

Chapter 1

So You Want to Be a Filmmaker

In This Chapter

- ▶ Recognizing how independent films differ from studio pictures
- ▶ Getting an overview of the filmmaking process

Film is a powerful medium. With the right script under your arm and a staff of eager team players, you're about to begin an exciting ride. The single most important thing that goes into making a successful filmmaker is the passion to tell a story. And the best way to tell your stories is with pictures. Filmmaking is visual storytelling in the form of shots that make up scenes and scenes that eventually make up a complete film.

You have the power to affect people's emotions, make them see things differently, help them discover new ideas, or just create an escape for them. In a darkened theater, you have an audience's undivided attention. They're yours — entertain them, move them, make them laugh, make them cry. You can't find a more powerful medium to express yourself.

As a filmmaker, you have to decide what you enjoy doing most. Do you like putting things together and making them happen? Then you'd probably make a great producer. Do you like things just a certain way, can you envision things as they should be, and do you love working with people? Then your calling may be directing. Or do you love telling stories, and are you always jotting down great ideas that come to you? If so, then writing screenplays may be for you. You can be referred to as a "triple-threat" in filmmaking if you write, produce, and direct. Having some understanding of what the other people on your crew do — like the cinematographer, the producer, the editor, the dolly grip, and the prop or wardrobe person — is important. Understanding what each person on your team does will improve your working relationship with them and, in the end, make a better film.

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Independents Day versus the Hollywood Way

An independent film is often a low-budget film (costing anywhere from \$5,000 to \$1 million) because the filmmaker has to raise money to make the film on his or her own and not be dependent on a studio for the financing. Many films circulating the film-festival circuit are independent films, produced independently of the studios. These films are little gems that didn't have a string of studio executives sending script notes to the filmmaker and ruining the film before anyone even set foot on the set. If a major film studio puts up the money for a film, the studio — not the filmmaker — ultimately ends up calling the shots.

You can find both advantages and disadvantages to making a studio picture or an independent film. On an independent production, your film ends up on the screen the way you envisioned it, but you don't have much of a budget. A studio picture has larger financial backing and can afford to pay the astronomical salaries that actors demand, as well as pay for seamless special effects and longer shooting schedules (the studio has more money to spend, allowing you to spend more days filming to get the best footage), but the film ends up the way the studio envisions it — and in the most commercial way. The studio looks at dollars first and creativity second. They look at the market statistically. What are the demographics for this type of film? Who's starring in it? Will it make a good profit? Many independent filmmakers discover that, although having and making money is nice, being independent allows them to tell a story in the most creative way.

However, an independent film doesn't always have to be a low-budget or no-budget film. George Lucas is the ultimate independent filmmaker. He's independent of the studios and makes his own decisions on his films without the politics or red tape of a studio looking over his shoulder. *Star Wars* may not seem like an independent film, but that's exactly what it is — even though you may have difficulty seeing yourself as one of Lucas's peers.

Developing Your Sense of Story

Without a great story, you can't possibly end up with a great film. Finding the right story makes all the difference, which means that choosing the right material is more important than anything else. Great film careers have been built on making the right decisions about a story more than having the right talent and skills.



Digital filmmaking: The future of making films

Today, you can shoot your film in several different formats. You can choose *analog* video or *digital* video or use a completely different format by shooting with a traditional film camera using super-8 or 16mm film, or the choice of studio productions, 35mm motion-picture film stock.

In this age of digital technology, almost anyone with a computer and video camera can make a film. You can purchase (for around \$3,500) or rent a 24-frame progressive digital camcorder (like the Panasonic AG-DVX-100 — see Chapter 10 for more on cameras) that emulates the look of motion picture film, without incurring the cost of expensive film stock and an expensive motion-picture camera.

If you can't afford one of these digital cameras, you can purchase computer software that takes a harsh video image shot with an inexpensive home camcorder and softens it to look more like it was shot with a motion-picture film camera. Many new computers come preloaded with free editing software. In Chapter 16, I give you tips on starting your very own digital-editing studio. You can also find out more information on the world of digital filmmaking in *Digital*

Video For Dummies by Martin Doucette (published by Wiley). You can uncover more camera information in Chapter 10.

High Definition (HD) TV is a new technology that takes the video image one step farther. The picture is much sharper, richer, and closer to what the human eye sees as opposed to what the video camera shows you. Watching HD video is like looking through a window — the picture seems to breathe. The new HD digital cinema cameras (the ones used by George Lucas) combine HD technology with the 24-frame progressive technology to emulate a unique film-like picture quality in an electronic environment, without the use of physical film. Unfortunately, HD digital is still expensive (much more costly than using a regular digital camcorder); the cameras are extremely expensive to purchase, and daily or weekly rental rates are usually beyond what the independent filmmaker can afford. HD also requires special monitors and viewing equipment that processes the high resolution in this new technology, making this medium too complicated and expensive to be part of the independent filmmaker's equipment.

So where do you find the good ideas to turn into films? An idea starts in your head like a tiny seed, and then it sprouts and begins to grow, eventually blossoming into an original screenplay. Don't have that tiny seed of an idea just yet? Turn to Chapter 3, where you develop strategies for finding ideas or taking a story or book and turning it into a screenplay. In that chapter, I show you how to *option* (have temporary ownership of) existing material, whether it's someone's personal story or a novel that's already been published.



You have a story in you. If something is a curiosity, is constantly on your mind, or is troubling you, write about it. See Chapter 3 for tips on turning your idea into a feature-length script (at least 90 pages). You'll find yourself answering many of your own questions — you may even solve your problem. Best of all, you could very well end up with a screenplay.

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Surfing sites for filmmakers

You can find a virtually unlimited number of Web sites dealing with filmmaking and independent films. Becoming a filmmaker includes plugging yourself into informative outlets that help you be more aware of the filmmaker's world. Here I list six sites that may be helpful to you as a low-budget filmmaker:

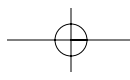
- ✔ **The Internet Movie Database** (www.imdb.com) is a valuable information source used by Hollywood executives. It lists the credits of film and TV professionals and anyone who has made any type of mark in the entertainment industry. It's helpful for doing research or a background check on an actor or filmmaker.
- ✔ **The Independent Feature Project** (www.ifp.org) is an effective way to get connected right away to the world of independent filmmaking.
- ✔ **In Hollywood** (www.inhollywood.com) is a research site updated weekly that offers current information on film projects.
- ✔ **The Association of Independent Video and Filmmakers** (www.aivf.org) is an organization that (as the name suggests) supports independent filmmakers. At the Web site, you can find subscription information to *The Independent* (a magazine geared toward the independent filmmaker), discounts on film-related books, festival updates, crew classified ads, and other membership perks.
- ✔ **IndieTalk** (www.indietalk.com) is a discussion forum for filmmakers. Here you can post and read messages about screenwriting, finding distribution, financing, and lots of other topics. It's a great site for communicating with other independent filmmakers.
- ✔ **Amazon.com** (www.amazon.com), an Internet store where you can purchase movies and books, has a plethora of information for the independent filmmaker, from films available for sale on VHS and DVD to cross-referencing actors, directors, producers, and all related movie memorabilia.

Financing Your Film: Where's the Money?

After you've turned your idea into a completed screenplay, you can't get it made (produced into a film) unless you have the financing. In Chapter 5, I give you some great tips on how to find investors and how to put together a *prospectus* to attract them to fund your film. You also find out about other money-saving ideas like bartering and product placement.



In Chapter 5, I even show you how to set up your own Web site to help raise awareness for your film, attract investors, and eventually serve as a promotional site for your completed film. Raising money isn't as difficult as it sounds if you have a great story and an organized business plan. You can find investors who are looking to put their money into a film for the excitement of being



involved with a film and/or the possibility of making a profit. Even friends and family are potential investors for your film — especially if your budget is in the low-numbers range.

On a Budget: Scheduling Your Shoot

Budgeting your film is a delicate process. Oftentimes, you budget your film first (this is usually the case with independent low-budget films) by breaking down elements into categories — such as crew, props, equipment, and so on — the total amount you have to spend. Your costs will be determined by how long you'll need to shoot your film (scheduling will determine how many shoot days you'll have), because the length of your shoot will tell you how long you need to have people on salary, how long you'll need to rent equipment and locations, and so on.

When you know you can only afford to pay salaries for a three-week shoot, you then have to schedule your film so that it can be shot in three weeks. You schedule your film's shoot by breaking down the script into separate elements (see Chapter 4) and deciding how many scenes and shots you can shoot each day, so that everything is completed in the three weeks you have to work with. An independent filmmaker doesn't usually have the luxury of scheduling the film first (breaking it down into how many days it will take to shoot) and then seeing how much it will cost. You also should have a budget and even a possible schedule as ammunition to show a potential investor.

Planning Your Shoot, Shooting Your Plan

Planning your film includes envisioning your shots through storyboarding, by sketching out rough diagrams of what your shots and angles will look like (see Chapter 9). You can storyboard your films even if you don't consider yourself an artist. Draw stick characters or use storyboard software, like Storyboard Quick or the 3-D Storyboard Lite, which gives you a cast of characters along with a library of props and locations.



You also need to plan where you'll shoot your film. You research where you're going to film much like planning a trip — then make all the appropriate arrangements like figuring out how you're going to get there and the type of accommodations if it's out of town. Regardless of where you're shooting, you'll need to sign an agreement with the location owner to make sure you have it reserved for your shoot dates. Also, you'll have to choose whether to film at a real location, on a sound stage, or in a virtual location that you conjure up inside your computer.

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Film feeling

Audiences experience distinct psychological effects when looking at film or video. Film tends to have a nostalgic feeling, like you're watching something that has already happened. Video elicits the feeling that it's happening right now — unfolding before your eyes, like the news.

Many people love old movies, not just because of the great storytelling, but because of the sentimental feeling they get, especially with old

black-and-white films or even the color films of the 1960s. Steven Spielberg made *Schindler's List* in black and white to help convey both the film as a past event and the dreariness of the war. The medium on which you set your story — whether it be actual film celluloid on which the images are developed, videotape, or digital with a film-style look — has a specific feel and effect on your audience.

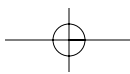
Hiring Your Cast and Crewing Up

Your film crew becomes your extended family (although maybe a dysfunctional one). You spend many days and nights together — through good and bad times — so hiring people who are passionate about your project and willing to put their all into it is important. You may have to defer salary to your crew if you're working on a tight budget. (Find out how to do that and more in Chapter 7.)

Acting is not as difficult as you may think. People are born natural actors and play many parts on the stage of life. Everyone is constantly in front of an audience — or performing monologues when alone. In Chapter 8, I lead you step by step through the process of finding a great cast to bring your screenplay to life. I also fill you in on acting secrets so that you can direct your actors and get the best performances.

Filming in the Right Direction

Making a film requires special equipment, like *cranes* (tall apparatuses on which you place the camera for high shots), *dollies* (which are like giant skateboards that you put the camera on for movement), camera systems, and so on. Without the proper lighting, you'll leave your actors in the dark — literally. Lighting can set a mood and enhance the entire look of your film.



In addition to seeing your actors, you need to be able to hear them as well. This is where the art of sound comes in. Microphones need to be placed close enough to the actor to get a good sound recording, but not too close as to have the microphone creep into the shot. The skill of recording great sound comes from the production sound mixer.

If you're taking on the task of directing, you'll become a figurehead to your actors and crew. You'll need to know how to give your actors direction and what it takes to bring the best performance out of them.

In terms of telling your story visually, you'll need to understand a little about the camera. Much like driving a car, you don't need to understand how it works, but you need to know how to drive it (your cinematographer should be the expert with the camera and its internal operations). The camera is a magical box that will capture images so that you can effectively and visually tell your story to the world.

Seeing the light

The eye of the camera needs adequate light to "see" a proper image — whether it be appropriate exposure for a film camera, or enough light to get a proper light reading for a video camera. Chapter 11 gives you the lowdown on lighting. Lighting can be very powerful and can affect the mood and tone of every scene in your film. A great cinematographer combined with an efficient gaffer (see Chapter 7) will ensure that your film has a great look.

Being heard and scene

Production sound is extremely important because your actors must be heard correctly. Your sound mixer, who's in charge of primarily recording your actors' dialogue on set, needs to know the right microphones and sound-mixing equipment to use, as you see in Chapter 12.

Actors taking your direction

The director's job is to help the actors create believable performances in front of the camera that lure the audience into your story and make them care about your characters. Directing also involves guiding your actors to move effectively within the confines of the camera frame. Chapter 13 guides you in the right direction with some great secrets on how to warm up your actors and prepare them to give their best on the set.

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Threatening film

Chris Gore runs an e-mail newsletter called *Film Threat Magazine*. If you're a filmmaker or want to be a filmmaker, you need to be on this mailing list. You'll find interesting reading including

information on film festivals, box office updates, and brutally honest movie reviews, along with actor and filmmaker interviews. Get more information at www.filmthreat.com.

Shooting through the camera

Directing the camera requires some technical knowledge of how the camera works and what each lens and filter does, which I explain in Chapter 10. Chapter 14 addresses how to frame your shots and when to move the camera. In that chapter, you also discover the skills that make up a successful director and how to run a smooth, organized set.

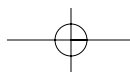
Cut It Out!: Editing Your Film

Editing your film gives you a chance to step back and look at the sequence of events and all the available shot angles in order to shape and mold them into the most effective production. You can even repair a bad film (or at least make it better) during the editing process. Editing is the time when you'll really see your film coming together. It's a fascinating phase of filmmaking and can be very rewarding as you watch your baby come together piece by piece.

Nonlinear editing software is now available for virtually any computer (starting at \$50), and it allows you to edit anything from a home movie to a professional theatrical-length piece (90 to 120 minutes). The technology of nonlinear editing allows you to cut your shots together in virtually any order. You can easily see different variations of cutting different shots together, rearrange them, and move or delete in between scenes in a concise and easy-to-understand manner. Chapter 15 tells you what the new digital technology makes available to you for editing your film on your desktop.

Listening to your film

At the editing stage, you add and create the audio, dialogue, sound effects, and music as you see and "hear" in Chapter 16. Titles and credits are important, too, and I discuss them in Chapter 18.



Simulating film with software

If you can't afford to shoot your movie on film, you can use a technology by FilmLook (www.filmlook.com). FilmLook runs your video footage through special processors, electronic settings, and so on, and creates the effect that your image was shot on film.

Software programs can also make your video footage look more like film. These programs emulate grain, softness, subtle flutter, and so on. Bullet software available at www.redgiantsoftware.com can convert your harsh video footage to look like it was shot on film. The video-to-film process converts 30-frame video to a 24-frame pulldown, adding elements to create the illusion that your images were photographed on film as opposed to shot on video.



Using software that makes your video footage look like film takes time for the computer to process. Depending on what software you use, the processing time could take hours or days just to turn video footage into something that looks more like film. With a 24-frame progressive video camera, you get the film image immediately as you shoot. (See Chapter 10 for more information on 24-frame progressive video.)

Distributing Your Film and Finding an Audience

The final, and probably most important, stage of making a film is distribution. Without the proper distribution, your film may sit on a shelf and never be experienced by an audience. Successful distribution can make the difference between your film making \$10 (the ticket your mother buys) or \$100 million at the box office. *The Blair Witch Project* may never have generated a dime if it hadn't been discovered at the Sundance Film Festival by Artisan Entertainment.

There's no business like ShowBiz Expo

ShowBiz Expo is one of my favorite conventions. Four times a year, Mind Ventures offers regional conventions in Miami, Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York. Thousands of people flock to the expo to schmooze with fellow filmmakers, network, and see the latest developments in equipment

technology (and in some cases, even experiment with the technology, hands-on). It's like a giant toy store for filmmakers. The convention runs for three days, and you can get a free pass (worth \$50) by pre-registering at the expo Web site (www.showbizexpo.com).

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Even mediocre films have done well commercially because of successful distribution tactics. And great films have flopped at the box office because the distributor didn't carry out a successful distribution plan.



Here are several suggestions on how to find a distributor for your film:

- ✓ Send out your screenplay before shooting your film and see if you can get distribution interest based on the script.
- ✓ Send out screening cassettes of your completed film to distributors with the potential that one will acquire your film and distribute it.
- ✓ Enter your finished film in film festivals like the Sundance Film Festival (see Chapter 20) and let a distributor discover *you*.
- ✓ Have a premiere screening for your film and invite distributors and industry people to the big event.
- ✓ Set up a publicity stunt (see Chapter 22) to attract the attention of a distributor.

Check out Chapter 19 for more tips and secrets to finding a distributor.