

FILM MAKING

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Learn Basics to Becoming a Film Maker

Start With a Good Story

To begin with, in a nutshell, filmmaking is broken down into three parts. Pre-production, Production, and Post-production. Distribution is the last part, way down on the timeline and doesn't come into play until everything is in the can. However, if you are ever going to get to distribution you will need to spend a great deal of time in the Pre-production phase. There are times when you don't have that luxury, especially if you are shooting on the fly, but more often than not a film can take years to make. This can keep it in the Pre-production process much longer.

If I was to write about filmmaking, and I am (wink), I guess I would have to start with the script, story, or concept. Screenwriting is usually split into three different styles. They are: narrative (linear), non-linear, and documentary. Narrative stories follow a timeline taking the story from beginning and moving chronologically to the end.

Non-linear is the opposite of chronological. An example of a non-linear is the movie "Momento" or "Pulp Fiction". These directors chopped up time and used time sequencing to throw the viewer off balance. While non-linear has gained popularity, it seems that the narrative film is the more enduring style. It is much more difficult for folks to figure out what is going on in the non-linear format, that may be one of the reasons it is used.

The third format would simply be, documentary. This is a real-time reality presentation letting the facts present themselves with little or no direction or editing. Documentary is different from Narrative in that the director works to keep from manipulating the production as little as possible. Narrative film is all about the director manipulating a scene to illicit certain reactions from the viewer, therein lies the difference between the two.

Depending on the story you are telling, you will choose the best format to use. While the narrative and linear may have traditional scripting, you may have to refer to an interview script in the documentary format. This may simply be a list of questions to be asked, usually by an off camera interviewer, allowing the subject/talent to drive the dialog.

Many times there is no real dialog to script except for the questions an interviewer will ask. Much of documentary film is done by showing up and filming things as they are happening with some narration to explain to the viewer what they are watching.

There was a type of documentary films referred to Cinema Verité. This means "cinema truth" in French and of course was made popular by the French in the 1950's. This was done as an effort to remove artifice from film to allow a more truthful depiction of a story.

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In Verité the camera is to be merely set up and turned on. Additionally there is to be as little editing as possible. The theory being that even the act of editing a film is Manipulating the true representation of what is really (truthfully) happening. Hey, these guys would have loved Reality TV, but at the time (1950's) Verité was considered cutting edge.

So now you need an idea, a concept, an inspiration. If you want to make film you have to have a story or two in you, so if you don't already have a story itching to get out, then you need to brainstorm. The word brainstorm means that your brain puts out, literally, a storm of energy with all the ideas pouring out like swollen rain gutters.

This will happen somewhere after your first cup of coffee on a Sunday morning or in the shower, maybe even on a street corner. You got into the idea of filmmaking because to some extent you must be a creative person. So, I recommend lots of caffeine and your favorite conditions for daydreaming.

Your most comfortable chair, and a good computer are always good, but inspiration can come at inconvenient times when you are away from the comfort of your own computer and desk. Always have something to write with and a piece of paper handy in case of the "writing rapture" or sudden inspiration.

Another way to handle this is to have a small tape recorder or a voice recognition software. There are several inexpensive MP3 players that play/store music as well as letting you record. These will have a small microphone already in the device. Use this to get your ideas down.

When you are in the grocery store or just crossing the street it is a good idea to be able to get it (your inspired ideas) down before it leaks back out of your ear. I swear from the crosswalk to the car I can forget an idea, that is how scattered my brain is. If however, all you are left to write down your ideas with is a purple crayon and an old piece of paper, well then, just go with it.

It is always nice to have a partner in the writing process. Actually, it is good to have a partner through the whole production process. Ben Affleck and Matt Damon are the most notable partnership that comes to mind. Having each other to bounce ideas off of can make things happen quicker and it is a hell of a lot more fun.

Dialog is not done in a vacuum. Someone has to write it and someone has to say it, then someone has to hear it. This is a symbiotic relationship, each part depending on the other, hence the need for a partnership of some sort to use as a sounding board.

The most exciting time for me in the whole screenwriting process is to have taken a class in writing screenplays and to have a panel reading in that class. Everyone in the class has to pick a scene from their screenplay and have a panel of people read it aloud to an audience consisting of the rest of the class.

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All participants in the class have an opportunity to be the author, the actor and the audience each in their own turn. After the reading, each student's script is discussed. This has got to be one of the best experiences in writing I have ever had especially for writing comedy.

In comedy, you know immediately if you've got winning dialog just by whether you get the laugh or not. Not everyone can achieve this so don't be discouraged if you don't get a laugh. That is what your group can help you figure out afterward, this is where the brainstorming comes in. Comedy is difficult to write. You have to have a good sense of timing. It seems with comedy, you either have a gift for it or you don't.

The trick here is to do these group readings regularly with a line of progression happening in the film writing process. The idea is to have a whole screenplay at the end of it all. It doesn't matter if it is two people or a whole group of people, but do meet with your partners, meet regularly and do your writing in between. At the end of a few months you will have something to show for your efforts.

It's all in the rewrite. Rewriting will be the Bane of your existence as a writer but you will eventually find out that it is a process that pays off greatly in the end. Additionally, you will want to save your drafts from each rewrite because you may want to refer to them later, so try to keep each version complete. I suggest making files expressly for your different drafts and you may want to keep these and all your writing in a safe place. Make back-up copies on a Thumb drive or disk and keep that in a safe place in case something happens, like your computer crashing.

Once you have it on paper, tell your story to you parents, your wife, your kids, your sister or brother, your best friend and just about anybody that knows you intimately. Observe their reactions. If they are negative don't worry, move onto telling a friend or someone else that may be more objective.

Be careful how you tell your story because you are not in the business of giving away your ideas for free however, do tell it or parts of it and see how people react. You do not tell stories or write screenplays in a vacuum. You must want at some level to please the public, therefore you must have some sort of an arena for you to gauge how effective your story is.

I wrote a screenplay for class and I felt very passionate about it. I was very excited to hear what would happen after it was read by a panel of students in my class. The reaction to the reading was a split, one half of the class loved it and the other half had a big reaction to it. It made them uncomfortable and they didn't like it. They all had loud opinions about the script.

At first I was very worried but then the teacher finally had his word with the class on their split opinion. He told them that my screenplay was effective. Not necessarily because everyone liked it, but because it had people on both sides of the issue reacting and talking, this caused them to engage in a dialog about the issues that the film brought out.

The teacher told the class that it didn't matter what they said, at least they were all talking. I thought it sounded a bit like "all press it good, even bad press", but he seemed to think that this was a good indicator of how my script would be received. After I thought about it I saw that he had a point.

When the movie "Monster's Ball" came out I heard what people said around me about it. There were those that just did not like it and there were those that thought the sex in the movie was just gross, yada, yada, yada. I, however, saw the sex as an integral part of the film. While the act of Hallie Barry having sex right after the death of her son was considered an irreverent and inappropriate one, it was also seen by other's as very honest and very human and life affirming.

Most importantly, it had people talking and you can't ask for better press than that. Hallie Barry needed this vehicle to punch her through to the success she gained in being the first Black Woman to win an Oscar. She would not have made it through with a role that was written limp-wristed. It had to have an edge to it. The old Hollywood formula of screenwriting has changed.

There are some that still prefer a good conflict neatly resolved at the end of the story but there is now an equal share of the market going to those that write about stories that do not have nice neat resolutions to them. These are the movies that are meant to be unsettling and make you ask "now what did they mean by that?" So whatever your story happens to be, just tell it.

When you are out observing people at someplace like the mall, notice their movements and expressions. If they are talking, listen shamelessly to what they are saying. If it is interesting you won't be able to help yourself. Use it in your screenplay. This type of observing can help you to make your sketches for the characters in your script.

There can be several triggers to get the script out on the page. Do character development borrowing from your own environment. Your story can spring up from a well-developed character sketch, or perhaps a story can be found in the location. Certainly location can drive many things in the script. Time period can also drive a screenplay. While many a script is written in the present, there are those that are written in the past or even in the future. This can determine many different factors in your story.

All of these elements of story development are used when creating your character's back-story. The back-story consists of the details of life prior to your character in the here and now. The back-story can make your character more three dimensional, more real. The back-story provides the character's motivations as well.

You might think writing a back-story to be a waste of time, but you will find yourself referring to it again and again. While this may not prove to be useful for the present film you are working on, many a sequel has been built off of the back-story to the original film. You will also refer to the back-story because it may give you motivations and keep you consistent with your “facts” so the continuity of the script is not compromised.

Scriptwriters for screen and television have very specific formats for their scripts. This is something that you should study before you actually submit a completed script. If you are working off of your own script for production you generally don't have to worry about the form being perfect, but if you submit it to the studio or their representatives then keep as close to the expected format as you can.

I hate the red pen. They even call it “red-lining” a script. If you are fortunate to shop your film and get it picked up by a studio then you may have to deal with the red pen used to hack your original story into more of what the studio thinks it should be. This is the main reason that Independent film has grown like wildfire. The artist can maintain the integrity of his screenplay with no major changes to the script.

It is important to remember that there is a distinct difference between writing for film and writing for television. Television, although it has expanded, it still in the box and on the small screen. Television is dialog driven while film is not. It is not necessary to have dialog in a film for a story to be told. So when writing for Film, understand that there is a difference.

It has been said that the test of a good film is to watch it with the sound turned off. You should be able to follow the story just by the movement of the film. None of that *talking head* stuff works in film the way it does in TV. One can easily write for both Film and Television but you have to keep in mind that they are 2 very different mediums.

If you are used to watching TV or you have written for TV you will be expecting dialog rich scripting, but with film be careful with your use of dialog. When writing for film, remember not to write too many stage directions as this is the director's job and they get a little fussy about that.

There are many sound elements to write from. Some of these are: the ambient sound in the film environment, the musical soundtrack, the character dialog, or voice over narration. These are all elements that can be written into the script like dialog. They tell the story just as effectively as straight dialog.

There is screenwriting software available with the templates already in place for you to plug in your script. Shop and see what is out there, but at the least try to get a book on how this is done. Upon further research I found a site to help out. Lester Crombie from the Queensland School of Film and Television has kindly made available a simple template for download.

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Put “Lester Crombie ” in Google or the search engine of your choice and he has for download a very simple template for screenwriting and also a download for a manual in PDF file format. There are software packages out there that are costly... about \$100 but this one should get you started. Personally I feel you don’t need all the bells and whistles, just a basic template that you can use to plug your screenplay into.

One of the things that can drive you crazy is worrying about getting “it” just right. Writing dialog can be challenging in that a natural flow will need to happen. Audiences will be turned off by stiff and phony sounding dialog. While that is the ultimate goal, you may have to rewrite a line several times to achieve this.

It is ironic that you have to work so hard to make it sound natural but this is important. However, that can all be changed and reworked later, first just get what comes out of your mind down on paper. If you sit and look at a computer screen for hours and type nothing you will never start.

There are a few simple things that all full-length screenplays have in common. They will all have the same length. The Hollywood movie has gone with the same formula for many years and it is still the standard by which most screenwriters all write.

A typical screenplay will have 120 pages. It will consist of 3 acts separated into 30 pages for each act. Each page of scripting represents about 1 minute of screen time with the majority of films running between 90 and 120 minutes.

As a first film it may be easier for you to write a short film. There are many short films that have really wonderful stories that can’t be told in 90 minutes. This gives the short film a chance to be made. This is a great opportunity for you to make your first film. Short films can be good for the first time filmmaker for a number of reasons.

The first reason in favor of producing a short film is that you have a greater chance of having your film being completed. A short film is manageable on a low budget and the financing of your film will assuredly be the biggest stumbling block. Producing a 60 second Public Service Announcement seemed like it should be easy, but you have no idea how long 60 seconds can be. I do because I had to produce a 60 PSA for a station I once worked for. My advice is to try the short film first, as a matter of fact, do a couple before moving on to a feature length.

Also in the beginning you will have to depend on the good graces of your actors and crew. A short film is a good way to have your actors in and out quickly so they don’t get peevish about their time spent. You never know when you might need them for the next film. The most important thing you need to remember to budget is food service. You must feed your people or they will revolt. The one thing you want is to keep your talent and crew happy.

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When you have, for the most part, finished your script and wish to share it with others it is recommended that you write a treatment. A treatment is a short description of your screenplay outlining what the story is about. Treatments consist of 3 or 4 pages and each page represents one act of your screenplay. They can be a bit longer but no more than an extra page or two.

The treatment has to be the best of your screenplay and it must be written in a very clever way. This is what you show around to garner interest in your screenplay. Show the treatment to your mom and dad, your sister and brother, your best friend, and maybe even your instructor at school. While they are offering advice you have a chance to gauge their reactions, and decide if these responses are what you want from your viewing audience. Listen to their feedback and make whatever necessary script changes that may come to your attention.

Call this group of people that you share with your “Core Group”. This group has to be people you trust. Not necessarily your mom or dad, but people that you are sure of in your trust of them. It is a difficult thing to have to discuss and while it would be nicer to pretend it doesn’t happen, there are those people out there that will steal your work. Read up on how to protect your ideas before you put them out there on Front Street.

Look up copyrighting your work on the Internet. You will probably find an example of the “Poor Man’s Copyright” as one of the ways of protecting your work. Maybe one of your classmates suggested you use this method, but I would advise against it. Instead register your screenplay with the Writer’s Guild of America.

Next send away for a copy of the application for copyright (Application Form PA) at the following address:

Register of Copyrights, Copyright Office
Library of Congress
Washington, DC 20559

Don’t be foolish and let this one go unchecked. It doesn’t cost much to at least register copyright on your screenplay. As you move forward with your production you may need to revise your copyright to extend to other aspects of the production but at least register it with the Copyright Office and the Writer’s Guild in the beginning.

Once you have done this you can move forward with shopping your script if that is what you want to do. One thing that you must remember though is that once you sell your screenplay or enter negotiations to do so, it might be necessary for you to compromise. If the producer and director decide to, they can cut your film or rewrite it to the point that it may not even resemble what you originally wrote. Avoid the red pen by making your own film any way you can.

Let's Take a Meeting

If you are making your film yourself without the benefit of traditional backing you will probably find yourself writing, producing and acting in your own film. But that is not to say that you won't need help. You will have to be completely active in all phases of the production. Such are the joys of the independent filmmaker. However, you will need help. You will need other actors, sound people (someone has to hold that boom), camera operators, and so on.

If you are in school studying film you have a perfect group of people to draw from to get your film made. It is a "you scratch my back, I scratch yours" situation. Students help each other to get their films made. Each of us has a specific talent and we can contribute that to the production at hand. If you are not in school you may have to convince your friends to help you with your film. It shouldn't be too difficult because it is exciting to be involved with making a film.

Of course you can't get all the help you need from you friends and family. You will have to go with associates that have the same desire to make film that you do. This means you have to find social events that allow you to network with others that have a similar interest in film. Networking is going to be important from start to finish with the production of you film. It would be wise to make a business card with your contact information on it, maybe even make your own website.

Make contact lists of people you might be able to gain assistance from in the various fields of expertise. It doesn't matter if this is you first film or you 21st. You may begin to use the same people as you learn whom you work best with. Some of the disciplines you may need are: electricians, carpenters, camera operators, audio engineers, make-up artists, set designers, locations scouts, script supervisors, costumers, publicists, and finally craft people for your food service.

Once you make a list of these contacts remember to keep careful track of them. Make copies of contact lists stored in a number of places. It will make you crazy if your computer crashes and all the info for your crew is on it, so make back up contact lists.

You may learn to live without some of these positions on the production of your film, but chances are you will be picking up the slack for that position. You may find yourself directing a film and doing make-up or wardrobe at the same time. Multi-tasking is the name of the game and you get better at it as you go along.

Many new filmmakers are actually in film school and they use what and who they have available to them. This means working with people that may be a little flaky in their punctuality. However, each filmmaker has their own film that they want to make and they will give you good work with the expectation that they will get it in return on their film.

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Again, one thing you might consider is this; if you are not in film school perhaps you should go. In film school you have the equipment and facilities made available to you as long as you are a matriculated student. My school had a \$900,000 per year budget for equipment for students to use. We had sound mixing booths and editing suites available to us 24/7.

Once you have people that have agreed to work with you on your film you can set up production meetings in order to plan for the actual production or shoot. The success of your shooting schedule will depend on how effectively you have planned the shoot in your production meetings. Make notes prior to your meeting to make sure all necessary business is covered. Try to make the meeting stay focused on the business at hand instead of visiting and shooting the breeze with everyone attending the meeting.

If you have people working for you and they are doing this out of the goodness of their hearts, it is always necessary to keep them fed and watered. It is the least you can do for another artist so make sure you always have food and beverages available for your crew at meetings and during the production.

It is advisable that you keep liquor out of these meetings as it undermines the professionalism of your group and impedes the flow of work. This is not to say that the group may not ever celebrate by having a drink or two together, but it is hard to keep the crew focused if drinking is allowed during shooting. On studio shoots it is absolutely forbidden due to Union rules and insurance requirements for continued coverage.

Once you have a crew assembled then post your first production meeting. In your meeting, tell your group what your vision of the film is and open a discussion about how they can help to make that happen. Assign crew positions and make a shooting schedule. Then split your group into 2 separate groups, crew and actors. Schedule readings of the script so everyone gets to run through their lines and so you can give them your direction.

The actors must have an opportunity to meet with the director to determine what is expected from them once the camera is rolling. This will help your actors to arrive prepared and ready to work without you having to stop them as much for direction. Next a separate meeting should be made with your crew. You will need to discuss equipment, location, set design, sound, lighting, and any other production issues that may come up.

You will need story boards and a shot list sheets to hand out. Have your crew study them with enough time available before the shoot to bring up any obstacles that need to be cleared for the shoot. Schedule enough time on rehearsals and fittings to be approved by the director prior to the shoot.

Whoever has worked on scouting the location needs to speak to everyone about the logistics of the location you will be shooting the film at. The location will need to be accessible prior to the shoot so that light readings can be taken and electrical requirements can be determined.

There are books out there that are written that could be used as guides for picking the right location. Refer to them please as this is an area that is going to be totally foreign to you if you are in any way creative. You have to make sure details are arranged like, parking being arranged, access to unload equipment, restroom access, food craft area set-up, signed releases, maintenance of the location, location clean-up etc. ad naseum.

In my case I had a group of buildings that were houses from the 40's that were abandoned and in a state of complete disrepair. They were cool and very spooky looking. I didn't want to go in them I just wanted to shoot on the street in front of them. I procrastinated and they tore them down. Boy was I upset about that.

Do You Have a Good Eye?

My first experiences with production school, was with a *fully manual* camera. What a dinosaur that was, but oh, the pictures I could take. I learned how to used depth of field and how to push and pull focus. These are terms you should make note of and study. Using a manual lens taught me just what I could do with a camera. Now I have a very expensive digital camera but my roots are definitely in film.

We have grown accustomed to the digital crispness of the image we get with digital and find film to be hazy and lacking focus. Film can create amazing shadows, especially in black and white but the cost of film and processing is absolutely impossible for a filmmaker just starting out, to get a film completed. If you have the luxury of using film you can play around with it but eventually it will be transferred to digital so you can edit your sound and image

I have shot on film and I have shot on tape and I have to report that both have their merits. In the end the project will dictate which you will use. In film school I used a funky little Super 8 camera and shot on black and white reversal film. Basically it was like shooting to a positive instead of a negative. The quality was bad and the lighting was a challenge but I managed to make a really decent abstract film journal.

The processing was terribly expensive yet once I got the footage back I was excited beyond belief. I used a funky little viewing box with a hand crank and made lists where I wanted my cuts in the celluloid. I wrote them down and hung them up in the order I was going to edit. The next thing you do is, splice the pieces together with tape. Then you put the splice with the tape on it, in a small machine that that punches neat holes in the splice where the holes are on the side of their film.

Editing real film, as in celluloid, is a great experience and I will always value it, but I have since learned how much easier it is to just shoot and edit in digital. Believe me, I was a die hard film user until I got tired of all the money it cost, and shooting digital is so immediate. There are a number of reasonable priced video cameras on the market that you can use when you start shooting.

Equipment List

The following is a basic list of equipment you will need. This is a bare minimum list but this should get you started.

Camera

1 digital camera
Extra Battery or Power Source
25 ft. & 50 ft. Power Cords
Monitor with headphones
Small Dry Marker Board to Use As Scene Marker

Sound

Headphones (2 or 3)
DAT – (Digital Audio Tape)
Microphones:
 2 Lapel Mics (Lavaliers)
 1 Shotgun
 1 Omni
 1 Battery Operated Reporter's Mic
 1 Directional Mic with Pedestal (for narration)

Boom (2)
Windshield (for boom and mic)
Gaffer's Tape – 1 or 2 rolls

Lighting

3 Lights – 1 large, 2 small
3 Light Stands
25 ft. & 50 ft. Power Cords
White Bounce Cords
Gauzy Material for Diffuser
Binder Clips – Small, Medium, & Large
Stands For Diffuser

One thing is certain, in the list of equipment you will need, the camera is the most important. A very durable camera that has been recommended is the Samsung VP X220L camcorder with an external lens. This camera was used on the Jack Ass Movie and you know how physical the shooting got on that film. You should be able to get this camera for \$800. I only found one of these for sale from a UK website, but there are many other cameras to be had.

The best thing to do is to go shopping and try out cameras. Try them out to see what kind of picture you get. See if the zoom is as strong as you need. Once you find one that you like and can get a decent price on it, check and see what kind of warranties there are on the camera. If purchased from a camera shop there are protection plans that will replace the camera if damaged and give regular cleanings for your equipment. It is important to keep all your paperwork on file for this, as with all your equipment.

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In 15 years of using cameras I have seen the technology change vastly. A camera that you buy today will be archaic by next year. The top cameras coming out now are amazing. The Grass Valley Viper Film Stream Camera TM shoots completely without videotape, or compression. Your images are recorded directly to a removable hard drive that goes from the camera to the computer. Talk about cool!

This camera was used in the film Zodiac and the clarity of image is amazing. This film is technical genius and you must see it. David Finchner is the director of the film and he worked with the creators of this camera to shoot the first film done entirely with the Viper. This image is so clear you can see how many pores are on the guy's face.

This is the future in cameras and while it is too rich for our pockets now, there are perfectly acceptable cameras you can use in the meantime. Try out any camera before you buy it. Handle it in the store and take test footage. Make the salesman work for his paycheck and ask him a million questions if you have to.

When you start shooting you will have to be familiar with the various types of shots. The following is a list of the shots and the abbreviations that are used on shot sheets.

EWS – Extreme Wide Shot

Shot so wide the subject can't even be seen. This is also used as an establishing shot which is used in the beginning of every film..

VWS – Very Wide Shot

Subject or object can barely be seen but is still placed in the frame.

WS – Wide Shot

The subject fills full frame, much the same as a long shot. Takes in the whole person from the bottom to the top of the frame.

MS - Mid-shot

Subject is closer with more detail but frame still has the whole subject. The subject will fill the frame with this shot.

MCU – Medium Close-Up

Midway shot between Mid-shot and close-up.

CU – Close-Up

Face of actor fills the frame.

ECU – Extreme Close-Up

Shot gets in and shows extreme detail.

CA – Cutaway

Shot other than the subject, away from the main action.

CI – Cut-In

This is a view of some part of the subject in detail. Example: CU of hands shaking and wringing in anxiety and worry.

Two-Shot

An easy shot of two people framed equally in a mid-shot.

OSS – Over the Shoulder Shot (or Cross-Shot)

Shot taken over the shoulder of someone aimed at the subject.

POV – Point of View Shot

Show the subjects view or perspective. Example: POV shot of hands on a computer keyboard.

There are also terms for camera movement and there are just a few that are used repeatedly. They are as follows:

Pan

*This is a horizontal camera move across the screen. Also used is the term **Swish Pan**. This is a camera movement that is a pan done so quickly that the picture blurs until it stops and stabilizes. Frequently a swish pan is used to hide the cut in the editing process. In a comedy film the swish pan comes with it's own sound, which has been used in shows like "Malcolm in the Middle".*

Dolly

A dolly is a cart on wheels that has mounts for the camera. Track is laid down to the specifications of the shot and the camera is dollied down the track for the shot. A dolly shot refers to movement in and out of the frame moving closer or further away from an object in the frame.

Tracking

Refers to a dolly movement that crosses the screen.

Tilt

A camera tilt is simply what it says. It is a panning movement but instead of across the screen it will be an up and down movement.

This should account for most of your camera directions. You will see these terms used in screenplays and you will use these terms in writing your own script. When you have access to your camera you should practice all these moves in order to be familiar with them when you are filming.

Once you have your camera purchased and you are ready to start shooting, you will need a few other pieces of equipment to get you going. While you will want to "carry" your camera when you shoot, it is advisable to use a tri-pod for most of your work.

One thing you will want to do is assign someone to carry a camera and take the production stills. Shooting production photos can be done by anyone in the crew. These shots are a sort of tradition on the set and it is a good idea to get production shots. They do have practical uses though, the photos show the crew at their jobs with the actors and sometimes they are helpful to recall the way a shot was set up.

Most cameras out there at this time have great stabilization already built in, but the fact of the matter is that when zooming in for a close-up and then holding the shot, shake can happen. Not using a tripod allows for a great deal of “shake” with the camera. This will compromise the quality of your shots.

You can avoid blurry, jumpy, static shots by using the tri-pod. They are frequently referred to as “sticks”. For your filming purposes you will need to get a tri-pod that has a “fluid head”. This is a head on the top of the tri-pod where you mount the camera, and its purpose is to make panning and trucking shots smooth and in focus.

When you purchase your tri-pod you should find sticks that have sturdy legs, not too thin or too long. Bogun tri-pods are the standard in the industry so if I were to recommend a brand, Bogun gets my vote.

Before we move on from the discussion of cameras and shooting I need to talk about composition in the frame. You know how “film people” walk around with their hands up liking they are framing things, it’s so annoying when they do that. However, that is how we see things, in the frame. Where are you placing the objects and the people in your frame? Is it a boring or compelling composition?

Something that all beginning photographers learn is about the rule of thirds. This is where you place the subject on the third of the frame as opposed to constantly centering the subject in the middle of the frame. You also need to get a sense of what is proper “head room” in a frame. You can create intimacy or tension and alienation in how you compose the shot. Practice looking at art and film to see how the artist places the subject in the frame.

Turn Up the Volume

I am not into doing sound. I am a Camera Person and find the whole sound mixing process to be a big mystery. I know enough to get the initial capture but if I were to make my own film I would find someone to perform this function for me. What you need is a sound person otherwise known as an audiophile. This person will hold a boom for hours of dialog and will know the channel on the board during the final mix.

Advertise on Craig's list or in the local Entertainment paper. I would find this person and get a commitment early on in the Pre-production phase but you will need them right until you are through Post-production as well. Needless to say when hiring for any position for a production, make sure you check references. You will want to hire someone that has a proven history of finishing projects.

Every camera that you will shoot with will have a mic that comes with the camera and while it might work in a pinch, it simply does not supply adequate sound. You will need a way of recording that is in sync with your image. In order to do this you will need a DAT (Digital Audio Tape) recorder and a good selection of mics.

While I have a hard time with the mechanics as a whole, I appreciate good sound when I experience it. You will want good sound on your film so there are some basic things you will need to know. These are the types of microphones available to you. Any or all of these are good for you to have in your sound kit.

Omni Directional Microphone

Omni Mics record sound from the front, back, and sides of the mic, in other words, 360° around the mic. These are good if you want to record your talent delivering lines and get the ambient sounds on the backside of the mic. In the most perfect of situations the background sound and dialog will be recorded on separate tracks.

Once you bring them back to the studio for the final mix you will be able to adjust the ambient sound track slightly lower and the dialog track a bit higher. This will make it so the dialog is heard clearly while having the ambient sound is there as well.

Directional Microphone

This is pretty much self-explanatory. A directional mic records specifically in one direction and that is the direction of the speaker. These are used for reporting or interviewing and can be hand held or clip-on.

Shotgun Microphone

A Shotgun mic or a gun mic, is a microphone that picks up sound from a distance. While these are great if you are a private detective and want to get private conversations, but they are especially effective on the end of a boom used in production.

Lavalier or Lapel Microphones

This is a mic that is clipped onto a shirt lapel or collar and is usually an Omni directional mic. This mic is good for interviews and commentary reporting but beyond that they are limiting because the rustle of clothing interferes with a clean recording

If you are actually recording dialog you will probably do one of two things. You will do voice over recording in the studio or you will use a live mic. Recording live would require the use of a directional mic on the end of a boom. If it is on location outside you may need to use a shotgun mic on a boom with a windshield (made of furry or foam material) that fits over the mic to block out the interference of wind blowing on the mic.

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Once again, a school equipment loan program is going to have most of these items so you can use this resource if it is available to you. Otherwise it will be a good idea for you to purchase some or all of the equipment I have mentioned here.

I just want to have a word about holding a boom during shooting. It is harder than it sounds. You have to have strong arms and concentration. You will have to roll the boom back and forth at times to pick up cross dialog. Make sure you feed the Boom Operator and keep them happy. It is a valuable job and is very tedious. I know because I have done it.

It would be a very bland movie if there were no sound effects or soundtrack in the film. When I lived in Venice, California I had a neighbor that was a horror movie soundtrack composer. That man had the spookiest and weirdest sounds coming out of his house. He did the soundtrack for the Howling.... the original one, not any of the sequels.

He had a sound studio in his home that he worked out of and I didn't hear much of what he did for the most part. Every now and then there would be a scream or a crash and I knew he was doing his thing.

Another sound element you may want to consider is Foley work. Foley work is done in the studio to produce sound effects that will enhance the scene. A squeaking door, the squelching sound of wet shoes walking through the mud, tinkling glasses and silverware in a restaurant, and the sound of a fist hitting flesh, these are all sounds that could be produced in a Foley environment.

For this type of sound to make an impact in the film it has to be a bit larger than life. These Foley sounds will be recorded on a track that will be laid down with the other tracks. Then you can fade it in or out as you see the need in the scene. It might be a good idea to keep a Foley library of sounds to use, just as you have an image library to use.

If you are going to have a soundtrack, and you will want one, I encourage you to use all original scores and lyrics. You don't want to enter into any copyright battles. This is where networking comes into play. Find a music student that is looking for a project. Once again, I have to say, try Craig's List.

One last item that you will need to acquire for the shoot is some sort of remote 2-way radio. Nextel offers a good product so you can consider them. There may be some other company that offers a similar service for a better price so look around but do get a 2-way radio, actually get as many as you feel you need for your crew.

A Little Light on the Subject

Lighting is always a key issue. While it is not hard to learn, you must learn to see lighting issues right away. Lighting for film was always very tricky and in film it is absolutely necessary to use a light meter. With film there is a question of the color of the light as well. With video, the problems with shadow, glare, and color temperature, become much easier to deal with. I do not want to throw you off trying actual film, when film is lit and shot properly it is heaven, but in the beginning it will be more realistic to use a digital video camera.

While you may have areas that don't have enough light, it is also a problem to have areas with too much light. These areas are termed "hot" and some sort of diffusion material is used to take the glare off the subject. These are the major lighting problems you will be dealing with.

It will make your life a lot easier if you have a monitor set up on the scene location. You should have a fairly good one that gives you a true representation of what you are taping. While shooting in film you needed a Light Meter and a Color Temperature Meter, in digital recording you can use the monitor to tell you what you need to know. You will see the areas that have lighting problems that need to be fixed.

By looking at the monitor you can see problems of light and dark and fix them easily. The other lighting issue that exists is the color of the light in your picture. Different *types* of lighting will have different colors.

Household Tungsten *lights have a yellow glow. If you want that yellow color in the picture that is fine, but if not, you can color correct with digital filters during the edit process.*

Fluorescent lighting *can be a real disaster depending on how bright it is and how close it is on the subject. Fluorescent lighting throws off a greenish cast and can be very unflattering to the subject. The whole pea soup complexion thing tends to really make the talent look bad. I hate fluorescent lighting.... just turn them off.*

Outdoor Sunlit lighting *will sometimes be a problem but refer to your monitor. Outside daylight gives off a blue cast. This will be especially evident when shooting into the shade. If there is any grass or foliage in the picture the blue cast will be very strong.*

Halogen *lights are reputed to have a pink glow to them. Halogen lighting is not as prevalent but might come into play during outdoor night shooting as Halogen is used for night outdoor lighting.*

Lighting will be used as a signifier to what time of day it is. We will know if the sun is setting or if it is raining outside by the lighting. Be aware of the conditions in the actual story that will demand certain types of lighting. A flashlight in the dark or headlights will telegraph things about to happen. You will be able to create tension and suspense with your lighting. You will also be able to transmit a romantic atmosphere or an office or working environment all by how you light the scene.

It should be determined what lighting is needed for a shot(s), and then accomplish that lighting set up for the duration of shooting in order for the lighting quality of the film to be consistent. This means that it is important to make note of the color of the light when you begin the shoot and to keep everything consistent through the shooting of your piece

This will keep you from having to fix inconsistencies in post-production, which is sometimes impossible to prevent, but if you are really good that won't happen. Have I mentioned how important Pre-production is? You will find as you make a few short films that, it is important to keep things like lighting and the lighting color temperature marked down in your production notes. It will be a real pain if you are editing and you have lighting color that jumps from edit to edit. It will be a glaring mistake of continuity in your film.

If there is an over all problem with the color of the light in your production, then your digital software may have color correction filters and that can be taken care of at the time of post production editing. Previously, when shooting with film, filters had to be used over the lens at the time of shooting and it was much harder to accomplish what we now achieve with digital editing.

Three Point Lighting

Three-point lighting is the standard lighting setup and is used in all film and television production. It is always better to have good natural lighting, but if you do not have good natural light available then this is where you start.

Three-point lighting consists of the following:

Key Light

Your key light is the main light shining on your subject. Be careful not to have it too close to the subject as it may create hot areas and glare.

Fill Light

Your Key light usually creates a harsh light that makes a distinct shadow. The best way to get rid of that shadow is to use your Fill light.

Kicker Light

The Kicker light is used behind the subject to fill in the shadows there. Using the kicker light can give the subject dimension.

When purchasing supplies for your light kit, these are the main lights you will need. You will also need a way to use diffusion material. Look at the lighting outside with your screen door open. Do you see how bright and vivid it is? Then shut the screen and look at how the lighting is naturally diffused and it becomes darker. This is what you are doing when you are using lighting diffusers in a scene.

There are a number of ways to achieve this, and in most light kits it is useful to have a gauzy material like, cheesecloth, muslin, or a material that is white and gauzy to shine the light through. You will achieve this by using binder clips and makeshift scrim stands. (Scrim is another word for diffuser.) I have used old 3-legged music stands and binder clips to create a scrim stand for the light to pass through.

Shooting in natural lighting is always good but presents difficulties of its own. From 11:00AM to 3:00PM in the afternoon, the sun will create harsh shadows under the eyes and nose of the subject. This can be remedied by using a fill light under the subjects face. This will correct the problem

The best natural lighting is the lighting that comes at the end of the day, a couple of hours before sunset. This lighting will be a golden caramel colored glow, that give everything a halo. This light will fall directly on the subject's face so this is a perfect angle for the sun to be in for shooting.

Sunset lighting is really good for portraying moments of sentimentality or romance. I have to warn you her though, shoot fast because once the sun starts to set there isn't much time to get your shots finished so you have to have everything ready in anticipation of the sunset lighting.

Lighting is one of those situations in filming where you have to come up with creative ideas of how to solve your problems. Taking a trip to the hardware store will sometimes help you to fix your lighting problems. Lighting is something you have to practice. If you arrive the day of the shoot and expect to just have it all down, you are in for an unpleasant surprise. You must work with your lights first and take test shots.

****It is crucial that you check the electrical requirements for your lights. Lights take an incredible amount of so make sure you won't be shorting out the system an the entire block as well. Check with an electrician about this. REMEMBER! These lights are hot. Protect yourself and others. You may have an occasional bulb pop and spray glass everywhere. This seldom happens, but be cautious.**

You must do everything that you can to be safe. There are going to be cords everywhere on the ground or floor during the shoot. You will have people running everywhere so secure down all your cords firmly and make people aware of where they are located.

You can use gaffer's tape on the electrical cords to keep them in place. Gaffer's tape is more expensive and doesn't leave marks on walls on floors. You can use duct tape in a pinch but gaffer's tape is best.

Prior to your first day of shooting you need to gather all of your talent and crew together and do a run through of a few scenes. This is called blocking the scene. Have each actor stand at his or her marks and read their parts and get sound levels on them, also test your lighting and see how it looks on the monitor. You will want to make this a full dress rehearsal if you need to see wardrobe and make-up for a final check.

This is the time to determine what works and what doesn't, not the day of the shoot. Make any adjustments that are needed and make note of where your settings are set at this time. These are to be your settings for the duration of the production. It is very important to do this in order to maintain continuity and believability of your film.

Later when you have a few films behind your belt you can mess around with the placement of the lights and the volume control, but when you are still new at this it is best to establish your settings and keep them consistent throughout the rest of the film.

In most cases on film production the Scrip Supervisor is the person that is responsible for maintaining the continuity from scene to scene in your film. This position makes sure that the lighting is the same, all the furniture in a room is in the same place, the actors have the same clothing, and make-up, and say the same lines.

It is important that you arrange all your shot sheets so that you shoot economically. If you are going to be in the farmhouse one day shooting then you have shoot all scenes that are in your script for the farmhouse. You don't need to shoot each scene in sequence, that will have you running all over town. Shoot all scenes at location by location.

If you are making your film yourself without the benefit of backing then you will have to do your own continuity supervision. Maintaining continuity is important if you want your film to look professional.

Once it gets down to the shoot it becomes all about the actors and the director. Both are committed to the telling of the story. Any given film is as much about the actors and director as much as it is the story on paper.

There has to almost be a chemistry between the actors and director. A director needs to be all things to the actors, friend, mother/father, counselor, priest, or nurse. You name it, you gotta be it. The one constant is the actor's need to be able to trust the director.

A director has to be a "Big Picture kinda person. Reining in all the elements of a film is like conducting an orchestra, everything needs to blend together to make the film. Solving problems on a daily basis is the norm so problem solving skills are very necessary.

It has been said that you can tell how good a film is by watching it with the sound off. If you can follow the film easily by watching without the sound then the director has done his or her job. This clearly illustrates that film is not driven by the dialog itself, it is the action that drives the film.

When It's In the Can, It's a Wrap

So the production is done and your last pick-up shots are in the can. Now you can begin the edit. So you gather up your footage, your sound and anything else that needs to be added in the edit and get ready to hunker down until it is all finally edited. Maybe it's time for more caffeine and a shower, time for sleep later.

Now you get to go through hours of footage to construct your edit. You will now begin the tedious job of going through footage to put together your edited material. Mark your *in* and *out* points on your edit sheet with a description of the cut. Your *in* and *out* points will be the time codes that the edit points are at. The codes will be marked in hours, minutes, seconds, and 10th's of seconds. It will look like this 01:15:03:20.

Now that you have your edit on paper, it is time to sit down with all of your elements and go to the edit. You may do this all on your own and you may have someone edit it while you direct the edit. Either way, this is the most fun a person can have. The edit means you are near being done.

I found editing to be wonderful and I got so into it that I lost all notion of time. I went in for a couple of hours and ended up staying to do the edit for 8 hours. I don't even think I had anything to eat. I came out of the edit bay feeling like I had been drinking coffee all day, well actually I had, but I was so energized. It is great to see the story that you have been working on for the last year, come together in a few evenings of editing.

Once you have put together all your cuts you can lay down your music and soundtracks you will be ready to do your credits. The credits are very important to the little people that worked on your film... probably for beer and pizza. This is their proof that they have worked on the film and it is like their resume for other paying gigs, so make sure you spell everybody's name right. Once these are done, you have finished and you are ready to promote your film and find someone that will pick up your film in distribution.

Now it is time for the Wrap party. If you don't have the money to put on a big bash for your cast and crew get your Mama to cook and put the drinks on your credit card because these folks deserve a good time.

Time to Toot Your Horn

If you haven't been talking about your film to people, now is the time to start. Now is the time to get a logo designed and make a website to promote your film. There are at least a couple websites that help you to build free websites. It does take a few days of work to make the website but it is actually quite fun. You learn a great deal by making your own site.

Once the site is made find someone to host it, Yahoo and Google are good. Start a blog about the film and publish it on your website. Offer promotional items for sale with your logo on them from the website. Cross promote other artists on your website. Use some of your production shots for the site.

After you have built your own site make a Myspace page. Then go shopping for friends and gather a fan base in Myspace. Many musicians and other artists have used Myspace to promote themselves and it has been quite an asset to building an audience for artists in music and film. I have a couple of musicians that send me clips of their music regularly. It is interesting to see how the musicians have built their "friend" list and kept everyone abreast of their new music when it happens.

Of course there is always the idea of putting clips of your film on YouTube. Get your fans and friends from Myspace to download them. You can even put your YouTube on your Myspace page. It would be good to cross-reference your website and Myspace page, one linking to the other.

Make eye-catching flyers to post in community centers and bulletin boards. If you go to college or know anyone that goes to college, post your film flyers on the community bulletin board. Find someplace in school to show your film to students. Every student wants to do something on a Friday night and has no money to get out. Free is better than cheap I always say! Let them see your film for free.

Get a couple of other Indy filmmakers and show your films together. Have your own mini Film Festival at your house, or at school, or anywhere you can get a group of people together. Get Mom to do that cooking thing again that she does so well. This endeavor will only be successful if you badger people into coming. Make them promise that they will show. Give out free promotional items with the Film logo on them like hats, t-shirts, and coffee cups.

I guess we didn't talk about naming the film, yet, did we. Think carefully on what is going to be catchy and make a good logo. Wild, controversial titles are things that people want to see on things like t-shirts and baseball caps. For instance, you decided to a space version of the Wizard of Oz and we'll call it "Space Monkeys". Well that's a catchy name, weird but catchy and it will look great on a t-shirt. Whatever you do come up with a name that the public can grab on to.

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All of these promotional ideas mentioned up until now are free or darned cheap. Perhaps you can use some of the proceeds of selling your hats and t-shirts to fund some of the ways you promote your film. There will be costs so it is a good idea to let the film pay for itself.

Finally, you should have a Media or Press Kit made up for the public. A Press kit contains a letter of introduction, info on the film, photos, a disk with a sample trailer, and perhaps a few of those promotional t-shirts and hats you had made up. Once that is done it is time to find a publicist. If someone buys the option for your film you will really have the need for a publicist.

One of the most effective ways to market your film is to enter it into a film festival. One of the things you have in your favor is that Independent films have made it big in the last 15-20 years. The Hollywood formula for filmmaking became predictable and boring and with the expansion of television the film viewing audiences became much more sophisticated than they were before. You can't pull anything over on us.

Indy film has become the driving force in the industry and that has been good news for the small Indy filmmaker. Film festivals all over the country show Independent films, and this has become a standard in the industry. Sundance Film Festival was started to showcase otherwise unknown filmmakers. Now there are film festivals in every state and cities, large and small.

This doesn't mean that these festivals are easy to get into. Be prepared for a certain amount of rejection letters. The most important and well known film festivals to get into are the Toronto, Tribeca, and Sundance festivals. However there are hundreds of other smaller film festivals that you can get into.

I just Googled film festivals and got 19,900,000 hits in .07 seconds. You have more than enough to pick from. So what Sundance sent you a rejection letter, submit to another festival. The trick will be getting past the rejection letters. One of the biggest reasons rejection letters are given out is that there were too many films submitted. If the film reviewing committee gets 1,000 submissions and can only take 100 films that is a lot of rejections they have to send out.

Once you go to the festival website and download the application there will be listed the dates of submission. The best way to avoid rejection is to make sure that your film is submitted the first day into accepting films. Some films that are perfectly good entertainment never get seen because there were just too many submitted and they ran out of time to view them all. Get your film and application in as soon as possible.

Film Festivals usually have an entrance fee and when I checked I found them all to be reasonable, between \$25 and \$50. Still, that can add up as you send out applications. Perhaps some of the money made off of selling promotional items will help pay the fees. After you fill out your first application form and send in your first film, you will get the application process down.

Another thing to remember, which is quite obvious, is that your film may not be appropriate for some festivals. You would now enter a steamy thriller with sex scenes, into a Young Adult Film Festival. I am sure the young adults would love it but the adults in charge will reject it with a thud. So submit where it is appropriate.

Since I have suggested you start out with a short film as your first attempt at filmmaking, I have to caution you about the length of your film. Find out the maximum length of films or short films. Then your entry is too long if at all possible trim your film. Films are frequently rejected for coming in over the time limit. Make sure you read all the requirements before submitting your film for consideration.

An interesting phenomenon is film festivals borne of films that have been rejected. The Sundance Film Festival is held in Park City, Utah. The same weekend the Slam Dance Film Festival is held and it shows films that were rejected by Sundance. The Slamdance is in its 13th year and it has expanded to a festival in New York.

Sundance, although it still owes its success to Indy film, has become quite commercial and takes entries that are considered the best. Slamdance came along at a time when there was a need for an alternative to Sundance. Festival creators tout Slamdance as “by filmmakers, for filmmakers”. Films that were passed on by Sundance and picked up by Slamdance are, *Memento*, *Monster’s Ball*, *Napoleon Dynamite*, *The Woodsman*, and *Maria Full of Grace*.

The 2008 Slamdance festival is being held from January 17th to January 25 in Park City Utah. For any readers interested in entering Slamdance the early deadline for the 2008 festival is August 27th. The deadline for the teleplay competition is August 20th, 2007. I encourage you to check out their website.

There are many other festivals for you to check out. I encourage you to attend festivals in as a film enthusiast first and then later as a competing filmmaker. I can’t think of a better way to spend an afternoon. Chris Gore wrote a book titled “The Ultimate Film Festival Survival Guide”. It has information that would be useful in what to do when submitting a film for approval into a festival.

The largest film festival in the country is the Seattle International Film Festival. They show over 300 films and short films in a month’s time in May and June. Offered at SIFF are an excellent group of filmmaker forums. A few of the offerings this year were: “*Encoding Your Film For Internet Streaming*”, “*The Producer School Series*”(Parts 1 & 2), “*Introduction to Motion*”, and “*Advanced Techniques in Final Cut Pro*”. I have attended these forums and they are invaluable to filmmakers.

One of the functions at SIFF is “Fly Filmmaking”. Fly Filmmaking is a competition for filmmakers, that takes place 3 to 4 weeks before the festival. The completed films (usually 3) are shown during the festival and at the end of the festival the judges pick the winner.

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Guerilla Filmmaking has many similarities to Fly Filmmaking except that Guerilla Filmmaking is a bit more aggressive and the budget is leaner (if that is possible). This year (2007) the filmmakers were given 5 days to shoot and 5 days to edit a 10 minute film. These are incredibly difficult conditions to film under and the results are amazing.

Fly Filmmaking was started a little over 10 years ago and since then many other venues have “borrowed” its format for their own Film contests. Seattle has the corner on this market though, they are the creators of Fly Filmmaking. They really produce amazing results with a handful of crew, actors and a camera.

It seems to me as a new filmmaker this formula might work for you. It will show you how to work with deadlines and how to work on a shoestring budget. No doubt you know all about tight budgets and can excel at this but working on this sort of deadline will force you to be resourceful, and after all Indy film is all about being resourceful.

Of course you won't have help that SIFF gives their Fly Filmmakers but this will teach you many things. You will be able to see your mistakes and correct them in future film ventures. I see this working for the beginning filmmaker as a learning tool so this may be a perfect way to challenge yourself in order to learn the process before you are working on a film that really matters to you.

Film school is a perfect place for you to start any plan to be a filmmaker. You have endless opportunities to work with other artists, and have the availability of the equipment loan programs. This will give you all the “stuff” you need to make your films. It will also put you in a situation where you have others to give you feedback on your work. This is a very necessary part of the process.

Everyone wants to attend USC, UCLA, Columbia University, or NYU, but sometimes that is not possible. That does not mean that there aren't other film schools out there. In the end it is the body of work that you have achieved that commends you to the position of filmmaker. What have you done? What is your experience? If you don't have any experience you may need to work on other people's films for a while and gather up some experience to put on your resume.

To make the claim that you are a filmmaker says many things. It says that you have a great deal of energy and you are good at enlisting people to work with you on the development of your vision. These people trust that you are going to direct them so that they produce a masterpiece. Okay, maybe not a masterpiece but defiantly something noteworthy.

My very last piece of advice is this. Get another job in something that you are good at and that makes decent money. Filmmaking will not make you money overnight. You will need to pay bills and at times you may need to finance your films so get used to working 2 jobs. Also learn to sleep less and love caffeine. It won't matter once you catch the fever of being the middle of a production. Good luck and happy filmmaking.