STUDENT TOOLKIT

Film Student Archival Footage Checklist

A classroom-safe checklist for planning, licensing, and editing archival footage in short films, thesis projects, and capstone docs.

AUDIENCE	READ TIME	CATEGORY
Film Students	10 min	Education

THE ARCHIVE BEHIND THIS GUIDE

162,000+	121	1930s-1980s	1,600+
searchable clips	countries	decades covered	physical source reels

Student films run into archival trouble at the worst possible moment: delivery. The cut is locked around clips nobody licensed, the festival form asks for a rights list that does not exist, and the budget is already spent. Every one of those problems is a planning problem, and all of them are cheap to avoid in pre-production.

This guide is four checklists that follow production order, from pre-production through final delivery, plus the five mistakes that sink first archival films. Each checklist comes with a table you can copy into your project sheet.

The workflow at a glance

1. Plan: Years, scenes, and budget before any searching
2. Research: Log every clip and an alternate as you go
3. License: Match the license to where the film will show
4. Post: Track usage, grade gently, run two final passes
5. Deliver: Rights report archived with the masters

01 Pre-Production Checklist

Archival decisions made before the shoot cost nothing. The same decisions made in the edit cost money and days you will not have at the end of a semester.

- Define your story years and locations before sourcing footage.
- List 8 to 12 must-have scenes that support your thesis argument.
- Set a max archival budget and reserve contingency for last-minute licenses.
- Create a shared sheet with columns for source, rights, and editorial notes.
- Align instructor, producer, and editor on acceptable visual quality ranges.

PLANNING WORKSHEET

Field	What to decide	Example

Story years	Start and end year for the archival material	1962 to 1968
Locations	Region, town, and setting targets	Small-town Texas; school and main street
Must-have scenes	8 to 12 scenes that carry the thesis	Graduation, drive-in, county fair, front porches
Budget	Total cap plus a held-back contingency	$300 total; $60 reserved for one late license
Quality floor	Minimum resolution and condition you will accept	HD scan minimum; faded color acceptable

Set the budget before you fall in love with clips
A budget set after research always loses to the perfect clip you cannot afford. Cap the spend first, then let the cap force you toward alternates. Alternates are where student films find their most original material.

02 Research Checklist

Home movie archives are indexed by when and where a reel was shot, not by keywords. Search year and place first, and log everything the moment you find it.

- Search by year + place first, then refine by activity and visual mood.
- Capture source URLs and clip IDs at the time of discovery.
- Save alternates for each key scene in case rights or cost changes.
- Flag uncertain dates, uniforms, signage, and landmarks for verification.
- Prioritize clips with clear people/actions over generic establishing shots.

RESEARCH LOG COLUMNS

Column	What to record	Why it matters
Clip URL + ID	Captured at the moment of discovery	Re-finding a lost clip can take hours
Scene it serves	Which must-have scene the clip supports	Stops you pulling footage with no job in the cut
Date confidence	Confirmed, estimated, or unknown	Flags the verification work before picture lock
Alternate	A backup clip ID for the same scene	Your fallback when rights or cost changes

Estimated dates are normal
Families rarely labeled their reels, so many archival clips carry estimated dates. Check vehicles, signage, and fashion against your story years before a clip becomes structural to your film.

03 Licensing Checklist

The license you need depends on where the film will show. Clear the widest use you can realistically foresee, because relicensing after picture lock is always more expensive.

- Confirm license scope: festival, broadcast, streaming, social, classroom.
- Document attribution requirements and keep records with project files.
- Check music/audio rights if a clip includes synchronized historical audio.
- Store receipts and terms in one rights folder for final delivery review.
- Keep a backup option for every licensed sequence.

LICENSE SCOPE QUICK CHECK

Where the film will show	What to confirm
Class screening	Classroom or educational use is covered by the license
Festival run	Festival exhibition rights; some licenses cap audience size or entry fees
Online portfolio or YouTube	Web and streaming rights, including whether monetization is allowed
Broadcast or distribution deal	Usually a separate license tier; budget for an upgrade before signing

> **Audio is a separate question**
> Music or synchronized sound inside an archival clip often carries its own copyright, separate from the picture. Confirm the audio is cleared or plan to replace it in the mix.

04 Post-Production Checklist

In post, the goal is integration, not restoration. Grade the footage to sit inside your film and keep a record of every archival frame in the timeline.

- Normalize exposure and grain only enough to match your cut, not erase history.
- Track every archival clip in a timeline usage log with in/out timecode.
- Verify continuity between archival and interview/B-roll transitions.
- Run one legal + one historical pass before export lock.
- Archive your final rights report alongside project masters.

TIMELINE USAGE LOG

Column	Example entry
Clip ID + source	104522, stockfilm.com
Timeline in / out	00:04:12 to 00:04:19
License status	Licensed; receipt saved to the rights folder
Continuity check	Passed the historical pass on March 12
Notes	Graded to match the interview footage; camera audio removed

> **Deliver the rights report with the film**
> Instructors, festivals, and distributors all eventually ask for the same document: what you used, where it came from, and what the license covers. Export the usage log as a one-page report and archive it with your masters.

05 Five Mistakes That Sink Student Archival Films

The same mistakes show up in first archival films every year. Each one is cheap to avoid up front and expensive to fix at delivery.

FIRST-FILM MISTAKES AND FIXES

Mistake	What it costs	Do instead
Cutting with unlicensed clips	A recut when the license falls through	License or confirm price before picture lock
Assuming old means free	A takedown or a festival rejection	Verify rights for every clip, whatever its age
Ignoring aspect ratio	Awkward crops: 8mm film is 4:3, not 16:9	Design the frame around pillarboxing or deliberate reframes

Stacking vintage filters	Real film that reads as a phone-app effect	Grade for match and keep the original grain
Skipping the usage log	Hours rebuilding the rights report at delivery	Log every clip when it enters the timeline

Helpful Starting Points

Start discovery in the Archive Index, browse Curated Collections for pre-grouped themes and periods, and keep the Licensing Handbook open when you clear your final cut.

Archive Index — stockfilm.com/all-collections

Curated Collections — stockfilm.com/curated

Licensing Handbook — stockfilm.com/resources/archival-footage-licensing-handbook

Request Footage — stockfilm.com/request-footage

Browse the Full Archive

stockfilm.com | Authentic 8mm and Super 8 Archival Footage