

What makes a movie a big budget and a small budget?

[Scott Myers](#)

There are critical choices a writer can make at the script stage which directly influence a project's budget... and its potential viability for getting set up.

Acct#	Category Title	Page	Total
1100	STORY & SCREENPLAY	1	\$141,685.31
1200	PRODUCER	1	\$217,509.53
1300	DIRECTION	1	\$242,392.00
1400	CAST	1	\$2,263,100.31
1500	TRAVEL & LIVING	1	\$77,681.97
1600	A-T-L FRINGES	2	\$164,909.83
	TOTAL ABOVE-THE-LINE		\$3,107,278.96
2000	PRODUCTION STAFF	2	\$742,522.94
2100	EXTRA TALENT	3	\$89,377.76
2200	SET DESIGN	3	\$240,632.43
2300	SET CONSTRUCTION	4	\$653,145.18
2500	SET OPERATIONS	5	\$481,264.87
2600	SPECIAL EFFECTS	6	\$206,256.37
2700	SET DRESSING	6	\$425,433.22
2800	PROPERTY	7	\$211,412.78
2900	WARDROBE	7	\$151,254.67
3100	MAKEUP & HAIRDRESSING	7	\$137,504.25
3200	ELECTRICAL	8	\$453,764.02
3300	CAMERA	8	\$617,898.06
3400	PRODUCTION SOUND	9	\$180,474.33
3500	TRANSPORTATION	9	\$457,201.63
3600	LOCATIONS	10	\$498,452.90
3700	PIX VEHICLES/ANIMALS	11	\$34,376.06
3800	FILM AND LAB	11	\$299,430.00
3900	SPECIAL VISUAL EFFECTS	12	\$103,128.19
4000	SECOND UNIT	12	\$75,577.75
4100	TESTS	12	\$4,000.00
4300	PRODUCTION FRINGES	12	\$812,105.02
	TOTAL PRODUCTION		\$6,875,212.43
5000	EDITING & PROJECTION	12	\$459,455.39
5100	MUSIC	13	\$220,202.02
5200	POST PRODUCTION SOUND	13	\$234,882.15
5300	POST PRODUCTION LABORATORY	13	\$102,320.00
5400	OPTICAL EFFECTS	14	\$322,962.96
5500	TITLES	14	\$44,040.40
5700	POST-PRODUCTION FRINGES	14	\$84,150.52
	TOTAL POST PRODUCTION		\$1,468,013.44
6500	PUBLICITY	14	\$20,552.19
6700	INSURANCE	14	\$158,545.45
6800	GENERAL EXPENSES	14	\$114,505.05
	TOTAL OTHER		\$293,602.69
	TOTAL ABOVE-THE-LINE		\$3,107,278.96
	TOTAL BELOW-THE-LINE		\$8,636,828.56
	ABOVE & BELOW-THE-LINE		\$11,744,107.51
	TOTAL FRINGES		\$1,061,165.37
	CONTINGENCY		\$1,174,423.67
	GRAND TOTAL		\$12,918,531.18

A question from Susan Burch:

I've read posts about writing a screenplay within a certain budget, but as a beginning screenwriter, I have no idea what that means. I saw one of your reader questions sort of address this with a sample budget, but as a writer, I'm still not clear what makes a movie big budget vs. small. Can you help me out?

The easy thing is simply to say "Write the best story possible." But screenplays are not just stories. They are **movies**. And movies cost money to produce. A studio's production budget is pretty much a zero sum game, they only have so many dollars to go around, so it's possible you could write a great story, but price yourself out of a deal because what you've written is too expensive.

In general, I don't think it's a bad idea to wear a producer's hat along with your screenwriter's hat, at least be aware of some elements that drive up the cost of a script. Setting aside the cost of the cast which can vary depending upon who commits to the project, here are some story elements which can translate into higher production costs:

- Crowd scenes
- Multiple locations
- Large cast
- Water shoots
- Snow shoots
- Night shoots

- Children
- Animals
- Period piece
- Music rights
- CGI effects
- Page count

If you are writing a script with an eye toward the [path of least resistance to getting representation](#), target the \$5–20M production budget range (not including cast). So looking at the above list:

- Minimize locations to reduce transportation and potentially housing costs.
- Avoid writing a period piece which can require additional costs related to wardrobe, props, cars, and so forth.
- No popular songs (besides in general, including *any* song title in a spec script is perceived as being a sign of an amateur).
- Keep computer generated imagery and other post effects to a minimum.
- Snow, water, children, and animals can take more on set time (although my movie *Alaska* had all four, so that shows what little I knew back in the day).
- 120 page script will likely cost 15–25% more than a 90 page script, so be cognizant of page count.

Here's the thing: You can take care of a **lot** of budget issues by your choice of a story concept. For example, I

[interviewed Chris Sparling in 2011](#) about his movie *Buried* starring Ryan Reynolds. IMDb plot summary:

Paul is a U.S. truck driver working in Iraq. After an attack by a group of Iraqis he wakes to find he is buried alive inside a coffin. With only a lighter and a cell phone it's a race against time to escape this claustrophobic death trap.

I began the conversation with a question about his choice of story concept:

Scott: As writers, we face countless forks-in-the-road with every story we create. With "Buried," you made some really tough choices, going down paths that would seem to be harder ones to take. For example, you decided once you were in the coffin, the story would stay there. No flashbacks, no cutting away to other characters and their perspective on the narrative. What was your thinking behind that choice?

Chris: It's funny, but this is always the first question people ask me, which is why I wish there was a cooler answer I could give. But the fact is, the movie stayed in the box because it was the cheapest way to make the movie! My initial plan with "Buried" was to direct it myself and shoot it for about \$5,000. When it took on a bigger life, that's when the questions (from studio execs, etc.) began popping up about whether or not we should stay in the box the entire time (as well as other

“interesting” suggestions). By this point, however, I began to realize that my financially-driven decision is what actually made the movie more interesting creatively, and this is why I pushed to keep the movie in the box for its duration — in spite of now having the money to shoot the other side of the phone conversations. Thankfully, the producers and the director (Rodrigo Cortes) who came on board all felt the same way as I did, as did Ryan Reynolds.

By choosing to write a project with a single location, you can not only considerably lower the budget, you can also create a context for a [contained thriller](#) a la movies like *The Invitation*, *Panic Room*, *Green Room*, and even *A Quiet Place*.

Here's what you can do to educate yourself re movie budgets: Find actual movie scripts. Then go to resources like [Box Office Mojo](#) which often includes the reported movie production budgets. Read the script. Watch the movie. What's included. What's not. Do this with low budget movies, higher budget movies, and big budget movies. You'll not only begin to sort out production elements which add to a movie's cost...

You'll also be reading scripts and watching movies, which are both key to learning the craft.