Micro-Budget Film Budget Builder — Quickstart

Slate & Ledger • real SAG-AFTRA/IATSE rates, 7 tiers, one workbook • 2026-2027 edition

Open it

Open the workbook in Excel, Google Sheets, or Apple Numbers. Save a copy under your project's name first — keep the original blank so you can start over. Nothing in this workbook is ever sent anywhere; it's a file on your computer.

1 Start here

- **Assumptions:** choose Union or Non-Union for cast and for crew, your shooting city, and how many shoot days. Union cast? Pick the SAG-AFTRA tier that fits your budget.
- **Cast Budget** / **Crew Budget:** turn each person on (Yes) or off (No). Rates fill in where a union sets one; where none does, you'll see a blue suggestion — replace it with your real number.
- **Production Costs** / **Other Costs:** turn each line on or off, replace the blue sample amounts with your real quotes.
- **Top Sheet** totals everything automatically. A red bar at the top of a tab means your numbers don't fit the tier you picked — the **Tier Check** tab explains why.

2 Read the colors

- **Yellow cell** = yours to fill in. **Blue text** = our starting suggestion/placeholder — replace it. **Black on yellow** = you've entered it. **Black on white** = worked out for you.
- **Green text** = set by a union agreement, or copied from another tab. **Grey italic** = doesn't apply to your setup — skip it.
- A budget is an estimate — fill in a rough number everywhere to get a first total fast. Locations & Props has its own Estimate/Actual toggle per section for exactly this.

3 Everyday tips

- **Active?** turns a role or line on/off; the total updates right away. Need more rows? Copy an existing row and **Insert Copied Cells** — a blank Insert Row carries no formula.
- **Lock Rate?** = Yes lets you pay one person a specific rate (type it in **Locked Rate**) instead of the lookup.
- **City** tag on each Cast/Crew row feeds the By City tab and, for a few roles (Key Grip/Gaffer/Sound Mixer in LA/NM, plus DP in Atlanta), sets a real sourced day rate — everywhere else it's reference only.
- Already have a real shoot schedule from the companion **Schedule Builder**? Run **companion_tools/import_schedule.py** on its schedule.csv to update your real shoot-day count and see locations/company moves for reference. Optional — you don't need one to budget.

4 Check it, then share it

Tier Check warns if your total exceeds your tier's cap, checks runtime limits, shows your DGA level, and flags the WGA script-publication fee once you reach the top tier. **By City** totals cost by city and catches a mistyped one. Track real spend as it comes in on **Actuals** — Variance and Est. Final Cost work themselves out.

Top Sheet (Full) and **Detail Budget (Full)** are your investor-ready budget, already built on the full industry chart of accounts. Want a shorter version with only the lines this tool actually tracks? Run the file through the companion **Presentation Budget Generator** and choose Lean. **Working in Apple Numbers or Google Sheets?** Export to a real .xlsx first (File > Export To > Excel, or File > Download > Microsoft Excel) — the companion tools can't read a .numbers file or a live Google Sheet.

Not sure what a placeholder line should cost? The **Resources** tab has real vendor and marketplace links, grouped to match Production Costs, Other Costs and Crew Budget. Residuals and self-distribution revenue live in a separate companion product — this one only covers what the film costs to make.

Research and planning estimates only — not legal, financial, or production advice, and not guaranteed accurate for your specific production. SAG-AFTRA tier caps and day rates reflect union agreements current as of late 2026; confirm current figures at sagaftra.org/lowbudget before finalizing a real budget. Crew day rates are editable placeholder estimates, not sourced union scale. Provided “as is”, 2026-2027 edition.