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Planet Trial and Error: A Student's Guide to Film Preproduction

Zach H. Varnum
Southeastern University - Lakeland

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Planet Trial and Error: A Student's Guide to Film Preproduction

Zach Varnum
Southeastern University

Author Note
Zach Varnum, Department of Communication, Southeastern University.
Abstract

This article highlights the importance of preproduction to the filmmaking process and provides a series of steps and guidelines meant to aid student filmmakers in the preproduction phase of their own films. The research was gathered from various filmmaking textbooks of note and from the personal experiences of the author during the making of his capstone film project.

*Keywords*: Preproduction, filmmaking, student
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Planet Trial and Error: A Student’s Guide to Film Preproduction

We’ve all seen bad movies, and all filmmakers, even the great ones, have made at least a handful. That, if for no other reason, is because all filmmakers have to start somewhere. They have to be beginners. Learning to make films is like learning how to do anything else: mistakes are absolutely inevitable, and essential. This is especially true of film because it is an absolutely collaborative effort. Film schools are big boxes full of beginners who, not only don’t know what they’re doing, but also have to not know what they’re doing together. That’s a big part of why so many student films are bad. However, some student films are exceptionally good, which couldn’t be true if not for one thing: preproduction.

Almost every mistake that is made with a film boils down to a lack of preparation. There is no such thing as a perfect film, or a perfect film set, but mistakes can be minimized through good preproduction. This is something that I, like so many other filmmakers before me, have had to learn the hard way. My goal here is to save you a bit of heartache by providing you with a guide on how to prepare for your shoot. A film should never be made if it has not already been made in preproduction, and this document will show you exactly what that means. I have included everything I learned from the textbooks and from making my own 12-minute capstone film. I’ve made mistakes, just like you will, but the sooner a filmmaker can learn how to prepare a film for production the better.

I began preproduction of my film, Planet Trial and Error in February of 2015, about ten months before the capstone due date. That probably seems like a frighteningly big timeframe, especially if you’re still writing the script for a film due for a festival deadline in less than a month. It might be a good idea to wait until next year to submit that film. It’s too late for a rewrite when audience members are laughing at lines you wrote that aren’t supposed to be funny.
If you wait until next year’s festival, those lines don’t need to be heard or read by anyone except you and a few trusted proofreaders. Remember that last word: proofreaders. Cherish it.

It can be frustrating to put a project on hold, but it can make a huge difference for the better that is completely worth the wait. The first film I ever made was supposed to be set in a cabin in the woods. If I had waited another year to make the film, I could have taken my time and found a house that was perfect for the spooky mood I was going for. Instead, I started scouting for the location about a week before I wanted to shoot, and the film ended up taking place in a perfectly nice and not-spooky suburban home. That is just one way that the film could have been better. A film student’s directorial debut deserves a little leeway, but it is perfectly possible for skill to shine through inexperience, and good preproduction is the way to pull that off. Preproduction is like an extension of the writing process because a good finished product comes from multiple stages of refinement. It’s hard work, which is why a lot of film students try to avoid it. The stacks of paperwork, which I’ll be talking about soon, are no fun, but they are essential. A filmmaker’s willingness to do all the boring stuff, to endure the pain of preproduction, is the mark of a story worth telling.

This guide will take you from the first inkling of an idea for a film to the first day of shooting. You’ll see all of the steps I took to make my capstone, and then you’ll be able to watch the film itself and see how I implemented them. Even if you don’t like the film, at least you’ll see that the work we put in before shooting was hugely beneficial to the production. When you decide to make your own film, know that it has the potential to make everyone proud. Each of the following steps will help you get it there, but it’s important to note that they are not necessarily arranged chronologically. The preproduction process is different for every film, and
oftentimes the steps are all mixed together (Ryan, 2010, p. 55). Problems arise, and the process has to be restructured. The important thing is it all happens with efficiency and confidence.

**Story Development**

The creation of a film typically begins with an idea. It is a truly amazing thing when inspiration strikes, and if the thoughts that come at those moments stand the test of time and get the right kind of attention, they can blossom into a great script and then into a great film. At this stage of filmmaking the possibilities are endless. That's why, when you choose which idea to turn into a film, you have to take great care in order to pick the right one.

Sometimes inspiration comes to nothing because the idea that comes from it isn't good, and that's okay. There is always another idea that will eventually follow the last, and oftentimes you have to weed through dozens of ideas before you think of one that works. When you feel like you have an idea worth producing, make sure that you test it thoroughly. Tell it to as many people as you can, and do research on it. You might find that your idea has been overplayed or won't be appealing to a wide audience (Ryan, 2010, p. 7), or maybe it would make a better feature-length movie than a short film (Munroe, 2009, p. 26). This is okay, too. Move on and wait for the right idea. It's worth it. During the writing process only you have to be passionate about your story, but when the film enters preproduction the whole crew has to share those feelings. Otherwise the film won't be worth their time. A good idea is worth everybody's time.

The story can take a few different forms before it becomes a screenplay. The most basic form is the logline, which is a 1-2 sentence summary of the film (Ryan, 2010, p. 18). This is useful for pitching the idea to prospective crewmembers or to anyone else. Since it's everyone's first taste of your story, the logline should be rewritten and fine-tuned. It should be interesting and easy to understand. The next form the story should take is the synopsis, which is a longer,
more complete summary of the story, usually 2-3 pages long (Ryan, 2010, p. 22). This part of the development process is much closer to the actual writing of the script. It requires a detailed mapping-out of the story and its plot points: beginning middle and end (Field, 1984, p. 90). It, too, should be fine-tuned, interesting, and coherent.

In the case of *Planet Trial and Error* the development phase lasted almost five years. I got the idea when I was in high school and wrote several versions of the script before deciding to give it the form it now holds. The process became more official in the spring of 2015 when I started the Capstone Development class at Southeastern University. This is when I wrote down the logline and synopsis (see Appendix) and finalized the story structure. The other versions of the story were much longer and had more characters, but I decided that the film would be more likely to succeed if I made the script as simple as possible. The basic premise stayed the same, but it was trimmed down from 30 pages to 12 pages and from a cast of over twenty characters to only three characters. This minimized the number of people involved and the number of shoot-days that would be needed for production, which benefited the film a great deal.

I have always been committed to the concept of *Planet Trial and Error* because the characters' situation holds great significance. Many people can relate to the difficulty of finding purpose in a world that seems to offer few opportunities. I also found the idea attractive because there were not many other films I had seen that have a setting much like it. It provides a unique vehicle for a proven style of comedy that I enjoy working on. All of these things worked together to fuel my ongoing passion for the project, which would continue to be the driving force behind my efforts as the film neared production.

Whatever the reasons you have for investing in your idea, you and the people who help you produce it have to be passionate about it. It's obvious to the audience when a film has been
thrown together, but it’s also obvious when a film has been made by a group of artists that were devoted to a story. If you have an idea that can do that, then it’s time for you to write a script.

**Writing the Screenplay**

Writing scripts is a discipline all on its own, and three pages in no way does it justice. That’s why the first thing you should do, before you write a single word, is to do some research on how it’s done. One of the first things you’ll read about screenplays is that they have a specific format: Courier, 12 pt. font, and a whole other list of specifics. These criteria are important for two main reasons. The first is that they have been fine-tuned to ensure that one page of a screenplay is equivalent to roughly one minute of screen time. The second reason is that professionals ignore screenplays that don’t follow the rules.

Early screenwriters had to arrange the spacing and margins themselves because all they had were typewriters. Now there is software made special for screenwriting that does most of the technical work for you. The most trusted option in the industry is Final Draft, but Celtx is more popular among students because it’s free.

The basic mechanics of a screenplay include the slug line, stage directions, and dialogue (Field, 1984, p. 220). The slug line specifies where and when the scene takes place. If a scene took place inside a train station at 2:00 PM, the slug line would read as follows:

**INT. TRAIN STATION— DAY**

Next would come the stage directions and any dialogue that happens in the scene. Stage directions are written in complete sentences in the present tense, and they extend from margin to margin. If a character named Marvin steps onto a train at the station, the stage direction might read:

**Marvin steps onto the train.**
Screenwriting is both visual and dramatic, so a good stage direction would probably include more details than that (Ryan, 2010, p. 14). For example, one might describe the sound of the train’s engine, the movement of the crowd, or Marvin’s body language. If Marvin accidentally bumps into someone, a line of dialogue might follow:

**MARVIN**

*Sorry about that.*

As you can see, it is fairly easy to write a screenplay that looks good on paper, but quality goes way beyond mechanics.

The most important part of the script is the characters. A script with poorly constructed characters is a poorly constructed script. Every turning point in the plot and every line of dialogue should be influenced by the characters. You should know which ones are the main characters, and you should know exactly what kind of people they are before you write the script (Field, 1984, p. 48). The main character makes the choices that drive the story, and these choices reveal that character’s inner thoughts and feelings. You should know everything about that character, from his/her political views to his/her favorite food. You should know what your characters’ families are like and what their greatest fears are. This way, when it is time for them to speak and act, you know what they would say and do, and what they would not.

In the actual script, the characters have to have a goal because the ending of the story depends on whether or not they achieve that goal (Munroe, 2009, p. 31). The audience has to know what the goal is within the first quarter of the film, or, in the case of short films, the first minute (Munroe, 2009, p. 34). Otherwise they will lose interest. The characters should go through a journey, and they should go through some changes during that journey. It could happen all in one year, or in one moment; across a country, or in a single room. It just has to
happen. Whether they know it or not, that is why audiences watch movies. They want to witness a character’s journey.

Scenes are the building blocks of the script, and each scene has a similar structure to the film as a whole: it has a beginning, middle, and end. Within a scene, the intensity of the situation, or conversation, should rise to a climax and then end, leading to the next scene. The climax of a single scene is called a beat, not to be confused with an acting beat, which is a short pause in line delivery. In the same way that a scene increases in intensity, the overall story should rise toward the beat. The beat either advances the plot or reveals character, and if a scene does not do this it should be cut from the film (Field, 1984, p. 162). A great way to determine if your scenes accomplish this is to write a summary of each one on a note card and lay them out in front of you. This way you can see exactly how they fit into the story, and you can rearrange and edit them as much as you want (Field, 1984, p. 202). Of course this is less useful when writing a film that runs under five minutes, but even a film that short has to be well structured.

Once you have characters and a plot structure that satisfy you, the script is ready to be written and rewritten. There is no such thing as a good rough draft, so you must be critical of your own work. However, you can’t be so critical that you won’t show it to people. Choose two people that you trust to give you good advice and show them your script (Field, 1984, p. 292). Tell them to rip it apart, and don’t be sensitive. Your script needs to change, and it is their duty to tell you how. With every change, with every draft, your script should become smoother, more believable, and more compelling. As you continue to polish it, show it to more people. Show it to your teachers, to film school graduates, or even just to huge movie fans. You can’t follow all of their advice, but you should follow a lot of it. It should also be noted that no one is going to
steal your work or leak your big ending, so don’t even let that enter your mind. It’s not important. The important thing is to let your script be as good as it can be.

As I was writing *Planet Trial and Error* (see Appendix), I found it very helpful to read other scripts of the same genre to see how the professionals do it (Ryan, 2010, p. 3). I used imsdb.com to read the scripts to *Superbad* (2007), *Bad Santa* (2003), *American Pie* (1999), and *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective* (1994), and they provided me with a lot of useful insights. I found that in comedy scripts the stage directions are just as witty as the dialogue and that they reveal emotional content rather than strictly visual information. I used this strategy in my own script, and it helped a lot. I also read the dialogue aloud to myself to see which lines I wanted to keep and which lines could be funnier. *Planet Trial and Error* went through five drafts before it was finalized.

**Script Breakdown**

When the script is complete, the next step is breakdown. This is where the real producing begins, and it’s an integral part of the scheduling and budgeting processes. In the professional world this is the 1\textsuperscript{st} assistant director’s job, but with student projects the producer or director usually does it (Ryan, 2010, p. 58). Script breakdown is comprised of the organization of elements in the script, which is accomplished by highlighting, or tagging, and color coding each element according to its category: script title, page count, slug line info, action, cast, extras, props/special effects, animals, vehicles, stunts, and hair/makeup (Ryan, 2010, p. 60). This is important because it provides a detailed list of items and people that must be brought on set and which ones will be needed for each day. After all of the script’s elements are highlighted, they are recorded on breakdown sheets. Every scene in the script has a breakdown sheet that is divided into a series of boxes used for recording each category of item. Formats for a breakdown
sheet vary according to filmmakers' personal preference. Traditionally, the elements of a script were written by hand into breakdown sheets, but now there are several programs available that fill out the sheets automatically.

One of the more popular preproduction software available is Gorilla. This program allows you to upload a screenplay and structure breakdown sheets however you want. Programs like this are a worthy investment for people who produce films consistently. Automatic breakdown could save hours that would have been spent physically writing out each item onto a stack of papers. Gorilla is an especially user-friendly program that is used in conjunction with a tagging-software called Final Draft Tagger. After uploading the tagged script, only minor adjustments are required for the completion of a thorough collection of breakdown sheets. Such adjustments might include costumes that were not included in the script or props and characters that carry over into the next scene.

I was able to acquire Gorilla software, and it proved to be highly useful during the breakdown process (see Appendix). My script is ten-scenes-long, so I had to make ten breakdown sheets. For *Planet Trial and Error* breakdown was fairly simple because of the simplicity of the scenes, but breakdown for other scripts can be more difficult. For instance, after tagging the elements in the script, translating the tagged elements into breakdown sheets in Gorilla is often ambiguous. It requires a lot of personal judgment because the elements in a script are extremely variable, and the needs of the film are not always explicitly clear from the script alone. A costume designer needs all the information she can get so that she can make informed choices on the characters' wardrobe. This is true of any production department, so any elements in the script that leave room for imagination must be explained and listed very specifically in the breakdown sheets (Moore, 2011, p. 188).
It is also important to anticipate how certain elements will be captured during production. For example, it is not a given that all sound effects in a scene can be captured during a take. This is why Foley art is such an integral part of filmmaking. For a student film, as with any film, these tasks take time to accomplish and must be planned out accordingly. In *Planet Trial and Error* there is a scene where the audience will hear the impact of a baseball bat against someone’s head. It was impossible to capture that sound on set because we couldn’t really hit an actor on the head, so that sound effect was totally dependent on postproduction sound. That is why it was included in that scene’s breakdown sheet. If each element in the script is tagged and logged properly, subsequent stages of preproduction will go more smoothly.

Sometimes breakdown brings elements to light that aren’t feasible for the film (Ryan, 2010, p. 80). These might include dangerous stunts, expensive equipment, or any number of other things. A script might call for a song or a trademarked item that would require licensing to use, which is very costly. It’s best to keep all manner of intellectual property out of your film (Moore, 2011, p. 188). Revision is a constant in filmmaking, and script breakdown is helpful in making sure those revisions happen.

**Scheduling**

Scheduling is intertwined into almost every other aspect of the film. The number of scenes that can be completed in a day determines how many days it takes to make the film, which determines how much it will cost. This means that great care must be taken in creating the schedule. Seemingly tiny details can mean the difference between finishing the film and suspending production indefinitely.

The two key factors in scheduling a film are cast and locations. The more professional the production the more things will cost, so it is important to get as much done in a day as
possible and to organize shooting days as efficiently as possible (Munroe, 2009, p. 80). However, even if your cast and locations are free, you must still work efficiently out of courtesy to them. If multiple scenes take place on a location, but they are spaced apart in the script, the best course of action is to shoot those scenes back to back so that production can move on from that location. This is called “shooting out” a location. The same practice is used with cast members, and it is a great time saver. Also, if there is a scene that takes place outdoors you should plan for an indoor contingency location that can easily be switched around in case it rains (Ryan, 2010, p. 79). Planet Trial and Error takes place almost entirely outdoors, and our key actor had been flown in from out of state, so contingency locations and pickup days weren’t an option for us. Luckily the weather was beautiful when we shot, but you should plan better than we did if you can help it. Schedule for as much preproduction time as possible so that a solid backup plan can be arranged (Ryan, 2010, p. 151).

While efficiency is very important, it should not be confused with speed. Each scene should be given a realistic amount of time to be completed. It’s common for four pages of a script to take one day to shoot, but this is not a hard and fast rule. Depending on what a script entails, four pages could take far more than one day to complete. It’s much better to overestimate while scheduling than to find yourself short of time on a crucial day of shooting.

Scheduling should occur far in advance of production, but film schedules are almost invariably subject to change. Therefore, a schedule should have a fluid structure to accommodate any sudden variations in the availability of an actor or location (Ryan, 2010, p. 77). This long-standing reality of film production led to the invention of the strip board, which is made up of one large sheet of cardboard and several smaller ones that represent scenes and shoot days. Strip boards are available in digital form, and I used one for Planet Trial and Error.
Scheduling *Planet Trial and Error* was fairly simple because the entire film basically takes place on two locations: the field and the gas station. In the beginning I thought it would be wise to devote two weekends in a row to shooting. This way, none of my student crewmembers would need to skip classes, and we would be able to shoot three pages each day. We solidified the shooting schedule for October 16, 17, 24, and 25, and they of course changed within the week.

During the casting process we found that the best actors available to us were stationed out of state. This ruled out splitting the shoot into two weekends (Moore, 2011, p. 197). Luckily we found out that the 24th and 25th of October fell on Southeastern University’s long fall weekend, giving us three full days in a row during which a student crew could meet unimpeded by classes. If we could get a small crew together for Thursday, we would still be able to break the shoot into four days. We checked with our established cast and crew and they all agreed that the long fall weekend would work, but one of our actors would have to miss Sunday. About a quarter of the film only required the two remaining actors, so we saved those scenes for Sunday. This meant we would shoot in the field on Thursday, at the gas station on Friday and Saturday, and at the field again on Sunday.

Of course, we found out within the next week that the actor missing Sunday had a midterm on Thursday and would only be available in the afternoon. This meant that we would only be able to squeeze in one scene on Thursday. We decided to solve this by shooting the simplest scene in the script that day and split Friday’s shoot between the two locations. The movement of a set between two locations is called a company move (Ryan, 2010, p. 78), and it should be avoided when possible. However, that is the strategy we used in the end, and it worked quite well. Flexibility is key in scheduling, as well as in all other aspects of filmmaking.
Crew

Writing can be a solitary endeavor, but self-reliance is no longer an option when preproduction starts. No matter how strong a single filmmaker's vision, filmmaking is a team effort. A good crew is essential for the film to come out right, and the first member you need is the producer, whose duty is to shepherd production from beginning to end (Munroe, 2009, p. 54). This includes putting together the rest of the crew. A lot of student directors try to do this on their own, but it doesn't work too well. A director's vision most effectively comes to life when he, or she, is surrounded by people who know exactly what they are doing (Munroe, 2009, p. 96), so a very specific list must be made before production so that such people can be found and brought to the set.

*Planet Trial and Error* was written for a straightforward shoot, so its crew needs were fairly basic (Ryan, 2010, p. 12). I was set to be the director, so the first crewmember we had to choose after the producer was the director of photography, or DP. The director of photography is responsible for the look of what is captured on camera, a vitally important role. This means that the DP has to be adept at lighting and camera work and must be up to date on the latest photographic techniques and technologies, so we chose to work with an up-and-coming cinematographer from a professional production company.

Due to our small budget we needed to recruit our fellow film students, who customarily work without pay, for the other positions. About a month and a half before production we sent out a department-wide email calling for willing crewmembers to meet with us and provide us with their contact information. This helped us to acquire several grips, who are responsible for handling equipment on set, and a script supervisor, who is responsible for writing down the data from each take, such as which lens was used and how long the take lasted. The camera assistants
and boom operators were gathered through word of mouth. The specialized positions, namely assistant director and audio supervisor, I sought out myself. The assistant director, or AD, is essential because he is responsible for keeping the rest of the crew on task and on schedule. I chose the AD for this film based on his ability to exude an authoritative presence without coming across as bossy or unkind (Ryan, 2010, p. 169). It also helped that he was one of the tallest people I knew. He turned out to be the perfect choice because he almost single-handedly pushed us through our most difficult day of shooting. We were also lucky enough to bring on a fellow student who is highly experienced at recording audio and who owns her own recording equipment. The gas station proved to be a demanding location, especially when it came to sound, so it was extremely beneficial to have her on set.

If possible, it's great to have a production designer, makeup artist, and costume designer on set. Unfortunately, those resources weren’t available to us, but we had to make sure those bases were covered anyway. I took charge of costume and set design so that the film would have the post-apocalyptic look it needed.

A film crew also needs to be well fed. It is best to assign this duty to someone else, but sometimes you have to handle it yourself. The crew needs good food one way or another because it helps maintain morale and encourages productivity (Munroe, 2009, p. 73). A good rule to follow is that the less you pay the cast and crew, the better the food should be.

Finally, we had to choose who would assist us with the postproduction process. Even though postproduction occurs after principal photography, you should never start filming until you’ve secured people for the jobs it entails (Munroe, 2009, p. 87). Editing is the bare minimum of the work that should occur during postproduction, but it is usually the only thing that happens with student films. This can work sometimes, but it is rare that a film truly functions without a
strong musical score. It is easy to fall in love with your own dialogue, so it’s not uncommon to feel like it stands on its own, but music makes all the difference, and its absence, as well as its presence, should be completely justified by the story. I chose an editor and a musician, one a fellow student and the other an alumnus from Southeastern University, both heavily experienced in their fields. As soon as production was wrapped they were ready to dive into the project and give it the comedic timing that it needed. Aside from music and editing, *Planet Trial and Error* also called for heavy coloring and some animation. After asking around I was put in contact with two SEU students who had the skills necessary for what I was looking for. With these positions secure I finally had a full crew. Later, I called them all together for an informational meeting to ensure that we were all on the same page. Thorough contact must be maintained with the entire crew up to the first shoot day so that nobody falls out of the loop.

**Casting**

It’s sometimes said that 50% of the director’s job is done during the casting process. Casting is difficult, but it can be fun because it’s the first glimpse of the realization of the script. You should never settle on an actor, because it’s painfully obvious to the audience when a role is miscast. If your script calls for a rough-and-tumble, Harrison Ford type, don’t cast the first skinny, bald guy that shows interest in your film. Only cast a skinny, bald guy if that’s already what the character looks like. The actor should become the character, not vice versa.

There are a lot of good actors in the world, but it’s really difficult to get them into your movie if you can’t pay them. Good money attracts good talent. If you’re able to build up a decent budget, you can submit a casting call to a legitimate agency (Ryan, 2010, p. 144). We used Benz, a company based in Tampa, and we got two responses from a great actor and actress who both looked right for the parts. We held Skype auditions with both of them, which went
extremely well, and we knew that these were our actors if they could swing our schedule. In the end only the actress was available, so the search was still on for two actors, one to play Steven and one to play Rick. We held another audition using Orlando Greenroom, but only two actors showed, and neither of them fit what we were looking for. We finally found Steven when the other actor from Benz referred us to one of his friends, whom we auditioned and cast almost immediately.

That only left Rick. We weren’t sure whom we would be able to get because so few actors had responded to our casting calls, and production was getting closer and closer. In the end I decided to go back on my own advice, and alter Rick’s age range to fit another actor I knew. Ultimately, you have to go with what works, even if it means altering your vision, so that’s what I did. We auditioned my roommate, and he was perfect. We made Rick younger, and it ended up working for the story. We had our cast.

**Budgeting**

It’s never too early to start budgeting. Most seasoned veterans of filmmaking can make a ballpark estimate after reading a script just once. After the crew has been listed and the script has been completely broken down, it’s possible to create a more concrete budget (see Appendix). An accurate budget comes from multiple revisions, and it can help ensure that the production has enough money to produce a quality product (Ryan, 2010, p. 95). This step must not be glossed over because a lack of funds can hamstring a film. No one should ever plan on making a professional film without first securing a hefty sum of money.

There is a popular illustration in the film business that reinforces the importance of a well-funded production. The illustration is a triangle with points that represent three characteristics of any given film production: fast, good, and cheap (Ryan, 2010, p. 151). Only
two of these aspects can be achieved in a film at one time. If production is performed expeditiously and with high-quality work, that production is sure to cost a lot of money. One could possibly produce cheap, high quality work at a slow pace, but this hardly ever works because it’s unreasonable to keep a good crew working for weeks and weeks without pay. Such a set is likely to lose most of its manpower within the first few days of filming. If you make a film quickly without spending any money, it won’t be any good. In short, the best approach is to budget honestly and accordingly raise as much money as possible.

Practically speaking, raising money is a difficult process, but practicality is not the only obstacle in producing an expensive film. Seeing that first estimated figure is an emotionally daunting experience for a fledgling filmmaker. My professor’s first guess at the cost of producing *Planet Trial and Error* was $7,000. The word impossible comes to mind. In reality, this is a relatively small budget in comparison to most professional short films (Munroe, 2009, p. 61). As a number, $7,000 is shocking and disconcerting, but it is not unattainable. With the right amount of work and skill, any young filmmaker could raise such an amount. That is why it is important not to be afraid of numbers, especially during preproduction. As each small cost adds up, the overall budget will climb, but this is not a signal to quit. It is a signal to buckle down and face the reality of the undertaking. Acknowledge the cost sooner rather than later, and the film will be unlikely to run short of cash (Munroe, 2009, p. 64).

Attention to detail is key to honest budgeting. Every prop and crewmember must be accounted for (Ryan, 2010, p. 93). I accessed a sample film budget that was extremely helpful in achieving this. This detailed list of costs brought aspects of production to my attention that would otherwise have fallen by the wayside. Although I did not utilize every space, it was good for me to have considered each one because more of the listed items were needed than one might
expect. Including them yielded more peace of mind in the long run than overlooking them would have early on.

A good film requires the work of skilled craftsmen, and their work does not come cheap. It’s not difficult to find cheap labor to fill smaller crew positions, but good actors and a good cinematographer are invaluable commodities (Ryan, 2010, p. 108). $1,000 can mean the difference between great work and really lousy work. Surrounding oneself with people who know what they’re doing is worth every cent that it costs. We hired our cinematographer for a day rate of $300, adding up to $1,200 for a four-day shoot, and our two professional actors took a day rate of $125, costing $1,000 between the two of them. The film wouldn’t have turned out the way it did without them.

Between our professionals, props, costumes, and location fees, we figured we needed to raise $6,000, so we set up an Indiegogo campaign with that goal (Munroe, 2009, p. 84). Since we needed to pay our actors at the end of the shoot we scheduled our funds to be delivered a week before production began (Ryan, 2010, p. 152). We only raised $4,200, but several factors allowed us to make that work. One was that our school provided us with all the equipment we needed to accomplish each shoot day. This is a luxury that doesn’t really exist in professional filmmaking. If it had been necessary for us to pay for equipment rental, our budget would have been at least $1,500 higher. Another factor that helped us was that my parents kindly offered to provide food for the entire shoot. The cost of food accounts for much of a film’s budget because it is imperative that the cast and crew be fed every six hours, and they have to be fed well (Ryan, 2010, p. 114). When your crew works for free, food is their payment, so don’t underpay them. The fact is that filmmakers have to spend a lot of money, and money is in short supply. When it
comes time to make your film, you will have limitations, but if you’re creative with what you have you can make it work (Ryan, 2010, p. 82).

**Writing a Proposal**

Raising money for a student film is difficult, especially when the budget reaches four figures. In the professional world, filmmakers get money from production companies, but student filmmakers have to rely on donations from friends, family, and kind strangers (Moore, 2011, p. 45). The factor that links these two funding arenas is that all filmmakers must convince their beneficiaries that their film is worth funding. This is accomplished through the creation of a proposal package.

A proposal is essentially a sales pitch for a film. It is a document that presents the key information on a potential project, such as genre, runtime (Ryan, 2010, p. 21), storyline (Ryan, 2010, p. 22), and projected budget (Ryan, 2010, p. 37) while also presenting its most marketable aspects and attractive rewards, all toward the goal of giving potential investors as many reasons as possible to contribute. The film must be proven worthwhile, even to those wealthy film-lovers who like nothing better than to support the arts. This is why the proposal document must be both fiscally and aesthetically attractive. A good proposal presents the mood and style of the film as well as the production and distribution plans (Ryan, 2010, p. 52).

In the larger scale arenas of both independent and studio filmmaking, investments are made based on a film’s potential for yielding box office returns. Producers often speculate on this by researching films similar to their project and taking the success of those films into account (Ryan, 2010, p. 21). Monetary returns are virtually nonexistent in the world of student filmmaking, but it’s still a great thing to encourage donations using perks such as DVD copies and on-set experiences. Someone who is eager to donate to a film would probably be interested
in coming on set and watching the production take place. This was pitched in my proposal as a fun experience because *Planet Trial and Error* is a comedy that involves a moderate amount of stunt work.

It's important to consider how best to present all of this information. I chose to send out my proposal in the form of a promotional video because it's much easier to watch a video than to read a document, and my friends and family would instantly be able to recognize me on the video's thumbnail image. I posted it to the film's Indiegogo page and sent a link to all of my parents' contacts using mailchimp.com. I made sure that the video looked professional so that potential donors could trust that I knew what I was doing and was taking the project seriously (Munroe, 2009, p. 74). I set up film equipment in the background, added music, and intercut with images that helped summarize *Planet Trial and Error*. It was corny, but it worked.

Perhaps the thing that bodes best for a film is a strong crew and actors. It makes no sense to give money to a group of young people who don’t know what they’re doing, so it is essential to make clear the level of skill that will be involved with the production (Ryan, 2010, p. 22). Most of the budget for *Planet Trial and Error* was put toward the cast and director of photography, and I made it clear in the proposal that professional crew and actors, coupled with a good story, are a recipe for a good film.

**Finding Locations**

Also paramount to the production value of a film is the locations. The setting of the story must be believable and dynamic. The wrong location will be off-putting for the audience, so choosing the right one requires special effort. A hospital scene shot at a school does not work because everyone knows what a hospital and a school look like. Waiting until the last minute and settling for a bad location is a terrible mistake that is detrimental to a film.
A location must also be visually stimulating. A drab, featureless location is disappointing to the audience and, again, detrimental to the film. A teen’s bedroom should have a lot of personality. No one will believe a room with bare walls belongs to your adolescent leading man. The look of the location should contribute to the look of the movie. Every part of the scene should fit nicely into the frame, which helps move the story along. This can’t be accomplished with whatever place happens to be available. It has to work for the film, just like the cast and crew (Ryan, 2010, p. 205). Misfit locations make for a misfit movie.

*Planet Trial and Error* takes place at an RV in an empty field and at an abandoned gas station. There are no people except for the main characters, and there is no civilization. The locations I chose needed to convey these ideas seamlessly. The ideal location for the gas station scenes would have been an actual abandoned building on an empty road. I told my family exactly what I was looking for, and they gave me plenty of suggestions of where to look (Ryan, 2010, p. 204). We were unable to find an abandoned gas station that had the right look and surroundings, but we did find an operational one that did. I simply wrote a detail into the script that prevented the characters from entering the building. The owners of the place were kind, and very interested in what we wanted to do, and they allowed us to dress up the front of the store with tall weeds I had pulled up from my house. With those details in place we were able to make the location convincing. Unfortunately there was a lot of traffic on our days of shooting, so we had to go through several takes of each scene in order to capture shots and audio without cars driving by. By visiting the location well in advance, we were able to prepare ourselves for these problems (Ryan, 2010, p. 205). My family was kind enough to provide us with the empty field and RV for the other scenes, and those worked out perfectly. The field was quiet and beautiful,
and I was able to dirty up the RV with mud to make it look a bit more weathered than it really was. There were only a few remaining steps to securing all of our locations.

Precautions must be taken to protect both the filmmakers and the owners of the locations. Each owner must sign a location release form, which is a document informing the owners of when the shoot will occur, how much they will be paid, and how their property will be used (Ryan, 2010, p. 207). Make sure that the person signing this form actually has absolute authority over the location. The manager of a location is usually not the owner (Ryan, 2010, p. 208). If there are guns, or anything else that might raise public concern, involved in your film, you should contact local authorities and inform them of what you’ll be doing. Be prepared to pay an officer to oversee the scenes in question (Ryan, 2010, p. 210). Also be prepared to answer to any damages done to the location. You should always leave a place looking better than when you got there, but it’s also a good practice to survey prior damage before shooting (Ryan, 2010, p. 211). Finally, even when everything has been signed off and accounted for, arrange for a backup location because nothing is ever guaranteed (Ryan, 2010, p. 207).

**Director’s Book**

Once all the technical elements are in place, it is the director’s job to execute his, or her, vision for the film. This, too, takes a great deal of preparation. It serves the director well to keep a collection of documents that organize all of his ideas for the story of the film, called the director’s book. This collection contains all manner of documents that back up the director’s choices during shooting, primarily the list of beats, the storyboards, and the look book. The director’s book makes sense of the director’s ideas, which makes for smooth, economical communication between the director and the crew (Munroe, 2009, p. 86).
Director’s Book: List of Beats

The director must have a deep understanding of every scene in the film, whether he wrote it or not, because the director’s job is to guide every other crewmember in bringing the story to life. Key to accomplishing this is finding the beat of each scene.

As mentioned before, the beat of a scene is the point at which the motivation of the characters changes. Just like the film as a whole, each scene should have rising and falling action with a climax in between. That climax is the beat, and each one is part of the driving force that keeps the plot moving. If a scene does not have a beat, it should be removed from the film (Field, 1984, p. 162). This is an important part of the writing process, but cuts are often made late in preproduction and even during production. It is ultimately the director’s duty to ensure that the story is properly crafted. Once this is done, the director can collaborate with the actors and DP so that their creative decisions will be informed by where the story is going.

When it came time to develop the director’s book, identifying the beats of the script was a fairly simple task. I drew diagrams that resemble Freytag’s pyramid, a traditional representation of plot structure, and wrote a one-sentence description of the rising action, the beat, and the falling action at the beginning, peak, and end of the line respectively (Block, 2008, p. 235). For example, the pyramid that represents scene 4 begins: “Rick invites Steven and Gertrude back to the gas station.” There is other dialogue and stage directions that make up the rising action, but the beat comes when Steven stands up and finally decides to go to the gas station with Gertrude and Rick. I put a brief description of this moment at the peak of the pyramid. At the end of the line I wrote, “Gertrude and Steven go to the trailer.” This scene carries a lot of weight in the story because Steven’s reluctance casts a foreboding light on his decision. This makes the beat easy to spot, but some scenes can be so simple that the beat almost
goes unnoticed. The characters’ arrival at the gas station is the shortest scene in the film, but it has a beat because Steven hesitates to follow Gertrude and Rick, which is why the film would not work without it. The beat is an inherent factor in scenes that advance the plot, which makes it an integral part of the director’s book.

**Storyboards**

As the director prepares for production, he must map out each shot well before production begins. This is done in hand-drawn frames, each depicting the characters and objects that will appear in a shot and showing how large they will be in the shot. The resulting collections of drawings are called storyboards.

The creation of a storyboard is for the benefit of both the crew and the director (Brown, 2012, p. 265). Before and during shooting, key crewmembers, primarily the DP, should be able to look at the director’s exact plan for the film. The relationship between the director and DP is indispensible to the execution of the film because the DP must capture the director’s vision on camera. The storyboard should reveal not only the position of the camera and the actors, but also the style of the film. This is not to say that the director should be a master sketch-artist, but the storyboard should be clearly drawn and well thought out. Film is, after all, a visual medium, and a well-crafted storyboard demonstrates the director’s ability to think and communicate visually. It’s one thing to tell people what you are thinking, and another thing to show them. The presence of a storyboard also gives the crew assurance that the director has a solid plan. The good faith of the crew keeps the set moving, but it’s difficult for a director to earn their faith when it seems like he’s making things up as he goes.

The storyboard is helpful to the director for the above-mentioned reasons and also because it minimizes on-the-spot decision-making. Improvisation can often yield stunning
results, but it should never be used as a crutch on set. Proper planning has a tendency to have a positive outcome as well. Storyboarding should be treated like another part of the writing process. It will not be perfect the first time and should be looked over and revised several times before shooting begins. The plan can always be changed on set, but the time that it takes to create and recreate the plan is nonetheless valuable for that fact.

Completing the storyboard for *Planet Trial and Error* (see Appendix) was a great experience. I started by folding blank sheets of drawing paper into six equal segments and tracing the creases on both sides. Each box represented a shot in the film. I then read through the script and designed each shot as I envisioned it. Later, I took pictures of each frame and uploaded them into a storyboard template in the Gorilla program.

My knowledge of editing and cinematography came in handy during this process. Film uses a visual language made up of visual components, which include the physical aspects of places and things such as shape and color (Block, 2008, p. 2), and conceptual tools, which include the aspects of a shot such as frame and movement (Brown, 2008, p. 4). The way that these tools are used determines the point of view of the film (Block, 2008, p. 255). It tells the audience who the story is about and where the story is going. Holding the structure of each scene in mind, I knew roughly which shot sizes should be used for which parts of each scene.

Generally speaking, the beat of a scene should be represented by a close-up (Brown, 2012, p. 8). The beginning of the scene should be represented by an establishing shot, either a wide shot or an extreme wide shot. The editor and cinematographer gradually increase the intensity of a scene by cutting to close-ups and highlighting the visual contrast amongst characters and objects. These strategies add layers of meaning to the visual story (Brown, 2012, p. 8). Rules were made to be broken, especially in film, but these principles have proven over
the last hundred years to be fairly reliable. Knowing the function of these and other shot sizes helped me to envision a feasible plan for each scene and write it all down (Brown, 2012, p. 8).

I also found the storyboarding process to be useful because there were several times when I had to actively discern the physical layout of a shot. For instance, I planned a shot looking up at Steven from under an open drawer, and I quickly found that I did not know how to draw that out. I had to leave my seat, go to the kitchen, and stoop under one of the drawers to know exactly what that shot would look like. This provided me with the unexpected opportunity to consider whether or not the shot would be physically possible. I later found myself standing up again and considering the size of the room and, using those dimensions, imagining what it would be like to position, or block, the actors on the day of the shoot. I found myself looking closely at my friends, examining the way they filled up my line of sight. This experience alone helped me to grow significantly as a filmmaker.

Closer to production I drew top-down diagrams, which helped me to decide in which order each shot would be captured. They depicted the whole scene in one giant frame looking straight down at the set, mapping out each camera position. I assigned each shot a number representing its place in the sequence of shots, and each camera position was drawn as an obtuse triangle expanding in the direction in which the camera would be pointed on the shoot day. I then assigned an estimated timeframe to each shot and compiled them into a schedule, which I gave to my AD before the shoot. This procedure, more than anything else, prepared me to direct my crew both confidently and efficiently.

**Visual Samples**

In addition to storyboards, it can also be helpful to gather pictures that exemplify the look of the film. These might include pictures of buildings, people, or frames from other films. This
serves to guide the key crewmembers as they prepare for production. For the most part, visual samples pertain to cinematography, editing, and production design (Brown, 2012, p. 265).

Visual samples are useful to the cinematographer because they inform color and shot size. Both of these are instrumental in determining the style and mood of the film, and a good cinematographer uses them as tools with which to craft the story. A simple picture of a landscape could tell the person looking at it what the director wants the characters to be feeling at a given part of the story. The director of photography might use this information while choosing lenses, filters, and lighting arrangements (Brown, 2012, p. 264). The same principles apply to editing. The mood of a film is often determined in postproduction, so it is important for the editor to have a set of guidelines as to what the director wants for the story. Visual samples serve this purpose quite effectively.

The function of visual samples is similar for those in charge of production design. The right combination of pictures could inform the choices of the set designer, costume designer, makeup artist, location scout, and many more. Much like cinematography, production design contributes to the mood and style of the film. A director might choose a picture of a character from another production to use as a visual sample for the costume designers, makeup artists, and actors. Such a picture would speak volumes about the character as the director envisions her. These crewmembers would by no means copy from the picture, but they would use it as a reference in creating their own work (Brown, 2012, p. 265).

Collecting samples for Planet Trial and Error was a fun process. To help inform the cinematography and editing, I selected a frames from O Brother Where Art Thou? (2000) and Children of the Corn (1984). These were useful images for several reasons. Much like Planet Trial and Error, O Brother Where Art Thou? features three main characters that engage in all
sorts of physical comedy. In this way the picture establishes that I am looking for the same mood in my film.

*O Brother Where Art Thou?* is also famous for its achievement in color correction. This Depression-era film has a beige hue throughout that reminds the audience of the story’s place in history. In much the same way, I gave *Planet Trial and Error* a color scheme that reminds the audience of the strangeness of the characters’ situation. The film itself does not take place in outer space, but I want it to have an outer space theme. Including the frame from *O Brother Where Art Thou?* helped to establish that color will play a huge role in my film.

The frames I chose from *Children of the Corn* helped with set decoration and lighting choices. One image depicted an abandoned street, which had a look similar to what I was looking for at the gas station. In this frame the area is strewn with cornhusks, creating the appropriate look of an abandoned town with surprisingly little effort. Similarly, another frame I chose from that film depicts the interior of an abandoned house, an effect created by light shone through a mist-filled room. This helped us to create the same effect in the interior RV scene.

**The First Call Sheet**

Once the crew is in place, the locations are secured, and the storyboards are drawn, preproduction is almost at an end. The film has been made before it is made. The final step is to call the crew together for the first day of shooting. As with all other parts of preproduction, details are important at this stage. A well-prepared set requires a well-made call sheet.

The purpose of the call sheet is to inform the cast and crew of when and where a day of shooting will take place and of what the day of shooting will entail (Ryan, 2010, p. 198). It must include the time of arrival for cast and crew, who should always arrive a bit before the time listed on the sheet.
The call sheet also includes what the day will be like. Some call sheets tell what the weather will do that day. If any special materials or equipment will be needed for the shoot this information would be included as well.

The first day of shooting for *Planet Trial and Error* took place where we would later park Gertrude and Steven’s RV (see Appendix). The crew was told to wear long pants and close-toed shoes, always a must on a film set. Call time was set at 8:00 AM on location. The call sheet was emailed to each crew member a full day before shooting began (Ryan, 2010, p. 198). No member of the crew should be up the night before wondering where he, or she, is supposed to drive in the morning. The purpose of the call sheet is to keep things organized, and that is how our set was run. There were four days of shooting scheduled for *Planet Trial and Error*, so there were four sets of call sheets sent to the cast and crew. The preproduction phase was over.

**Conclusion**

Good films and good preproduction are absolutely inseparable. If a film is not properly planned out, every detail attended to, it is guaranteed to show up in the finished product. A great finished product is worth every minute spent searching for locations, sending emails, drawing storyboards, redrawing them, sweating over each draft of the script, and everything else. If you are not willing to put real time and work into these things, your film will reflect the neglect.

Preproduction is part of telling the story, and you are not just doing it for yourself. Filmmaking is a collaborative effort made by a whole army of storytellers. All the crew members bring the story to life in their own unique way, designing what ultimately becomes part of the story at large. Preproduction is the act of bringing these storytellers together.

If you are a filmmaker, your efforts will be driven by passion. Film should be art, although it often isn’t expressed that way. Your audience can tell the difference between art and
garbage, and professionalism defines that difference. Taking shortcuts in preproduction, or neglecting to learn it altogether, betrays a willingness to produce garbage that the audience cannot and will not appreciate.

Preproduction sounds hard, perhaps even undoable. It sounds like a lot of fruitless, boring steps that take away from the fun of filmmaking. This is not the case at all. It is filmmaking. A lack of preproduction turns a film set into a nightmare. No one in his right mind would embrace this. Preproduction takes a long time, and it can be very difficult, but you will never be worse off for doing it. When I was a beginning film student, I learned these things the hard way, but you don’t have to. With good preparation, your film could show everyone what a great filmmaker you’re going to be.
References


Appendix

1. Logline and Synopsis
2. Script
3. Sample Breakdown
4. Sample Budget
5. Sample Storyboard
6. Sample Call Sheet
Logline: Two siblings living on a remote chunk of Earth that was stolen by aliens meet a stranger who claims he can improve their lives.

Three-Sentence Synopsis:

Bored siblings Steven and Gertrude have spent most of their lives alone on a chunk of Earth that was stolen by aliens. They are soon met by a new face named Rick, and against Steven’s better judgment, they follow him back to the gas station where he lives. This turns out to be the wrong decision when Rick reveals his intentions to enslave Steven and Gertrude, and they must work together to escape from him.

Full Synopsis:

For the past nine years, siblings Steven and Gertrude Knopfler have lived alone on a chunk of Earth that was stolen by aliens. Steven has insisted that they stay isolated at their grandfather’s old trailer where they will be safe from the Earth-plug’s other violent residents. Gertrude complies, but she begins to go stir-crazy sitting in one place all the time. She wants to visit the nearby gas station to break the monotony, but Steven refuses.

The siblings’ argument is interrupted by the arrival of a clean-cut stranger named Rick who invites them to visit the gas station. He claims that the violence has ended on the plug and that the gas station is now a safe, fun place to stay. Against his better judgment, Steven agrees to join Gertrude in accepting Rick’s invitation, but he packs a revolver before they leave. They arrive at the gas station to find a dull, but seemingly safe, scene. No one is there, but Rick welcomes the siblings to take a look around and later join him for a picnic.

Later, at the picnic, Gertrude could not be more pleased with the way things are going, but Steven is still suspicious of Rick. Rick gives them some privacy, and Gertrude expresses her frustration that Steven is too controlling to let her enjoy her life. It seems like Gertrude has won the argument, but they are once again interrupted by Rick, who announces his return by cuffing the siblings’ ankles to the table. Rick then proceeds to present his plans to enslave the siblings to aid him in reconstruction of the plug, also revealing that he has murdered all of the plug’s other former residents. Gertrude quietly apologizes to Steven, who quickly draws his gun on Rick, commanding him to release them. Rick instead turns tail and runs, and Steven shoots him in the leg. Steven and Gertrude chase Rick down, dragging the table along with them, until they are finally able to catch him and retrieve the key to their bonds. Upon their return home, Gertrude is depressed, but Steven cheers her up by inviting her to play a game of catch.
PLANET TRIAL AND ERROR

Written by

Zach Varnum

11940 Walter Hunter Rd.
(813)924-5831
FADE IN:

MONTAGE: A SHODDY MULTIMEDIA PRESENTATION UNFOLDS

-A slide bearing an emblem: CreatureGrab Institute, “We grab things”. A throaty, over-enunciating VOICE narrates the presentation over music straight from the can. Anyone suspecting this guy of being a space alien would be correct.

VOICE (V.O.)
Greetings from CreatureGrab Institute! We are thrilled to inform you that the Earth Plug Experiment was a great success and that your donations have been put to good use.

-They throw up an illustration of the globe.

VOICE (V.O.)
With your help we were able to collect a sample of Earth and place it on a desert planet capable of sustaining the lives of our homo sapien research subjects.

-A crude animation depicts this process. Perhaps the crudeness is accurate?

-A map of the piece of Earth bears a small smattering of red dots concentrated in one area.

VOICE (V.O.)
Although we collected a significantly smaller population than intended, and most of that population killed each other off after they realized their situation,--

-All but three of the dots disappear. (One dot is far from the other two.)

END MONTAGE

VOICE (V.O.)
--the past nine years have taught us more about Earth life than ever before.

Grainy hidden-camera footage shows a lone camper in the middle of a field. GERTRUDE (23) and STEVEN (24) KNOPFLER sit in lawn chairs under the camper’s awning.
Their visages are as drab as the landscape. Their clothes are loose-fitting and out of style.

VOICE (V.O.)
But there’s still so much to learn!

Close on Gertrude’s face, unaware of the camera. She’s fuming, eye twitching.

Back to full view of the camper.

VOICE (V.O.)
With another kind donation, we could repeat the experiment all over again, increasing our Earth knowledge by an awful lot.

Gertrude leaps up and flings her chair at Steven. Steven recoils and tumbles to the ground. Gertrude screams at the sky.

VOICE (V.O.)
Donors of more than 10,000 bits will receive a chance to meet humans Gertrude and Steven Knopfler at a safe distance!

The bottom of the screen flashes: PLEASE SEND MONEY!

CUT TO BLACK

VOICE (V.O.)
The CreatureGrab Institute thanks you.

TITLE CARD: PLANET TRIAL AND ERROR

EXT. TRAILER- LATER

The aliens’ presentation has ended, and we now see the world as the human characters see it.

Steven sits on a large box. He sports a bruised head as he plays a game of solitaire spread out on the ground before him. He looks calm, but frustrated as he flips the cards. There is a knock from inside the box. He looks down.

STEVEN
You done?

GERTRUDE (O.S.)
(muffled)
Yes.
Steven stands up and opens the box. Gertrude’s head emerges. She gasps a breath of fresh air and props her fist under her chin.

GERTRUDE (CONT’D)
Sorry. That was outta line.

Steven shrugs. Gertrude climbs out of the box.

GERTRUDE (CONT’D)
We need an outlet.

STEVEN
You need an outlet.

GERTRUDE
Right. Let’s weigh my options.

They look out on the grassy nothingness before them. Neither of them look optimistic for a solution to Gertrude’s problem.

GERTRUDE (CONT’D)
Nothing here. Now, the gas station...

Steven shakes his head firmly.

STEVEN
Absolutely not.

GERTRUDE
Steven.

STEVEN
No. There’s a reason Grandpa drove us out here.

GERTRUDE
Maybe the marauders are done marauding! Just because there was a bunch of murder happening when this all started doesn’t mean it’s... still like that.

STEVEN
“There might not be murder happening.” I’m starting to see the appeal.

GERTRUDE
Being murdered would be better than literally dying of boredom like Grandpa!
STEVEN
Grandpa’s appendix exploded.

GERTRUDE
From how bored he was!

STRANGER (O.S.)
Hello?! Hello!!

Gertrude and Steven turn their heads, forgetting the argument. The hello’s are coming from far off. Someone is looking for them.

Gertrude and Steven exchange surprised glances.

EXT. WOODED RIDGE- DAY

Gertrude and Steven peek over a fallen tree. RICK RAWLINGS walks through a clearing in their line of sight. They’ve never met this guy. Rick is slim, dressed in a green t-shirt and cargo shorts. His age is ambiguous.

Gertrude and Steven look at each other.

GERTRUDE
(whispering)
This must be handled very delicately.

Gertrude and Steven burst into the clearing. Steven throws a sheet over Rick’s head, and Gertrude whacks Rick a good one with a baseball bat.

EXT. TRAILER- DAY

Gertrude, Steven and Rick sit in a circle of lawn chairs. Rick rubs his head delicately where Gertrude hit him.

GERTRUDE
Gotta apologize. We don’t see people very often, and we just...

STEVEN
We overreacted.

Rick holds up his hand.

RICK
Hey, you’re fine.

STEVEN
What brings you out here?
RICK
Actually, I was looking for some people to invite back into town.

Gertrude brightens up. Steven stares her down menacingly.

RICK (CONT’D)
I knew there was somebody settled somewhere out here, and I thought it’d be great to have you back at the gas station.

Gertrude and Steven give each other looks that say, “Please?” and “No.” Steven turns back to Rick.

STEVEN
Thanks, uh...

Steven waits for a name.

RICK
Rick Rawlings.

STEVEN
Rick. That’s really nice of you, but I think we’ll pass. It was pretty hairy out your way last time we checked.

RICK
Oh, but things have changed a lot. It’s been years since the last Sacrifice Lottery.

Gertrude looks ready to jump out of her seat with excitement.

STEVEN
That so?

RICK (nodding)
Not to mention, there’s a lot of food from the old world there... And we figured out a way to generate electricity...

Now Gertrude actually jumps out of her seat.

GERTRUDE
WE’RE GOING!!

Rick stands up.
RICK
Great!

Steven stands up.

STEVEN
Hold on!

Gertrude and Rick turn to Steven, looking disappointed. Gertrude and Steven lock eyes. Her desire to go is explosive, but she's not leaving without him.

Steven grits his teeth against the decision he's about to make.

STEVEN (CONT'D)
Fine. Let's go.

Gertrude literally leaps for joy.

GERTRUDE
Yes!!
(to Steven)
Let's grab our stuff!

Gertrude makes for the trailer.

INT. TRAILER- CONTINUOUS

Gertrude enters and commences to loading a small backpack with the sparse amenities that she has been able to preserve over the years. Among the items is a toothbrush, a worn baseball glove, and a softball.

Steven enters behind her. He glances to make sure she is occupied. In her blind excitement Gertrude is now trying to cram things into her backpack that have no business there: ice cube trays, a toaster.

Steven takes that moment to pull a .38 revolver out of a drawer and stow it under the waistline of his pants.

EXT. GAS STATION- DAY

The parking lot to the dilapidated building is filled with weeds. Some parts of the blacktop are stained with what is probably blood. But hopefully not.

The trio arrives, each reacting to the place according to their own predispositions. Rick has seen it, Gertrude is ecstatic, and Steven is skeptical.
RICK
Well, here it is.

GERTRUDE
Isn’t this great, Steven?

Steven grunts irritably.

RICK
Feel free to take a look around...
Don’t go inside, though. We’re fumigating.

Rick starts briskly toward the station. The siblings pause at that last remark. Gertrude shrugs and follows Rick. Steve also follows, but he frowns. Something’s fishy.

EXT. GAS STATION—OUT BACK—DAY

Steven drifts around the yard. He scoffs at his surroundings. No better than home. Then something catches his eye.

He bends down to pick up a baseball glove, tries it on. He punches the leather with his other fist. He might hold onto it in spite of himself.

A weird sound grabs his attention. He looks across the yard to see Gertrude standing next to Rick sitting on an exercise bike. Gertrude has headphones in her ears from an iPod hooked up to a car battery connected to the bike.

Rick pedals the bike, and Gertrude, a look of joyous surprise on her face, starts dancing to music from the headphones.

Steven watches Gertrude closely. She hasn’t looked this happy in years. Steven smiles.

He turns his gaze to Rick. Steven narrows his eyes, still skeptical of Rick’s friendly demeanor. He looks to the convenience store. Rick isn’t watching the door. Steven sidles over there.

The the glass doors are covered up with cardboard. Steven reaches slowly for the handle. “Fumigating.” Yeah, right.

A harsh jangling sound almost gives Steven a heart attack. Gasping, for breath, Steven turns to see Rick ringing a huge dinner bell about ten feet from him.

RICK
Soup’s on!
Rick motions Steven to follow him. Steven grudgingly glances at the door one more time before following Rick.

**EXT. GAS STATION/OUT BACK—DAY**

Gertrude, Steven, and Rick sit at a picnic table, each of them munching on an uncooked pop-tart. Gertrude is in ecstasy.

**GERTRUDE**
Rick, these scones are divine.

**RICK**
You flatter me. They’re so easy to prepare.

Gertrude and Rick share a chuckle.

**STEVEN**
Do you really think these are scones, Gertrude?

Rick and Gertrude stare him down. You could spread the tension on a pop-tart.

**GERTRUDE**
So... Where are the others, Rick?

Rick dabs his lips with what looks suspiciously like a used medical gauze.

**RICK**
Great question. Let me take a peek down the road. I’ll be back in a jiffy.

Rick stands and exits toward the road. Gertrude shoots Steven a nasty look. She pounds her fist down on his pop-tart. Steven jolts.

**GERTRUDE**
Stop being rude!

**STEVEN**
Look, I’m sorry, but I still don’t trust this guy.

**GERTRUDE**
Oh, gimme a break. You’re just mad you’re not sitting in front of that stupid trailer playing with your deck of cards.
STEVEN
That's not true.

GERTRUDE
Yes-huh!

STEVEN
The trailer is better because it's safe.

GERTRUDE
From pop-tarts! We've been doing jack squat for nine years when we could have been trying to enjoy life!

STEVEN
Gertr--

GERTRUDE
No, Steven. Just say you were wrong. Tell me that my way is awesome, and your way is--

"Click."

The two of them look down to see that their ankles have been chained to the table with two sets of makeshift shackles.

Seeming to come out of nowhere, Rick pushes a large rolling whiteboard in front of them. The board is scribbled with various diagrams.

RICK
Good. Glad we got that out of the way.

Steven stands. Gertrude sighs wearily and rubs her temples.

RICK (CONT'D)
Don't worry. Key's safe with me.
   (pats his hip pocket)
Right now, let's look at my platform for reconstruction.

GERTRUDE
Rick, this better be a joke because you're making me look like a real butt right now.

RICK
It's job training. You two are going to help me rebuild society.
   (MORE)
RICK (CONT'D)
(indicates illustrations on the whiteboard)
We’ll start with indoor plumbing and a master bedroom in the gas station.

STEVEN
You forgot to draw the part where that ain’t gonna happen.

RICK
(turns to them)
Actually, it will, or I’ll poison you to death—
(points at the gas station)
and stuff you in there like I did everybody else.
(turns back to the board)
But I don’t think it’ll come to that this time because I’m going to brainwash you. That’ll take a while, but we can make up for the lost man hours by reducing your food rations.

Rick continues to yammer on with his back turned. Steven and Gertrude examine their restraints, which are actually quite heavy. Gertrude looks at Steven and winds herself up for an apology.

STEVEN
(hushed)
Forget it. Let’s just think about escaping. We need that key.

GERTRUDE
(hushed)
But how are we gonna get it away from Tricky Rick over there?

We return to Rick’s speech.

RICK
--and we’ll also be brainstorming names. I like Ricksburg.

“Click.”

Rick turns around. Steven points his grandfather’s revolver right at him.
STEVEN
Let us go, or I'll kill you right now.

Rick is clearly at a loss. Everyone is still for a moment.

Rick flings the marker at Steven's face and dashes into the neighboring field. Steven balks as the marker hits his face.

STEVEN (CONT'D)
Friggin'...

Steven re-aims the gun at Rick's retreating figure. He hesitates.

GERTRUDE
Steven! Kill him!

STEVEN
I can't kill him.

GERTRUDE
Then maim him!

Steven considers, then nods. He fires the gun. Bang! Nothing... Bang! Still nothing... Bang!! Rick gives a feeble cry from off in the distance. Steven smiles.

EXT. FIELD- CONTINUOUS

Rick hobbles along on his shot leg, still desperate to get away. Steven and Gertrude trail a ways behind him dragging the table.

GERTRUDE
Give us the key, you fruitloop!

Rick presses on, sweat beaded on his face.

Steven and Gertrude strain to go faster. They're gaining on Rick now. Rick falls down, quickly gets back up.

Steven is right on Rick's tail now. He swipes at Rick, misses. He swipes again, this time grabbing Rick's shirt. He dives in for a tackle.

Rick tumbles to the ground. He squirms violently in Steven's grasp. Gertrude joins in, and she and Steven wrestle the key from Rick's pocket. Steven holds Rick down while Gertrude unlocks their bonds.
Once they are free, Steven marches off. Gertrude hangs back and kicks Rick a few times. Steven comes back to pull Gertrude away. They leave.

Rick calls after them.

   RICK
   You will be my slaves!! You will--
      (clutches his leg wound)
   Ow. Ooooow, my leg.

EXT. TRAILER- DAY

Gertrude and Steven sit once again in their lawn chairs. Their faces are even more bleak than when the story began, especially Gertrude’s.

   GERTRUDE
   Well, that was stupid.

Gertrude’s backpack sits between them. Steven looks down at it. He cracks a quick smile.

He unzips the backpack and pulls out Gertrude’s baseball glove, her softball, and the glove he found at the gas station. He tosses Gertrude’s glove into her lap.

Gertrude’s eyes brighten when she sees the other glove in Steven’s hand.

   STEVEN
   Wanna throw the ball around?

   GERTRUDE
   Yeah.

They stand and put some distance between them. They engage in the most satisfying game of catch the planet has ever known.

ALIEN CAMERA POV

The camera sits behind Steven, downrange of Gertrude, and watches the game of catch. The bottom of the screen once again flashes: PLEASE SEND MONEY!

After a short moment, the ball misses Steven’s glove and hits the camera.

CUT TO BLACK

FADE OUT
RIDGE: A SHOOTO MAGIC PRESENTATION UNFOLDS

-A slide bearing an emblem: CreatureGrab Institute. "We grab things." A throaty, over-enunciating VOICE narrates the presentation over music straight from the cam. Anyone suspecting this guy of being a space alien would be correct.

VOICE (V.O.)
Greetings from CreatureGrab Institute! We are thrilled to inform you that the Earth Plug experiment was a great success and that your donations have been put to good use.

-They throw up an illustration of the globe.

VOICE (V.O.)
With your help we were able to collect a sample of the Earth and place it on a dense planet capable of sustaining the lives of our homo sapien research subjects.

-A crude animation depicts this process. Perhaps the crudeness is accurate?

VOICE (V.O.)
Although we collected a significantly smaller population than intended, and most of that...

- A map of the plug bears a small smattering of red dots concentrated to one area.
EXT. MONTAGE: A SHODDY MULTIMEDIA

Scenes: 1

Synopsis:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cast Members (3)</th>
<th>Extras</th>
<th>Stunts (1)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Gertrude</td>
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<td>Flings Her Chair</td>
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<td>2 Steven</td>
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<td>5 Voice</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Illustration Of The Globe</td>
<td>Sleeveless Flannel</td>
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<td>Map Of The Plug</td>
<td>Softball Jersey</td>
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<td>Red Dots</td>
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9/8/2015
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|             |     |           |
| AARON       |     | $2,201.75 |
| TOTAL PAID AARON ACCT | $2,201.75 |
| TOTAL LEFT AARON ACCT | $199.91 |
| ZACH        |     | $1,525.48 |
| TOTAL PAID ZACH ACCT | $1,525.48 |
| TOTAL LEFT ZACH ACCT | $274.52 |

ZACH | Amount Left Over | $474.43
**Scene(s): 1**

Scene 1; Setup 1

1. **ANIMATED INSERT**
   - Still of Creature Grab Emblem
   - Start: End:

2. **ANIMATED INSERT**
   - Representation of the globe.
   - Start: End:

1. **ANIMATED INSERT**
   - Creature Grab Emblem
   - Start: End:

2. **ANIMATED INSERT**
   - Representation of the globe.
   - Start: End:
**ANIMATED INSERT**
Representation of Grab Claw.

Start: End:

**ANIMATED INSERT**
Claw grabs the plug.

Start: End:

**ANIMATED INSERT**
The Plug is taken.

Start: End:

**ANIMATED INSERT**
Map of the plug then.

Start: End:
7. ANIMATED INSERT
Map of the plug now.

8. ALIEN CAMERA POV- FULL SHOT
S&G sit in front of trailer

9. ALIEN CAMERA POV- CLOSE UP
Closeup of G
Day 3: get "soups on" audio

Scene 1

Scene 2
# Call Sheet

**Planet Trial & Error**

**Crew Call:** 10:45 AM - Mi Casa  
**Shooting Call:** 12:00 PM - 5:00 PM

## Call Sheet

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Director:</strong> Zach Varnum</th>
<th><strong>Producer:</strong> Jimmy Tlkunoff</th>
<th><strong>Date:</strong> October 22, 2016</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(813) 924-5831</td>
<td>(417) 389-0550</td>
<td>Day: Thursday</td>
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**1st AD:** Aaron Mouer  
**Line:** (480) 433-6098

**Location 1:** Varnum Family Property  
11940 Walter Hunter Rd  
Lithia, FL 33547

**Location 2:** N/A  
**Location 3:** N/A

### Wooded Ridge Meeting Rick 3 123

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>CAST</strong></th>
<th><strong>LOCATION</strong></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Karleigh Chase</td>
<td>Gertrude on location</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ryan Watson</td>
<td>Steven on location</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jamin Metcalf</td>
<td>Rick on location</td>
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<tr>
<th><strong>EXTRA/STAND-INS</strong></th>
<th><strong>CALL</strong></th>
<th><strong>SPECIAL REQUIREMENTS/ DEPARTMENT NOTES</strong></th>
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