

# Responsible Filmmaking Guide & Evaluation Rubric

## Purpose

This guide helps filmmakers identify and evaluate whether content meets a standard of Responsible Filmmaking—filmmaking that takes the audience's mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being into consideration.

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## Core Definition

**Responsible Filmmaking** means:

- Every creative choice considers its impact on viewers
  - Nothing gratuitous or purposefully harmful or exploitative
  - Content serves the story and message, not shock value
  - We steward our audience's trust carefully
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## The Three Key Questions

Before including ANY content (scene, dialogue, image, sound), ask:

### 1. PURPOSE: Does this serve the story?

- Is this necessary to move the plot forward?
- Does it develop character in a meaningful way?
- Does it communicate something essential that can't be shown another way?
- **RED FLAG:** If it's only there for shock value, humor at someone's expense, or to look "edgy"

### 2. IMPACT: How will this affect viewers?

- Will this harm someone who's already struggling? (trauma survivors, those battling addiction, young viewers)
- Does this exploit real pain for entertainment?
- Could this normalize destructive behavior?
- Will this leave viewers feeling hopeless, degraded, or manipulated?
- **GREEN FLAG:** Does this challenge viewers toward growth, hope, or truth?

### 3. ALTERNATIVES: Is there a better way to show this?

- Can we imply rather than show explicitly?
  - Can we show consequences without glorifying the act?
  - Can we communicate the emotional truth without graphic detail?
  - **PRINCIPLE:** The most powerful storytelling often happens in what we DON'T show
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## Content Evaluation Matrix

Use this to evaluate specific elements in your film:

### VIOLENCE

#### ASK:

- Is violence necessary to the story?
- Are we showing consequences, not just action?
- Are we avoiding glorification or making it look cool/fun?

#### RESPONSIBLE APPROACHES:

- Show emotional/relational impact of violence, not just physical
- Imply rather than show graphic detail
- Focus on victim's experience and recovery, not perpetrator's power
- Show real consequences (grief, trauma, justice)

#### AVOID:

- Excessive gore or brutality for shock value
- Violence without consequences
- Celebrating violence as problem-solving
- Dehumanizing victims

### LANGUAGE

#### ASK:

- Does this profanity reflect the reality of the character/situation?
- Is it gratuitous or just trying to seem "authentic"?
- What are we communicating by including it?

#### RESPONSIBLE APPROACHES:

- Use sparingly and only when it truly serves character development
- Consider the cumulative effect of repeated profanity
- Remember: authentic doesn't always mean explicit
- Consider if this will prevent some of our target audience from being able to actually view the movie (i.e. age restrictions)

#### AVOID:

- Profanity for shock or comedic effect only
- Language that demeans or objectifies people
- Excessive use that desensitizes

## **SEXUAL CONTENT**

### **ASK:**

- Is this exploiting bodies for entertainment?
- Are we respecting the dignity of people made in God's image (audience and actors)?
- Could this contribute to unhealthy views of sexuality or relationships?

### **RESPONSIBLE APPROACHES:**

- Imply rather than show
- Focus on emotional/relational aspects, not physical
- Show the beauty of commitment and respect
- Address consequences of broken sexuality honestly

### **AVOID:**

- Any exploitation or objectification
- Gratuitous scenes that serve no story purpose
- Content that could trigger those struggling with sexual sin
- Normalizing casual or harmful sexual behavior

## **SUBSTANCE USE**

### **ASK:**

- Are we showing reality without glorification?
- Are consequences clear?
- Could this trigger someone in recovery?

### **RESPONSIBLE APPROACHES:**

- Show the full picture: initial appeal AND destructive consequences
- Portray addiction/abuse accurately, not romantically
- Include hope and recovery when appropriate
- Be sensitive to those in recovery

### **AVOID:**

- Making substance use look glamorous or problem-free
- Comedy that minimizes real harm
- Detailed "how-to" depictions

## **MENTAL HEALTH & SUICIDE**

### **ASK:**

- Are we portraying this with accuracy and sensitivity?
- Could this be triggering to vulnerable viewers?
- Are we offering hope, not just despair?

#### **RESPONSIBLE APPROACHES:**

- Consult resources on responsible media portrayal of suicide
- Consult resources on responsible media portrayal regarding mental illnesses
- Show support systems and paths to help
- Avoid graphic depictions of self-harm or suicide methods
- Include resources (helpline numbers, etc.) if topic is central

#### **AVOID:**

- Romanticizing or glorifying suicide or self-harm
- Detailed methods or "how-to" content
- Portraying suicide as the only option or a heroic choice
- Using mental illness as a plot device without respect

#### **THEMES OF HOPELESSNESS**

##### **ASK:**

- Does our story leave room for redemption?
- Are we honest about darkness while pointing toward light?
- Does this honor the reality that Christ offers hope?

#### **RESPONSIBLE APPROACHES:**

- Be honest about brokenness AND the possibility of restoration
- Even in tragedy, acknowledge transcendent meaning
- Let suffering lead somewhere, not nowhere
- Remember: lament is biblical, but so is hope

#### **AVOID:**

- Nihilism that denies meaning or hope
- Despair without any redemptive arc
- Suggesting that darkness wins permanently

## **The "Gut Check" Test**

Sometimes you can't articulate why something feels wrong. Trust that instinct.

#### **If you feel uncomfortable including something, ask:**

- "Would I want my younger sibling/child to see this?"

- "Am I trying to justify this because I think it makes the film look more 'professional' or 'mature'?"
- "Is this honoring to the people this represents (victims, those struggling, etc.)?"
- "Would I be embarrassed to screen this in front of my church, my parents, my loved ones and/or others I respect?"

**If the answer gives you pause, take a step back.**

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## **Decision-Making Process**

### **STEP 2: CREATIVE TEAM DISCUSSION**

- Pray together and seek wisdom as a team
- Don't make these calls alone
- Discuss with Crew Members
- Listen to concerns from any team member

### **STEP 3: EVALUATE USING THIS RUBRIC**

- Go through the Three Key Questions
- Check the Content Evaluation Matrix
- Do the Gut Check Test

### **STEP 4: PRAY**

- Again, not a formality— seek wisdom
- Ask: "Does this honor and serve our audience well?"
- Ask: "Does everyone have peace about this?"
- Be willing to cut things you've worked hard on if they don't pass

### **STEP 5: CONSIDER ALTERNATIVES**

- Brainstorm 3-5 different ways to communicate the same truth
- Often the more creative, less explicit option is stronger

### **STEP 6: SEEK OUTSIDE PERSPECTIVE**

- Get feedback from trusted leaders outside the immediate team, ex. Mentors, Pastors, etc.

### **STEP 6: MAKE THE CALL**

- Once decided, commit to the decision
  - Document reasoning for future reference
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# When You Disagree on What's "Responsible"

IT MAY HAPPEN. Here's how to navigate it:

## For Crew Members:

- Express your concerns respectfully
- Explain your reasoning using this rubric
- Listen to the Crew Member's perspective
- Submit to final decision even if you don't fully agree
- Remember: erring on the side of caution honors our audience

## For Department Heads:

- Take other's concerns seriously—they might see something you don't
- Explain your reasoning clearly
- Be willing to reconsider if multiple people have concerns
- When in doubt, pray about it
- Model humility in decision-making
- Default to the more cautious approach when legitimately unclear

## For Producers/Directors:

- Create space for honest discussion
- Value concerns from any crew member
- Make the final call with both artistic integrity and spiritual responsibility in mind
- Explain your reasoning to the crew
- Be willing to revisit decisions if new information emerges

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## Red Flags That We're Drifting

Watch for these warning signs in your team or process:

⚠️ **Avoiding prayer** - Sign we know something's off ⚠️ **"Everyone else does it"** - Comparison to mainstream media as justification ⚠️ **"It's realistic"** - Reality doesn't always need to be shown explicitly ⚠️ **"The audience can handle it"** - We don't know everyone's story or wounds ⚠️ **"It'll win more awards"** - Creating for acclaim rather than Christ ⚠️ **"We already filmed it"** - Sunk cost shouldn't drive inclusion ⚠️ **"No one will care"** - Someone always cares; we're accountable to them ⚠️ **Rushing decisions** - Pressure leads to compromise ⚠️ **Ignoring concerns** - Dismissing team member's discomfort

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## Practical Examples

### SCENARIO 1: Portraying a Character's Fall into Addiction

### **IRRESPONSIBLE APPROACH:**

- Montage of fun party scenes with drug use
- Focus on the high, the freedom, the excitement
- Minimal or delayed consequences
- Makes it look appealing

### **RESPONSIBLE APPROACH:**

- Show initial appeal briefly, honestly
- Quickly reveal escalating consequences
- Focus on relational damage, loss of self
- Show the lie of what was promised vs. reality
- Include hope for recovery without making it seem easy
- Avoid graphic drug use scenes

## **SCENARIO 2: Addressing Bullying/Abuse**

### **IRRESPONSIBLE APPROACH:**

- Graphic, extended scenes of abuse
- Victimization without dignity
- No path to healing or justice
- Exploits pain for emotional manipulation

### **RESPONSIBLE APPROACH:**

- Imply abuse; show emotional impact more than physical
- Maintain victim's dignity
- Show support systems and path to healing
- Address systemic issues, not just individual evil
- Provide hope without minimizing real harm

## **SCENARIO 3: Character Using Profanity in Anger**

### **IRRESPONSIBLE APPROACH:**

- Constant profanity throughout film
- Used for shock or humor
- No distinction between characters
- Desensitizes viewers

### **RESPONSIBLE APPROACH:**

- Character's anger expressed through tone, body language, context
- If profanity is used, it's rare and truly reflects the character's brokenness
- Contrast with characters who handle anger differently
- Show consequences of unbridled anger

# Regular Team Practices

## BEFORE PRODUCTION:

- Team prayer over content decisions
- Script review using this rubric
- Discussion of potential concerns
- Consensus on approach to sensitive topics

## DURING PRODUCTION:

- Daily/weekly prayer for wisdom
- On-set check-ins if anything feels off
- Freedom for anyone to raise concerns
- Willingness to adjust in the moment

## IN POST-PRODUCTION:

- Pray for God's wisdom in post-production
- Review rough cut with rubric in hand
- Fresh eyes from outside the editing team
- Ministry Head/Producer final approval
- Consider test screening with trusted viewers

## AFTER RELEASE:

- Gather feedback from audiences
  - Debrief as team: what did we learn?
  - Refine this rubric based on experience
  - Celebrate what we did well
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# Resources for Continued Learning

## Organizations:

- Act One: Writing for Hollywood
- The Redemptive Film Awards

## Websites:

- Plugged In (Focus on the Family) - for understanding content impact
  - Common Sense Media - age-appropriateness and content details
  - Film & Theology blog discussions
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# Final Reminder

## Responsible Filmmaking is not about:

- Being boring or preachy
- Avoiding all difficult topics
- Making "safe" films that don't challenge anyone
- Pretending the world isn't broken

## Responsible Filmmaking IS about:

- Loving our audience enough to consider their well-being
- Using our creative power wisely
- Telling stories with integrity
- Honoring the image of God in every person
- Creating excellent art that serves rather than harms

**The Goal:** Films so good, so compelling that they don't need to exploit or harm to make an impact.

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## Questions? Concerns? Disagreements?

This rubric is meant to guide, not restrict. If you encounter a situation not covered here, or disagree with something in this guide:

1. Pray for wisdom
2. Make the best decision you can with the information you have
3. Document it to help refine this guide for the future

**Grace for ourselves, responsibility to our audience, glory to God.**