



# Short-Form Digital Series Guidelines

## 2023

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# Overview of the Bell Fund

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## Mission

To support Canadian media content makers in creating for and connecting with, audiences here and everywhere.

Since 1997 the Bell Fund has received over \$275 million in financial contributions from Bell TV to support Canadian Independent Producers in the development and production of great Canadian content. In 2001, the Bell Fund was awarded an endowment of \$10 million from Bell TV, as a result of a tangible benefits package. The revenues generated by this endowment are made available for development funding.

## Background

The Bell Fund is a not-for-profit organization. It has been certified by the CRTC as an independent production fund eligible to receive and administer contributions from broadcast distribution undertakings under section 29(2) of the Broadcasting Distribution Regulations. The Fund is governed by a nine-member board operating at arm's length from Bell TV and has offices in Toronto and Montreal.

## Guiding Principles

The Bell Fund is committed to supporting a more equitable, diverse, and inclusive industry across Canada. This means supporting:

- Screen-based producers/creators who identify as Black, Indigenous, and those from racialized communities.
- Screen-based producers/creators from underrepresented groups including but not limited to 2SLGBTQIA+ and persons with disabilities;
- Emerging, screen-based producers/creators and teams;
- Gender parity;
- Regional representation and OLMC communities.

Production teams are encouraged to consult resources like ['ON-Screen Protocols & Pathways: A Media Production Guide'](#) for guidance on working with First Nations, Metis, and Inuit communities and ['Being Seen: Directives for Creating Authentic and Inclusive Content'](#), for recommendations and best practices for creating content relating for working with Black, People of Colour, 2SLGBTQIA+ and People with Disabilities communities.

## General Policies

The Board of the Bell Fund has complete discretion in the administration of Bell Fund programs including, without limitation, determination of eligibility of applicants and projects and all funding decisions. All Board decisions are final.

Program guidelines may be changed at any time, provided that guidelines publicly posted at the time of a Program deadline will be the applicable guidelines for that application. Producers are encouraged to ensure that they have reviewed the most current guidelines, templates, and policies available on the Bell Fund website prior to submitting their application.

Bell Fund recipients are expected to support an inclusive and respectful workplace climate; free of discrimination, bullying and harassment.

Content must be compliant with all standards and policies applicable to broadcasting and to intellectual property laws and not infringe upon any public or private rights and not otherwise contravene any civil and criminal laws in effect in Canada.

**Failure to Comply and Misrepresentation:** Any failure to comply with the terms and conditions of the guidelines and or any misrepresentation of information in connection with an application, as determined by Bell Fund, may result in the application being deemed ineligible and repayment of any advanced funds (with interest) may be demanded. It might also affect the eligibility of future applications.

# **1. Introduction**

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The Short-Form Digital Series Program is a selective Program that supports Canadian, independent producers/creators by funding premium, original series for **online distribution**, specifically the production of fiction (drama, comedy, and children's and youth programming) and non-fiction (documentary and lifestyle/factual programming).

**Financing is limited to any two seasons of a series.**

## **2. Definitions**

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### **Broadcaster Affiliated production company:**

Is a for profit Canadian company (a taxable Canadian corporation within the meaning of Canada's Income Tax Act) carrying on business in Canada, with a Canadian business address, owned and controlled by Canadians, whose business is the production of film, video or live programs for distribution and, in which, a company with a licence to carry on business as a broadcasting undertaking (aka a broadcaster) or any company related to the broadcasting undertaking, owns, in aggregate, a 30% or greater (voting) equity interest.

### **Canadian Independent production company:**

Is a for-profit company (a taxable Canadian corporation within the meaning of Canada's Income Tax Act) carrying on business in Canada, with a Canadian business address, owned and controlled by Canadians, whose business is the production of film, video or live programs for distribution.

### **Emerging:**

Emerging refers to a screen-based producer, director or writer who has not yet acquired extensive experience but has at least one credit (as producer, director or writer) in a professionally-produced, screen-based project (digital or tv series, short or feature).

### **Short-Form Digital Series:**

English or French language, fiction or non-fiction, minimum 6 episodes, minimum episode length 5 minutes, maximum episode length 20 minutes, intended for distribution as a 'digital first' series on a digital platform/channel. Sometimes referred to as a "web series." See Eligible Content.

**Spin-Off:**

Although a 'spin-off' is derived from an existing series, it has significant differences from the original series. For non-fiction this might be new host(s), locations and topics. For fiction this might be new characters, storylines and narrative arcs. (See eligible content section.)

**Format:**

Unlike spin-off's, formats are generally the same/similar to an original version. There are no significant changes from the original, apart from what is required to adapt the series for different/international markets. (See ineligible content section.)

### **3. Eligible Applicants**

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Applicant must operate as a Canadian Independent Production Company (see definitions) and must have at least one credit as a producer, writer or director, in a professionally produced screen-based project (digital or tv series, short or feature). (see definition of emerging creator). While incorporation is not required at application, the applicant must be prepared to be incorporated if application is recommended for funding.

Given the limited funds available, a Company comprised of, and/or exercising common control over, several production companies is only entitled to one application per deadline.

### **4. Eligibility Requirements (please read carefully)**

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Bell Fund will deem ineligible any application considered incomplete. This includes unsigned documentation. Prior to applying, applicants should ensure they meet all eligibility requirements as this is a highly competitive fund and requests for funding will exceed the amount of funding available.

**The following conditions must be met, and the documents submitted at time of application: (See the document check list for a full list of required documents.)**

- The platform must be acceptable to Bell Fund and the appropriate agreement must be in place. (See below)
- The request for production financing from Bell Fund must not exceed 75% of the series production budget.
- Principal photography must not start prior to the Bell Fund deadline.
- At time of application, all rights and underlying rights are owned, optioned or controlled sufficiently to produce and exploit the program throughout the world.

- First-time applicants must attend an application clinic. Visit [bellfund.ca](http://bellfund.ca) for dates and registration information. Applicants are encouraged to sign up as soon as registration opens.
- Applicants applying for a series that received slate development financing must complete and deliver the development prior to applying.
- All associated documents (including all sources of confirmed financing) must be signed and dated by appropriate parties.
- A **preliminary** audience development plan. (A comprehensive plan is not required at application.)
- A budget and finance plan for series production.

#### a) Agreement with Platform

At time of application, applicant must have a licence agreement, commitment letter or detailed deal memo from:

1. A digital platform owned, controlled, and operated by a Canadian, broadcaster (e.g., OUTtvGO, APTNlumi, CBC Gem, Savoir media) including operating as a Hybrid VOD service (e.g. Crave, Club illico) or
2. a pre-approved platform/channel (Canadian or foreign)

The agreement must outline terms, including but not limited to:

- Any financial contribution, licence fee, and/or advances,
- Revenue sharing (if applicable),
- marketing support,
- plan to make the series available in Canada within 24 months from notification of funding.

#### b) Pre-Approval of platform

**All non-broadcaster platforms must be pre-approved by Bell Fund prior to application submission.**

Producers are encouraged to complete the Pre-Approval form/process before beginning their applications. Pre-approvals may be requested **\*up to 3 weeks before** the application deadline. Bell Fund will review requests and make best efforts to provide an answer within 5 business days.

Bell Fund reserves the right to determine the acceptability of the service.

### c) Platform Requirements

- Be available to Canadians and demonstrate that it markets to Canadian audiences (platform may be Canadian or foreign owned).
- Feature original, premium quality, entertainment content, including short-form digital series that are comparable with short-form digital series financed by Bell Fund.
- Feature original content and not exclusively acquired content.
- Be able to provide evidence of the performance of the platform (e.g. audience data including Canadian audiences) for similar series.

Please refer to this [list](#) of some of the digital platforms & channels Bell Fund has approved in the past.

Note: While eligible productions must initially be created for online/digital distribution on platforms available to Canadian audiences, projects may subsequently be exploited on other platforms such as linear broadcast

### d) Financing Requirements

While in-kind and deferred costs may be included in the finance structure they will be assessed, as part of the budget and schedule review, to determine whether they are necessary and reasonable.

The producer is required to provide a cash flow document, particularly where there is a producer investment and/or tax credits in the finance structure.

For provincial and federal tax credits, applicant must demonstrate eligibility, provide calculations and estimate a maximum of 90% of anticipated tax credits, in the finance structure. Federal tax credits require a Canadian distributor and streaming on a CAVCO approved digital channel. Requirements for provincial tax credits vary by province and applicant must clearly demonstrate eligibility. Note: Bell Fund's non-repayable contribution is considered assistance and will grind tax credits; ensure this is included in your calculations.

#### Financing from other Funding/Provincial Agencies

You may apply to Bell Fund with unconfirmed financing from other Canadian independent production funds/provincial/federal agencies (such as IPF, Creative B.C., Quebecor, Ontario Creates, CMF, Telus, etc.), provided that all of your financing is confirmed within 60 days of the Bell Fund notification of financing.



Details must be uploaded with your Bell Fund application including name of funder, name of funding program, amount pending, deadline date and expected date of notification.

Applicants must indicate whether they intend to submit applications to other funding agencies. Applications that fail to disclose this information will be deemed incomplete. Applicants that have higher or lower budgets under review with other funding agencies must submit the alternate finance scenarios to Bell Fund as part of their application (adapted from the Ontario Creates IDM Fund guidelines). Applicants must inform Bell Fund of the decisions of other funders as soon as they are notified and, if applicant must seek alternative financing, they must inform the Bell Fund of the plan and have the confirmed financing in place within 60 days of Bell Fund notification.

### **e) Audience Development Plan**

The Bell Fund, Shaw Rocket Fund and Telus Fund are partnering on an Audience Development Pilot Project to provide new tools for producers to plan, measure and increase audiences for their Canadian, screen-based content. The Funds have standardized their requirements for an Audience Development Plan. There are 2 phases:

- 1. An Audience Development Preliminary Plan** (approx. two pages) must be submitted at application. Please refer to the [template](#) for guidance in preparing your plan.
- 2. An Audience Development Comprehensive Plan & Budget** - In the event that your application is approved, a detailed plan will be required 60 days before the start of principal photography. In addition, a budget must be submitted using the audience development [budget template](#) provided by Bell Fund. Note: principal photography must be timed appropriately to align with the plan. Please refer to the [template](#) for guidance in preparing your plan.

### **f) Audience Reporting**

The Bell Fund, Shaw Rocket Fund and TELUS Fund are piloting Magnify Digital's new audience analytics platform ScreenMiner™ (formerly ViewerCentric). This will allow for the standardization of audience data collection, measurement and analysis, and reporting requirements. Successful applicants who receive financing will be required to set up an account with ScreenMiner.

### **g) Series Proof of Concept/ Non-broadcast Demo, Trailer**

**New Series** If applying for a new series submit a Proof of Concept (POC)/non-broadcast demo video. Maximum 2 minutes reflecting the look and feel of the proposed series including key, on-screen talent. The proof of concept must be comprised of original footage from the applicant company.

**Subsequent Season** If applying for a subsequent season you may use/adapt a trailer/teaser from the previous season provided it reflects the look and feel of the proposed new season including key, on-screen talent.

## 5. **Funding Contribution:**

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**Digital Series Production** - Funding is available as a non-repayable contribution for up to 75% of eligible production costs to a maximum of \$150,000.

Note: a 10% third party cash contribution is not required.

**Audience Development Plan for Digital Series** – If series is recommended for financing, an additional amount, up to a maximum of **NEW \$45,000**, may be requested for the cost of implementing the Audience Development Plan.

Applicants are strongly encouraged to increase the budget for audience development by securing financing from an additional source.

Broadcaster-affiliated companies are limited to a maximum of 15% of the available funds in a program.

## 6. **Budget & Eligible Costs**

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A budget must be submitted for production of the series on the template provided by Bell Fund. Eligible costs include standard digital video production (costs to implement the Comprehensive Audience Development Plan are captured in the Audience Development Budget). See the Financing and Budgeting Policy for details about preparing your production budget for your application.

Bell Fund encourages producers to consider the environmental impact of production. Here is a link for more information. [Resources for Green Production](#)

If a COVID-19 safety plan is required in accordance with local, provincial or federal guidelines, the budget must include the costs associated with implementing the plan.

## 7. **Subsequent Season**

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**Financing is limited to any two seasons of a series.**

If applying for a subsequent season the majority of the previous season must have streamed in order to provide key performance indicators (including but not limited to audience analytics)

## 8. Eligible Content

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**Fiction:** Eligible genres of programming include scripted drama, comedy and children and youth programming (excluding animated series), being produced as an ongoing series.

Spin-off: See definitions. Spin-offs may be eligible.

**NEW:** For sketch comedy to be considered eligible, the applicant must provide evidence that the platform is responsible for providing oversight of the content and will ensure that the content is in keeping with CRTC guidelines.

**Non-Fiction:** Eligible genres of programming include factual, (commonly understood to include but not limited to science, history, art, religion), documentaries and lifestyle programming (commonly understood to include but not limited to cooking, decorating, finance, real estate), and children and youth programming (excluding animated series), being produced as an ongoing series.

All content must:

- Be closed captioned and have described video.
- Achieve a minimum of 6 out of 10 Canadian certification points under CRTC or be certified, by Telefilm, as an official Canadian treaty co-production or be certified as per the CRTC's requirements as a co-venture.

## 9. Ineligible Content

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The following types of content are not eligible:

Content that is primarily vlogs, user-generated content, including but not limited to content such as product review videos, how-to- videos, advice, tutorials, gaming videos, unboxing videos or other forms of unscripted programming.

Content that is industrial, corporate, or primarily promotional or informational. Interstitial programs, wraparound segments or filler content, commonly used by broadcasters as television programs.

Animated series, sports, news, current/public affairs, talk shows, and all content that has a primary mission of providing a public service.

Film and Television convergent projects (i.e. short-form digital series associated with a TV program for the sole purpose of driving audience to the TV program).

Formats: See definitions. Formats are ineligible.

If in doubt, applicants are encouraged to read the [FAQ's](#) and contact the Bell Fund to determine eligibility before applying.

## 10. **Evaluation Process**

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1. Applications are reviewed to ensure that eligibility criteria are met and that the required documentation is complete.
2. Eligible applications are evaluated by an independent jury.
3. Funding decisions are made by the Board of Directors six to ten weeks after the application deadline.
4. An application may be submitted a total of two times. Re-submissions must address any notes provided from the previous application.

The Bell Fund Short-Form Digital Series [Assessment Criteria](#) contains the key criteria that are examined in the evaluation process.

For a full list of required documentation refer to the [Document Checklist](#).