

How to Land a Job in Film, TV, or Digital Entertainment

HOLLYWOOD GAME PLAN

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GAME PLAN:

A carefully thought-out strategy for achieving an objective in war, politics, business, or personal affairs.

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INTRODUCTION

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

WELCOME TO HOLLYWOOD

The afternoon I called my mother from the private screening room at Steven Spielberg's Amblin Entertainment was one of the best days of my life. I'd just gotten my job as Vice President of Television and was reviewing every film he'd made to see which properties might make good TV shows. From the time I had graduated from high school, my conservative mother had encouraged me to become a court reporter; it's a safe, solid career choice, she'd remind me every time I tried something new. With *Raiders of the Lost Ark* playing in the background, she finally had to concede the truth: I was right and the risks I'd taken to work in the entertainment industry had paid off. I was now doing what I'd always dreamed of.

This book is my way to encourage you to take a risk and follow your dreams. But you don't have to take it alone. When I began the journey that ultimately took me to that darkened screening room, I didn't know anyone in show business and didn't have a clue how to proceed. Along the way, I kept wishing someone would tell me what to do; explain the unwritten rules that everyone else seemed to know. As I was figuring things out, I vowed to help other aspiring hopefuls.

When I became an executive, I began to mentor wonderful, talented people. I also started to teach classes at colleges and universities on career development — how to break into and succeed in the entertainment industry. Over time the material evolved into the Hollywood Game Plan. It's a concrete, step-by-step plan that offers the tools you need to navigate this highly competitive, rapidly evolving business.

WHO THIS BOOK IS FOR

It's for anyone considering a career in show business; even if you don't know what you want to do yet. It's for aspiring filmmakers: writers, producers, directors, actors, cinematographers, make-up artists, visual effects artists, and everyone in between. It's for creative professionals interested in the traditional Hollywood model of success, as well as for those taking advantage of the Wild West environment of digital entertainment. The tools in this book are useful for people just breaking in as well as for experienced professionals wanting to make a career crossover. It's for people living in Los Angeles and for those thinking of moving here. It's also for creative individuals looking for entertainment opportunities in their local area.

Throughout the book I talk about working in Los Angeles—that's because Los Angeles is where mainstream Hollywood does business. Getting work in show business is based on whom you know and on personal relationships. If you want to get personal in Hollywood, you need proximity. But there are entertainment jobs in most major cities, so whether you're in Beverly Hills or Charlotte, North Carolina, you can use these powerful career strategies to get a job you'll love.

HOW THIS BOOK IS DIFFERENT

In addition to sharing the insights I have gained over two decades, I wanted you to benefit from the advice of many others. Using the networking techniques in Chapter Eleven, I reached out to fifty newly minted Hollywood professionals—mostly young people who broke in within the past two years and who are on their way up the ladder—and asked them to share their experiences. They come from many different parts of the business and include aspiring writers, directors, actors, and cinematographers. They work as production assistants, production coordinators, agent trainees, junior executives, editors, costumers, and personal assistants. You'll benefit from their experiences, shared through their quotations and in stories placed throughout the book. You're getting a combination of advice and wisdom

from someone who's hired hundreds of professionals and from those who were recently on the other side of the hiring desk.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Like any game plan, this book is laid out in linear progression so you can take it step by step from the first chapter to the last. But it's also designed to allow you to jump around, depending on your specific needs at the time.

Throughout the book you'll find short *Insider Tips* as well as relevant *quotations* from the people I interviewed. If you're running out to a meeting and need a quick shot of advice, take a look at the Insider Tips in Chapter Fourteen on how to master the Hollywood Meeting. If you're waiting in line at the grocery store, check out the quotations in Chapter Eleven on how to network like crazy or the ones on how to move up the food chain in Chapter Sixteen.

You'll find two *exercises* at the end of each chapter. They're fun and challenging. They're designed to help you immediately start using the tool or strategy you learned in the chapter. You will accelerate your job search and get quicker results when you do the exercises.

CONCLUSION

You're about to start on an exciting journey that will take you places you can't currently imagine. *The Hollywood Game Plan* is a detailed roadmap to get there. My hope is that the practical knowledge in this book will be immediately useful as you begin to follow the Plan. My desire is that genuinely talented people will find their path to this business and help create the new face of entertainment.

section two

GET SMART

GET PREPARED

GET CONNECTED

GET FOCUSED

GET HIRED

GET GOING

FIND A PATH TO DEVELOPMENT AND PRODUCING

Olivia knew from the time she was eight that she wanted to be a director. She started making movies with her parents' camera; writing, starring in them — along with friends — and editing them. On her fourteenth birthday she got her own high-end camera. She entered her videos into film festivals and won prizes in several. Before she graduated from college, she sent a letter to her favorite director, told him how much she loved his work, explained how passionate she was about filmmaking, and asked if he would meet with her briefly to give her advice. The director was so impressed with her enthusiasm and commitment that he got her a job as a P.A. on his next film.

Some people know from the time they're eight exactly what they want to do in show business. Others are drawn to the industry but don't have a clear idea of how they can fit in or even what jobs are available. This chapter and the next describe different jobs and what it takes to get started.

A good thing to know is that many job categories cross over between film, television, commercials, concert videos, premiere themed entertainment, original online content, and most other forms of entertainment. Though new technology is changing how projects get made — eliminating some jobs and adding others — a human still needs to write the lines, say the lines, hold the boom mic so you can hear the lines, and edit the lines together.

BE AN ENTREPRENEUR AND DO ALL THE JOBS YOURSELF

One of the major differences between traditional media and new forms of digital entertainment is that with the latter, the producer, writer, director, editor, and actor can easily be the same person. It's a more hands-on-at-every stage, entrepreneurial endeavor. Many content creators give themselves their own show business break by creating something exceptional and distributing it themselves. As one producer said, "I can make a Hi-Def movie on my phone."

There are some really good acting classes and schools that will train you and put on a great showcase.

— Justin, actor

THE TRADITIONAL APPROACH

If that's not the path for you, check out the following lists and see what appeals to you. It's broken down into three major categories: what happens before the camera rolls, meaning development and deal making; what happens once the camera rolls, meaning physical production, including postproduction; and what happens once the production is complete, which includes distribution and marketing. Though many jobs are listed, some haven't even been invented yet!



INSIDER TIP > The terms "above-the-line" and "below-the-line" refer to an imaginary line drawn on a production budget. Above-the-line covers costs associated with major "creative" talent, whereas "below-the-line" covers the production crew, which provides craft and technical services to make the project happen.

Above-the-line refers to writers, directors, cast, creative producers, and executives. Below-the-line includes cinematographers, production designers, editors, camera operators, special effects artists, sound editors, and so forth.

ABOVE-THE-LINE: DEVELOPMENT

Development is where the process of creating entertainment begins. It's the stage where the idea takes form and is developed and honed until it becomes a completed script or other form of work ready to be produced.

WRITER

Without writers no one would be working in Hollywood. If there's no script, actors don't have lines to say, directors don't have anything to direct, and production designers have nothing to design. Even television reality shows have a version of writers called "story producers."

How to get in

Writers can take many different avenues to break in, but the most important thing to do is, as my friend Chad Gervich, television writer and author of *Small Screen Big Picture* says, write your ass off. Write a lot of bad scripts and keep writing until they get good. Then write more until they're great. Once your material is great, you can get hired or get representation through screenwriting contests, film festivals, and personal referrals.

Start your screenwriting career by creating an original piece of work, without getting paid, which is called a "spec" (for speculative) script. If you're very lucky, a producer may buy that script and make it, but most often it's used as a sample of your work. If your spec is outstanding, you might get hired to write a script based on someone else's ideas or on existing material.

When I was in middle school, I would rewrite episodes of my favorite television shows and make them end the way I wanted them to. That's how I knew I was wanted to be a writer.

— Morgan, emerging writer

PRODUCER

"Producer" is one the most over-used, baffling titles in the business. There are executive producers, supervising producers, coproducers, line producers, and associate producers.

Depending on the project, the title can mean different things. In general though, there are three primary categories: creative producer, line producer, and those who finance a project.

Creative Producer

The creative producer may be the hardest working person on the project. She starts the process by finding an intriguing idea or great script. Or, a studio or network may ask her to develop a project based on one of their pre-existing brands like *Batman*. In projects outside of film and television, she may create the concept herself or be given one by a client. Then she develops the material with a writer and/or director, “sets it up” at a studio, network, production company, or distributor and oversees all creative aspects of the process, from development through production and postproduction to distribution and marketing.

In the world of independent feature films, the producer has a more challenging job; it’s a huge amount of hustling, convincing people, and raising money. Producer Adam Fratto describes producing as, “Somehow keeping at least one hand on the reins of a particularly ornery bronc.” It’s a massive undertaking and can take years to complete. More than one Academy Award-winning film has taken a decade or longer to make it to the screen.

In television the person with the creative vision and the power to execute it is usually a writer with the title of Executive Producer or Showrunner. She creates and writes the show and oversees every aspect of the production, from budget and wardrobe to promotion.

How to get in

In the traditional studio model you might transition from a senior-level executive to a creative producer through a “production deal.” You can also become a creative producer by producing a project. That means coming up with a script, concept, or other property, securing the financing, and making it.

Because I want to write and direct, I wrote and directed. I’ve made about seven short films.

— Kyle, emerging director



INSIDER TIP > Who else gets a producer credit? It was a wildly arbitrary process until the Producers Guild of America issued a Code of Credits used as a guideline to settle title disputes. Previously a vanity credit like “producer” or “executive producer” was given as a reward to big name actors or the person who financed the film or the star’s manager or the director or studio executive. Fortunately, titles are starting to become more merit based and uniform.

Line Producer

The line producer is absolutely essential. He’s the one who actually makes the production happen. He manages the budget and scheduling and hires the key members of the crew. He’s the head of production on the set. Though he doesn’t usually function as part of the “creative” team, he is the critical liaison between creative and production. He works with the creative team to determine what can be accomplished within the budget. Part of his unique brand of creativity is getting the most on the screen for the allotted amount of money.

How to get in

Line producer is a technical job that requires years of experience to do well. You work your way up through the ranks, learning the job as you go. The entry-level job is a production assistant or production secretary, then coordinator, then Production Manager.

DIRECTOR

Directing feature films is one of the most sought after jobs in Hollywood. Talk to almost anyone in show business and he or she is harboring a secret desire to yell “Action!” It’s probably because film directors have so much power. They develop the creative vision and are in charge of the set as they bring that creative vision to life. They decide how to shoot a scene, guide the actors’ performances, and shape the movie in postproduction. In independent features and the online world, directors are often the writer and producer as well.

How to get in

In most cases, in order to get a job as a director, you have to already be a director — an exceptional director whose work sets you apart from the thousands of other aspiring directors. So the first step is to direct a lot of projects on your own and to keep improving your craft until it's stellar. Take risks and create a distinctive body of work that shows your unique, highly original voice. Start by directing student films, inexpensive music videos, and online projects. As you grow as a director, you'll begin to be hired to take on larger projects in film, television, commercials, and other media.

Another time-honored path to directing is to write a screenplay that's so compelling you can attach yourself as a director. It doesn't usually happen with the first one, but eventually you could have enough clout to insist on being the director.

Starting your career as a set P.A. gives you a good overview of what's involved when you're ready to step onto a set in the leadership role of director. Another way to start is as an assistant to a director or producer. It'll help you learn the business from the inside and you'll make contacts for later when you're working toward your first directing gig.

Starting out at a talent agency is the best way to get a 360-degree understanding of the business.

— Brett, agency coordinator

ACTOR

Glamorous movie stars and serious actors, comedians and dramatic character actors; they're the face of the project. Big stars have clout and get projects made. But for every big star there's hundreds of working actors who are happy just to have a job and thousands of aspiring actors who would kill to get the chance to be on screen.



INSIDER TIP > As all seasoned professionals know, the hard reality of becoming a successful actor is less about your talent and more about how you look. Unfair but true. If you're young and gorgeous or a particular "type" that's currently in demand, your chances of getting work are much greater than if you're older than an ingénue or look like everyone else. But don't give up, for every rule there's an exception.

In addition to being a comedic, dramatic, or character actor, there are other acting categories and opportunities worth considering. You can be the host of a reality, game, or variety show; a voiceover artist, a stunt person, a stand-in, or an extra. You can work in commercials, online projects, themed entertainment, corporate entertainment, and other types of productions.

How to get in

Graduating from a prestigious performing arts school is very helpful, but it's still focus, commitment, and work ethic, along with luck, that will launch your career. In order to get cast, people have to see your work. Put yourself in front of casting directors, agents, directors, and producers every chance you can. Put up a play or one-person show yourself; do stand up or write, produce, direct, and star in your own online series. Sign up for classes, workshops, and showcases. Take classes where the teachers are industry professionals. It will help you improve your craft and expand your network of contacts. To get current information on what roles are available, register with breakdown services like actorsaccess.com. You might consider getting a job as an assistant to a casting director to get an inside look at the business.

EXECUTIVE

There are two general categories of executives: those involved in the development process and those involved in the production process. They work for studios, networks, and production companies. In films, development executives are

called “creative executives”; those overseeing production are referred to as “production executives.”

Creative executives decide which projects will be put into development. They work with writers, producers, and directors to get the best script possible. They’re also involved in attaching talent, producers, actors, and directors to projects in order to get them made.

Production executives represent the studio’s interests and make sure that a project runs smoothly and stays on budget. Because the studio is paying millions — sometimes hundreds of millions — of dollars on a production, they need to be sure the project is not headed for disaster.

In television, the titles are “development executive” and “current executive.” Development executives work on developing new shows and current executives work on series that are currently on the air. Like their film counterparts, these executives are charged with the job of representing the network’s or television studio’s interests.

How to get in

The typical path to becoming a creative executive is to start off as an assistant and work your way up the food chain. Because these jobs are almost never advertised, the way to get one is through industry job boards or through your contacts — finding someone who knows about an opening. Assistants at talent agencies are usually the first to hear about these jobs.



INSIDER TIP > You can find traditional film and television assistant jobs through the UTA Job List. This elusive listing of Hollywood assistant jobs is put out by assistants at one of the biggest talent agencies in the business, the United Talent Agency. The only way to get it is to have it forwarded to you by someone inside the industry. Many people say all the jobs are taken by the time the list goes out, but a number of people I interviewed for this book found their first jobs through the list.

READER/STORY ANALYST

A story analyst, often referred to as a reader, evaluates and summarizes material that's been submitted to a studio, network, production company, or agency. It can be a screenplay, manuscript, play, or short story. Though most jobs are freelance, some staff positions exist.

How to get in

If you don't have a personal connection to find out about job openings, call every studio, network, production company, talent agency, and management firm in the Creative and Representative Directories and IMDbPro and ask if they're hiring readers. After you go through the directories once, start at the beginning and go through them again. If you can afford it, start out reading for free to get experience. Once you can put a story analyst or reader job on your resume, getting a paid gig will be easier. It's a typical path to launching a career as an executive, producer, or writer.



INSIDER TIP > Though getting your first industry job is very competitive, being a reader is one of the "easiest" ways to get into the business. Because so much material needs to be evaluated, more opportunities exist to be hired as a reader than any other position except P.A. Readers are used at studios, networks, production companies, and agencies.

AGENTS AND MANAGERS

Agents get jobs for their clients. That's their whole job. They work their butts off and hustle day and night to get their clients work. It's a hard job and it's easy to get burned out; but successful agents are at the center of the action. They make deals and they make things happen. Managers hustle night and day to get their clients work too, but they also provide emotional support and help guide their clients through long-term career goals. There's a trend of managers acting as producers on projects to which their clients are attached. Because of this trend, being a manager is now a career trajectory to becoming a producer.

How to get in

Most major talent agencies have training programs, or you can start in the mailroom. It's a demanding, thankless, pitifully low-paying job, but it is an invaluable opportunity to learn the business and get on the inside track. In smaller agencies, starting as an agent's assistant is sometimes possible.

Becoming a manager is similar to becoming an agent. You start in the mailroom or as an assistant and work your way up. Agents have to be licensed by the state, but managers don't, so if you, on your own, find talent to manage, then congratulations, you're a manager!

Business Affairs Executive /Entertainment Attorney

Lawyers who work at studios, networks, or production companies are usually in the Business Affairs or Legal Affairs department and represent their company in negotiating deals. Entertainment attorneys work at firms or independently and negotiate contracts on behalf of their individual clients. High-profile entertainment attorneys who represent A-List talent can use the leverage of their client's participation in a project to become a powerful player in the business.

How to get in

Graduating from a prestigious law school helps give you a leg up, but getting into an entertainment law firm is still very competitive. A lot of lawyers start at smaller firms and then join a larger firm or transition into a Business Affairs job at a studio, network, or production company.

Now that you know what's involved in development, let's move on to production.

CHAPTER 8

FIND A PATH TO DEVELOPMENT AND PRODUCING

EXERCISES

1. Development and producing are collaborative. To prepare yourself to succeed, start collaborating now. Find three people you would be comfortable working with — an aspiring producer, director, writer, or actor — and work together to come up with a project you could produce.

2. As you go through the jobs in this chapter, see if one type of job really calls out to you. If it does, identify someone whose work you admire in the field and contact them using the search techniques in Chapter Thirteen. Ask if you can interview them for a school project or see if they'd spend fifteen minutes on the phone with you explaining how they got to where they are. If the first person says no, move on to the next.

section three

GET CONNECTED

GET PREPARED

GET SMART

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GET GOING