



Leeds Young
Filmmakers
Golden Owl
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VISTA



Filmmaking tips to improve your film

- **Story & Characters**

- You can't make a good film out of a bad story. While it's often more exciting to be on set and using the camera, it's really important that you have a really good story before you turn on the equipment.
- Beginning, middle and end. Most stories follow what is called the 'three act structure'. Think about how your story starts – who are the characters, what are they doing and why? The middle of the story is usually when something happens that has to be resolved – often involving some kind of peril. The end is how the story is resolved, which may or may not be a happy ending.
- Characters. Take some time to think about who your characters are and perhaps even create a backstory for them. Your actors will be able to get into character if they know something about them. A good test is to imagine if they could exist outside of your story – do they have a life that goes on even when your story has finished?
- Don't write something into your story if you don't have access to it. Play to your strengths. If you know someone who has a tractor, write a story around that. If you don't, then choose something else, rather than putting all your energy into finding a tractor.

- **Camera Techniques**

- Use different shot types (wide, mid, close-up). This will add variety and interest to your film. Wide shots that show the location and set the scene are great opening shots to establish what your film is about. Filling the frame with a person's face really adds drama and emotion to your film. Pointing a camera at people and having them perform in front of it is video recording, not filmmaking.
- Don't move the camera unless there is a reason to do so. It's very easy to run round with the camera but unless there's a need for it in the story (e.g. a chase) keep the camera still. What looks like a tiny amount of movement in the viewfinder may be huge when it's projected on the big screen. Even better, put your camera/tablet/phone on a tripod.
- Don't be tempted to play with the zoom button. If you need a close up, stop filming and move the camera closer. There is a reason you hardly ever see zooming in professional films – it's really hard to do well.
- Headroom. Some TVs and projectors suffer from something called 'overscan' which cuts off about 10% of the top, bottom and sides of an image. Allow for this when you are shooting and make sure everything that's important isn't right at the edges of the frame.
- Backgrounds. Try not to have too much movement in your backgrounds. It can be distracting and, especially when using budget digital cameras, reduce the quality of the video as it tries to compress the images, making them flicker.

- **Acting**

- Audition. If more than one person wants to play the role, have them try out and choose the best person for the part.
- Practice makes perfect. Get your actors to rehearse before you switch the camera on.
- Don't automatically use the first take – if it could be better, do it again! It costs nothing to record footage these days (not like when you had to buy and process film) so keep going until you get what you want. It's quick and easy to throw away what you don't need but much harder to go back and reshoot.

- **Sound & Music**

- If you are recording dialogue, make sure it can be heard clearly. Audiences are less forgiving about bad sound than they are about bad filming.
- Use a separate microphone if possible. If you can't, think about what sounds / noise the microphone will pick up and try and minimise the ones you don't want it to (e.g. background chatter, traffic)
- If shooting outside, try to pick a non-windy day. Wind noise (baffle) can be very loud and distracting. If you have to shoot on a windy day, try and reduce the noise by using a muffler (you can now get cheap mufflers to fit pocket cameras and tablets from Amazon).
- If it is really noisy it might be better to record your sound separately and replace it in the edit, or even try making a silent movie.
- Don't choose your favourite song as a soundtrack. You have to have permission to use copyrighted music and this can be very expensive. Most editing software comes with some stock music and sounds or you could use copyright-free or public-domain music that's available online.

- **Editing**

- Your editing software probably comes with lots of different transitions and special effects. It is not your job to try and use them all in one go. Unless you are making an 80's style music video, it's best to avoid the spiral wipes or mosaic tile effects. Keep it simple – fades or cuts through black work best.
- Use different scene lengths. Having some shorter and longer ones make the film more interesting and can help with the pacing of the film. Shorter cuts are good for creating action, longer takes for drama.
- Keep it short. If it takes 2 minutes to tell your story – that's fine. Longer is not necessarily better. Ask yourself whether each scene really adds something to your story – if not, cut it out!

And Finally:

Watch more films! Filmmakers learn through studying films. These don't have to be films you've never seen before (although it's obviously good to try new things). Pick a film you really like and watch it with the sound turned down – concentrate on camera angles and shot types. Think about the editing and the lighting. The more you watch the more you will understand and the better your films will be. Watch short films other people have made on YouTube – what is good about them? What could be better? What techniques can you copy?