

A man with a beard and dark hair, wearing a blue and white plaid shirt, is kneeling in a field of tall grass. He is operating a professional video camera mounted on a tripod. The camera is a large, black, professional-grade model with a lens, a viewfinder, and various attachments. The background is a soft-focus field of tall grass under a bright sky.

FILMMAKING 101

Ten Essential Lessons

For
The
Noob

by
Film School Online!

Filmmaker

**FILMMAKING 101:
Ten Essential Lessons for the Noob Filmmaker**

By
Film School Online!
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FOREWORD

This eBook is a compilation of several lessons and articles from the Film School Online [website](#). Most eBook distributors require a nominal purchase price, but I hope that you find the information here well worth the small investment.

As NYU Film School's production supervisor for the past twenty years, I have observed common questions and misconceptions that film students have when they enter the program. This is true for many noob filmmakers outside the halls of NYU, as well; hence, this eBook.

The "ten essential lessons," as I call them, run the gamut of filmmaking and address these issues. My hope is that they provide a nice foundation for future learning, or perhaps, set you on the right path if you are thinking about becoming a filmmaker.

If you are a fundamentals level instructor, this eBook may be helpful in providing your students with an overview of the exciting and complex field we call *filmmaking*.

Please visit our [website](#) for more tips, advice, and information on digital and traditional filmmaking. Thanks for checking out the material and best of luck in your creative endeavors.

-Louis La Volpe

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The Process of Filmmaking

If you want to understand how to make a movie, you've come to the right place. This is an overview of the filmmaking process--a primer, if you will. The process is probably a bit different than what you think it is.

It's obvious that making a movie involves "lights, camera, and action," as they say, but how is this actually accomplished? By understanding the steps used to make a movie, you will better see how the pieces fit together.

The filmmaking process can be divided into five basic steps or, to use a better term, *stages*:

Development

In the development stage, the producer secures the script and raises financing. The script is perhaps the most important ingredient used to make a movie. It serves not only as the blueprint for production, but also as the foundation for everything that follows.

The story must be outstanding; otherwise the finished film is destined to failure. The producer can locate a great story by purchasing the rights to a book, optioning an existing screenplay, or adapting a news story or historic event.

Pre-Production

When people talk about making a movie, it's usually in terms of production, but a lot of work occurs prior to the camera rolling. This period is called pre-production.

During pre-production, the director, cast, and crew are hired. Casting is perhaps the most important element after the script. Great acting gives life to a script, but poor acting is its death knoll. On major productions, casting can take many months. It's important to find actors that have the ability to bring depth and dimension to the roles.

In addition to casting and crewing, pre-production also involves finding locations and developing the production schedule.

Production

During actual production, the director is the artistic leader, responsible for translating the script to the screen. To accomplish this he relies on different craft departments--camera, sound, design, etc.

Each craft department has its own boss. For example, the cinematographer is in charge of the camera department, the mixer is in charge of the sound department, and the production designer is in charge of the design department.

Based on years of union regulation, each department is carefully structured with its own chain of command. You wouldn't think this because film is considered an art form, but a major film production is run like a well-oiled corporate machine!

The director has his own little department as well, composed of the assistant director and the continuity supervisor. Believe it or not, the assistant director has no creative duties. His job is solely to keep the set running smoothly and on time. Depending on the size of the production, there can be one or more assistant directors.

The continuity supervisor is the person you see following the director around with a notebook. The job involves keeping track of the director's shots and preferred takes.

Post-Production

As you might expect, post-production involves editing the film, which is shot in small snippets and usually out of sequence.

What most novice filmmakers don't understand is that sound editing is a huge part of the post-production process. There are special editors called "sound designers" that add all of those great sound effects that contribute to the excitement of a scene.

Sound actually goes through two cycles in post-production. The first cycle involves adding the right sound effects and music, and the second step involves blending all the sound tracks together so that they sound right. The latter step is called sound mixing and it is crucial indeed. Without proper sound mixing, dialogue might sound too low, music too loud, and sound effects a mishmash. Sound mixing puts all of these tracks in proper perspective.

Distribution

When a movie is completed, it goes through a rollout process whereby the film is distributed to different outlets for exhibition to the public. There are many steps involved, including: developing an advertising campaign, assessing how many theaters to open in, determining whether to enter film festivals or use sneak previews, etc. Later considerations are DVD, TV and international release.

Like the other areas of the filmmaking, there are people who specialize in the different areas of distribution. Although many low budget films

wait until the end of the filmmaking process to secure distribution, successful producers know that this is one of the first steps and it goes hand in hand with raising financing.

Conclusion

If you are a low budget filmmaker, you will not be able to afford all of the specialists discussed above. This doesn't mean that you can't make a great movie.

To achieve the highest level of efficiency for your limited money, it is important to combine jobs and duties in a logical way. Remember, you cannot do everything yourself, and if you try to, the final product will be inferior. At the very least, you should have a competent cinematographer, sound person, and assistant director.

Finally--and this applies to all levels of production from no budget to mega budget--you must have a great script and talented actors. Otherwise, you are wasting your time.

We hope that this primer is helpful in understanding how all the pieces fit together to make a movie.

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Filmmaking Jobs & Departments

The first thing you must understand about filmmaking is that it is a collaborative process requiring the skills and talents of many people.

The process is similar to a construction project--there are many technicians and craftspeople that come and go as the job progresses from blueprint to final structure. No one person can do it all. The same is true for a film project, except perhaps, a tiny micro-budget documentary.

Despite the collaborative nature of filmmaking, you, the filmmaker, must know the basics in all of these areas. This is critical because it gives you control over creative and budgetary elements by knowing what is and isn't possible in making the movie.

Without a basic understanding of each key area, you will be forced to rely on others when making decisions. In essence, other people will be calling the shots (both literally and figuratively). In the world of filmmaking this could lead to your project becoming someone else's vision rather than your own.

There are six key areas that you must have a basic understanding of to be a successful filmmaker:

Producing

There are several kinds of producers. When people think about producing, it's usually in terms of the executive producer. The executive producer is essentially the CEO of the movie. He purchases the script, raises financing, arranges for distribution, and hires the crew and talent.

The executive producer can work for a studio or own the movie outright. Either way, the success or failure of the project rests on his shoulders. On bigger productions, the executive producer can have one or more associate producers helping him. There may be several line producers, as well, overseeing different segments of the production.

One of the trickiest parts of producing a movie is at the very beginning and very end of the process, specifically: financing and distribution. Many aspiring filmmakers don't understand that these two functions are intertwined and that their handling can make or break the production.

Screenwriting

Screenwriting is perhaps the most important single element in the making of the movie. Great production values cannot save a poor script, but a great script can raise the ante for modest production values.

Screenplays have a unique form and structure. The successful screenwriter must understand these conventions along with the fine balance between action and character development. Too much action can create a shallow unsatisfying story, while too much character development can be boring! Needless to say, the story and conflicts along the way must be nothing short of intriguing.

Finally, the script must be written using a very specific format. Hollywood is so rooted in this format that any deviation will result in the script getting tossed.

Directing

While the executive producer is the business leader of a production, the director is its creative leader. The director's job is to translate the script to the screen, ideally adding his/her creative vision and style to an already fabulous story.

An often-overlooked part of the director's job is that it must be accomplished within the budgetary parameters set up by the producer. Directors that ignore this and come in over-schedule and/or over-budget develop a poor reputation and soon cannot find work.

The director's job is split between working with actors and overseeing the craft heads, two of the most important craft heads being the set designer and cinematographer.

Cinematography

Cinematography is perhaps the most mysterious of the craft areas. While it does involve camera operation, this is only a small part of the job and the cinematographer doesn't even do it! The camera itself is handled by the camera operator and one or more assistants.

The real job of the cinematographer involves lighting the image. If you study how things look around you, you will see that light is composed of varying degrees of shadows and hues. The cinematographer recreates this on the set, with his choices designed to support the emotional subtext of the scene.

There are many interesting tools available to the cinematographer. It is a fascinating area of study, often called "painting with light."

Sound

One of the most critical craft areas, but the most overlooked, is production sound. A movie can survive with subpar cinematography, because the human eye will adapt to the image. This is not true for sound. The ear has zero tolerance for poor quality sound and it will ruin your movie.

Consequently, the main job of the sound person, professionally known as the sound mixer, is to record the best quality sound, and he should do this using no audio filters if possible. The reason that filters are avoided is that once they are applied, they cannot be removed.

The rule of thumb sound mixers use to achieve these goals is to get the microphone as close as possible to the actor. If they cannot do this using a boom pole, then they will either hide the mic near the actor or pin it to the actor's clothing. Anything to get the mic as close as possible.

Editing

The editor not only combines the shots in the manner suggested by the director, but also designs the sound effects and adds the supporting music provided by the composer. This is a major job and, on big budget productions, it is performed by several specialty editors.

After the print is "locked," there are several steps that must be taken before it is ready for distribution. First, the dialogue, sound effects, and music tracks must be mixed down to a single track.

Finally, the color must be balanced to correct any differences that may have occurred during shooting, which is common. From this timed composite print either DVDs and/or release prints are struck.

Screenwriting: The Story

The screenplay tells a story using *character* and *action*. The most common pitfall in writing the screenplay is making it one-dimensional. Stories that concentrate too much on action tend to be shallow, while those that concentrate too much on character tend to be dull.

The best screenwriters avoid these problems by developing clearly defined action and complex realistic characters. Both of these ingredients are essential to a screenplay's entertainment and thematic value.

To achieve this balance, the main character, or protagonist, must be involved in two story lines. One story line deals with his/her *outer motivation*, and the other deals with his/her *inner motivation*. The inner and outer stories are fleshed out through *conflict* and *theme*. Let's take a closer look at these elements:

Outer Motivation

The outer motivation is about the protagonist's outward goal (i.e., desire). This goal must be tangible and manifests itself in physical action. The action need not be high energy, but it must be clear to the audience. The outer motivation is resolved when the protagonist succeeds or fails at achieving his goal.

The outer motivation is about physical action, so it provides most of the script's entertainment value. It moves the story forward by keeping the audience interested in the outcome. Without a strong outer motivation, there is little momentum and the result is a boring script.

In *The Godfather* (1972), Michael's outer motivation is to avenge his father's shooting. In *Rocky* (1976), Rocky's outer motivation is to the championship fight.

Inner Motivation

The inner motivation is about the protagonist's inner need (i.e., character flaw). It is not fully recognized by the protagonist despite the fact that it governs the negative way he treats himself and the people that care about him. The inner motivation can be guilt, ambition, or selfishness, to name a few. It is resolved when the protagonist recognizes and overcomes it.

The inner motivation is usually caused by a traumatic experience in the protagonist's past. The inner motivation is ultimately about relationships, so it is how character and theme are explored.

In *The Godfather*, Michael's inner story is about his transformation into a heartless killer. Although he follows in his father's footsteps to become the Don, he does it without any of his father's compassion, killing family members and enemies alike. Unlike most protagonists, Michael shows negative growth at the end of the story rather than positive.

In *Sophie's Choice* (1982), Sophie is haunted by guilt after being forced to choose which of her two children must die in a Nazi gas chamber

Inner vs. Outer Motivation - The inner motivation gives depth to the story because it explores character and theme. It is, however, slow moving and depends heavily upon the outer motivation to *hook* the audience with exciting action. For this reason, the outer motivation is called the *spine* of the script.

Conflict

Conflict is opposition between characters. When faced with conflict, the protagonist is forced to take action. As the story progresses, each new conflict must become seemingly more insurmountable and provocative than the last. Ultimately, the protagonist must develop a plan of action to succeed.

Both the inner and outer stories must contain conflict. The outer story involves conflict with an opponent who prevents the protagonist from achieving his goal. The inner story involves conflict with an ally, such as a love interest or friend, who is trying to help the protagonist. The inner story deals with personal struggle so it gives the protagonist depth and realism.

Conflict can be in the form of a dispute, challenge, deficiency, decision, threat, or an obstacle. It creates tension in the audience and curiosity about the outcome. This makes for a quick moving, interesting story. Conflict, therefore, is the single most effective story element for keeping the audience involved. It is the essence of drama!

Theme

Theme is an idea presented in a story about the meaning of life or the human condition. By its nature, theme embodies the writer's opinions about the issues dealt with in the screenplay. All great movies explore one or more themes.

Theme is developed through the inner story line, which deals with character growth and interpersonal relationships. In a properly structured story, action *converges* as the protagonist encounters

increasing conflict. At the same time, theme *expands* as values of the protagonist are revealed and tested.

If theme is too obvious it will dominate the story and seem pretentious. It must, therefore, be implicit in the action. Any use of symbols, metaphors, and motifs must be woven subtly into the fabric of the story. The least effective way to convey theme is through direct dialogue.

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Directing Basics: Subject Size

Subject size is the size of the subject as it appears in the frame. The most common sizes are the *wide shot*, *medium shot*, and *close shot*. At the far ends of the spectrum are the *extreme wide shot* and *extreme close shot*. The main function of subject size is to convey story information by orienting the audience and emphasizing (or de-emphasizing) the subject.

The classic shot structure for a scene starts with a wide shot, cuts to medium shots, and climaxes with close shots. In other words, the subject size gets bigger as the action intensifies.

This pattern can be monotonous when used for every scene. Nonetheless, it is basic to understanding how shots relate to action and can be used as a springboard for more creative scene designs. The following discussion elaborates on the different subject sizes.

Wide Shot

The wide shot is primarily used to establish the setting or location of a scene. Since objects appear small in the frame, it can also be used for *de-emphasis* and is ideal for conveying character isolation.

The wide shot has two drawbacks: it weakens the director's control over audience attention and lessens the impact of action. It should be avoided when important detail must be conveyed. Wide shots are also referred to as *establishing shots*.

Close Shot

The close shot is the exact opposite of the wide shot in that the subject is very large in the frame. Consequently, it is used for emphasis. When the subject is an actor, anything closer than mid-chest is considered a close shot, or *close-up*. Here, the actor's head dominates the composition.

There are several variations on the close-up, including the *head shot* and the *head and shoulders shot*.

Another variation is the *over the shoulder shot*, where an actor is seen in close-up over another actor's shoulder. This shot is often used in dialogue scenes as a bridge between a shot of two actors and a close-up.

The close shot is a powerful tool and should be used sparingly. When used too often, the audience becomes desensitized to it and its effectiveness is lost.

Medium Shot

As the name indicates, the medium shot falls between the close shot and the wide shot. When the subject is an actor, the upper body dominates the frame, usually from the thighs up. Movies are primarily constructed of medium shots, with wide shots and close shots used for orientation and emphasis, respectively.

Multiple Sizes

A composition can have multiple subject sizes. For example, one actor can be shown in close-up, while another is in full shot. This enables the audience to follow action in the foreground and the background simultaneously. The technique, called *deep focus*, was pioneered by Orson Welles in his landmark film *Citizen Kane* (1941).

Variable Size

The size of a subject can be varied during a shot by moving the camera and/or subject. For example, an actor in medium shot can move away from the camera into wide shot or toward the camera into close-up.

Cutting Heights

There must be a clear understanding between director and cinematographer as to where frame lines cut off the actor's body. These designations are called *cutting heights*.

The director should be aware that terminology might vary slightly from one cinematographer to the next, so definitions should be clearly established before shooting begins.

A rule in cutting heights is that frame lines should not cut through an actor's primary joints, since this has a strange look on screen. Primary joints include the neck, waist, knees, and ankles.

Technical Considerations

The preferred way to change subject size is to move the camera in relation to the subject, or vice versa. Subject size can also be varied by changing the lens focal length (i.e., magnification), however, this affects the way the image looks in terms of depth perspective and depth of field:

Depth Perspective - Depth perspective is the apparent distance of the foreground and background in relation to each other. Wide focal

lengths expand the apparent distance, while long focal lengths compress it.

Depth of Field - Depth of field is the amount of acceptable focus behind and in front of the subject. Short focal lenses tend to produce a wide depth of field, where everything on the set appears in focus ("deep focus"). Long focal lenses produce a shallow depth of field, where only the subject area is in focus.

To avoid fluctuations in these variables from one shot to the next, the cinematographer chooses a focal length and shoots the entire scene with that lens. The camera is then moved in relation to the subject to create the desired subject size.

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Cinematography: Painting with Light

Cinematography is how the visual elements of the movie are framed, lighted, and recorded on film or video. The cinematographer is the person charged with this responsibility.

Cinematography is arguably the most mysterious of the filmmaking craft areas. Film students either love it or hate it. Tech types love it, while non-tech types fear it with a passion!

Even if you are in the latter group, once you understand the elements that go into the job, you'll discover that cinematography is no more mysterious than directing or screenwriting, and quite interesting since it encompasses the ongoing breakthroughs in digital technology.

The Cinematographer

Most people associate cinematography with camerawork. While this is true, camerawork is only a small part of the job. Framing is established by the director and tweaked by the cinematographer, after which a camera operator does the actual shooting.

The cinematographer rarely touches the camera except to check the camera operator's framing. With that said, let's take a look at the real job of the cinematographer, also known as the director of photography or "DP."

The cinematographer is hired to translate the director's visual interpretation of the script to the screen. He does this using the creative and technical skills discussed below.

He also plays a vital leadership role on the set by working closely with other department heads in maintaining quality and continuity. These department heads include the set designer, sound mixer, and special effects supervisor.

Lighting the Image

The foremost creative job of the cinematographer is lighting the image. Most newbies are surprised by this because, again, they see the cinematographer in terms of operating the camera. Camerawork is generally straightforward, but lighting the image is a challenge. It sets the mood of the scene and supports the emotional tone of the actors.

Complicating this is that there are so many different ways to get a specific job done. Unfortunately, budgets and schedules are the bane of filmmaking, so the cinematographer must find an approach that strikes the right balance between creativity and efficiency.

The actual lighting of the set involves two components: equipment and setup.

Lighting equipment remained pretty much the same until the late 1990s. Tungsten lights were standard with the occasional use of HMI units when daylight simulation was needed or a large area had to be lit. Color gels were used to adjust lighting hue for either creative purposes or color correction. They were particularly helpful at locations with fluorescent light fixtures, which generated an objectionable green tinge.

As digital filmmaking became prevalent, lighting fixtures became smaller and "softer," spearheaded by an innovated company called Chimera. In a strange twist of fate, fluorescent and LED lighting became indispensable tools, rather than scourges. The most popular of these are Kinoflo (fluorescent lights) and Litepanels (LED lights).

Setting up the lights involves placing the units around the set and adjusting their brightness intensities based on the mood and emotion of the scene. To use a simplistic example, a frightening or suspenseful scene may require a lower intensity with lots of shadows, while a daytime party scene may require the opposite, depending on how the director sees it.

While this sounds technically straightforward, it requires a great deal of artistry on the cinematographer's part since there are countless ways to manipulate light and shadow. The main variables in dealing with lights are hue (color) and quality (i.e., hardness/softness), while the main variables in dealing with shadows are density and directionality. Because of this, the job is often characterized as "painting with light."

The cinematographer must achieve the mood requirements of the scene while maintaining some level of realism in terms of the location and the source of light that would normally be found at such a location. Unless, of course, the style of the film is surreal.

Most lighting setups are variations on a setup known as "three point lighting." The size of the setup can vary greatly, depending on whether you are lighting for "detail" or "movement," the latter covering much larger areas.

Capturing the Image

After lighting the image, the cinematographer must then capture it on film or video. Prior to the digital revolution in the late 1990s, theatrical movies were shot exclusively on 35mm film. This was very costly.

The alternative was 16mm film, which was primarily a teaching format. Unfortunately, 16mm was not taken seriously by the industry and such films rarely found distribution. Two of the lucky ones were Spike Lee's *She's Gotta Have It* (1986) and Robert Rodriguez's *El Mariachi* (1992). A 16mm film had to win a key festival award or attract a major Hollywood player for this to happen.

Today, the playing field is much different. 35mm is no longer a prerequisite. Digital cameras are smaller, cheaper, and record higher quality than most cameras prior to the digital revolution. The cost of this equipment is so low that independent filmmakers can buy the equipment rather than rent it.

Keep in mind that we are talking about high definition (HD) video, which has reached resolution levels comparable with 35mm film. If you are unfamiliar with HD, the concept is easy to understand. Standard definition video (what you see on tube style TVs) is composed of 525 horizontal "scan" lines. This resulting image is acceptable, but nowhere near theatrical quality.

High definition video has reached an amazing 4,000 lines of resolution. So high, in fact, that as of this writing there are no projectors or monitors on the market that can show the full 4,000 lines. HD televisions are only 1,180 lines. Pretty amazing--but there is more.

The latest development in independent filmmaking is DSLR cinematography. DSLRs are high quality still cameras. These cameras are reasonably priced at \$1,000 - \$2,000, but record video that is superior to the camcorders typically used in schools and on indie productions. The image sensor and lens capability is generally comparable to professional camcorders costing \$30,000 or more.

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Sound: Micing Techniques

The first step in micing a set is to *block the action*. This involves working out actor and camera movement with the director and cinematographer. This process will help you make decisions about which microphone to use and where to position it.

The key to optimal microphone performance is in the placement of the microphone in relation to the sound source. If a microphone is too close, too far, or off axis, complications will result, including poor frequency response, noise, and distortion.

There are three basic mic placements from which all mic setups are built: *boom, plant, and lavalier*. This priority is sometimes referred to as the *Hierarchy of Microphone Techniques*. Let's examine each approach:

Booming

Booming involves attaching the microphone to a pole, called a *boom pole*, and suspending it in front of the subject. This technique allows for considerable movement by actors. Professional boom poles should extend at least 12 feet. Some extend as far as 18 feet. It is crucial that the boom pole be lightweight, yet strong enough so that it doesn't bow under the weight of the mic.

The mic is attached to the boom pole using a *shock mount* that suspends the mic in a rubber band-like webbing. This prevents vibration from traveling up the boom pole to the mic.

Booming is done by a *boom operator*. The process is exacting since it involves juggling many variables at once, such as holding the mic as close as possible to the subject, moving the mic from one subject to the next, and keeping the mic out of the picture frame. To facilitate this, the boom operator must be equipped with headphones so that he can hear the sound. Rehearsals are also helpful when blocking is complicated.

The rule of thumb when booming is to get as close as possible to the subject, which is just outside the camera frame line. The further the mic is away from subject, the greater the background noise and echo, so every *inch* closer improves sound quality.

The mic is normally positioned several inches to a foot over the actor. Up to two feet may be acceptable depending on the situation. The camera operator will help you determine how close you can position the mic without passing the frame line.

Booming can be done from overhead or underneath the subject:

Booming from Overhead - In overhead booming the mic is suspended above and slightly ahead of the subject. Overhead booming is the most favored technique since, in most situations, it provides the most natural sounding dialogue with the least amount of mixing.

Overhead booming allows multiple actors to be recorded with a single mic, yielding a pleasant blend. Sufficient sound effects are picked up to give the soundtrack a full texture. Perspective is easier to maintain, too. Since faces are closest to the mic, dialogue dominates sound effects. On wider shots, the mic tends to be higher resulting in thinner, more distant sounding dialogue. On closer shots, the mic is closer, resulting in greater presence.

With all of these benefits, it is easy to see why overhead booming is the first preference in the hierarchy of microphone placement. Because of physical obstructions, this technique is not always possible to apply. The next favored option is booming from underneath.

Booming from Underneath - When booming from underneath, the mic is suspended below and slightly ahead of the subject.

Booming from underneath has several drawbacks when compared to overhead booming. First, dialogue tends to be bassy because the mic picks up more sound emanating from the chest cavity. Second, the mic is closer to the actor's hands so sound effects may appear louder than dialogue, throwing perspective off. Third, booming from underneath can be tricky on sets tight with furniture and actors.

Despite these drawbacks, booming from underneath can be an alternative to overhead booming and provide perfectly acceptable sound under the right conditions.

Pistol Grip

A pistol grip is used in tight spaces where a boom pole is impractical. Since your arm acts like a boom pole, the mechanics are essentially the same as booming. Most shock mounts can be switched between boom pole and pistol grip with a minimum of fuss.

Plant

A *plant* is any microphone fixed in place. It is used to cover a static subject when it is impractical to use a boom. Plants can be conventional condenser mics or lavalieres (discussed below). The type of microphone used depends on the situation. Placement is important because plant mics are effective only if dialogue is directed within their pickup pattern and range.

Another important consideration is that the mic be properly hidden (planted). Mics can be hidden just about anywhere: behind, on top, and below props, furniture, and walls. The possibilities are limited only by your imagination. It is still important to use shock mounts to protect against vibration.

Lavaliere

The next approach in the mic hierarchy is the lavaliere. Lavalieres, called *lavs* for short, are tiny microphones worn on the actor's body, either inside or outside the clothing.

Lavs are given less preference than booming because they are prone to problems with perspective and contact noise:

Perspective - Since lavs are attached directly to actors' bodies, their voices dominate the soundtrack. Consequently, actors always sound close to the camera, even in long shots. In addition, the track is devoid of sound effects and ambience. Overall, lavs result in sterile, less natural audio.

There are two ways to improve lav perspective. First, the lav can be moved further down the actor's chest. This opens up the air space and allows the mic to pickup more ambience. Second, a supplemental boom mic can be used to capture ambience and sound effects that the lav might ignore, such as footsteps.

Contact Noise - When rigging lavs on actors, contact noise occurs when clothing rubs over the mic head or cable. To avoid contact noise, clothing must be secured on all sides of the mic head. The best way to do this is to sandwich the lav head between two triangular wads of cloth tape, such as camera or gaffer tape. Folding them like a flag, sticky side out, creates the wads.

In addition, tape or pin down any loose flaps and soften stiff areas of clothing with some water. Another way to avoid clothing noise is to attach lavs to non-traditional areas, such as hat brims and props.

Noise from the lav wire can be prevented by taping a few lengths of cable to the clothing. Double sided tape or sticky wads prevent the clothing from rubbing on the actor's body. A loop should be formed near the mic to provide strain relief.

Camera Mounted Mic

Mounting the microphone on the camera is a last resort measure! It violates the rule of getting the microphone as close to the subject as possible (i.e., just outside the frame). The sound is subject to

excessive background noise and even vibration from the camera. Camera mounting should only be used when you work solo. If another person is available, use a pistol grip.

Wired vs. Wireless Mics

Wireless (radio) mics send the audio signal over the airwaves using a transmitter and receiver. Their main drawback is that they are subject to RF interference, so a wired mic should be used whenever possible. Wireless mics are helpful when the boom operator cannot get close to the action and it is impractical to run a lav cable.

Single vs. Multiple Mics

A good rule of thumb is that each mic should do as much work as possible. On smaller sets where actors are a few feet apart, one mic will suffice. On larger sets where actors are further apart, additional mics may be required.

Multiple mics can interfere with each other when positioned too close together. This is called *phasing* or *phase cancellation*. It occurs when certain frequencies cancel each other out, creating distortion.

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Documentary Filmmaking

Documentaries have become very popular in recent years. It started in the 1990s when cable television actively sought documentary film proposals for their programming.

Since then, documentaries have continued to find a growing audience on network and cable television. They are made in various forms, from half hour seasonal shows like *Dog Whisperer* (2004) to epic mini-series like *The Civil War* (1990).

A decade after cable TV discovered documentaries, feature length documentaries hit theatrical screens in a big way. *Fahrenheit 911* (2004), *Super Size Me* (2004), and *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006) have established documentaries as a viable genre for the aspiring filmmaker.

There are two reasons for this. First, documentaries are vastly cheaper to make than narrative films. Second, there is a better chance that a distributor or festival will recognize a good documentary over the typical genre film.

There are three schools of thought in documentary filmmaking. It is important that you to understand the differences because it will determine your approach to the project, particularly in what you shoot and how you edit it. The schools of thought are distinguished by the level of objectivity:

Direct Cinema

Direct Cinema is the most unbiased approach. The filmmaker does not intrude on the subject and does not instill his opinion in the choice of shots and editing. The documentary is presented in such a way that the audience can draw their own conclusions.

If an issue is being debated, the various points of view are presented as objectively as possible.

Direct Cinema is sometimes referred to as the "fly on the wall" approach because the filmmaker is an objective observer, like a fly on the wall. Some Direct Cinema purists believe that even interviewing the subject is too much of an intrusion.

Cinema Verite

Cinema Verite is similar to Direct Cinema and is often confused with it. The difference is that the filmmaker takes a more active role. He may provoke a reaction from the subject or may voice an opinion

through his choice of shots and editing. The filmmaker may even impact the outcome the events being documented.

Harlan County USA (1976) is a classic Cinema Verite documentary. The film is about striking coal miners in Kentucky during the mid 1970s. At first it looks like Direct Cinema, but on closer inspection you can see that the filmmakers are actively involved in what is unfolding on screen.

For example, in one scene the crew approaches the company foreman who is toting a gun and is clearly dangerous; later on, the filmmakers are physically attacked by the foreman's men. Despite this, the presence of the camera kept the overall level of violence down. Many believe that if the documentary had not been made, the coal miners would not have negotiated a contract. Ultimately, the filmmakers had an impact on the subject matter.

Harlan County USA won an Academy Award for best feature documentary. Not only is it a riveting work, but it demonstrates the central difference between Direct Cinema and Cinema Verite.

Essay Film

The polar opposite of Direct Cinema and Cinema Verite is what is known as the essay film. Like a written essay, the essay film is an opinion or position on a given issue. Specifically, the filmmaker states a thesis early on, and then goes on to provide supporting evidence throughout the film.

All sides of an issue are not necessarily shown. If they are, it is usually designed to expose or trip up the opposing party.

The biggest criticism of this approach is that it is not balanced. Proponents say that there is no need for "balance" because these films are, in essence, *essays*. An opinion based on the way the filmmaker interprets the evidence.

Michael Moore uses this approach in his movies. In fact, most of the successful documentary films of recent years are essay type films.

8 Film Financing

If you are looking to make a feature film, this lesson will be a real eye-opener. We will examine film financing from the perspective of successful producers.

The approach is probably not what you expect since it goes against the grain of what is typically taught in film school. On hindsight, however, you may come to appreciate it. Especially when it helps you avoid repeating the mistakes of countless unsuccessful filmmakers.

Typical Approach

Virtually all aspiring filmmakers and film school grads want to make a feature film. One of the first things they do is try to raise financing.

Film financing is a difficult task because of the risk investors are expected to take. Despite this, some budding filmmakers actually achieve it. They typically raise financing from friends, relatives, and/or "angel" investors. After completion, the film is rolled out on the festival circuit in search of a distributor.

This is the typical route for novice filmmakers. Seems reasonable, right?

Wrong. There is an inherent flaw that will doom the film to failure. Read the approach again and try to find it.

The problem is that the approach is *backwards*. Securing distribution should be the first step, not the last.

Crucial Link

You may be asking yourself, "What does distribution have to do with financing?" The answer is: everything!

The distribution deal is how you raise financing. By pre-selling distribution rights, you can raise anywhere from seed money to virtually the entire budget. Distribution rights include:

- Domestic Theatrical
- International Theatrical
- DVD
- TV
- Syndication

Pre-selling distribution rights is how all the real players in the industry get their projects off the ground.

Recall the compelling "Cinderella stories" about projects that were unsuccessfully pitched to everyone in Hollywood before they were finally picked up, launching major careers in the process. Well, those filmmakers used exactly the approach recommended here.

Do you think that an unknown Sylvester Stallone made *Rocky* (1976) with his own money? Or that Mark Burnett used his personal savings to produce the first season of *Survivor* (2000)? Of course not. They went around Tinseltown pitching the idea until someone bought it.

The person or company that buys distribution rights may not be a distributor per se, but can guarantee distribution by virtue of a prearranged deal with a distributor. It boils down to the same thing.

Also, the various rights can be sold to different parties. That's why you often see many companies listed in credits of a film, depending on the complexity of the deals involved.

First Things First

In film school, there is an old adage that says you should use OPM (other people's money) to make your movie. This is to minimize your personal risk.

The first thing newly minted filmmakers do when they graduate is run out to raise OPM. Okay, so they make a movie using OPM. What's the point if they can't get it in front of an audience?

The truth is, with today's affordable equipment, anyone can make a movie. However, making the movie is only half the battle. Distributing the movie is the other half; and the deal should be made before spending time and money on anything else.

In the development stage, all your effort must be geared to securing a distributor. This is accomplished by putting together a viable *package* (script, talent, production team) and *pitching* it to parties interested in buying the distribution rights. It is what successful producers spend most of their time doing.

You must find a distributor eventually, so why not do it the way the pros do--before the movie is made. By using this approach, you will waste less time and radically increase your chances of success.

Additional Benefits

Not only will this approach enable you to make the movie, but there are additional benefits as well:

1. The distributor has a vested interest your project and will make every effort to see that it turns a profit.
2. Distributors know what audiences are looking for at any given time and can help you develop the project in terms of story choice and actors.
3. Sale of distribution rights imparts credibility to the project and can help secure additional financing if needed.

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Low Budget Strategies

The success of the film Paranormal Activity (2007) shows that it is still possible to make a low budget movie that can achieve theatrical distribution and propel the filmmaker to fame and fortune. It also demonstrates that despite home theaters and the growing problem of film piracy, audiences will still flock to the cinema if a movie is worth seeing and not just another remake or timeworn sequel.

This is great news for aspiring filmmakers, but don't run out to buy a DV camera just yet. Such success is rare in the film industry.

Low budget hits like She's Gotta Have It (1986), El Mariachi (1992), The Blair Witch Project (1999), and a few others are but a fraction of the thousands of indie films that have been made since the infamous Ed Wood tried his hand at it in the 1950s. The majority of low budget movies simply go down in flames despite the personal fortunes and years of effort invested in them.

Rather than jump headlong into the fray, aspiring filmmakers are advised to first learn the art and craft of filmmaking, and then approach their productions in a realistic levelheaded way. The high burnout "guerilla" style of filmmaking and the dreamy film festival approach are not recommended if you intend to build a career. The best strategy to adopt is that of successful producers, discussed in the previous lesson, Film Financing.

With that said, The Blair Witch Project and Paranormal Activity are two of those special films that defy the typical path to success. Specifically, they are self-financed, have an unknown cast, and had no distribution deal prior to production.

The Blair Witch Project grossed over \$300,000,000 worldwide and Paranormal Activity is expected to break that record. The original production budget was \$35,000 for The Blair Witch Project and a paltry \$15,000 for Paranormal Activity.

Analysts like attribute the success of these low budget movies to their respective marketing campaigns. The truth is that marketing only influences the initial rollout of a film. After that, word of mouth takes over. So, clearly something else is going on here. What is it about these low budget horror movies that propelled them to the top of the heap, above most Hollywood productions?

The two films share certain common denominators for success, which are, in fact, present in all successful films, budget notwithstanding. It may surprise you, but these factors have nothing to do with marketing

or production values or the myriad of technical issues that filmmakers get caught up in.

The secrets to success lie in the simple rules of good screen storytelling, which cannot be overemphasized. Many filmmakers seem to forget this or miss it entirely. Great acting, great directing, and great camerawork cannot compensate for a boring script. The old-time studio bosses may have been tyrants, but they had one thing right: "story is king."

Interestingly, Oren Peli, the writer/director of *Paranormal Activity*, had no film training prior to making the movie. Despite this, he had a strong sense of storytelling, no doubt honed in his profession as a video game designer.

Okay, so what are the factors that turn low budget productions into box office gold? Let's take a closer look.

Slant

One of the first things student screenwriters are taught (or should be taught) is that there are no new story ideas. Every story concept has been used in one form or another. After all, storytelling has been a form of entertainment for thousands of years. The goal is to come up with a unique slant on a proven idea.

There are several ways to do this, which involve manipulation of genre, plot, and/or characters. Both *Paranormal Activity* and *The Blair Witch Project* have unique slants, hooks, and twists, not only in the overall story concept but also in the beats along the way.

Keep in mind that "unique" is relative to the time that a movie is made. What was unique a few years ago might be a cliché today.

In *Psycho* (1960), the main character is murdered halfway through the movie. That never happened before and it shocked the hell out of audiences. The movie was also the first "slasher flick." Remember *The Sixth Sense* (1999)? It turns out that the main character is a ghost, which the audience doesn't realize until the very end. Neither does he! Pretty cool.

That's your goal. Make it "cool" enough that one person tells the next. Again, word of mouth is still the primary way a movie becomes a hit. It was so strong for *Paranormal Activity* that audiences began requesting the film at their local theaters, prompting a broader release than planned.

In terms of a unique slant, *The Blair Witch Project* has a great backstory. So good, in fact, that it was copied countless times and

soon became a cliché. That's what normally happens to a great slant--it becomes a cliché. Never use a story element that has reached the end of its life cycle.

Paranormal Activity has an equally intriguing backstory. It too has an interesting slant and it's very simple, to boot. Not much screen time is spent on it, but it sets up the main storyline nicely.

The creators of The Blair Witch Project were not afraid to let the screen go totally black, and did so for many seconds in several scenes. This was unheard of at the time and made audiences cringe with fear.

The idea of the characters setting up a video camera in Paranormal Activity a la *Sex, Lies, and Videotape* (1989) is a great hook for a ghost story. Okay, it was done in *Poltergeist* (1982) as well, but there is something really scary about the clock churning away in the lower right corner of the frame during Paranormal Activity (see the movie if you don't understand why). Now that's a cool slant on an old idea!

Are you starting to understand the concept? Not only must the overall story have a unique slant, but so should as many story beats as possible.

Plot Points

One of the killers of a good screen story is when plot points (aka story beats) flatten out in intensity. The second act is prone to this. The only thing worse is when plot points decrease in intensity--the death knoll for any film.

It's amazing how many Hollywood movies suffer from this and fall flat on their celluloid faces. The Blair Witch Project and Paranormal Activity, like the Energizer Bunny, keep on moving on. They keep audiences on the edge of their seats, or at least curious, from beginning to end.

Paranormal Activity is particularly good in this regard. Plot points are intriguing, carefully paced, and escalate from a simple creak in the rafters early on to a huge crescendo ending, which is quite shocking in its effect on audiences. Each story beat is more intense than the one before it.

The job was so well done that the movie's trailers feature audience reactions rather than actual footage from the movie! And isn't that the ultimate goal of any movie, to inspire an emotional reaction in the audience? The Blair Witch project had a similar effect during its run.

The Blair Witch Project may seem like old hat now, but at the time of its release it was fresh and unique. Audiences didn't know what to

expect and were truly frightened. You had to see it during this period to appreciate the impact it had. Unfortunately, by the end of its initial run, word of mouth was so overblown that it couldn't possibly satisfy audience expectation.

Characters

In addition to a taut story, a film must have believable, well-defined characters to drive it home. Both movies accomplish this, not only in the way the characters are written but also in their casting, which is equally important. While we are not talking Jack Nicholson caliber, the lead actors in both movies are attractive and charismatic, fitting their roles perfectly.

The male and female characters in both films do not have a classic romance, but their interpersonal storylines contain the conventions of a romance. Specifically, they care about each other but are at cross-purposes in terms of the main storyline. This adds considerably more conflict to the mix.

In *The Blair Witch Project*, Heather wants to keep shooting the documentary, while Joshua wants to call it off. The roles are reversed in *Paranormal Activity*. Micah wants to continue investigating the entity, while Katie wants to stop. The instigating characters are motivated by ambition, while their partners are motivated by fear.

Despite the role reversal, the dynamics are the same in both movies, with the same results. It creates a lot of dramatic tension, particularly towards the end of the movie when the main storyline is climaxing. Acting abilities are sometimes pushed to the limit in both films, but the characters are so well defined and likeable that this doesn't become a problem.

The audience will become emotionally involved in a movie when they identify with the main characters in some way. Early in *Paranormal Activity*, humor is used to accomplish this. It also served the dual purpose of disarming the audience right before a frightening scene. While this technique is used less in *The Blair Witch Project*, the characters' skill and determination to pull off the documentary make you care about them.

Notice how we keep coming back to the classic rules and conventions of good screen storytelling. Hopefully, this is a relief to you as there is nothing mystical or magical about making a movie audiences will want to see.

Conclusion

Horror movies have traditionally been a favorite with audiences and low budget filmmakers, providing a huge payoff for both when the film hits all the right marks. Comedies are also viable as we've seen with *She Gotta Have It*. There's no reason why the principles discussed here cannot be applied to low budget dramas and other popular genres as well.

Whether you intend to pitch your script to Hollywood or finance it yourself, we hope these pointers are helpful. As *The Blair Witch Project* and *Paranormal Activity* demonstrate, success has less to do with the size of your budget than with the script itself.

In fact, success doesn't hinge on the popularity of actors, technical wizardry, or your personal passion. While all of these variables contribute, the real springboard is a solid script. This comment by Peli makes the point and pretty much sums up what we've discussed here:

*"When I think about the movies that were most effective on me as a viewer I think of the original *Haunting* and the *Exorcist*, *Rosemary's Baby*, the *Sixth Sense*...they are movies that rely on good story telling, good acting, good premise, good exposition."*
-Oren Peli

As simple as it may seem, there are basic rules and conventions that must be addressed in your screenplay for it to resonate with audiences. Otherwise, everything that follows is for naught.

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Is Film School Necessary?

Is film school necessary for success in the movie industry? The short answer is no, however, there are important benefits that film schools provide. If you can compensate for this, then you don't need to spend upwards of \$100,000 to attend one.

Demand

Film schools as we know them today--with full blown curriculums and specialized majors--didn't exist until the 1960s. Prior to that, filmmakers learned their craft on the job, by doing. Alfred Hitchcock and Howard Hawks didn't go to film school. There weren't any!

These filmmakers learned their craft by moving up through the ranks of the old Hollywood system. Studios would groom their talent much the same way trade labor unions do it today. When the studio system collapsed in the 1950s, there was no way to learn the art and craft of filmmaking without having connections.

Filmmaking equipment was complex and difficult to operate. There were no "point and shoot" cameras, you needed someone to train you. Access to equipment was equally difficult since rentals were very expensive.

This void opened up the demand for film schools, which began to spring up in the 1960s. Famous graduates like George Lucas and Martin Scorsese were idolized by aspiring filmmakers, spurring the demand. Schools like NYU and UCLA became wildly popular.

Changing Needs

Demand hit an all time high in the late 1990s and then something interesting happened: the digital revolution. Filmmaking equipment became compact, easy to use, and affordable. Aspiring filmmakers began to question the need for film school. And rightfully so!

Today you can buy a broadcast quality HD camera and editing system for under \$4,000. Couple this with some good books or online training (see link below), and you are on your way to becoming a filmmaker. Or are you?

Self Study

This brings us back to our original question of whether film school is necessary for success. With today's digital equipment and access to information, it is not. Film schools still flourish not because they are a

gateway to the industry, but because students still go to college and major in subjects they like.

This is not to minimize the value of film schools. They provide important benefits that will help you develop your filmmaking skills and career. What are these benefits? The three most important are:

1. Instruction - Most teachers are not Hollywood stars, but you can still learn a lot from their trials and tribulations. A few will really inspire you. There is nothing better than studying with a great teacher.
2. Critical Review - Your work will be judged by instructors and colleagues. Though this can be rather blunt or downright harsh, you need it! Your parents and friends will love everything you do, so don't depend on them.
3. Contacts - Typically you will not make Hollywood contacts. This is true for even in the best schools. The contacts you make are your fellow students. This is important because as all of you move up through the industry, you become your own industry contacts and call on each other for jobs and deals.

Conclusion

If you choose to learn filmmaking on your own, it is important to compensate for the lost benefits of attending a school. A good place to start is developing a circle of filmmakers that you make movies with. Another good source is the Internet. Discussion forums can help not only with contacts, but with information and critical review as well.

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