

Assistant Directing a Student Film: Everything You Need to Know



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Taking on the role of Assistant Director (AD) is one of the best ways to learn the ropes of student filmmaking. Your duties are challenging but straightforward. If you're proactive and strike a good dynamic with your director, you'll have opportunities to weigh in creatively and see all elements of production.

Here are your responsibilities, divided into pre shoot and on-set.

PRE SHOOT:

Call sheet

Purpose: to tell people where and when they need to be on set.

Find templates online.

Ideally sent out by Thursday before weekend shoot (even if you can't send until Friday, send an email Thursday with a heads up of any crucial info, like call time and location).

In your email, remind people to look for their individual call time - not everyone needs to be there at the earliest time!

Schedule

Ideally sent out by Thursday before weekend shoot.

Director of Photography & Director make shot list and AD's convert that shot list to a shooting schedule. If possible, attend storyboarding with DP & Director, though they can also send you the shotlist.

Print at least 5 shoot schedules. People who will need a copy on set: Director, Assistant Directors, Directors of Photography, Script Supervisors.

Factors to consider when converting shot list → shoot schedule

Actors' timing: actors *need* to be at shoot. Check their schedules first.

Type of shot: (ex: wide shots first then move into closeups)

Continuity elements: if there's a spill for example, wait to do it last if possible to not waste time on cleanup earlier in shoot.

Outside v. inside: (Try to minimize moving. Try to allocate all shots at a certain location to one day instead of jumping around.)

Time: Be mindful of time of day, especially for outdoor shoots. Don't schedule 3pm shoots. The light will be changing.

ON SET:

Have a gameplan before going on set

If you have a 1st and 2nd AD, delegate beforehand. You can decide that the 1st AD delegates to the 2nd, or that the 1st AD handles schedule and timing and the 2nd AD is responsible for organizing actors and crew, etc.

Don't forget to delegate tasks to production assistants. Their help can be great when your hands are full. (ex: PA can do slate)

Responsibilities: the General and the Mom

The director is responsible for the creative vision. You are responsible for providing the director the brainspace to do that by directing all things on set outside of the creative part.

Keep the Director and Director of Photography on track. Sometimes, you'll need to shout. (*Can we wrap this shot up in the next 5 minutes?*) Sometimes you suggest changes to the schedule. Nothing is set in stone. (*Let's move on to 5.2 and 5.3. We can save 5.1 for tomorrow, since we don't need Lisa for that one*).

Corralling actors: (ex: reminding actors they have 10 mins before they are in shot)

Slate: (phone or physical) Bring markers!

The General: Sometimes you have to make hard decisions, yell at people, keep them focussed (not in an aggressive way, but it's loud on set!).

The mom: You also have the opportunity to interact more flexibly with the crew than the director does (ex: check in with how people are feeling).

A FEW MORE TIPS:

***Tip #1* Set a weekly AD meeting**

(if there are two of you) to handle pre shoot responsibilities. This way you can collaborate, create structure, and keep each other accountable.

***Tip #2* Print physical copies of the schedules**

for on set. People will likely write on them.

***Tip #3* Be proactive!**

Ask the director if you can shadow her. Some directors really appreciate having a right hand person for second opinions. Shadowing is a great way to learn about the filmmaking process.

***Tip #4* Communicate!**

Talk with director first and foremost. This may be their first time directing. Tell them what their AD will do for them. They may not know! And communicate with your fellow AD. A lot!

***Tip #5* Reach out to your executive producer**

(if you have one). They are often more than happy to give guidance.

Have fun and best of luck!