

10 Steps to Becoming a **PROFESSIONAL FILMMAKER**





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Professional Filmmaker

Do you dream of being the next Spielberg or Scorsese? Being part of the production team on the next big hit? Or making your mark on the indie scene? The term “filmmaker” encompasses everything from the director to the editor, camera operator, audio technician, boom operator, gaffer, compositor, visual effects specialist, etc. While each of these professions follows its own distinct path, the basic shape of the path that we outline below is a great start for students who are interested in any part of filmmaking.

Film is one of the most celebrated and accessible entertainment forms of the 21st century, with the ability to reach and influence millions of viewers. It is a cornerstone of modern culture, a bonding force that brings people together with shared memories and quotes. And it’s continually evolving.

“Every time I go to a movie, it’s magic, no matter what the movie’s about. I dream for a living...”

- Steven Spielberg

Whether with new 3D film technologies or jaw-dropping special effects, technology is opening up more and more options for filmmakers. The power of screen time to entertain, inspire, and educate is basically limited only by the imagination!

Whether you want to help people unwind with a fun romantic comedy, or spread awareness with hard-hitting documentaries, film is a great way to express yourself creatively and share your vision with the world.

What can filmmakers expect out of a career?

Filmmaking can be lucrative, with salaries ranging from an average of \$50,930 (median for film and video editors and camera operators) to \$68,440 (median for producers and directors) depending on your specialty. Directors can make the big bucks with the top 10% earning \$166,400, but top rate editors, art directors, camera operators, and writers can also earn impressive six-figure salaries. If you get to the level of blockbusters – like the recent *Hunger Games*, with record-breaking opening weekend earnings of \$155 million in North America – you may earn even more.

"Film is incredibly democratic and accessible, it's probably the best option if you actually want to change the world, not just re-decorate it.

- Banksy, Graffiti artist and film director

The day-to-day can be long and taxing, and levels of involvement will vary depending on what part of a project you work on, as well as the exact time in the cycle of a project. If you work on movies, filming could take anywhere from a couple of days to a couple of months – and even years on the big budget pictures.

Read on to find out more about how to become a filmmaker!

1. Study movies.
2. Take an introductory filmmaking class.
3. Learn useful software.
4. Make your own films.
5. Build a demo reel.
6. Establish a presence in your film community.
7. Attend film school.
8. Get an internship.
9. Network.
10. Find your voice.



Step 01:
Study movies.
Identify what you
like. Watch the
behind the scenes
footage.

One of the best ways to start as a filmmaker – whether you hope to be a director, editor, etc. – is to identify what moves you. Watch movies, identify genres or directors that consistently create quality pieces you enjoy, and figure out what exactly it is that makes these scenes powerful. Watch the behind-the-scenes footage on DVDs, and always check out making-of segments. Do you enjoy a certain atmosphere? Do you find certain lighting techniques to be most effective? What about camera angles, sound choices, and special effects? Simply being aware of everything that goes into film, and consciously thinking about what it is that makes you enjoy a movie, is a great way to go into filmmaking. Although this is just the beginning, knowing part of what your end goal is – whether you want to be a director and shoot sharp, edgy films or you want to work in special effects and create mind-blowing sequences – will give you a vision and sustain you through classes, internships, first jobs, etc.

Step 02:
Take an introductory
filmmaking class.

There are many facets of filmmaking, and you may not be aware of everything. Take an introductory filmmaking course to get a general overview of the movie making process and all of the different roles involved. You may think you want to be a director, but find that what you actually are best suited for is editing. Or you may be interested in lighting, but find that the sound aspect of film is actually a better fit.

An introductory filmmaking class will help you understand the bigger – more complicated – picture of filmmaking, as well as introduce you to some essential software (see Step 3). Get a basic foundation in everything from plot to pacing, camera angles, editing, visual effects, sound, lighting, and more!

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Some comprehensive introductory filmmaking classes offered by iD Tech Camps and iD Film Academy include:

INTRO FILM COURSES

- Movie Making Camp with iMovie®
- iD Film Studios 101: iD Film Academy

INTERMEDIATE & ADVANCED FILM

Other classes for students with a little more experience interested in special effects include:

- Film Production with Final Cut Pro®
- Visual FX with Final Cut Pro® & Adobe® After Effects®: iD Film Academy

Step 03: Learn animation software.

Even if you're not planning on specializing in a tech-heavy aspect of filmmaking, a working knowledge of all aspects of the process is very useful. It may even make you more marketable – for instance, if a project is looking for an editor but also needs someone with special effects experience, and you can wear both hats, you'll get the job over someone who only has editing knowledge.

Beyond a working knowledge of both Macs and PCs, some essential software to know includes:

- Final Cut Pro®
- After Effects®
- Photoshop®
- Industry-standard cameras and camcorders

Step 04: Make your own films.

Practice practice practice. Getting hands-on experience is invaluable. Even if you're a kid with a camcorder making a low-budget (or no-budget!) home movie, the experience of scouting locations and working with a group of friends and actors is a great starting point.

"Pick up a camera. Shoot something. No matter how small, no matter how cheesy, no matter whether your friends and your sister star in it. Put your name on it as director. Now you're a director. Everything after that you're just negotiating your budget and your fee."

- James Cameron, *Titanic* and *Avatar*

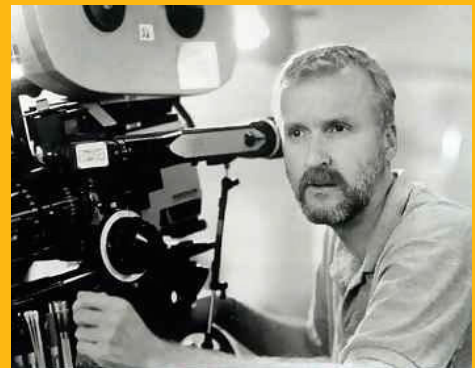


Image via
<http://ianthecool.wordpress.com/2012/02/19/director-talk-james-cameron/>

Making your own films is the hands-on version of taking an introductory filmmaking class – it will reveal things about the process that you may not have considered, and it can reveal where your greatest strengths lie. Maybe you originally thought you'd be interested in directing, but after working on a few projects, you realize that you prefer post-production aspects of filmmaking like editing. Work on a few different projects, and try to cultivate a variety – try doing documentaries, try a special-effects focused piece, try a plot-driven drama, try a special effects -driven action piece, etc. And when we say "your own films," it doesn't mean you have to be the sole creator and organizer of these projects. As long as you are working on the project, you'll be taking ownership of a part and it becomes "your" baby. Help friends out with their projects, and they will reciprocate. This is the starting point of networking!

Step 05: Build a demo reel.

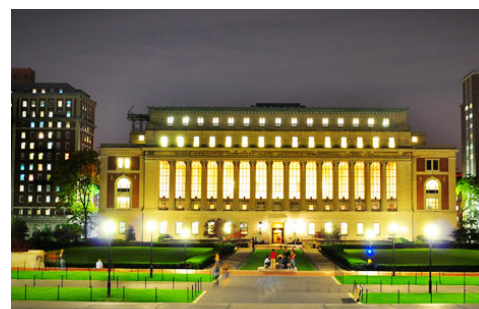
A demo reel is the filmmaker's version of a portfolio. You will use this when you're applying for jobs and film programs. Don't worry, you don't need to be applying just yet, but having a work in progress reel will help you keep track of your work and be ready when the time comes.

Make it short and sweet, only showcasing your best work. A standard demo reel should be 1-2 minutes and include clips of projects you've worked on. If you want to specialize in editing, include clips that show your editing skills. If you're trying to get into special effects, show clips with your After Effects® work. Always include your contact information, and get someone – a friend, a professor, a fellow student – to critique it before sending it out.

Step 06: Establish a presence in your film community.

Enter film festivals. Take advantage of YouTube.com and Dailymotion.com. Distribute your work, and solicit feedback. Doing the film festival circuit and developing awareness online will help you gather constructive criticism, as well as possible support for future projects. You don't have to have graduated from film school, or even be attending film school to go public. Just put together a polished piece and get feedback.

Besides your reputation as a professional, you also want to establish your likeability factor. By getting to know your local film community and getting your name out there, you'll be setting yourself up to meet future colleagues. It will also be easier to pull together projects and procure equipment when you know more people.



Step 07: Attend film school.

Attend film school and work towards your Bachelor of Fine Arts (B.F.A.). The placement of this step along your personal timeline may vary. For many students, making films, building your demo reel, establishing a presence, and attending film school may happen simultaneously or in some other jumbled, overlapping order.

Film school will allow you to take more specialized classes and hone your craft. You can focus on director's craft, scriptwriting, editing, camera techniques, lighting and sound, special effects, etc.

Some schools with great film programs include:

- UCLA
- Columbia University
- NYU

Attend iD Tech programs at these locations to get to know the campus!



These are the big-name schools, but you may find that a local school near you actually has a great program specializing in your area of interest. Just do the research to find the best fit. Any school with a good film department will be beneficial, it doesn't have to specifically be a film school.

You can also take a shorter length program or look into trade schools such as the Los Angeles Film School. Or, if you would rather keep your options open and get a Bachelor of Arts degree, that is also a practical choice. Degrees with a lot of crossover include English (scriptwriting and directing) and Anthropology (documentary filmmaking).

"...having a really good understanding of history, literature, psychology, sciences — is very, very important to actually being able to make movies."

- George Lucas

Step 08: **Get an internship.**

It may be tough to find one, but it's worth the time and effort to get an internship. Oftentimes your work experience, your references, and demonstrated work ethic are much more important than simply showing that you have a degree. Many communities have film centers – e.g. if you are in the Bay Area, check the Bay Area Video Coalition (bavc.org) for opportunities.

Even if you can't get an internship specifically in film, get an internship in a related industry. It will show that you are reliable, you work well with a team, and you can meet deadlines.

Aside from internships, you can demonstrate applicable skills with college experience in clubs and associations. Build your resume with projects from your film department, student-run TV shows, or helping friends with their independent projects.

Step 09: **Network.**

It's all about who you know! Attend industry events, schmooze at parties, etc. Join associations, guilds, unions. Filmmaking is an incredibly collaborative profession, so relating well to other people and being able to work in a team is essential. Communication skills are also really important to develop, and will serve you well whether you're a director asking your actors to try something new, an editor explaining a decision to the director, or a special effects person working with the editor on a new scene. When all else is equal, your likeability factor will be the key to getting jobs.

Unions are tough to join, but a good goal to shoot for. For instance, you might plan to eventually join the Directors Guild of America, the Screenwriters Guild, or the Screen Actors Guild. You must apply and have a certain amount of screen credits – but if you are unionized, you can often find better-paying jobs at bigger companies.

Step 10:
Find your voice.

You'll never make great films if you're not working on projects you're passionate about. After you've made films, experienced a lot of different projects, interned, gone to film school, etc. it's time to go back to step one and figure out what it is that moves you. After all of your education and experience, you will be better prepared to consciously examine your preferences and find your voice. Figure out what it is you want to say, what kinds of projects you are happiest working on, and then pursue those will all of your energy. Filmmaking is a competitive career, but the payoff of seeing your name in the credits and knowing that you've had an impact on other people is well worth the effort.

"Self-plagiarism is style."

-Alfred Hitchcock



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