

DIRECTING A SHORT FILM

Michael Hines

To be able to direct your short film easily, effectively and creatively, here are some steps you should try and follow so that you can realise your vision and produce the best film you can. You may not have access to all the crew or resources mentioned below, you may be shooting entirely on your own, but these notes will help you to identify the different elements you should be considering as a director.

Introduction:

The director on a short film is responsible for deciding on everything we see on screen – the locations and how they look, who the actors are, how they say their lines and where they stand while saying them, which shots to shoot and where to shoot them from... the list is almost endless!

It is the director's job to tell the story and the ONLY way you can do that is to make sure that everyone else involved with your shoot understands what you want. Communication is the key to that. You have to tell your cast and crew what you want and why, but remember, you are a director NOT a dictator!

Directing can be split into three main areas, and we will examine each of these areas in detail, using the scene below as an example. If you can apply this template for this scene to all of your scenes, then you should be able to successfully direct your cast and your crew to get all the shots you want for your film.

Pre Production:

Planning your film. This is the time when you plan and organise everything you're going to need for your shoot. Now your script is ready you'll need to decide where and when you're going to shoot, who your actors will be (auditioning them if needs be), you'll need to arrange your crew and give them all the information that they need to know. You also need to plan how you are going to shoot the script.

Example scene:

SCENE. 1

EXT. DAY. 15:30pm.

WE SEE A DOG AT THE SIDE OF THE ROAD. KERRY, AN 8YR OLD GIRL LOOKS OUT OF HER WINDOW AT HOME. SHE SEES THE DOG AND RUNS DOWNSTAIRS, OPENS THE DOOR AND SHOUTS:

KERRY:

Bouncer! You're back! Come here boy, come on!

THE DOG RUNS ACROSS THE ROAD, JUMPS THE FENCE, RUNS UP TO THE HOUSE AND THROUGH THE FRONT DOOR.

KERRY:

Where have you been? I'm so glad to have you home! You naughty dog!

This is a very simple scene. You will probably have written your own script, but you need to remember that this will be the first time that your cast & crew will have seen it. You will no doubt have already seen everything in your mind, but your crew and cast are not mind readers and need guiding through your vision. Each of your different departments will have lots of questions, but you can also ask their opinion.

- The camera department will want to know what kind of shots you want to shoot, if you are filming Kerry from inside or from outside the house, whether Kerry says the last line while inside the house or while still at the front door...
- Sound will want to know if it is a busy road, if Kerry's line at the door to be filmed from the gate at the house, ie where the dog's coming from, or from closer. Does she shout the line to Bouncer?
- Location will want to know what kind of house Kerry lives in, what the fence looks like, whether Kerry is watching out of a downstairs window or an upstairs window and whether the dog will run into the house or not.
- Costume and Make Up will want to know what Kerry looks like & what she is wearing. As the time is 15:30, is it a school day or is it the weekend / holidays?
- Design will want to know what type of dog Bouncer is, what room Kerry is in and if we can see into it, if we can see into the hall and if so, what it looks like.

Already you can see the many types of questions you will get or need to think about. You need to know the answers so you can tell them. Of course you should always ask advice too. Maybe you

haven't thought about the sun shining in through the windows at that time of day or maybe you wanted a really busy road but hadn't considered how dangerous it might be. Maybe your location person has found the perfect house but there's no gate... can design build you one?

If you're not sure about the camera angles and how to shoot it, you can get advice from your camera person, but you should have some idea of how you would like your scene to look.

How to plan your shot list:

The director chooses a shot that is appropriate to the emotion played. Read the script and imagine in your mind how it will look.

- Bouncer is running towards a house. We will want to see a shot of the house that Bouncer is running towards, so that would be W-S (Wide Shot) of the house. Write that on your scene and on your shot list for scene 1.
- Kerry is so happy to see the dog, it might be nice to do a medium close up on her face so that her words and smiles and gestures are big in frame. Or, you might want to stay wide and shoot from a low angle as if she's talking to the dog. Are we seeing this from across the road, or is she in close up? Maybe you would like to do both. If so, write down a) L-S Kerry from across the road and b) MCU (Mid Close Up) Kerry.

You should do this until you have covered all the elements in each scene that you want to see. This will be your shot list. You should then draw a small plan, looking from the top down, of where people are standing, and put on this where you want your camera to be for each shot. Your camera operator can also help you with the placing of the cameras. See below for an example of the scene above.

You will also need to consider your cast, and at the very least you should have a read through of the lines with them, but preferably a rehearsal if you have the time available. Here are some tips for working with actors, again using the previous scene as an example.

- Is Kerry happy to have Bouncer back? Yes, of course. But look at the line, "You naughty dog!". The actress might ask if she should be really angry here or if she is joking but smiley. Only you can answer that. You need to decide how the character is feeling at this point. Actors will have their own opinions too, and often they will instinctively know the right emotion to give you. But they might be too smiley, so you need to ask them nicely to do it again, just less smiley.

Be clear with the actors about the intention of the characters, BUT DON'T ACT IT OUT FOR THEM - it's their job to act and yours to direct.

All these elements should be decided in pre production, so that on the day of filming you can concentrate on directing the action.

Pre-Production Checklist :

- You should be able to answer any question from any department about the scene
- You should be able to tell the actors how to say their lines, and why their characters are feeling those emotions
- You should have a shot-list that covers the scene, giving you options in the edit, but without over shooting
- You should have a plan of the scene so that you know where the cameras and actors will be on the day

Production:

Shooting your film. This is when you get to make it all happen! Out on location, you will be making all the decisions, such as where the camera will be and what shots you want, where the actors will stand and how they will say their lines, whether or not you are happy with what is recorded, and so on... You will also need to make sure you have enough time & daylight to ensure that you get everything you need.

When it comes to the shoot day, you should follow this guideline for each shot:

1. Discuss with your camera operator and actor as to how you think the shot should look. (See the camera notes for different shot sizes). Remember the camera operator knows about the sizes of shots, but not WHY you've chosen certain shot sizes.
2. Once you've done that, let the crew set up the shot whilst you talk elsewhere to the cast and let them read the lines and listen. Does it sound how you imagined it to? Are they playing the right emotions?
3. Once you're happy with the rehearsal and everyone's agreed with the emotion of the lines and the crew are ready to shoot, guide the cast through their 'blocking' ie. where they will stand / sit or move to. You should then rehearse the shot with the camera and sound.
4. If there are problems with the crew, ask why. What can be done to help? Perhaps it's too noisy as you're filming too close to the road... can you move? Are shadows / sunlight causing a problem as you're filming into the sun... can you move the shot round a little?

5. Rehearse the whole scene on camera as if for real. You should ALWAYS watch the camera rehearsal through a tv monitor. That's the shot, nothing else. Don't watch the action in front of your eyes - you are only interested in what you can see on the monitor.
6. If happy, ask to record it. You should ask if costume and make up want to do a quick check of the actors before you start, then as the crew to "go for a take please"! Camera & sound will then 'run up' or 'turnover' which means getting the camera to the right speed (from the old film days). You should then make sure that everyone is set before you call "Action". Remember – you are only interested in what you see in the monitor!
7. If you're happy with how it went, then you should say "CUT!" when you want to stop filming, and tell people you're happy with it or if you would like to go again. Sometimes the camera or sound might ask to have another go, and you should allow them if there's time, but if you're happy then its time to move on to the next shot. If you're not happy then it's very important to communicate the reason. You should be careful not to ask people to shoot something again without giving them a reason. Be polite but clear about what wasn't right about it.
8. Each scene needs to be covered in as many shots as you want it to be covered in, BUT there's no point shooting it in 20 different ways. Doing this wastes time on the shoot day and in the edit. Plan to shoot a scene so that you have every line covered and with perhaps more than one size of shot. That way you can create a rise in tension, or emotion through editing.
9. Finally make sure your sound person picks up wild-tracks of the surrounding ambience so you have it for the edit. (See the sound section for more details.)

Post Production:

Editing your film. This is when you edit all your shots together, adding music and sound effects to your film.

This is where you piece all your shots together; using your shot-list & any notes you may have from the shoot as a guide. If you are lucky enough have someone editing it for you, let them put it together first, then you can watch it through as a whole film. If there are part you feel don't work then be clear as to what you would like instead, and why. You should also look to add music and sound-effects to the finished edit to add to the atmosphere and emotion.

Good luck!