



I Want to Show a Movie!!!

(Without worrying about getting arrested!)

When you want to show a film on campus, you may be asked to provide proof that you have obtained permission (the “rights”) to show that material. This handout is designed to help you understand why this is necessary, and how you can go about getting the permission you need.

Why does my organization need to get permission to show this film?

Copyright infringement is a serious offense under the law. While it is important to abide by the law, it is also important that your organization represents itself well by doing the right thing—getting permission to show the film. As a Washington University student organization or department, the University expects you to follow University policies, and state, local, and federal law. Should you or your organization be caught violating copyright law, the University would **not** provide any kind of protection from your group’s liability under the law.

When is permission required?

Permission to show a film is necessary more often than you might think. Some common examples include:

- **Any time you show a film in any public University space** (this includes any classroom, lounge, or common area at the University). These spaces are considered “public” spaces, and showing the movie in these areas is the equivalent of showing them in a theater. *Permission is required even if the event is free, and has not been advertised.*
- **If you have used publicity to invite your audience** to the showing, regardless of the location (this includes but is not limited to mass emails, letters, flyers, and web postings). Because movie rentals are intended for private use, renting them does not provide you with the permission you need to have a public showing in which an audience is invited.
- **If you are charging admission for the showing or an event in conjunction with the showing** (charging for a lecture that will accompany the film, for example). This would be true even if you showed the film at your house, or at another venue off campus.

When is permission not necessarily required?

- You may not need permission if the film is being shown as part of a face-to-face teaching activity that is tied to the curriculum of an established University course. *It is important to note that this face-to-face teaching exception is extremely narrow, and usually does not apply. Simply having an “educational” component to the showing is not sufficient to bring it within this exception.* In addition, even if the distributor provides special permission

for films shown for educational purposes, they will still need to provide you with written confirmation to protect your event under the law and University policy.

- **You may not need permission if you are showing only brief parts of a film.** There is no set rule for what “brief” means in this context, but a general rule is that these snippets are permissible when the event is free, when the snippet does not reveal key plot items to the film, when the length of the showing is insubstantial, and when it does not reduce the likelihood of viewers seeing the entire film.
- **Your department or organization may already have permission to show the film.** If you are showing the film in conjunction with an academic department, that department may already have permission. Check with your department to be sure. If permission is already granted, they will be able to show you written proof of that fact.

How can I get permission?

Getting permission for showing most films is fairly simple, although it may be somewhat more complicated for some rare or international films. There are resources on campus to help you if you should have problems. Most “mainstream” films that are distributed for non-commercial use (which is what most campus showings would be) come from one of two main distributors, or you can search for the proper source:

- **SWANK Motion Pictures, Incorporated** – the web site for this company is www.swank.com, and the phone number is 1-800-876-5577. The list of films they distribute is on their web page, but they add new films regularly.
- **Criterion** – Another company like SWANK; they are the other big distributor. Their web site is www.criterionpic.com, and their phone number is 1-800-890-9494.
- **Conduct a web search**—a good place to start is www.imdb.com, the Internet Movie Database. Simply go to the site, type in your film in the search area on the left, and choose the correct film out of the results. Once you choose your film, go to the “Company Credits” and look up “distribution.”
- **If you STILL can’t find out** who distributes the film, you can call **(310) 247-3020**, to the Reference Library of the Motion Picture Academy.
- **If you have already done all this**, and you STILL can’t find it, call the Office of Student Activities. The Advisor of the Day may be able to help you.

What is a film distributor going to ask me?

- Your name, and the name of the organization you are working with
- How you intend to show the film (advertise all over campus vs. to a small group, whether you are charging, what kind of venue you are showing the film in)
- If there is a charge, how your organization will pay
- When you intend to show the film
- Contact information for your organization
- Whether or not you need them to send you a copy of the film

Is this going to cost money?

It might. The only way for you to determine this is to call the distributor, explain under what context the film will be shown, and see what they can do for you. If there is a fee, it will matter whether or not you are charging for the showing, how many people you expect, whether or not you need a copy of the film sent to you, and how often you show films. Have all of the information handy about your event when you speak with the film's distributor.

After I have obtained permission, what "proof" does the University need to see?

Once you have obtained the rights, you will receive a written record of your permission to show the film. This is commonly called a "confirmation." If you are being charged, an invoice will follow this confirmation once you show the film. Confirmations can come via the mail, or via email, and will have the film, the date(s) you have permission to show the film, the contact information of your representative from the distribution company, and the format you requested the film in (if the film is being sent to you), and other pertinent information. If a distribution company is unable to provide a confirmation, they should send you a letter electronically or via mail that certifies that you have legally obtained the rights to show the film. This should be on letterhead with all contact information of the distributor available.

This is so complicated! Why don't I just not tell the University that I am showing a film?

Even though it sounds complicated, it really is not difficult to obtain the proper permission to show films on campus. It will definitely take less time and money than defending yourself or your organization in a copyright infringement lawsuit. Intellectual copyright infringement is being prosecuted more and more on college campuses. It is just not worth the risk. More immediately, if you show a film in the University without getting permission, and the University becomes aware of it, your organization could stand to lose valuable benefits, including use of space in the University.