Tips for High Quality Short Films

* No logos!
  + Try to avoid large or noticeable logos or characters on clothing or in the background of your films.
  + These are generally copyrighted and could prevent your film from being shown in other festivals or settings. (This includes school logos!)
  + They also are distracting to the audience and can make your film feel less believable (For example, your character is not going to be believable as a doctor if he is wearing a Pokemon shirt)
* Check the background!
  + When you set up a shot, make sure you look at what is showing up in the background. Is it what you want your audience to see?
  + Try to make your scene/ location match your characters and story as much as possible. This may include removing distracting items like identifiable or personal items, family photos, etc. from the shot or angling the camera so they are less visible. (For example, if a character is named “Anna,” avoid showing a big sign on the wall that says “Jessica” if the setting is supposed to be her own bedroom)
* Work with what you’ve got!
  + Try to match the characters and setting of your film to the actors, locations, costumes, etc. you have access to.
  + Avoid having actors play characters that are vastly different than their own age/ characteristics or using settings/locations that don’t fit with your film.
  + Doing this makes it harder to make your film and less believable to your audience. If your actors are teenagers and you are filming at school, maybe avoid trying to make a film about grandmas in a jungle or six-year-olds on Mars.
* Keep it simple!
  + 7 minutes isn’t a long time to tell a story, so avoid complicated plotlines, subplots, extra characters, or situations that require a lot of explanation or backstory.
  + Focus on one main concept, conflict, or relationship and include just the important elements you need to tell the story.
* Tell a complete story!
  + Even if your film is short, it still needs to have a story arc. You need to establish a situation, have it reach some sort of climax, and then some kind of resolution of the conflict or tension. This could mean a happy ending, a plot twist, a reveal, etc.
* “Show,” don’t “tell”
  + Film is a visual medium, so use visual elements (and sound) to show the audience the location, relationships, emotions, etc. instead of using words.
  + Use dialogue strategically. Use dialogue that reveals the backstory, relationships, feelings, and setting without directly explaining it.
  + “Showing” also saves time! When time is limited, you can fit more into your film this way. It keeps up the pace of your film and keeps the audience engaged.
* Be realistic
  + Don’t try too much. You may have amazing, elaborate film ideas, but a two-week short film contest is probably not the best time to try them all out. Think about what you can realistically accomplish with the time, resources, and skills you have.
  + Go with the flow. Sometimes plans don’t work out, things fall through, and people flake on you. Be flexible and don’t get discouraged. Many successful films have been somebody’s “Plan B” when things didn’t go as planned.
* Be original
  + Make sure you aren’t ripping off someone else’s movie or show! (Even unintentionally!) Think about your story and characters and make sure they are too close to something else you’ve seen.
  + Using someone else’s story or characters without permission is not only unoriginal but illegal. (And will get you disqualified!)
* Don’t forget about sound!
  + Make sure you add music and sound effects, even when there is dialogue. When done strategically, this can add emotion, momentum, and impact to your film.
  + Try to level out the sound across your film so there aren’t any parts that stand out as too quiet or too loud. This includes checking the level of music/ sound effects added over dialogue.
  + Avoid background noises when filming dialogue. Even noises like wind, appliances, ventilation, etc. that don’t seem loud in person can make it hard to hear recorded dialogue. Monitoring your sound while filming can help make sure you notice this problem before editing!
* Save time for editing!
  + It typically takes at least 30 minutes to an hour for every minute of finished film, so plan ahead.
  + Even the best acting, plot, shot composition, etc. is unsuccessful if it is poorly edited. Don’t put too much focus on the filming process and shortchange your hard work by rushing through the editing process.
* The film is made in the editing room.
  + Editing can make or break a film. When you edit, think about more than putting the clips in order. Editing can shape the pace, emotion, and perspective of your film, so use it to your advantage.
  + Try to include a variety of clips within each scene, including using different shot lengths (i.e. closeup v. establishing shot) and different angles. Use the sequencing of the clips to help tell the story of the scene.
  + Watch the length of your clips – they need to be long enough to be understood, but short enough to keep things moving. Try to match the pace of the scene; for example, scenes with a lot of action might have shorter clips. Editing to fit the beat of your music can add impact and momentum.
  + Pay attention to perspective and point of view. For example, if you use clips showing a conversation from a distance, it communicates something very different than if you use extreme closeups of the characters’ faces during the conversation.
  + Avoid gimmicky or obvious transitions, filters, effects, etc. If used sparingly and intentionally, these effects potentially add to a film. But often, they can make a film look unprofessional, generic, or cheesy. If you want to use them, make sure they serve a purpose and don’t detract from your film.