

## A Short & Comprehensive Guide to Short Film Funding

Hello, hello.

Hope you're well.

My name is Mickey: I'm a writer/director, and through that - because for a while, no one will let you write and direct unless you make it happen yourself: I produce. In 2021 I founded my own production company Look Aside Films after working for a number of film and theater collectives. At Look Aside, our aim is developing and producing original films and other content that innovates and advances storytelling.

I've been making short films for a few years now and I must preface all this by saying, there are many who understand the business of shorts far better than I do. But - I do think I've learned a lot, not more than most people who similarly to me have been making shorts for a few years, but I think a lot of people who've been making shorts for a few years aren't, for a number of reasons, wanting to share what they've learned. There's too much gatekeeping in this industry - as there is in any industry; film is a business after all and any business is generally incredibly cut-throat. I'm not writing this as some magical guide to success and I'm not really spilling any crazy industry secrets - this information is available out there, I've learned it myself through a lot of research and trial and error, but it's scattered amongst a plethora of misinformation and otherwise useless advice. So, this guide will not serve as some flawless blueprint to making your short - that does not exist, you need to make your own blueprint, it's the only way any of it is going to work - but it might ease your search and give you ideas and different avenues to pursue.

Look Aside is now slowly transitioning to making features and weirdly, I wouldn't say (so far!) sourcing funding for a feature is *much* more difficult than sourcing funding for a short, even though it's *a lot* more money. Because here's the thing about shorts - there's absolutely no return of investment. Your short will not make money, that's as close to a fact as anything in this industry. Shorts are made for a number of reasons, including creative expression, practice, building a portfolio and a reputation, and they are an amazing journey for an artist, but from an investment point of view, they make no sense. Still, there are ways, but it's difficult. We're trying to sort funding for a short at the

moment - one of our more expensive projects we've ever aimed to tackle - and it's proving difficult. Because who will just give you 30K to spend on something when the chances of them seeing that money back is close to 0? When making a feature, you can prove return of investment, you can make a detailed marketing and business plan, you probably have a bunch of shorts behind your back to prove your creative worth. When making a short, more often than not, you're going up to a person or an organization and basically saying *hey, I have all these ideas and I know I can be great, so can I have a bunch of money to prove myself?* You maybe have all the ideas and you maybe can make it great, but it's a big gamble.

It's unfortunate, but it's true - this takes time and effort. You really need to prove your worth and your creative vision because, at the end of the day, when someone, whether it be an individual or an organization, is funding your short, they are not really investing in the short, they are investing in *you*. And there are thousands more people out there who want the exact same thing, so you need to be more savvy than them: both creatively *and* (this is important) you need to understand the business.

This guide is for those who are currently in earlier stages on their producing journey (or maybe you're writing/directing, but want/need to learn about this stuff). Maybe you've made a few no-budget shorts, maybe you're just thinking about starting this entire process now, maybe you're struggling to even begin, maybe you want to direct and producing your own thing just makes sense - I hope this helps in that case. If you're already an established producer or have been in the shorts game for a while, you probably know most of these things already.

First, I want to differentiate a few different types of shorts, budget-wise, one might be producing.

First, we have the no-budget first/second/third ever short film. Something up to 1K. In my experience, the way to go here is self-funding. You don't necessarily need to put in 1K, you could put in £300 or even nothing. These shorts are fantastic for practice and for building up a portfolio. I've seen many filmmakers make 'cheap-looking' shorts that I think are amazing and I immediately think those people could definitely progress really far in their career. I think it's important to note here that you maybe shouldn't aim for that cinematic look with this short or even go for a traditional narrative short. You can

do a high-quality documentary or documentary or found-footage film or audio-visual project or shoot the thing on your phone - the 'look' of the film doesn't really matter in this case, to be honest - this is about proving your creative vision and developing your voice. This is also not a festival film - believe me, I thought these sorts of films could get into festivals when I started making them - but they just can't. It's just the reality of the business. Just release it out there.

Then, mid-budget, something between 3K and 7K. I love these shorts - you can pay a crew (not their deserved rates, but you can pay them *something*), you can have a full 2-4 day shoot, you can invest in gear, locations, actors, etc. These are a great step-up and can be vital for your career. Making one or two of these is necessary, in my experience, for moving up the ladder. These are also absolutely the most difficult films to fund - at this point, you probably don't have anything 'big' in your portfolio, so this is really the first time someone is banking on you: that you can take this money and make a high-quality product with it. These shorts can absolutely go to festivals, *if* they are great.

Then we have those 15K-30K shorts. A lot of shorts you see at festivals or winning awards are in this budget range. These are more often than not organization-funded and difficult to fundraise unless you have a few things going for you already that prove your 'worth'. These are kind of the pinnacle of short film moviemaking - a lot of directors or producers will make a few of these and then move to feature. These are absolutely festival projects - in fact, festivals do tend to prefer shorts in this budget-range, for better or for worse.

There is a final category here - those high budget shorts between 50K and 100K. I won't talk about those because, in my opinion, honestly, that budget makes no sense for a short. If one has 100K, I absolutely would not recommend investing that into one 20-minute project - I would either make five shorts for 20K or make a micro-budget feature. It's just too much money to distribute on one piece of film that won't really give that much of a return. Five 20K shorts will probably give a much better return, both creatively and career-wise.

Okay, now that we've gotten that out of the way: how the hell do you get the money?

## 1. Self-funding.

I spoke a little bit about this above. The easy way to make a short is you just pay for it yourself. A few catches here: first, obviously you need to have the money and a lot of people don't. Sure, maybe you have savings, but is it smart to put, like, 7K of your own money, that rainy day fund, into a short that might not lead anywhere?

In my opinion, you *should* self-fund, but only those starting projects - anything in the £100-£1000 range. It's unlikely someone serious or an organization will give you 500 bucks to make a short - maybe a family friend might or you could crowdfund (I'll get to that) - but realistically, investing that money yourself is a good idea because it motivates you to do well. At the end of the day, it's your vision, reputation, *and* money on the line.

By the way - I know this isn't easy. When I started doing this, I didn't have 1K to blow on a short and the idea was terrifying - that was rent for two months! But it's possible - you have to be a little stupid and a little reckless, but it's possible.

## 2. Crowdfunding

A lot of people crowdfund a short and there are a lot of benefits to this, but there are also a lot of cons. And it's a difficult process, for two main reasons.

First, you need to be managing a marketing campaign. This isn't impossible and plenty of people do a fine job at it - there are companies that even specialize in this - but it's no easy feat. If you think you'll put your short on Kickstarter and magically, a bunch of rich people will give you money *simply because they have it*, that probably won't happen. It *does* happen *sometimes* - I've seen shorts on Kickstarter get funded this way - someone wealthy sees the project and anonymously contributes a lot - but it's very rare. Which is a nice segway into reason two why crowdfunding is a difficult process - unless you know *a lot* of wealthy individuals yourself, you probably need to get featured by the platform of your choice. And that's quite difficult, you need a solid project that people really like and that the *platform* really likes. And even then, full funding is not guaranteed. I worked on a short once that got featured on Kickstarter and that only ended up benefiting us a few hundred bucks from strangers.

There are also a thousand variables and details when it comes to crowdfunding (really, this is deserving of its own guide one day) that you need to take into consideration. For example, if your short is a horror it will get funded a lot easier on a crowdfunding platform - investors there just like that genre more. Drama, not so much. Or if you have secured a few thousand pounds already - maybe a family friend promised these to you *before* you launched your campaign and then contributed *once* the campaign was live - then it's more likely to get a few thousand more because investors see that someone already believes in the project.

But if you're starting from 0, it can be really tough. Not impossible - but prep here is everything. You need to package your project perfectly, present the film beautifully, be smart and savvy, and most importantly, have a great idea and a great execution plan.

I've found that crowdfunding is really useful in the 1K-5K range. Anything above that, it gets tricky and you need to have a previously thought of plan if you're working in that range. Prep is everything. It's a campaign you're building and you need to focus heavily on that - don't just treat it as some side hustle that will showcase your project to a bunch of wealthy individuals. There are plenty of great detailed crowdfunding guides out there - take a look.

I must also mention that *when* you crowdfund, in terms of timing in your personal career, is also important. Usually (not always), you only get once shot at this funding method because: say you know a bunch of people who would all donate 100 pounds to your short. They do, and you get 2K-3K and you make the film. Then, if you launch another campaign in a year, are they going to contribute again? They might, but probably they won't - in my experience, friends and family will help you out once, that first time you go for it, but then are less inclined if it keeps happening again and again and again.

Of course, you could also gain a dedicated following through the platform the first time you crowdfund. I spoke to a producer once who specializes in high-budget shorts and asked him how he keeps getting 50K-100K for shorts again and again - and he said, it's because the first time he crowdfunded, Kickstarter ranked him top of their list, a lot of people saw the project and contributed a lot of money, then he successfully made the

short, and then when he was crowdfunding again, he just contacted the same people - they trusted him now and were wanting to dedicate more money for further projects. He said that every time he makes a new campaign now it gets funded quicker than the last - because more and more people trust him every time. I will mention that this producer preps incredibly well for every campaign and also has an extensive portfolio behind his back, so investors are more likely to trust him. But usually, you've got one shot at a proper campaign (again, not guaranteed, but a usual scenario), so think smart about when you want to take that shot.

### 3. Product placement

I've seen this has become *trendy* counsel and a bunch of freelance producers that sell courses feature this as solid advice.

This is not solid advice. I'm only including this in the list because many seem to think this is a good path towards funding, and I'm here to promise you, it is not.

Companies will not give you money to feature their product in your short. When you think about it, it makes no sense they would. Your short will *maybe* go to a festival where it will be seen by a couple hundred people. If you're very lucky and very good, your short might get picked up for short film distribution or make Vimeo Staff Picks and then it will get seen by a couple hundred thousand people max.

From a company perspective, the chances of that happening are very low (because they are, statistically, very low) so it makes no sense for them to give you money to feature their products/services. They might send you products to use for free - maybe - I've had this happen before by the nicest man ever - I cold emailed his company and he gave us this *incredible* chess board and a bunch of jewelry to use in the film - but he's an exception to the rule because he's an angel on earth.

People give this advice, I think, because this is common with features, but features are different. It's very possible to get funding for a feature through product placement because you'd have a more solid plan of distribution i.e. for an advertiser, it makes more sense to purchase an advertisement spot that a lot more people would probably see.

If you think I'm being a negative Nancy here, trust me, I speak from experience - when I was starting to fund my first 6K short - remember, that's the toughest project to fund - I cold emailed 1100 people and companies specifically pitching product placement opportunities to them. I got around maybe 70-80 responses, which might seem like a lot, but when all of them (besides one!) found out where their products will *actually* get seen (film festivals, hopefully), they all backed out.

Now, this was earlier on in my career and if I attempt to source funding through product placement now, I might have a bit more success because I know how to pitch better and I know who to go to better. But still - I doubt it would lead to much. You might be able to swing product placement if you're a big name of course, but this guide is for those starting out. For those, I recommend you do not go down this path as at best, you could get some free beverages, but nothing more. You could definitely learn how to structure a bomb email though, so there are benefits of course.

#### **4. Institutions / Grants**

A big one.

The BFI is an amazing institution that genuinely focuses a lot of their time and resources on funding and developing a variety of shorts. I imagine from their perspective, this develops the UK film sector, but also nourishes new talent that might be the next big thing and that might make the next award-winning feature. But in short, for a variety of reasons, the BFI is awesome - I genuinely mean that.

You could always apply to get funding from the BFI. Obvious choice - wanna make a film, get the Film Institute for help. There are a few catches, of course. A recommendation or a connection to someone 'important' works wonders, but if not, you probably need both the writer/director and the producer to have already been officially selected in a good festival.

The BFI usually funds the majority of your budget, often times 15K-25K, so this is where that 5K-7K short can do wonders - if you manage to make that really well and get it into a good festival, then BFI funding is more likely, I imagine. I haven't personally ever

gotten BFI funding, I've also never applied (yet), but I have a lot of friends and colleagues who have. They all say the BFI is wonderful to work with and nurture talent and creativity really positively, but of course, being chosen to get funding is no easy feat. Again, you'd need a solid portfolio, a really good project, and a plethora of documents. The BFI Short Film Fund is no easy application and if you do it, you need to take it seriously.

I'd personally recommend going to the BFI once you've done a few things already and have some experience under your belt (unless, of course, the BFI themselves or someone connected to them reaches out to you, then go for it of course!). I've produced 7-8 shorts and wrapped a feature and I'm just now starting to think about getting seriously involved with the BFI. Truth is, for them to take you seriously, you need something to prove yourself with. They will rarely fund anything solely based on the idea or the writer/director, regardless of how good either of those things might really be.

The big problem in the UK specifically is that the BFI is really the only institution that gives grants. They have plenty of opportunities available, but they are all under the same umbrella - The British Film Institute. This is a massive issue in my opinion - we need more independent film funds, but that's a topic for a whole other day. There are a few more funds out there, like the Pears Film Fund or Genesis, but they are indeed very few and they don't offer as much support as the BFI. So if you want to go the grant route, BFI is the really obvious choice (oftentimes: the only choice) and you should take great care and responsibility with your application. Also, don't lie to yourself: are you at a point in your career where you can handle and *should* have 25K for a short? If yes, awesome, if no, then that's not a bad thing - go and make some low budget shorts, develop your voice, just make more stuff - the more you make, the easier it gets, at least in my experience.

Look Aside *will* open an independent film fund someday. I hope sooner rather than later, but you have my word it will happen eventually, so keep an eye out.

## **5. Private investors**

This might seem overwhelming, but I promise you, it's not. In my personal experience - and also in the experience of a lot of my friends and colleagues - this is the best way.



Firstly, working with private investors can often speed the process along - you don't necessarily need to make a campaign or prepare a plethora of documents (you should prep those anyway, by the way). What you need to do is create and nurture a good business relationship. I can promise you that almost every start-up production company in the UK right now has at least one or two angel investors behind them who are funding most of their projects.

The million dollar question is how you find these people.

This is what I used to do. I'd go on Kickstarter or other platforms and look at which projects were trending. Then, I'd check if they have an associate or executive producer pledge and I'd check if someone has donated that amount. More often than not, someone had.

Now, most platforms don't show who donated how much for privacy reasons *but* most projects / companies have social media pages where they post *thank yous* to those who've supported them. So if you see that *someone* donated 1K to some project, but you can't see their name, if you go to the project's social media page, you'll find that information almost always.

Then, what I'd do is I'd go on IMDB Pro (an absolutely *vital* tool - get it immediately if you're serious about doing all this) and search the name of the person. Sometimes, they have their email right there and that's awesome, but sometimes, finding their contact takes a bit of time and research.

But here is where it gets interesting.

If say, John donated 1K to a project, then John probably donated 1K to a bunch of other projects - it's just what John does. You can go to John's IMDB and find those projects. Open up the projects, then see all the *other* executive and associate producers listed. Sometimes, it's around 7-8 people - those are more potential investors.

And here's the cool thing. Each of those 7-8 people have *also* invested in a bunch of other projects. If you find Samantha because she worked on *Deadly Assassin 4* with

John, open up Samantha's IMDB, see what other projects she's worked on - then open up those projects, go to the producers tab, then boom - Samantha has also worked with Gary, Sarah, James, and Lizzie on *Into the Woods*. Open up Gary, Sarah, James, and Lizzie's profiles. See the projects they've worked on. Oh, Lizzie has worked on *Back in the Game* with Nick, let's check out Nick. You can work this into an endless cycle and make a long extensive list. Not everyone will have their email on there, so make a list only of people you can actually reach.

Also - make sure these are independent investors. On IMDB, some people will be a part of a production company - I wouldn't reach out to them (more info below). With this method, try to find individuals who invest in movies, not organizations.

Then get emailing. Email everyone individually - do not do template emails. Be honest and frank and transparent - I find that when asking for investments, it's always best to just put all cards on the table as people want to know who they're *really* working with and what that person *really* wants.

And you need to be aware of course, this is not some magical fountain of unlimited money. Everything that you should do usually still applies - you need to have a solid strategy, a solid team, a great script, a bunch of materials prepped already (more below) and most importantly (and often something that gets overlooked) - you need to be a good person.

It sounds funny and obvious, but I really mean this - this is vital. Do not ask for more money than you need so you can pay yourself extra. Do not over-budget just because you can. Do not cheat, lie, scam, or steal - and you *really* need to ask yourself, *am I doing these things?* Because I've met a lot of people who *think* they're not doing these things, but really, they kind of are, and not only is it morally not right, on a business level, it just ends up blowing in their faces more often than not. Why are you doing this whole film thing? Do you want money or do you want to make movies? You can want both, but at least in the early stages in your career, you need to be aware that you won't really make that much money for a little while. Accept that and work to change it, but don't mess with people who trust in you. You need to understand - this is someone's earnings you're playing with. No matter how much money someone has, even if it's

millions, it's still their earrings - so treat that with respect and always have that on your mind. Treat all investments, no matter how small, with gratitude.

Truth is, you'll email a lot and get very few responses and a lot of them will be rejections. Because maybe it's just not the right time for that person on the other end, maybe they are not interested in your project, maybe they're not interested in you - all of that is possible and all of it is okay because if you keep reaching out, then you'll eventually find someone. I had to send 700 emails before I found someone to fund that first 6K short.

And please - beware of sharks. As many amazing and generous people there are out there, there are equally as many sharks. There are people out there who will want to take advantage of you or your talent or your vision - or more often than not, they'll want something back, they'll want favors from you and treat you as an employee and not as someone who's legitimately in business with them. There are many people who will ask you to sign crazy contracts - do not do that just because money is on the table. Money will come, I promise you. But if you start off the wrong way, it will happen a lot harder, and it will be really difficult to get out. Trust your gut and proceed with caution.

I've personally been incredibly fortunate - or maybe I've trusted my gut, or maybe I've been subconsciously conscious, or maybe I've simply been lucky - and have always ended up working with people, on the money side of things, that are truly nothing short of incredible. Every single EP I've worked with, whether they contributed £500 or 5K or a lot more - they've all been amazing and they've all treated me with respect. But trust me - I know a lot of horror stories. Sharks are out there and often, they don't reveal themselves until later. So please, do your research, ask around, and make smart decisions.

Here's the thing, too - finding your people will get easier down the line. You'll probably reach a stage in your career where you're only reaching out to people you've previously worked with. That doesn't mean they'll fund your project again, but hey, at least you won't have to spend 8 hours on IMDB all day every day.

## **6. Production Companies**

You could also pitch your project to different production companies with the aim of working with them on the development side of things. This is more something a writer/director would do, not a producer, as presumably independent producers aim to do all that themselves.

This is possible, but difficult and usually slightly unrealistic - a lot of production companies will only work on short film projects where they personally know the writer/director and take on new projects based on recommendations only. Most production companies do not accept unsolicited scripts for legal reasons - we don't, for example, even though I love to read people's scripts - and you'll find it difficult to get in the room for a meeting. Making friends and knowing people is everything here; when I was starting out, I never managed to pitch to a production company off a cold email and I don't think I know anyone who has. I know some people who've had their scripts produced through a production company, but they've been contacted by the company first or they've gotten a meeting through a recommendation.

To be honest, I don't advise doing this. Companies usually have a very full slate and if they have the time and energy to produce something new, they probably have an endless stack of scripts already in the back end waiting for that one slot to free up. You could get your project on that list, but again, it's nearly impossible to do that through a cold call or a cold email.

### **Some final thoughts:**

Throughout this whole process you should have a secure team, a polished script, a pitch deck, a synopsis, a logline, possibly a business plan (if not typed out, then at least in your head), along with any other materials you think your project specifically needs, like a preliminary budget, preliminary shooting schedule, mood deck - there are a plethora of documents you'll need and want to prep. Maybe I'll make a guide on those too, one day, if all goes well. Let me know if that might be helpful?

I think before you start this whole making-a-short-and-funding-it process you should also establish *to yourself* why you're doing this. Why are you making this film? Is this short a sort of stepping stone for you, are you building up a portfolio to then try and make a

feature down the line? Proof of concept? Practice? You love shorts? You love film? You simply want to create?

There is no wrong reason really, but you should treat your project with the respect it deserves. Making a short should never be a means to an end - I learned this the wrong way. I never really wanted to make shorts when I first started directing, I always wanted to make features - and this is why a bunch of my shorts are not really that good - I never really put my heart into them, they were sort of something I always wanted to just get through. But then eventually I fell in love with shorts too, I fell in love with this particular moviemaking medium, and when I truly *wanted* to make a short film because that's what my story needed - then when the stuff I made was pretty good. So always give your project 100% - even if it's a stepping stone. The way you do one thing is the way you do everything. A film is your baby - regardless if you're writing, directing, or producing, it's just co-parenting then - so treat it with all the love and care in the world.

I've spoken a little bit about 'connections' and 'people you know' - a lot of people think you meet these people or make these 'connections' through networking events. That doesn't happen most of the time. There's not a single person I've worked with, and I mean *seriously* worked with, that I haven't had *some sort of* personal bond or friendship with beforehand. I think a lot of people think connections are simply who you meet, but really, your 'connections' are the friends you make along your journey. If you go to an event with the sole purpose of meeting someone important, everyone can smell that on you. But if you go to have fun, if you simply want to meet more human beings working in the industry you love, if you're yourself, then it gets a lot easier. There's no magic way to 'making connections' in any industry - you just need to go out there, do a bunch of stuff, and through that, make a bunch of new friends. If you want something out of someone, they can sense it, so try and change that mindset. Try to meet people because you *want* to, not because you *have* to, as more often than not the people who actually end up helping you do it because you're close and because you like each other, not because you structured that first cold email really well.

And lastly, I'll say this - which is something I touched upon in the beginning of this guide, but maybe I should've expanded on it then too because now you've spent a bunch of time reading all of this, *but* - take everything I said with a grain of salt. Maybe I missed something - maybe your path is different. Maybe you can revolutionize and if you can,

you should. At the end of the day, I'm not Jerry Bruckheimer or David Heyman. I've just started doing this only a few years ago and yes, in that time I do think we've done really well here at Look Aside, but we're barely just beginning. We've *just* started focusing on features; it still sometimes takes us months, sometimes years of planning to find funding for a short. The fact that I know (or I think I know?) all these avenues doesn't mean anything. It's never easy and everyone's path is different, so please, do your own thing. I hope this helped, and please let me know if it did, but at the end of the day - I'm on the same wheel you are. I genuinely do believe that if we all share knowledge, if we're all just a little bit kinder and more helpful to each other, then we can make the wheel turn faster than ever.

Hope this helped. Thank you all. Love you all.

- Mickey