrees above their head. This is a nice flattering light for people. Also place that key light on the good side of the persons face, or the side that represents where the natural light would be coming as if from a window. A good place to start with your fill light is 45 degrees to the opposite side of the key light. Set it to about half of the intensity of the key light. From that starting place, you can adjust the lighting to your liking. The back light is set behind your subject and can be used a hundred different ways to add texture to your subject and scene. You can use it to light the background or use it to light the hair of your subject. This will increase the separation of your subject from the background and increase the depth of the scene.

Working with Practical Lighting

After you have set your three-point lighting as a starting point, look at adding “practical’s”. Practical lighting is any type of light commonly found in the real world. These include things like streetlights, table lamps, candles, flashlights, and any other type of light that you might find in the type of scene you are shooting. Even the light from a TV is considered a practical light and can be used effectively to create special lighting effects. All of these lights give your scene a sense of realism because we all know that light comes from somewhere.

Unless you are trying to create a dramatic lighting effect, scenes should be lit so that an audience is not distracted by strange lighting that doesn’t seem like it is coming from the right kind of light source. A streetlight should not cast daylight color on the scene, nor should a desk light for an indoor scene, and you don’t want cool moonlight shining on a daytime scene at the



beach. There are always going to be exceptions to any rule, so remember the style of the film you are making and the effect you want to create. Enhancing the realism of your scene usually means using what an audience would expect, given the location and time of day which you are either shooting or simulating. So, placing real lamps and lighting fixtures in your scene only makes sense. When positioning studio lights that are not in the scene, consider what lights to use, what

color temperature you want for the bulbs, and the appropriate intensity of the light for the scene. If you want a warm and cozy feel, put a table lamp with an incandescent bulb in the scene. Light from an LED or Tungsten light would seem out of place in such a scene.

To create the best lighting possible for your short film, spend time playing with the lighting before everyone arrives on set so you know exactly how the scene will photograph.

When scouting locations, make a couple of trips and look around your environment

at various times of the day. Then plan on recreating what you see and avoid using lights that distract an audience from the look and feel you want to achieve. When you get on the set, use light like a brush to paint your scene with the color and intensity varying across the screen. Painting with light is the perfect metaphor for talking about lighting a scene. It is really more than just a metaphor. It is literally what a good gaffer does anytime he is working on the set, indoors or out.



Sound

(Personal Insights from Gary Parker)

Sound, like lighting, can easily be overlooked when shooting film or video. A poorly executed soundtrack can leave you with only half a movie. Only half the movie is in front of your eyes on the screen. The other half is in the sound in your ears. Have you ever had to replay a key scene on your Television or missed key dialogue in an action movie because the explosions were too loud? Even the major production companies struggle with sound. I can't tell you how many movies I've given up on trying to watch them on TV, because the sound was designed for the theater where expensive speakers let you hear every drop of sound. Sadly, they rarely remix the sound for television or DVD's when they release movies to the public. A few lucky people have the right sound equipment in their homes to hear movies as they were intended to be heard when they were made for the theater. The rest of us have to suffer.

We live in a noisy world, but as we move about our daily lives, we tend to tune out much of this noise. In contrast, when we watch a movie, we expect the sounds to be there. Without the sounds of city traffic, a scene filmed on the streets would sound dead. Every scene needs to include the sounds we would commonly expect to be



there. They should not be overly loud, but they have to be there. Neither should they be a cacophony of sounds constantly running in the background. As a filmmaker, you have to achieve a balance between too little sound, and too much sound or the audience will notice. When they do, they will stop following the story and then you lose them.

In ordinary life, our brains process all the sounds around us before we hear them. A part of our brain decides what to let in and what to tune out. Our conscious mind only hears what our subconscious mind lets through. As filmmakers, we must manage that task for our audience. We control what they hear, how they hear it, and when they hear it. You should pay as much

attention to your sound as you do with the visual images you are recording. If you do, the sound design of your short film can enhance your production to the point that it feels like a real movie.

There are four elements that make up the sound in a film. They are 1) the dialogue track; 2) the ambient soundtrack; 3) the special effects track; and 4) the music track. We will discuss each of these in turn.

The Dialogue Track

Obviously, you need a clean clear recording of your characters talking to each other. If your audience cannot understand your actors, you have not produced a watchable movie. This is not a problem the sound technician can solve for you. As the director, it is up to you to make sure your actors read their lines clearly so the words can be understood. Today, it has become popular for actors to loudly whisper, sometimes throughout a whole scene. The film editor can address this in the edit suite, raising the sound levels in the recording for each actor, one at a time. This is often done whenever one actor speaks louder than the other actors in the scene. We have seen plenty of examples where correcting this is so poorly done that it is impossible for the audience to hear what



someone is saying. This is a disaster for a film, and it should be avoided at all costs. We have never seen an academy winning film that has this problem... which is an indication that extra care was taken when filming to make a perfect dialogue track. That should be your goal, but it is hard to achieve. If possible, watch the dailies (the film you shoot each day) to identify any kind of sound problem, and shoot the scene, or partial scene, again the next day.

You need to mic the scene to capture good clean audio from your actors. Most filmmakers use a boom microphone when they are shooting in a wide variety of situations, including wide, medium, and closeup shots of their actors. Boom microphones consist of a small diaphragm condenser mic mounted on the end of a boom pole so the audio technician, or boom operator, can get the mic as close to the actors without getting the microphone into the shot. These microphones are very directional and have a tight cone of reception, so you will need to point the mic in the direction of the mouth of the person speaking and get it as close as possible without getting it in the picture. This technique will help eliminate the background noise in the

scene. You will need a separate boom person to handle the boom mic, while your sound person is monitoring the recording. If you are the director, you can also monitor the sound by listening to the camera mic using headphones. It's always better to have two people listening to the dialogue recording in real time, just to improve the chances that you catch problems when they can easily be fixed.

Your sound person will have to have excellent hearing so they can listen for any extraneous noise you don't want to pick up, like cars, trucks and trains going by outside, or air conditioners, refrigerators, or any other strange noise. It is a good practice to turn off all electrical equipment when shooting interior scenes. These kinds of noises are easily overlooked until you get in the edit suite where they suddenly sound extremely loud and annoying to you. Editing



software can reduce any constant sound in the background, but the editor will have to double check all the recorded video and adjust levels as they work through the project. Some sounds are harder to reduce than others, so don't be surprised if you find an extraneous noise that is unusually troublesome.

When using a boom, your boom person should be trained to be sure the boom is never in the picture. A good practice is for the boom person to intentionally put the boom in front of the camera when the production coordinator calls out the scene using the clapboard and the director calls out "rolling", but before he calls "action," and the actors begin speaking. Then the boom person slowly pulls the microphone away from the lens

until it is out of shot. Usually, the DP will call out to the boom person that it is clear. This is an excellent practice. It trains the entire crew to ensure that a boom mic is never in the picture. Of course, it is still possible for a boom to drop back into frame, so the DP should always be on the lookout for this problem, especially if actors are walking about during a scene. It can be incredibly challenging for even an experienced boom person to keep a mic out of the picture all the time.

This is another good reason to watch the dailies as much as you can, so you can reshoot a shot if necessary.

If your actors are walking in an extremely wide shot and you cannot reach them with your boom mic, you will need to use wireless lavalier microphones hidden on your actors. These mics are omnidirectional, meaning they pick up sound from all directions, but the head still needs to be pointing in the direction of your actor's mouth. It is always a challenge trying to hide these kinds of mics. One frequent problem is the noise created when the mic rubs against clothing. If you use lavalier mics, be sure your sound person is listening for this problem. Lavalier mics come with a wind screen which can be helpful to isolate the mic from clothing interference.

Some first-time filmmakers will only use a microphone mounted on the camera when shooting dialogue. If you do this, find the quietest place you can shoot and get the camera as close as you can to the actors. Because you shoot a scene multiple times, you may have to use the sound from the closeups and match it to their dialogue in the master or medium shot. For that reason, it is a good practice to have your actors repeat their lines exactly as written and in the same tone of voice whenever you shoot the same scene multiple times. If the actors change what they say, instead of what is written in the script, this technique might not save you in the edit suite. Of course, it is hard for a director to get the actors to read their lines perfectly every time. One reason you make extra takes is because a good director is looking for the best possible performance. And sometimes that means letting an actor drift away from the script and read lines using their own words. If you try to match up sound from a closeup with a medium shot, you may find the sound does not work well. You will need to get lucky in post-production, but it can be done, if the actors read their lines the same way in every take.



The Ambient Track

The ambient track is the atmosphere or background sounds you hear when filming a scene. Every scene and location will have its own combination of ambient background noise. In a perfect world this soundtrack would recreate the sound you hear in the real world. On-location, outdoors in a city much of this sound is out of your control. You cannot shut down people walking

about, or car traffic passing by, so you capture whatever happens when filming, and much of the time, it is not good.

If I had a dollar for every time I was shooting outdoors near traffic, and someone drives by honking, I would be a wealthy person. The only way to handle this is to stop filming until the sound passes, then make another take... sometimes over and over again until you get what you want. The same thing can happen when someone walks by on a city street and freezes when they realize they are on camera, then sheepishly try to inch their way out of the camera, or worse, stand there like they are just another extra in the film. Of course, instead of acting like an extra, who would have kept on walking, they just stay in the scene and stare at the camera. No one on camera ever looks into the camera when filming. That is called “the fourth wall” and it is broken only rarely in film (as in *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off*).



One way to avoid these kinds of problems is to shoot on Sunday mornings when most people are either in Church, or still in bed. Another approach is to record ambient noise before or after you shoot a scene. Record from different spots around your location to get as many variations in your sound recording as possible. You can add these in when editing and adjust the levels as necessary to help make your scene as realistic as possible. That’s the reason for using ambient noise in the first place.

The Special Sound Effects Track

The special sound effects track is where you can get really creative and have a lot of fun. There are obvious sounds you will want to add, depending on the script. These include things like explosions, gun shots, slamming doors and various fighting noises. You will also want to mix in some sounds that blend in with the ambient sound track you have already recorded. But there are also more subtle sounds that you can add to bring your film to life.

For example, when a character looks at their watch and, in the background, we hear their phone ring at the same time; or a dog barking in the background just as they hear a sound at the front door. These little sound effects can really add a lot to a scene. Focus on adding something during your establishing scenes, when you set up the time and place for a scene. A little extra sound effect can help make an establishing scene seem more realistic. Also look for places in the script that are important plot points or dramatic moments, then brainstorm possible sound effects that could enhance the moment. Anything you do on the soundtrack will stand out, so make it relevant to the script. This little trick can help get your film noticed at film festivals. A well-made film with a great soundtrack has a far better chance of winning an award against one that has a great script but a poor soundtrack.

You can also purchase sound, just like music, to add to your short film. Check out royalty free sites that specialize in sound and music to find something specific you need. Be sure that it works in your film. Anything that sounds a little off will make your film seem less realistic, not more so. Major motion pictures

use foley artists, who specialize in making a lot of ordinary sounds as well as special ones. If you study the art of foley work, you can make a lot of these sounds yourself. Orson Wells famously scared half the nation during his national radio broadcast of *The War of the Worlds*, mostly by adding some scary sounds. One sound broadcast live during the show



seemed to be particularly disturbing to Americans living in 1938. When the alien's spacecraft landed the audience could hear the sound of the spacecraft doors slowly opening. The sound was made by an assistant opening a mayonnaise jar inside a toilet! Another eerie sound effect that is hard to forget is from the sounds of the giant ants in the 1954 movie, *"Them!"* I always thought it sounded like a squeaking fan belt on a home air conditioner, but it is actually a

recording made by mixing the calls of tree frogs with the calls of a common songbirds. Go figure! If they could create such great sound effects in the first half of the 20th Century, imagine what you can do on your own today.

The Music Track

The music track can be the most important track of all. It can do more than enhance a film. It can make it shine! I love music. I love music to put it in as many scenes as I can. You can purchase music on royalty free music sites. If the music is old enough, anyone can record a modern version without having to pay royalties. Unfortunately, this is not true for most popular music which is usually still under copyright protection, but if you want a royalty free version of classical music, you can probably find one (we use the theme from the movie 2001, A Space Odyssey, in our IFF opening [Richard Strauss's "Also Sprach Zarathustra"]).

There are two ways to use music in a film. The first way is to enhance individual moments with a few notes. Finding royalty free recordings for this purpose is easy. Watch a few olde films to find simple examples of how this works. Sometimes modern films take a simple approach to music, but older films are easier to study. Copy their approach (but not their actual music).



The other important way to use music in film, is by including the soundtrack of real songs. Because popular artists are generally not available, or affordable, I like to use original singer songwriters whenever I can. For a short film, you only need a single song or two. Use one song to establish an overall mood for your film. The second song can be a standout feature, used either in the opening or at the end, or both. You can find some popular songs on royalty free music sites, but really good music is harder to find. That is why I like to use original songwriters. Surprisingly, they are

more around than you might think. You can check with your favorite bands. Many of these bands will have original music that they never perform because local audiences only want to hear cover music. If they don't have any original songs, ask them if they know anyone who does. Local musicians are usually well known, at least among themselves, so it is not hard to find the best songwriters in any community. It is also awfully hard for a songwriter to get their music

recorded by a major label, so there is a lot of great music out there waiting to be discovered. When you find an original songwriter willing to let you use their song or songs in your film to help promote themselves, sign a simple agreement that gives you permission to use their song(s) in your music track. Agree not to use them for any other purpose, except in your trailer and other commercials or promotions you might make. Sometimes you can find a local songwriter who takes such an interest in your film that they are willing to help you fill in your soundtrack with other little pieces of music. It is good practice for them, and you can give them a bigger film credit as a result.

When using an original songwriter, I want my audience to ask, who is that singing? Local audiences may know the songwriter if he performs locally. Regional musicians can have an even bigger impact. I also want to see the audience reaction when they watch the film. A great song can add that “wow” factor that can turn a good film into a great one. It’s important that the song be relevant to your script, so make sure that you use it in such a way that it fits with what is happening on screen when it is playing, or otherwise fits with the theme of your film.

In dialogue scenes you want to use instrumental music only, so you can hear the actors, but in montages, opening scenes and in the closing credits, find some melodies and lyrics that enhance your story. Lighting and sound are your friends if you plan to use them properly. Prepare a plan ahead of time to address lighting and sound issues throughout your screenplay. Build a team to help you create and manage all aspects of lighting, sound, and music. Team members should include your crew and any extra people who can contribute, especially local musicians, who will add tremendous credibility to your project and help motivate the rest of your team who will be impressed by the inclusion of a musical expert.



Perfecting your skills in video and film requires a lot of practice, particularly when it comes to getting lighting and sound right. Both are easy to do badly, but the reward for doing them well comes when you proudly show off your film to a live audience or include it in your portfolio of projects. This is true for everyone that works on your film projects, but even more so for you, when you are the producer or the director of your own film. As with every other aspect of filmmaking that we have covered in this book, take the extra time to do it right and you will see the extra work pay off in the quality of your production. If your film is good enough to win a

local, regional, or even a national film festival, it will be because you took the time to plan and execute a lighting and sound plan along with managing all the other aspects of filmmaking described in this book. This short film of yours is the next step to creating a career in corporate video or film and television.

Directing a Short Film

(Personal Insights from Gary Parker)

I have been directing and producing Indie Films for over twenty years. I have worked with some great actors, some of whom you have seen on screen. I have also produced multiple documentaries, and short films. The purpose of this book is to teach you how to make short films, so I'm going to share some insights I've learned over the years, including differences between filming short films vs. full length feature films.

In many ways directing a short film is harder than a full-length feature film. You have less time for character development, less time for backstory, and less time to pull the audience into your film. These challenges mean that, the most important thing you need in your hands before you start filming, is a good story. A great screenplay will establish a relationship with your audience almost from the first scene. A great story gives your audience reason to care enough about your characters to enjoy watching your film and remain engaged as the story unfolds on screen.



Gary Parker, Producer/Director

Many directors start out writing their own short stories in the beginning of their careers and this is great practice for first time directors. By being in charge of the screenplay and the directing, they can exercise more control over the final cut. You can't really learn how to direct unless you also know how to write. That is because filmmaking is an art that marries these two skills together in amazing ways. Major motion picture directors spend countless hours searching for the perfect script, often rewriting what they are handed in order to make it work. In the end, it is the director that defines the vision for the film, sometimes making major transformations in the original script.

When you begin making your first short films you will likely have little or no budget to work with. This can actually be a blessing. Working without a budget, forces you to be creative in every step of your production. This experience is the perfect training for polishing off your filmmaking skills. If you continue your career in the industry, it will prepare you for your first full length feature project because you will understand how to make the best of every dime you spend. You will learn when to beg, borrow, and barter for your cast, crew, and equipment needs by making low or no budget films. A producer handles these tasks, but a successful

director will work closely with his producer to address these challenges, so I suggest you find a good friend with excellent organizational skills to be your producer.

Directing Skills

As Director you create a film's artistic and dramatic aspects using the script as your guide to visualize the story. You lead the film crew and actors in the fulfilment of that vision. The director has a key role in choosing the cast members, production design and all the creative aspects of filmmaking. If the director does his job well the film will be well received and appreciated for fulfilling the artistic vision of the director. As the director you will be the hero or the heel, depending on how your short film turns out. So, being creative is the most important skill that any great director brings to the table, but it is hardly the only qualification needed.

At a minimum, a good director must possess:

- The ability to work well with others.
- Good leadership skills.
- The ability to use your initiative to solve challenges.
- The ability to accept criticism and work well under pressure.
- The ambition and a desire to succeed.
- Knowledgeable about film equipment and production process,
- Attentive to details throughout the production process.
- The ability to multi-task on the set and during production.
- Adaptable to setbacks and capable of making changes.

The Ability to work well with others is at the top of the list for a reason. You must know your cast and crew and how to lead and motivate them. You must create this short film despite budget and endless limitations which create frustrations for everyone on the set. These first short films are your calling card, your entry into this magical world in which you want to pursue a career. Can you even imagine how amazing it would be to work in film and video production for the rest of your life? I have been the luckiest man alive because I have spent over forty years doing video and film production as a career. I have not worked a day yet that I didn't enjoy, and I am always learning new things about the technology, and how to polish off the skills described in the list above. I have made a good living and done a



job most people only dream about. So, treat this short film with the joy it deserves, which is the first of tens of thousands of minutes of visual storytelling that will make up your career if you are determined enough to pursue it successfully.

There are a number of things you need to do before you get to the fun stuff, working on the set with your cast and crew. You will need to attend to these details during pre-production. The most important relationship you have is with the Producer, who will likely become your best friend while you are making your short film because you will depend on this person more than anyone else to keep your production moving forward. The Producer keeps everything working in the background during filming so you can keep your mind focused on being creative when it comes to blocking, setting up shots, and directing the actors. During pre-production you will spend much of your time together with your producer, planning every aspect of your production. Pre-production is a collaboration between you and your producer, providing for what is needed during production, based on what is possible within the time and budget limitations you are given. In addition to the list that we provided in the first chapter; you will want to talk about these things during pre-production.

- Set design
- Location shooting
- Travel plans
- Acquisition of props
- Music and other digital assets
- Salaries for the cast and crew
- Equipment needs
- And of course, the budget

These should be addressed before production begins. During pre-production, when schedules are not set in stone, issues can be addressed, as necessary. All questions regarding the actual production work must be worked out ahead of time, while working out the final production schedule. This includes finding and arranging for locations needed for shooting, set designs, construction plans and actual set construction. Of course, on a short film, you may be able to avoid set construction altogether, with the creative use of locations and props to simulate the scene without wiping out your limited budget. Working closely with your producer to work out all your expenses ahead of time and establish a tight shooting schedule will do more to ensure the success of your project than anything else you do. It will also help you avoid big headaches when filming starts.

Building your Team: Your Crew

The most important crew member you will hire is the Director of Photography (DP). In both short films and big feature films, the DP is normally the second in command on the set during filming. As his title suggests, the DP will create the visual fabric of your film, based on your vision as the Director. On short films, the Director of Photography is also the camera operator. If you are lucky enough to have an assistant camera operator, it will free up the DP for more important tasks. An assistant camera operator can help with camera set-up, file management (for all those



files you have to keep track of) and running the second camera where needed. This allows the DP, as much as possible, to manage the crew for you, freeing you up, as the Director, to focus on working with the cast, working out shots, and setting up blocking. During filming, the DP is the most important person on the set, next to the director.

Building a great crew comes down to finding the best people you can get with the most experience. These may be difficult to find, so look for team players, people who love your project and believe in your dream. Good people who are as passionate as you about filmmaking, will make up for what they are missing in experience, by being open to learning and taking constructive criticism. It is far easier to work with people willing to learn than with even seasoned professionals who care little for the film you are making. If you have no budget for crew, look to family, friends, and classmates who want to work on your film. Let them read the script and encourage them to offer up ideas that might make your film better. When you are recruiting your team, help them get excited about your film by sharing your vision for what you want to create. When they suggest ideas for your film, listen without criticizing, and let them buy into your vision so they will want to help you create the film you really want to make.

Once you are on set, you must limit everyone’s input to save time. As the Director, you are the creative captain of this ship... and there can be only one captain. Managing your time wisely is half the battle to keeping a production on time and on budget. Instruct your crew to turn to your Director of Photography when they have questions about what to do. Your DP can always send them over to you if necessary. Sometimes the crew will have input that is valid and useful, and this should be passed on to you as the Director. Your DP can help save time on the set when any distraction can slow things down, costing you precious minutes you can’t afford to waste.

Building your Team: Your Cast

Casting is the first and one of the most important parts of successful filmmaking. You want to find actors who can portray their characters as they were written if your audience is going to relate to them. Miss casting actors can destroy the integrity of your vision. Some characters, particularly in short films, may have little or no dialogue, so you must rely on actors who can act. The good news is that there is a lot of talent out there, even in your own school. Look to your theatrical classes for this raw talent. Don’t be hesitant to be picky when casting your movie, even when your actors are working for free. Give small parts to family and friends but for key roles, cast the best talent you can find. Hold open auditions and invite as many potential



candidates as possible. If you have too many actors trying out for the same part, consider that a good thing! Remember to always be considerate when casting actors. There is no need to be mean or insulting. That is unprofessional, and it will come back to haunt you. Collaborate closely with your producer and screenwriter during casting. They will have their own ideas about what a particular role should look and sound like. Listen to their input carefully before you make up your mind. Ultimately, it is the Director’s choice when it comes to who gets what part.

During casting calls, have actors read lines from the actual script. Spend enough time with them to see if you want to work with them. Sometimes a great actor can be difficult to work with or unprofessional. Being on time and in character is the minimal level of professionalism that you should expect. Anything less will risk disrupting the schedule and create personal problems for the rest of the cast and crew. Avoid these situations by hiring good people before you get on set. As much as possible, cast actors that are right for the part. This is more than about looking right for the part. Appearances matter, but even more important, when reading for a part, an actor should express the essence of the character. Getting this right on your part, as the director, is essential if you want to cast the right person for the role.

Also look for people who see this as an opportunity to improve their skills and build a portfolio of work that can help them find more opportunities. In the end, the cast should be proud to be part of your film and excited to show off their work to their family, friends, and peers working in film.

Managing on the Set

Once you have handled the business side with your Producer, and you have hired a crew and cast for your film; now the fun stuff begins. The first day on the set is exciting, but it can also be a little stressful and not as productive as you would like, so bring some patience and whip that film making army of yours into a lean, mean producing machine.

The set is where all the pre-production planning pays off. Getting started may be a little rough because everyone will be looking to you, as the Director, to tell them what to do. After a rough morning on the first day, your cast and crew should settle down into a routine so your production can move smoothly. Your team will be looking to you with anticipation as they learn how the production is going to proceed. Now they will begin to have fun and can enjoy the process. Life is good. The crew is feeling confident. The cast is falling into their characters. Your job is beginning to feel easy. I wish I could say that everything will go smoothly from this moment on, but it never does. There will be questions and challenges that pop-up all day long. As the Director, you just keep smiling through it all. Remain claim and



delegate as much as possible so you can keep the production on time and on budget. Your producer can handle the business side of things, like making sure people are in the right place... and lunch is served on time. Your DP can take care of faulty recording media and the light that just got knocked over and broken. It is important for you, as the director, to stay calm and focused on the big picture and keep everyone moving forward. Remember the old adage, "Never let them see you sweat!" The director is the leader of the team, and you need to embrace that, not by being bossy or pushy with people, but by inspiring them with confidence and good communication.

Working with a Line Producer

Another key team member we have not talked about is the line producer. On a short film, the same person may take on the rolls of producer and line producer, but these roles are in charge of different tasks which can be assigned to two different people. A producer, whatever they may be called (i.e., assistant producer, associate producer, or executive producer), is in charge of the budget, financing, casting, and creating the production schedule. A line producer is in charge of the activity on the set. They help make sure that the needs of everyone on the set are met. That can mean anything and everything from handling lunch and organizing the cast, to watching for problems during filming and offering solutions. A good line producer can help you avoid costly errors and generally ensure that things go smoothly throughout production.

Start each day, and after each lunch break, with a quick production meeting with your staff and crew to ensure that everyone is on the same page. Go over what scenes are going to be shot, who needs to be there, and what needs to be done. There can be many details that must be accounted for during shooting. An assistant director and the line producer are largely responsible for ensuring that everything and everyone is in



place and available when they are needed during shooting. A full-length feature film usually requires multiple assistants to deal with all these details. Indie film producers must deal with a multitude of challenges that could require additional assistance. Just how much help you need should be addressed during pre-production to ensure that things go smoothly during shooting.

It is very expensive to go back and reshoot scenes which is rarely done in short and low budget films. Getting it right the first time is important to the success of every film and television production. As the director, rely on your line producer to handle most of the production details that your DP doesn't need to be bothered with. A director, DP and a line producer make a great team if they all know what they should focus on, so have meetings with just the three of you to talk about those issues, prior to and during filming.

Working with Lighting and Sound Technicians

Lighting and sound are key technologies on the set, so you will want experienced people handling these jobs for you. If your crew lacks experience, you will have to coach them, at least through the first few scenes. Once you are comfortable with their performance, you can relax and focus on shooting the scenes, shot by shot. A full-blown course on lighting is beyond the scope of this book but let me give you a few tips that will help ensure that every scene comes off looking good. Even a small light kit can provide you with all the tools you need to make a quality film. You can use soft boxes or LEDs to fill in broadly across a set, and then make key elements pop with spotlights. When lighting a set, imagine that you are painting with light. Observe the image in the view finder as you move lights around until you are satisfied with the results. You can change up the lighting with each shot, so this needs the constant attention of the DP. The



director should regularly double check the image to ensure the desired effect is achieved. A good director can rely on his DP most of the time, but there are cases, as for example during a tight closeup, or anytime a director is trying to create a special lighting effect, when the DP should look to the director to double check their work. If you have one or more lighting technicians assisting the DP, changing up lighting, shot by shot is easy to do. If you do not have formal lighting technicians, you can bring on untrained crew members (or actors that have nothing to do) to help move lights around. Limiting the work of the DP to manage the movement of lights will make your production go much faster. The DP can remain at the camera, monitoring the effects on the shot as others move lights around on the set.

As with lighting, sound is critical to getting the final result you want. Do not neglect the importance of sound on your film. Audio can make or break your film. Pretty pictures with bad sound are only half a movie at best and mostly a distraction for your audience for which they

will never forgive you. Again, just as with an inexperienced lighting crew, spend extra time the first day working with your sound technicians to ensure they are doing a good job. It may seem like a lot of extra work, double checking the sound on every shot, but film with poor sound is no better than not having any film at all... so, stop and review the sound for every shot, until you can confidently rely on your sound crew to capture the sound you need.

Shoot like you Edit

Remember the Director's decisions are final, but even a director must live within the limits established by the budget. You must get it right when shooting so that editing will fulfill the vision. You do not want to be sitting in the edit suite, saying to yourself, *there is no way to fix this problem!* The best time to fix things when they go wrong is on the set. The Director, the DP, and the line producer should address major issues whenever they are identified and come up with work arounds to ensure the editor has all the footage needed to complete the film. This may require that some compromise be reached so the film can be completed on time. In some cases, this might involve bringing the scriptwriter in to consult, rewriting scenes as necessary to make the storyline work better, regardless of what went wrong. Once again and I can't say it enough, ***it is far better to do this during filming rather than waiting to "fix it in post-production" when the options are way more limited.***

Perhaps the best kept secret in the profession, is learning how to shoot like you edit. What this means is that the director must visualize the finished picture in their mind and plan

out the shots as they should appear in the final cut of the film. A good Director naturally tends to do this, in part because it is a good production practice but also because it is the best way to guarantee that the vision for the film is fully achieved. No film that has been patched together in an edit suite just to make it work is very good. A film that has been well thought through by the director is easier to edit because it



already fits the vision the director has for it. So, shoot like you edit and you will make your job easier in the edit suite. This simple approach to filmmaking will do more to bring your film in on time and on budget more than anything else you could do. More importantly, it will guarantee that your film flows well, is easy to follow, and makes sense to your audience.

Building a Shot List

If you have thought through your film, shot by shot, and know exactly how you want to film it, then you do not need a shot list. However, most successful Directors come to the set each day with a shot list in hand. It is not unusual for a director to stay up late into the night, reading the script and working out, page by page, exactly how he wants to shoot each scene. If you do this, it is only natural to write down your ideas, creating a shot list to guide you through the next day. This is not necessary for a short film, but it is a good practice, and it will help you train yourself to be successful on longer films and hopefully one day, to work as a director on a full-length, feature film.

If you are shooting action or fight scenes, you may want to storyboard the movement, shot by shot. This is often done on major motion pictures because it is the best way to guarantee that an action scene flows well and makes sense to the audience. Major motion pictures will often have a fight director, or second unit director, who is responsible for filming these kinds of scenes. Interestingly enough, Steven Spielberg enjoys the role of the second unit director so much that he often performs it himself, even on films he has produced after hiring another person to direct the film. Steven likes to say that the dramatic scenes are the most important, but it's the scenes filmed by the second unit director that sells the popcorn!

Working with a Production Coordinator

A production coordinator usually helps during filming, making sure that all the actors needed on the set are available and ready to perform. A production coordinator may also help with set decorations and props, to ensure that continuity is maintained throughout the filming. Making sure that everyone is wearing the right clothes and holding the right objects is a never-ending task and everyone on the film crew is invited to keep an eye on things. If you do not have a production coordinator, a line producer can handle this job, but there are so many things to be thinking about, it is extremely helpful to assign this role to a separate individual. Even someone untrained can help take the burden off a line producer, so consider finding someone to be a production assistant to the line producer and make them the production coordinator.

It is not unusual for a few things to slip by unnoticed, even on a major motion picture, such as a digital watch on a 19th century character, or a coat that appears,



then disappears on a couch, or a red dress in one shot that suddenly turns into a blue dress when two days of shooting are edited together. There are a thousand ways to lose continuity while filming. The more eyes on the set the better. Encourage the entire cast and crew to speak up if they see anything that seems out of place.

A production coordinator usually focuses on coordinating the activities of the cast, along with overseeing details of the production that need to be in place before the camera begins rolling. A line producer may do some of these things, so it depends on how they split these responsibilities. If you are lucky enough to have both a line producer and a production coordinator, hold meetings prior to beginning filming to determine who is responsible for specific duties. For example, you may assign a production coordinator to bring the right actors on the set when they are needed, and also oversee the placement of props and other set pieces, then leave everything else to the line producer. Exactly how you split up the various responsibilities is up to you as the director and the producer, so work this all out before you start filming on the first day.

Working with a Script Editor or Script Coordinator

A script editor or script coordinator will help during filming to ensure that all takes are properly labeled, so that when they are being edited, the editor does not have to hunt down all the materials they need to edit a scene. Sometimes the screenwriter performs this task. It is useful to have the original screenwriter on set to help the actors understand their lines and to help ensure that the director gets all the shots they need to complete the film. The original screenwriter often has a clear idea in their head for how the scene should look and that can be extremely helpful to the director who might be so focused on a particular shot that they lose track of where the dialogue is going.

Using a Shot Log

In all cases, you will want to keep track of every shot, in what is simply called the Shot Log. This job may fall to the script editor, but it could be anybody. If you find yourself short staffed, do not do away with this job altogether. You will regret not having his list when you start editing your film. Instead, rely on your entire cast and crew, to step in and fill out the shot log for your film, as necessary. We did this when we made our 2021 Summer Film. People would jump in whenever someone who was doing the shot log had to do something else. The Director, the line producer, and anyone else that was paying attention, could call out the shot to whoever was writing it down in the shot log. When we got to the edit suite, that list saved a lot of wasted hours. More importantly, it meant that we could edit the film correctly, without leaving out any pieces of dialogue that were critical to making the film work.

Here are best practices for logging shots during filming:

- Every time the camera moves from one person to another, or to something physical in the scene, it is considered a new shot.
- Each shot is listed in order (i.e., Shot 1, Shot 2, etc.)
- Each shot is listed under a specific scene, which should be named in the shot log. Numbering shots begins over at the beginning of each scene.
- Each time the director wants to take another take of the same shot, it is labeled as such (i.e., Shot 1, Take 1; Shot 1, Take 2, etc.)
- Shots should be listed, by scene, then by shot, then by take. They should be written on the clapboard exactly this way. Place the clapboard in front of the camera so it will be recorded on film for every shot and take in your film.
- After a series of takes, it is best practice for the director (or the DP) to call out to the script coordinator, which take was the best. It may be the first, the last or one in between. If the script coordinator makes note of this on the script log, then the editor has the information he needs to put the right shot in the finished film.
- It is also best practice for the script coordinator to ask the director (or the DP) which shot they considered best for a specific series of takes, because sometimes, neither the director nor the DP will remember to call it out.
- It is also best practice for a script coordinator to write down where a shot begins in the Master Script. The next shot defines the end of the last shot and the beginning of the next one.
- For example, shot 7 might take place halfway down page 3 in the script, then Shot 8 might take place on page 4. Everything in the script between these two points is officially Shot 7. If the script coordinator notes this correctly on the Master Script, the editor will know exactly what shots he needs to find when he is editing a specific scene.



- When going back over a scene and shooting another actor’s line, or another actors reaction to a line, the entire scene is reshot, sometimes multiple times, depending on how many people are in the scene. Each of these shots are labeled as a sub shot (i.e., Shot 1b, Shot 1c, etc.)
- If a shot doesn’t have dialogue with multiple actors, then there will not be any sub shots for those scenes.
- There may be or not be subshots in action scenes. Manage that however it makes the most sense to you at the time.

Blocking and Shooting

When you get on the set for the first time, before you begin shooting, you have to block out the action. This means that you lay out the action that will take place for that scene. That includes walking through the scene with the actors, showing them where they will start a scene, how they will walk through it, and how other actions will take place (for example, cars or spaceships moving by, and other actions taking place that actors will have to react to. The whole time the director is blocking out the action, they visualize how the camera will capture the action. Once the actors have a good sense for where they have to be, how they will move through the scene, and understand who or what they will have to react to, then the blocking is done. Then the director can move on to setting up the first shot and begin capturing all the shots they need to create the scene on screen.



There is no one right way to block out a scene and shoot it, but there are some best practices. *Here are a few key ones that will help you work out the blocking for your short film.*

1. Walk all the actors through the scene as described above.
2. Begin by shooting an Establishing Shot,” usually a wide shot of the whole scene.
 - There can also be a montage, or series of shots that are edited together to establish a scene.
3. Shoot one actor at a time, face on, through the first part of the scene.
 - Do this for each actor that has lines
 - You can shoot the whole scene or break it up into more workable sections.

- Use medium or wide shots to reestablish a scene when you move the camera to a new position (as for example, when moving to the opposite side of a table that has actors gathered around it).
 - Be sure and call out each shot for the Shot Log.
4. Shoot each actor in turn, with all the actors reading their lines.
- Shoot in medium or closeups.
 - Repeat tight closeups as you go so you do not have to repeat setting up the camera again.
5. Then shoot over-the-shoulder shots to capture the other actors listening to and reacting to the character who is speaking.
- Do this for all the reactions that are significant, but not every actor for every line.
 - Watch a few TV shows to see how this is usually done. Typically, a director will go back and forth to create a sense that two people are talking to each other.
 - Group conversations work the same way, but you can limit the reactions to only a few or possibly a wide shot of the group listening, or a few medium shots featuring small groups (2-5) people listening/reacting.
6. Special Shots can be more complex, following an actor as they move through the scene.
- Long shots can be distracting to the audience. Use them only rarely and only if there is a dramatic reason for doing so. For example, if someone just learned of the death of a loved one, you might capture their reaction to hearing the news, then follow them with the camera as they stagger toward a chair and sit down.



Working with Actors

Directing actors can be very rewarding and challenging. To achieve success, you must spend time in pre-production meetings, individually with each main character. Share your thoughts on who their character is and explain how you see their character acting throughout the film. You can also tell the actor why you cast them and how you see them playing their character. After that, turn them loose and let them become that on-screen personality. On the set, the director's job is to keep actors true to the character they have become on screen. Support and encourage great performances, and lovingly correct any issue you see. Actors want constructive input. It is important that they feel supported and valued for their work. If you

want to get the best out of the actors in your film, be sure to inspire them to become the character they play when they are in front of the camera and coach them when they need help.

Remember these key elements when directing talent.

- Know your actor's skill level and experience.
- Include your actors in the process of developing your film.
- Create a calm and respectful work environment.
- Trust your actors and provide them the space they need to work.
- Do not make actors wait on the set; be ready when they arrive.
- Listen to their input and be flexible as much as possible.
- But be direct, tell your actors what you expect from them.

When working on short films, with little or no budgets, chances are that you will often work with first-time, or inexperienced actors. Create a comfortable environment on the set. Make them feel like they are doing a good job. Talk to them about how they see their character playing the scene. If you disagree, tell them how you see it, and explain why. Tell them just to be themselves, because it is likely that who they really are is why you cast them for that part in the



first place and they are simply playing themselves. If that is true, only focus on their emotional reactions, and otherwise let them be themselves. Explain how you see their character's motivation; how you see their character's mood in the scene; how you see their actions and reactions. Your goal is to be a good coach, helping them play their character on screen. This is always a challenge when working with first-time actors, so rehearse with them as much as necessary. When you start to see the performance you like, don't make it obvious to them that

How to Make a Shot Film

this is a “take.” In other words, call out “rolling” when you first start coaching them, then keep the camera rolling while you are rehearsing. Most often, the first couple of takes are the best. Even experienced actors get worse the more they think about it. First-time actors can deliver a good performance, if they are well coached by a director who is genuinely interested in helping them.

Enjoy directing your short film. After all, it is the best job in the world! Directing any film, short or long, is a learning experience. It is the pathway to a future career working in corporate media or even in the film and television industry. Every film you get to direct is another opportunity to polish off your directing skills. If you love working in film, remember that you are on a journey where you get to do what you love, because you love what you do!

Editing a Short Film

(Personal Insights from Gary Parker)

Editing has always been my first love through-out my career. I don't always admit it, but I learned how to shoot, direct, write, and produce so I could feed my need to edit. After over forty years in the business, I can say proudly I have never finished editing any movie, documentary, or corporate video project I started. What I mean by that is I could still be tweaking and editing everything I have ever done. It is the endless fine tuning that never ends. A couple of weeks ago I was in the edit suite with a director doing a little touch up editing a movie we shot ten years ago. But if you are going to be successful in this business, you must learn when to stop editing and say out loud, this is as good as it is going to get today! This doesn't mean that it isn't good enough... or perhaps even great. The reality is, there comes a point where you just have to stop tweaking your film. Here is a little secret that will help you accept that reality. Your audience will never know how much work you did on the final cut. They only see the final film. They will never know how much work you did in the edit suite. They will never know the agonies, the triumphs, and the defeats you had to overcome. In the end, the audience decides for themselves whether they love your work. The reality is this. Your film will never be as good as you imagined it might, but it may be even better!



How to Begin Editing Your Film

The starting point is to cut, trim and sequence separate video clips into a comprehensive narrative structure. You do this for each scene, one at a time. The sequence begins as a rough cut, then transitions into a final cut for each scene. The complete story, based on the screenplay, creates the narrative structure for the whole film. Each scene must move smoothly through the story structure to eventually become the final film.

Before you begin editing, there is the pre-editing phase where you review the shot-list made during filming and revisit any storyboarding that might have been done. Next meet with the director to be sure you understand the mood and style he was trying to achieve while filming. You also want to have a basic understanding for the directors' vision for the film. It is your job to

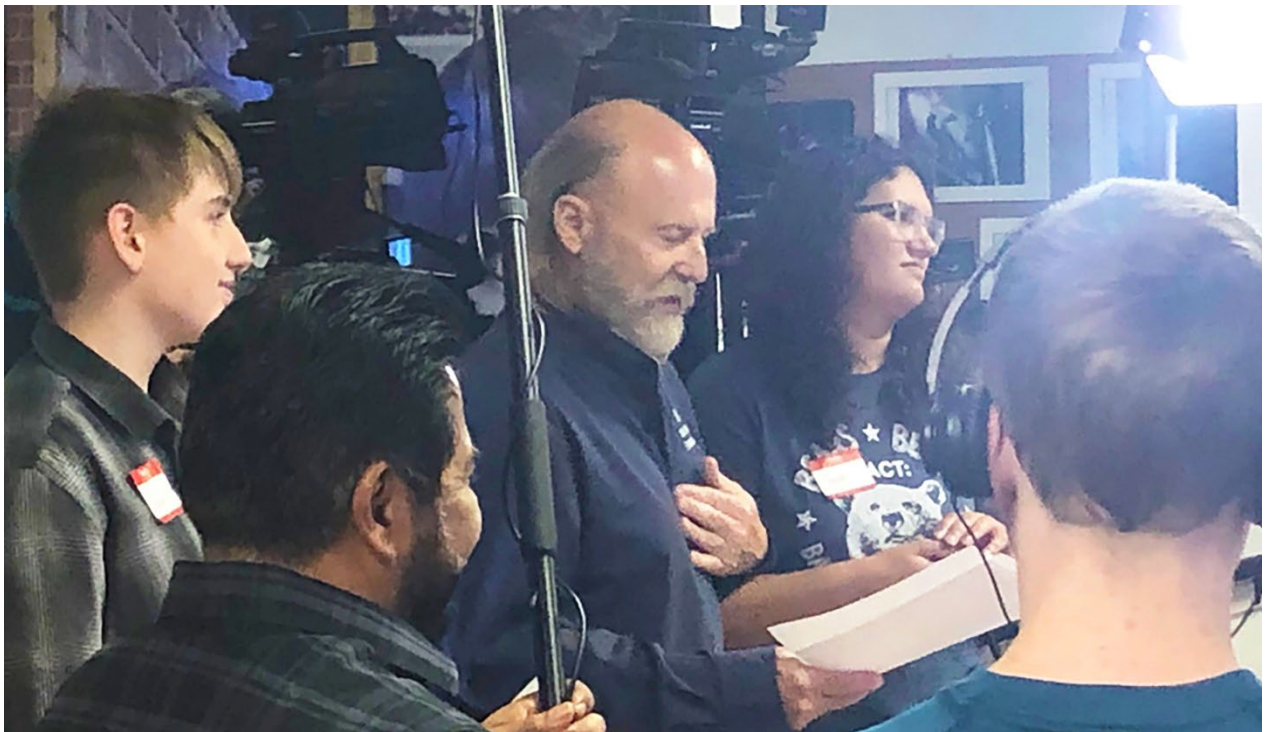
fulfill that vision. Also, meet with both the director and the producer to see if there were any changes to the script or problems during filming that you need to know about. We have already talked about the importance of continuity during filming. Any issues with continuity or cinematography need to be addressed in post-production.

I always get excited when I transition from the studio floor to the edit suite. I just want to start cutting scenes together, but experience has taught me that the more organized I am before I start editing, the better my edit session goes. Even if you shot all the footage, as the director or DP, you should log all your footage and pick the best takes before you start editing. *(See page 52 for a list of best practices for logging shots in the Shot Log).*

Technical Jargon

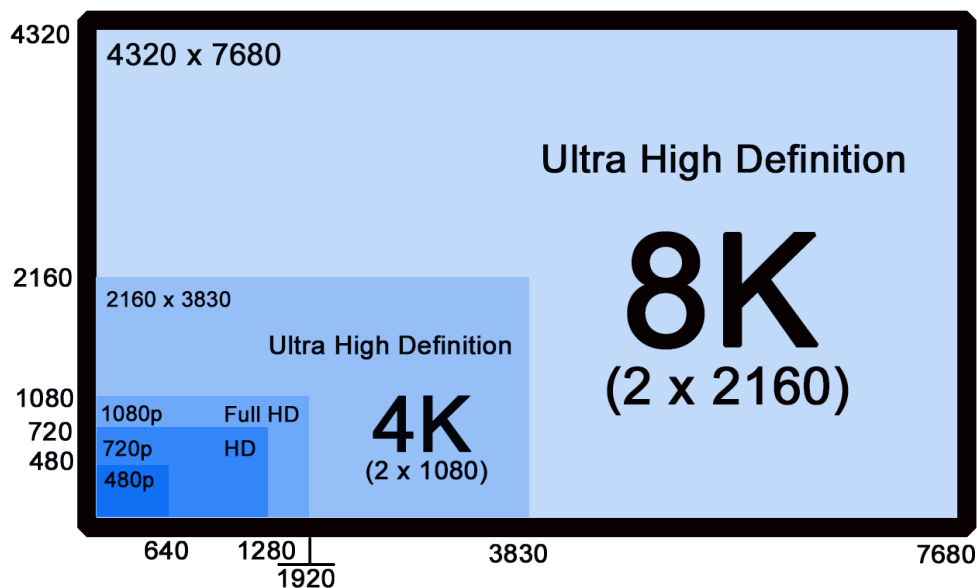
As with any profession, there is some technical jargon that you should be familiar with before you start editing. Because we do not intent to get into the weeds with too many details in this book, I just want to mention some key terms and offer brief explanations for each. You can learn more about the details of all this terminology in your own film classes.

Frame rates – Frame rates are the number of still images, or frames, taken each second which creates the illusion of motion in film. If you want your video to look like normal motion (as seen in the real world), you should shoot at 24 fps (frames per second). For slow-motion footage, shoot at more than 60 fps to get the effect you want.



Video resolution –The resolution determines the number of details in your video. It is measured by the number of pixels contained in each frame. Some common video resolutions are 720 (1280 x 720 pixels), 1080 (1920 x 1080 pixels), 2K (2560 x 1440 pixels), 4K (3840 x 2160 pixels) and 8K (7680 x 4320 pixels). For TV, 2K is excellent, but 4K is consider High Def (HD). For films, 8K is required to get full resolution on a theatrical screen.

*The “p” in 720p and 1080p means “progressive”, which is the way the signal is sent to a TV. The other way this was done was by a method called “interlacing”. This was done with old fashioned televisions to save signal space. The vertical lines were not sent one after another. The odd rows were sent, then the even rows were sent. It is rarely used now, in part because it can cause blurring with fast action motion (as in sporting events). Almost all video technology is now progressive. They leave the “p” in the older technology names, but don’t bother with 4K and 8K (sorry for getting into the weeds, but we can’t explain it without telling you the whole story).
See the chart below for all the details.¹*



As you add more pixels to an image, the quality of the of the projected image also increases, creating a higher resolution. The only problem with adding more pixels is that you need more information processing capability and increased bandwidth capacity. You also need more power on the editing side as well, which means more storage, faster processing chips and higher

¹ We did not include 2K in this chart. 2K is between 1080p and 4K.

quality graphic cards. Television is broadcasting in everything from 720p to 2K. As transmitter equipment is updated across the country and producers acquire higher resolution cameras and production equipment, we will continue to see higher quality resolutions in everything we watch, through broadcast channels and streaming platforms.

Aspect Ratio: The aspect ratio is the relation of the width to the height of an image. Some common aspect ratios are 4:3, 16:9, and 2.35:1. Until they started making wide screen TV's, 4:3 was the common resolution for television. Now wide screen resolutions are common for television and films. 16:9 is the most common wide screen resolution.

Likewise, a 16:9 aspect ratio can also be $16/9 = 1.78$. These are just different ways of expressing a mathematic ratio. Another way of saying the same thing is to express it as a ratio measured per inch, as for example 1.78:1. Just divide the ratio (expressed with a colon, ":") to get the decimal version). The reason aspect ratios are so essential is because they influence how you compose your photograph. For the director or the DP, that becomes obvious when you look through the viewfinder and see how the image looks once you set your camera to a specific aspect ratio. What really matters, is how you fill the space with the things and people in front of the camera. Wide screens require that you put more "stuff" in the image.

Video codecs – Video codecs compress a large video file for storage or sending video over a cable or broadcast system. The coded files are then decompressed for playback or editing. Some standard video codecs are H.264, MPEG, and ProRes.

Compression Codecs speed up downloads and increase the speed of transmission over the Internet or over a cable channel. Algorithms are written to encode, or shrink, a signal for transmission and then decode it for viewing or editing. Without codecs, downloads of video and audio would take three to five times longer than they would otherwise. It is important to use the highest quality codec to keep your file sizes as small as possible, making them faster to transmit and easier to store. MPEG4 has become the most popular codec over the last few years for that reason.

File formats – File formats, or video formats, each have a unique container and codec used to make it. The container is the "wrapper" that holds the audio and video data together in a single file (with extension files like .mov, .avi, or .mp3). The codec lays out the actual data in the file or reads the same data when it is decoded. The codec is literally, the code for reading the data that makes up the video images.

From high-end home theaters to video streaming, to your cellphone, video is everywhere. By understanding the various formats, you can ensure that your video is viewed in the right way with the best quality. Ideally, you want the best resolution for the size screen it is being delivered to. Lower resolutions are fine for cellphones while higher resolutions are needed for television. Theatrical films require the highest resolution possible, usually 8K. That's why the most cinematic

images are produced for viewing in a theater, but they also are beautiful on an HD television. Rarely does a production made originally for TV use the highest resolutions because of the extra expense involved.

- MP4 works well for videos posted on YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram.
- MOV (QuickTime Movie) stores high-quality video, audio, and effects, but these files tend to be quite large. Developed for QuickTime Player by Apple, MOV files use MPEG-4 encoding to play in QuickTime for Windows.

Safe Zone – If your video might end up being viewed on a consumer television (instead of a computer or mobile device), it is best to make sure your titles and actions fit comfortably in the safe areas (title safe and action safe areas).

As the name implies, title safe is the area where titles are supposed to go, and the action-safe area is where any important moving parts should be placed. Everything kept within these borders can be seen even on old televisions and standard definition broadcasts.

The following is a short list of some technical terms that relate specifically to editing:

Montage – A montage is a sequence of shots edited together to illustrate an idea. Ideally, the editor will add more visual information to help tell a story or convey an experience, usually without dialogue, although in documentaries, a voice over narration often talks about the images in the montage. Sometimes fictional films use a narrator in the same way, as for example, to establish a scene, particularly an opening scene for a film. A well shot montage conveys a wealth of information or sets the mood for whatever follows. For example, just think about the classic opening montage for any James Bond film, usually taking place between the



short opening story and the rest of the film. There is no limit to the ways you can use a montage to enhance the creative storytelling nature of your film. It can be used at the opening of a scene, as a series of establishing shots; at the end of your film to create a mini visual story to wrap up multiple story lines; or anywhere in your short film.

Transitions – A video transition is a technique created using editing software to connect one shot to another. The most commonly used transition is the “cut” (instantly replacing one shot with

the next). Next is a dissolve (two clips overlap in time for a period of several frames), and fades (fade-out or fade-in, mainly used to show the passage of time). Video editing software comes with many transitions, but most of the time, you will be using the “cut” about 90 percent of the time. However, sometimes a carefully placed transition can add a stylistic visual effect to the production, so use them to your advantage. You will always want to create some kind of transition, other than the cut, when transitioning from one scene to the next, so the audience will understand that the story is shifting to another place or time. Failing to do this can lead to confusion when the audience suddenly sees different actors who were not in the previous scene.

Visual Effects – Visual effects — or VFX — allow an editor to complement a scene by adding elements that make a scene shine. By integrating live-action footage and generated effects, you can create realistic environments that you can’t capture on film. Examples of visual effects include things like a spaceship flying overhead or a CGI explosion. CGI stands for “Computer Generated Image” in the film business (in researching for this book, we counted over 60 differentonyms for CGI)!

Motion Graphics – Motion graphics are animated visual elements that move on screen. An editor can generate and animate stylized clips, text animations, and complex title sequences, or even 3D compositions. Animation programs, such as *Adobe After Effects*, allow you to create incredible motion graphic animations. Become familiar with *After Effects* and experiment to see how many different animations and other effects you can create. These are valuable skills to have in visual arts technology.

A Note About Editing Software

I began editing my non-linear editing on *Avid* and so I still prefer *Avid* today. I do about 80% of all my work with my *Avid Media Composer*. I also use *Adobe Premier*, primarily for clients who prefer using *Premier* in their companies. I do like working in *Premier*. Nine out of ten people new to editing chose *Premier*. It is more a matter of personal taste whether you choose to work with *Avid* or *Premier*, but they do have a different workflow. Both *Avid* and *Premier* have monthly and annual subscriptions, so I suggest you test drive them both and decide which one works best for you. There are hundreds of other editing software available, but the pros generally prefer *Avid* or *Premier* products.

Organizing Your Files

Your project will inevitably have a lot of assets like video clips, audio clips, music, sound effects, graphics, titles, and special effects. You need to be able to find all these elements when you need them, so you want to take the time to organize and label them. Organize and sort clips into bins and folders. Carefully organizing your clips makes it easier to identify and locate each piece of footage. Most importantly, it will save you time and money.

Use the shot log to match the timeline of shots you made during filming with the memory cards used in the cameras. Transfer video files into folders on your computer you use for editing. You can also do this with your editing software using Bins, which act just like file folders (Bins can have folders inside them, just like a folder can have a sub-folder on your computer). You can name these (either bins or folders) by scene number or a series of scenes (i.e., Scene 3, Scene 5-8, etc.). If you have already collected additional files, for music, sound, or special effects, you can add these into subfolders, titled by specific scenes. When you begin editing you will likely acquire more assets including purchased video clips, music, and sound. Add these into the appropriate folders you have already created. Taking the time to organize all your files before you start editing will do two things for you. First it will make it easier to find the files when you need them. Second, it may uncover gaps in missing files you need to complete the film. Finding these gaps early is important because you can reach out to others who helped you film, to find the missing files before they get erased and disappear forever. You can come up with other ways to organize your video and audio assets but beware coming up with a scheme that makes it difficult to match files to your story timeline, for example by grouping them by camera, or by actors or anything that really doesn't make any sense.



If the shot log notes the best take for a given shot, you can transfer only that video into your editing files before you start editing. Then you won't have to look through multiple takes and risk using the wrong one. Be aware, that if there is an issue with a take that wasn't noticed until you started editing, you may have to go back and find another take to use.

Editing Scenes

With the master script, shot log and other notes in hand, you are ready to start editing your video. Start with the first scene and build from there. Create each scene, shot by shot. If you are acting as both director and editor, it will be easier for you to put the shots together because you were overseeing the entire production. If you are editing the film without having been on the set, you will have to rely on the shot log to help you piece it together. Make a rough cut by following the script and finding shots that match. Use the shots that have actors speaking as much as possible, then go back and fill in with reaction shots. You don't have to use all the shots that were filmed. In fact, you probably won't want to do that. Often a director will shoot

many more shots than they need. To make a scene flow smoothly, you only want enough reaction shots to make the scene flow like a natural conversation. Editing in too many reaction shots, will make a final scene seem awkward and it slows down the action.

If you are editing an action sequence, for example a chase scene or a fight, you will have to rely on the script and the shot log to clue you in on how the shots should come together. Also, consider the different ways in which a scene could be edited, and the camera angles you could use. Do you need a wide shot to establish a scene from the outset or would you prefer to create suspense with closeups before a big reveal?

Break down the actions of your characters into steps, stages, and processes. Then use the best footage to achieve your vision for that scene. There are many reasons to edit a video, and your editing approach will depend on the desired outcome. Removing unwanted footage is one of the simplest and easiest ways to get started. Many videos can be dramatically improved by simply getting rid of the flawed or unwanted bits. Choose the best footage because hopefully, the crew shot far more footage than you need. Chose only the best material for the final edit. If you have multiple takes for a specific shot, make sure you use the best take of each shot when editing. Your editing style can vary, depending on the mood and style of the film. An action-packed thriller should have a very different style and mood than a romantic comedy. Rely on the many years of film watching to help you achieve the effect you want.



If you are making a documentary, you are still telling a story filled with emotion. Some documentaries are more informative and focused on just telling the facts, but if you are telling a great story, don't hold back on portraying it in a thrilling or exciting way. If the script calls for it, and the director has given you the raw footage to portray a dramatic scene, don't hold back. In fact, you should have a clear idea by talking to the director before you start editing, exactly how they see the film working, including ideas about mood, style, and pacing.

Pacing is an important part of filmmaking, and it is up to the editor to get this right in the edit suite. The script should give a sense for when the pace should pick up and when it should slow down, but often it is a decision that the editor has to make on their own. Action scenes or scenes with a lot of activity are usually fast paced. Emotional scenes can be fast paced if there is action involved, but often they should slow down. If your director has included a long shot of

someone reacting to something dramatic, use a closeup to capture the emotion. Even if the actor is just staring into the distance, the audience will read emotion into the actors' face based on what just happened in the story. Some of the greatest moments in movie history are nothing more than an actor staring into the distance or looking right into the camera, and not reacting!

Getting it Right

Polishing off a scene after you have built the rough cut is the exciting part of editing a film. It is the part that puts the “wow” factor into the film. You can improve watchability of your film by adding extra elements including both music and visual effects. Used wisely, these elements can dramatically influence how the audience will react to a scene. After you edit your first scene, step away for a few minutes and then come back with a fresh set of eyes. Pull it up in full screen and watch it objectively. Did the scene work for you as a member of the audience? If so move on to the next scene. If not, take another swing at it. It is important to create a look and feel that will be consistent throughout the whole film and achieve the desired outcome the director was seeking to create. While pacing can change throughout a film, it too should be consistent within a single film, and not jar off too fast or drop down too slow from one place in the story to another.

Editing can be an exciting experience or a horrible disaster, depending on how well a film comes together. The ability to control the final edit may not be entirely in your hands. If you don't have the raw material you need to work with, if scenes have been lost or missed altogether during filming, or if a script was just poorly written, you may find yourself dealing with a mess that you don't know how to fix. Don't sweat! This is a far more common problem than you imagine. If you find yourself in this situation, sit down with the director and define the extent of the problem, then brainstorm ways you can go about fixing it. Perhaps you can edit a scene



down, making it even shorter (that's an easy fix). Or perhaps you can find footage from another scene that will work, as for example a shot of an actor just staring off into the distance (they do that a lot). Or maybe you can ask the screen writer to come sit down with you in the edit suite and create a whole new approach that may require getting an actor to come

in and do a voice over. A character doesn't have to be on screen when talking, so it is often possible to use a voice over to complete a scene. Simply use the shots of others reacting to the character speaking (off camera now). You can use, shots that were made during filming another scene, or even the same scene.

The audience will probably not notice that you used a shot twice, but don't try this trick too often or for too long, or the audience might catch it.

Why I Love Editing

Writing, producing, and filming are hard work and rewarding in their own way, but for me personally, it is in the edit suite that you see a film come alive. It is where you create the "Wow" effect, the thing that can move an audience to tears, or raise them up to a newfound hope in life. My love for editing began in the first moments of my video career. I transitioned from a still photographer and medical textbook illustrator to the video and television department at the University of Texas Health Science Center. Max and David were my mentors. They ignited a spark that began an explosion that has driven me ever since, to a career in corporate media, film and television that has lasted over 45 years. It also led me to create the *Indie Films Foundation* with my dear friend and co-founder Bruce May. Now it is our chance to give back to the next generation of filmmakers.



After six months at the Health Science Center, I was hired as a news editor at KTRK, Channel 13 in Houston. I worked there for five years as the supervisor of the News Edit Department. It was the best training I could get. I learned how to edit the best story possible in the shortest amount of time. We were producing multiple news stories for the nightly news every day. I loved the pressure and excitement of working in this fast-paced environment. After five years, I purchased an independent news bureau in Washington D.C., where we did Washington based reporting for over 150 television and radio stations, including some overseas news outlets. We grew that company into the 3rd largest independent news bureau in D.C. Back then we had to upload our video via satellite, including everything we produced, from live shots to fully edited news stories, and boy, was it expensive! We bought a thirty-minute block of satellite time every afternoon. I had to be tough on my editors, making sure they had all their editing done and stories ready to go on time or else!

Because I grew my career, editing in the television news business, learning how to edit news stories quickly and effectively, I learned that editing was a skill that should be done right the first time. I also developed my storytelling abilities, which go hand in hand with the actual editing of the story. I learned to trust my first instincts, marrying the technical act of editing a story with the creative narrative, to produce a clear, crisp story that can be easily understood by

the viewer. Editing is the visual side of storytelling, and just like good screen writing, clarity is always the goal, even if editing a mystery that leaves the audience guessing until the very end. That is the goal for any competent editor. It's not that you want your films to be edited like a news story. A film gives you much greater latitude in how you creatively tell a story, but in the edit suite, the ability to produce a narrative that is edited with precision and easy to follow will always result in a well edited film.

Your primary concern in the edit suite is to always be polishing off your skills as an editor, getting better and faster all the time. You want to improve the quality of your work because that is how you will succeed, and you want to get faster because time is money. Not only will you save the producers money, you will make more for yourself! And remember... enjoy the story making, it is the best job in the world!

Acting

(Personal Insights from Gary Parker)

The one word that comes to mind when I talk about the relationship between the Director and an Actor is trust. Trust builds a creative environment for both the director and the actors. The director trusts that the actor will give their role the best performance possible. The actor trusts that the director will create a nurturing environment for their performance. This is necessary for the actors to remain in character and play effectively off of each other.

Because I am a director, I don't get the chance to act very often. My last chance to act came with our student film which we produced last summer. Bruce mentored and helped the students write an extremely creative script for our student film. It was a flashback inside a dream, inside a daydream, inside a character's mind. It was a pretty cool script, and it was based on ideas the students all came up with. It called for a crazy film professor, a small part with only about a minute screen time. When I occasionally get the chance to act, I am always cast as a little bit crazy. I'm not sure why... maybe my looks bring that out.



Playing the crazy guy is something I can do. I tapped into my silly side, added a little crazy... and the character was born. This was easy to do because I am only a supporting character, with little character development and no emotional scenes to play... well within my comfort zone as an actor. During filming, when I was in front of the camera, I just played the part in my ridiculous silly way... it wasn't much different than when I am joking around on the set or in the edit suite, which I do a lot to help keep the working environment relaxed and comfortable for everyone working on a project. Directing yourself is hard to do. When you are directing a film and playing a character, I suggest that you assign someone else to direct you. In my case, for filming my simple role in our student film, I directed myself because my part, as written by Bruce,

was simple and straightforward. All I had to do was be myself, my silly self. And Bruce wrote the part knowing that I would be playing it. Naturally he made the character crazy!

I use that same advice with all the actors I have worked with throughout my career. It may sound strange to say to an actor, *“just be yourself”*, when they are acting as someone else, the character they are playing. Yet, it works, and the actors know what I’m telling them. A better way to explain it would be to say to an actor, *“just relax and be yourself, the actor you know you are, and let yourself become the character you see yourself being,”* but it’s a lot easier to say, *“relax and just be yourself.”*

Experienced actors know exactly what I mean. When an actor can relax and let themselves slip into the character, they can forget about the camera altogether.

Inexperienced actors may take a little longer to figure it out. Working with inexperienced actors can be challenging. I know. In my career I have worked with many new actors, some who have had little or no acting experience at all. That is



common in the indie film business. When directing someone who has very little experience, I take the extra time to help them feel comfortable in front of the camera. That’s not easy, even for many professional actors. It’s always awkward on the first day of a new project. An actor is expected to perform with a new crew, a new director, in a new role, as if it was just like putting on a new set of clothes. It’s not. It takes time for an actor to transform themselves into the character written on a page they just read. That’s why rehearsals are so important. That’s why I recommend that you hold readings around a table, by the entire cast if possible. Have everyone read through the script together, without any expectations on creating a real performance. Just let them get used to saying the dialogue and reacting to others saying their lines. Hearing the dialogue out loud is a great way for everyone to make sure the words on the page work as they were written and ring true for the characters. Many television shows do this routinely, especially on new productions, so actors can better understand the characters they are supposed to play. It also helps build that sense of trust that is so crucial between a director and their cast.

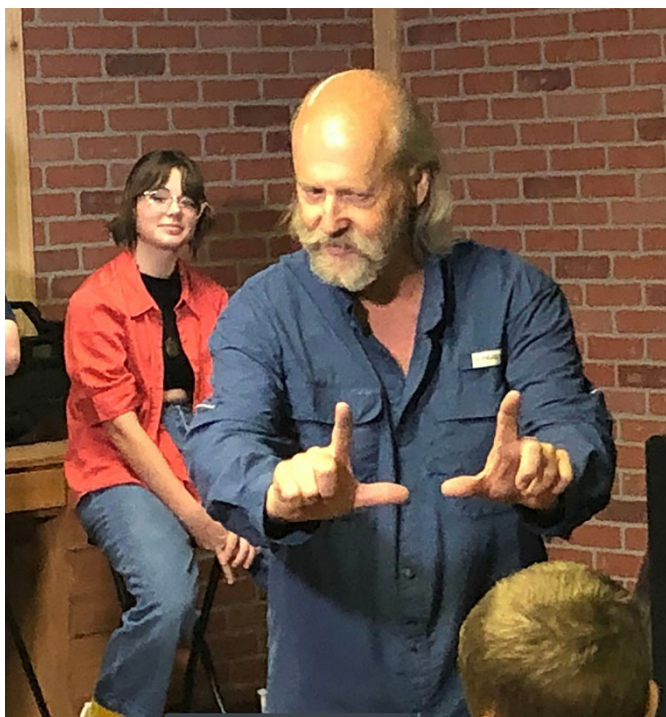
If you do this, ask the screenwriter if they can be there in person. If you are the director, you and the screenwriter can answer any questions the actors have, about their character, how you see them changing or growing throughout the story, and anything they don’t understand about the story itself. Of course, you should describe your vision for the film. Also ask the

screenwriter to talk about the script. Ask them to identify the key elements and plot twists, explain the conflict and the resolution for the main actors, and explore the underlying theme as it is written into the screenplay.

When you get on the set, you can tell all your actors the first time they read their first line in your short film, *“just be yourself, and forget the camera!”* Actors need to learn that the camera is their friend if they let it be. The director can help them feel that way.

Blocking

Even if you can't do a complete read-through with all the actors before you get them on the set, you still can read through the script as you shoot each scene. At a minimum, you should do this as you block out how the actors will move around the set. Blocking is simply the practice of working out how the actors will move around on stage. As an actor, you have to follow the directions of the director, because the director has a clear vision for how the finished film will look. You have to trust the director to tell you where he wants you to stand, and how he wants you to move along with the other actors within a scene. How a scene should play out on screen should become clear to you as you



follow the instructions of the director as he works through the scene. If you are confused or uncertain about what the director wants you to do, just ask. Blocking is the time for everyone to get on the same page about what is supposed to happen in the scene. It is not spelled out in the script. That's because there are endless possibilities. It is up to the director to choose the actions he wants to see. There will be reasons why he will want to shoot a scene a certain way. As an actor, you should not waste his time asking about why he wants to shoot it a certain way, or what his vision is for the film. Your job is to figure out what you have to do and how you have to move on camera, based on the instructions that the director gives you. Specific questions about where or how you should move are appropriate but keep the big picture questions to yourself. The director doesn't want to stop and take time to explain what the film is about. Questions about your character's motivation are best asked when the director is setting up a specific shot, not when he is working out how all the actors will move during the entire scene. It's not wrong to

ask questions about your character, how they should react, and what motivates them. Just do it at the proper time, not when the director is blocking out the scene.

From Script to Screen

Translating a story, from script to screen, is the heart of filmmaking. The rubber hits the road when the cast and crew assemble on set and the director starts to block out the scene. There are a thousand things on the mind of the director when he first steps on the set. The process begins with the script. As a director, I depend on the screenwriter to help me through this. The goal is to get the story as it reads on the page, into the camera and onto the screen. That's why I find it so helpful to work directly with the screenwriter, both while he is writing the screenplay, and even more so, when I get on the set.

Bruce and I have written a couple of screenplays together, but all the heavy lifting and dialogue is on his shoulders. When we have worked on feature length films together, I usually provide a basic story line, then turn it over to him to write the dialogue and fill out the story to create a complete screenplay. He will write the dialogue and fill out the storyline with specific scenes designed to complete the narrative, providing rich character development, detailed plot



lines, and of course, a satisfying resolution. He is very good at creating authentic, believable characters. Bruce will send me the screenplay as he is working on it so we can talk about the details as I watch them unfold. He enjoys hearing my feedback and ideas as a director who is responsible for making the story come alive. As a writer, Bruce is very in tune with the visual elements of the story, coming up with some amazingly creative ideas about how scenes can play

out on screen. Together, we work well as a team and it's a joy for me to watch the whole process unfold. It is truly magic to see a story come to life as a good writer crafts the interactions between the characters, weaving together the story in a rich and rewarding way that the audience will appreciate when they see the film. There are always surprises as the screenplay follows unexpected pathways, leading to the inevitable resolution.

Because Bruce is the writer in the family, I always like to have him in the room whenever we are doing script reads, but even more so, on the set. That's because there are always questions, about the characters, about the words that actors have to say, or about the



motivations of the characters. If script changes are needed, who better to make those changes than the original screenwriter? Especially a good one like Bruce. We can talk about the backstory for a character with the actor playing that part and Bruce can share how he understands the character, explain what that character is going through during a specific scene, or how that character will change throughout the script, sometimes going through a significant transformation that is part of the story, or even a crucial transformation that occurs during the resolution of the conflict in the film.

Everything that a character says, their actions and reactions to other characters, all come out of the backstory for that person. The backstory includes how that person grew up, where they lived, how they fit into society, and significant events that occurred to them during their life. All of these things affect how an actor portrays a character on screen. Sometimes backstories are clearly written into the script and sometimes they are left to the imagination. I like to use the ideas that the original writer has about the characters in a film. Some directors make up backstories on the fly and sometimes actors imagine their own backstories for the characters they play. That can work well enough, but I prefer to hear the ideas from the person who created

the characters in the first place. It just holds more water. Inauthentic performances usually result from inauthentic ideas about who the character is. Consistency and realism are crucial elements in a successful screenplay. Turn to your screenwriter to find answers to these important questions whenever they arise. Understanding these issues is one of the things that can turn a good film into a great one.

In working with actors over the years, I have learned that no two actors prepare for a part the same way. Some start by memorizing their lines, while others develop the look and style of their character first. Hairstyles, posture, and accents all come into play depending on what the part needs. A really good actor can transform themselves, coming to look like the characters they play. Sometimes they surprise you with a look you didn't expect. Based on my experience, it is best to trust the actor in these choices, because they are the one playing the part. The more they feel the character, the better their performance. The only exception I make to this rule is if an actor comes out of left field with a look that just doesn't fit the role. Then we will talk about it... until I convince them to change their look.

About Method Acting

The preceding description of how an actor prepares for a part applies to anyone type of actor, but some actors are trained in "Method Acting, which is a discipline that is sometimes taught formally, but often it is just adopted to one degree or another by actors themselves. You can read a lot of stories about how this led to someone winning an Academy Award for Best Actor, but there are also stories about negative outcomes for the actors themselves. Method Acting involves the actor getting into the mind of the character, almost to the point of becoming that person themselves, on the set and off. Obviously, this could be a problem if an actor is playing a dark and sinister character.



This can be a series problem. Some actors have seen their personal lives go off the rails after playing a dark character this way, resulting in drug addiction, alcoholism and even suicide. Many others have shared stories about how their lives were affected in less negative ways, but none-the-less, many say they regret embracing method acting in an extreme way. If you are an actor, be careful about using what amounts to brain altering thinking patterns and changes in behavior that would not be acceptable in normal society. If you are a director, be aware of this

risk and talk to all your actors about how these issues can affect them personally, especially if they are playing a dark role in your film. It probably matters little if they are playing Mary Poppins, but then again, who knows? My own rule in this case is simple: Proceed with Caution!

Bruce has a favorite story about method acting which I am going to borrow here. Dustin Hoffman got so into method acting in the *Marathon Man*, that it began to negatively affect him on the set. After filming one day, his co-star, Laurence Olivier, known for playing a lifetime of leading roles, turned to Dustin, who appeared to be suffering terribly, and asked him, "Why not attempt acting?" Clearly, getting into the mind of your character is not required for creating an award-winning performance, at least not for Laurence Olivier. In the end, it is up to the actors themselves to figure out how they get into character and for most, it probably requires that they adopt the character internally. There is nothing wrong with doing this. For most actors, this should not be a problem. So, encourage your actors to "get into character", but caution them if things start getting crazy, especially if they seem to remain in character after you call "cut."

Auditions

I have said before, if you are a producer or a director, I think it is important to audition all of your speaking parts preferably in person. Certainly, if not in person, by a zoom or other video conference meeting. I know some actors who like auditions and some who don't. Probably most actors don't like auditions for obvious reasons. It is hard to stand up in front of complete strangers and practice the art of acting, doing a character that you have never seen before, in an attempt to portray this unknown character better than a slew of other actors, some of whom have just walked away after creating a perfect performance, right before you get your chance to audition. So, of course it's easy... anybody can do it, right? The hard truth is that auditions are the life blood of professional acting.

Getting good at doing auditions is essential for an actor; getting used to doing them is not, but it certainly helps. Very famous actors have lots of stories about auditions gone wrong, so read up on those stories. They may not help you much, but at least you won't feel like you are the only one who finds auditions hard to do. In the end, auditions provide you with the means to showcase your talent and they will help you get those parts that are perfect for you, at least the ones that you actually get. So, thicken your skin and know that while you will lose more than you win, without those winning auditions, you wouldn't



even have a job. Successful actors learn to take auditions all in stride. The best training for doing auditions well comes in simply doing more of them.

Once the actor has the part, they should read the script and begin developing the character, making the part their own. No two performances will ever be exactly the same and some can be wildly different. Think of the many different actors who have played Ebenezer Scrooge in countless films over the years, or perhaps even more so, Sherlock Holmes. While the core character is always the same, the personality, mannerisms, and behaviors are all unique to every actor, and you probably have your favorite. As a director, trust your actors to create a realistic character. Don't worry about the particulars of personalities and behaviors. As long as the performance is true to the character, believable, and consistent with the script, let the actor put their own spin on the character.

If you are the director, mentor your actors and support their performance in every way you can. A good actor has a passion for performing and they enjoy being in front of the camera. Help them gain confidence in the part so they can portray their role convincingly. That will guarantee that they connect with the audience and that is another key to making an award-winning film. The actor needs to be able to convey the emotions, motivations, and intentions of their character through their speech, manner, and physical behaviors on camera. These then are the most important tools of the actor: their body, voice, and imagination.

Actors all have their own personalities and there is no one right personality that can guarantee a great performance. Sometimes actors just act like themselves and that is perfectly fine if they can embrace the emotional gauntlet of the character as it is written in the script. Other times, actors transform themselves, becoming a completely different person on camera. This is true regardless of their normal personality. The point is that there is no one right way for an actor to develop their character when acting, and there is no one personality type that can act. Anyone can act.



Following are the tips from the chapter on Directing. I want to review these and add some additional comments.

Working with Actors as a Director

- Know your actor's skill level and experience.
 - Nurture new actors to help them deliver a great performance.
 - Support both new and experienced actors by creating trusting relationships with them.
- Include your actors in the process of creating your film.
 - The performance your actors create is crucial to your film. Encourage them to be a part of the whole process of filmmaking so they can help you fulfill your vision for the film.
- Create a calm and respectful work environment.
 - Make your actors feel comfortable when they get in front of the camera. Recognize that every performance is stressful for an actor, so creating a calm and respectful environment can help them get into character and deliver their best performance.
- Trust your actors and provide them the space to work.
 - Give your actors the time they need to get it right. The time to rush is between takes, not during them. Give actors the opportunity to perform by giving them multiple takes. Both the director and the actor should be happy with the performance.
- Listen to their input and be flexible as much as possible.
 - Listen to actors when they critique their own performance and give them the chance to get it right. Be flexible about shooting multiple takes, within reason.
- Do not make actors wait on the set; be ready when they arrive.
 - Actors have to get into character and that begins when they are told to be on set. If they have to wait too long, they can slip out of character, so be sure the details of lighting, sound and camera preparation are done before you call them on set.
 - This does not apply to blocking out scenes which requires time working with actors on the set but get ready to shoot as quickly as possible.
- Be direct, tell your actors what you are doing and what you expect from them.



- Creating a trusting relationship with your actors does not require that you treat them like guests in your home. A trusting working relationship requires honesty. Be frank when talking to actors about the level of professionalism you expect from them.
- This also applies when coaching an actor, even more so. Don't tell them you are happy with a performance when you are not, but be a good coach, telling them what you want from them, rather than what you don't want.

I love working with actors on the set. It is one of the most rewarding aspects of being a film director. I enjoy coaching actors to help them achieve the best performance possible. I know in my heart that great performances make great films. Getting that performance recorded on film in such a way that it fulfills your vision for your film, is the work of the director. It is the path to your end goal, making a great film that your audience will enjoy and hopefully come to love. I treat all actors, and even extras and stand-ins, with the same respect I give stars. I have been lucky enough to work with some well-known stars in my career, as a director or DP, and I can tell you from my experience that some of the nicest people I know are famous actors, who can often be some of the nicest people you will ever meet.

Great actors are often good coaches, helping other actors improve their performances. I have learned a lot about coaching actors by watching other actors help their fellow actors on and off the set. The relationship between a director and an actor is one of the most sacred in all of filmmaking. Treat it as such and you will learn more than you can imagine, even to the point of learning how to make great films. Movies, long and short, are a collaboration between creative people, who all have to come together in a commitment to create a work of art, a film that when the final cut is made, is a thing of beauty for anyone to see. The satisfaction that comes from that cannot be overstated.

If you are a director, enjoy the opportunity to work with actors, experienced, and inexperienced alike. Working with inexperienced actors will prepare you for working with experienced actors because that is how you learn to be a good coach and mentor. As an actor, use the chance to be in a short film to further your career. Create the best performance you can and add it to your portfolio. That is how you break into the industry in a big way.



The future of film and television has never been better. There are more channels, more streaming content, and more roles than ever before. I can promise you that you will never forget any film you ever do, and the early experiences you gain will give you some of the fondest memories of your lifetime. They are where you will perfect your craft and turn you into a true artist working in the best field in art, film, and motion pictures!

Advice on Screenwriting

(Personal Insights from Bruce May)

I have been working in corporate video, local television, and film for over twenty years. In that time, I have written countless TV commercials and marketing videos. I have also produced and starred in several local talk shows, interviewing business experts. Of all this work, the most rewarding writing I have done is on the three screenplays I have written for the Indie Films Foundation. Many of the TV commercials and marketing videos I've written work like mini movies, telling a simple story, one that highlights the benefits of a product, but told in a way that has characters featured in some kind of customer experience. These projects were good practice, preparing me in all aspects of production, from pre-production, to filming, to editing. As a result, I've become a pretty good co-pilot, helping my business partner on these projects, Gary Parker, edit countless hours of video and film. When he asked me twenty years ago to write a screenplay

for him, I didn't hesitate to accept the challenge. I had no idea at the time whether I could do it or not, but since he wasn't paying me, what did I care? I was curious to know if I could write a screenplay. Initially it took me less than eight weeks to write the first version, and I surprised myself at not only how much I enjoyed the



work, I also found out that I was pretty good at character development and writing dialogue... good enough that Gary has continued to ask me to write more for him. Since he has produced, directed, and acted as a DP on over twenty documentaries and feature films, I guess his opinion of my work is as good as any body's.

The second film I wrote for Gary is *Shattered Lives*, a movie about a distracted driving accident. Gary has filmed 10-minute videos on this topic at dozens of high schools over the last 22 years. When he asked me to be a co-founder with him for the Indie Films Foundation, he asked me to write a full-length feature film about an accident in a local community that tells the

story of the impact of the accident on the lives of all those affected and on the local community. It was a challenge that I wasn't really prepared to take on. I didn't think I had the necessary experience to write the prison scenes, which would be critical to writing a story that made any sense. Gary solved that problem for me when he set up a meeting for me with a member of the prison ministry that operated out of the Texas prison system. After that, I felt that I could give Gary what he wanted, and once again, once I started writing, it only took about eight weeks for me to finish the script. Both this film and another one that I have written are in pre-production with the IFF. While I don't yet know how *Shattered Lives* will turn out, I am confident that I have fulfilled the goal of writing a great script, one that would fulfill the original vision that Gary had for the film. I will be helping with every aspect of production on the film, but it is really in Gary's hands now to make this film everything that he wants it to be. I am confident that he will fulfill that vision.

In the meantime, I have learned an awful lot about screenwriting, both for short films and marketing videos, but also for full length feature films. The best way to get good at screenwriting, just as with filmmaking, is by writing a film script. I have relied on my personal experience watching thousands of films over my lifetime, including virtually everything made from the 1930's



through to the end of the century, and most of the films made since then. This experience is open to anyone interested in becoming a screenwriter, so I encourage you to watch as many films as you can. Do so with an eye on the script itself. Watch carefully how the dialogue is written and how the director chooses to tell the story. Filmmaking is an art that marries the skills of the screenwriter with those of a director that can make the story come to life. How well that works depends on both of these skills coming together in a magical way that breathe life into a story and makes it something that an audience can fall in love with.

In feature films, a master storyteller will provide information slowly as the plot thickens. Characters will have many secrets known only to themselves. A master storyteller will trickle these out in such a way as to build the story, explain the relationships between the different characters, increase the tension as the story goes on, and build a more powerful theme. In a short film, these rules still apply, but on a much shorter time scale. It is similar to a joke, where everything leading up to the punch line sets up the joke. The punch line gives it away. Just as with feature films, short films have a beginning, a middle, and an end. Reveal the important facts in each of these stages, not all at once. When working on your screenplay: focus on character

development to make your characters authentic; reveal the inner story, which is about the thoughts and feelings of the main character; polish off your dialogue to maximize its impact on the audience; make sure your plot lines are relevant and move the story toward the climax; and include an ending that gives your audience the emotional fulfillment they want.

Character Development

Great stories contain great characters. Many action thrillers have characters that are just two-dimensional, which you can get away with in action movies because these are usually simple stories about good and evil. Great characters are more complex than that. They have flaws. They have bad experiences that often shape them and set them up for failure. Often, the conflict itself will help them overcome these flaws.

In *Casa Blanca*, Rick is not just a jilted lover, he is a bitter and angry man who is disillusioned with a world filled with evil. When Ilsa comes back into his life, he learns that she thought her husband had been killed in the war during the brief affair she had with Rick. She abandons him without warning to go back to her husband when she finds out that he is still alive. This revelation causes Rick to forgive her, but he holds on to his anger and bitterness. Rick has papers that Ilsa and her husband need to leave Casablanca, but Rick still refuses to give them to her. Out of desperation, Ilsa pulls a gun on Rick and demands that he give her the papers. He



tells her to go ahead and shoot him to put him out of his misery. She drops the gun and Rick realizes that she still loves him. They make plans to stay together, but it is not until the end of the movie when they are about to get on the plane, that he makes her join her husband on the flight, saying that it would be a mistake if she stayed with Rick. It is this moment of self-sacrifice that not only provides the climatic end to the movie, it also heals Rick, transforming him into the hero he really is.

It may seem that a short film has little opportunity to do the kind of character development we see in a great, feature film like *Casa Blanca*. To some extent this is true. Yet, character development can occur quickly. If you watch the film carefully, you will discover that

the most emotional scenes in the movie add up to less than five or six minutes. Watch for Ricks' reaction when Ilsa first walks into his bar; and again, when he finds out she is married. Then watch the confrontation when Rick tells Ilsa to go ahead and shoot him. Finally, watch the last minute when Rick talks Ilsa to get on the plane and leave him behind. Sure, these scenes are more powerful because of the plot lines that stretch the movie into 90 minutes, but they tell the story all by themselves. You can achieve the same effect in a short film, with three emotional scenes, one in each of the three parts. These key scenes define these characters and that is the real goal of character development.

The Inner Story

Casablanca is a great example of a complex character who must resolve the basic conflict of the story, helping to free Ilsa and her husband from the Nazis, but also overcome his own conflicted emotions. This emotional story provides a second layer to the story that makes the entire plot far richer and more meaningful. The plot has to be driven by the outer story, defined in terms of a series of actions based on the conflict that must be resolved, but a rich, inner story that illustrates the emotional connection between people will bring your script to life and provide the audience with a compelling desire to follow the film to the end.



Spielberg famously said that action sequences, usually shot by the second director, are what sell popcorn, but it is the work of the first director to focus on the emotional connections between the main characters and that is what creates the connection between the characters and the audience, which is what makes them want to eat the popcorn in the first place. As a screenwriter, it is up to you to provide the emotional subtext that makes the audience fall in love with your characters. George Baily (*It's a Wonderful Life*), Ebenezer Scrooge (*A Christmas Carol*) and Rick Blaine (*Casablanca*) all provide excellent, well written protagonists that have complex emotional lives.

Again, in a short film you are limited on time, but that does not mean you have to sacrifice the inner story. Much of this can be provided in a single line or two that sets up the conflict. The emotion should be included in those key scenes that define the characters and reveal their

transformation. The part you leave out in a short film, is the long, roller coaster ride of scenes, one frustration followed by another. Reduce those to two at the most or combine them with the transition scenes, from the beginning to the middle, and the middle to the end. It only takes one line of dialogue to create a scene, and a single scene can serve multiple purposes.

Writing Powerful Dialogue

Great movies have great dialogue. If you watch any great film, you will find it nearly impossible to identify a single line that does not belong in the movie. That is because great screenplays offer the minimum amount of dialogue necessary to move the story forward, pausing only for emotional highpoints and climatic endings. Even then, words are sparsely written. If a story is well written, there is no need to provide a lot of dialogue in the important scenes. Think of Rick telling Ilsa, “go ahead and kill me, you would be doing me a favor,” or George Baily begging for his life back when he has lost all hope. The whole story sets up these important scenes, so they almost write themselves.



In fact, when writing dialogue, you will often find that characters take over, so that you are not putting words in their mouths, but simply recording what you know they would say under the circumstances. This is a natural result of building powerful characters. You do that by making your characters reflect real people. Often your characters are not based on a single individual, but on a composite image that you build based on your knowledge of the many different people you know, including real people and fictional characters. That is why it is good to watch lots of movies and read lots of novels. Fictional stories expand our knowledge of the world. They enlighten us in some way, introducing us to events, places, and people that we would never otherwise know about. You will find that you can draw on this knowledge as a screenwriter, as you build your own characters.

Because dialogue is often so sparse, it is not like how people really talk. Yet, it seems to be, because it captures the emotions and thoughts of real people; even more reason to take the time to create realistic characters. The more real they are, the easier it is to write dialogue for them. Do not fall into the trap of trying to make your characters talk like real people. They will say too much and drag down your screenplay.

Unlike a novel, a screenplay cannot spend time exploring the inner thoughts and feelings of the characters, except when a narrator offers up these insights in a voice-over. Beware of using a narrator because these voice-over moments tend to pull the audience out of the story, and anytime that happens you risk losing them. There are exceptions of course, as with *Ferris Buellers Day Off*, in which the main character is also the narrator (he also breaks the fourth wall and looks at the camera). This cleverly written script can break the rules, in part because it is a comedy, and in part because it is just so well-conceived and written.

To work effectively, a film script must use visuals as much as possible to convey emotion, relying on the skill of the actors, and by providing a few well-timed lines where the characters express their feelings in unique and memorable ways.

Designing Plot Lines

When working out the structure for your screenplay, spend extra time working out the details of the plot. You begin with a conflict and end with a resolution, but it is the roller coaster ride through the middle of the script that makes the ending worthwhile. Without dramatic twists and turns and a rich, emotional subtext, your story will fall flat. The audience will not care about the ending if they don't care about the characters, and you use the middle of the script to build that connection. This is true for short films as well as feature length films. The only difference is the roller coaster ride is shorter, driving the audience quickly through to the ending.

Human beings are about our relationships more than anything else. The specific things we do, and all that we achieve in our lives, mean nothing if we cannot share them with others. So, focus on the human relationships between your characters to create emotional connections between them, and with your audience. Then use the emotional context to provide motivation for your characters. Ultimately, tying emotional needs to the overall goal of the story will provide your screenplay with two layers of meaning. The first layer is based on the actions the characters take throughout the story to resolve the conflict. The second layer is the emotional explanation for what they are feeling inside. The first layer provides the structure for your film. The second provides the emotion that makes your story come to life.

When writing your screenplay, think like a director, visualizing scenes as they will play out on the screen. While you do not want to waste screen time on too much dialogue, there are times when you want to slow down the pacing and let the camera linger on the characters,



particularly in those emotionally charged moments, as with the Big Event, and also during the resolution. Ultimately how these scenes are shot is up to the director, but if you have a well written script, the director is likely to visualize it in the same way as the screenwriter. It is important that you try and convey your vision for the film to the director in the screenplay... and you do that in how you write the scenes. Include reactions in parentheses to let the director better understand how you see a scene playing out. Otherwise, specific directions included in the screenplay should be kept to a minimum. It is not your job, as the screenwriter, to define the exact vision for how the film will be made. That is up to the director. But you should give him a clear idea for the possibilities. I always think of the first *Jaws* movie. Steven Spielberg picked up the screenplay on a producer's desk and sat down, flipping through the pages, when he suddenly exclaimed, "I have to make this movie?" When the producer asked why Spielberg was so excited about it, he said, "it's all about the barrels!" It only takes one powerful element, cleverly written into a screenplay to make it stand out. The girl who got eaten by the shark at the beginning of the film was the Big Event, but it was those barrels, exquisitely shot by Spielberg, that kept the audience glued to their seats!

The Final Ending (the Denouement)

The final ending, often called the denouement, is different from the climax which resolves the main conflict. If you think of a story as a gift, the denouement is the final wrapping up of the package, where the screenwriter ties up all the loose ends and puts a bow on it. Subplots are quickly resolved, and the theme is brought home. In a classic Western, the hero rides off into the sunset. Many movies do little more to express the theme, leaving the emotional impact to fulfill the message. In other movies, the theme can be spelled out in greater detail, as with a closing monologue by the main character, or a supporting character who acted as a guide to the hero.

It can also be told in a more powerful way by simply tying up a few loose ends, as in *It's a Wonderful Life*. In the final scene, George receives a copy *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, carried about by



Clarence (the angel who helped create the original conflict where George was given the chance to see what the world would have looked like if he had never been born). In the book, Clarence writes that “no man is a failure who has friends.” George opens the book and reads what Clarence had written. George’s reaction is captured by the director and is clearly seen on his broadly smiling face in a well-planned closeup. Then we hear a bell ring on the Christmas tree and George’s daughter says that “An angel has earned his wings.” We intuitively know that Clarence has successfully completed his mission to save George. The intense emotions that George has experienced are replaced with a great sense of joy in George, and all those around him, the audience included. In your screenplay, include at least one shot after the resolution of the conflict, to capture the emotional impact of the resolution on the main characters and on all those who are around them, and you will have created the perfect denouement.

Storytelling is an exciting endeavor. Until you write your first script, you have no idea how rewarding it can be. As a screenwriter, you get to create characters out of whole cloth and weave together plot lines that can draw an audience in, experiencing a world that you create for them. In writing the narrative for your story, you will be amazed to find it taking on a life of its own. I’ve always felt like great stories write themselves, but it takes the artistic genius of a writer to bring them to life and set it up, so that the tale can be told by the characters themselves, as they react to the situations you create for them. At some point, even the storyline begins to write itself. That’s when you know you’ve created a story that has come to life, at least on paper. When you pass it on to a talented director, you will experience the joy of watching it come alive, in a cinematic vision the director creates, one that fulfills the original story in all its fullness. There is no greater satisfaction for a writer than seeing the characters he created come to life on the big screen.

Your journey into filmmaking begins when you start writing your first story. Most first-time directors have to do that for themselves, but then they get to experience both the joy of writing, and the joy of seeing their vision for making the story appear visually, in all its glory. Enjoy the ride. It makes life worth living.

Submitting Your Film to Festivals

When you finish shooting and editing your film, it is time to think about how you are going to get people to watch it. The best place to start this process is by entering your film into film festivals. Some are specially for student films. Many of the large festivals have special categories for high school students with reduced entry fees. Some even offer scholarships or special discounts on workshops and other prizes. Consider entering your film in multiple festivals. This is like building a resume for yourself. The more contests you enter the more bragging rights you will acquire, especially if you win awards!

Of course, you can also upload your short film to YouTube where anyone in the world can watch it. People may never see your film if they do not know about it, so you should think about how you can market your film to a larger audience. Indie film producers can be quite ambitious when it comes to marketing their films, but most short films get little attention outside of film festivals. Yet, there is no better place to be if you want to get better connected to your local Indie Film community, so look for festivals in your own backyard. Meeting other filmmakers is the best way to get better connected to the large indie film community where you can meet many more people who can help you make more films.

If you want to create a marketing plan to promote your film and gain more attention for your work, begin with identifying two or three film festivals. Include at least one of these in your hometown, or at least in the nearest big city. If your state has a large festival, consider entering your film there. In Texas, South by Southwest (SxSW.com) is the largest indie film event in the state, and one of the largest in the whole country. You can also enter your film in our own, *Indie Films Foundation Film Festival* (see below for more information on how to enter). The *IFF Film Festival* is a year-round, online festival so you do not have to travel to Conroe to enter, but you may want to, if your film wins the semi-finals and is shown at our live event held once each year.

Next, create a YouTube channel and upload your film to that. You can also upload a trailer and any other videos you want to share. These can include interviews with the cast and crew, outtakes from the film, and special footage showing how you created special effects or simply showing you making the film. All of these additional videos make great marketing content that you can share in social media which will definitely help you market your film.

If you are in high school, you should create a portfolio of all your work. Include any films that you produced yourself and also any films that you helped produce. You can create a small website to feature these, but you should also create a one- or two-page flyer listing all the films you worked on, with links to videos on YouTube. Working on real film projects is perhaps the best thing you can do if you want to get into a film school. You could even win a film scholarship or qualify for special grants just for film students.

THE IFF FILM FESTIVAL, CONROE, TEXAS

- Texas High School Film Competition Shorts (5 minutes or less)
Filmmaker must be enrolled in a Texas High School
- National Filmmaker Film Competition Shorts to Full Length Films
Open to anyone in the U.S. (any age)

Location: Conroe, TX

Festival Date: Continuous (Online); Live (Mid October)

Submission Deadline: (Monthly); Annually, Mid-September

<https://iffschool.com/filmfestival>

If you want to enter your film in the *Indie Films Foundation Film Festival*, just go to <https://iffschool.com/filmfestival> and follow the directions. Our online festival operates every month. Following review, your film will be uploaded in one of our monthly contests. Winners are selected each month and move onto the semi-finals. Each year, we hold a live film event in Conroe, featuring the finalists. Special prizes and awards are offered in multiple categories. For more information, you can see details on our website.

SOUTH BY SOUTHWEST FILM FESTIVAL (SXSW), AUSTIN, TEXAS

- Texas High School Film Competition Shorts (5 minutes or less)
Filmmaker must be enrolled in a Texas High School.
- National Filmmaker Film Competition Shorts to Full Length Films
Open to anyone in the U.S. (any age)

Location: Austin, TX

Festival Date: Mid-March

Submission Deadline: Mid-September

<https://www.sxsw.com/>

OTHER FESTIVALS IN YOUR AREA

If you live in another state, outside Texas, search for festivals in your state. There are many film festivals just for High School students. Many states also have one or more large film festivals opened to anyone. Check to see if they have special categories for student films.