

# FILM FESTIVAL SUBMISSION TIPS

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Courtesy of the Faux Film Festival ([www.fauxfilm.com](http://www.fauxfilm.com))

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First of all, take all advice, here and elsewhere, with a grain of salt. There is no such thing as an expert in how to submit to festivals since each festival is different and submissions are subject to the whims of different reviewers. The advice here is great for many film festivals, but your mileage may vary.

You are dealing with Humans on something very subjective. Many factors outside your film will influence the viewing experience. For example, a reviewer's mood at the time they view your film could affect their perception of your film. Likewise, their perception of you (based on your submission package) before they watch your film could affect their perception of your film. You want to reduce or eliminate as many potential annoyance factors as possible so the reviewer will be totally focused on viewing your film with an open mind. The golden rule is:

**Don't do anything to detract from the viewing experience of your film.**

## EDITING

Doctors have an oath that first and foremost they must "do no harm". Film festivals also have an oath – "don't be boring". If a reviewer thinks your film will bore the audience, your film will be rejected. I have heard this from numerous film festival operators. **Slow pacing is the single largest reason for rejection.** Films edited by the writer/director/actor are often the worst culprits of slow pacing, so be especially thorough if this means you. People are reluctant to cut material they shot or wrote. **Use test audiences you can get honest feedback from.** We frequently receive short films that would have been accepted if they weren't paced so darn slow. They could easily have been tightened up, vastly improving the pacing without losing any of the story.

There are two main causes of slow pacing – unnecessary scenes, dialog, etc and staying on something too long, taking too long to do something, etc. Watch the deleted scenes on a DVD some time and listen to the director's commentary. The scenes were almost always axed because they slowed the film down or explained something that was already explained elsewhere. Just because you shot it doesn't mean it's important for the story. Making sure each scene is tight is also important. Somebody famous once said, "**Begin a scene as late as possible, end it as early as possible. A screenplay is like a piece of string that you can cut up and tie together - the trick is to tell the entire story using as little string as possible.**" This isn't about more explosions or constantly wowing the audience. It's about good editing. Not fast pacing, but the lack of slow pacing.

If you're stubborn, you might try creating two versions of your film – your “directors cut” and a shorter one for film fests. Show them to test audiences of people not involved with the film and let them tell you which one to submit.

**What about submitting a “Work in Progress”?** Don't do it! Finish the film, then send it in. The festival will be around next year. Sure, if all you need to do is color correction or fix a few minor sound glitches, go ahead (being sure to note this on the disk and the case). But if you have any slicing to do, finish that first and be sure you're really done with cutting before you submit your film. Some festivals may specifically prohibit works in progress, so read the festival rules.

## **CREDITS**

Keep the credits short - the shorter the better. Festival reviewers and audiences don't care who worked on the film. Leave the long credits for your “directors cut”. I recommend **no up front credits, other than the title and possibly production company**, and a scroll at the end of no more than 6 seconds per minute of film. That's a maximum, not something to shoot for. Shorter is better. A minute of opening credits on a short could immediately put reviewers in a bad mood. In a shorts block, the audience wants to move on to the next film, not sit through lengthy credits with unknown names. Save the 5 second shot of each cast member credit for the “cast edition”.

## **SOUND LEVELS**

What sounds good on your tinny little computer speakers may not sound right when played in a theater. Use a subwoofer on your editing system. The lack of base causes misperceptions in sound levels that can result in music levels being too loud when compared to dialog. The overall volume level should sound about the same as most standard DVDs. Be sure to test the volume level and sound mix on your home theater system and compare the volume to other films. Most films are set at this standard level and it's annoying to have to alter the sound level for one film.

## **WATERMARKING**

**Do not watermark your video.** This is the practice of putting a subtitle on the screen that says “for preview purposes only” or some such. **It hurts the viewing experience of your film!** It also prevents the use of the DVD as a backup for your projection tape, should it fail. I have heard horror stories where the projection copy did not arrive in time or got lost in the mail and the festival had to show the subtitled DVD with the warning message always present! I even talked to one festival operator that received three projection copies from the film maker, each one still having the watermark! Anyone who has had problems like this will be leery of accepting a watermarked film. **Don't do it!**

## SUBMISSION FORMAT

**Always submit on DVD** unless specifically requested otherwise by the festival. VHS quality sucks and it's more difficult to share with festival reviewers. Plus your DVD becomes a backup if something goes horribly wrong with your projection tape. Plus there is a stigma with VHS, mainly because it sucks. While MiniDV is better quality, it is far more expensive and also difficult to share with festival reviewers. Most festivals will not return your submission materials, so you're out a MiniDV for every festival. It will not improve your chances of acceptance, so why do it? The main issue with DVD submissions is that some home-made DVDs don't play. If you follow the advice in this document, you won't have that problem. For the cost of a few MiniDV tapes you could buy a DVD printer instead. **Submit on DVD.** Save your higher-quality format for projection if accepted.

## DVD COMPRESSION

Poor compression can make your film look pixilated. No festival wants to show something that looks like they downloaded it from the Internet. Be sure you format your DVD in the best possible quality, not the fastest. Some basic DVD programs default to fast writing rather than best quality. Check the settings.

## DVD EXTRAS

Color bars are totally unnecessary unless a film festival specifically requests them. Sometimes the tone can be jarring and affect the fragile psyche of the reviewer. You want them in a good mood. Excess black can also be annoying. It's ok to include a little black before and/or after your film, but keep it to two seconds or less.

Perhaps you have a compilation DVD and you are submitting only one film. This is usually ok and some reviewers will watch extra stuff on a DVD if it sounds interesting. **Clearly mark which film you are submitting.** The paperwork rarely travels with the DVD to the reviewer, so at least mark the film to watch on the case if not with a sharpie on the DVD - unless it's obvious, like the main film is the first selection and everything else is listed under "bonus material". If you have only one selection, it's your choice whether or not to include a menu or autoplay your film. Festivals don't agree on this and it's not really a big deal either way, though it's kind of pointless to have a menu when there is only one option to select. Some DVD players cannot make a menu selection without the remote and I have seen cases where folks were frantically searching for a remote because they got a DVD with a menu, so I recommend including one only if there is more than one option on the menu. Do not put sound on your menu. The festival already has to hide your menu until they press play. Hiding your sound too is unlikely and could make your screening look unprofessional. You don't want a jarring blast of sound before your film starts. Note that some festivals may specifically state in their rules not to include a menu or not to include more than one film on a DVD, so read the festival rules carefully.

## DVD WRITING

Your DVD writer and disks may be rated for 8x or 16x, but that is the maximum writing speed, not the safest writing speed. Burn your disks at half the lower of the maximum speeds for your burner and disks and you will have fewer coasters. In other words, if your DVD burner is rated at 16x and your DVDs are rated at 8x, burn at 4x.

## REPEAT MODE

**Do NOT have your video set to REPEAT or LOOP.** This is the default setting for some burner software. It is extremely annoying for a video to start over from the beginning immediately after finishing and it serves no purpose. It could also cause embarrassment during your screening. Be sure your DVD is set to either stop or return to a menu after finishing.

## WIDESCREEN

**Don't export your widescreen film in letterboxed standard aspect ratio.** Test the DVD to make sure you didn't do that by accident. There is a simple test for this. Play the DVD on your computer in a window, not full screen. Does the window hug all sides of your video, or does it have black bars above and below? If it has black bars, then those are hard coded and are using precious pixels! Also, a film festival could make the mistake of thinking your film is widescreen and showing it in widescreen mode – but because you letterboxed it, the film appears stretched, your actors all look fat, and your film still doesn't fill the screen! Don't let that happen to you. Check your settings and your DVD to make sure you're not letterboxing your output.

An exception to this is if you have already edited in letterbox. Some people choose to fake 1.85 by doing this. Then it's too late and you will have to also export in letterbox. It's not the end of the world. If you've already done it, don't sweat it. Either the fest will show it the same size as 4:3 films, in which case your image will be small, or they will alter the projection to fill the screen, in which case your image may show digital artifacts.

Generally speaking, even theaters not capable of showing widescreen will still project your 16:9 film properly in 4:3 letterboxed, though I have seen this messed up by less experienced fests. If you want to cover your bases, include two versions – 4:3 and 16:9 – clearly labeled.

## DVD LABELING

**Don't use adhesive labels.** Most of the time they work ok, but quality varies, they don't last over time, and they can cause a disk to stop playing correctly, even if it plays correctly when you test it. Some festivals now require that you don't use adhesive labels. I actually had a label lift off a DVD while playing! Better to use a permanent marker (such as a Sharpie) and best to use a DVD printer. Epson makes some dirt

cheap printers that do a fantastic job of printing on DVDs. Printable DVDs are cheap in bulk and if you don't go crazy with your design you won't go through ink too quickly. Of course you can also have them printed and burned professionally, but that only makes sense in large quantities and when you know you won't be making any changes. There is also a feature on some burners called "LightScribe" that burns an image onto the top surface of the disc. It's one color and LightScribe discs cost a little bit more, but that may be the simplest solution.

**Don't use stickers either.** Stickers are even worse. Since they are not specifically made for DVDs, their ability to adhere varies even more. In addition, since they don't evenly cover the surface of the DVD, they throw off the DVD's center of gravity, thus potentially causing read errors. **If you can't print on it, use a sharpie.**

**DVD Print Surfaces.** If you choose printing over LightScribe or Sharpie, you have choices in DVD print surfaces. First there are silver and white printing surfaces. White discs produce an image true to the original design whereas silver printable disks can produce an interesting almost 3D effect but with some loss in contrast. Also, you can choose between matte and gloss printing surfaces. On top of that, you can choose standard or smudge-resistant surfaces. There are many choices to make and I recommend experimenting with multiple types and choosing the one that looks best and burns well in your burner. My own experimenting resulted in using WaterShield disks, which are smudge-resistant and glossy. Aquaguard is similar but generally Matte finish, if your image looks better that way. WaterShield disks look better and are more durable than standard disks, though they do cost a bit more. Note that whatever surface you use, you must use disks with a printable surface. If you try to print on standard disks that don't have a printable surface, the ink will come off very easily if it even adheres at all.

**What to Write.** Your disk could get separated from your case, so always put the title of the film on your disk. It is a good idea to also put your name and contact info (phone and email) on your disk. Many festivals insist upon this. If you are submitting through Withoutabox, you also need to put the WAB number on your disk. Since I print on my disks with an Epson printer, I print a little box that says "WAB#" and I fill in the WAB number with a Sharpie. I have seen many fests project films in the wrong aspect ratio, so an additional thing you may want to put on the label is the aspect ratio of your film – either 4:3 or 16:9. This is the true aspect ratio to set the projector to, not to be confused with the "faux" aspect ratio! For example, some people choose to shoot a film in 1.85 by shooting in 4:3 and masking the image. Of course you **must** verify you are writing the correct aspect ratio! Use the visual test I mentioned in the Widescreen section or use a ruler (on the window frame, not the image).

## DVD TESTING

If you have followed all the advice here for creating your DVD, then you are less likely to have problems, but don't tempt fate. Test your DVD in two different DVD players, not the computer. Computer DVD drives will play almost anything. Verify the aspect ratio is correct and there are no glitches or stutters. Watch it all the way through. Play it on both a widescreen TV and a standard TV if you can.

## DVD CASES

**I much prefer the slim DVD cases**, both as a film maker and a festival operator. They are virtually indestructible and easier to mail. I have never received a broken slim case. They take up less space yet fit nicely on a shelf with the standard cases. Even though they are thinner, you can still print a full case insert for them, including spine. Slim cases fit perfectly into standard 6" x 9" envelopes, though I use 9" x 12" so I can include any paper forms or press info without folding. They are also cheaper than the standard cases.

**Standard DVD cases are ok too.** A standard DVD case is more likely to poke through a non-padded envelope and therefore is better to ship in a padded envelope and still may end up with a broken edge (though the DVD is still protected). Since a standard DVD case is more expensive and needs a more expensive shipping envelope, why not use a slim case instead?

Make sure the cases you buy securely hold the DVD in place. You should have to press the center hub to release the DVD. If the DVD pops out easily without pressing the hub, then it will pop out and rattle around during shipping and may get scratched up. You can guard against this by making little foam rings to put around your center hub to hold the DVD in place, but it's best to just get good quality cases.

**Do not use CD jewel cases** as they are fragile and will fall to pieces if you look at them too hard. More than once I have poured plastic shards out of a padded envelope!

**Do not use paper CD sleeves** as the DVDs are easily broken in transit, even in padded envelopes or envelopes with cardboard added. "Oh, but all my Netflix DVDs arrive in envelopes!" Yes, and sometimes they arrive broken! Paper envelopes are also easily misplaced in someone's messy office and are hard to find when fishing through a box of submissions.

Just use sturdy DVD cases, preferably the slim ones. You can't go wrong with those. You can get great deals on them through the internet if your local sources are too expensive.

## DVD CASE INSERT

**What to print on.** If you are going to ship in a DVD case, be it standard or slim, you may as well print a decent case insert for it. This is not required but does create a good presentation for your DVD. It also makes it stand out more and easier to find! If your design has a lot of white space you won't eat up ink too quickly. You can print these on any kind of paper, but generally if you are printing photos or images from the film, they will look better on glossier paper. Do not use photo paper – it is too thick and too expensive. I use HP Brochure Paper (glossy). It comes in bulk packs for a reasonable price. Some office supply chain stores now sell generic glossy brochure paper as well, though it tends to be thinner and thus more likely to ripple from the ink. Be sure whatever you print on that you purchase paper rated for your kind of printing device. Do not use inkjet-specific paper in a laser printer or the ink may not adhere properly. Note that there is pre-perforated paper you can buy specifically for DVD case inserts, but these tend to be very expensive, may not perfectly fit your case, and greatly reduce your paper choices. Better to print on the paper of your choice and use a paper slicer to cut the sheet to size. I print the size I want with dotted lines on the page and then use a paper slicer to cut just inside the lines for a perfect fit every time.

**What to print.** At a minimum, the case should include the title on the front and on the spine. It should also include the WAB number (for WAB submissions), but that can be written on the insert like I suggested for the DVDs. It's easier to create a bunch of cases at once without having to individually print one for each fest. It is best to let the ink dry for several hours before inserting it in the case or it could stick to the plastic and pull ink off the paper. Other things you might put on the insert include festival laurels, awards, name stars, running time, and anything compelling that makes your film sound like it would attract an audience (without overdoing it).

**Be green.** After the festival, many fests will spindle all the DVDs to save space, if they save the DVDs at all. This means they may get rid of all the cases. Allow them to be reused by not writing directly on the case or using stickers. The reusable cases might be donated to film schools or programs.

## SUBMISSION FORM

Don't make a bad first impression by writing like a five-year-old. It's annoying to have to guess what letters you intended. Use WAB or an online submission form if available. If not, fill in the submission form on the computer and print out the completed form. If the form cannot be submitted online or filled in and then printed, then hand write on the printed form. **Always print neatly** - never use cursive writing. It's amazing how often people fill out forms so sloppily that it is virtually impossible to read their email address correctly.

**Fill out the form in its entirety.** No questions are optional unless stated as such. Seems obvious, yet people miss this.

## **PRESS KIT**

This is likely the most subjective part of this document, so take this with extra salt grains. Do not ship a physical press kit with your submission if you are not asked for one by the festival unless it contains information that you feel will definitely help your film, such as info about big name stars or festival awards. You can print that info on your DVD case insert instead, though. All the festival operators I have spoken with about this have said basically the same thing – unless there is something obviously compelling about it, they don't read the press kit and it has no affect on acceptance. However, some festivals do request basic information, such as cast/crew list, director bio, and production stills, and some films are helped by a little explanation.

**Instead of an expensive press kit, consider a double-sided one-sheet.** This will allow you to submit this information without a lot of added expense and is much more likely to be read than a thick press kit with too much information. You can print your one-sheet on glossy brochure paper mentioned above. It's not too expensive and both sides have the same glossy coating.

Here's what I suggest putting on your one-sheet:

- Film title
- Web site address & contact info
- Brief film synopsis
- Brief information about the film that may be helpful (background, name stars, etc)
- Cast & crew list
- Two production photos
- Director bio and photo

Change the paper type in the printing options to glossy paper or the ink could rub off or streak.

## **SHIPPING**

**Never ever EVER use fiber-filled envelopes! NEVER! I MEAN IT!** I have heard this from many festival operators. Crushed paper fibers invariably leak into the envelope, covering your precious project in nasty dust. It is virtually impossible to open a fiber-filled envelope without getting dust everywhere. It immediately labels you a newbie. **DO NOT USE THEM!** Even if they are free! Are we clear on this? Good.

Instead, use an envelope with plastic bubble padding or use a non-padded envelope! The slim DVD cases work well without padding in standard 6" by 9" envelopes.

**Do not ask for return of your DVD.** It annoys the festival and they have most likely already stated somewhere that submission materials will not be returned, so you look like an ignorant newbie if you make that request. Don't do it. It is reasonable to expect return of a higher-cost medium if you provide shipping cost and return envelope.

**Don't do anything that requires someone to sign for your package.** The odds of someone stealing your DVD are extremely small. Anything that prevents delivery is a bigger problem! If no one is available, then a notice is left instead of your package, causing delay. If no one is ever available during delivery times, then the festival has to send someone to the delivery office to pick it up. A major inconvenience and even more delay. Or, they may never get your film!

**Do not send packages via "registered mail".** These are held at the post office after only one delivery attempt. This is a major pain for the festival and your film could be returned to you.

## **FESTIVAL FIT**

**Make sure your film fits the festival.** You can usually determine this from the first page of the festival website or the home page of the festival's Without-A-Box listing. Don't send a drama to a comedy fest!

## **SUBMISSION INSTRUCTIONS**

**Read and follow the submission instructions for each festival.** Some require extra copies. Some require standard DVD cases. Some require specific submission formats or specific information on your DVD. While it is unlikely a fest would disqualify you for a minor infringement of the rules, there is no guarantee and you want to keep annoyances to a minimum, if not non-existent. **Follow the rules.**

## **SUBMISSION AGREEMENTS**

**Read the submission agreement for each festival you apply to.** Be wary of anything that could prevent you from submitting to major festivals, such as web streaming, DVD distribution, etc. Submit to web-streaming fests last. DVD distribution should always be negotiated separately – never part of a submission agreement. Also be wary of agreements that grant a festival permission to show your film anywhere at any time forever. **You should always know where and when your film is showing.** Don't enter any fest that takes that control away from you.

## **SUBMISSION CONFIRMATION**

If you submit your film through withoutabox.com, the system notates your film has been received by showing a green dot in your submission status list. Some folks get nervous if the dot stays red too long, and right they should. But how long should you wait before

sending the “did you get my film” email? A general rule of thumb is to allow one week for mailing, one more week for international air mailing, and at least two more weeks for processing (three if submitted before the early deadline). You don’t want to annoy a fest with an unnecessary question (most likely they just haven’t started processing films yet), but you want to know if your film was lost. A festival processing 2000 films is bound to lose something, especially if sent in a paper envelope rather than a DVD case. ☺

## **FEE WAIVER REQUESTS**

Remember the golden rule – don’t do anything to detract from the viewing experience of your film. When you send your film in, you don’t want the reviewer thinking “I granted a waiver – for *this*?!”. You want them to watch your film with no baggage, so don’t give them any baggage. Most fests will decline your waiver request anyway – it’s not fair to the other film makers. You are better off saving money by researching each fest for appropriate fit before submitting.

## **PREVIEW REQUESTS**

I get them all the time. “Can you watch my film online and tell me if you think it would be a fit for your fest?” Your lame attempt to bypass the submission process will be viewed with contempt by the festival. Remember that golden rule? Why would you want someone to watch a tiny, grainy, jumpy, low quality version of your film anyway? Read the festival’s web page and submit your film properly.

## **EMAIL**

Most festivals communicate through email. If your email address changes, you must immediately notify all festivals you might hear from. Even then your email address may not get updated, so it is best to transition your email if you need to change it. Keep the old address until you no longer expect any email to it. Do not over-use spam filters and avoid filters that automatically block out email without confirming the sender as a true spammer. Most spammers fake the email addresses of innocent people, so those filters frequently mark innocent addresses as spammers. Some such filters include SORBS and SPEWS. If you use a spam filter based on spam-like content (such as SpamAssassin), be sure the filter’s spam scoring is not too aggressive. If you use a spam filter built into your email program, such as Microsoft Outlook, be sure to frequently check the spam folder for legitimate emails. If a festival sends you an email, you don’t want to miss it!

## ATTITUDE

Remember to keep a positive attitude, even if your film is rejected. Taking out your frustrations about the business, the process, or other film festivals on someone else will not help you and could hurt your film. No one likes a whiner. Don't act like a prima donna demanding your red carpet. Running a film festival is fraught with variables and problems occur. Be courteous in dealing with them. Also be courteous on web forums. Festival operators read film forums. They also have private forums for film festival operators where people have been known to post warnings about "problem directors". It's simple – BE NICE.

Questions or comments? Use the **Contact** form at [www.fauxfilm.com](http://www.fauxfilm.com)

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