7 Deadly Sins of Filmmaking

Fail to do these, your work will look “student film-y” faster than a speeding bullet.

Dig for a good idea. Something emotional, not dumb. Fear your parents, seeing your DVD at the end of the semester, screeching “This is what you spent your time doing....!?”

Constantly, endlessly ask, writing, shooting, editing: What story are we telling?

Hey, have a script! If you don't have a good script you will not have a good movie.

The Good Guy must want something desperately. The Bad Guy must want the same thing or something very different, desperately.

Do not write the unfilmable. “And Superman flies off the houseboat...” Write a movie you can actually make, well and semi-easily.

Find a way to have conflict, on some level, in every scene.

Hey, more on script! Cut all repetitive, boring, or obvious dialogue.

If camera can’t see it, you can’t write it. Not a novel! Read everything out loud.

Never, ever cast people who are the wrong age for the character. Rewrite to match cast.

A day or two before the shoot, rehearse with your actors and full crew.

Sacrifice look for performance. When student films fail, it's not usually because of technical issues, it's because of the actors.

Do a location scout. Where is power? Is location too loud to get good sound?

Choose interesting looking locations, not the first thing that came to mind.

Check all equipment the day before shoot. You will feel like a jerk if your mics or cable are defective and you get lousy sound. Bad sound makes your movie look like dreck.

Avoid “pretend” production design. Nothing screams “student film” like “I see those empty plates with forks on ‘em. I’ll pretend someone ate a hearty meal.” Oh, please.

Create a shot list. Check stuff off as you shoot it. You’ll thank me later.

Do not plan for elaborate, moving master shots unless you also plan where you can cut into them or you will regret it later.

You do not need a master shot. They’re massive time wasters and you barely use them.
Know the conflict and subtext in each scene so you can convey them to your actors.

**Safety of your cast and crew is your most important consideration.** Say it out loud.

Pay attention to stage line. You can’t feel it on set when you cross it, but, wow, in the editing room, it’s like a 2x4 in the face.

Feed your crew; an army runs on its stomach. Make a mighty effort for it not to be pizza.

Don’t forget extra batteries. Charge them the night before the shoot.

Use a tripod. Always. Unless the shot requires hand held. Look around; the world does not shake, nor should your film.

Never use the on camera microphone. Always wear headphones. Get mic close enough for good sound. If it is distorting, fix it.

Keep the iris set on manual. Automatic iris getting dim and bright looks like porn.

Generally, start wide and move in for coverage / tighter shots.

The viewer will assign meaning to EVERYTHING in the frame, and it will mean what they think, not what you hope. Before you shoot, look at your shot! What will it mean?

Beware headroom. Cut the tops of the actors heads off in MED and CUs. Hair don’t act.

Get enough coverage. Always get clean entrances and exits. Your editor will thank you.

Overlap action between shots.

No uncalled for / flamboyant, “Hey, look at me, I’m directing!” shots.

Trust the eyepiece, not the monitor, as far as exposure is concerned. Unless you calibrated the monitor.

Use lights indoors, reflectors & silks outdoors. Hauling bulky gear gives you control.

Do not make actors do things people do not actually do. Caress photographs, for one.

Excuses = loser. “This was supposed to be better, but ______ happened.” Fix it, slacker.

Fade music out gently, don’t cut out abruptly. Unless you do it on purpose.

Have room tone. In every shot. It should match in every shot of a scene, too.

Cut anything that’s even slightly boring. Cut anything that repeats what we know.