

# HOW A MOVIE GETS MADE

## INDEPENDENT FILM

**Writer/Director**  
is the creator of the story, movie concept

**Original Concept**

SCREENPLAY

**Packaging**

Packaging is the engine — this is where the writer/director attaches bankable elements to unlock financing and distribution interest.

PITCH MATERIALS

A **Pitch Deck**, this is a 12-16 page overview of the project. This includes logline, potential cast, visual reference, synopsis, themes, audience, etc.

Sometimes a **Sizzle Reel** is created. This is a short video made up of scenes from similar existing films to give an impression of what the director is going for.

! This is one of the first steps in the process. Proper legal council is critical for IP, investors, utilizing tax incentives, compensation, etc.

Legal helps set up the LLC and investor docs (PPM Private Placement Management, operating agreement, subscription agreement secures chain of title, handles contracts, and puts insurance in place (including E&O Errors and Omissions) — everything must be investor/distributor ready.

Getting an **entertainment lawyer** as soon as possible is critical to protecting partnerships, contract, expectations. A small investment up front will save tens of thousands later.

**Legal Council** **! Casting** **Producer's Rep**

**Locations** **Distributor** **!**

Attached partners included in the Investor Deck, Business Plan.

The role of a **producer's rep** is to set up meetings and negotiations (along with legal council) with distributors, sales agents, etc. This is different than a line producer or executive producer.

Conversations with distribution partners should occur prior to or in early production.

INVESTOR DECK/BUSINESS PLAN

The **Investor Deck** sells the concept of the film, demonstrates market appeal and earnings potential.

The **Business Plan** outlines budgets, financial projections, marketing and distribution plans and potential revenue streams. It also outlines the business structure and project ownership as many entities will be subcontracted, some with option to invest.

These may also include a list of investors, amount invested, and percentage of ownership. This is known as a **cap sheet**. It also shows which investors are paid off first from revenue. This is known as a **waterfall**.

**Funding**

**Investors**

In the indie film scene, these are typically high-wealth individuals with a passion for film, arts, or a theme/cause that aligns with the screenplay.

**Donors**

Some high-wealth individuals often prefer to take a tax deduction rather than risk loss. Some non-profits such as SLFW offer fiscal sponsorships to allow filmmakers to accept donations.

**Tax Incentives**

Local tax incentives (also international if production or post-production is outside of the U.S.) and rebates are often used to repay investors while the project is still in production. Tax credits can be sold on the open market for a percentage of its value.

**Grants**

There are a number of non-profits and foundations offering grants to filmmakers. These grants are typically 'mission specific' such as subject matter or supporting minority filmmakers.

**Marketing**

Trailers Advertising  
Media Junkets Social Media

**PRODUCTION**  
(PRE thru POST)

FINISHED FILM

**Self-Distribution**

**Film Festivals**  
Enter the festival circuit in the hopes of gaining the attention of a national distributor.

**Theater Rental**  
Pay to rent out theaters in 10 markets for a week. This qualifies films for consideration at several streaming platforms.

**Aggregator**

Aggregators get films onto platforms where it can be purchased such as Google Play and Amazon. Fees and pricing models varies, due diligence is necessary to get the best deal.

**AVOD**

Advertising Video on Demand, this is free streaming platforms (ie. Tubi) with advertising breaks. These are gaining in popularity among younger viewers.

**Direct Sales**

Film available for sale on the director's website.

**Sales Agent/Distributor**

! Conversations with distribution partners should occur prior to or in early production.  
! Attorneys should review at any distribution deal. There is a cottage industry of predatory distributors taking advantage of filmmakers desperate for a distribution deal.

**Film Markets**

Distributors will often recut scenes based on audience testing or market experience.  
Many distributors try to sell completed films at film markets, such as the American Film Market in Las Vegas and the European Film Market in Berlin. Cannes and the Toronto Int'l Film Festival host film markets.

There's a million ways a movie gets made and each journey is unique to each film. This is an extremely simplified flow chart.

In reality, there's a lot of moving parts, it's messy, often out of order and challenging for the most experienced professionals.

Writer's agent

Writer

The writer's agent shops screenplays to executive producers and studios as well as requests for screenplays on trending genres and subjects.

! Often, the writer's reputation helps attract talent and sell the concept. Sometimes studios insist on a particular writer for a project.

! In adaptations, sometimes the original author negotiates screenplay credit and input. This typically applies to famous, well-known authors. This is not common.

## STUDIO SYSTEM

**Studio/Executive Producer**  
originate ideas from either an:

**Existing Script** **Original Concept** **Adaptation** **?**

The studio may buy or option the rights to a screenplay or book, etc., or hire writers to develop a new idea. The studio retains the rights.

An **adaptation** is existing intellectual property (IP) such as a novel, video game, comic book, etc. that's been 'adapted' for film or another media.

**IP Note:** Works in the public domain still often have restrictions and limitations.

**IP-owner's rights and territories**

Depending on the pre-existing IP publishing rights, additional rights such as international markets may have to be negotiated with a **sales agent** or an **entertainment attorney**.

**Story Development**

Executive Producer and a Writer(s) create the initial story with logline, synopsis and treatment.

SCREENPLAY

PITCH MATERIALS

Materials may be created to help sell the concept during this packaging phase.

A **Look Book** is an overview of the project, logline, visual reference, synopsis, themes, etc.

A **Sizzle Reel** (or ripomatic) is a short video made up of scenes from similar existing films to give an impression of the style and vibe the producer is going for.

An **Investor Deck/Business Plan** demonstrates the project's financial viability.

**Packaging**

'Packaging' is where the studio shapes tone, audience, and budget level. This also includes shopping the concept/script around to interested parties to see if anyone bites. Actors, directors will get 'attached' to a project. The goal is if enough players get attached, it may snowball into a 'green-lit' project.

**Development or Development Hell?**

The process from idea to production is known as 'development.' Many times the term is also used specifically regarding story/screenplay development.

As more players are brought into the mix, the concept often changes as does expectations and potential budget causing the screenplay to undergo rewrites. Many times an attached director and/or actors drop off due to creative difference or scheduling. Other times, business objectives at the studio level can dramatically change or kill a project.

! If the studio abandons the project, this is known as a **turnaround**, meaning another studio or production company can buy the script and rights, often paying back development costs and interest to the original studio.

Rewrites, reshoots and re-edits are often ongoing even after principal photography is completed. Many features have private screenings with a test audience. Due to audience feedback many scenes are cut, altered, etc. Some films are never completed nor released due to not being able to adequately fix problems in post-production.

Writers Directors Actors Producers

Legal Distributors Sales Agents

Production Companies Locations

**Funding**

**Studio**

If a major studio initiated the project, the project will be reviewed by the financial department for **green lighting** (approval). The studio will employ a mix of funding strategies to absorb/minimize costs.

Studios have many projects in development, very few get green-lit and produced.

**Advertisers**

Brands may invest in a film to advertise their product (BMW/James Bond) or pick up the cost of P&A or marketing the film. (Nissan Rogue/Star War Rogue 1).

P&A (Prints and Advertising) is a holdover term from when 'prints' were made of the film, put on reels, and shipped to theaters nationwide.

**Investors**

Many projects are financed by hedge funds and investment groups. Typically, the fund finances several projects (a **slate** of films) knowing some will tank at the box office, others making huge profits thus offsetting the losses.

The profitable films are called **'tent pole films'**. Studios do this as well.

**Incentives**

Tax discounts and rebates up to 30% of production. Tax credits can be sold on the open market for a percentage of its face value, converting credits to cash. This can be used to repay investors while the project is still in production.

A lot of feature, TV, and VFX production is moving outside of the U.S. due to generous tax incentives in other countries.

**Foreign Sales**

This is basically a 'cash up front' distribution deal. Foreign distributors will pre-purchase distribution rights of a movie in production for their specific territories.

Total foreign pre-sales can bring in several million dollars of financing. The UK, France, Germany, China and Japan are the most lucrative markets.

**PRODUCTION**  
(PRE thru POST)

FINISHED FILM

**Marketing**

Trailers Advertising  
Media Junkets Social Media

**Distribution**

If a distributor does not have a deal with streaming platforms, theater chains, etc., it will try to negotiate one at a film market.

**Theatrical**

Most familiar form of distribution. Must be in 600 theaters (U.S.) to be considered a nationwide or wide release. A 'wide' release is 1,500 - 2,000. 'Blockbusters' range around 3,500 - 4,000.

**Cable/SVOD**

Originally considered secondary distribution, cable and **Streaming Video on Demand** (Netflix) platforms will pay a licensing fee to show the film after the Theatrical run. Many films release directly to SVOD (or both) as well as SVODs creating their own content.

**DVD**

Despite declining every year, there is a still a market. Some analysts believe sales may stabilize as more consumers become aware that a 'digital purchase' is access and not ownership.

**Hospitality**

Includes distribution in hotels, cruise ships (typically PPV), in-flight entertainment, and public viewing such as airports, lobbies, and restaurants.

