

How to Direct a Movie

Making a movie can be something you're doing for fun with friends, or as something you're completely serious about. Either way, it's a process that takes a little bit of time, between choosing a script, casting your actors and shooting the...

Part 1 of 4:

Preparing for Filming



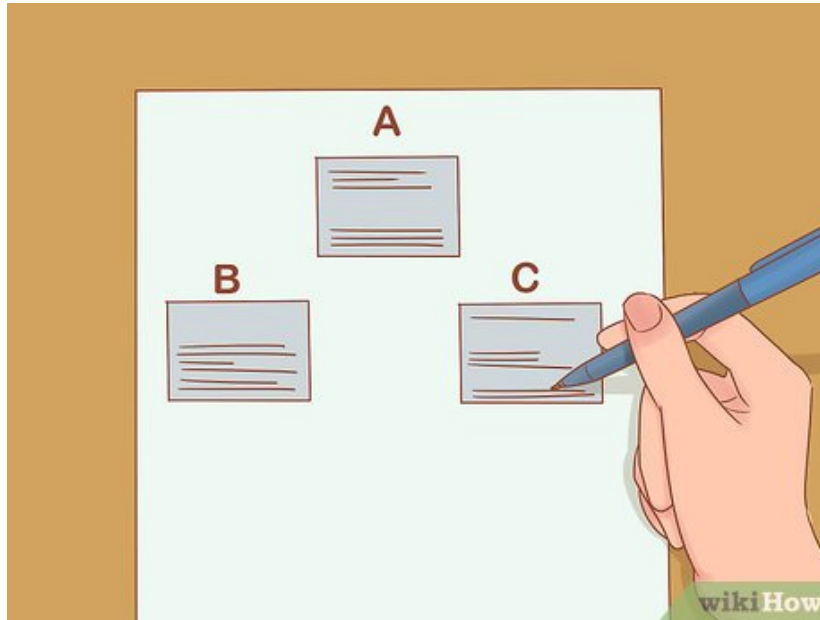
1.

Choose a script. A good script can make even a mediocre director look good, so choose wisely. You can also write a script yourself, if that's something you enjoy and are good at. When you're writing, or choosing a script there are a few things to look out for that can help you pick the best script possible.

1. Structure is key to a good story. The three-act structure is a device commonly used for scriptwriters to come up with a good story. It works like this: set-up (Act 1), confrontation (Act 2), resolution (Act 3). Key turning points happen at the end of Act 1 and Act 2.
2. A good script shows rather than tells. You want your audience to guess at what is happening based on body language of the actors, what they're wearing, what they do, and how they say the lines. Screenplays are, by nature, extremely visual.^[1]
3. Each scene has to be headed by a slug line, which tells whether the scene is interior or exterior, whether it is night or day, and where it is. (For example: INT. LIVING ROOM -- NIGHT.)
4. When describing action all you are describing is the actual, factual of what will be seen on the screen. For example, instead of saying "John enters the living room. He is angry because his girlfriend left him," you would say "John enters the living room. He slams the door behind him and

kicks the sofa."

2.



Storyboard your script. Storyboarding is incredibly important so that you know how best to direct each scene, what camera angles you want, what you want it to look like. You don't have to stick to the storyboard as you're shooting, but it will give you a place to start.^[2]

1. Things that you'll be covering are: what characters are in each frame, how much time has elapsed between current frame and the previous frame, where the camera is in the frame (what the shot looks like).
2. Your storyboard doesn't have to be perfect. It simply needs to give you a sense of the script and how the script should be shot.
3. Decide on the tone for your film. A gritty film about a private detective in the 1920s is going to have a very different feel than a light-hearted comedy about the perils of parenthood. A great way to make your movie fail is to switch the tone midway through, so that the light-hearted comedy suddenly becomes a tragedy without warning. This doesn't mean that a comedy cannot have elements of tragedy, or vice versa, but your film, especially if you're new to directing, should stick to one tone.

3.



Get financing for your movie. You can't make a movie without some kind of financing, especially if you want it to be a movie that people other than your family watches. Filming equipment costs money, you'll need props, locations, actors, and tech people. Most of these things cost money.

1. If you're going to indie film route, you should still try to find a producer for your movie, someone who will figure out funding, get you filming locations.

4.

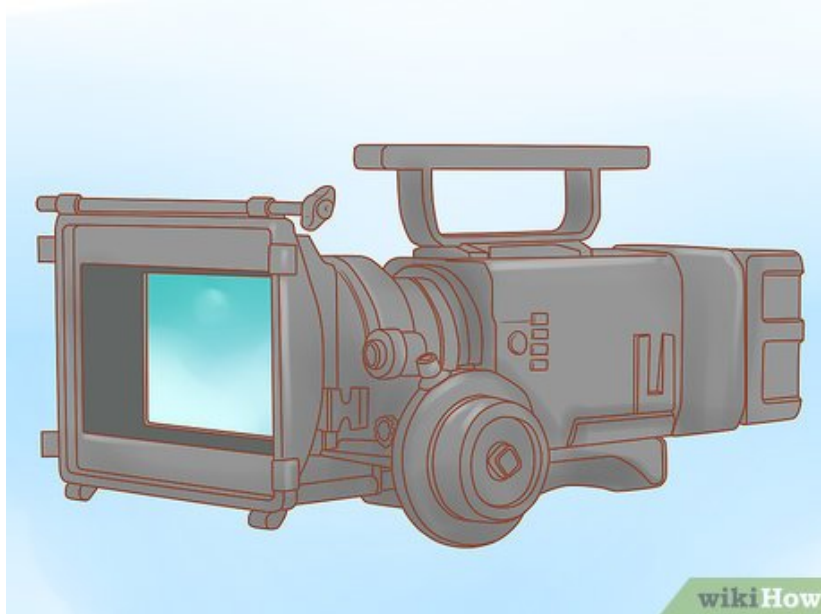


Cast actors for each role. If you're low on funding you'll probably have to do the casting yourself, but otherwise it's a good idea to hire a casting director to do that job. Usually a casting director has access to more avenues in which to find appropriate actors for your movie.

1. You want people who have been in other films and understand how it works. Theater actors are not great for this, as acting in a theater and acting for a movie is incredibly different.
2. There are good up and coming actors who aren't too expensive. What you're looking for is charisma and talent. This usually means not just casting your friends in the roles (unless you're just directing a

film for fun, in which case, have at it).

5.



Find the locations, props, and materials. Movies require locations (a bedroom, a living room, a street corner, a garden, etc) in which to film. Sometimes you can film in these locations for free and sometimes you have to pay. Likewise, you'll be needing props, costumes, make-up, and materials for filming (a mike, cameras, etc).

1. If you have a producer this is what they will be doing. Making sure that you have everything you need and the permission to film in certain locations. Otherwise, you'll have to do this yourself.
2. If you're on a really low budget, talk to friends and family. Maybe you know someone who's good at make-up to do the make-up for you, or maybe your aunt happens to have a bunch of period clothes up in her attic.

6.



Plan appropriately. If you don't have a clear vision and plan for how you're going to film, what it's going to look like, it's going to be a difficult filming process. You need to have the specifics laid out and you

need to know all the things to do that make a filming process successful.

1. Create a shot list. This is basically a numbered list of all the shots in the film that describes the framing, the focal length, camera movement, and things you need to bear in mind (like possible filming concerns). You can also double this up with the storyboard, whatever works best for you.
2. Create a script breakdown. This is basically the process in which you identify every single item needed for shooting the movie, including location, props, any effects, etc. Again, it will be easier if you have a producer to help you out with this.
3. Tech scout with all your tech people. This means going over to the movie locations and go over every single shot with your tech people so that everyone knows exactly what to expect for each shot. You can discuss problems that may arise (things like specific lighting, sound issues, etc).



Schedule the shots. If you can get a good 1st AD (assistant director) you'll want to. They're the person who yells at the actors if needed and who does things like, takes down all the notes during the tech scout, and who schedules all the shots.

1. Scheduling the shots basically means setting up the schedule for when the shots are going to be filmed. This is almost never in chronological order, but usually has more to do with lighting or camera set-ups.

Part 2 of 4:

Working with the Actors

1.



Practice the script before shooting. This seems like a very obvious step, but it's really important. When you get to the actual filming part you want the actors to be comfortable with their lines and their blocking.

1. Start off by having a script run-through, where you and your actors sit around a table and run through each scene. They'll be getting more comfortable with the words and with you and with each other, which will make the filming part much easier.
2. Really talented actors don't necessarily need much of a rehearsal before shooting and it can be better to not over-rehearse highly emotional scenes so that they will be fresh for the actual shoot, but that only works with seasoned and talented actors, so if you're working with amateur actors, practicing the script before shooting is a good idea.

2.



Make sure the actors have learned their lines. An actor can't give a stunning performance without knowing their script backwards and forwards. You do not want them to suddenly turn up on set the day of the shoot without having learned their lines. This is why rehearsals are so important.

3.



Explain the subtext in each scene. This means what is going on in the scene beyond simply the dialogue. It will also tell an actor what his or her character's true intentions are, in the scene and in the movie, which will determine how you direct them.

1. Less is more in acting in a movie. What you want for your actors is a strong presence that shows even when they aren't doing anything. An actor that can draw viewers into the character without doing much.
2. For example: John, our angry protagonist from above, is going to be played differently depending on whether he hates his girlfriend for leaving him, or if he's still in love with her (or both).

4.



Be calm, focused, and clear. The cliché of the angry, screaming director is just that, a cliché. As the director you're the one in charge (if you don't have a producer) which means that everyone's going to be looking to you for calm and clear direction.

1. This is why the storyboard and script breakdown are so important. You can refer back to them for each scene and for showing your vision to those who are working for you.
2. Remember that a movie gets made based on the contributions of a lot of different people, even if the director and the actors get most of the credit. It's best not to behave like you're the most important thing on set, when you're dealing with your cast and crew.

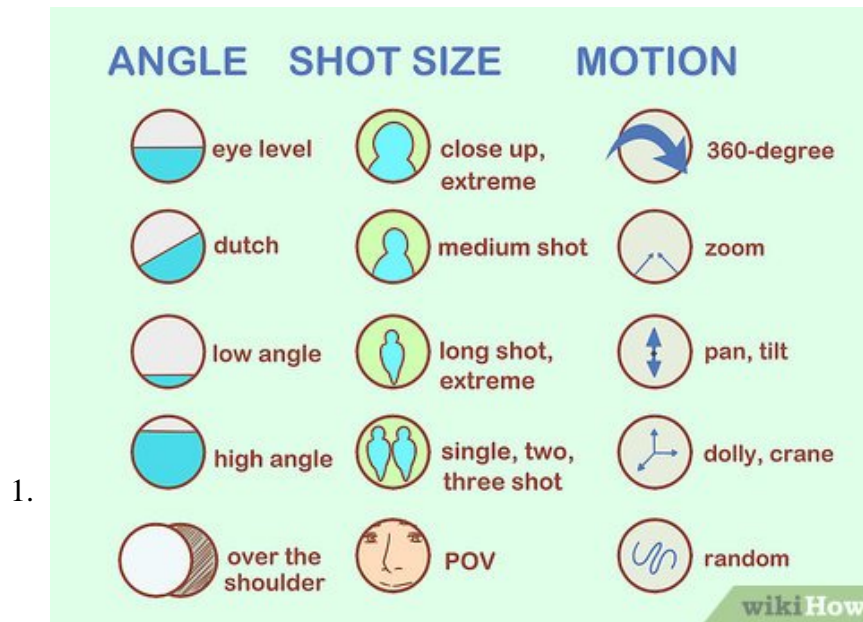


Give specific instructions. This is for the actors. If you've explained the subtext to your actors and your vision for the film, there shouldn't be too much of a problem of them doing what they need to do in their scenes, but it is important that you give specific instructions, even ones like "try that line again faster."

1. Take copious notes. On your shot list write down specific camera critical things you are going to want your actors to do. The clearer and more detailed you can be in your feedback and your requests, the easier it will be for the actors and the crew to follow through on your vision.
2. Give negative or detailed feedback to actors in private. You can even do this when other people are around, just as long as only the actor who is receiving the feedback is hearing it. This way no one gets embarrassed or offended.
3. Make sure to give positive feedback. Actors like to know that their work is being appreciated and that they are doing the right thing. Make sure you let them know that, even if it's something as simple as "I really liked what you did in the last scene; let's try that when we're filming the shot."
4. Sometimes, if you have a really good actor, it's best to let them do their own thing without a whole lot of direction. While it may not always go in the direction you had planned, scenes and the movie itself have a possibility to go in a new and fresh direction.

Part 3 of 4:

Shooting the Movie



Know the different types of shots and camera angles. When you're directing you're going to need to know the different kinds of shots and camera angles and camera movements so that you know how to shoot each scene and what you're trying to get from each scene. Different angles and types of shots change the feel of a scene.^[3]

1. Framing (or shot length): extreme long shot (usually an establishing shot, from as much as a quarter mile away), long shot (this is a "life size" shot that corresponds with the distance between audience and screen in a cinema; it focuses on the characters and the background images), medium shot (this is usually used for dialogue scenes or a close-up on a certain action and usually contains 2 to 3 characters from the waist up), close up (this shot concentrates on a face or object with the background as a blur, usually used to get into the mind of a character), extreme close up (usually focuses on one specific detail like a mouth or eyes, usually used for some sort of dramatic effect).
2. Camera angle designates the relationship between the camera and whatever is being shot and gives emotional information to the audience about the object or character in the shot. Bird's eye view (shows a scene from directly overhead, putting the audience in a god-like position, as well as making normal things unrecognizable), high angle (this has the camera above the action using a crane and gives a sort of overview of what's going on), eye level (this is a more neutral angle with the camera acting as another human observing the scene), low angle (tends to make the audience feel a sense of powerlessness, or confusion and as it is looking up at an object it can inspire fear or disorientation), oblique/canted angle (used in lots of horror films, this shot inspires a sense of imbalance, transition, and instability).
3. Camera movements make the action seem slower rather than the quick cuts, but it can also have a more "realistic" effect. Pans (scans a scene horizontally), tilts (scans a scene vertically), dolly shots (also known as tracking/trucking shots, where the camera follows the action on a moving vehicle of some sort), hand-held shots (the Steadicam camera makes it so the handheld shots are less jerky, while still instilling a sense of immediacy and realism), crane shots (this is more or less a dolly shot in the air), zoom lenses (this changes the magnification of the image, changing the position of the audience either slowly or quickly), aerial shot (a shot similar to the crane shot, but taken from a helicopter and usually used as an establishing shot at the beginning of the movie).

2.



Come in at call time. This is basically when the crew comes in to set up everything. If you have an assistant director, it isn't really necessary that you be there, but it's a good idea to show anyway. You can start thinking about the shots for the day and considering how best to do them and whether you need to change anything.

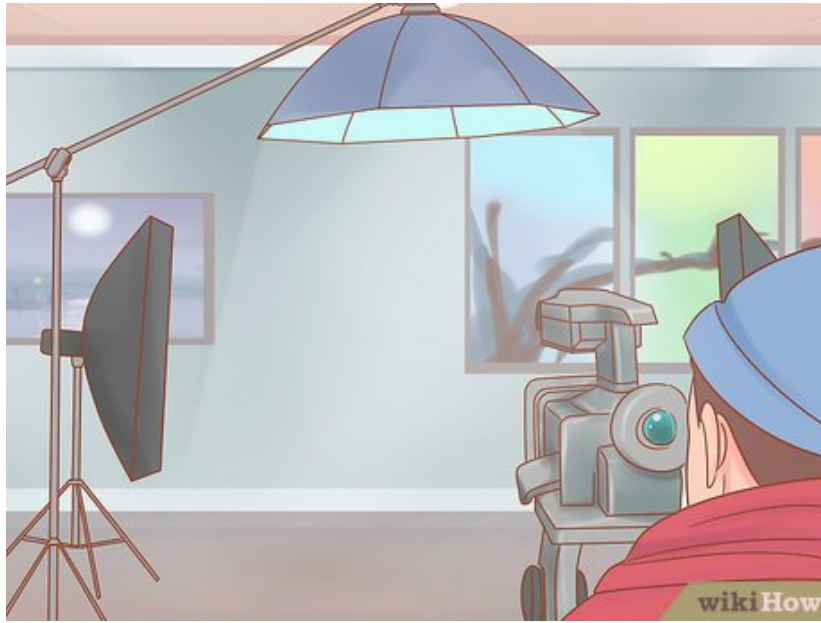
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Rehearse the shot. Before you start shooting the shot and while your tech team is setting up the equipment, run the actors through the shot and figure out what they're going to be doing in relation to the camera (where they'll be standing, what type of shots you'll be using, how they're going to say their lines).

1. Experiment with the viewfinder to test how the different shots are going to look. At this point you might want to change and redefine some of your scenes and shots to get the best possible scene.

4.



Set up the shot. For each shot you'll need to know the focal length, the camera placement, the actors' marks (where they need to stand, etc), which lenses to use and the movement of the camera. You'll set up the shot, using all these different considerations, with your cinematographer.

1. Now depending on the type of director you are and the type of cinematographer you have (maybe you're the one making the deciding on the shots) you'll need to give more or less direction. Discuss with them the lighting and the camerawork until the shot is ready to be taken.

5.



Film the shot. The filming doesn't take that long and it's usually a short scene that's being shot. You run through the scene, using the camera movement, and placement, etc. that you'd already covered with your cinematographer. When you call cut you're ready to move on to looking over the take to see how it went.

6.



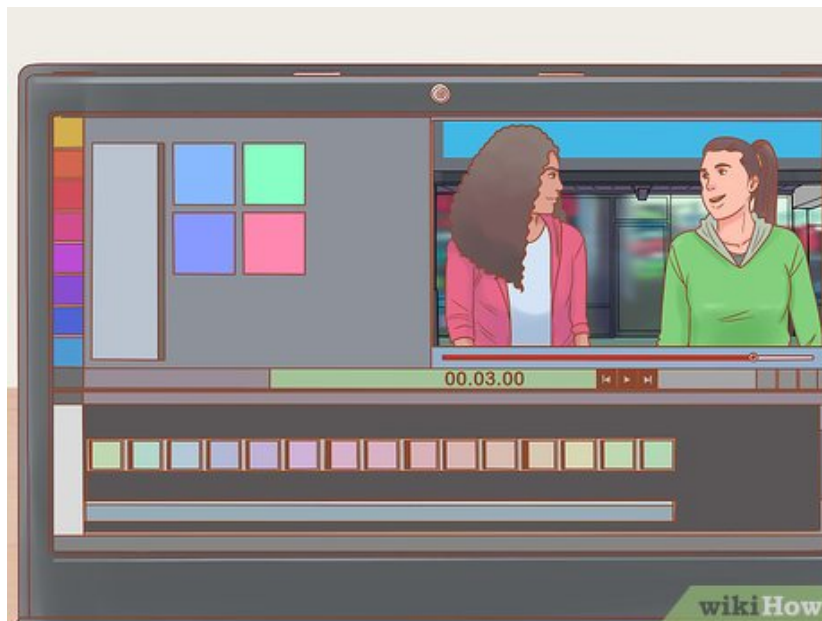
Review the take. Reviewing the take on the video monitor right away lets you consider how to make the scene better, how close the scene comes to your original idea. Then you'll repeat the scene until it holds up to your scrutiny.

1. This is very different from reviewing takes in the editing room later on. There you have the time, clarity, and perspective to see every single thing you could have done to make that scene better.

Part 4 of 4:

Finishing Up

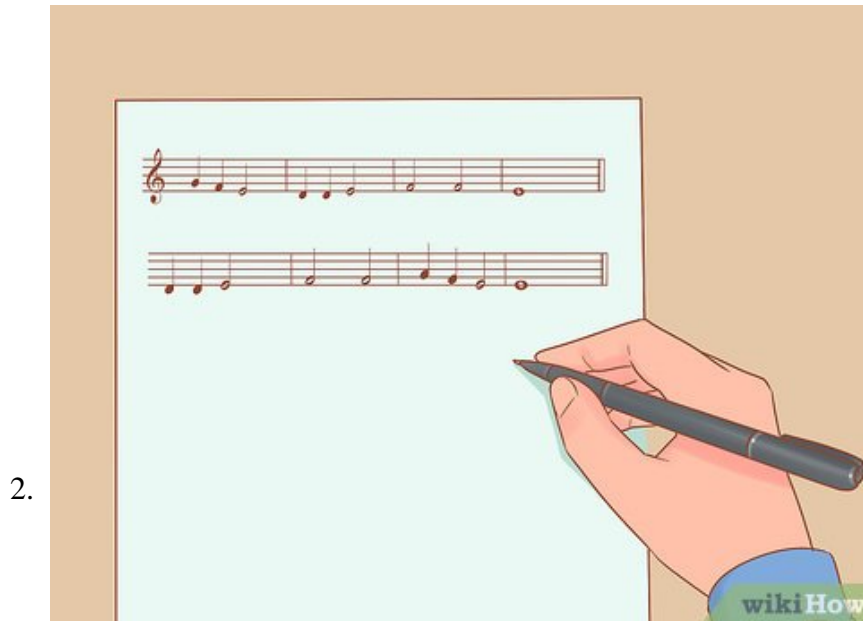
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Edit the film. What you're trying to do at this point is to put together the film edits in a way that is seamless, smooth, and coherent. As a general rule you want to cut on action, so that there isn't much of

non-action boring the audience. This means that you cut from one shot to another right as the action is performed (like John opening the door to the living room). You'll join the shots with the first part of John's motion in the wide shot and the second part in a tighter shot.

1. Cutting on cross-frame movement is typical a reveal shot. For example, medium shot on two men talking, one man moves and reveals close-up on villain's face.
2. Cut to an empty frame, where the subject comes in. For example, this is often used with someone stepping out of a car, where you only see the foot. The foot moves into the empty frame.
3. Remember, as you're cutting that it takes about 2 film frames (equaling about 1/12th of a second) for your audience's eyes to switch from one side of the screen to the other.



Do the music composition. For your soundtrack you will want to make sure that it works well with the film. There's nothing worse than a score that doesn't fit with the tone and the appearance of a movie. When you're discussing the music composition with your composer, talk about things like style of music, instrumentation, music speed, music cues, etc. A music composer needs to know your vision for the film to make an appropriate score.

1. Listen to the demo tracks that a composer gives you, so you can keep track of how it's coming on there end and where there need to be changes made.
2. Now, if you're doing the music yourself, you need to make sure that you're not stealing copyrighted music for your movie, because you can get into trouble for that. A lot of times you can find composers for cheap in your town or city. It's not going to be professional level (but then, your movie probably isn't either), but it can still make it sound good.
3. There is a difference between soundtrack and score. The soundtrack is previously recorded music that fits a scene or sequence through content, rhythm and mood. Score is music that specifically accompanies certain images or motifs in a film (like the "shark theme" in *Jaws*).

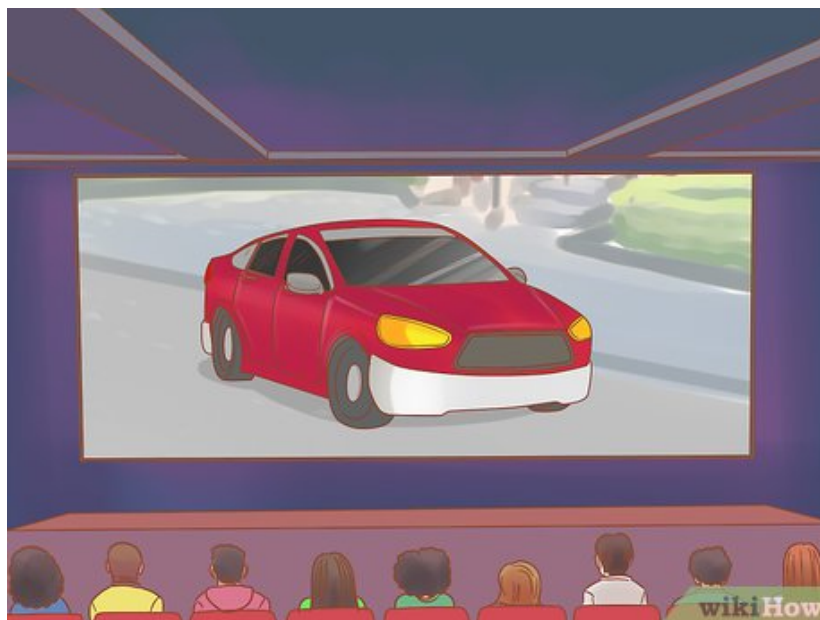
3.



Add the sound mixing. This means making sure that the soundtrack suits the finished and edited film. It also means going in and adding sounds that need to be added, or enhancing sounds already in place. You can edit out sounds that shouldn't be there (like a plane going overhead) or edit in sounds that should.^[4]

1. Diegetic sound means that a sound is made by something that the audience can see in the image or the shot. While this will usually be captured when you're doing filming, it is almost always enhanced later, as well as adding things like ambient sound (outdoors) and room tone (indoors) to cover up things like a plane going overhead, but to make the background noise not utter silence.
2. Non-diegetic sound means that a sound is coming from outside the image, as in a voice-over or the musical score.

4.



Show your completed film. Now that you've shot your film and edited it and added all the different sounds, you're ready to show it off. Sometimes this means gathering some friends and family and showing your hard work, but you can also usually find other avenues, especially if this is something that is

important to you.

1. A lot of cities and states have film festivals that you can enter. Depending on the quality of the film it might even win, but at least a wider audience than your family and friends will see it.
2. If you have a producer, this is usually something they'll have been working on and usually you won't have gotten the green light on your project if there weren't some sort of distribution scheduled after its completion.

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