

63rd Ann Arbor Film Festival Screening Guidelines

Top 6 Things to know:

1. Your notes are the most valuable part of your review. Please be thorough and thoughtful - even for films you are not sending to the next round. It is okay to be unsure about a film. **NOTE: Once you click “Submit”, you cannot change your answer. If you want to think about it more before you rate a film, do not enter the final “Yes” or “No” vote.**
2. We are looking for films for AAFF programming. No matter if you love or hate a film, please answer the question: Is this film right for the festival?
3. Communicate if you will be delayed with your assigned films. Completing reviews on time is essential if we are to meet our goal of having all first round films (about 2800) reviewed by mid-November.
4. Screening is fun! Watch with a buddy, join the screening salons, enjoy the wide variety of films.
5. Films are assigned by a human. We do our best to honor your requests and appreciate your patience if we need to make a correction.
6. Do not reject a film just because you are unable to view it or think it's categorized incorrectly; any such reason will count as a "no" vote. Contact us for a new link or reassignment if necessary.

If you have any questions, please contact us at screening@aafilmfest.org

Part I: General Information

Screening and Selection Overview

The Ann Arbor Film Festival (AAFF) is committed to...

- the careful review of all submitted films
 - For the 63rd festival (March 25-30, 2025), we anticipate approximately 2,800 entries from more than 80 countries

- The volume of submissions makes the selection process highly competitive
 - About 5 percent of submitted works can be programmed for festival exhibition
 - The screening process was intentionally designed to make possible the efficient and effective review of this large body of work from around the world, leading to the identification and selection of the best possible program for the 63rd AAFF
- presenting cinema as an art form, outside the expectations and restrictions of cinema as entertainment
 - From the time of its founding in 1963 by filmmaker, painter, collagist, activist, and contrarian George Manupelli—who at the time was teaching in the University of Michigan Art Department—the festival was intended as:
 - a counterpoint to the New York destination art world
 - an alternative to commercial cinema
 - Since 1963, the festival has annually presented contemporary film works that express the original vision of their makers. The films often include...
 - personal visions that break new ground through a deep engagement with their medium
 - the innovative exploration of a subject, whether familiar or marginalized

The films that interest us are not so much a “calling card” for makers with a single-minded aspiration to enter the film industry. Nor are they films that serve only to entertain or to demonstrate new techniques. The films at the festival might be entertaining, and often they are technically innovative, but these are not their sole or primary elements.

Genre Overview

Characteristics of appropriate work for inclusion in the AAFF include:

- films made outside of any film industry for non-commercial purposes
- films made by individuals or by small groups of people creating engaging work with their own resources, outside of the studio system
- experimentation

The notion of *genre* in the screening and selection process serves primarily as an organizational tool. Any genre can exhibit the quality of *experimentation*—a new approach to:

- telling a story, or
- creating a work of nonfiction, or
- realizing a deeply personal vision through innovative filmmaking

Keeping these shared attributes of independence and experimentation in mind, we use the terms *narrative*, *animation*, and *documentary* to describe genres. With narrative and animation, we look for films that create space for ambiguity and complexity of thought, rather than stories that follow a conventional and predictable form.

With that said, filmmakers can submit work to AAFF in any of these five categories:

- Experimental narrative
- Experimental animation
- Experimental documentary
- Experimental
- Experimental music video

Works that are *experimental* by AAFF standards typically have one or more of these qualities:

- they primarily explore the medium of film or video itself
- they are not fundamentally narrative
- their dominant element is abstraction or lyricism

Do not reject a film because you feel it does not fit in the category it has been submitted.

While some films could be considered within multiple categories (for example, an animated documentary), each filmmaker selects a preferred genre, which serves to help organize the submission review process. Screeners with an interest in, or familiarity with, the history of works in a particular genre may be asked to review the films in that category. Programming decisions are not made by these category/genre labels.

Screening Committee Structure

- Members of the screening committee will view films on the internet-accessible software platform Festivant by InfoReady. (For details, please refer to the attached User Guide).
- Led by AAFF's director, the screening committee will participate throughout the screening and selection process for *Films in Competition*.
- Because the majority of submissions will be narrative films, the festival needs the greatest amount of help with the screening of these.
 - Screeners at all levels of experience are encouraged to screen narrative films.
 - *New screeners to AAFF are required to review narrative films to start.*

Screening Salons

Designed especially for beginning and novice screeners, seasoned volunteers are also encouraged to attend. Screening salons provide an optional—and optimal—opportunity to

connect with others while viewing and discussing films as a group from August through November. Dates and times for salons will be announced soon.

Part II: The Screening Process, in Three Rounds

Round 1: Screening Committee

Every film is reviewed by at least two people, so screeners work in pairs. To make this possible, each screener is assigned and introduced to a screening partner, according to their preferences. New screeners are always paired with someone who has more screening experience.

When each pair is assigned its first group of films to review, screening partners are encouraged to consult each other about the films, with the ultimate goal of addressing the question: "Is this right for the festival?"

Each screener rates each film on five criteria:

- originality
- artistic vision
- technical quality
- sound design
- how compelling it is

Then each screener votes "yes" or "no" for each film.

Screeners must include notes for each submitted review. In Round 1, if a screener votes "no" on a film, the screener *need not rate* the film, but the screener *must provide* an explanatory comment (for example: "This is not an experimental film"). Your comments are crucial to the programming process, so it is imperative that you heed this step.

Outcomes:

After the initial two screeners' reviews, the film advances as follows:

2 No votes => the film is dropped from the selection process *

2 Yes votes => the film skips Round 2 and advances to Round 3 with two scores

1 Yes + 1 No Vote => the film advances to Round 2 for further scoring and review by a screening advisor

* *Caveat:* Even in the case of two "no" votes, the AAFF staff and Advisory Board may suggest any film for reconsideration at any time. Special attention is given to alumni and local filmmakers.

Round 2: Screening Advisors

Screening advisors are selected by the AAFF for their education and expertise in experimental film. Films that receive conflicting votes in Round 1 are sent to advisors for a tie-breaking review and vote. Additional films may also be flagged for advisor review by the AAFF Director.

Rounds 3 and 4: Selection and Programming

All films entering Round 3 have been recommended and scored by a minimum of two people. AAFF screening advisors review and recommend films for programming. The goal of round 3 is to reduce the total number of films in consideration to 200. In round 4, the Director will use scoring and individual reviews to prioritize films for programming and further discussion or review by advisors and selected committee members.

Guidelines for screener acceptance:

Below are the probability of films being programmed, by genre, for the 62nd festival. These numbers shift year to year based on the pool of submitted films as well as those programmed. When considered by genre, films have very different chances of being programmed. For instance, for the 62nd AAFF, we had 969 Narrative films submitted and only 10 were programmed, while 102 Music Videos were submitted and 12 were chosen.

2024	Narrative	Experimental	Animation	Doc	Music Video
% of films programmed	1%	4%	9%	3%	11%

Only 109 of the 2977 submitted films were programmed last year!

Use these guidelines to help you determine how many films should be given a “yes” vote:

	Narrative	Experimental	Animation	Doc	Music Video
How many films should be reviewed to accept one?	review 40 accept 1	review 6 accept 1	review 5 accept 1	review 13 accept 1	review 4 accept 1

Further Guidelines for Reviewing a Film in Round 1

Question: Is this right for the festival? Yes or No.

- Some potential reasons for a “no” vote:
 - No avant-garde/experimental/creative aspects
 - Poor technical components, such as lighting, sound, editing, script (without intentionally using these techniques)
 - If acting is involved, the acting is poorly executed (unintentionally)
 - Execution components, such as: if period piece, set/clothing is unintentionally inconsistent with the intended era
 - Derivative of other people’s work; not original
 - Film direction is not consistent (it needs to feel like one film)
- If you are casting a “yes” vote:
 - Assign a score for each criterion

Your notes should reflect your ratings - if you give sound design a “5” explain why
 Always remember to provide notes (aka “screening comments”) regardless of a “yes” or “no” vote.

What to include in your screening comments

- A few sentences addressing form, content, and effectiveness
 - Give an idea what kind of film it is, what it is about, or what it is doing
 - Please avoid extensive plot summaries and scene-by-scene recaps - they are unnecessary
- A couple of sentences describing the strongest aspects and flaws
 - Help us understand which aspects of the work led to your recommendation or dismissal
 - This should be descriptive and neutral
 - Please avoid hyperbole and pejoratives (not useful)

Example of a screener comment

Film: *Memories of the Past*

Ratings:

Originality – 3

Technical Quality – 2

Artistic Merit – 3

Compelling – 2

Sound Design - 3

Vote: NO

Home-movie footage (domestic scenes, family vacation) interspersed with close-up 16mm photography of colorful abstract shapes revealed by a series of zooms. Soundtrack has raw sounding interview of young person asking older family-member about his memories of the

war. Piano music throughout. The music, which is maudlin sounding, gives the film an overly sentimental feel. The interview is poignant and the strongest element of the film, but isn't original or boundary pushing. The abstract footage is confusing and does not add to the narrative.

Rating System

- 1 = as poorly executed as possible
- 2 = flawed aspects outweigh the positive aspects of the work
- 3 = good but not excellent
- 4 = excellent and recommended for festival (a "yes" vote)
- 5 = superior and impressive

5's should be a rarity! This score is reserved for films which are truly outstanding.

A few other considerations when viewing and evaluating submissions:

What is the medium? ** Identify what you're looking at. Think about the specific aspects of the medium being used and how this work is in conversation with those aspects. How do these aspects relate to the core (subject, concept, experience, etc.) of what the work is doing?

Is it film? Originally shot or appropriated, found footage, educational films, home movies, etc.? Is it hand-processed, chemically, or optically manipulated?

Is it video? Archival or found footage? Digital effects? Shot on film, finished on video? Is it animation? – 2D or 3D? Cel? Computer? Machinima? Cut outs? Pixilation? Etc.

**This may not be apparent to newer screeners. Do your best to make good judgements and comments.

Part III: Submission Categories

Considering a Film's Submission Category

The Ann Arbor Film Festival programs films which are experimental in nature. As discussed above, filmmakers choose the category they are submitting their film under. AAFF only uses these categories or genres for organizing the screening process. Categories may be blurred (animated narrative) which is why we accept the submission of many categories.

Experimental

Knowledge of the broad history, concepts, and vocabulary of avant-garde film and a familiarity with both major and minor historical and contemporary avant-garde films and videos is a requisite to screen films in this category. *Most beginning screeners will not be asked to evaluate this complex category.*

Experimental Narrative

Most of us have been watching narrative films for most of our lives. When critically viewing these works, the qualities of acting, dialogue, character development, pacing and story will be apparent. Also consider how music is being used and the production values. Does it seem like the filmmaker has been purposeful with how they crafted the look of their piece? Or do they seem like they're showing off tricks and techniques (e.g., unnecessary camera movement), which don't support the story and characters?

Please consider the possibility of self-reflexivity. If the dialogue, acting, and construction is poor, does this seem intentional or just unskilled? Is the work consciously speaking to its own artifice? If so, how? What is being explored?

Lastly, consider whether or not the narrative film still has experimental elements. A film may be good or even great, but not right for AAFF.

Experimental Documentary

We are looking for documentaries that explore their subjects in imaginative and interesting ways, emphasizing the visual nature of the medium. We are most interested in documentaries that treat their audience as intelligent viewers, opening up a space for viewers to arrive at their own ideas about the subjects depicted. Often, these are films that seek to portray the complexity of their subjects, and employ subtle expression.

Documentaries that are primarily vehicles for delivering information or advocating a particular position are of little interest, no matter how important or urgent the particular issue. We are interested in good cinema, not PSAs.

Please consider length. We are looking for works that have a strong and coherent internal sense of their own pacing and rhythm, exploring the subject matter without truncating or filling out the work to fit into a 90-minute (or 60-minute) time-frame (i.e., public television).

Please remark on the form (observational, essay, use of voice over, “talking heads,” use of archival footage, etc.). Consider how these are being used in conventional or original ways.

Documentaries with a wide range of production values have been exhibited at AAFF. Production values, whether raw, polished, or overly polished, shouldn't detract from the work. This is more difficult to achieve and less common with poor production values, but some filmmakers can create compelling works while using these limitations intelligently.

Experimental Animation

Identify and remark on the medium and form: pixilation, cel, paper, sand, digital, hand drawn, some combination of these? Many animated films are so focused on the technique and look, they forget to create an original story or concept. Does the film seem like an animation exercise or a work of purposeful art? We're not really looking for CGI or TV-style cartoons. We're looking for animated films with a unique style, technique, textures or vision. Entertainment is fine, but only as a secondary consideration to the artistic intention of an animation.

Experimental Music Video

Does the visual aspect feel like it's complementing and enhancing the music, helping it come alive even more? Does the piece feel like it fully explores its concept, story or progression? Is the song compelling and does it stand alone on its own merits?

Additional materials to review

Please see our online Learning Library of films. These films have been curated to provide you with exceptional examples of each genre of film and are accompanied by information on how they were reviewed in the year they were programmed. This collection was suggested by our screeners - thank you! You can find this resource on [our website](#).

Thank you for your time and dedication to this process.

We could not do it without you!

If you have any questions, please contact us at screening@aaiffilmfest.org.