How to Submit to Film Festivals: Tips from an Industry Screener

Written by Christopher Piccione | Published on March 23, 2023

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Film festivals are an essential part of the movie-making process, and submitting your film to these events can be a thrilling yet daunting task. You're eager to showcase your work, but how do you ensure it catches the eye of festival programmers and stands out in a sea of **film festival submissions**?

As someone who has been on both sides of the film festival world — as a filmmaker and as a festival screener — I have some insight into what really goes on behind the scenes, along with some of the most common submissions dos and don'ts. This article will give you helpful tips on what screeners are looking for, as well as my personal perspective on the submission process.

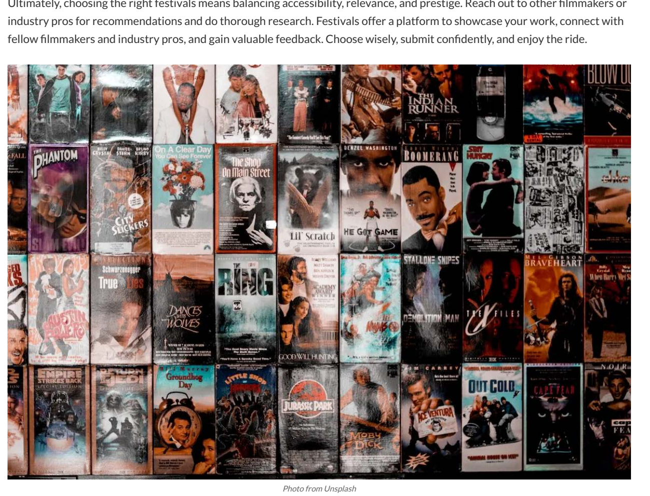
How to Choose Film Festival(s)

As a filmmaker, you might be eager to submit your work to as many film festivals as possible, hoping to increase your chances of getting noticed. However, submitting to too many festivals can be extremely costly and time-consuming. It's essential to narrow down your choices to those that are the right fit for your film. But how do you go about doing that?

The first step is to **research festivals**. Look at the type of films they've screened in the past few years and see if they align with your film's style and genre. For instance, if you've made a horror film, you wouldn't want to submit to a festival that primarily screens romcoms or vice versa. Once you've found a few festivals that seem like a good match, dig deeper into their submission guidelines, rules, and deadlines.

Another factor to consider is the **festival's reputation and prestige**. Festivals like Sundance, Cannes, and the Toronto International Film Festival have a long history of showcasing groundbreaking films and launching the careers of many filmmakers. However, they're also highly competitive and may have strict entry criteria. On the other hand, smaller festivals are more accessible and have a greater chance of accepting your film. Although, they may not provide as much exposure or networking opportunities.

Ultimately, choosing the right festivals means balancing accessibility, relevance, and prestige. Reach out to other filmmakers or industry pros for recommendations and do thorough research. Festivals offer a platform to showcase your work, connect with fellow filmmakers and industry pros, and gain valuable feedback. Choose wisely, submit confidently, and enjoy the ride.



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How to Submit to a Film Festival

One Sheet

Your film's poster is the first thing that many festival screeners, programmers, and directors will see. It's essential to make it eye-catching and memorable. You don't need to spend a fortune designing it, but it should look professional and capture the essence of your film. It will help to draw audiences to your screening, so make sure it's a real showstopper.

Trailer

While most screeners won't have time to watch them because they're too busy watching your film, it's still worthwhile to upload a trailer with your submission. Trailers are an effective promotional tool and if your film is accepted, the festival itself will want one.

Keep it Short and Sweet

When it comes to your film's cover letter and director's statement, less is definitely more. While most screeners won't read them (since the focus is on your film) there are occasions where we need a bit more information or context about the film. So, keep it short and to the point. Don't make us sift through a novel of a statement just to find the simple answers we need.

Fill Out ALL Details

Filling out all the details about your film will make a big difference in the submission process. Don't leave anything out — whether it's genre, budget, cast, crew, or camera used. These details are necessary for screeners and programmers to evaluate your film properly. Don't forget to highlight any well-known names or specific genres you feel your film falls into. Keep it to two or three genres max.

Keep Premiere Status, Screenings Updated

It's imperative to keep your premiere status and prior screenings up to date in your festival account. We need to know if it's a world premiere or if it's been shown before and where. Some festivals prioritize world premieres while others value films that have played at other prestigious festivals. So, don't forget to update your poster with any fancy laurels from other festivals. Keep everyone in the loop!

Tell Us if You're an Alumni

Did you know that mentioning your previous film screened at a particular festival can actually work in your favor? It's true! Make sure to mention it in your cover letter. It can jog the memory of screeners, programmers, and festival directors who have seen your previous work. It can also show that you're committed to building relationships in the industry.

Photo from Unsplash

What Do Screener Committees Judge?

While every festival has its own unique criteria for judging films and advancing them up the ladder, there are a few key things that most selection committees look for. It's important to remember that what one festival values might not be as significant for another. However, as a general rule, they all want to showcase great stories that entertain and inspire audiences.

Story

When submitting a film, the **story** is paramount. Even if it's a familiar genre, it must be told in a fresh and innovative way. The writing should be excellent and keep us engaged until the end, evoking emotions in the audience. Make it worthwhile, entertaining, and unforgettable. We'll be sure to spread the word about your film, but only if it truly stands out.

Sound

Sound tends to be more often overlooked when it comes to a short film rather than a feature, but it must be known that a sound mix can make or break the viewing experience. No, you don't need Oscar-worthy sound or a Hans Zimmer score, but a proper mix can make a world of difference. Be sure the sound is spot on, paying attention to levels, include some foley coverage and properly mixed dialogue is key. Don't let poor sound ruin your chances of getting selected.

Performances

We all have that one friend or family member who's dying to be in front of the camera. But let's be real — not everyone is cut out for it. Cast strong actors (credits or not) who are invested in your screenplay. You want people who can bring your characters to life and make us feel all the feels. Trust me, it'll pay off in the end.

Production Value

Hoo boy, let's talk production value. Even if you don't have a substantial budget, you can still get creative and make each scene and frame look amazing. Attention to detail is key. Get your hands on production lights, paint some backdrops, and even raid your own closet for some cool costumes. A little bit of effort goes a long way. Make your film pop with production design and the screeners will be invested in your film.

Overall

In conjunction with the previous subsections, this is the culmination of your film as a whole. Everything is evaluated and given a score out of five or ten. How did we feel after watching it? Did the filmmaker tell the story with clarity and purpose? Did the film keep our attention from start to finish?

Photo from Unsplash

Film Festival Submission FAQs

Are you keeping up or still feeling a bit lost about some other areas of the film festival submission process? Don't worry, we've got you covered. Here are some frequently asked questions that often come up regarding the process.

How much does it cost to submit to film festivals?

A big question on everyone's mind: how much does it cost to submit a film to a festival? The truth is, it can be pretty steep. Some festivals have free submissions, but most charge $35 to $45 on average. If you're aiming for an Oscar or Bafta qualifying festival, be prepared to shell out upwards of $85 per submission.

The good news is, you can save some cash by submitting during the Early Bird deadlines. Costs will be the highest if you wait until the Late deadline. We recommend setting a budget early on in the budgeting stage to factor in these expenses. On average, filmmakers spend around $1,500 submitting their film to as many festivals as possible to give it the highest shot at being accepted and seen by audiences. It's an investment, but it can be worth it in the end.

Can anyone submit to a film festival?

Whether you're a professional, hobbyist, or a budding student filmmaker, the festival world is your playground. Short films, feature films, music videos, documentaries, animations – there's a festival for everyone. But before you hit the "submit" button, make sure you double-check the festival's submission categories. Some festivals only accept certain genres or categories, like micro shorts (*under 3 minutes*) or shorts (*under 30 minutes*). Pay attention to the rules and guidelines.

Where can I submit to film festivals?

No longer are the days of mailing your tapes, DVDs and paperwork, and thank goodness for that! We've moved on from online submission sites like Withoutabox too. Nowadays, if you want to submit your film to festivals, FilmFreewayis the go-to platform. They've pretty much taken over 99% of the market share for festival submissions. The remaining 1% is given to festivals that work through their own websites or other third-party platforms that aren't as widely used.

A quick side note: If you find yourself continuously making films or submitting to a large number of festivals, it's worth getting the Gold Membership on FilmFreeway. For $13 a month, you'll get 10 to 50% off submission fees on select festivals as well as submission fees waived. Once you've submitted to all of the festivals on your list, you can cancel this membership at any time.

Do filmmakers get paid for film festivals?

No. A festival will not pay you for screening your film and you won't get any sort of distribution from the festival itself. Of course, if you submit to some of the bigger festivals and your film is well received, distributors attending the festival may notice and want to make some kind of deal.

Where some festivals *do* offer compensation is in the form of accommodations if you're attending in person as well as meals. Usually this will also include two all access passes for the filmmaker and person of their choice. Keep in mind, even if a festival offers that, they will not cover air fare, per diem, and any extras. Most festivals don't offer any compensation so it's wise to anticipate travel costs and lodging if you plan to attend any festival in person.

How hard is it to get into film festivals?

Submitting to film festivals can be competitive with many variables determining which films are selected. The percentage of submissions versus selections varies by festival. To put things into a bit of context, the top tier film festivals (Oscar qualifiers) can receive up to 10,000 submissions and they only accept around 100 films. That's around a 1% selection rate. Smaller festivals will have less submissions with a selection rate that hovers around 10% depending on the amount of days the festival is held.

It's helpful for filmmakers to remember that there are so many factors such as the festival's theme, location, length, screening blocks, and popularity when they decide their final films. While the quality of a film is also a major factor, even a stellar film may not get selected due to these variables. Remember that festivals are also very political, subjective, and only have so much time to screen x number of films. If your film wasn't selected, don't take it personally. Expect the worst, hope for the best, and move on to the next.

Film Festivals Worth Your Time and Money

Are you ready to take your film to the next level and showcase it to the world? The following are the top 40+ film festivals throughout the world that you should consider submitting to.

United States

- Sundance Film Festival *Park City, Utah – January 2024*
- Slamdance Film Festival *Park City, Utah – January 2024*
- Hamptons International Film Festival *Hamptons, NY – October 2023*
- Santa Barbara International Film Festival *Santa Barbara, California – February 2024*
- Hollyshorts *Los Angeles, California – August 2023*
- Indie Street Film Festival *Red Bank, NJ – August 2023*
- Blackbird Film Festival *Cortland, NY – April 2023*
- Bend Film Festival *Bend, Oregon – October 2023*
- Tribeca Festival *New York, NY – June 2023*
- Blowup Arthouse Film Fest *Chicago, Illinois – December 2023*
- Austin Revolution *– Austin, Texas – February 2024*
- Dances With Films *Studio City, California – June 2023*
- Genreblast *Winchester, Virginia – August 2023*
- Palm Springs International ShortFest *Palm Springs, California – June 2023*
- LA Shorts International Film Festival *Los Angeles, California – July 2023*
- Brooklyn Film Festival *Brooklyn, NY – June 2023*
- AFI Fest *Los Angeles, California – October 2023*
- Long Island International Film Expo *Bellmore, NY – July 2023*
- Outfest Los Angeles LGBTQ+ Film Festival *Los Angeles, California – July 2023*
- SOHO International Film Festival *New York, NY – September 2023*
- SCAD Savannah Film Festival *Savannah, Georgia – October 2023*
- Julien Dubuque International Film Festival *Dubuque, Iowa – April 2023*
- Nashville Film Festival *Nashville, Tennessee – September 2023*
- Chicago International Film Festival *Chicago, Illinois – October 2023*
- Cinequest Film & VR Festival *– San Jose, California – March 2023*
- New York Film Festival *New York, NY – October 2023*
- New Orleans Film Festival New Orleans, Louisiana – November 2023
- Bushwick Film Festival *Bushwick, Brooklyn – October 2023*
- Woods Hole Film Festival *Woods Hole, Massachusetts – August 2023*
- Coney Island Film Festival *Brooklyn, NY – May 2023*
- St. Louis International Film Festival *St. Louis, Missouri – November 2023*
- Gig Harbor Film Festival *Gig Harbor, Washington – September 2023*

International

- Cannes Film Festival *Cannes, France – May 2023*
- Tiff *Toronto, Canada – September 2023*
- Sitges Film Festival *Sitges, Spain – October 2023*
- Fantasia International Film Festival *Montreal, Quebec, Canada – July 2023*
- Aesthetica Film Festival *York, United Kingdom – November 2023*
- Raindance Film Festival *London, United Kingdom – October 2023*
- Austin Film Festival *Austin, Texas – October 2023*
- Cork International Film Festival *Cork, Ireland – November 2023*
- Short Shorts Film Festival & Asia *Tokyo, Japan – June 2023*
- Locarno Film Festival *Locarno, Switzerland August 2023*
- Melbourne International Film Festival *Melbourne, Australia August 2023*
- Sydney Film Festival *Sydney, Australia – June 2023*
- Bolton International Film Festival *Bolton, United Kingdom – October 2023*

Most festivals live over on FilmFreeway while a few do require submissions directly through their individual website. It goes without saying that this is just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to all of the incredible film festivals across the globe.

Photo from Unsplash

My Festival Run is Over. Now What?

Filmmakers use the terms "submission life" and "festival life" to describe the process of submitting to festivals and waiting for their response. This process can take up to a year due to festival deadlines and premiere considerations. After being accepted, it can take another year for all the festivals to finish screening.

However, be smart. Don't fall into the trap of submitting to every festival on the planet, dropping $10k on submission fees, and spending three years trying to get the film out there. Be judicious in your selections and complete everything within two years. Accept the film has had a decent run and move on.

There's also something to be said about having a life online after the festival run, should you choose to take that route. You can submit your film to Vimeo Staff Picks, Short of the Week, or even the highly popular YouTube channels Alter (*horror*), Omeletto (*Oscar qualifiers only*), or Dust (*Sci-Fi*). You can always release it on your own channel as well if distribution isn't an option.

That's a Wrap!

Hopefully, you have a better understanding of how to submit your short, documentary, or feature film to film festivals and increase your chances of being selected. Remember to choose festivals that align with your film's style and genre, follow submission guidelines, and make your film stand out with a compelling story.

Submitting your film is just one step in your journey as a filmmaker. Whether your film is selected or not, take the feedback you receive to grow and improve your craft. Keep creating and submitting, and who knows? Your work could become the next big hit at Cannes, Sundance, or Toronto International. Go out there, grab your camera, and let the world see what you've got.

Christopher Piccione
Christopher is a freelance podcast and video editor, actor, and screenplay writer living in New York City. He is incredibly passionate about traveling, hobby photography, and filmmaking when he can afford it. A fan of dogs, cats, & a mean burrito. You can occasionally catch him on TV, the silver screen, or a film festival near you.

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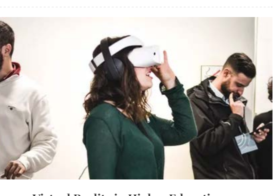

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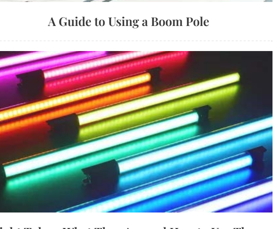

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