Reels

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Also known as "demo reels", this is how you prove your acting skill level to the industry. There's two primary situations you need a reel. The first is to obtain representation – an agent and/or a manager. The second is to help secure auditions.

As you progress, you may have multiple reels, each one focusing on a different skill set. For example, you might have one for scripted comedy acting, another for scripted drama, and yet another for improv. But, if you're just starting out, you just put everything all in one reel until you have enough to do separate reels by topic.

Reels to obtain representation:

The reason you need a reel for this is to prove to prospective agents or managers that you truly have the skills you claim to have. An actor's skill level reflects on the agent or manager, so if the actor is not good overall, or has weaknesses in certain areas, it could be damaging to the agent or manager's reputation. So, they want to see proof of your skills before they begin to represent you and start to submit you for projects, and pitch you for roles.

You might need a reel when switching agents or managers, especially if there's been in a substantial gap in representation.

They may want separate reels, one for each skill type (comedy, drama, improv, etc.), and go into a bit more depth than to just have a compilation reel.

Reels to help secure auditions:

It is not uncommon for the creative staff (writers, director, producers) to look for actors to play roles before they have funding in place, which means before a casting director is hired. Sometimes this is for sizzle reels for deferred, minimal or no pay, which 90% of the time go nowhere. But sometimes they do, and it can be a huge career boost. Having a reel ready is the best thing for this, to be submitted behind the scenes before a casting call comes out.

So, if you are not already well known for your work, the creative staff may reach out and request a reel to see if you have the energy and presence they are looking for on camera, as well as the acting skills to play a certain type of role.

What's in a reel?

A reel needs to contain examples of the range of acting skills you have. That means every major emotion that is typically expressed in the type of acting you have in the reel. You should try to deliver a layer/multidimensional performance that may or may not contain

appropriate transitions. The transition could be like anger to sadness, or delight to fear, or forlorn to joy, but it needs to be naturally in the script.

The reel should have clips from scenes you have done, that clearly show you. They should be either slow or fast moving, and either way need to keep the attention of the prospective representation, or creative staff. Remember that we see this kind of material daily, in the form of self taped auditions, reels from prospective clients, etc, so you have to capture our attention quickly and solidly. Don't begin your reel with clips that start off slow – jump right into it. But make you do what the script calls for.

Legal use of footage and how to obtain footage

In most cases an actor is allowed to use footage from scenes you appear in for demo reel purposes. Typically this means you won't get the footage until after the finished project has been released, to avoid spoiling it in advance.

Oftentimes, you have to capture the feed streaming or broadcast, to obtain it quickly and cheaply. There are services that can obtain footage for you, but they charge for this service. If you were in a really major project, it might be worth it to pay for, especially if it's been some time ago.

Why does it take so long to get clips?

You might have done student films, or sizzle reel (or trailer or pilot) work for free or on deferred payment, just so you can get footage for your reel. Or, maybe your big break came for a speaking role. But here you are, months later and haven't yet gotten it. There's a reason for that.

They don't want to put out footage that is substandard, or does not exist in the final cut. So, your entire big scene could end up not included – hence there's a chance you might never get anything if your scene was short. Reshoots might have been necessary. Once the final cut is done, they have to do sound and color correction, plus add titles, and so on. Some productions will not allow any footage out until after a project has premiered, and that can add additional months as well. If it's for film festivals, that can add many months, as the project may have to be finished before festival submission, and the submissions deadlines are typically months before festival.

So, for all of that work, the wait time after shooting can be quite long. Here's some really vague and general rules:

Film: For short films (under 40 minutes), expect to wait at least a couple of months for finishing. For feature films, expect at least six months. For major films with lots of VFX, expect nine months or more.

TV: Web series tend to be quicker, in general, but not always. Broadcast and cable series could be a bit faster with maybe a month or two from shooting to air date. Streaming

series can be from a few weeks to many months, depending on if they stream sequentially, or drop the entire series at once for binge watching.

Quality of footage

The best quality you can obtain is preferred. A video at 720i is ok, while 1080p is even better. The intent is to be able to see you clearly, and to hear you clearly. If you have footage that looks like it's from 30 years ago, so blurry you can't be seen, you're not doing yourself any favors.

Can I use self taped auditions?

If you have been doing self taped auditions, by all means use good clips from those.

Things to avoid

- Don't include any non-speaking roles. Non-speaking roles are called background acting typically, and do not use agents to get into auditions. (Successful background actors use call services connected with Central Casting.)
- Don't include a montage.

Documentaries, reality shows and media interviews

These don't show acting skills, but could be used in a separate reel showing your interview skills, or your capabilities as a host.

Can I use monologues?

Most monologues come from theater, rather than tv or film. So if you are going for tv or film, that's not going to help you. They show us nothing about your reactions to other characters. They simply show us that you can memorize lines.

Can I use footage from theater?

First off, it's really hard to even get any useable footage from theater. Not only is it very hard to obtain, but it's usually shot from a distance, with no closeups. Keep in mind that theater is performed at a distance from the audience, and body language and facial expressions are done to be seen from a distance. With film and tv, the camera is right there in your face, so even though you do body language and facial expressions, they are more natural as one would see in daily life.

So, in general don't include theater footage, unless by chance it's been shot in the style more like one would see in a tv situation comedy (also known as multi-cam comedy), with the cameras are there on the stage with the actors.

What about dialects or special skills?

If you are good at a particular dialect, you might consider doing a reel of just those. That also goes for special skills, such as dancing, singing, or physical skills such as sports.

What if I'm just starting into film and tv?

If you're just starting out, you may need to shoot your own scenes to create a reel. Choose your scripts carefully. Each one can be just a minute or two, in order to highlight a particular acting skill, in order to show your range. Choose a good off camera reader, hopefully another actor, to interact with. The reader(s) do not have to be seen on camera, and can be totally different than what the script calls for, since this is about you, not telling a story. Shoot each one like you would do for a self taped audition (see our **Self Taped Auditions** instruction sheet for guidelines.)

There are plenty of places to obtain short or even full length scripts you can use for shooting your own scenes. You might want to choose something you're familiar with, like a scene from a famous movie. You can search the internet for full scripts or sides (a portion of a script) that are available free.

How long should each segment be, and how long should the overall reel be?

Each scene can be whatever it takes to show the part of the range you are showcasing, or the transition between emotion you are highlighting in that scene. But try to keep each segment to a minute or less, and the overall length to around 3 minutes.

Keep your reel current

As you book more roles, make sure you obtain the final clips of your acting to use in your reel. Since this can take a very long time to obtain, sometimes you can use trailer footage if that is released far in advance, and the final cut is still a long way off. Keep adding better work, and dropping lower quality, or work not well representing your range.

Because you could be requested for a reel at any moment, there won't be time to put one together easily by the deadline typically requested. It's much easier to have an updated copy that you can just send a link to immediately. That's a job for your down time between gigs.

Where can I put my reel?

You can put your reel on your web site, or on your streaming video channel (YouTube, Vimeo, etc). They can also be uploaded to IMDb, and to casting web sites like Actor's Access, Casting Network, or Casting Frontier, but there may be a charge for any of those.