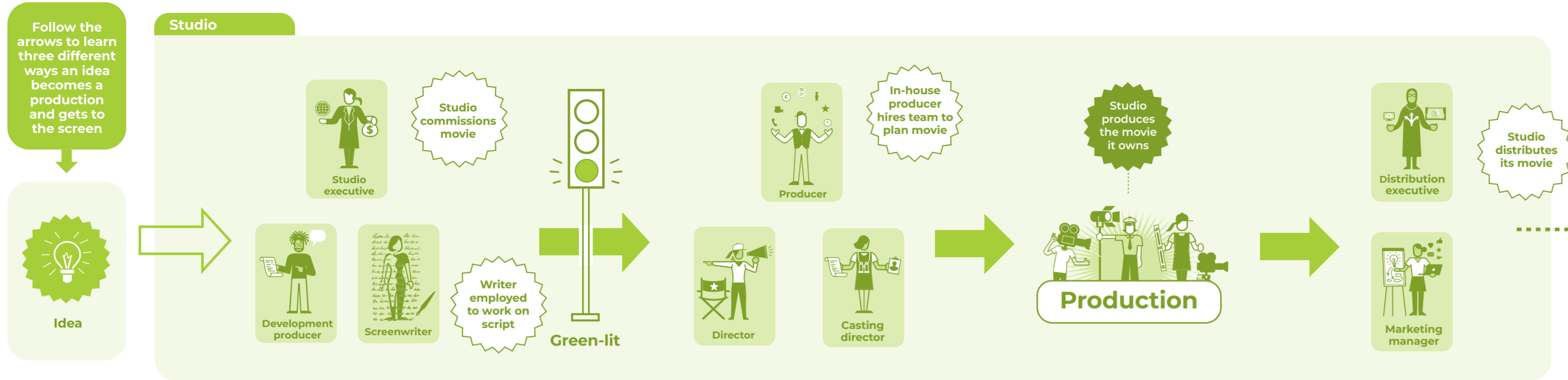
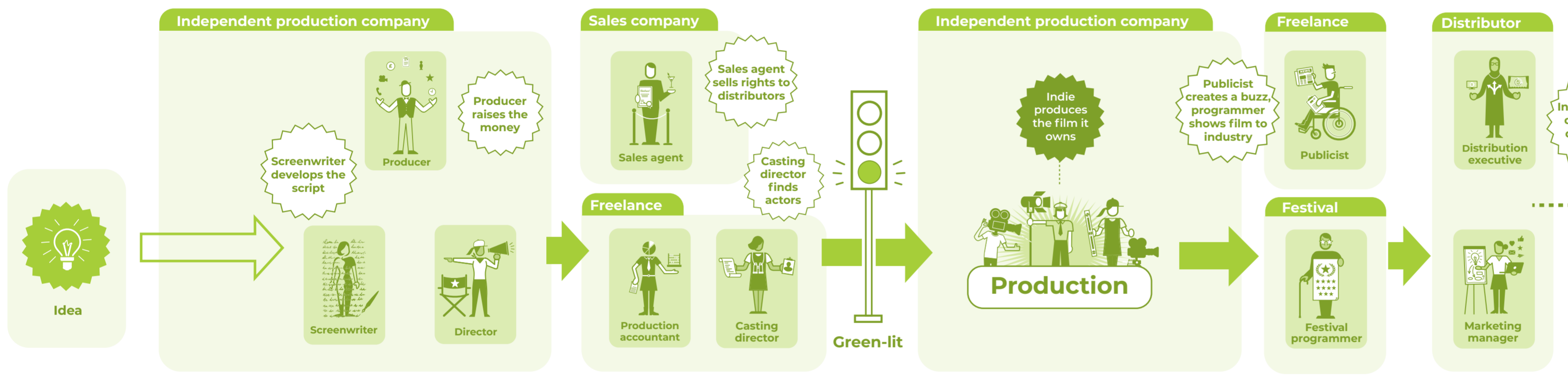


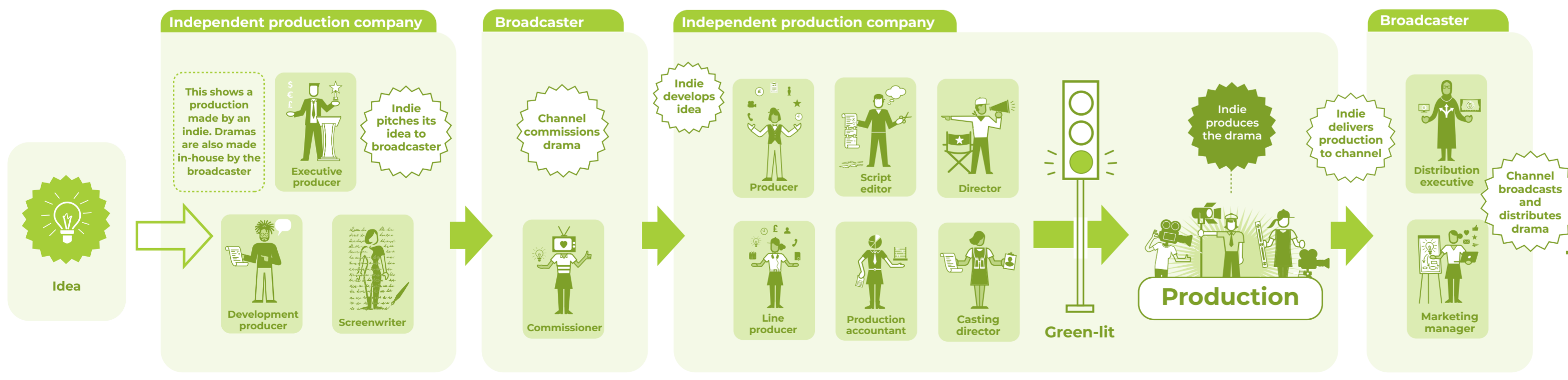
Hollywood movie



Independent feature film



TV drama



Recoupment

Money from audiences goes back to funders



Film and TV drama: idea to screen

Movies are big business. £1.23 bn was spent on film production in the UK in 2023 and £2.87bn was spent on high-end TV (television productions costing more than £1m per broadcast hour).

While many will be familiar with what the industry has made – *Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker*, *Barbie*, *Game of Thrones* and *The Crown* – fewer are aware of the process of getting a film and TV drama from an idea to the screen.

Whenever a film or high-end TV drama is made, there must be money upfront to pay for it. That money needs to be recouped once the production is released, which usually happens in a mixture of ways, including cinema ticket sales, TV network deals, subscriptions, sales of downloads and merchandise. Here are the three main processes (business models) through which a production gets to the screen.

Hollywood movie

Examples: *Avengers: Ghostbusters: Frozen Empire*, *Aladdin*, *Wonder Woman*

What it is

A Hollywood movie, also known as a studio production, is a film produced through a system in which the studio owns both the production and the distribution arms. These studios, also known as majors, include Paramount Pictures, Sony Pictures, Universal Pictures, Walt Disney Pictures and Warner Bros. Bollywood operates in a similar way with studios in Mumbai. Studio productions tend to have big budgets, be big in scale and have wide appeal.

How it works

The studios provide the funding for movies. A development producer within the studio has an idea and pitches it internally for development. If it's successful, a screenwriter is commissioned to write the screenplay.

The screenplay is then developed in line with budgets, schedules and maybe some concept art, before it goes before the "green light committee" of studio executives. Then a director is appointed and a casting director sets about finding the actors. The studio has its own producers who bring the production together.

The studio's distribution arm then does deals with cinemas – or chains of cinemas – in the US and across the world. They give

cinemas the rights to show the films for a fixed period. In exchange, a percentage of the money taken at the box office goes back to the studio that funded the production.

Just as important as the screenings at cinemas is the home entertainment market. These are the sales of DVDs, Blu-ray and downloads. Distribution companies do deals with supermarkets and other outlets that sell the copies of the film. This release usually happens after the release in cinemas, although this can vary significantly from title to title.

Many films are also sold to subscription services such as Netflix, Amazon Prime or Hulu. The distributor does those deals too. Additionally, the rights might be acquired by a broadcaster like the BBC or Channel 4.

Independent feature film

Examples: *The King's Speech*, *God's Own Country*, *Peterloo*, *Hoard*

What it is

An indie movie is a feature film produced outside the major studio system. The production company raises the money for the film itself and finds another company to sell it and distribute it. Independent films are usually lower budget than Hollywood movies and tend to have a distinctive style. The Oscar-winning *The King's Speech*, for example, focussed on the relationship between King George VI

and his speech therapist, rather than on grand scenes with lavish visual effects, which would have made it more like a Hollywood movie.

How it works

A film starts off as an idea that might come from a writer, producer or director. It's more common for an independent film to be borne of an individual's creative passion, than is the case with a studio production.

The producer makes the production happen. Producers raise the money, usually from a variety of sources – typically by selling distribution rights in the film (presales), selling shares in their company for the film (equity), borrowing the money (loans), or from funding bodies like the British Film Institute. The producer also borrows money against the UK Film Tax Credit. Any movie that shoots in the UK receives a cash rebate from the UK government as a thank you for employing UK screen workers and spending their budget with UK companies. While the money is being raised, the writer works on the script, a casting director scouts for the actors and the producer appoints a director. The development process can take several years, and includes developing the whole proposition, not just the script.

Most independent productions need a sales agent. The sales agent aims to sell the rights of the film to a distributor. They do this by estimating what the film's value will be in a certain country, and, to promote this, getting programmers to show the film at festivals, like Cannes and Toronto.

Film festivals are competitions through which the process of being nominated for Oscars and BAFTAs starts. But they often have markets for distributors, sales agents and producers alongside the actual competition. The distributors decide what films they want to buy the rights to. Then they use the sales agents to do deals with the producers.

Once the rights have been agreed, the distributor gets the film shown in cinemas, on DVD and on platforms such as Netflix, just as a distributor does with a studio production. The money that's recouped goes back to the distributor, sales agent

and production company. Generally, independent films are shown in fewer cinemas than studio productions – but not in every case.

TV drama

Examples: *Game of Thrones*, *Downton Abbey*, *Killing Eve*

What it is

TV drama, in which the production costs more than £1m per broadcast hour, is classed as high-end TV (as opposed to lower budget soaps like *EastEnders* and *Coronation Street*). High-end TV, like *Game of Thrones*, is of similar quality to a feature film, but can tell a more complex story. The 73 episodes of *Game of Thrones*, spanning eight seasons, make it possible to explore minor characters and develop intricate sub-plots in a way that cinema doesn't do so well.

How it works

High-end TV is commissioned by a broadcaster, such as Channel 4, the BBC or ITV. Each channel, such as ITV2 or BBC Three has its own commissioners.

Commissioners consider ideas for dramas from a variety of sources, including executive producers, producers and script writers. They might greenlight a project from an independent production company that has a well-developed idea with a producer, director and cast already in place. In this scenario the independent production company is likely to retain the rights to the production. The producer might do deals with broadcasters in different territories, such as the BBC in the UK, Studio Canal in France or Alibaba in China.

Alternatively, a writer, usually in partnership with a producer, may develop and pitch a script. Or a channel might commission a writer to write a screenplay which is little more than an idea. In those situations, the channel goes on to find a producer, cast and director and usually retains the rights to the production.

The channel broadcasts the drama and the broadcaster's distributor gets the drama screened in other countries and on other

platforms, such as Netflix and Sky Cinema. It recoups much of its investment through those sales.

The funding of a high-end TV drama means the producer and director sometimes don't have the same creative freedom that they would have in an independent production. Whatever they do, they are accountable to the commissioner.

It isn't that simple

There are all sorts of variants between these three models. There are many British films that are backed by US studios. This means the film is wholly or partly

Who the employers are

According to the British Film Institute, almost one third of the people employed in the film and video industry work in sales, marketing and distribution. This is where you will find them:

Broadcasters

Companies like the BBC, ITV, Channel 4, Channel 5 and Sky all have marketing departments, acquisitions departments and commissioners.

Distribution companies

The Film Distributors' Association has a list of distributors (launchingfilms.com/fda-members) and Film Export UK has a list of independent sales companies (filmexportuk.com/MEMBER-COMPANIES). These companies employ sales people and marketing executives.

Studios

Studios like Walt Disney and Warner Bros have arms in the UK through which they acquire, sell and market their movies.

Marketing agencies

There are marketing companies that specialise in supplying services to the film industry. Their roles include project managers, marketing strategists and account holders.

financed and controlled by one of the majors, but has a British writer, cast, crew and locations and is edited in the UK too. *Star Wars* is an example of this.

As well as acquiring content, platforms such as Netflix and Amazon have studios and make their own. Since the release of *Roma* in 2018, Netflix has continued to release movies in cinemas before they become available online.

The length of time in which a film is shown in cinemas (theatrical window) is becoming shorter. Some films are released in cinemas and on DVD at the same time. The lines between the different business models are also becoming increasingly blurred.

Subscription services

Companies like Hulu and Netflix have bases in the UK where they have acquisitions and marketing departments.

Festivals

Festivals such as Raindance and UK Film Festival employ people in marketing as well as programmers.

Cinemas

As well as managers and box office staff, cinemas have programmers who negotiate with distributors and marketing teams. The Independent Cinema Office has a map of independent cinemas in the UK and Ireland.

Yourself

Many people in the industry are self-employed. Publicists are often self-employed. So are the photographers who take pictures on a film set to be used in marketing campaigns. Once you have got the core skills and strong contacts, you might find you can build your career best through the freelance route.

Looking for further advice?

If you're interested in a career in sales, marketing and distribution in the film and TV industries, check out these websites to find out more:

ScreenSkills, for information on careers screenskills.com/job-profiles/browse/film-and-tv-drama and ScreenSkills Select courses, screenskills.com/starting-your-career/screenskills-select

Independent Cinema Office, UK body supporting independent cinemas and film festivals: independentcinemaoffice.org.uk/distribution

Film Export UK, trade body for companies with UK offices that sell independent feature films internationally: filmexportuk.com

British Film Institute: bfi.org.uk

Royal Television Society: rts.org.uk

Bectu, the media and entertainment union: bectu.org.uk

Film Distributors' Association, trade body of film distributors: launchingfilms.com

Produced by ScreenSkills

Statistics courtesy of Statistical Yearbook 2018, British Film Institute

Design by Dave Gray iamdavegray.com

With thanks to Phil Clapp, UK Cinema Association; Charlie Bloye, Film Export UK; Amanda Wilkie Sweeney, Sky; Max Rumney, Pact; Jo Taylor, film marketing and distribution specialist; Deborah Rowland, We are the Tonic; Emma McCorkell, Team PR; Clare Welch, all3media; Christine Healy, New Pictures; Amy Reith, script editor; Jo Evans, Tiger Aspect; Nanw Rowlands, Nanw Rowlands Casting; Julie Burnell, ITV

Second edition (2025) produced by ScreenSkills in association with the Adobe Foundation

First edition (2019) written and produced by Jo Ind and commissioned as part of the Future Film Skills Programme supported by National Lottery Funds awarded to ScreenSkills by the British Film Institute

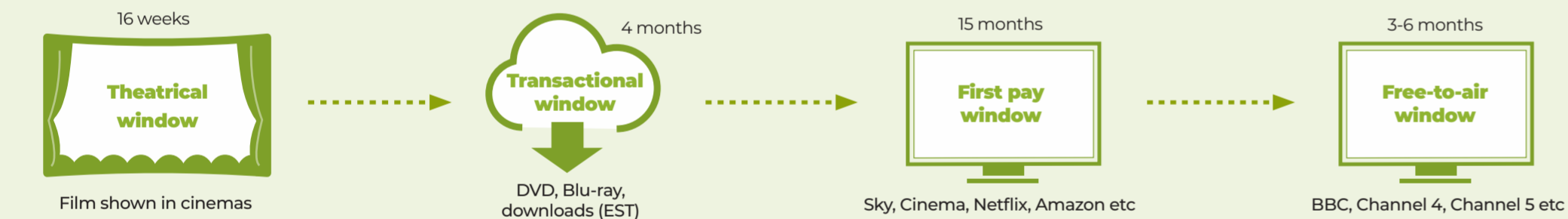
Based on an original concept by Ian Murphy and Allan Burrell



Content © 2025 ScreenSkills. All rights reserved.

The standard release process

A typical agreement over the rights to screen a film made between its owners and distributors.



Job roles

Studio executive

Leads and manages the whole studio. Studio executives receive pitches from agents who are selling their film scripts. They make decisions about which films go into production and are responsible for the financing, producing, marketing and distribution of them.

Producer

Makes sure the film gets made. Producers spot the potential in an idea or script, raise the funds and drive the business deals to produce the film. They appoint the director, line producer and other heads of department. They have overall responsibility for the practical, financial and creative aspects of making a film.

Executive producer

Is the leader of the whole TV drama. Executive producers acquire screenplays for development. They pitch ideas to the TV commissioners and deal with the legal, financial, and marketing aspects of the TV series.

Screenwriter

Writes and develops screenplays for film or TV drama. Screenwriters either write from their own ideas or are commissioned to write someone else's. They prepare their script in a way that enables readers to envisage the setting, emotion and the way it will work on screen.

Development producer

Finds scripts and gets them into good enough shape to be commissioned by a TV channel or made into a feature film. Development producers read screenplays and make notes on how they can be improved (script notes). They often pitch ideas to TV commissioners.

Sales agent

Acts on behalf of the producer to sell the rights to a film. This is usually done before a film is made to raise the funds for the production. Sales agents negotiate with distributors and promote films at festivals and film markets.

Commissioner

Decides which programmes will be right for their TV channel. Commissioners discuss new ideas and say: "yes" or "no" to them. When they have commissioned an independent production company to make a drama, they give it money up front and keep track of the production's progress.

Casting director

Finds the stars to bring the characters in a film or TV drama to life. Casting directors understand the art of acting. They read scripts, meet the producers and directors, get a feel for the roles and find the actors.

Director

Is in charge on set. Before filming, directors establish the style and work with the casting director to decide on the actors. On set, they get the best photography and best performance from the actors. After filming, they lead on the editing.

Line producer

Is responsible for all members of the crew and their contracts. Line producers hire the crew, allocate the money and make sure the filming is done safely, creatively, on budget and on time. They are typically the most senior member of the production team, second only to the producers.

Script editor

Liaises between the script and production teams. Script editors review scripts to ensure there's continuity between scenes, as well as episodes.

Production accountant

Helps the producer prepare budgets and estimate costs. During filming, production accountants oversee all payments, manage payroll and provide daily or weekly cost reports.

Film programmer

Selects the films to be shown in festivals, cinemas and on TV. Film festivals, like Cannes, are competitions where film professionals see unreleased films with their peers. They also function as markets where sales agents and distributors go to do deals over the rights of movies they are interested in buying.

Publicist

Create the 'buzz' that surrounds the release of a film. Publicists get the critics talking. They are responsible for getting media coverage of the film through having good relationships with journalists and critics.

Distribution executive

Gets productions to screens whether that be in the cinema, on TV, or on streaming platforms like Amazon and Netflix. Distribution executives go to film markets where they look at films and negotiate for the rights to release them. They then pitch the film to cinemas or other platforms and manage its release.

Marketing manager

Convinces audiences that theirs is a "must-see" film or TV drama. Marketing managers help to identify the audience and create a campaign to bring it to their attention. If a film is being screened internationally, the campaign needs to be adapted to different cultures and countries.

Entry level roles

Marketing assistant

Could do any work that's needed, from scheduling tweets to ordering lunch for meetings. Marketing assistants help with proofreading copy, filing, and using data to help assess effectiveness of campaigns. They might be employed by film sales agencies, marketing agencies, production companies or broadcasters.

Casting assistant

Offers general help with finding actors to star in a film or TV drama. Casting assistants read the script and help the casting director draw up a list of possible actors for the main role. They call agents to check actors' availability. They help out with screen tests, operating the camera and doing general office duties.

What to study

Sales and distribution roles in film and TV drama require a combination of industry knowledge with core business skills such as accounting and marketing. You need to make sure you have a good grounding in both, whether through formal education or through learning it yourself.

Film studies

If you want to learn about film and TV drama through formal study, have a look at ScreenSkills Select list of recommended courses. Filter with the film and high-end TV tags. We recognise courses with strong links with the film and TV industries. (screenskills.com/starting-your-career/screenskills-select)

Marketing

A-levels or Highers in English and business studies are a useful basis for a marketing qualification. So are Level 3 vocational qualifications in business or marketing. A degree in marketing or digital marketing is useful. The Chartered Institute of Marketing has advice.

Law

A background in law is useful in film and TV sales and distribution. There are no particular A-levels or Highers required to study law but English, maths and languages are good. Get a degree in law that will enable you to focus on licensing and copyright.

Business and accounting

A-levels or Highers in accounting, business studies or maths are useful. Or you could take Level 3 vocational courses in business or accounting. Degrees in business studies and accountancy aren't essential, but they will come in handy nonetheless.

Short courses

Fill in gaps in your knowledge through a short course. FutureLearn offers a course on The Business of Film and the National Film and Television School has courses on business and marketing directly relevant to the industry. The Independent Cinema Office does training and events too.

Careers in Film and TV drama: idea to screen

