

# Production Values

---

## SECTION ONE

### [The Indie Film and Production Values]

by [Harold Hay](#)

Probably one of the most misunderstood concepts in film, TV, and video production is the definition of production values. What exactly is a production value, and why is it important? Some people will tell you that production values are essentially the quality of the image that is captured by the camera. That may be true, but it really doesn't explain the importance of production values. Or, perhaps, I should state it this way. Production values are important to what group?



For the big-budget Hollywood producer, the concept of production values is a moot point. Production values are practically a given. When you have budgets approaching \$100 million, you can put whatever image you want to on the screen. Production values really apply to the world of

low-budget filmmakers. They are essential for their success. Everybody wants production quality, but the key for the guerrilla and the low-budget filmmaker is to obtain it through value.

You have to convince or, in some cases, trick your audience to believe your story is real. Otherwise, they will not see you as a legitimate filmmaker or take you seriously. Finding production values is the only way that you can attain this. It starts with finding the right locations, props, wardrobe, and talent. I would also throw in lighting, jibs, and dollies.

Have you seen the recent J. J. Abram's film, *Super 8*? It's a great illustration of production values. In fact, the term is used several times throughout the movie. In one key scene, Charles Kaznyk assembles his friends to help him make his Super 8 movie that he is planning to enter into the Cleveland International Student Film Super 8 Festival. Charles has little or no money to make his movie. So he's looking to play every angle and make his movie look bigger than it actually is. He finds a great location at a remote train station. He has his actors dress in the proper wardrobe. He also convinces Alice to be the protagonist's wife to add an emotional impact and to give the audience someone to care about.



He uses one of his crew members as a prop by directing him to make a phone call in the background as the scene plays out. But the real break comes when by chance a train is approaching the station. Charles sees his chance and screams "production value". It's a gift. It wasn't planned or designed. But by shooting the scene with the passing train, it adds a level of energy, excitement and action. And that's production values in a nutshell. Sometimes they just fall into your lap.

The train did not cost Charles a dime. It was just there free for the taking. As a low-budget filmmaker, you have to see the opportunity and seize it. The best production values are the ones that you didn't plan and that didn't cost you an arm and a leg. However, they helped you to create a believable and authentic image.

NOTE: Images may not be in the original. Section One is a modified version of material sourced here: <http://www.visualstorynetwork.org/profiles/blogs/production-values>



## SECTION TWO

# Why Hollywood Budgets Are Big

Films are made by big teams, commanding big budgets. But the studio system didn't arise from an industry cabal: **Film budgets are big because film distribution is expensive.**

Putting a movie in front of viewers requires theaters. That means real estate: mortgages on prime commercial property. Showing a movie requires projectors and other theatrical equipment --



equipment that is made in small volumes because it's sold only to theaters. The movie industry, as a whole, needs to pay rent on theaters in every city and town from London to Wagga Wagga.

**With such huge distribution costs, any one-time expense that might make a film better or more marketable becomes attractive.** Because the world can only afford a limited number of theaters, the channel between filmmaker and viewer is narrow. Because broadcast channels are scarce, television provides only a few additional venues at a time. Only a few films can reach an audience, and so it makes good sense to spend infinite care and nearly infinite resources on each film.

## Production Values and Production Budgets

Creating immersive media is expensive. While inexpensive equipment is beginning to make quality sound and video recording accessible to individuals, live action is intrinsically more expensive than prose. Even the cheapest actors, lights, and locations cost more than pencil and paper. And when something goes wrong -- when sets collapse, cameras jiggle, the sun goes behind a cloud -- retakes cost more than using an eraser or pressing Delete.

When everything works right, hot media can have tremendous impact. But when one thing goes wrong -- a video stutter, a brief audio dropout, an equipment shadow falling across an actor's face, an actor forgetting his lines -- the illusion is lost. The finely polished surface calls attention to the slightest imperfection.

NOTE: Images may not be in the original. Section Two is a modified version of material sourced here:

<http://www.eastgate.com/HypertextNow/archives/ProductionValues.html>





## SECTION TWO (a)

### [Big Budget Equals High Production Values]

In the movie industry, the quality of a film is referred to as its “production value.” Films with a higher [budget](#) will usually have a high production value, because of the greater investment of resources. It is the goal of most movie makers to make films that are stylish, attractive, and use high quality special effects in combination with exotic locations. These films can be quite costly to make, representing a major gamble on the part of potential investors.

In some cases, films are deliberately made with a low production value, because the campy aspect of cheap movies is enjoyed in some genres. “B Movies,” as they are called, are characterized by unrealistic special effects, poor continuity, and grainy film. In some cases, these films are enjoyable to watch and often fun to make as well. Low budget film making is an art form, and especially in the 1990s when individuals could easily record and distribute video media, it became quite popular.

Most moviegoers expect a high production value when they go to the theater, however, and as a result, Hollywood directors make an effort to achieve realistic looking effects and sophisticated camera shots. Big budget films often use unique locations, stellar special effects, and sophisticated technology to create what they hope will be a crowd pleasing film. In addition, many big name actors will increase the production value of a film.

Many low budget filmmakers work to achieve the look of a high production value film, either by investing a great deal of resources in one or two scenes, or using various tricks of the trade to enhance the quality of the movie. These tricks include playing with camera angles, relying on a strong script, using lesser known character actors, and integrating unique lighting techniques.



Using old skills in a novel way may increase a movie's production value, making it ultimately more appealing to investors.

In order for a film to succeed commercially, it usually requires a high production value unless the film makers have made a conscious artistic decision to go for the look of a low production value film. As a result, potential producers and investors like to be assured that the movie they are financing will meet this criteria, resulting in a major return at the box office. Many filmmakers provide investors with a [proof of concept](#), showing how the movie will be presented and how novel techniques will be used. This is often the case with movies that rely heavily on digital elements.

Ultimately, high production value is the result of a combination of factors, including a strong script, good acting, [cinematography](#), and special effects. A determined filmmaker can make an excellent film in a basement with the right techniques, although the millions of dollars behind big budget movies usually make it easier.

NOTE: Images may not be in the original. Section Two (a) is a modified version of material sourced here: <https://www.wisegeek.com/what-is-a-high-production-value.htm>

---

## SECTION THREE

### The Low Budget [Indie] Film and Production Values

By [Noam Kroll](#)

**It's easier than ever to make a low-budget film with high production value, yet so many filmmakers still create films that look unpolished.**

More often than not, poor production value on independent [indie] films is a result of putting emphasis and effort in the wrong places, not as a result of not having enough money. **For instance, a filmmaker may spend weeks and weeks dwelling over their camera choice, but spend little to no time focusing on their audio setup.** It's not that one element is more important than the other, but it is important to thoroughly focus on each and every facet of the process so the film can have a solid foundation on which to stand. There are literally hundreds of elements that are overlooked on low-budget films, but

Guys,  
in general, in films,  
production values are  
inversely related to  
verisimilitude.

—Instructor

the 5 that I've outlined below are some of the most common misses, and in my opinion some of the simplest to remedy.

## Locations

Often times independent films will limit their locations severely as a means to keep costs down as much as possible. While this may in fact help to save a bit of money, it can also make a film feel very hollow and cheap. There may be some specific instances where a film needs to take place in a single location, but for the most part if you are making a film that takes place in multiple locations, try not to consolidate them (out of convince) to the point where it starts to look like a stage play. *If you have a 7-minute scene in one single location, it is going to feel really tired and boring by the end (unless your dialogue is absolutely mesmerizing), yet if you were to simply break that 7-minute scene up into two scenes and show it across two locations, it would instantly make the film feel more substantial and engaging.*

## Camera Stabilizers

Nothing screams "cinematic" more than beautiful, stabilized camera movement. The type of camera movement you choose to use will depend on your specific film and the aesthetic that you are going after, but generally speaking there is nothing that adds more production value to a scene or sequence than a nice fluid camera-move. For instance, let's assume you are introducing a new character in a scene. You can use a slider or dolly to reveal that character and this will immediately give the scene more power as you draw the viewer into the moment, as opposed to just cutting to that character from a tripod shot (or handheld).

Guys,  
verisimilitude in cinema refers to the quality, within the context of the film, of believability by being "realistic"—*from the perspective of the film viewer*—which is a prerequisite for the "suspension of disbelief" (which in turn is a prerequisite for the appreciation of films).

—Instructor

## The Hair Light

It goes without saying that it is crucial for you to place a premium on lighting when producing or directing a film, but one of the most overlooked lights on lower budget productions is the hair light. **For those of you that don't know, a hair light (also called a rim light, or edge light) is commonly placed behind and above your talent, and is directed at the back of their head.** It

creates a beautiful and subtle glow around the edge of their hair that separates them from the background.

Traditionally, audiences are used to seeing this technique employed on higher budget films, and since so many low budget films neglect to use a hair light, when you are able to implement one on your shots, it really shows. Not all styles and genres are going to call for the use of a hair light, but most can work really well with one. And achieving this look can be quite easy – in fact you don't necessarily even need a light at all. For example, if you're shooting outside in the day time, you can use a reflector board from behind to add an edge to your talent and separate them from the background.

## The Post-Audio

We all know that capturing quality audio on set is integral to making a good film, but how you treat the audio in post is just as important. **The slightest tweaks when mixing your audio can make a world of difference in the way the audience perceives the scene and the film as a whole.** For example, if you have two characters driving along in a car and their audio sounds really flat (because the car is so padded inside), then adding a little bit of reverb to the dialogue track can make the entire scene come to life.

But it's not just dialogue editing/sweetening that needs your attention though – you also need to pay close attention to other elements like sound design and foley. It doesn't need to cost you anything to go out and record a phone ringing or a door slamming, all it takes is a little bit of effort and time – but in the end these little details can make your film feel so much more polished and complete.

Imagine watching one of your favorite films with no sound design, effects, or foley in it... It wouldn't even come close to providing you with the same experience. So do whatever you can to pay attention to detail during the post-audio stage (with regards to dialogue, mixing, and foley), and you will





increase your films value dramatically.

## Color Grading

Having a strong knowledge of color is fundamental to visual storytelling, as it subtly creates a mood for your audience and allows them to subconsciously understand the world they are immersed in. Most filmmakers recognize this fact and do attempt to do some of color processing on their film, however they often don't fully understand the difference between color correction and color grading. *Many filmmakers inadvertently choose to just color correct their film, but never really grade it to give it a look and feel of it's own*, which can end up leaving their film feeling somewhat unfinished.

*Color correction always needs to be done first*, and is essentially the process of matching the color temperature and contrast of individual clips to achieve a consistent appearance. Only once this is done, can the color grading stage can begin – and it's here where the visual tone of the film is set. Color grading will allow you to control the sensory experience of the audience by making scenes feel warm and inviting, cool and bleak, or any other variation in between.

One popular technique that many films utilize to achieve a higher production value is the 'blockbuster look'. Essentially this is the technique of pushing the shadows to the blue side of the color spectrum, and the mid tones and highlights to the orange side. This allows for skin tones to feel warm and pleasant, while shadows feel cooler and unsettled – ultimately creating a nice amount of color contrast in the image.

NOTE: Images may not be in the original. Section Three is a modified version of material sourced here: <https://www.premiumbeat.com/blog/5-ways-to-give-your-low-budget-film-more-production-value/>