

# Avoid the Dreaded G Rating

By **Uhf**, [allthetropes.org](http://allthetropes.org)

February 23rd, 2015

*"There was some MPAA rating confusion about The Avengers. The early previews for the film clearly identified it as being a "PG" movie, but the actual release carries a 'PG-13.' There's really nothing in the film to warrant that, with one minor exception -- a single use of the 'f-word.' What's curious is that this particular expletive seems to have been dubbed in after the fact. It's not unreasonable to speculate that Warner Brothers, not wanting the film to be tagged with a 'wimpy' 'PG,' added one really bad word to bump the rating up."*

—**James Berardinelli's** review of *The Avengers* 1998

Movies are a business. Sure, you can say that they're also art—many screenwriters, directors, and other people are in the industry to tell stories rather than just make money. However, the people in charge of funding and distributing the films are in it for the money, so to make as much money as possible, they'll try to bring in as many people as possible. Sometimes this involves lying about the content of the movie, showing all the best parts, or, in the case of family movies, changing the rating.

That's right, changing the rating. Perception means a lot, and age-based rating systems tend to result in people using ratings to judge whether or not something is for them. R ratings tend to indicate something for adults (though

not always), and G ratings tend to indicate something for young children, such as a non-violent animated film. In between are PG and PG-13, which indicate content for older ages, but not necessarily adults.

So what tends to happen with a lot of perfectly clean, family-friendly movies is that the word "damn" or "hell" (or both) might be added to the script, just to drop that dreaded G rating and move up to a PG so the movie has a better shot at avoiding the "kid stuff" stigma that keeps teen or adult viewers away. (Of course, this can still vary: the movies *Airport* and *Star Trek the Motion Picture* have the word "damn" in them and both had G ratings, and the G-rated *Gone with the Wind* has, in addition to the most famous use of the word "damn" in history, a lot of other distinctly non-G-rated things like barely off screen sex, open bloodshed, and a sea of dead bodies.) An advantage of very little swearing is that it makes it much easier for the film in question to be edited for TV and airplane flights without particularly interrupting the story. Sometimes even stronger profanity will be unnecessarily added, or the characters might pay an irrelevant and fleeting visit to a strip club, or in rare cases, a scene of mild violence might have blood added to it instead. Any way, the goal is always the same: to make people perceive the movie as not exclusively for children. Ironically, this may be counterproductive, as the average G-rated film makes more money than the average R-rated film (although this might simply be due to the oversaturation of R-rated films compared to the incredibly rare G-rated films, the latter simply getting more average business due to a total lack of options for young children).

There are also instances of content being added to create an intentional PG-13 rating, and in some cases, content being removed from an R rated movie for the same reason. It's all about trying to get a certain audience to watch the film; in the UK, the practice is sometimes known as "fifteening" since the target was the BBFC 15 rating, though this has faded since the advent of the PG-13-equivalent 12 (later 12A) rating.

Ironically enough, in modern times, it's nearly impossible to get a G rating these days on any theatrical release done in live action without some serious, *serious* negotiation (in a strange inversion of the Animation Age Ghetto, the MPAA is more than happy to rate something as PG for "nothing offensive" just because it's live action). As if assisting the production companies in the propagation of this attitude, almost nothing ever makes it to theaters with a G rating in the first place, but practically none of *that* is live action. Contrast this with some of the G rated movies of old, which not only included violence but sometimes even blood (for example, Disney's 1954 movie *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*<sup>[1]</sup> has a pretty high body count and has some unconvincing but definitely present blood during the death of a key character).

The existence of this trope is due to Flanderization of the MPAA rating system. Originally "G" ratings were for movies for a "General" audience, not for "Grandmas & babies." *Star Trek the Motion Picture* was rated G despite a couple of horrific deaths by transporter malfunction. *Planet of the Apes* was rated G and you saw Charlton Heston's bare butt, not to mention all the violence, "damn dirty ape" and "God damn you all to hell!" The G-rated *The Andromeda Strain* also had bare butts along with a dead woman's breasts. *Sinbad and the Eye of the Tiger* was rated G and it showed Jane Seymour naked and almost raped. As a broad generalization: when the PG-13 rating started, all the PG movies became PG-13 and the higher end G movies became PG, leaving G to Disney and the like. By the same token, the "X" rating originally denoted any film with content deemed unsuitable for minors, not just porn. It's probably no accident that the only G-rated film to win a Best Picture Oscar (*Oliver!*) and the only X-rated film to do the same (*Midnight Cowboy*, although that film has since been downgraded to an R rating due to the same dynamic we're talking about) were released in 1968 and 1969 respectively, right after the MPAA system was first instituted.

The "G is for Grandma" effect is probably the motivation for the US TV rating system, introduced years after the movie version called the bugs into sharp contrast, to have both a TV-Y rating and a TV-G rating: TV-Y is "specifically for kids", and TV-G means "nothing offensive". The ESRB ratings for video games, since interactive media have to account for both content and playability, also have both the "E for Everyone" and several ratings for different younger age groups (some lower-end E10+ games suffer as well, albeit to a lesser extent). Incidentally, even though the video game industry is no stranger to edginess for marketing's sake, this trope is probably least common in video games. That said, the original name for the all-inclusive rating for games was "K-A for Kids to Adults," with the name changed specifically because games sold better among older gamers when the rating didn't have "kid" in it.

See Rated "M" for Money, and for more information on the rating systems see Media Classifications.

**This is NOT about movies that just happen to have a high rating.** It is *only* about when something clearly unnecessary and unneeded is added to bump the rating higher, because without it the rating would be lower than what the company wants. Also note that it's not always certain what caused a movie to get (or not get) a certain rating, as outside of a few guidelines, the MPAA ratings are a black box. You give them the movie, they tell you what it would be rated, but not why, and there's no point count included to guarantee how you can raise or lower the rating.

## Movies - Straight Examples

- In the UK, 15 is the most common rating for any film not specifically marketed as family viewing and (according to the IMDB) the most common rating overall.

- This is true, of 100 films around 60% will get 15 and 12A rating, 10% will get 18, 10% will get a U and 20% will get PG. Even the word "cunt" alone doesn't justify an 18, as both *Kick-Ass* and *Shaun of the Dead* feature the word and only get a 15 (mentioned by Simon Pegg on the commentary who bemoaned "15 rating horror" and then got one).
- American made films do occasionally suffer due to the differences in ratings between the UK and US. Because the US ratings go from 13 to 17, and the UK goes 12 to 15 to 18. While a some R or NC-17 rated films fall naturally into the 15 range, others get cut to force them into it, as it is deemed more profitable than 18. For example, the subway fight between Smith and Neo in *The Matrix* has the headbutts cut out of it in the UK version.
- In the UK, the movie *Spider Man* has been mis-associated with an overhaul of the BBFC ratings system. A large number of parents thought its 12 rating (legally enforced) was too high, and they wanted their younger children to be able to see it, leading some local councils (who have the the final say on film certificates) to let the film be released as PG or PG-12. This co-incident with the introduction of, and pretty much replacement in cinemas by, the 12A rating (still legally restricted to this age, and still labelled as just 12 for video, but adults may bring minors if they feel the film is appropriate).
  - The same situation had happened for *Mrs. Doubtfire* and resulted in that film being cut for PG.
- The movie version of the musical *Annie* had two crooks say "You goddamned kid" to deliberately avoid being rated G.
- The film *The Astronaut's Wife* got an 18 rating in Ireland and the UK. Y'know why? Johnny Depp says "cunt". Once. There are a few "fucks"

too, but there is no major violence or nudity that would warrant an "adults-only" rating otherwise.

- The entire opening scene of *Be Cool* invokes and lampshades this phenomenon. While telling his friend about how stupid the MPAA system is, he says to him "Did you know you can only say *fuck* once? That's it. Or you get an R." That's the only time the word is uttered throughout the film - which received a solid PG-13.
- At one point in the movie *Beetlejuice*, Charles Deetz screams "shit" very loudly (but perhaps as an understatement considering the near death situation he had just experienced) and this noticeably spices up a dark yet mostly clean movie.
  - Oddly, the original theatrical version was rated PG, yet had the title character quite clearly yell out "Nice fucking model!" before grabbing his crotch with a honking noise.
    - And just in case that went over your kids' heads, there's the brothel within said model.
- The sole content descriptor for the movie of *Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs* is "brief mild language". This was an attempt to nudge the movie towards an older audience, who would definitely appreciate its humor more than kids. Alas...
- The shot of Sacha Baron Cohen's penis late in the film seems to have been the only reason why *The Dictator* was given an R rating as most of the film was clearly shot with a PG-13 in mind. The trailer even appeared with some PG rated films (such as *The Three Stooges*).
- The use of the insult "Penis Breath" (possibly also the "Uranus" joke) in *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* was Spielberg specifically gunning for the PG

rating. *Yet again* this didn't work in the UK.

- Ironic, considering the line was removed in the infamously Lighter and Softer rerelease. (The one best known for the walkie-talkie guns)
- The film of Jane Austen's *Emma* added the word "bitch" (describing a female dog) to escape the G rating.
- *Flubber* had one instance of "damn" very obviously inserted just to earn the film a PG rating. Strangely enough, when the film aired on *The Wonderful World Of Disney*, it had the word seamlessly removed to bring it back down to TV-G.
- For much the same reasons as *The Queen* (i.e., a total lack of appeal to persons under 18 years old), one of the characters in *Gosford Park* gratuitously uses cluster F bombs on the phone to drive the rating up to an "R".
- John Waters thought any chance for *Hairspray*'s success was ruined when it got a PG rating and didn't have time to modify it to target his usual adult audience. Instead, the lighter approach made it a major success, although he has had issues with people mistaking his other movies for family fare without looking at the rating.
- The sixth *Harry Potter* film was rated "PG" after the two previous installments had merited "PG-13". Many fans reacted to this news as though it were an announcement that they were bringing back Chris Columbus and replacing all the actors with muppets. In the UK, contrary to the trend seen so far on this page, it retained the same 12/12A rating as the fourth and fifth films. Despite the rating, it was arguably the most violent and frightening of any of the movies up to that point.

- A racial slur briefly used in the movie of *The Help* is what mainly gives it a PG-13 rating, but like *Stranger Than Fiction*, though the whole pie scene probably would've put it in between PG and PG-13, the racial slur was probably added to push it over.
- Indiana Jones occasionally says swearwords ("shit" several times across his movies, what may be a severely muffled "fuck" in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*) probably for this very reason, just to make absolutely sure that movies featuring people melting, people on fire, people getting stabbed by walls, open heart surgery using hands, rapid ageing and *exploding lightning Nazis* would not be shown to small children. Didn't help much. The sequel was even more violent and famously contributed to the creation of the PG-13 rating.
- *Invictus* would probably be PG for sports-related violence and a few curse words. A Precision F-Strike, used by the team captain as motivation, got it a PG-13.
- Probably the reason why Ralph Roach said "fuck" once in *Joes Apartment*, other than that, the band's name being "Shit", and some violence and innuendo the movie is relatively tame.
  - I don't know. Even without the f-bomb, I'm pretty sure the movie wouldn't have received below a PG-13.
- *The King's Speech*, a biopic about Prince Albert, the Duke of York; later King George VI, and his struggle with stuttering. It was rated R after two scenes that involved Cluster F-Bomb. Other than that there are no violence or sexual situations.
  - In the UK, this trope was actually inverted. Those scenes landed the film with a 15 rating, but the producers wanted a lower rating and eventually convinced the BBFC to give it a 12A (equivalent to PG-13;



similar to the US, in the UK you're allowed one f-bomb for a 12A and any more than that makes it 15). The posters note that it contains "strong language in a speech therapy context". One suspects this was done to help the film appeal to the older audience that would likely make up a lot of the ticket sales.

- Inverted in the US as well with the theatrical re-release that took out some of the profanities.
- Gramercy requested Tom Servo say "shit" a couple of times in *Mystery Science Theater 3000: The Movie* to bump up to a PG-13.
  - Some sexually suggestive and drug-related jokes helped get the rating, as well.
- *Ocean's Eleven* has two noticeably gratuitous F-bombs, contrasting the rest of the movie, which is squeaky-clean. Apparently it was added to secure a PG-13.
  - And that one of the F-bombs was one character's only line in English just made it a Funny Moment.
- *Planes, Trains and Automobiles* has Steve Martin drop a Cluster F-Bomb to give the movie its R rating. The Precision F-Strike reply serves as a Funny Moment for good measure.
- The Australian movie *Playing Beatie Bow* bears the PG label on the DVD cover. The reason? Abigail says "Oh, shit" towards the end. It even *feels* forced, as otherwise the movie is clean (and based on a YA novel to boot)
- *Psychonauts* features a few tiny uses of barely-visible red blood and a few awkward usages of "ass," presumably to bump the game up to a T rating. Without them, there's very little in terms of objectionable content in the

game to justify a rating higher than an "E," but the *themes* it deals with are heavy and/or creepy enough that marketing the game to kids wouldn't have really worked. They just needed to add things the ESRB would actually object to.

- *The Score* is a nice caper movie about a bunch of robbers. It would've earned a PG, maybe a PG-13, if not for the few dozen swearwords the characters used at every opportunity. It got an R.
- Don Bluth wanted *The Secret of NIMH* to have a PG rating to appeal to a larger audience (and the fact that it has more frightening scenes than most of the Disney canon films combined). Defying all logic (and one "damn"), the MPAA gave them a G. Then again though, there's another reason it was rated 'G'...
- The film of Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* was sneakier; the filmmakers there avoided the G rating by inserting some profanities into the background din of a ballroom scene.
- *Sneakers* is not a kids' movie, nor is it exactly "light, family-friendly fare," but has very little violence and no sex. In order to prevent the movie from getting a G (or even a PG) rating, which would have been disastrous on several levels, the directors added foul language and some references to sexuality to bump it to PG-13, including a Precision F-Strike from none other than Sidney Poitier.
- Paramount Pictures originally wanted *South Park Bigger Longer and Uncut* to be rated PG-13, but Trey Parker and Matt Stone said they wouldn't make it unless it was rated R.
  - In an inversion of this trope, Terrence and Phillip were originally going to sing "Mother Fucker", which got the film an NC-17 rating.

To make it rated R, the songs was changed to "Uncle Fucker". Trey and Matt said the change made the song funnier.

- Possibly gunning for a PG-13 rather than a PG, the Wachowski Brothers' *Speed Racer* film uses the word "shit" twice, notably by Speed himself in shouting "Get that weak shit off my track!" The film still only got a PG rating.
- In the 2001 director's cut of *Star Trek: The Motion Picture*, the rating was deliberately pushed up to PG. The new cut is still just *barely* PG.
- According to Hollywood legend, *Star Wars: A New Hope* came back from the ratings board with a notice that it had fallen squarely between G and PG. The producers requested it be given the PG rating.
  - Han making a preemptive strike was bowdlerized into him reacting to Greedo in *Star Wars: Special Edition* specifically so that Star Wars would retain its PG rating rather than being bumped up to PG-13. Certain fans were not happy about this, and also think George Lucas did it because he hates the true fans.
    - The funniest thing about blaming Lucas is that he's been seen on multiple occasions wearing "Han Shot First" T-shirts, suggesting that he isn't any happier about the mandated change, or possibly just pandering to the fans.
    - Probably because Lucas made such a big deal for so long about everything being his 'original vision', rather than ever being willing to slip out a tacit admission that perhaps he got nudged into a few decisions. In doing so, he basically absolved the ratings people of any blame for the changes and took it all upon himself. Oops.

- The original trilogy is rated U (the equivalent of G) in the UK, which doesn't seem to have affected its success.
  - The original Original Trilogy was rated FSK 12 (For Ages 12 and up) in Germany. Oddly, the Director's Cut of the Original Trilogy, years later, was bumped down to FSK 6.
- *Stranger Than Fiction* features a scene where two characters walk past a locker-room shower full of naked guy butt. It's clearly only there to ensure a PG-13, as nothing else in the movie really bumps it beyond PG. Well, that and "Dramatic irony: it'll fuck you every time."
  - The latter is also a Funny Moment.
  - There's also the sequence, mild as it is, where Ana practically tackles Harold while he's playing a song on his guitar and starts taking her clothes off. No actual sex is shown, but they are shown in bed together following this scene, and it's arguable that this scene made the film so "up in the air" between PG and PG-13 that the shower scene was added to push it over.
- The movie of *Stuart Little* got a PG rating by having the villains occasionally say "damn" or "hell."
- Related to this trope, and Rated "M" for Money, the horror movie parody, *Student Bodies*, had this scene in the middle of the film:

**Announcer:** Ladies and gentlemen, in order to achieve an "R" rating today, a motion picture must contain full frontal nudity, graphic violence, or an explicit reference to the sex act. Since this film has none of those, and since

research has proven that R-rated films are by far the most popular with the moviegoing public, the producers of this motion picture have asked me to take this opportunity to say "Fuck you."