



The Better Film Festival Submissions Toolkit

by Chris Holland

**How to submit smarter, save money, and make
your submission more compelling
to festival programmers**

<http://www.filmfestivalsecrets.com>

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When it comes to festival submissions, what you don't know is almost guaranteed to hurt you.

This guide has a very simple purpose: to help you improve the way you submit your work to film festivals.

Hi. I'm Chris Holland, a former film critic who has been working with film festivals for more than a decade. I've served on the staff of two Academy-qualifying film festivals in various roles, I've worked for distributors and film technology companies, and I'm the author of **Film Festival Secrets: A Handbook for Independent Filmmakers**. Among my friends and acquaintances I count hundreds of fellow film festival staffers . . . whether they want to admit it or not.

Back during my first job on staff at a festival (the Austin Film Festival), I sat a few feet away from the programming team. This was 2005, and while email was already the main method of communication, we still got lots of phone calls from filmmakers who had questions. Every day I would listen to the programmers answer the same questions over and over again, mostly about the selection process and how to best position a film for selection at the festival. Things like "How important is the cover letter?" or "Do you program shorts over 20 minutes long?" One day during a particularly repetitive string of calls, I thought to myself, "someone should write all this down in a book so these programmers could just say: *look, read this book and it will tell you everything you need to know.*"

It wasn't too much later that I was taking notes for the book that, in 2008, would become **Film Festival Secrets**. Once I

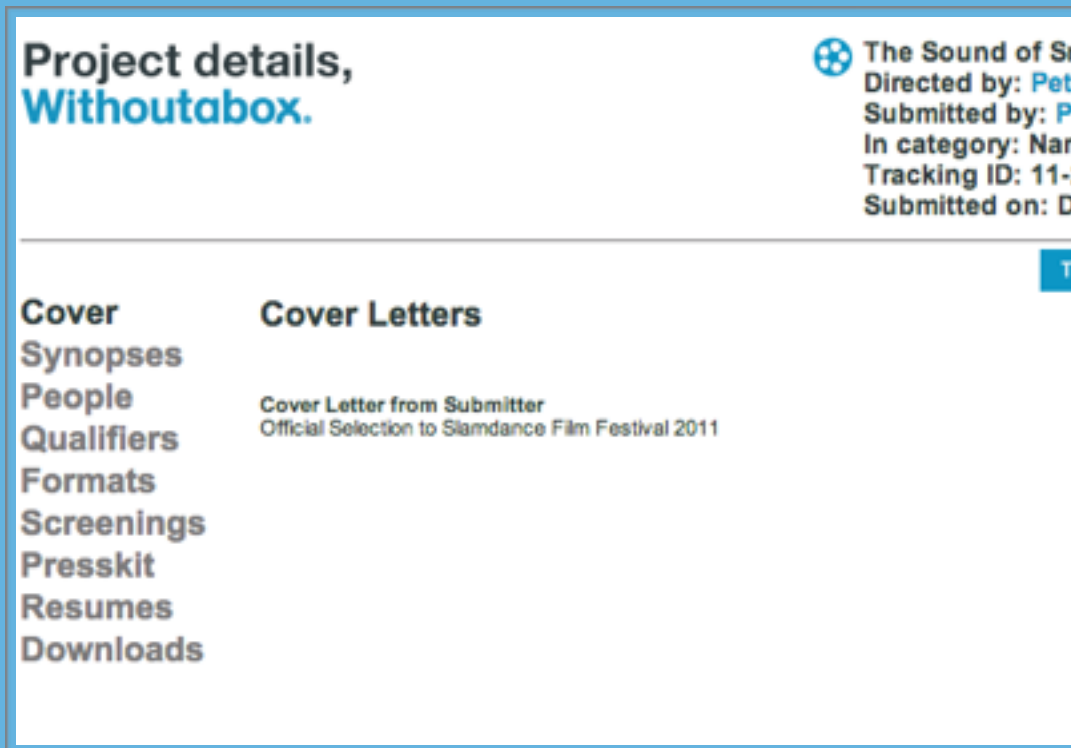
became known as the "Film Festival Secrets" guy, filmmakers began to ask for my help on the film festival circuit. Because their questions kept evolving with the changing realities of film distribution and turning up still more questions, my strategies and best practices for taking advantage of the festival circuit evolved too. That brings us to today, where I continue to write about festivals on the **Film Festival Secrets** blog and occasionally release ebooks like this one to help filmmakers like you.

While this guide doesn't go as in-depth as **Film Festival Secrets**, it is very actionable. If you did just one of these things each day, in a week you could have a submissions package that is better than 90% of the submissions I see at the film festival where I work now.

Let's get started.

Task #1:

Prepare 3 very short cover letters



Withoutabox (aka WAB) is the software that most festivals (and therefore most filmmakers) use for festival submissions. While filmmakers end up spending a lot of time in Withoutabox, they seldom get the chance to see it from the festival's perspective. It's about what you would expect, except for this: the very first thing a festival programmer sees when she pulls up your project in Withoutabox is the screen picture above – the cover letter. It's your chance to make a good first impression. Many filmmakers take this opportunity to include lots of information that seems relevant but really isn't any different from what every other filmmaker has to say. This "wall of text" effect encourages the viewer to simply slide his eyes elsewhere. Instead, include only the most relevant and distinctive information about your film in the cover letter. This one, a single line that mentions that the film played at Slamdance, is actually one of my favorites.

Good cover letters are:

- **Short** - in most cases, only a few sentences long.
- **Well-written** - at least cover the basics of grammar and spelling. Get someone you trust as a writer to proof it for you.
- **Specific** - don't talk about how hard you work or how much passion you put into the film. Every filmmaker did exactly the same. Talk about your subject matter, your audience, and yourself **if those things provide a compelling reason for the festival to be interested in you.**
- **Relevant** - if you have a particular connection to the festival (you're an alum, it's your hometown, the subject matter, the locations, etc), this is the time to mention that.
- **Remarkable** - If your movie was filmed entirely from the back of an elephant or features never-before-seen footage of someone famous, say so.
- **Funny** - if you can make someone laugh in a few sentences, that will help them remember you.

Your cover letter doesn't have to be **all** of these things, but it should be **some** of these things.

The three different cover letters you want to prepare are as follows:

1. Mention that your film is geographically, topically, or personally **relevant to the festival**. This letter might mention that you or someone on your crew had a film in the festival previously, or that the film has a local audience. (This has more weight than you might expect.)
2. If your film isn't particularly relevant to the festival, you can **fake it by demonstrating that you have some knowledge of the festival** itself. Look at the festival's previous programming selections and try to draw parallels. For example, "I noticed that you played hipster comedy *Bob's Garage* last year – our film has a very similar feel and audience profile." (If you truly think that your film shares an audience with *Bob's Garage*, you should probably be targeting festivals that played that film.)

3. If you can't find some way to make yourself relevant to the festival at hand, **call attention** to something about your film that is a) different from most other films and b) something that any festival would see as a positive thing. This is something that the one-line "Official selection for Slamdance 2011" cover letter does quite well – most festivals are interested in films that have a stamp of approval from other festivals. (There are a few fests that insist on hosting the world premieres for all their films, even the shorts, but those are a tiny minority.)

Other examples of unusual positive traits include:

- Specific sub-genres: sci-fi, horror, gay/lesbian
- Unusual locations (underwater, mountain adventure, etc)
- Highly unusual production details: filmed over the course of 20 years, last known appearance of a well-known person
- Notable names *directly* associated with the film. An endorsement from some Emmy-winning director who watched your film as part of a workshop does not count.

Things *not* to include in your cover letter:

- The words "to whom it may concern" or really any greeting at all. It's just not necessary unless you know the programmer personally.
- Your budget or other mundane production notes.
- How personal the story is to you, or how hard you worked on the film. While these things may be true and may be meaningful in another context (such as in front of an audience), that is basically what every other filmmaker also has to say. You want to set yourself apart from the crowd.

If you're submitting a physical DVD to a festival, you can include a longer cover letter, but anything much longer is probably a waste of time.

Task #2:

Create a submissions calendar



Much of your success on the festival circuit will depend on your timing. While it's very difficult to say exactly when the moviegoining public is most ready for your film – so much depends on current events and ideas in the public consciousness – you can very much **control when you submit and to which festivals.**

Once your film is completed, the #1 thing you can do to reduce your festival fees and improve your chances at festival acceptance is to **submit on the early deadline.** Festival programmers have more time to pay attention to individual films earlier in the submissions process, and the fees on early deadlines are typically half the fees on late deadlines.

Fee Schedule for Feature Films

Deadline	Regular	WAB Member	Student/ATLFF Member
Earlybird Deadline June 28, 2013	\$35	\$30	\$30
Regular Deadline October 4, 2013	\$45	\$40	\$40
Late Deadline November 8, 2013	\$55	\$50	\$50
WAB Extended Deadline November 22, 2013	\$90	\$75	\$75

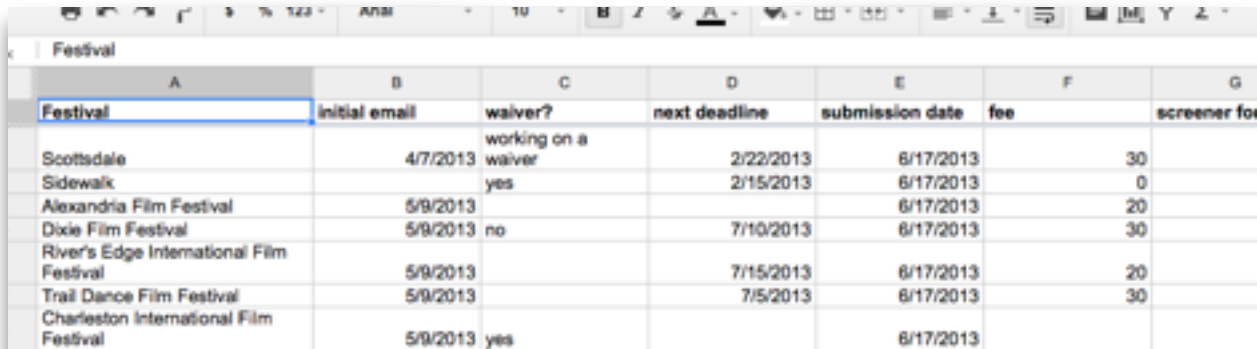
As you can see above in this grid from the 2014 Atlanta Film Festival website, Withoutabox requires many festivals to keep their call for entries open for an “extended” deadline for WAB members. Many festivals respond to this by jacking up the price on extended deadlines (which are usually well past when they actually want to be accepting films) to discourage submissions. Don’t fall for it. If you didn’t learn about the festival until its late deadline, a perfectly valid option is to wait until the early deadline for the next year of the festival.

A calendar dedicated to tracking the festivals to which you plan to submit is a great way to stay on task and on budget. Add the submissions deadlines (being careful to note whether they are postmark or receive-by dates) and the estimated notification dates, so you’ll know when to expect some news.

It doesn’t matter if your calendar is electronic or paper, unless you’re sharing it with a team – and even then you can probably get away with just sharing your tracking spreadsheet, described in the next section.

Task #3:

Track your submissions with a spreadsheet



Festival	initial email	waiver?	next deadline	submission date	fee	screener for
Scottsdale	4/7/2013	working on a waiver	2/22/2013	6/17/2013	30	
Sidewalk		yes	2/15/2013	6/17/2013	0	
Alexandria Film Festival	5/9/2013			6/17/2013	20	
Dixie Film Festival	5/9/2013	no	7/10/2013	6/17/2013	30	
River's Edge International Film Festival	5/9/2013		7/15/2013	6/17/2013	20	
Trail Dance Film Festival	5/9/2013		7/5/2013	6/17/2013	30	
Charleston International Film Festival	5/9/2013	yes		6/17/2013		

Don't just rely on your submissions page in Withoutabox to tell you which films you've submitted to and where you are in the process - track that stuff yourself! WAB's tracking pages are hard to read and often hide useful information from you behind a series of clicks and page loads. Use a tracking spreadsheet like the one pictured above for a heads-up, all-at-once display of important details. (If you'd like my template for spreadsheets like this, email me at chris@filmfestivalsecrets.com and I'll send you a copy.)

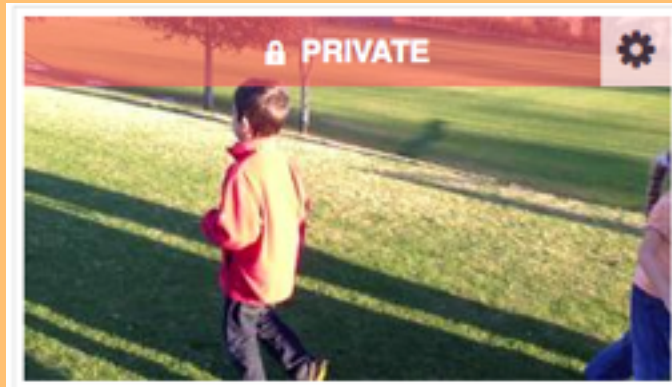
Why is tracking it yourself important?

- Not every festival uses WAB - this lets you see all of your submissions
- With a service like iCloud or Google Drive, you can share your festival status and progress with your cast and crew
- This format allows you to more easily see patterns and perform numerical analysis
- A personal spreadsheet is controlled by **you**, not by a slow (and sometimes unreliable) database on someone else's servers

Just remember that your spreadsheet is only as reliable as the data you put into it, so set yourself reminders to keep it up to date if you need the extra nudge.

Task #4:

Put your film online (behind a password)



Football
10 months ago



How to Screen for Atlanta FF
10 months ago

Chances are you already have your film online somewhere, for your own purposes, hopefully hidden behind a password. Give some thought to preparing a copy you can use just for festivals. Don't worry about piracy or your film getting "out there" – you want festival programmers to be able to see your film instantly should the whim take them (especially when asking for waivers, which we'll cover later). Just upload the film, set the password, and **leave it alone**. For the love of Pete, don't change the password every week thinking that makes it "more secure." Sure, it's more secure, but it's also less available to programmers who want to see it when they remember it a month later. Don't sabotage yourself.

For password-protected screeners I like Vimeo. For hosting festival screeners, their system is better than YouTube or any other video host that I know of. Keep in mind this is my opinion, but the combination of high video quality, password protection, and easy streaming to my iPad and AppleTV makes it a clear winner. It seems to be the preferred service of filmmakers and other festivals too. If you're cringing at the thought of sending DVDs or WAB screeners (both of which are far inferior to HD streaming video), poke around the web sites of the festivals you're submitting to, or send an email. They will probably take a Vimeo link – you just have to ask.

Task #5:

Go old school with DVDs

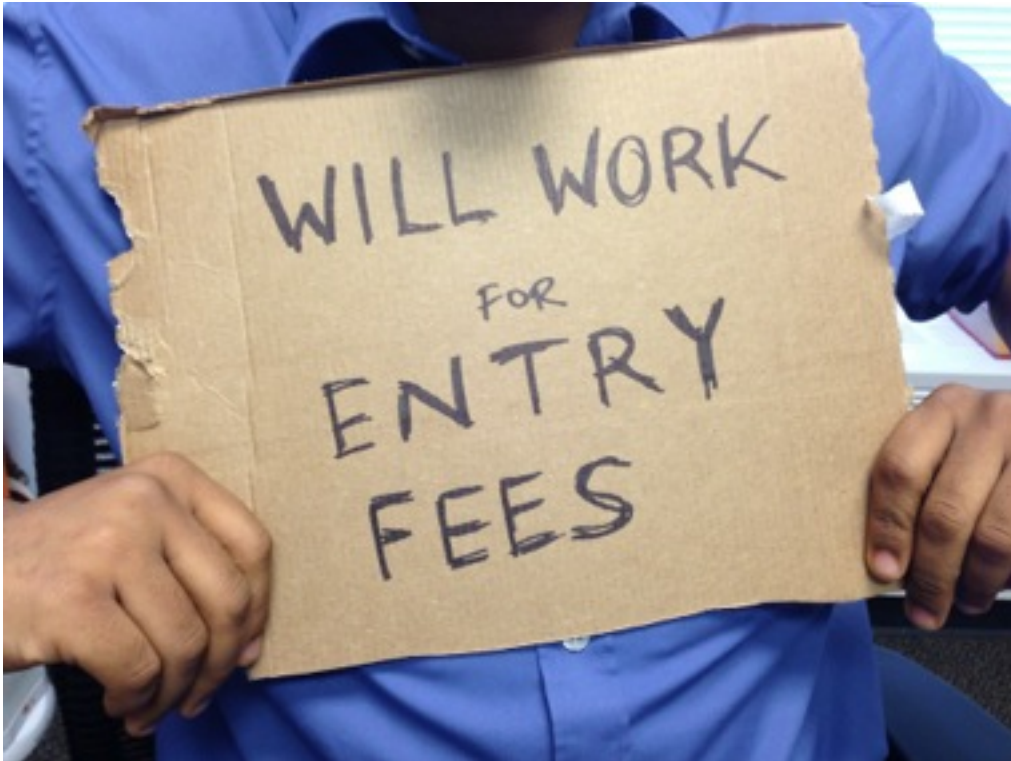


I know, ick. DVDs, long the *lingua franca* of festival screeners, are dying a long, slow, ugly death to make way for digital video in a number of forms. They are only slightly preferable in quality to WAB's awful, low-res online screeners. (I still hold out hope that Withoutabox will get it together and at least provide video that doesn't require the Adobe Flash Player.)

As of this writing (October 2013) are still festivals out there that only accept DVD, including AFI Fest. So go ahead and make a DVD screener. Keep it simple, no extras or even menus – just set it to auto-play when you put the disk in. Seriously. And no color bars! Burn about 10 in advance. They're cheap. Write the title and your contact info on them with a sharpie, leave room for the WAB number. Buy pre-paid mailers ahead of time (whether they be priority mail or whatever) so you can just pop them in the mail – then go buy more at your leisure.

Task #6:

Learn how (and when) to ask for fee waivers



It is an exciting time in a filmmaker's life when she learns about the concept of fee waiver requests.

"Wait a second!" she will shout. "You mean I can just email film festivals, tell them how poor I am, and ask if they'll waive the submission fee? And some of them say *yes*?"

What follows is a predictable orgy of keystrokes as said filmmaker sends emails to every film festival imaginable, asking for a fee waiver. While this is universally despised by festival programmers, it is nonetheless an effective way of garnering a handful of free festival submissions – provided you don't care *which festivals*. Most of the festivals for which this ploy works are smaller fests who fear missing out on great content more than they fear losing a fee. These are arguably the fests who can least afford to give up the money, but that's the way it is.

If you're bound and determined to try your hand at fee waivers, at least learn how to do it right. Here are a few insights for requesting fee waivers and increasing your chances of actually getting to "yes."

Don't plead poverty.

While your instinct might be to explain that you're a poor student or that you maxed out your credit cards making your film, a lack of money will not score you sympathy points from festival programmers. Many film festivals are struggling non-profits with expenses of their own – the implication that you need the money more than the festival does could be construed as an insult. Is the *only* reason you feel the festival should extend you a waiver is that you can't afford to continue submitting?

What do you have to offer the festival?

Some things are more important to a programmer than your submission fee – a movie that fits into a particular niche, for example, or a film that has a proven track record. Festivals are always on the hunt for good content, so if you can tempt them with the promise of a film that serves an important audience segment or has already been accepted by other festivals, lead with that. A programmer desperate to fill out a sci-fi shorts block may be primed for your robot comedy, or simply curious about the fact that four other festivals deemed your film worthy of inclusion.

Say it with pictures.

An arresting still image that gets a reaction is like catnip to someone who works in film. If your film has one of those amazing images that pulls people in, use it. Try to embed it in the body of the email, though – you can't trust that your reader will be bothered to download and view an attachment.

Don't swamp the reader with too much information...

So many of the waiver requests I see are hundreds of words long (cast lists, overly lengthy synopses, director's statements) with several files attached. Guess what? Festival programmers file them in the [TLDR](#) folder.

...but make sure relevant info is available.

At the other end of the spectrum are those filmmakers who want to submit "a film" without providing any information at all. When I go looking for information on the web about the film, there's no web site, no Facebook page, nothing. If you're not prepared to build an audience for your film, why should the festival be interested enough to waive the fee?

Why are you asking ME?

When I bring up the subject of fee waivers with other festival staffers, one of the most common answers I get is that fee waiver emails are just generic requests shotgunned to dozens of festivals. If you have a reason for submitting to a particular festival (and you should), try to include that reason with your waiver request and do your best to build a rapport with the reader.

Include a private online screener link and password in the email with your request. If a programmer is really curious about your film and excited that it might be a film she could program, nothing is more frustrating than having to wait to see it. Seeing the first few minutes of the film may be all that's needed to deem your film worthy of the fee waiver.

Task #7:

Let's review

1. **Prepare 3 very short cover letters.** Your cover letter will probably only get read in passing on the way to your Withoutabox online screener. If it's short and snappy and interesting, it might help. A little.
2. **Create a submissions calendar.** Use it to ensure that you always submit on the early deadline. Submitting late means paying more money for a smaller chance of acceptance. Not good.
3. **Track your submissions with a spreadsheet.** It just makes sense.
4. **Put your film online behind a password.** I recommend Vimeo, but other methods are nice too.
5. **Go old school with DVDs.** Some festivals still want DVDs, so you might as well be prepared. Don't get fancy with labels and menus.
6. **Learn how (and when) to ask for fee waivers.** Waiver requests by and large will be ignored, but there are some things you can do to improve their success.

When you've done these things, your life will be easier, you'll spend less money, and you'll have a submissions package better than most of the competition. Good luck with your festival run!

Here is what you should do next:

1. Visit the Atlanta Film Festival classes page (atlantafilmfestival.com/classes) and see if we have any upcoming webinars you might want to attend. (Some of them are free!)
2. Check out my book, Film Festival Secrets (filmfestivalsecrets.com).
3. Follow [@atlfilm365](https://twitter.com/atlfilm365) and [@ffsecrets](https://twitter.com/ffsecrets) on Twitter.
4. Send an email to chris@filmfestivalsecrets.com with any feedback you might have about this guide.

Thanks for reading!