



Filming at the Smithsonian Institution Frequently Asked Questions

1. How do I get permission to film at the Smithsonian?

Filmmakers interested in filming at the Smithsonian need to complete the “Application for Filming at the Smithsonian Institution.” The application is available online at <http://newsdesk.si.edu>. Once the application has been completed, it should be submitted to the appropriate museum’s press office.

2. Why do you need to know so much information before we can film at the Smithsonian?

Providing the information as requested on the application gives us an accurate picture of your project, which we use to determine if the project is appropriate for the Smithsonian and consistent with its mission and objectives. Institutional policies and procedures require that we have a complete understanding of all aspects of a project before Smithsonian participation can be considered. Each request to film at the Institution is reviewed on an individual basis, using information from the application and through discussions between the museum’s public affairs office and the filmmaker.

The application also serves as the basis for preparing a contract.

3. Why would the Smithsonian say “no” to a request to film at the Institution?

The Smithsonian declines requests to film at its museums for a variety of reasons. These include: the proposed film is not consistent with the museum’s mission; the Institution does not have an expert in the requested area; the Institution does not have the requested object or artifact in its collection; a curator is not interested in participating in a particular project; a request is made to remove an artifact from a museum for filming; the proposed filming is for an advertisement or other commercial project; or the film proposes to make more than an incidental use of Smithsonian content.

4. I’ve been hearing that “incidental use” is one of the criteria you use to determine whether or not an application will be approved. What is “incidental use” and how do you determine it?

The majority of filming requests made to the Smithsonian fall into the category of “incidental use” of Smithsonian content. In very few cases, the Smithsonian receives requests that seek to use Smithsonian content in a significant way (such as, a one-hour special on museums with 30 minutes devoted to Smithsonian collections) in films that are proposed for broadcast or cable television (in contrast to films that, for example, are distributed on local access channels or as part of school course work).

In determining if a request is to use more than an incidental amount of Smithsonian content, the public affairs officer and a central Smithsonian committee considers a number of factors, among them: the subject matter of the film; the total run time of the film; the estimated run time for Smithsonian content; and how many other organizations or experts are participating in the program.

In the rare cases that a request is made to use Smithsonian content in a significant way, (e.g., not “incidental”) there are options available to both the Smithsonian and the filmmaker.

- Independent filmmakers may decrease the amount of Smithsonian content to make it incidental
- The filmmaker may approach Smithsonian Networks about filming the program for Smithsonian Channel. (If a filmmaker elects to do this, all negotiations will be between the filmmaker and Smithsonian Networks, which will follow all standard business practices, including copyright considerations.)

- The Smithsonian may elect to pursue certain programs outside of Smithsonian Networks

If none of the above options are acceptable or feasible, the Smithsonian may decline the request

5. *What are the fees to film at the Smithsonian?*

To recover costs, the Smithsonian has a standard location fee schedule based on the length of time crews will spend in the museum or interviewing staff.

The fees are as follows:

- Up to one hour \$500
- One to four hours \$1,000
- Five to eight hours \$2,000
- After eight hours \$350 per each additional hour

These fees cover the costs incurred by the museum in making its facilities, collections and staff available. When filming goes beyond eight hours in a day, additional fees maybe charged to cover specific costs of security, building services (i.e., electrical, cleaning, etc.), audiovisual needs and equipment operation. These overtime charges are over and above the \$350 per hour overtime location fee.

Checks should be made payable to the “Smithsonian Institution” and are due on or before the first day of filming.

6. *Why does the Smithsonian charge fees? The Institution is supported with tax dollars and we should all have access to it for free.*

The Smithsonian is supported by federal funds which cover the costs of collections care, buildings and federal salaries. It does not cover costs of escorting and assisting independent film producers. Therefore, when working with independent and commercial organizations, we must recover our costs. Our fees cover the costs incurred by the museum in making its facilities, collections and staff available. In special circumstances, the fee may be waived.

7. *Why do we need a contract to film at the Smithsonian?*

A contract outlines exactly how the film can be used now and in the future, sets forth the fees that will be charged, and provides a written record of permissions and limits placed on the footage. It also stipulates how you will credit the Smithsonian Institution.

8. *Can our own contract be used instead of the Smithsonian’s?*

No. The Smithsonian uses its own contract for filming on Smithsonian premises. If there are additional issues that you would like to have addressed by the contract, you may discuss that with the Smithsonian’s contracting officer.

9. *Is the Smithsonian limiting access to its collections as a result of a contract with Showtime?*

The Smithsonian is not limiting public access to its any of its collections, archives or curators as a result of the creation of Smithsonian Networks. The first offering of Smithsonian Networks will be available in September 2007. Meanwhile, filming at the Smithsonian continues as it always has—interested filmmakers contact a museum’s press office and fill out the standard “Application for Filming.”

10. *Has the Smithsonian had to decline any filming requests because of a conflict with the contract with Showtime?*

From Jan. 1, 2006 to Aug. 3, 2007, the Smithsonian received more than 210 requests to film at the Institution. Of these, only two were declined due to the creation of Smithsonian Networks. One request was for a one-hour show, focusing entirely on the Smithsonian and the other was a proposal for a partnership with the Smithsonian on a children’s series. Both requests were made by producers for commercial cable channels.