

Filmmaking Tips For Student Filmmakers

This is a list a tips and tricks for student filmmakers. Before beginning your project, review this list to avoid common mistakes.

Planning and Production Tips

Plan Ahead: Storyboard

In short films, every moment is precious. Don't try to cram an hours worth of story into ten minutes. Look at each moment and each scene when writing and editing your film and ask yourself:

- Does this moment move the story forward?
- Does this scene move the story forward?
- What does it tell the audience?
- Is this character necessary to the scene?

Cast Appropriately and Rehearse

The audience can only suspend their disbelief so much. For example, try not to have your friends play older characters - a 16 year old is never going to pass as your grandfather. Make sure you rehearse your scenes with your actors as much as possible before the shoot. Acting is about chemistry. Your actors need to get to know each other and their characters before you will get more real and honest performances from them.

Show, Don't Tell

Don't have your characters describe what your audience can plainly see. If you've written dialogue to explain what is happening, find a way to show it instead.

Be Prepared

First and foremost, always, always read your user manuals and test your equipment before you shoot. It is also important to scout out your location ahead of time to anticipate any challenges you might encounter (i.e. lighting, sound, logistical) during your shoot. Once you are ready to begin be sure you have all the necessary equipment and supplies to make your shoot successful:

- Videocamera
- Headphones

- External Microphone(s) with appropriate cables
- Batteries (charged)
- DV Tapes
- Tripod
- White Balance Sheet
- Release forms
- Camera for still photographs

Pay Attention Audio

The most important and most often broken rule: Make sure your audio is the best it can be. You can have a very nice looking short film, but if the sound is no good, the film itself will suffer. Your audio should be planned as methodically and completely as your visuals.

If your camera allows, always use an external microphone (shotgun or lavalier with a wind screen) to record sound. If you have access to a boom pole, find a friend to be your sound operator. And always, always wear headphones while you are filming so you can monitor your audio quality and levels as you go.

Always White Balance

Many video cameras have a “white balance” (WB) function. WB is the process of removing unrealistic color casts, so that objects which appear white in person are rendered white in your photo. An incorrect WB can create unsightly blue, orange, or even green color casts. If your camera has this function, remember to white balance every time you enter into a new environment or the light changes in a current environment. Consult your user manual to learn how to properly use this function.

Steady Your Shots

Use a tripod whenever possible. This will give you a great steady shot without the shoulder ache. That said, don't let the tripod tie you down and make you miss something.

Set-up Your Shot

The most immediate and obvious sign of a student film: lots of wide-shots, too much head-room, wide-shots that should be mid-shots, mid-shots that should be close-ups, close-ups that should be extreme close-ups. When using a video camera you are looking at a little screen, which gives the impression you are close enough, but you are probably not, so move in closer.

Post-Production Tips

Spell Check and Fact Check

Be sure all your facts are accurate and all the text in your film (including names) is spelled correctly.

Audio Levels

Make sure your audio levels are consistent throughout the film before completing your final format. It can be embarrassing in a public screening if you have to keep adjusting the volume for your audience.

Titling

If you plan to use titling in your film, be sure it is legible. Select a font color, size and type that is easily legible. It is best to edit with the title safety frame activated and that all your titling fits within the frame.

Filters and Video Effects

Filters and video effects can improve the quality of your film and provide interesting visual effects. If you plan to experiment with these features, be sure you understand how and when to use them. Too many effects can be distracting and filters used incorrectly can badly distort the picture quality and sound.