

Location Scouting Best Practices

This location scouting best practices and safety tips apply to scouting on public, private, municipal, state and national parks, and rural areas. Scouting activities should be conducted with clear procedures from arrival to departure, including proactive communication to alert nearby communities and stakeholders.

pre-scout preparation

- Research location via maps, property records, and local resources.
- Contact the Direct Marketing Organization (DMO) in advance. If it is a rural area, perhaps the Convention and Visitor's Bureau (CVB) or Chamber of Commerce could assist.
- Let them know you plan to film in the area and ask for a referral for a local contact who can make introductions or offer suggestions.
- Ask questions about the region's culture, how to best approach people and if there are any sensitive issues happening in the area that could prepare you for building rapport with the locals.
- Scout in pairs when possible. Avoid going alone.
- Identify owners or managers ahead of time and request permission.
- Carry official ID and use vehicle signage identifying your scouting role.
- Bring business cards and a form letter explaining your scouting purpose. Contact Explore Minnesota's Film & TV Production Liaison for a template form letter.

scout procedure

arrival on property

- Only visit during reasonable hours. Avoid early or late times.
- Announce your presence and project clearly.
- Respect "No Trespassing" signs and do not enter without explicit permission.
- Do not leave form letters in mailboxes. According to USPS regulations, it's not allowed to put flyers or advertisements in someone's mailbox without their consent, and it's also illegal to affix flyers to a mailbox.
- The best way to distribute flyers is by hand delivering them or placing them in a public area where they are easily accessible. Always consider postal regulations and obtain consent before distributing flyers to avoid potential legal issues.

scout hazard assessment

- Evaluate terrain, traffic, wildlife, and other on-site physical risks. When scouting structures, follow [OSHA](#) standards for entering abandoned or under-construction buildings—look for hazards like unstable floors or exposed wiring.
- Assess logistics: parking, access points, exits, restrooms, power.
- Document layout, lighting, and hazards through notes and photos.

scout: explain legal permissions & insurance

- Share your standards of practice with the property owner, such as obtaining film permits for public locations and signed location agreements for private locations.
- Explain what your standard liability insurance covers and offer to show proof in advance of filming.
- Reinforce your plan to have a trained crew and security handle or assess any firearms, stunts, or sensitive conditions.

scout: conflict awareness & exit strategy

- Always approach property owners calmly and respectfully.
- If confronted or threatened, do not argue—exit immediately and notify authorities.
- Never assume access—get verbal or written permission first.
- If scouting rural areas use the no trace principles and respect nature. Avoid disturbing wildlife and vegetation.

departure from property

- Express gratitude for the location owner’s willingness to meet with you and consider becoming a filming location.
- Stick to the agreed upon timeframe. Avoid overstaying. Keep the scout concise and efficient
- If the owner seems uninterested, do not pressure them. Read their cues and move on to find a new location if they are not interested.

post-scout communication

- Report safety issues to producers or assistant directors immediately.
- Include safety details in call sheets or scouting reports.
- Follow up on any permissions in writing to document for future use.
- Have the courtesy to give the location honest feedback as to whether you have passed on the location or wish to proceed to the next step. Offer your best guess timelines for when you will follow up with them, and then follow through with timely communication about the project's status.

negotiating locations release

- Offer clear communication, flexibility, fair compensation, and a written agreement. The goal is to balance your production needs with the property owner's expectations, creating an arrangement that works for both sides.
- Compare rental rates for similar properties in other productions to help set a fair and competitive offer.
- Approach the property owner courteously, acknowledging their concerns and priorities.
- Provide a concise overview of your production, its purpose, and exactly how the location will be used.
- Share accurate information about the scope of activities and potential impact on the property.
- Provide reasonable payment for the location's use and consider non-monetary incentives such as credits or promotional exposure.
- Be prepared to adjust schedules or plans to accommodate the owner's availability or restrictions.

laws to keep in mind

stand your ground/castle doctrine/duty to retreat

Minnesota law generally imposes a duty to retreat before using deadly force in self-defense. This means that if a person is faced with a threat outside their home, they have a legal obligation to withdraw from the dangerous situation or avoid the confrontation if they can do so safely. This requirement applies when an individual is in a public place or on property that is not their dwelling. The law expects a person to prioritize de-escalation and escape over the use of lethal force when a safe avenue of retreat exists. It underscores the principle that deadly force should be a last resort, employed only when no other safe option is available to avoid harm. A significant exception to Minnesota's general duty to retreat applies when a person is inside their own dwelling. This exception means that an individual is not required to flee their home before using force, including deadly force, to defend themselves against an intruder.

Under Minnesota law, a "dwelling" typically includes a person's home, apartment, or other place of abode, and can extend to attached structures like garages or porches that are considered part of the living space. Minnesota's "Castle Doctrine" principles, particularly concerning the no-duty-to-retreat exception, also apply to an "occupied vehicle." Court interpretations have generally limited the dwelling exception to the

home's interior and directly attached living spaces, not extending to surrounding property like a front yard.

mail tampering/flyers

The United States Postal Service (USPS) has exclusive rights over mailboxes, as established by federal law. Under 18 U.S.C. 1725, mailboxes are federal property, and only authorized personnel, such as postal workers, can place items within them. This law protects the integrity and security of the mail system, preventing unauthorized access and potential mail tampering or theft.

Additionally, USPS regulations prohibit placing non-postal items in mailboxes without proper postage. Even informal notes or flyers must bear postage and be processed through the postal system. This ensures mail delivery efficiency and prevents interference with postal workers' duties.

According to USPS regulations, it's not allowed to put flyers or advertisements in someone's mailbox without their consent. It's also illegal to affix flyers to a mailbox, as it could block mail delivery.

The best way to distribute flyers is by hand delivery, placing them on doorknobs, or in a public area where they are easily accessible. Always consider postal regulations and obtain consent before distributing flyers to avoid any potential legal issues.

how to approach property owners

Negotiate a location agreement

If you're going to shoot in a private location, contact the property owner as early as possible in your planning process. This contract should clearly state the permitted activities, payment terms, responsibilities, insurance coverage, and liability provisions.

SCRIPT: Pitching a property owner:

"Hi, is the manager or owner in, please?"

(Allow them to respond. If they're not in, leave a message.)

My name is [your FULL NAME]. I'm an independent film producer.

We're doing a [SHORT FILM] that we're going to be submitting to film festivals and online. We're going to be shooting in June. We need the use of a convenience store for a couple of scenes, and we'd like to film in your store."

(Allow them to respond.)

"We wouldn't need it for too long. It'll probably take [1-2 nights] depending on how it goes, preferably after you guys close, at [10:30 PM] so we wouldn't interrupt your business.

(Then ask if they have any questions. If you're leaving a message, simply conclude with the following...)

This is my phone number. Please share these details with the owner. The number is [YOUR NUMBER]. Thanks!"

negotiate smart

When pitching a property owner, always be honest about the size and nature of your film project. Misrepresenting your production size can backfire quickly, leading to revoked permissions or lawsuits.

If you're working with a tight budget, offer creative compensation such as free meals, on-screen credit, or promotional posts for businesses. Any agreements should be documented in your film location contract or film location agreement to protect both sides.

legal tip: Always ensure the person signing the location release has the true authority to grant permission. If you're filming at a business, make sure the owner, not just a manager or tenant, signs. Confirming ownership upfront can save major headaches later.

ask if they have any questions

Most property owners have never seen a film production before, so they'll have many questions.

Describe your [film production](#) accurately. Don't tell them you're a small indie crew when you plan to show up with forty extras!

pro tip: Be empathetic. A film crew can be very disruptive when a production enters a business or home. People without entertainment don't realize how long or chaotic production can be. I've seen many situations where people invited us to shoot, expecting the whole thing would only take a few minutes, unprepared for the twelve-hour workday.

set a time to deliver the location release form

Once the property owner agrees, you'll want to get it in writing if they change their mind. A location release form is a requirement before you set foot on their property with any equipment, and it protects both parties. Execute the agreement as soon as possible before the shoot, at least a week or two in advance. If you haven't already done a [tech scout](#), you'll want to do so before you secure the location. You don't want to sign papers and move forward until you know the location works for your team and your production.

When everything is confirmed, you can email the location release form to the property owner for signature. However, remember that they generously offer their space for your film project—taking the time to meet in person or showing a little extra appreciation can go a long way toward building trust and ensuring a smooth experience on set.

pro tip: [LOCATION RELEASE FORM](#)

For a quicker signing experience, fill in as much information as possible on the location release form prior to sending (or seeing) the location owner. Once the agreements are fully executed, ensure the location owners receive a copy.

what if you don't use a location release form?

legal and production risks

Skipping a location release form—or failing to execute a proper film location contract—might seem tempting when you're on a tight schedule, but the risks are enormous:

1. **Production shutdowns:** Property owners can legally demand that you leave mid-shoot.
2. **Lawsuits:** Filming without permission can expose you to trespassing or damages claims.
3. **Insurance issues:** If an accident happens, your insurance provider may deny coverage without a documented location agreement.

4. **Distribution problems:** Film festivals, streamers, and distributors often require film location release forms to verify legal clearances and protect against legal disputes.

The bottom line is that using a signed film location release form protects your production, your budget, and your distribution plan.