

Joe's Guide to Boom Operating

The part of working with the boom that takes the most practice is moving it silently. Try it out while wearing the headphones to get a handle on how to move it as quietly as possible. You'll find that generally, a lighter grip gives you more agility to adjust it quickly and without much noise. Every move you make with your hands against the pole can translate into noise, so when possible, use your arms and body to move instead of your hands.

The last part of getting good sound that isn't really the boom op's job (it's the sound mixer's), but is good to think about is controlling noise on set. You want as quiet a recording location as possible, so that only the dialogue gets recorded, not the background noise. Choosing your location with sound in mind is the best first step, but once you're there, think about what's making noise. Sometimes listening with the headphones helps you to notice noise. Turn off computers, control Air Conditioning and Heaters (hunt down the thermostat and don't forget that just because it's not on now doesn't mean that it won't pop on when you're not expecting it), or anything with a fan. You might even need to unplug refrigerators (a good habit is to put your keys in the fridge, so you don't forget to plug it back in before leaving). Anything that makes noise should either get turned off, moved away from the set, or you should move the set away from the thing making noise. Be looking for any noises early, so that you can move away from them before all the lights and camera and blocking get set. Comparatively, it's much, much easier to fix the problem on set than to try and fix the dialogue or re-record it later. Much, much, much easier. Trust me.

Again, good dialogue isn't that hard to record, once you know a bit of what to do. So go out there and get some good dialogue – it'll raise the professionalism of the film by leaps and bounds!

So you're the guy they talked into holding the boom mic? Congratulations! Here's what you need to know: First, you have what many would consider to be one of the most important jobs on the set. Good booming makes the film sound good, which then just makes the film noticeably better.

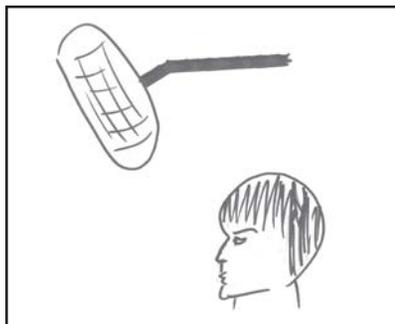
To start, there are three kinds of audio in films: Good, Great, and Bad. Great audio is really hard to do- it takes years of learning and experimenting. Bad audio is easy to do, as evidenced by most student films and 90% of youtube.

Good audio, on the other hand, isn't that hard to do most of the time, once you know a couple tricks.

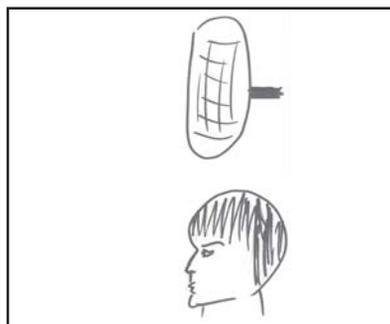
The first question you might have is: What is good (or even great) production audio? Good production audio is getting the dialogue on set as cleanly and as isolated as possible. You're aiming to record only the voices, with as little other noise as possible.

First, you need to know one thing: the only way to get good audio is to get the mic as close as possible what you're recording. That's the biggest part of the job. Controlling the noise on the set is the second part of the job that you want to think about, and we'll talk about that shortly.

There are just a few things about getting the mic as close as possible that you need to be aware of to be a good boom op. The first is, a boom/shotgun mic is very directional. That means that it picks up the sounds in the direction it's pointing much more powerfully than the sounds coming at it from off-axis or the sides. So you need to point the boom mic in the direction of the noise you want to record (usually towards the mouth of the person who's talking). The best position for recording production dialogue is above the actor's head, slightly in front of them. And make sure the mic is angled toward their mouth.



GOOD POSITION



NOT-SO-GOOD
(not in front of mouth)

The best way to find the best position for the mic is to actually be wearing headphones. It always amazes me to see a boom operator not wear headphones- that's like the camera operator working without a viewfinder! How do you know what it sounds like if you're not listening to it? You should loop the headphones cable (and the XLR mic cable, too) through a belt loop- or find some other way to keep the line from accidentally pulling away from you.

You want to get that mic in as close as possible - sound distance is exponential, meaning that twice as far away is four times worse sound. Every inch that you can be closer to the source is going to make your audio that much better.

Getting the mic close to the mouth is often going to put you in conflict with the camera operator- you'll be fighting to get closer into the frame, and the camera op will be trying to keep you far away. You need to communicate with the camera team to find the edge of the frame, and be aware of when the camera adjusts its framing so you can shift with it. Again, you always want to be as close to the mouth as possible, while staying outside of the frame.

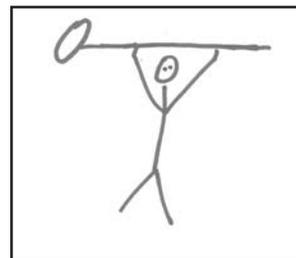
Another skill to try and perfect is to follow the motion of the actors with the mic. Practice during the rehearsals, and learn to read the actor's body language, so you can follow them naturally and always keep the mic close and in front of them. Knowing the script can help, too, so you can make the moves with them, or if you're mic'ing more than one person in a shot, you can move the mic to

them before they begin to speak, instead of playing catch-up and missing their first few words.

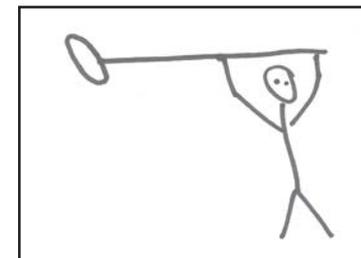
Some notes on the boom pole and blimp (the "blimp" is the big grey plastic windscreen for the mic – if there's no wind, you can take it off). First, if you're using the blimp, make certain that the mic inside is pushed as far forward as possible inside the blimp, without actually touching the blimp. Otherwise, you might have the *blimp* as close to the mouth as possible, but the actual mic inside might be an extra couple of inches away. You can see where the mic is inside the blimp by holding it up to the light. There's also a "fuzzy" cover for the blimp in the equipment room that REALLY helps cut down on wind noise. Try it sometime, you'll be amazed how much it helps!

When you extend the boom pole, make sure to only finger-tighten the twist-locks. They lock pretty easily, but if you over-tighten them, they also break pretty easily. Be careful with that- nothing on the boom pole needs to be tightened much at all.

And finally – holding the boom pole. If you have the space, you want to extend the boom pole as long as possible.



GOOD



NOT-SO-GOOD (hard to balance)

Even if you don't need the pole to be that long, it makes it easier to balance if you're holding the pole from the middle, instead of trying to balance it all from the end. It's also easier to move and adjust silently from the middle. You also want to hold it with both hands over your head. Even though that's not the most comfortable position (it can start to hurt after a while), it's the best position to keep the pole mobile and to stay out of the camera's frame.