



# Why was my film not accepted?

Notes from the 2005 DC Shorts Screening Committee

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"Why was my film not accepted?"

Every judge cringes on hearing this seemingly simple question. Which is why the notes of the various judges from last year's festival (and other festival directors around the country) have been gathered and edited to pass onto future entrants. Hopefully, armed with this information, filmmakers will be better able to self-evaluate their films to decide if they are indeed "festival worthy."

This document is rather frank in presentation. Some of it you will not agree with. Much of it you will want to ignore. Do so at the risk of not getting your film included into a festival. And remember, we are looking at your film as how it will play with others we choose to screen. No film stands alone, but must share the screen. Didn't think of that, huh?

## **IT IS ALL ABOUT THE STORY**

Read the subheading again. It is all about the story. Period. If your film does not follow a proper storytelling arc, then your audience will be lost. In a feature script, the first hook happens by page 12. In a short film (15 minutes), that translates to page 2. If you don't get the audience involved in the first 2-3 minutes, they will be lost -- and waiting anxiously to see the next film on screen.

Again. It is all about the story.

## **EDITING**

There is a reason why independent professional editors are needed. They know what they are doing. Unlike director/editors or writer/editors, they are not as connected to the material, or the importance of a single shot, or the back-story behind a particular performance. They see the rough material for what it is -- and work with what they have to string your story together in a coherent, precise, calculated film.

It has been our experience that many self-edited films run too long, include unnecessary scenes and dialogue, and strange timing.

Yes, professional editors cost money. But the return on the investment might mean acceptance into more festivals.

## **FILM LENGTH**

DC Shorts accepts films to 20-minutes. We will evaluate slightly longer films if the story and filmmaking are exceptional. But for every 30 minute film we accept, we must program two fewer 10-minute films. Audiences want to see as many high-quality film as they can while at the screening. We strive for 8-10 films. But if all films were 20-minutes, we could only screen 6.

In our experience, most 20 minute films could be re-edited to a much stronger 12 minute piece. Seriously. One quote we learned in film school was, "That's a nice 13-minute movie. But it is a fabulous



8-minute film." Ask yourself the same thing and really think about it. Bring on a professional editor (read above again).

### **CAMERA SHOTS**

Are your actors in frame? Is that expensive crane shot really moving the story forward, or was it an ego boost for the camera operator? Are your romantic scenes in a medium shot or close-up? Poorly chosen camera shots, or jarring use of hand-held can take a viewer right out of the story. And your film in the reject pile.

### **ACTING**

Aunt Sally is a great stage actress. But can she really play it small for the big screen? Theater actors are easy to cast -- they are everywhere! But rarely do they have the ability to play small for the camera. Mugging on screen is incredibly difficult to watch and will get more laughs than applause.

### **LIGHTING**

Shooting on the fly? Stealing shots? Great -- but consider the use of a bounce board to illuminate the actors' faces. The audience needs to see the actors' responses to the dialogue. That is why they came to see a movie and a pretty face 10 feet high and not a play from 60 feet away with an actor's face indistinguishable.

Shooting on a set? Shooting DV? Shooting day-for-night? Whatever you do, get a grip and DP who know how to light. Practice tricky lighting before you shoot. You rehearse actors, so why not rehearse camera movement and lighting. Proper lighting makes the good looking gorgeous -- and more watchable.

### **COMEDY IS HARD FOR A REASON**

Is your film a one-joke story? Then save it for Saturday Night Live.

Is your film a parody? It has been done before -- dozens of times before. And we have seen it -- and rejected it.

Is your film funny to you? Chances are it's not funny to others. If your mom laughs, then you've got something.

Comedy is probably the hardest genre to direct. Comic timing is not something that most actors truly have. And fewer directors have the ability to bring it out of them and capture it to film. But when a comedy is done well (great acting, proper cuts to show characters' reactions (missing in so many indie comedies), humor that is smart, but not brainy (or vulgar), and edited by a professional comedy editor, they are irresistible to the judges.

### **SOUND**

If "Aunt Sally" really can act, what a shame it would be if we couldn't hear her performance because a train rumbled by just at the moment she professed her heart felt love for Uncle Jim? And worse, what if the train sounded like an F-16? Visual experiences are nowhere without sound and good sound can make or break a film. Otherwise, we'd all still be reading movies, with a honky tonk piano plunking



dramatically away throughout the whole production. People crave good sound; sound editors, sfx editors, Foley artists, dialogue cutters and mixers are all needed to create great sound. And when you edit your sound, is the underscore too loud? Can you hear the dialogue over it? I know that original song your friend wrote is cool -- but the audience is more interested in what the actors are trying to say.

### **KISS PRINCIPLE**

**Keep It Simple, Stupid.** As a director, you should be reciting this mantra under your breath during the whole production. Complicated sets are unnecessary if you use a well framed close-up. Special effects are not really that special if they are in every shot. Dialogue is not better the second time (or third) it is repeated.

### **GUNS KILL**

The other major principle learned in film school was that guns kill good films. Too many indie shorts have a gun in the last scene. If your plot resolution includes a gun killing the antagonist (or worse -- protagonist), then the script was poorly conceived to begin with. And no one wants to watch eight films in a row that end in gun violence.

### **THE TRUTH LIVES**

Would someone **really** say that? Out loud?! If the dialogue is not true, then it should not be said. Or worse, repeated (and yes, we know we have said this twice.)

### **CREDITS**

Rule of thumb -- If your film is under 10 minutes, no more than 45 seconds. Under 20 minutes, 1:15. Tops. We have rejected films with 3+ minutes of credits. I know you have a lot of people to thank, but we have an audience who needs to be able to sit through it without squirming or losing interest.

Bloopers? Leave them on the cutting room floor or the directors' cut of the DVD. 98% of the time they are funny only to those in the production, and audiences are lost. The reason the bloopers in Hollywood movies are funny is that because they are often scripted. You don't really think reality TV is genuine, do you?

### **DO WHAT YOU ARE SET UP TO DO**

Are you a 3-person crew. Then do a simple, one-location shoot. A historic epic is beyond you. Do you have 36 actors for a 12 second shot? Then you are feeding too many people and wasting your valuable (and expensive) resources in the wrong place.

This all goes back to the KISS principle. Do what can successfully be attained by the number and experience of the crew you have. Too many films are lost because they are overly ambitious -- especially when they would have been better as a smaller, more intimate story.

### **BE TAKEN SERIOUSLY**

Your film is complete. The masterpiece works on every level. But you put the DVD in a cheap plastic jewel case from an old CD and mailed it in one of those fiber-filled mail packs. Chances are your



disc arrived damaged (or at a minimum, the case is destroyed) and grey lint flecks are all over the judges' apartment.

Invest in real DVD clamshell cases (they are less than 20 cents each in bulk) and bubble-pack envelopes. Make sure all of your paperwork is included. That means the check, too. Include a promo item (postcard, poster, film review).

If you don't have the technical skills to author a DVD, find someone who does. Too many films arrive on a poorly authored DVD, with bad compression and conversion detracting from the content of the film itself. A tip: if your film is in widescreen, author the DVD in anamorphic mode rather than letterbox.

You never have a second chance at a first impression. And festival directors unwrapping hundreds of packages want few surprises.

### **THE NUMBERS GAME**

So your film is mailed in a nicely designed case, your plot is strong, the editing impeccable and the acting sublime. Still, you are one of hundreds of films in consideration for just a few dozen slots in one of the thousands of possible festivals worldwide. Some festivals have quotas (ie: certain number of local/women's/documentary films). It often seems like you have a better chance of getting into Harvard with an 800 SAT. But it is possible.

Send press clippings and a list of every screening and festival you have been accepted too. Judges love to show successful films.

Would your film be a premiere? Let the festival organizer know. Often, they will negotiate to show world (or local) premieres.

Create a buzz. Send a thank you card a few days after the screening copy.

Read the festival's mission statement and guidelines. Does your film really meet all of the criteria to be selected?

We do not want to discourage you from entering DC Shorts -- or any other festival. But we hope that the advice in this document gives you pause to reflect on your project. We want to encourage you to take your work seriously and professionally.

Still hot under the collar? Put this down for a few days and re-read it. Maybe you will see how your opinion has changed -- and you can develop a plan to improve your entry -- or reassure yourself that you have done all that you can.

Good luck!