

## Joe's Guide to Assistant Directing

ONLY THE DIRECTOR says "Cut" at the end of the scene, unless there is immediate danger to property or person that must be avoided. After checking how the take was for the director, the cameraman, and the sound department, depending on how the shot went, you'll either announce "Moving on to" whatever setup or scene you're moving on to, or you'll announce that you're "Going Again!" and doing the same shot over for another take.

The order of the roll might change, depending on filming circumstances. If there's no audio being recorded for this take, obviously, there's a change. If there are multiple cameras or special effects, you might need to incorporate special instructions for them. Sometimes the A.D. needs to remind a novice slate op to call the shot number by saying "Call it" after the Sound Mixer announces "speed." But this basic roll will get you through most setups.

One final note about the A.D.: the job may occasionally seem like you should be constantly wagging the clock in front of people, but that's not really the case. A good A.D. isn't just a nag about timekeeping, but is someone who helps to figure out WHY things may be running behind (if they are) and offers solutions. If, for instance, you're always waiting for set design to finish, the A.D. may find a way for the set dresser to start a bit early so they have a chance to stay ahead, or if the lighting is the problem, maybe if all the necessary lights are kept closer to set, and the C-Stands are prepped to go just behind them, and if a grip can be on constant standby with those items, the whole process can go more quickly. The A.D. is often the person with the eye to see those solutions, because they should be watching the process and seeing what can be fixed, instead of either being too close to the problem to diagnose it, or too far away just complaining about how far behind everyone is.

Without an A.D., a production often falls into disarray, resulting in things going wrong, and lots of wasted time. While not always considered a creative position (I would argue that keeping that far ahead of the game in preparation is a VERY creative role), the job of A.D. is one of the most important on the set, because they keep things running. A set just doesn't function well without one.

There is no more misleading title on a film set than the Assistant Director. The name suggests helping the director, and they do that, but the Asst Director really works for the producer of the film, and is in charge of seeing that the film is shot efficiently and effectively. They're the main person concerned with the whole shooting day, and are always thinking at least three steps ahead.

The biggest on-set job of the A.D. is timekeeper. They make certain that the production is running on schedule. If they're brought in to the crew early enough (they're usually the first person hired on a professional set), they'll create the schedule for the film. They're in charge of seeing that the production is running according to schedule (or ahead of it), usually by two methods. The first method is to keep on top of the crew (and director and actors) to see that everyone who should be working is working, efficiently and as a team, and helping to solve problems, and the second method is by anticipating needs before they come up.

Because they have to keep on top of the crew, an A.D. is stereotypically looked at one of two ways: everyone loves them or everyone hates them. That depends on how the A.D. works (as well as the work ethic of the crew). The most effective A.D.'s work as a problem solver and cheerleader, keeping everyone working through motivation and pitching in. But some A.D.'s see their job as a confrontational one, and take the opportunity to "crack the whip" on a set. Both are always focused on keeping everyone working effectively (including understanding and planning when a crew needs to rest), and of course, there are shades of gray in between, and sometimes one type needs to become the other type to get things accomplished, but you'll see these two stereotypes throughout your filmmaking career.

The second way the A.D. keeps things running smoothly is by anticipating needs. The A.D. should always be thinking at least 3-5 steps ahead. While the current scene is filming, what scenes are completed and could be torn down now instead of later? When is lunch? Is catering ready to go? After lunch, is there any special prep that needs to happen for filming to start? Who's handling

that? Can they go to lunch now and start early so things are ready when lunch is finished for everyone else?

By thinking ahead, the A.D. can make things happen as efficiently as possible, and keep “down” time to a minimum.

As schedule-keeper, the A.D. (or the 2<sup>nd</sup> A.D. if one is available) is also in charge of seeing that the actors are ready. Often the crew is working so hard on the set that everyone forgets about the actors. The cast wants and needs to know what’s happening, and when they need to be ready. By keeping them informed, they can be a more efficient part of the production as well. Letting them know when they’re 10 minutes out from shooting is really important—it lets them prepare. Let them know immediately about any delays or changes in the schedule, or if you’re running ahead of schedule. It may seem like hand-holding, but you want them to be constantly aware of what’s happening, so they can do their jobs as best as possible. If you don’t keep in constant contact with them, then the actors can understandably get upset because they don’t know what’s going on! Then they feel separated from what’s happening, and will often feel rushed when you need them, because they didn’t know that was coming up. And that leads to poor performances. Keep them informed.

The A.D. performs similar functions for the crew, as well. Oftentimes decisions are made that change the schedule or other procedures, and it’s the A.D.’s job to get that info to everyone. Once, as an A.D., I got chewed out by a lazy sound guy because he showed up and didn’t get his equipment ready immediately, and wasn’t ready when I needed him to be. He told me it was my job as A.D. to let him know what he should be doing. I told him, rather forcefully, that he should *always* be ready to go instead of sitting around doing nothing. The truth is, he was right. He was lazy, but he was right – it’s the A.D.’s job to keep on top of what everyone needs to be doing, letting them know as far ahead as possible when they’ll be needed, and to keep them informed.

One tried and true method of keeping everyone informed and motivated is to let people know where they are in the schedule. Friendly reminders about how long a particular setup is taking can help the director and DP prioritize what they’re doing in context of the whole shooting day.

Depending on the size of the production, this flow of communication to the cast and crew is often best performed by a 2<sup>nd</sup> Asst Director, who reports to the 1<sup>st</sup> Asst Director.

Finally, the A.D. also is in charge of “calling the roll” on the set. This doesn’t mean that they take attendance; it means that at the beginning of a take, they call out “the roll” of what’s to happen before filming begins. Having a standard, repeated way to start filming makes every take start out efficiently, and can even be calming in its repetition. It starts every take, which might otherwise be chaotic, in a very organized way, and also makes certain that everyone knows what’s happening and is ready for the take.

While there’s no hard and fast rule for calling roll, the standard order (along with who says what and some notes) is:

**1<sup>st</sup> Asst Dir:**           **“Waiting on…”**

This isn’t always necessary, but you use this to put pressure on whoever’s holding up the set. “Waiting on Camera,” “Waiting on Makeup,” etc.

**1<sup>st</sup> Asst Dir**           **“Last Looks!”**

All Production Design, Costume, and Make-up people take their “last looks.” 2<sup>nd</sup> Asst Camera (or the “Slate Op”) gets the slate into the camera’s view

**1<sup>st</sup> Asst Dir**           **“This is a Take! Quiet on the Set!”**

**1<sup>st</sup> Asst Dir**           **“Roll Sound”**

Sound mixer starts rolling. Once rolling...

*Sound Mixer*           **“Sound Speed”**

*2<sup>nd</sup> Asst Camera*      **“Scene 26 Apple, take 1”**

**1<sup>st</sup> Asst Dir**           **“Camera”**

Camera starts rolling. Once rolling...

*Camera Op*           **“Camera Speed” or “Rolling”**

**1<sup>st</sup> Asst Dir**           **“Mark it”**

2<sup>nd</sup> Asst Camera snaps the slate and holds it for a quick moment to make sure the camera records it. Then quietly gets out of the shot.

*Director*           **“Action”**

Sometimes the A.D. also says “Action,” depending on the preference of the Director. There may even be a “Background Action” before “Action” to get the scene set with the extras before the main cast begins.