



# DECIPHERING THE FILM SLATE (PART 2): PICKUPS, PLATES, MOS, AND MORE

The film slate hasn't existed for so many years -- adapting to the ever-changing filmmaking landscape -- without developing nuances and best practices for a few non-conventional

situations. So I want to help you navigate these grey areas.

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 CAMERA ASSISTING



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Now that you generally know [what to write on a film slate](#), it's time to get specific.

The film slate hasn't existed for so many years — adapting to the [ever-changing filmmaking landscape](#) — without developing nuances and [best practices](#) for a few non-conventional situations.

For instance, how do you slate if a shot has no sound? Should you still clap the sticks? Or what if you're recording sound in camera but want to get some wild lines or room tone — how should you slate those clips? Do reshoots slate the same way? Or pickups?

These are all [questions that are important to answer](#) *before* you encounter them. Slating well is all about consistency and if you try to tackle these issues as they crop up, you risk compromising the steady foundation you've built for the editor.

So I want to help you navigate these grey areas.

The 5 different slating scenarios covered below may not arise on every shot, but they're common enough that you need to know how to handle them.

## 1. MOS

M.O.S. means to shoot without sound being recorded.

It's said that the acronym stands for “Mit Out Sound,” “Minus Optical Strip,” “Minus Optical Sound,” or “Motor Only Sync,” but [no one really knows](#) and, frankly, the origin of the term is unimportant.

What is important is how you handle the slate to let an editor know there is no sound attached to a

shot. There are several different methods to do this and it's up to you to pick whichever one you prefer — all are fairly effective.

## Closed Sticks Method



The easiest way to let an editor know there is no sound on a shot is to keep the sticks shut and place a big, fat “MOS” tag on top of the sticks. The sticks are one of the first things editors glance at to sync sound, so they will read “MOS” and know there is no sound to be synced.

This is my preferred method [because it is fast](#) and easy to do with one hand.

## Closed Sticks Covered by Fingers



A subtle variation of the closed sticks method, this one involves placing your fingers over where the sticks meet. This shows the editor that there is no “clap” to be seen and thus no sound.

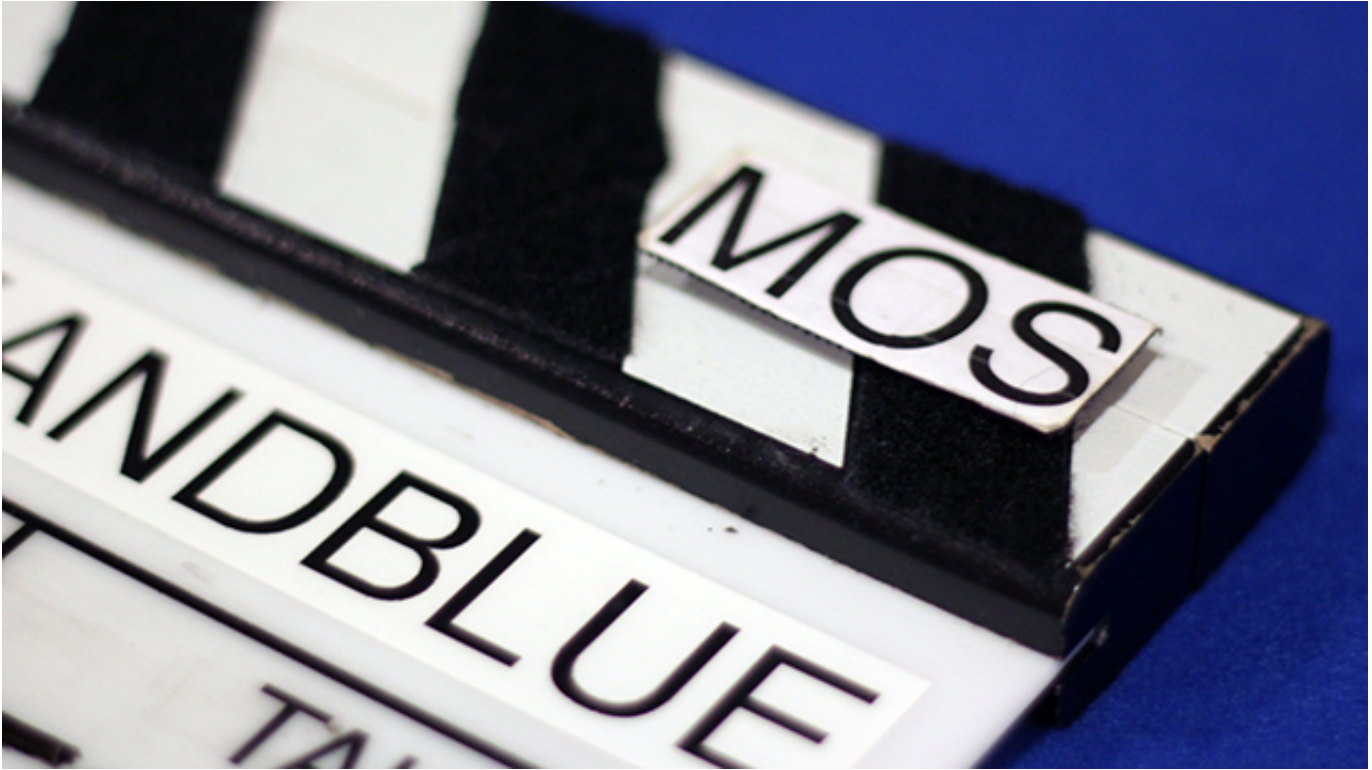
## Fingers in the Clap





This is a popular method among many camera assistants: hold the slate with your fingers between the sticks. This lets the editor know you're definitely not clapping them ([unless you're a masochist](#)) and is widely-known as communicating an "MOS" shot.

## The MOS Tag



One thing you see in all the example pictures above is the big, fat “MOS” tag on the slate.

**It’s important when slating MOS to signify it visually since there is no sound.**

That may mean you circle the “MOS” letters engraved on some slates or it may mean you use a tag. I prefer the tag because it’s easier to spot and you can place it wherever you want on the slate.

If you’re interested in making a tag like mine, you can pick up a [P-Touch labelmaker](#) or [follow this DIY tutorial I wrote](#) about making filter tags. Once you’ve made the tag, you put velcro on your sticks (preferably in the black areas) and put velcro on the tag as well.

If you don’t care to have a fancy-smancy printed tag or you’re in a bit of a pinch, just [grab some camera tape](#) and write “MOS” in Sharpie and slap it on top of those sticks. It’s just as effective.

Finally, as a quick MOS tip, [don’t hang too long in front of the camera](#). Editors only need one frame of your slate and since you aren’t calling out anything, you don’t need to dilly-dally in front of the lens.

## 2. Pickups and Series

A pickup is when you shoot only a specific part of a scene.

Directors usually choose to do pickups because they only need a certain line or to catch the tail-end of a lengthy dialogue. Whatever the reason, slating for a pickup shot is fairly easy: next to the Take number, write “P/U.”



Signifying this on the slate lets the editor know that particular take was a pickup and not to panic if the rest of the scene is “missing” from the shot.

Alternatively, a director may choose to do a “Series,” where the camera continues to roll as the scene or a moment plays out over and over again. Usually a series is shot for short one-liners or a particular action in which the director wants a lot of options.

In the same vein as pickups, you would write “SER” or “Series” next to the Take number. So the slate



would read Take 1 SER. This lets the editor know that there are several “mini-takes” within the timeframe of the larger take.



Pickups and series are fairly common, especially on sets where [time is extremely valuable](#), because they allow directors to focus their efforts on specific parts of a shot they deem most important.

Luckily, in terms of slating, they simply require the forethought to write a few extra letters.

### 3. Reshoots

A shot qualifies as a reshoot whenever you have to go back to a scene that was previously thought to be in the can. That can be on the same day, the same week, or several months down the road.

Reshoots are either a necessary evil to [repair broken scenes](#) or a welcome opportunity to [fix problems](#) that weren't detected in production.



The problem reshoots pose to slating is that you are technically shooting the same scene as before — so do you continue slating at the last remaining take? That would make sense, but is impractical if you revisit a scene several weeks or months later when you might not *know* what the last take of each shot was.

The much more elegant solution is to put an “R” in front of whatever shots are being re-done. So say you are reshooting Scene 27A, it now becomes Scene R27A:



Continue that naming pattern for all the shots you have planned.

And if there are reshoots of the reshoots? I've never had it happen before, but I would double-up on the R's so our example would turn into Scene RR27A. (That's just my solution, however, so I advise you to check with the script supervisor on the best way to proceed.)

## 4. Visual Effects Plates

In this article, [The Measurements You'll Want for Visual FX Shots](#), I wrote:

*Armed with the right kind of shot, a visual effects artist is limited only by their imagination (and maybe the budget, too). They depend on us crew on set to capture excellent footage so they can overlay their spectacular effects.*

*As a camera assistant, you don't have to worry about how the shots are rendered, but you do have to do everything you can to help the visual effects artists get it right. And that starts by providing them with a little bit of information.*

Visual Effects plates are a crucial piece of that puzzle for a lot of shots. And slating them so they can be easily found in post-production helps clear up a potential bottleneck of disorganization.

For those who may not have much experience with visual effects, a plate is a “clean” version of a shot without actors or motion. This allows visual effects artists to pull out background elements for rotoscoping, keying, or other blending effects. They're not always needed or used, but they are great to shoot “just in case” and help immensely with certain shots.

In terms of slating, working with plates can be very simple or very complicated depending on the planned scope of the plates.

If you're shooting only a few plates — and you're shooting them at the same time you film the scene — it's good enough to write the Scene number and then “Plate” under the Take column like so:



However, on more FX intensive shoots, it's more prudent to come up with a better naming schema. This is best decided between you, the Visual FX supervisor (or whoever is embodying a similar role), and the script supervisor. It may look something like this slate from *The Avengers*:





As long as those in post-production know what the slating means and it can be traced back to [the paperwork done on set](#) by the camera department and script supervisor, that's all that matters.

## 5. Room Tone

Ah, room tone: [the most annoying](#), yet important, 30 seconds (or longer) you'll experience on a set.

Room tone is the [natural sound of a room](#) as heard through a microphone. Usually sound mixers record it at the end of each scene, stopping the set for a brief moment as they capture a room's auditory "essence."

But as I mentioned earlier in the article, how do you slate this if you're recording sound in-camera? To capture the tone, you have to roll the camera, but a clip without a slate can easily be discarded as an accidental roll — taking with it the valuable room tone.

I treat slating room tone much in the same way as I treat slating visual effects shots: I keep the scene number the same, but write “TONE” or “ROOM TONE” in the Take section of the slate.



An alternative is to just flip the slate over (to the all-white back) and write something like, “Interior Kitchen Room Tone.”



Most of the time this won't be an issue for you, however, as sound mixers traditionally record their sound separately and won't need the camera running to roll on room tone. In the event that they do though, you should be prepared to slate tone and have the clip labeled.

## No Matter Your Approach, Be Consistent

The hard part about slating has never been figuring out [what to write on it for the most basic shots](#), but how to handle it when the shots become more nuanced as is the case with reshoots, pickups, MOS, plates, and room tone.

In the end, it doesn't matter *how* you approach these scenarios so much as everybody knows the way you're doing it and that it's kept consistent for the entirety of the shoot. The methods I outline above are [how I've been trained](#) to slate these 5 types of scenarios, but they are in no way gospel.

And, in fact, you may work with a script supervisor who wants to take another approach. No problem!



As we'll see in the final part of this series — [12 Real-World Examples of Film Slates](#) — not every shoot slates the same and there are many ways to cram information on the clapperboard.

**Read the rest of the posts in this Deciphering the Film Slate series:**

- [Deciphering the Film Slate Part 1: What to Write on a Clapperboard](#)
- [Deciphering the Film Slate Part 3: Twelve Examples of a Completed Slate](#)

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Editor and founder of The Black and Blue. Freelance camera assistant. French fry fanatic.  
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## DECIPHERING THE FILM SLATE (PART 3): TWELVE EXAMPLES OF A COMPLETED SLATE

I find looking at other slates to be extremely helpful. When I was first starting out as a 2nd AC, it was useful to see how others applied the

principles I had learned about slating. So let's take a look at twelve completed clapperboards.

### DECIPHERING THE FILM SLATE (PART 1): WHAT TO WRITE ON A CLAPPERBOARD

# FIVE TIPS FOR HOLDING THE SLATE PROPERLY WHEN MARKING A SHOT

## BE A FASTER AC #2: CUT DOWN ON WHAT YOU SAY WHEN SLATING

## PUT DOWN YOUR SLATE AND QUICKLY WALK AWAY

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dubiousachiever · 11 months ago

As a side note to visual effects shots, most script supervisors will generally add the prefix 'V' to the slate for all shots that include vfx. This is helpful for data management reasons in post

2 ^ | ▾ Reply Share ›



**Evan** Editor → dubiousachiever · 11 months ago

Can you expand on how it helps in post? I think I have an idea, but it'd also be helpful for others to read about how it's useful.

^ | ▾ Reply Share ›

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alex · 11 months ago

Hey Evan,

Quick off topic question. In your experience, what's the cadence/vocal cue for when you need camera movement before the actors start in on the scene? Say a tilt down from the beautiful sky onto your actors sitting at a table. You don't want to yell action because the actors will start the scene before the camera gets to them. Usually I solve this with good communication between the DP and Director, but is there a standard you've seen?

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**Evan** Editor → alex · 11 months ago

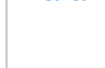
Depends. There are several avenues you can take.

- You can just have two actions and let each group know which action is their's
- You can specify the actions. So, "Action camera!" then "Action talent!"
- You can use different words. "Camera tilt!" then "Action!"

It depends, mostly, I've found, on the actors in a scene. Some actors are pros and know now to start the scene until the camera has found them. Most amateur actors, however, get too caught up in the word "action," so directors will intentionally save it only when they want talent to begin acting.

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**questions** · 8 days ago

Is it regular practice to call an MOS slate? In other words, what is the proper procedure for slating music videos?

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**Evan** Editor → questions · 6 days ago

For an MOS slate, you don't have to call it verbally. If anything, sound may record to get room tone or atmosphere, but they'll likely slate it themselves.

Basically, just flash the slate up long enough for the camera to get a frame or two of it and step away.

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**questions** → Evan · 4 days ago

Thank you!!

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