

Careers in Film: Development and Pre-Production

Which film is better?

Is it the silent 1925 color-tinted black and white film version of *Ben Hur*?

Or is it the classic 1959 version of the film directed by William Wyler, starring Charlton Heston?

Or will both of those classic films be eclipsed creatively and technically by MGM's 2015 remake of *Ben Hur*?

If you were to screen the two older versions of *Ben Hur*, one of the first things you will notice is how much the quality, look, and sound of the movies changed between productions. Each of the film versions has a similar story, but technology dramatically changed the visual and audio components of the later film. The 1959 version was more visually and audibly stunning than the 1925 version, but Wyler's film will likely pale in comparison to the technological wizardry of the upcoming 2015 version.

Compared to the silent and grainy black and white films of the early 20th century, today's films and movies are visual and audio spectacles. Digital technology enables today's film producers and technicians to create cinematic worlds that early filmmakers could only imagine. Although digital technology has enhanced and made filmmaking more accessible, producing a film is still a collaborative and skillful integration of creative and technical elements. Working in film can be exhilarating, but, because of the extensive amount of work it takes to produce a movie, it can also be daunting. Hundreds of technicians and creative personnel are involved in each of the five phases of filmmaking: development, pre-production, production, post-production, and distribution. The range of creative and technical positions on a production depends on the film's budget and the complexity of the production. Films with large budgets and more complex production requirements typically employ more pre-production, production, and post-production crew members.

This lesson will explore careers in the first two phases of filmmaking: development and pre-production. These two phases include positions such as screenwriters, producers, casting directors, production designers, and storyboard artists.

Objectives

- Describe the evolution of film and the impact of digital technology on today's films.
- Describe the five phases of film production.
- Describe the responsibilities of directors, including knowledge of story structure, script analysis, the relationship to the production team, and the responsibilities of pre-production crew members.
- Analyze various development and pre-production careers and their job descriptions.

Vocabulary

adapted screenplay

screenplay based on another published source, such as a novel, short story, or news article

computer graphics

CGI, the equipment and software used to create digital audiovisual

interfaces	special effects
documentary	nonfiction motion picture describing real-life events, stories, and people, made for educational or historical purposes
feature-length films	movies that are between 40 and 210 minutes in length
Final Draft	popular screenwriting software
kinetograph	one of the first cameras to show moving pictures, invented by Thomas Edison
kinetoscope	cabinet that enabled individuals to view short film clips through a viewing port, invented by Thomas Edison
original screenplay	screenplay conceived by the screenwriter and not based on previous published source
shorts	films with a full running time of less than 40 minutes, including all credits
storyboards	a sequence of drawings or images that depict the action in a scene, act, or part of a film; may include director's notes, sketched in dialog, or other information needed by the film crew

A Brief History of Film

It may sound cliché, but the more the medium of film has changed, the more it has remained the same. Early films were basically a sequence of images, strung together and projected to produce the perception of continuous moving images. Although today's films are grander and enhanced by technology, they are still sequences of pictures strung together to create the sensation of continuous movement. Early filmmakers used films to tell stories visually. Today's filmmakers may be pushing the technological boundaries of film, but good storytelling is still essential when it comes to creating and producing a successful film. The primary differences between films of the early 1900s and today can be attributed to the production and exhibition of today's films.

Filmmaking has changed considerably since early film pioneers, such as Thomas Edison and Robert William Paul, first brought moving pictures to the masses. The world got its first taste of movie magic at the 1893 Chicago World's Fair. Here, Edison debuted two revolutionary inventions, the Kinetograph, a camera that showed moving pictures, and the Kinetoscope, a cabinet that allowed viewers to watch short film clips. He produced these groundbreaking devices after engineers at Edison Laboratories developed a celluloid strip that allowed them to capture sequences of images on film. The Kinetoscope used a lamp to backlight a moving strip of celluloid film that was displayed through a magnifying glass inside the cabinet. Because of the popularity of the Kinetoscope at the World's Fair, viewing parlors began to spread across the country.

The British inventor, Robert William Paul, expanded on Edison's Kinetoscope parlors with his film projector, enabling theaters to display movies for groups instead of individual viewing. In 1895, Paul presented his first public film viewing using his invention, which projected the film's images onto an open canvas instead of a small viewing window inside the Kinetoscope.

The Short and the Long of It

It wasn't long before budding filmmakers produced short films with a narrative structure instead of random and single scenes from everyday life. By 1903, filmmakers were experimenting with not only narrative structure, but also shot selection and editing. Edwin S. Porter, one of Edison's company

directors used shot selection and editing in the short, silent film classic, *The Great Train Robbery*. The popularity of films grew rapidly throughout this era of silent films, and by 1908 there were more than 10,000 theaters or film viewing parlors in the United States alone.

Technological advances continued to evolve the film industry. Filmmakers produced longer, feature-length films – anything more than 40 minutes - that drew in larger audiences. Sound effects and orchestrated music accompanied these silent films. Since the beginning of motion pictures, Thomas Edison and other inventors had experimented with merging motion picture and sound. It wasn't until 1927, when Warner Brothers released *The Jazz Singer*, the first feature-length “talkie,” starring Al Jolson, that a new era of sound in film was launched.

Digital Technology

Digital technology has transformed the film industry yet again. Today's filmmakers use digital technology to create cinematic worlds that filmmakers of the early 20th century could not have imagined. Digital technology has fundamentally changed the way movies are made. Films are now shot using digital cameras, while sound and visual effects can be created using computers. Performers can be filmed using green screens then inserted into digital worlds created by art and set designers using computer graphics interfaces (CGI), the equipment and software used to create those digital audiovisual effects. A great example of this is the fantastic digital world created by director James Cameron in his 2009 Academy Award-winning film, *Avatar*.

Five Phases of Filmmaking

Another Academy Award-winning director, Steven Spielberg, described best the collaborative effort required to make a successful film in this new era:

"When I was a kid, there was no collaboration; it's you with a camera bossing your friends around. But as an adult, filmmaking is all about appreciating the talents of the people you surround yourself with and knowing you could never have made any of these films by yourself."

Filmmaking is generally divided into five phases. The development phase starts the process, in which the screenwriter, director, and producers work together to establish and refine their vision for the film. The development team also decides on a budget for the film.

- development
- pre-production
- production
- post-production
- distribution

The development phase starts the process in which the screenwriter, director, and producers work together to establish and refine the film's vision. The development team also decides on a budget for the film.

Once the film concept has been developed, the film company transitions to the production phases: pre-production, production, and post-production. In pre-production, the technical details are worked out, a schedule is set, and the resources to produce the film are assembled. This includes casting the film, filling the technical positions, and scheduling the production. The actual filming takes place during the production phase, followed by a post-production phase in which the footage is edited and the final film emerges.

The fifth and final phase of distribution can begin before the production is complete. The distribution

team is responsible for marketing the film to audiences, networks, theatres, or other distributors. This phase may include developing promotional campaigns, marketing the film through the film festival circuit, and handling media and marketing inquiries.

This lesson will focus on careers in the first two phases of filmmaking: development and pre-production.

Filmmaking Development and Pre-Production Careers – Screenwriters, Producers, and Directors

All films begin with an idea or a story, whether they are shorts – less than 40 minutes, features – more than 40 minutes, or a documentary - nonfiction motion pictures describing real-life events, stories, and people, made for educational or historical purposes. The story is at the heart of the film. Audiences may be entranced by the visuals and auditory aspects of a film, but without a good story, those aspects won't hold viewers for long. The primary goal of the filmmaking process is to capture (or create) the story on film. During the development phase, the screenwriter, producer, and director work together to develop the director's vision for the film, and outline the film's budget and backing. During pre-production, the production team is assembled and the script is created or adapted. Competition for audiences continues to grow each year as more in-home video streaming technologies are introduced. If the men and women working together to produce a full-length film for theater viewing do not work seamlessly and produce a top quality product, their efforts may not be rewarded at the box office.

Screenwriters

Did you know

Where the Red Fern Grows, a popular film produced by Lyman Dayton and directed by Norman Tokar, was based on a novel of the same name, written by Wilson Rawls. An interesting project would be to read the novel, then watch the film and compare the two. What kind of differences developed as the novel became the movie? Why might the screenwriter and film production team made those changes?

Screenwriters and scriptwriters have the job of creating a great script, which is the blueprint for the film. Because filmmaking is a collaborative effort, requiring the skills of many technicians and professionals, scripts are expected to be written to industry standards. Scriptwriting software, like Final Draft© or Celtx™, will assist with script formatting. If you are thinking about joining a film production company someday, taking a screenwriting course will help you learn the intricacies of story and character development. There are two types of screenplays: an original screenplay is a stories conceived by the screenwriter and an adapted screenplay is a script based on another source, such as a novel, short story, non-fiction book, or news article, and adapted for film.

While there are no specific degree requirements for screenwriters, many learn their craft at a film school and through college coursework. Some screenwriters learn by reading books on screenwriting and filmmaking. Many are writers of literature, or journalists, who make the leap to screenwriting after encountering a really compelling story.

Producers

Movie producers should have a thorough understanding of the filmmaking process because they supervise and coordinate the film from development through post-production. Some producers even have a hand in the distribution phase. The producer's responsibilities include:

- securing financing for the film
- establishing the film's budget and making sure the film stays on budget
- managing the film's on-camera and behind-the-camera talent
- setting the film's production timeline

Producers need to understand filmmaking from concept to distribution. Most have life-long experience and degree-level education in filmmaking, the arts, business, or communications.

Directors

While the producer oversees the entire project, the director has the key responsibility of establishing an artistic vision for the film. The director captures the cinematic vision of the screenplay and brings it to life. Once a director has outlined his vision for the film, the development team works to make the director's vision a reality. The director also plays a role in choosing other members of the film's creative and technical management.

The pre-production phase includes casting the film, hiring the production crew, and designing the production, as well as securing equipment, props, locations, and permits.

Directors need specialized training in all aspects of film production, so a film school degree in production, with an emphasis in directing, is recommended.

Filmmaking Development and Pre-Production Careers – Production Designers, Casting Directors, and Production Coordinators

Production Designers

The production designer creates the fictional world of the screenplay and/or the physical sets of documentaries, using storyboards and notes from the director. A storyboard is a sequence of drawings or images that depict the action in a scene, act, or part of a film. It may include, not only the director's notes, but also sketched-in dialog or other information needed by the film crew. Set designers, costume designers, artists, carpenters, craftsmen, and digital technicians assist the production designer in creating the physical and digital sets where filming will take place. Some scenes may be shot on location, which means location coordinators may be part of the pre-production and production crew. Before scenes are filmed on location, set designers and set dressers ensure the location is staged for the scene.

In the film *Ben Hur*, production and set designers were charged with physically recreating Jerusalem and Rome at the beginning of the 1st century. This included exterior and interior sets, most notably, the huge coliseum where the film's famous chariot scene took place. In the first two versions of the film, the sets were physical replicas. Costume designers supervised 100 wardrobe fabricators for the 1959 version of *Ben Hur*, while prop designers oversaw a workshop of 200 artists and craftsmen. The 2015 version will, no doubt, depend heavily on digitally created sets, costumes, and props.

Other examples of production design in classic movies include:

Aliens: In this classic 1979 suspense movie, starring Sigourney Weaver, production, and set designers created the futuristic space station, the alien creatures, the space suits, and weapons. The majority of the film sets had to be physically created since they were made prior to the standard use of CGI and other digital techniques.

The Hobbit: In this classic series, production designers worked closely with digital animators in

creating Middle Earth and the fabled characters that inhabit this imaginary world. Many of the characters, including Gollum, were digitally created and inserted into the film. The actors performed their scenes in front of green screens, were digitally altered to change the size and look of the character, and then digitally inserted into the digital world of Middle Earth. Can you see how much digital animation has changed filmmaking and enhanced production design?

Production designers should have the kind of specialized training conferred by college degree. Many production designers have degrees in arts, film, digital animation, or theater.

Digital animators and film designers typically have specialized industry training and college degrees in computer graphics and animation from film schools, colleges, and universities.

For other positions in production design, such as set designers, costume designers, and artists, a background or a degree in film and theater may be required, although extensive experience with a variety of film projects can also count on a résumé. For craftsmen, such as carpenters, lighting techs, and sound recorders, specialized training and on-the-job training may be required.

Casting Directors

The casting director is charged with finding actors to portray the film's characters. Casting can make or break a film. Casting the wrong actors can ruin an otherwise great film, while casting the right actor in the right role can create movie magic and award-winning performances. Consider Jennifer Lawrence's Academy Award-winning role in the 2013 film, *Silver Linings Playbook*. Casting directors oversee auditions, where actors perform monologues and scenes from the script. Several rounds of auditions and screenings may be necessary to find the right actor.

While there is no specific college degree or specific training for casting directors, many have degrees in arts, English, film, theater, communications, or media studies. If you aspire to become a casting director, you might look for an entry-level position in talent agencies. Note that most casting directors eventually obtain membership in one or more professional certification programs.

Notebook

Select a favorite film that was produced at least five years ago and recast the film with different actors. In your notebook, list your new cast members and explain why you chose them. How much do you think recasting the film with different actors would change the film?

Production Coordinators

The production coordinator's job begins during pre-production. This position is responsible for the coordination of various production managers and the technical and creative crewmembers to ensure the production runs smoothly. The production coordinator, like the producer, should have a thorough understanding of the filmmaking process from an administrative, production, finance, and business perspective. Duties may include:

- Coordinating schedules
- Ensuring the production is on schedule and on budget
- Assisting in casting and location scouting
- Supporting administration, management, and office personnel

Because production coordinators are responsible for the coordination of the cast, crew, and production schedule, the person in this position should understand filmmaking from concept through post-production. The best way to get this type of training is through direct filmmaking experience or degree

programs in film at a film school, college, or university.

Salary Outlook

Working in film may be glamorous and exciting, but it isn't always lucrative. It may be difficult to find steady work in some professions, and salaries are typically low. Studio films and television series may be the exception, but may be difficult to come by because of the strong competition for these positions. And, even a well-made film may not earn enough to cover more than basic expenses. This is why most of the people who work in film choose the profession because of their love of filmmaking and movies. Hitting the big time is just gravy.

Let's Review!

In this lesson you have learned that:

- filmmaking is generally divided into five phases: development, pre-production, production, post-production, and distribution;
- during development, the screenwriter, producer, and director use the script to develop the director's vision for the film;
- during pre-production, the film production is planned, cast, and scheduled;
- careers in pre-production include production designer, casting director, production coordinator, and cast; and
- some positions in these phases, such as screenwriters, producers, directors, and production designers, require a specialized college or film school education, while others, such as casting directors and production coordinators can learn on the job or through training.