



Who's who on the set: below-the-line (part 1)

Jobs description in the
directing, camera & light
departments

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Introduction

You're looking to start a career in film production. But where do you start? How do you know if your dream job is working in the Directing department or Camera department? What is the difference between an Assistant-Director and a Camera Assistant? Or a Gaffer and a Director of Photography?

This guide focuses on the key jobs which make the Directing, Camera and Lighting departments the cornerstone of any film production. It also explains the various bridges which exist between the different jobs, and how going from student to an assistant can lead you to your career as Head of Department (HOD) in your chosen area of expertise.



The Head of Department (known as HOD) is in charge of his/her department and builds

his/her team in agreement with the producer and line producer.

Choosing your path

A career in the film industry brings with it many rewards. But it takes hard work and discipline, as well as the understanding that there is no set routine. You're often working on several projects and need to keep a look out for the next one. Building relationships is key, as is gaining experience from lower level positions. Work is never steady nor guaranteed. But you do it for the love and excitement of a life in the film industry.

The wonderful aspect of a career on set is that no two productions are ever the same and there's always some new development, with advancements in equipment and technology that makes your job even more exciting. There's

always something new to learn. You get to work with different people, produce new stories, even travel to new locations. But it also means long hours and serious commitment. Things don't often go smoothly and you have to be prepared for anything, from equipment issues or that dreaded plane flying overhead.



Production jobs are defined as Above-the-line and Below-the-line. The terms refers to the budget where a line was drawn to separate key players on a film production. Those who are Above-the-line are involved in the creative direction of the project and have negotiated their pay prior to principal shooting. Below-the-line comprises the crew needed to complete the production once principal shooting begins.

The Timeframes of Film Production:

Pre-Production (Prep) refers to the period prior to the shoot. It begins when the budget

has been finalised and shooting dates are locked. At this stage, teams are built and preparation for the shoot begins. Depending on the size of the production, the prep phase can last between 8 weeks to a few months.

Production refers to the actual shooting period. It lasts between 4 weeks to a few months, depending on the complexity of the movie.

Post-Production refers to the period which follows completion of the shoot. It includes all the post-production elements (editing, VFX, grading, music score, sound mix, etc) as well as the admin tasks, such as closing the accounts, archiving files, etc.

Below-the-line roles: directing department

First Assistant Director (1st AD)

The 1st AD is considered the Director's right hand person and is a lucrative career on its own. On smaller productions, there is just one Assistant Director or AD that takes on all the roles of the various Assistant Directors, while on larger productions, there would be a 2nd and even 3rd AD. The 2nd AD will assist the 1st AD on any tasks and will often create the daily call sheets. The 3rd AD will assist both the 1st and 2nd and often supervise PAs. The larger the production, the greater the number of tasks and details. Every AD is a vital cog in a smooth-running machine.

While the Director oversees the production on a higher level, the 1st AD has many roles

during both pre- and during production. In pre-production, the 1st AD will break down the shots from the script and create a storyboard, then consult with the Director to determine shot order and scheduling. This not only involves just the creative side of the job, but also any budgetary constraints.

During production, the 1st AD runs the set each day, ensuring the proper cast and crew are scheduled, extras are placed, scenes are set up properly (equipment, props, etc.), and making sure shooting stays on schedule. The 1st AD is the liaison between cast and crew and the Director.



Film school with a Director's track will gain you valuable experience working with equipment and managing a set. Practical experience as a Production Assistant, 2nd or 3rd AD will be an important step in learning the job.

Key Qualities:

- **Ability to multitask** - There will be a lot of details from both the director and the cast and crew coming at you fast. It's important nothing falls through the cracks.
- **Diplomacy** - As these various personalities include a lot of egos, handling them will take patience.
- **Authoritativeness** - The Director will entrust you to make decisions on your own. This requires a command and respect of the set.
- **Business skills** - An important part of the job is to consider budget when scheduling and hiring. Financial acumen is key.
- **Problem solver** - Be prepared as problems will arise. Being able to prioritize and delegate to get them resolved as quickly as possible is vital.

Script Supervisor

Often called a “department of one,” this role is technically part of the directing team as they work with the director to ensure the script’s continuity. This means keeping track of the script as to what has been shot and what has deviated from the script.

The Script Supervisor also makes notes on all shots regarding props and actors’ blocking positions matched from scene to scene. Also, the Script Supervisor provides scene and take numbers for the production slate, as well as working with the Still Photographer to ensure visual continuity.



There’s really no formal training for this position, so film school is not a prerequisite. Reading scripts and working as a PA is the best education for this job.

Key Qualities:

- **Attention to detail** - It goes without saying that the Script Supervisor is the gatekeeper in ensuring every planned shot is completed and continuity between shots is maintained.
- **Note-taking ability** - Once a shot is “in the can” there’s no going back. Keeping accurate notes and doing so quickly is important.
- **Organization** - As a department of one, you are responsible for all tasks to complete the job. There’s no fallback, so be organized.
- **Ability to the big picture** - This goes to the continuity aspect of the job. As scenes are shot out of order, making sure something doesn’t come back to bite the production later is up to you.
- **Thick skin** - The Script Supervisor can often be considered “a pain” but it’s for the greater good. Don’t let it get to you.

Also part of the directing team:

| Stunt Coordinator

Many productions require stunts. The coordinator works with the director to plan and arrange the stunts and stunt personnel.

Camera and lighting

Director of Photography (DP)

Also known as Cinematographer, this person heads the camera and lighting departments and works with the director to light and frame the scenes. Without question, this is one of the most important jobs on a film set and one must be able to have a good working relationship with the director, as the DP is his/her closest artistic partner. The DP will help the director to convert the script into images.

The DP must interpret and convey to the crew the Director's vision and, in a sense, be his or her eyes of all the visual qualities of the shoot. They must capture the emotional aspect of the story through the lens, while maintaining the Director's perspective. This involves a great deal of preparation, first with the Director and then with the DP's crew.

The DP must also work with the Location Manager to ensure the viability of all locations with regards to camera and lighting setup, as well as the Script Supervisor to ensure all scenes and shots have been captured. Ultimately, the DP is the all-important cog in the wheel that is film production.



Film school is a great way to start building a resume as you will gain hands-on experience with equipment and have access to many student productions. Of course, working on set as a Grip in both the camera and lighting

departments will mean learning first hand from professionals in the industry.

Key Qualities:

- **Visual acumen** - Capturing the vision of the story within the frame of the camera is the number one quality needed in this job.
- **Aptitude for equipment** - Understanding and a desire to continue to learn new camera and lighting equipment will lead to a long, successful career.
- **Leadership** - You'll be leading a crew that, depending on the size of the production, can be quite large. Commanding respect of the crew is vital.
- **Collaborative** - Not only do you need to work with your own crew, but the relationship you create with the director will determine the success of the production.
- **Patience** - Working long hours and maintaining attention to detail are key factors in your career advancement.

Gaffer

This is the colloquial name for Chief Lighting Technician, which of course emphasizes the importance of the job. The Gaffer heads the electrical department and works directly with the DP to set up lighting for every shot. This includes maintaining generators, cables, lights and gels to achieve certain effects.

While any ultimate decisions on how shots are lit are made by the DP, the Gaffer implements and oversees the actual physical mechanics of setting up the lighting properly. They will direct their staff with individual tasks to make the process move smoothly and efficiently.

As such, their primary assistant is called Best Boy. Grips, such as the Key Grip , Best Boy Grip and Dolly Grip assist in the physical elements of the electric equipment, such as cables and dolly tracks.



The word Gaffer comes from the British word that means “old man” and is ascribed to foremen and supervisors. It’s used in the film industry from the use of a “gaff” to move overhead lighting equipment in British Theatre. This was adapted by the film industry, dubbing the position as a “Gaffer.”



And the name Best Boy? It is believed that back in the old days of film, when a gaffer or grip wasn’t available, the call went out for help from the “best boy” available.



Certainly going to film school will train you on key aspects of the job, but vocational learning in electric equipment is also important. On-set experience in the lighting crew as a grip or Best Boy is the best way to advance to this position.

Key Qualities:

- **Technical expertise of lighting and electrical equipment** - Without question,

knowing and respecting electric and lighting equipment is a must.

- **Leadership** - You will have a crew that needs your guidance. There are cautions to this job and you need to gain your personnel's trust and respect.
- **A good ear** - as much as you need leadership, you need to be able to listen and understand what the director and DP want from a shot.
- **Aesthetic decision-making under stress** - Unforeseen things will happen on the set that will affect a shot. Knowing how a setup affects the aesthetics of a scene and making quick adjustments is vital.
- **Efficiency** - A great deal of time is spent between shots setting up lighting and electric equipment. Being efficient minimizes costly delays.

Other Directing department jobs:

| Camera Operator

This person reports to the DP and physically operates the camera under their direction. On smaller productions, the DP would also be the Camera Operator.

| First Assistant Camera (1st AC)

also known as the Focus Puller, who ensures the camera remains in focus during shooting. They also will help choose the right lens for the shot. On larger productions, the 1st AC will have a Camera Production Assistant to help with small details.

| Second Assistant Camera (2nd AC)

also known as the Clapper Loader, the 2nd AC operates the clapperboard at the start of each take and logs the film stock - when received, used and sent for processing.

Depending on the format of the shoot, film or video, there will be either a Loader or a Digital Imaging Technician (DIT). The loader is responsible for loading the new film from the canisters to the camera and vice versa for the completed film. On digital shoots the DIT is responsible for physically maintaining the digital camera and managing the digital data.

Conclusion

What an audience sees on screen is the result of a great deal of collaboration behind the scenes. Depending on the size of the production, there are lots of on-set jobs. Whether you go to film school or jump right into production, starting as an assistant in any of these departments is a way to gain valuable experience and move up to the job of your dreams. Today's Key Grip is tomorrow's Director of Photography.



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