

Short subject is an American film industry term that historically has referred to any film in the format of two reels, or approximately 20 minutes running time, or less. It is now used almost interchangeably with **short film** (which can run somewhat longer than 20 minutes); either term is often abbreviated to **short** (as a noun, e.g. 'a short').

History

Early period

The term came to be applied in the 1910s, when the majority of feature films began to be made in much longer-running editions. A typical film program came to be expected to include a feature preceded by one or more short subjects. Short subjects could be live action or animated; comedy was particularly utilized as their style, and well-known comedians such as Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, Laurel and Hardy and others are best known from short subject films.

Animated cartoons likewise came principally as short subjects, as did newsreels. Less frequently, short subjects might be in the form of travelogues, human interest films or concert films. The form was so popular that virtually all major film production companies had fully staffed, special units assigned to develop and produce them; and many companies, especially in the silent and very early sound era, produced short subjects exclusively (e.g. Keystone Studios, Atlas Educational Film Co.).

The rise of the double feature

The death of the two-reel short as a commercially successful product for independent studios put producers such as Mack Sennett out of business. Hal Roach moved Laurel and Hardy full-time into feature films after 1935, and halved his popular *Our Gang* films to one reel at the request of distributor Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. Roach, who could no longer afford to produce shorts after 1938, sold *Our Gang* at that time to MGM.

After the 1930s, fewer shorts were made for theatrical release, most of which were one reel long, like George O'Hanlon's *Joe McDoakes* shorts, and the animated shorts of studios like Leon Schlesinger/Warner Bros., Walter Lantz, and Fleischer/Famous Studios. These shorts and others were produced in-house by, or financed by, motion picture companies that either owned their own theater chains (for example, Loews Theatres), or forced theaters to take their shorts by selling them in the same unalterable package as their big-name features. This practice, called block booking, was declared illegal by the US Supreme Court, who also forced the theater chains to sell off their movie studios. By 1955, thanks to double features, the ban on block booking, and the rise of television, the commercial live-action short was virtually dead, and the cartoon short was on its

way to being dead. Since the 1960s, short films have been largely reserved for independent filmmakers and special major-studio projects.

The *Three Stooges* shorts were the only major series of two-reelers to survive the double-feature system, because they were issued by Columbia Pictures using block booking. They continued into the late-1950s, largely by reusing footage from previous series entries to reduce costs.

In the 1950s, television programming, including broadcast of older short subjects sold to television stations, eclipsed the value of all but cartoons featuring well-loved characters; but by the end of the 1960s, the cost of manufacturing these had come to outweigh the return, and short subjects effectively disappeared from the movie screens.

Short subjects in the modern era

Since the 1980s, the term "short subject" has come to be used interchangeably with "short film", an international, academic term used to mean a contemporary non-commercial motion picture that is substantially shorter than the average commercial feature film. The definition of maximum length varies from 40 minutes (Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences rule) to about 80 minutes. The short-film form is to the full length film what the short story is to a full-fledged novel.

Short films often focus on difficult topics which longer, more commercial films usually avoid. Their filmmakers benefit from larger freedoms and can take higher risks with their films, but must rely on festival and art house exhibition to achieve public display. Most short films are better known outside the United States than within, due to less rigidity of audience expectation as to programme content, arrangement, and length outside the U.S.

Short films are often popular as first steps into the cinematic art among young filmmakers. This is because they are cheaper and easier to make, and also their brevity makes shorts more likely to be watched by financial backers and others who want some demonstration of a filmmaker's ability.

Short film making is also growing in popularity among amateurs and enthusiasts, who are taking advantage of affordable equipment. "Prosumer" or semi-professional cameras now cost under USD\$3,000, and free or low-cost software is widely available that is capable of video editing, post-production work, and DVD authoring. Such films can also be easily distributed via the Internet; [*Life of a Tennis Ball \(film\)*](#), for example, was solely distributed on the Internet.

Categories

The form itself splits into several sub-categories, mainly:

- Live action short
- Animated short (hand-drawn or CGI)
- Documentary short subject
- Experimental or abstract short films