

The Duties of an Assistant Director

A film set functions like a human body. Everyone is like a tiny piece of this body, all functioning towards forward movement and life. Every piece, no matter how big or small, has a crucial part, and without the most rudimentary part or piece, the body will fail. This body must be controlled by a brain. The brain, as you may know, in a human body does many things and is split off into multiple sections so it can fulfill its duty to bring movement and life to the body as efficiently as possible. The part of the brain that we will be talking about today is what's called "The Assistant Director".

The assistant director (AD) is one of the two highest technical roles "below the line". Like the parietal lobe of the brain, the assistant director has the responsibility of attention and body awareness. AD's must keep the crew focused and take care of their overall general health on set. Now, let's step back from the analogy for a moment and really get into what an AD does.

AD's, like I said before, are one of the two highest below the line positions you can have, the other being the unit production manager. Now you're probably asking yourself "Below the line? What's that?". This simply is the term for the technical side of filming, "above the line" would be the creative side. The role of the AD is often confused with the assistant to the director, with good reason, they sound the same. However, The two roles are polar opposite.

The assistant to the director is basically an intern, getting coffee, learnin the set, keeping track of the directors schedule, that sort of thing. The AD is responsible for the following: tracking daily progress against the filming production schedule, checking cast and crew, arranging logistics, preparing daily call sheets, maintaining order on set, and looking out for the overall well being of the cast and crew. As you can see, these two roles are in fact very different. The AD's position is also not done by one person, often times the role is split up into four or so sub positions: first, second, third, and fourth AD.

Yes, the names aren't the most creative but they all have important roles to play. Let's talk about each role one by one shall we? The first is, obviously, the first AD. The first AD has the most authoritative role of the four. The first AD works directly with the director and is responsible for running the floor on the film set. This means he or she is responsible for everything that happens on set; keeping the schedule strict and on track, communicating to the entire crew whats going on, and maintain general safety for the cast and crew. Calling the roll is the most important job that the first AD has. Calling the roll simply put, is when the first AD will say a phrase like "Action!" to communicate to the whole cast and crew what is happening in the most efficient way possible. The first AD also supervises the second AD.

The second AD creates daily call sheets in cooperation with the production coordinator, and is the backstage manager, which includes liaising with actors, getting people through makeup and wardrobe, overseeing AD trainees, and making sure the extras are in the right spot for the shot. The second AD takes care of these tasks for the first AD because one, they are a lot of work, and two, they require a lot of running around. It would be very difficult for the first AD to do his job and be everywhere the second AD has to be.

The third AD is with the first AD most of the time, and is there to communicate with the second AD about who to move from “base camp” to the set. Base camp is where the dressing room, makeup, and other trailers are. The third AD also is responsible for organizing crowd scenes and keeping track of production assistants. The second AD and the third AD often have the same duties and sometimes there is no real clear distinction between the two. The titles are different, however, and some view positions such as this subjectively.

Last but not least, is the fourth AD. Now, the fourth AD is not always called the fourth AD. Often, the fourth AD is called the key PA (key production assistant). The third AD and the fourth AD are not interchangeable due to the lack of experience of the fourth AD. This is why fourth ADs are also called key PAs. A PA or production assistant is the lowest job in rank and pay you can have on a film set. The fourth AD or key PA has basically two different jobs. The first, is catching the overload of the second AD on a big set or if there is no third AD to help the second AD. These duties would be things like the taking over the daily call sheet. The second, is to help the first and the third AD organize large crowd scenes and other stuff that the two can't get to.

While we're all aware of the importance and necessity of the entire crew, there is no doubt that without the assistant director, the show simply would not go on. From the time shooting begins to the final product, the assistant director is there to guide the production forward. A truly remarkable and successful AD is someone who exudes confidence, displays exquisite leadership skills, and above all is organized and motivating. Even though the assistant director is below the line, they are the ones who make the final product happen.