

SOLO FILMS

SOLO LAB · THE SHELF · DIGITAL PRODUCTS

A WORKING WORKBOOK

The Buyer's 30-Second Checklist — *Extended Workbook*

The shelf, the money, the ask. A full audit you run on your own deck before any buyer sees it — the same thirty-second framework a buyer applies, turned into a checklist you can score yourself against.

Thirty seconds. That's your window.

START HERE

How to use this *workbook*

A buyer does not read your deck. A buyer scans it — once, fast, looking for reasons to stop. This workbook rebuilds that scan so you can run it on yourself, page by page, before the market does it for free.

Work through it in order, with your actual deck open next to you. You will need a printed copy of your deck (or a second screen), a pen, and the honesty to score what is actually on the page — not what you meant to put there. Buyers only ever see what is on the page.

The workbook has five parts:

- **The Test** — what actually happens in a buyer's first thirty seconds, and why the order matters.
- **The Three Checks, In Depth** — the shelf, the money, and the ask: what passes, what fails, and how to tell the difference on your own pages.
- **The Page-by-Page Audit Grid** — every standard deck page, the question a buyer asks of it, and space to mark your verdict.
- **The Red-Flag List** — the specific details that make a professional reader put a deck down.
- **The Score & The Fix Order** — a fill-in scoring worksheet, your verdict bands, and the order in which to fix what you find.

THE ONE RULE OF THIS WORKBOOK

Score the deck you have, not the film in your head. Every filmmaker carries a better version of the project than the one on the page. The market never meets that version. If a point isn't on the page, it doesn't exist — mark it down and move on. The fixing comes later, in the right order.

The thirty-second *test*

Here is the scene this workbook is built around. A buyer — an acquisitions executive, a distributor, a sales agent's reader — opens your deck. They are not hostile. They are busy. Your deck is one of dozens in front of them this week, and their job is not to find reasons to say yes. Their job is to clear the pile. Most decks are cleared in the first thirty seconds.

In that window, the buyer scans for three things, in a fixed order:

1. **The shelf.** What is this, and where does it sit? Genre, tone, audience — placed by the logline in one breath. If they can't say where it sits, they don't read on.
2. **The money.** Comparable titles they recognize, sized to your budget. This is the buyer's shorthand for "is there a business here, and does this filmmaker understand it?" Wrong-sized comps raise instant doubt.
3. **The ask.** What do you want, stated on the page: rights, territories, what's attached, what's being sought. A vague ask gets a slow no — and a slow no is worse than a fast one, because it costs you the season.

Miss one, and the deck gets a polite skim instead of a meeting. Miss two, and it gets closed. The story — your beautiful, hard-won story — is read only after all three checks are passed. That is the part nobody tells first-time sellers: **the verdict happens before the story does.**

Why the order cannot be rearranged

Sellers constantly try to lead with their strength: the famous name loosely attached, the festival laurel, the gorgeous key art. It doesn't work, because the buyer's scan is not a preference — it's a workflow. The shelf comes first because a buyer buys for a slate: they have slots to fill and audiences to serve, and a project they cannot place is a project they cannot use, however good it is. The money comes second because placement without a business case is a hobby. The ask comes third because a buyer who knows what a film is and what it's worth still cannot act on "let's explore opportunities." They can act on a number, a right, a territory, a date.

A bad pitch doesn't get a second chance. The buyer who said no doesn't reconsider — they were never really considering. They were scanning.

Run the test on yourself, right now

Before the deep sections, take the raw version of the test. Hand your deck to someone outside the project — not a friend who has heard you talk about it for a year; someone cold. Give them thirty seconds and a timer. Then ask three questions:

- What is it? (Genre, tone, who it's for — in one sentence.)
- What does it sit next to? (The titles they name tell you whether your comps are landing.)
- What do we want? (If they can't say, your ask isn't on the page.)

Write their answers down verbatim. Those three answers are the most honest market research you will get for free, and everything in the rest of this workbook is about making them the answers you intended.

The shelf: *can they place it?*

The shelf is your logline's job. In one breath — one sentence, two at the outside — it must deliver genre, tone, and audience. Not the plot. The plot is what the synopsis is for. The logline is a placement tool: it tells the buyer which shelf this title occupies and which of their slots it competes for.

What a passing logline does

- **Names the genre plainly.** Horror, thriller, action, sci-fi, prestige drama — the buyer should never have to guess, and "genre-defying" is not a genre.
- **Signals tone with the engine, not adjectives.** "A grieving getaway driver takes one last job" carries tone inside the situation. "A gripping, emotional, edge-of-your-seat journey" carries none.
- **Implies the audience.** The right reader should be able to picture who queues this title on a Friday night.
- **Contains the hook.** The one element that makes this version of the genre worth a meeting — the twist in the premise, the world, the mechanism.

What fails, and why

The most common failure is the logline that describes the theme instead of the film: journeys of self-discovery, tales of redemption, explorations of grief. Themes are what the film is about after you've seen it. The buyer hasn't seen it. They are placing a product. The second failure is a logline that needs a third sentence to become clear — clarity that arrives late arrives after the scan has moved on. The third is tonal confusion: a deck whose logline says horror, whose art says romance, and whose comps say comedy. The buyer doesn't resolve contradictions. They set them aside.

THE ONE-BREATH TEST

Read your logline aloud, once, at conversation speed. If you run out of breath, it fails. Rewrite until a stranger could repeat it back after hearing it once. Repeatability is the point: your logline gets retold in rooms you're not in. Make their job easy.

YOUR SHELF WORKSHEET

- ☐ My logline, copied exactly as it appears in the deck:

- ☐ Genre named plainly? ☐ Tone carried by the premise? ☐ Audience implied? ☐ Hook present?
 - ☐ The shelf this sits on, in the buyer's words (their shelf, not mine):
-

PART TWO · CHECK TWO

The money: *do the comps size up?*

Comparable titles are not a tribute list. They are the fastest business argument in your deck: films like this, at budgets like this, found audiences like this. The buyer reads your comp page as a fluency test. Get it wrong and you've shown the opposite — loudly, in the section the buyer trusts most.

The sizing rule

Comps must be sized to your budget. A micro-budget horror feature comped against a studio tentpole doesn't read as ambition; it reads as a filmmaker who doesn't know what things cost or what audiences are reachable at their level. The buyer instantly recalculates everything else in your deck at the same discount. The reverse error exists too: prestige drama comped against titles far below its ambition undersells the film and confuses the shelf. Your comps should live in your weight class — similar budget band, similar release pattern, similar audience — with at most one aspirational title, clearly framed as aspiration.

What the buyer is checking

- **Recognition.** Titles they know, or can place instantly. An obscure comp that needs a footnote is a comp that isn't working.
- **Recency.** The market a comp proves is the market as it is now, not as it was a decade ago. Old titles can anchor tone; they cannot carry the business case alone.
- **Honesty of comparison.** Comp to the film yours actually resembles in scale and route to audience — not to the breakout that beat one-in-a-thousand odds. Buyers have seen the breakout trick from every seller at every market.
- **The pairing logic.** The professional format is "X meets Y" only when the pairing actually teaches the buyer something about tone plus audience.

Wrong-sized comps raise instant doubt — and doubt, once raised in the money section, attaches to every number that follows.

YOUR MONEY WORKSHEET

List every comp in your deck. For each: is it in your budget's weight class, and would a buyer recognize it without help?

COMP TITLE (AS IT APPEARS IN DECK)	MY WEIGHT CLASS?	RECOGNIZABLE?	KEEP / REPLACE

☐ Every comp is sized to my budget. ☐ At most one aspirational comp, framed as such. ☐ The set is current enough to prove today's market.

PART TWO · CHECK THREE

The ask: *what do you want?*

The third check is the one sellers resist most, because it feels like showing your hand. It is the opposite. A buyer cannot act on a mood. They act on specifics: what rights are available, which territories are open, what is attached, what stage the project is at, and what you are seeking — a sale, a co-production partner, finishing funds, distribution, representation. If those specifics are not on the page, the buyer files you under "interesting, unclear" — the pile revisited after the market, when the slot you wanted has been filled by someone whose ask was clear.

What a complete ask contains

- **Stage.** Concept, script, in production, post, finished. Stated, not implied — buyers route projects differently by stage and will not detective it out of your deck.
- **What's attached.** Cast, director, partners, financing in place — with honest status. "Attached," "in discussion," and "wish list" are three different things, and buyers can smell the difference. Mislabeling is the fastest way to lose a room permanently.
- **What's available.** Rights and territories, if you're selling; the size and shape of the opportunity, if you're raising or partnering.
- **What's sought.** The actual request, in plain words, on the page.

The slow no

A vague ask gets a slow no. Understand what that costs you: the buyer stays warm, asks you to "keep them posted," and does nothing — while you spend the market, and the months after it, waiting on a decision that was actually made in the first thirty seconds. A clear ask can get a fast no, and a fast no is a gift: it frees the slot, the week, and the follow-up energy for a buyer whose shelf you actually fit. Professionals prefer the fast no.

THE STRANGER TEST FOR THE ASK

Show a cold reader only your ask page. Can they answer, in one sentence, what you want and what stage it's at? If they hedge, the page is hedging.

YOUR ASK WORKSHEET

- ☐ Stage stated on the page. ☐ Attachments labeled with honest status. ☐ Rights / territories stated (if selling).
 - ☐ The request itself, in plain words, on the page. My ask, in one sentence:
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PART THREE

The page-by-page *audit grid*

Now the full pass. Go through your deck in order. For each page: the buyer's question, what a pass looks like, and your mark. Be strict — a "sort of" is a fail wearing a costume. Leave the scoring for Part Five; here, just see clearly.

DECK PAGE	THE BUYER'S QUESTION	A PASS LOOKS LIKE	✓ / ✗
Cover	Do I know what shelf I'm on before I turn a page?	Title, genre signal, one strong image. No clutter, no laurels doing the logline's job.	
Logline	Can I repeat this back after one read?	One breath: genre, tone, audience, hook.	
Synopsis	Does the story engine show, without a scene-by-scene retelling?	Short, propulsive, ends on the premise's promise — not a plot summary.	
Tone / world	Can I feel the film's register in five seconds?	Images and references that agree with the logline's tone claim.	
Team	Who are these people, in credits I can weigh?	Relevant credits, briefly. Bios that argue market value, not life stories.	
Cast / attachments	What is actually attached — really?	Honest status labels: attached / in discussion / target. Nothing blurred.	
Audience	Who is this for, specifically?	A named audience, not "everyone 18–49." Where they watch, what they finish.	

Comps	Is there a business here, at this size?	Recognizable titles in the project's weight class, current enough to matter.
Budget / finance	Do the numbers add up, and what's in place?	Budget stated, financing status honest, no fantasy math.
The ask	What do they want, and what stage is it?	Rights/territories or the specific request, in plain words, on the page.
Contact / next step	If I want this tomorrow, what do I do?	One name, one email, one clear next step. A deck with no door is a brochure.

Not every deck has every page — series, documentaries, and finished films weight them differently. What is not optional: the pages that carry the shelf, the money, and the ask must exist and must pass. A missing ask page is not a style choice; it is the third check failing by absence.

PART FOUR

The red-flag *list*

Red flags are the small, specific details that tell a professional reader the seller hasn't been in the room before. Any one of them costs credibility. Several together close the deck. Check yours honestly — every box you tick is a fix you get to make before a buyer sees it.

SHELF FLAGS

- ☐ Logline describes a theme or a journey, not a film.
- ☐ Genre listed as three or more genres, or "genre-defying."
- ☐ Cover art argues a different tone than the logline claims.
- ☐ Synopsis runs longer than a page and retells the plot beat by beat.

MONEY FLAGS

- ☐ Comps wildly above the project's budget class, presented as peers.
- ☐ Comps all a decade or more old, carrying the whole business case.
- ☐ Revenue promises, projected returns, or "conservative estimates" of profit. Buyers do their own math; yours reads as a tell.
- ☐ Budget missing entirely — or a budget that the deck's own ambitions contradict.

ASK FLAGS

- ☐ No ask page. The deck ends on mood instead of business.
- ☐ Attachments implied to be firmer than they are ("starring" a name who has seen a script).
- ☐ Stage unclear — the buyer can't tell if it's a script, a package, or a finished film.
- ☐ "Seeking distribution partners and visionary collaborators" — language that asks for everything and therefore nothing.

CRAFT FLAGS

- ☐ Typos in names — especially a buyer's, a comp title, or your own credits.
- ☐ Walls of text. If a page needs to be studied, it will be skipped instead.
- ☐ Stock imagery that belongs to a different film than the one described.
- ☐ Contact page with a form, a QR code, and no human name or direct email.

None of these flags say your film is bad. They say the seller is unprepared — and buyers buy from sellers they trust to deliver.

PART FIVE

The score, and the *fix order*

Score each area 1–5, where 5 means "a buyer would say this back to me exactly as intended." Score from the cold-reader answers and the audit grid — not from effort. Effort is not a category buyers grade.

AREA	SCORE (1–5)	EVIDENCE (WHAT THE COLD READER ACTUALLY SAID / THE PAGE ACTUALLY SHOWS)
The Shelf — logline & placement	1 · 2 · 3 · 4 · 5	
The Money — comps & business case	1 · 2 · 3 · 4 · 5	
The Ask — stage, rights, request	1 · 2 · 3 · 4 · 5	
Story pages — synopsis & tone	1 · 2 · 3 · 4 · 5	
Team & attachments — credibility	1 · 2 · 3 · 4 · 5	
Craft — design, proofing, the door	1 · 2 · 3 · 4 · 5	

Reading your verdict

- **Any of the first three areas at 1–2:** the deck fails the thirty-second test no matter what the rest scores. Fix in the order below before anything else.
- **First three at 3:** the deck survives the scan and dies in the skim. The fixes are precision work — sharper logline, truer comps, plainer ask.
- **First three at 4–5, story pages lagging:** the rare good problem. The business frame is carrying a story section that needs the same discipline.
- **Everything 4–5:** your remaining risk is not the deck. It's targeting — the right buyers, in the right order. That's a market problem, not a page problem.

The fix-it priority order

Fix in the buyer's order, not in the order of what's easiest or prettiest:

1. **The logline first.** Everything downstream quotes it. A week of design work on a deck whose logline fails is decoration on a closed door.
2. **The comps second.** Rebuild the set at your weight class. This is research, not writing — allow real time for it.
3. **The ask third.** Write the plain sentence. Get the honest status of every attachment confirmed before the page is rebuilt around them.
4. **Story pages fourth.** Synopsis cut to its engine; tone page made to agree with the logline.
5. **Craft last.** Proof, tighten, remove. Only now does polish matter — because now there's something underneath it worth polishing.

THE 48-HOUR FIX SPRINT

Day one: logline and ask — words only, no design. Run the one-breath test and the stranger test before bed. Day two: comps rebuilt, synopsis cut, red-flag list re-checked top to bottom. Then stop. Cold-read it once more, and let the new scores, not your fatigue, say whether it's ready.

DONE WITH YOU

Rather have the read *done for you?*

This workbook is the self-run version of what Solo Lab does professionally. The Breakdown is the same audit — run on your actual deck by a former distribution executive, delivered in writing, then walked through on a call.

The Breakdown — \$350

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