

Careers in Film: The Production Phase

When does the production phase of filmmaking begin? After weeks, months, and even years in development and pre-production, when the cast and crew, script and location, budget and look have been selected, three words—lights, camera, action—begin the production phase of filmmaking. When a film is in production, it is easy to see filmmaking is a collaborative effort and a major undertaking.

How long does the production phase take? It all depends on the scope of the project, specifically, its size, range, complexity, and budget. Take a look at the blockbuster superhero film, *The Avengers*. After years in development and pre-production, Marvel Studios and Paramount Pictures' \$220 million screen adaptation of the classic comic book began production in an Albuquerque, New Mexico, studio on April 25, 2011. Parts of the film were also shot in Los Angeles, New York City, and Cleveland, Ohio. Principal photography wrapped 93 days later on July 28, 2011. The film's second unit spent 47 days shooting exteriors and interiors that may or may not have required the main actors. During the production phase, the studios employed hundreds of technicians and professionals, from camera operators and lighting technician to sound mixers and digital animators.

The majority of films produced each year are not studio blockbusters with million-dollar budgets. Most filmmakers spend their careers making business and educational films or small, independent movies, which can be just as rewarding as working on a studio film. Over seven days in 2007, a filmmaker spent \$15,000 and used only two actors and a home video camera to film a movie in his own home. After editing the film, he entered it in a film festival, where it garnered a great deal of attention from Hollywood studios. A major studio acquired the film, and it eventually grossed more than \$190 million and spawned several sequels, continuations of the storyline (usually consecutive), in subsequent films.

This lesson will examine the production phase of filmmaking for both big budget and small, independent films.

Objectives

- Describe how digital technology is impacting film production and filmmaking.
- Demonstrate knowledge of the director's role and creative roles in film production.
- Discuss key positions in film production and explain the duties and responsibilities of each position.
- Demonstrate technical skills and the use of various equipment and tools used in film production.

Vocabulary

ad lib	when an actor adds original dialogue to his scripted dialogue
cinematographer	the director of photography during film production
green screen	the descriptive name for the colored background in front of which actors perform and are filmed and then these images are transferred to a digitally animated background
opening credits	the cast and crew principals whose names appear at the beginning of the film

readings	in film acting, means different reactions in takes, saying the same lines different ways
scope	can mean the size, range, complexity, and budget of a feature film or other project
sequel	a continuation of a storyline in a subsequent film, often after the success of a first

The Production Phase of a Feature Film

In the early days of filmmaking, cinematographers used large motion-picture cameras that captured grainy black and white images, which pale in comparison to today's high-definition digital images. Digital technology has revolutionized filmmaking. Gone are the bulky motion-picture cameras and the celluloid film they required. Digital photography and cameras, so small they fade into the background during filming, have replaced these early filmmaking essentials.

Digital filmmaking has impacted filmmaking in more ways than the obvious computer-generated imagery that drives today's studio blockbusters. Filmmakers with modest or low budgets can now use digital still cameras to produce high-quality films. Some enterprising filmmakers have used home video cameras and even their cell phone's video components to shoot short films and features.

Whether you are working on a movie being shot on film or using digital photography, the production basics are similar. In following section, we will identify and discuss the primary production crew.

All Hail the Director

The director is at the creative helm of film production. When it comes to filmmaking, the screenwriter imprints his vision on the script or page. However, when it comes to the actual film, it is all about the director's vision.

Having worked on the film during development and pre-production, the director has surrounded himself with the talented and skilled professionals he needed to capture his vision on film. The director is charged with leading all of the various production teams on the film. Based on the film's budget, possible production and on-camera teams may include:

- creative
- on-camera talent
- cinematographer/camera/lighting
- sound/audio

Notebook

Do you have a favorite director? If you do, make a few notes on him or her, and include one or more films they have made. Why do you admire their work? If you do not have a favorite director, list a few films you like and select and name a few of your favorite aspects. Look up the directors of these films and note them.

The Creative Team

Screenwriters

The director leads the creative team, including the screenwriter, who may be involved throughout the

production. As with most staged or planned events, a few last-minute changes may be necessary. Although the screenwriter and director may have worked together on script revisions during the pre-production phase, the director may request a few changes during filming. Screenplays are typically works of fiction and the characters in the screenplay and resulting film will not need to identify anyone on whom a character may be generally based.

Screenwriting must follow a defined structure. Screenwriters who create their own formats will often see their scripts rejected by studio producers and agents because the script is difficult to follow. There have been a number of styles employed over the years in script development, but in recent years, most follow a specific pattern that provides:

- Camera directions such as fade in, fade out.
- A description of the scene, written as clearly as possible. For example: EXT (exterior) daytime, busy downtown street corner.
- A description of any action taking place in the scene. For example: parking enforcement officer writing ticket with her foot resting on bumper for the vehicle. People looking on as they cross the street.
- A description of how the camera moves from this opening scene to the first specific actions.
- The name of the first character to appear in the film. His or her name should be written in all caps with a brief description of the character following. For example: DIEDRA, Mid-20s, dressed in a professional manner but carrying two large tattered paper bags. Clearly, she is upset.
- The character's dialogue. The character's name appears above any dialogue. For example: DIEDRE "Please don't write me a ticket. I can't afford another one and I have just been evicted from my apartment. Can't you give me a break?"
- Stage directions that describe how the characters may interact. DIEDRA moves toward the driver's side car door as the parking enforcement officer places the ticket under the windshield wiper.
- HELEN Parking enforcement officer approaching 70 but deeply tanned and looking very fit for her age.

Notebook

Conduct a Web search for screenplay templates or examples; note the common attributes and any unique approaches, if any, you identify among the samples you view.

Another important member of the creative production team is the person who oversees script continuity. Scenes are often shot out of sequence during production, so script continuity is important. This person is on set throughout production, and functions as the director's second set of eyes, ensuring that the filmed scenes adhere to the script and that there are no inconsistencies in the filmed scenes.

On-Screen Talent

The director is responsible for guiding and coaching the on-screen talent before and during filming.

In feature films, the on-screen actors' job is to bring the scripted story to life by portraying the story's characters. Actors can spend several days, weeks, and even months rehearsing and preparing for the production of the film. After casting, the actors begin by going over the script with the director so that he can describe his vision for the film. This insight helps actors develop their characters.

In recent years, animated films have become increasingly popular and can often cost as much to produce as a film with a full cast and live-action filming. The recent children's animated film, *Frozen*, from Disney Studios, cost an estimated \$150 million to produce but passed the \$1 billion mark in

earnings in 2014.

Actors also work with the director during filming. The director coaches them to bring out their best performances. In some cases, directors allow the actors to ad lib parts of a scene. A performer ad libs when she adds dialogue to the scripted or written dialogue. Unlike live-stage performances, during filmmaking, actors may have to perform each scene several times to ensure the scene is perfectly acted and filmed.

Education. Some actors attend college and earn degrees in theater and performance while others perfect their craft by attending acting courses and acting schools. New actors can also learn the basics by joining community theater groups.

Documentaries are mostly shot from a news or informational perspective, so the on-screen talent consists mainly of people being themselves, narrators, and spokespeople. Just like in feature or narrative films, the director works with the on-screen talent to bring out the best performance. This is especially true when the on-screen talent are people with no experience being on television or in a film. The director may have to instruct these cast members on the basics of performing in front of the camera. However, Narrators and spokespeople usually have television or film experience.

Education. There is no specific educational requirement for on-screen narrators and spokespeople, but a degree and background in broadcast journalism can help you gain entry into this competitive career.

Cinematography and Sound and Audio

The director's right-hand man on any film production is the cinematographer or director of photography. The cinematographer, the person behind the camera, plays one of the most critical roles during filmmaking because he is responsible for the look of the film. When shooting a scene, the cinematographer has to focus on the look of the film, its balance of dark and light, the depth of focus, and the relation of background and foreground.

Cinematographer

Sometimes they're called directors of photography or camera operators, and sometimes they're called lighting specialists. The best cinematographers wear each of these hats because their job is to capture the film scene in the best possible light and from the best possible angles. Working with the director, the cinematographer plots the best ways to set up, light, and shoot scenes. Cinematographers need to have a working knowledge of a variety of production equipment.

Cinematographers should have a background in digital imaging and digital animation because of the digital revolution in filmmaking. Today, many films can use a green screen, which are the colored backgrounds used to capture images of actors, and then transfer those images into a digitally animated scene.

Cinematographers can work on location or in the studio. They may also work with a single camera or be the lead camera operator and direct the second and third unit camera operators. Some cinematographers work full-time, steady jobs, while others work on assignment.

Other positions in this field include camera operators and lighting technicians.

Education. Cinematographers usually have degrees in production or photography from film schools, colleges, or universities.

The Sound and Audio Team

Sound and audio are important components of any film. Even the silent films of the early 1900s used orchestrated music and sound effects as enhancements. Recording and mixing a film's sound is a complex job that requires setting up microphones and other sound equipment in order to record sound with the fewest distortions.

Sound Recorders / Sound Equipment Operators

Sound recorders have to know various ways to inconspicuously record sound and audio. This may mean hiding microphones throughout the set and location, or attaching small, hidden microphones on cast members. Just like digital photography, digital audio equipment has transformed the way sound is recorded during production. Microphones are small enough to hide in plain sight. And, many of the sound effects, once created and recorded manually, are now created and recorded digitally.

Education. There are different occupations within the sound department. Some jobs, like sound designers, require specialized training, which can be obtained at film schools, colleges, and universities. Others, like equipment operators, require less college training and can be learned on the job.

Other Positions

Production principals are sometimes referred to as above-the-line crew members. When you watch the opening credits, the names of the main actors and key positions, including director, producers, director of photography, writing source, screenwriters, costumes, makeup, editing, sound, and music are given special position above the line of scrolling credits. In many films today, credits may come at the end, to get the action going, but even at the end of the film the above-the-line principals get a featured showing of their name and professional title. These are the artists that have Academy Award categories for their work, but each of their departments employs many professionals to get the vision and the budget onscreen. These principals have generally worked their way up through the production crew jobs in their fields, to become the leaders and directors in charge of the look or sound of the film.

Oddly Named Positions

Many of these important crew members are highly skilled problem solvers and work under interesting job titles such as gaffer, best boy, and grip. These technicians are tasked with setting up the lighting structures and camera equipment. The cinematographer decides how he wants the scene lit and the camera to move for a shot, and the grips, gaffers, and best boys rig for those requirements, which can be very complex. For example, if a camera track is needed to move into a close-up, they must build it and be sure it is precisely placed. If a scene is being shot outdoors and it rains, they can devise creative ways to give the production a few rain-free minutes to shoot the scene. These tasks require knowledge of the equipment and resourcefulness which most, if not all, production crew members possess.

Costumes

In the costume department, or wardrobe, similar problem-solving skills are required. Imagine large productions with many extras, such as the non-speaking cast members in large crowd scenes. They all need costumes that fit, that are ready, organized, labeled, and they need help dressing and undressing. Little details in costuming, like makeup, take time and skill, and with a large cast, that means many people on set are working long days in the department. The costume designer creates the look and designs or sources the clothes, and the department ensures they have the needed changes of wardrobe for multiple takes. Reshooting a crowd scene in the rain, for example, requires many identical sets of

costumes.

Did you know?

Dining table scenes, or other food scenes in film, can require the preparation of as many as 60 identical dishes, ready for multiple takes? Highly perishable foods, like fish, cannot withstand the long time and hot lights of a film set, and are usually “faked” by using chicken.

Identical costume changes and anything that is used in a scene, from fireworks to food, must be ready for replenishment when the director or AD (assistant director) calls for a re-set. Shooting a scene in one take, meaning the very first and only time it is filmed, is extremely rare. Some directors like to shoot multiple takes from different camera angles and with different readings from the actors, that is, saying the same lines different ways in order, to be sure they will have all they need for post-production editing. For support, every department needs to be prepared with multiples and at the ready to redo hair, makeup, costumes, food, and other things used in the scene.

Production Design

Production designers are the principals responsible for creating the look of the film and for bringing the director’s vision to life. These important professionals know how to create a signature look for the entire film. They have years of design and film work behind them, a vast knowledge of history and art history, architecture, and interior design. The production designer, cinematographer, and director are the creators of the film’s look. The production designer’s look will be created as the needs and budget of the film dictate, and can include location and studio work, set design, and construction that may be on a massive scale. These departments combine the talents of set design companies and many skilled workers in a variety of positions. Set dressers, for example, are in the props department making sure that each refrigerator magnet or item on a desk on set has an appropriate frame of reference for the characters. For example, many actors mention the benefit of skilled set dressers are in putting things in drawers and closets . Although the items may not be shown on camera, it helps the actors to feel like they are truly living in a house.

Stunts and Others

Stunts need stunt men and stunt women, stunt coordinators, equipment handlers, stunt drivers, explosives specialists and specialty items; for example, items like breakaway glass, often made of sugar, if an actor is going to be thrown through a window. Special handlers called animal wranglers provide animals in films. Behind the scenes, catering services feed everyone on set, tutors keep child actors up on their lessons as required by law, transportation captains make sure everyone gets where they need to be on time, trailer services make sure each star has a portable dressing room, and so on.

Watch the Credits Below the Line

If you are interested in a film production career, watch a film and pay particular attention to the credits, above and below the line. It may be helpful for you to select big names in your field of interest and look up their biographical information. See where they got their training, how they got started, and what jobs they held working their way up. You can be sure they will include below-the-line positions in film production.

Observe the rolling credits at the end of a film carefully. You may need to pause the screen, or run them in slow motion to really study each title. The production crew members are listed after the cast and before the post-production crew. Pay attention to the production titles. They are listed in a sequence that is commonly used in film, so you can get to know the specific departments. You may find watching

credits is instructional, as they show each department's structure. You can use the job titles as search criteria to find out more about exactly what each professional does.

Many production careers in different departments are not mentioned in this lesson. Each one requires knowledge, reliability, film production work experience, a great disposition, resourcefulness, stamina, ingenuity, and communication skills. A career in film production can take you many places, including a dark sound stage for 18 hours a day. Production schedules can be grueling, and it is often unglamorous, rigorous work, for demanding or even temperamental bosses. Remember that being part of a memorable film makes it all worthwhile.

Let's Review!

In this lesson you have learned:

- directors helm film projects and lead several different teams during the production phase of filmmaking;
- production teams on both low and high-budget productions include the creative team, the cinematography team, and the sound/audio team;
- cinematographers are responsible for the look of a film, its balance of dark and light, the depth of focus, and the relation of background and foreground;
- the lighting team works directly with the cinematographer to achieve the proper lighting and atmosphere; and
- sound teams are responsible for recording the on-set audio during production.