10 Ways To Instantly Improve Your Film For Free (Or Cheap)

What filmmaker doesn't want to have a better looking film?

Sure, filmmaking is about telling a story, and the story is the absolute most important part of any film, but great visuals can go a long way to help tell that story.

Directors like Stanley Kubrik, Christopher Nolan, Alfonso Cuarón, Guillermo del Toro, they all use stunning cinematography and camera work to help tell their story on film.

Now you may think that getting the kind of amazing images that these guys get in their films is something you need a huge Hollywood budget to do, but I'm here to tell you, that's not true.

The truth is, many of the techniques that these and other directors use in their films are very basic. In fact, many of them are so simple that you can learn them right now, start using them TOMORROW, and instantly see better results in the look of your own films.

And the best part is, these are all techniques that you can learn without having to buy a lot of expensive gear or software. You can get started using these right now, for very little, or even NO money at all.

It is entirely possible to make an indie film that looks like it came straight out of Hollywood, just by mastering these very simple techniques.

I want you to take a minute to just imagine something with me.

Imagine the very first film you made. Even if you haven't made a film yet, you probably have a film that you WANT to make, or that you've THOUGHT about making, so take a minute to imagine that.

So think about that film.

Now think about this--if someone handed you a camera, would you be able to make that film the way you're imagining it in your head right now?

Probably not. Or it would probably take you a lot of time trying to figure things out on set, probably reshooting a bunch of scenes, probably doing a lot of heavy editing in postproduction.

Hell, someone could hand you the best camera in the world and give you an unlimited budget for all the gear and special effects that you can imagine. But the truth is--if you haven't mastered the basic techniques on how to make a film with that cinematic look, it's never going to look as good as you imagined it.

Kubrick, Nolan, and all those directors I mentioned before?

They've mastered these. That's the real reason why their films look so good.

It's not about the gear they have, it's about the techniques behind how they use it.

I could go out and buy the exact same shoes that LeBron James wears, get all the same kind of shorts and jerseys that he practices in.

I could get all the exact same gear that LeBron James uses but that's not going to make me a better basketball player.

And if you ever saw me play basketball, you'd understand just how true this is.

But the same thing goes for filmmaking. Great gear makes a great filmmaker even better, but it's not going to help you if you haven't learned the techniques to make a great looking film.

The good news is, it's actually not that hard.

There are hundreds of things that go into making a film that looks and sounds good, but the good thing is, you don't have to know them all.

Just master these 10 things and you'll be well on your way.

Really learn just these few simple techniques, and you will instantly get better looking and sounding films.

And best best part? You won't have to invest thousands (or even hundreds) of dollars to do it.

Who am I?

Hi, I'm Brian Bowers. I'm a producer and the Assistant Director of Operations for the 48 Hour Film Project (http://48hourfilm.com), the world's largest timed film competition. In the over 10 years I've been with the 48HFP, I've worked with hundreds of filmmakers and producers all around the world.

My experiences come with watching literally thousands of short films over the years, and seeing exactly what filmmakers are doing or not doing, and how that translates into them making better films.

In the early days of filmmaking, it used to take a lot of time and money to get a film made. You pretty much HAD to have the backing of a major studio in order to get it done. Since then, the technology has changed to make it affordable for anyone to get the basic filmmaking equipment. And the 48 Hour Film Project has proven that literally ANYONE can make a film, even with no budget and in just a weekend.

But when you try to find good information to help you learn filmmaking, you'll find that a lot of it is extremely technical, or based heavily in theory. Why is this? I think a lot of the "old guard" in the filmmaking world don't want to give up control of their "wealth" of knowledge...they don't like the fact that filmmaking has become so accessible to anyone to get into.

They don't feel "special" if everyone around them can make films.

So these filmmakers spout off obscure technical details and film theory jargon, pretending that those are the things that make a good film.

But the fact is, the most important thing you need to make a good film is the ability to tell a story--that, and a few basic concepts that are easy to master and apply to turn your story into an engaging, cinematic film.

So this guide covers a handful of those basic concepts. There are many pieces and parts to filmmaking, so these certainly don't cover EVERYTHING that goes into making a film. But these are all simple ideas that you can start mastering today, without a lot of money, technical expertise, or prior filmmaking experience.

I look forward to seeing you apply these concepts and turn your filmmaking dreams into reality!

-Brian

1. Use a tripod

Let's face it, nobody likes to watch shaky-cam footage. Even the steadiest of hands won't keep your camera from picking up all of those tiny vibrations. And those vibrations and shakes look 100 times worse when your video image is blown up.

Using a tripod, gimbal, or some sort of camera stabilizer is the easiest way to fix that. Below are some suggestions at a few different price points. Can't afford an actual tripod? Check out the GorillaPod--at just $50, it's one of the most affordable options out there.

Can't afford that? Stabilize yourself and the camera using a simple stepladder, on the rung closest to the appropriate height for your shot.

GorillaPod for DSLR https://joby.com/gorillapod-slr-zoom

Cowboy Studio convertible tripod/monopod https://buff.ly/2Ch9fEK

2. Stop zooming

If you just started working with a DSLR for filmmaking, your first instinct is probably to use that kit zoom lens that came with your camera to start zooming in and out of shots as you're filming.

STOP. THIS. NOW.

Zoom shots aren't natural. They look very artificial, and usually end up looking like a bad home movie from the early 80's.

Zoom shots don't look right because that's not how the human eye works. When you want to see something far away, you don't magically zoom your eyeballs out to see it--you move your body so you can get closer.

What you're actually doing when you zoom in or out of a shot is changing the focal length of the camera lens. We won't get into the mechanics of focal length here, but understand that the focal length of a lens has a lot of do with the "feel" of a shot in relation to the background.

A short focal length will give you a widescreen shot that will flatten out your image and make your subject and background appear very close together.

A longer focal length will give you a shot that's much tighter on your subject, cropping out more of the background and also making it appear further away from the subject.

So when you zoom, you're distorting the image so it changes the relationship of the subject to the background within the shot as it zooms in. This is what gives zoom shots that very fake, unnatural look.

To get a really nice cinematic shot, you want to stay at one lens focal length and actually move the camera in and out to get a closer shot, just like you would move your body closer to something if you needed to get a better look in real life.

Professional cinematographers would typically shoot with a prime lens (one that has a fixed focal length and cannot zoom in or out at all) and then use a dolly to move the camera towards or away from the shot. A dolly is a track or wheeled device that the camera is mounted on to keep it stabilized as it moves in or out. This keeps the shot very smooth and natural looking as it brings you closer or further away from the subject.

Pretty much the only time to use an actual zoom shot is when you want to intentionally distort the image. The most common example of this is called the dolly zoom, or "*Vertigo*" shot. This is a very disorienting effect that Alfred Hitchcock famously invented for his film *Vertigo*.

The pull off a dolly zoom, you would actually zoom in on the subject while at the same time you dolly out to physically move the camera backwards (or zoom out and dolly in for the opposite effect). The resulting shot keeps the subject the same size in the camera lens, but distorts the background around it. It's a very dizzying effect that can be very cool if you use it for the right reasons.

Outside of that special trick shot, keep your hands off the zoom!

Check out the videos below for examples of zoom shots versus moving or dollying the camera, and for some samples of the "*Vertigo*" effect used in films.

Using zoom vs. moving the camera: https://vimeo.com/blog/post/zoom-vs-moving-camera-whats-the-difference

Good explanation of the dolly zoom, or "*Vertigo*" effect: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u5JBlwlnJX0

3. Shoot 24fps

If you want your films to have that "cinematic" look that everyone knows and loves, then you'll want to shoot at 24fps. FPS is short for "frames per second."

Remember that a movie is simply a bunch of still images played very quickly to produce motion. FPS is used to measure the actual number of images shown in each second of video footage. So 24fps means that 24 still images are shown in one second, 60fps means that 60 images are shown in one second, and so on.

There were some practical reasons that 24fps became the standard for the cinema. These date back to the earliest film projectors, limitations of budgets for film stock, and a bunch of other variables.

The most important thing for you to know is that 24fps "feels" the most natural when watching it. It produces just the right amount of motion blur that we're used to, and makes viewers internally very comfortable watching it.

There are other instances of other frame rates used for other effects. 30fps has historically been the standard for television, and produces a slightly smoother look. 60fps is actually closer to what the human eye actually per-

ceives, but it produces a hyper-realistic look that can make many viewers feel uncomfortable (Peter Jackson's *The Hobbit* films were shot in this higher frame rate). And 300fps is the standard for sports cinematography in order to be able to replay things in slow motion later on.

And while each of these different frame rates have their place, 24fps is still the gold standard for movies--it's what people are used to, and it will give your film that "cinematic" look that most filmmakers are after.

Changing your frame rate is usually a simple matter of going into the settings of your camera--check out the manual for your particular camera to find out how to do this.

Here's a video with a good explanation of frame rate and the history behind it: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8c8DrVvELe4

And if you'd like to see the hyper-realistic look of 60fps in action, check out the trailer for *The Hobbit: The Battle of the Five Armies*: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J2zItoDHK5M

4. Use a shallow depth of field

One of the most common characteristics of the cinematic effect that many filmmakers strive for is a very sharp, focused subject, and a blurry background. This is achieved by using a shallow "depth of field."

Depth of field (DOF) is a setting on your lens that lets you choose how much of the image you want in focus. A

larger DOF setting (also called an f-stop, which is how DOF is measured) will keep more of the image in focus, and a smaller DOF will keep less of the image in focus. For example, at f9 most of the image and background will be in focus, but at f1.8 your subject would be in focus and the background blurred out.

There are many dramatic reasons you use a different DOF for different shots. For example, you may want the viewer to see the details of a background establishing shot, so you would use a deeper DOF (larger f-stop) to keep more of the image in focus so those details pop out.

But for another scene, you may want a very tight shot that focuses on just the reaction of one actor. In this instance, you might use a shallow DOF to keep the actor's face in focus and blur the background, so your viewer's eye naturally goes exactly where you want it to.

Changing the DOF is a very common, easy way to draw focus in a film, and the beautiful blurred background from a shallow DOF (called bokeh) can elevate your film to give it a more cinematic feel.

5. Change the aspect ratio

Another easy and free way to change the "feel" of a film is to change its aspect ratio. And depending on what sort of camera you're shooting on, you may HAVE to change the aspect ratio to keep things in line with your audience's expectations.

The aspect ratio is the proportion of the width to the height of your image. Most contemporary TV watchers will instantly recognize the shape of the 16:9 aspect ratio that is most common with widescreen TVs.

However, just 10 years ago the more common aspect ratio was 4:3. This gives the image more of a squarish, boxy feel. The wider 16:9 image now gives the viewer a wider view of the horizon and includes more of the background in the image, making it more in line with the way the human eye naturally sees things.

The ratio can go even wider to capture even more of the image. Another common format is the 21:9 aspect ratio. This makes the image even wider and more cinematic, but adds the black bars to the top and bottom of the image (called "letterboxing").

You can often change the aspect ratio in the shooting settings of your camera. If not, you can do this in editing, though you run the risk of cropping some of your original image if you're showing it in a different aspect ratio than it was shot. There are plenty of free letterbox templates to convert your film into various aspect ratios, including the plethora found for free here: https://www.premiumbeat.com/blog/free-letterbox-templates-for-video-editing/

6. Remove the contrast--then add it back in

Lighting can dramatically affect the mood of your film. It can also influence the look, feel, and shape of your image.

An easy way to ruin that mood is to have a poorly exposed image. If there's not enough light the scene is underexposed, and looks muddy and grainy. If there's too much light the scene is overexposed, and looks washed out, or worse--completely blown out to the point that your camera's sensor ONLY registers the overexposed areas as white (with no image at all in those sections). In most cameras, there's no way to recover images that are blown out to that proportion.

And the worst thing you can do to your scene is to have the dreaded combination of being over and underexposed--parts of the image didn't get enough light,and parts of the image got way too much. There's no easy fix for this in post-production--if you raise the lighting levels to bring up the parts that are too dark, then the over-

exposed sections become ever brighter. And if you lower the levels to fix for the overexposed sections, then the underexposed parts become even harder to see.

This is truly a case of something you don't want to "fix in post." The best way to fix this is prevent it from happening to begin with.

To prevent these lighting peaks and dips, you want to remove much of the contrast, both in the lighting and the image. You can then add the contrast back in during post-production. This way you know that you're starting with a properly exposed image, but you have the control to digitally enhance it in post-production to make it more dramatic or cinematic.

In the lighting, you want to make sure that your entire image is more evenly lit. The lighting doesn't need to be flat--it's OK to have a 3-dimensional, sculpted look to your lighting. In fact, that's a good thing! But you want to make sure that the majority of your image is properly exposed, with just enough contrast in the brighter and darker sections to give it some shape, like little accents. Make sure you check your lighting through the camera's monitor so you can see exactly what the final image will look like. Don't rely on your own eyes, as the camera's sensor will interpret light differently than the human eye will. Make sure the lighting will be a good overall level in the final image, with no hot spots or dark spots.

You can help cut down on some of the contrast by adjusting your camera settings to shoot in Log (if your camera allows it). I won't get into the specific technical details, but essentially Log is a setting designed to enhance the tonal range of your camera's sensor. When you shoot in Log, it produces a very flat image that better capture the details in the shadows and light sections that most standard shooting modes allow. This then allows you to better control the contrast in post-production, either by manually grading the light levels, or by applying a Look Up Table (or LUT)--sort of like an Instagram filter that gives your image a particular "look."

7. Color grade

Color plays an important part in the subtle, psychological aspects of filmmaking. Filmmakers use color all the time to help convey a particular mood--they can tweak the color to create a warmer, more friendly feel for scenes where they need it, or create a more desaturated look for a cold, sterile feel.

At the very least, you typically want to color grade your films so they have a consistent look and feel throughout. Often your camera's sensors will naturally make subtle changes to the colors when you shoot in different scenes, or have different lighting. You can use color grading to keep the look consistent from shot to shot in your final footage.

The best part is that color grading can be done using free software, so it doesn't need to cost you anything but your time. Many editing systems have some form of color grading built into them, or you can download the Da-Vinci Resolve editing suite for free at https://www.blackmagicdesign.com/products/davinciresolve/. This is not only a free video editing software, but it also comes with a top of the line color grading software that is easy to use and can give you some excellent results.

8. Control your audio

Paul Sloop, Short Film Programmer for the Cleveland International Film Festival, once told me that the one surefire way to ruin a film is to have bad audio. Viewers can forgive a good film that doesn't have the best visuals, but a film with bad audio can make it almost impossible to watch.

There's no substitute for great sound equipment and a seasoned sound tech running your audio. But a filmmaker just starting out may not have access to either of those things. That doesn't mean that your film has to suffer with bad audio, though.

The best thing you can do regardless of your sound budget is to find ways to control your audio. This sounds obvious, but I've seen countless films ruined because the filmmaker shot scenes in a windy outdoor location, or near a busy, loud intersection, and the background noise drowned out the dialogue of the film.

If you don't have the budget for top of the line sound equipment, then you need to budget time to think through

ways to control this ambient noise. Does that scene need to be shot in the giant warehouse room that sounds like an echo chamber? If it doesn't, move to a different location that has better audio, or bring blankets and sheets to help deaden some of the sound. Do you need to shoot right near the street where cars are whizzing by in the background every few seconds, or could you move to a quieter street with less traffic? These are all things to consider when it comes to controlling the audio.

9. Find great music

Music is another component of films that can be used to subtly help tell the story. It can help set the mood, accent what is happening visually, or even help to set your story in a specific time or place.

The best (and most fun) way is to have original music created for your film. Not only will it be original, you can work with a composer to create music even more specific to the feel of your film and the story you're trying to tell.

But you may not know anyone that writes music, and that's OK. There's plenty of exisitng music out there that you can use for you film.

What you don't want to do is to just use any music without getting permission. It's a violation of copyright laws, and you could end up paying some fines or getting into big trouble. If there's a specific song or artist that you want to use for your film, you'll need to properly license the music. Depending on the particular song or artist,

though, that can be pretty pricey.

The good news is that there's tons of music that you can use in your films for free or for very cheap. One option is to use what's called "royalty-free" music. This is music that you can use for free or by paying a small flat fee, instead of getting a traditional (often more expensive) royalty license. Sites like http://pond5.com or http://premiumbeat.com offer a wide selection of music that you can use for a small fee. Once you pay the fee, you can instantly download the track along with the license giving you permission to use it in your film. Another popular site for filmmakers is https://incompetech.com. Composer Kevin MacLeod has created tons of royalty free music tracks that are available for free download, provided you include the song and website information in your film's credits.

Another option for music is to use "Creative Commons" music. This is all music that composers have released into the world for people to use for free, under certain conditions. There are many songs that can be used just by including the composer and song in your film credits (called an "Attribution Only" license), while there are others that may require you to get permission or pay a fee if you use the song for any commercial purposes (for example, if you wanted to use the song in a movie that you were going to sell to a distributor). There are a variety of licenses with different requirements. You can learn more about Creative Commons music and get a list of websites that distribute it by checking out https://creativecommons.org/about/program-areas/arts-culture/arts-culture-resources/legalmusicforvideos/.

10. Make some awesome titles

Star Wars.

Vertigo.

Stranger Things.

These films and TV shows capture you within the first couple minutes of watching them, and a lot of that has to do with their memorable title sequences. A great title sequence can set the tone for the whole film, and can sometimes tell a story in itself. For a great example of this, watch the opening titles to David Fincher's *Se7en* (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SEZK7mJoPLY). This sequence not only gives us the opening credits, but it also serves to share some of the back story of serial killer John Doe. The titles become part of the film's story, not an interruption of it.

Major studios often budget a good chunk of time and money to creating title sequences, but you don't have to. It's possible to get great opening titles using some of the thousands of premade Adobe After Effects templates that are available. You don't need to be an After Effects expert to use these--they usually come with step by step instructions that help even a beginner navigate the software. And the best part is, the heavy lifting is already done for you--you're not doing the hard work of creating the titles, you're basically modifying the text, images, audio, and video to personalize things for your film.

You are sacrificing a bit of originality by not creating titles from scratch, but the tradeoff is that you get very cool titles that you wouldn't have been able to come up with on your own, without the time and money investment that you would need to develop them from the ground up.

You can After Effects templates on sites like http://pond5.com, similar to royalty free music. Again, you simply pay the small fee and download the template and instructions, and you can use the templates right away. There's also tons of free templates out there on the internet--https://www.freeaetemplates.com/ offers hundreds, in a variety of styles and feels, that you can download at any time.

Want more film tips & resources?

Check us out at http://gorillafilmschool.com