

Crafting a Top-Notch Portfolio for Your Film/TV/Video MFA

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Everyone's had that moment—you're watching *Transformers* or *Frozen* and thinking to yourself, I could write that I could direct that! Well, thousands of students every year take that thought and try to make it a reality by attending a film or television MFA program. There are now dozens of MFA offerings at schools across America and Europe focused on a range of disciplines, from screenwriting to cinematography to documentary. The top five film schools in America—USC, UCLA, AFI, NYU and Columbia—have become more selective every year, with admittance rates ranging from 9–20%. (Full disclosure: I graduated from Columbia's MFA program in 2012, so for obvious reasons, I won't play favorites.)

Getting a creative portfolio in shape is a long-term project. In this article, I'll cover the key elements of the USC application and talk about what makes them stand out. Why USC? Because it is a top-ranked school, and many of the items it requests or requires are standard across the board at top film schools.

So here are the central elements of a Film MFA application—and how to make each one shine.

1. Cinematic Arts Personal Statement

One of the most common errors in a film school personal statement is excessive reliance on name-dropping. A top film school does NOT want to hear about the time you brought Robert Downey Jr. a beer on the set of *Iron Man 5*. They do not want to know that your mom's mom knew that girl from *The Big Bang Theory* growing up. Bringing that kind of stuff up in a personal statement is crass and off-putting.

Another typical mistake is obsessing over your film likes and dislikes. Who cares that you had a transformative experience watching *Persona* or *Cries and Whispers* for the first time—except maybe Ingmar Bergman? No one's interested in your top ten favorite episodes of *Breaking Bad* either. Making reference to USC-alum-directed films is also a silly move. They know their own success stories, believe me. What they're trying to decide is whether you're the next one.

Okay, so what *do* you talk about? Simple. They want to know your story—your personal, human narrative—that led you to apply to film school. Obviously, it would be impossible to tell that story without mentioning film, but the subject should come up organically. Going to the cinema with your grandfather and remembering how he gasped the first time he saw *Avatar* in 3D—that's a real memory. Getting so excited by *Raiders of the Lost Ark* that you recreated the rock-rolling scene with papier-mâché

cutouts in your backyard—now that I can sink my teeth into. But it's nowhere near enough, and if your client doesn't have those kinds of stories, don't worry. Everyone has stories inside them: raw material, attitudes, beliefs, and experiences that they will draw upon to tell their stories. And the very first story your client is going to tell will be theirs. So make it good!

2. Writing Samples

An outline for a four-minute film that contains no dialogue. It can be fiction or nonfiction. The story has to be communicated visually. (No more than two pages).

One important principle in screenwriting is that you're only allowed to write about what you can see and hear, present tense. This prompt tests your ability to tell simple visual stories that are restricted to the two senses cinema makes use of.

I like to think of silent films as little picture books or comics—each image contains its own story in miniature, and they add up to a larger story, one with twists, surprises, reversals, and real human connection. Tell your clients not to push the limits of the medium. Don't let them try to reinvent the wheel. Instead, have them be clear, direct, and specific. The freshness will arise naturally from the limitations the exercise places upon them.

And a special note to all those post-Twitter filmmakers you'll be dealing with. This is not, or at least should not be, an exercise in fast cutting and showmanship. Instead, sentences should correspond to shots and paragraphs to scenes. Think of something evolving step by step. Include detail. Slow the pace.

A dialogue scene between two people. Provide a one-paragraph introduction describing the two characters in screenplay format. (No more than three pages).

There is a principle in dramatic writing known as a *fulcrum*—the idea is that every scene in a movie contains its own miniature conflict and that conflict resolves (in one way or another) at the fulcrum, or climax, of the dramatic scene. A good dramatic scene is unpredictable—it could resolve either way, but it winds up resolving in one particular way, thereby advancing the story.

Whether or not your client agrees that every scene works this way, for THIS assignment and this scene, they should write this way. Why? It provides a useful framework that an admissions committee will immediately recognize and understand. It proves your client speaks their language. It also forces your budding writer to work efficiently, instead of burning a page and a half introducing characters and coming up with clever one-liners.

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Describe a concept for a feature-length movie, fiction or documentary, that you would like to develop. (No more than two pages).

Concepts, or treatments, as they are more commonly known in the “biz,” should be written in present tense format, just like screenplays. They should be limited to what we see and hear, just like screenplays. Unlike screenplays, they don’t need to use Courier font or any specialized formatting.

The most important thing to consider when writing a concept is pacing. Your client should think about the rate at which movies unfold their stories, and deliver something that is well-balanced and consistently interesting. One good way to make sure your client is doing that is to use an old screenwriter’s trick by breaking down the story into acts and sequences. A typical feature film contains three (or four, depending on who you ask) acts and eight to ten sequences, each of which should have its own self-contained story and sense of progress. Added together, they should make up a compelling whole. Different (but related) challenges apply to writing treatments for television scripts.

3. Visual Sample

Please submit one visual sample. It is essential that you specify what role(s) you have played in your visual sample.

Video Option: Create a brief narrative video in which you had a major creative role. The video can be live-action or animation, fiction or documentary, but it should reflect your aesthetic tastes and intellectual and emotional interests. (No longer than five minutes.) Please submit only ONE video. Multiple submissions WILL NOT be reviewed.

Photo Option: Prepare a series of eight photographs you have taken that when viewed in a specific sequence portray a unique and original character or tell a simple narrative story. Please upload the photos in order of sequence (1–8). Also, include a one-page narrative about the character being portrayed in the photos. The images may either be black and white or in color. Please also upload the required one-page narrative into the “media” section of the application.

You see that phrase, “specify your role”? There is a very good reason USC asks you to do that. This material is being used to assess your abilities, not whether you were peripherally connected to something famous or interesting. Don’t waste this submission by focusing on the biggest project your client was a part of. Instead, choose a smaller project that your client was integral to.

Another important warning here—less is better. USC helps you by limiting the duration of your video to five minutes, but many schools will give your clients more than enough rope to hang themselves. Your clients will probably fight you on this point. They’ll tell you they just don’t think that way, that they can’t tell a whole story in that short a period of time. You just tell them, that’s the point. Heck, you can make a great short film in 30 seconds—just check out the Super Bowl ads!

Don’t get too bogged down in technical details like production value, either. If your sample looks amazing or stars that kid from that show, hey, that’s nice, but it’s ultimately beside the point. Great storytelling can happen with an iPhone, starring a cat.

Those are the basic components of a compelling portfolio. Don’t feel like everything has to be perfect—after all, your client is going to film school to learn to make great movies. There wouldn’t be much point if she already knew everything!

Happy scribbling!

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