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The Production Assistant's Pocket Handbook

Because nobody has time to tell you
what you need to know

By Caleb Clark



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Dedicated to all kick-ass P.A.s

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INTRODUCTION

Think of it, to try and make movie. What a crazy idea! This handbook is designed to give new Production Assistants (P.A.s) an edge in the insane world of movie making.

Some of the advice you are about to read may sound a bit crazy, but keep in mind what is supposed to be accomplished in the production of a movie. Think of hundreds of people working double shift days, six days a week, for several months to gather enough content for editors to take yet more months to cut down to less than a couple of hours of finished content!

Like a painting, a movie is a single piece of creative work, but while a painter holds his brush with one hand, the director of a movie must sit back and paint his picture with a hundred-plus people holding the brush. Passionate artists, dedicated craftsmen and money-minded business people are thrown together into a pressure cooker of profit motives and rushed production! It's a crazy idea from the get go. But it's also a wonderful idea and after 100 years or so of trying, it seems to be the only way to make most kinds of big movies, not to mention big computer games.

Over time, trial, and error, the incredibly complicated nature of this kind of creative teamwork has resulted in new, and sometimes unusual, ways of getting work done. There are new words to learn, and strange ways of working together that can seem like a cross

between a military campaign and group art therapy. The rarified nature of movie production makes it very hard for people to teach newcomers how things are done. There just isn't time or money for apprenticeships, or practice. You've got to learn on the job, and literally, on your feet.

When I was a P.A. I remembered thinking that someone should take some notes so new P.A.s could get up to speed quicker with fewer stupid questions and mistakes. To be sure, many things can't be taught from a book, but some things can.

I took notes as I worked on several big location shoots, some low budget movies, and commercials. I used the notes as a foundation for this handbook and let friends in the business read drafts to make sure I wasn't out of my mind. I've also updated the handbook every few years with feedback from people in the trenches.

The creative process is wondrous for me, especially with more than one person. Imagine trying to tell a story in a huge group! If you're a P.A. that's what you are helping to do, and storytelling is not trivial work. Storytelling is a vital part of how we humans learn. It has been around for a long, long time, and we will always need good stories to learn by. So good luck out there! I hope you help tell good stories and have a lot of fun.

THE BASIC IDEA IN LOTS OF WORDS

P.A.s do everything nobody else wants to do. It is an entry-level job, in other words – You're in the proverbial mailroom, digging ditches, washing dishes, making copies, and entering data. So don't kid yourself, you're at the bottom, baby! But the good thing about the bottom is that there's only one way to go from there: up!

Like all entry-level jobs, the object of being a P.A. is to work yourself out of the job by making yourself too valuable to be kept in the entry-level position. Being a P.A. is also a weird test with only one question; Are you willing to become the best P.A. you can, even though you know that you won't be a P.A. for long? The logic behind this is that the people above you have paid their dues and proved their passion, (to themselves, not just to others) and they expect you to do the same.

The other side of the coin is that a good P.A. is very valuable because there is *nobody* else to do the job. Therefore, take pride in all the little demeaning tasks you will have to do. Take the job *seriously*. Be honored and happy to get coffee, and remember who likes three sugars. If you are an exceptional P.A., you will get promoted very quickly, and the coffee will come to you.

Work like you are at the top. You are an indispensable part of the production team. If you ever want to

become a rabble-rouser and prove this to yourself, just get all the P.A.s on a production to suddenly disappear and watch as everybody panics! Or maybe just think about it, rather than doing it, so you do get promoted.

But promoted where? The production department is the logical answer, the place where production coordinators, assistant directors, producers and executive producers hang out. However, being a P.A. is a great way to see what all the different people do on a film crew and find your place. To do this, keep your eyes open for what specialty you were made for by monitoring what you do well naturally, and want to do more of.

Movie production teams are made of (mostly) specialists; this is where the most jobs are. As a friend of mine once said, find out what you love to do, get really, really good at it, and work with others who've done the same.

THE BASIC IDEA IN FOUR WORDS

These letters conveniently spell “**S.T.A.R.**” Fitting for the business. I know it's cheesy, but so are some of my favorite movies.

SWIFT: Traversing space or performing movements in a brief period of time. Acting with readiness.

Prompt. In other words, boogie. Run to your car. If someone asks for a 3/8-inch bolt, say "No problem," and leave at a brisk gallop. Don't ask what it's for, or what it is, or where to get it. Just leave and find a Grip to help you.

TACTFUL: A quick or intuitive appreciation of what is fit, proper, or right. Skill in avoiding what would offend or disturb. Considerate. Basically knowing when to keep your mouth shut and smile, and when to add a bit of valuable input. When to be where you're needed, and when to leave when you're in the way.

AWARE: Conscious. Cognizant. Alert and informed. Always pay close attention to how you are affecting others. Read the call sheets so you know what is supposed to be happening. When things get hectic, take a deep breath and don't panic.

RESOURCEFUL: Capacity for finding or adapting. Skill or ingenuity in meeting any situation. Versatile, and devious. Try to think of solutions to problems, even if they are not yours. Carry a Swiss Army knife, have a good hat, backup power and a rain slicker.

SET ETIQUETTE 101

Never.
Sit.
Down.

P.A.s can't sit down because your job is to be ready to help anyone and everyone do anything, all the time. In the rare times you are unoccupied, you should stand, alert, with good posture, hands out of pockets, looking for something to do.

If you're not immortal, and you have to rest now and then, make sure to do it in a quiet out-of-the-way place that's within earshot/radio, but not eyeshot, of those who will call you.

Pick a time when you know that the chances of your being called are the slimmest, then check your radio if you have one, and relax. Someone will call you within 98 seconds; it never fails. So it's best to learn how to stand up and look alert while you're really relaxing.

SET ETIQUETTE 102

Communication

Communication

Communication

Good communication skills are the most powerful skill in the world of production. Learning how to use language in-person, on the phone, and online is a foundation skill for becoming a great P.A. In general, *be aware of how you sound, be careful, and don't assume.*

Good communication is hard. Bad is easy. It's easy to irritate other people when you are stressed out, go beyond your jurisdiction, or assume someone might not have understood you.

You will have to communicate in order to do all manner of strange tasks. Once I was suddenly told to quickly find a two-foot slab of fresh flank steak. "Well, that's interesting," I thought. "What in blue blazes *is* a flank steak!?" It turns out that flank steak is a piece of meat that is cut so that it is great for simulating muscle tissue, which makes it perfect for simulating flesh being stabbed in a horror movie. I called a local supermarket, worked my way politely and politically through to the meat counter, and told my story well. The butcher hooked me up with a huge flank steak that was wrapped and priced by the time I got there.

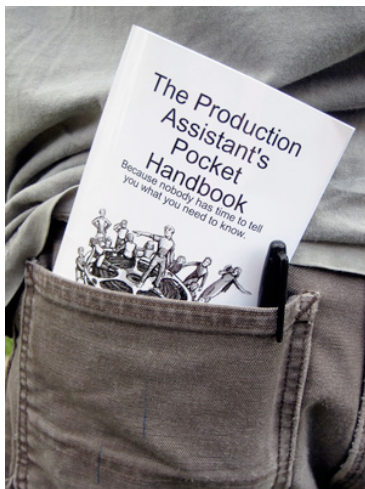
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Thanks! Caleb (calebjc@well.com)

About The Author



The Author Video Blogging in 2008

I badgered my way onto my first Hollywood location shoot in Maine in 1989 while on summer break from college. I continued work in the summers as a P.A., on location shoots for both big and small budget movies, TV shows and commercials. After college I moved to Hollywood and continued working as a P.A. until I realized that I liked to write about it more than do it. The Web appeared and I went to San Francisco and worked in educational Web media production while also freelancing for magazines like *Wired*. In 1999 I completed a Masters in Educational Technology at San Diego State University, and in 2008 an MPS from the Interactive Telecommunications Program (ITP) at NYU's Tisch School of the Arts. What can I say, I like to teach and learn! I hope this handbook helps you learn how to be a kick-ass P.A.

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