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.

You want to be a slate superstar? A champion of the clapperboard? A maestro of the marker?

If you want to be a slating pro, reading about it is only going to take you so far. What will help you learn the most is doing it — putting marker to board and stepping in front of the lens.

But right now, you're not on a shoot. And you want to be prepared ahead of time to dodge mistakes.

So the next best thing is to look at examples of real-world film slates and discuss what's written on them, why they're written that way, and you'll have a better idea of not just the theory of slating, but the practicalities of it.

Twelve Completed Clapperboards

Most of the photos below I found on Flickr. I have no affiliation to the productions, except where I mention it, and haven't the slightest inkling of any backstory with the pictures.

Yet, because the rules of slating are fairly universal, I can infer a lot of what these slates mean, why they were written the way they were, and what kind of shoot they're taken from. In some cases, it's obvious. In other cases, not so much.

I'll do my best to explain to you what's effective about these slates, what's ill-advised, and you'll end up with a good idea of how to fill out a slate properly.

So let's dive in:

1. Tree of Life

photo credit: Jai Mansson

Yes this is a slate from *that* "Tree of Life" movie.

And it might look a little funny to you because something's missing — the sticks.

That's because this is an insert slate. It's designed specifically for MOS shots when you aren't expecting to record sound. It's usually smaller (think pocket sized) so that the camera assistant (AC) can hold it in front of the lens from beside the camera.

You'll notice there are several extra things written on this slate. For starters, the roll is "XA3," likely indicating this is some type of B-Roll or VFX shot. That theory is compounded by the "200 fps" written in the bottom right. Under Take, there is "SER" written to indicate this was a series of shots — again making me think it was for B-Roll where you want to roll for awhile to give an editor options.

Finally, at the bottom right, you can see certain words crossed out indicating that those things are ***not*** true for this shot.

2. Argo

cc photo credit: xcorex

Here's another Hollywood slate from Argo, the recent film directed by Ben Affleck.

As you can see, the film's logo, as well as the director and cinematographer's names, are printed on the slate. Most well-funded productions will pay the extra couple hundred dollars to get custom made slates. It adds a nice level of polish to the filmmaking process. (And as an AC, it takes away the work of keeping those permanent names kept crisp.)

You may also notice on this slate the **huge** numbers — Roll A219 and Scene 337B. That's not uncommon for a feature length Hollywood production, especially since this is the "A" camera slate.

There is nothing entirely unique about this slate except for the pre-printed production logo, director names, and the production it's attached to. Otherwise, it's just a standard smart slate.

3. Below the Beltway

This frame-grab is from a feature film I worked on. Those arms you see holding it out belong to yours truly. While I wasn't 2nd AC on this shoot, I did fill in on occasion for slating duties while the 2nd AC tended to DIT work.

That 2nd AC had a no-frills approach to the slate. He only wrote on it what was needed at the time or what was requested. As a result, you'll see it's very bare-bones — roll, scene, take, names and date.

It helps that we shot this feature on the RED One which embeds a lot of valuable meta-data into the clips themselves. This eliminates some (but not all) items that you may choose to put on a slate.

4. Little Bruno

photo credit: jozecuervo

Let's get to the point: this slate looks like a ransom note.

But I wanted to show it to you because the camera assistant is using an alternative method to writing roll, scene, and take numbers with marker. What they've done is written numbers 1 – 9 on small pieces of tape that they most likely store on the back of the slate or on a tagboard. Then, instead of writing each number, they use the individual pieces of tape to form the numbers.

If you choose to do that, I recommend you try and execute it with more cleanliness.

With all that said, the information on it — how it is written — is still accurate and emphasizes the point that slating can sometimes be messy as long as the information is still accessible in post-production.

5. The Event

photo credit: Jai Mansson

Here's your standard smart slate that's used P-Touch labels for a super-clean look. The one thing I want to point out is the "C" marker right under the "Roll" section to designate this slate for the "C" camera.

Using velcro on a slate is a great way to attach permanent labels (like an MOS tag).

If you have an astute eye, you may have noticed that the "C" label is actually listed under "FPS" while the "Cam" label on the right is empty — why is that? Well, those extra sections are *sort of* preference. And nobody is going to mistake a "C" as an actual framerate. Plus, it makes sense to have the camera's letter listed under the "Roll."

6. Orpheus

photo credit: Orpheus 2011

This tiny slate — likely another insert slate — quickly shows how not to label the "Director" and "Camera" sections. Where there should be a name, this person has written the model of the camera on the slate and misinterpreted what those sections are for.

7. Friday Night & Saturday Morning

photo credit: Caspy2003

The clapperboard here is formatted a bit differently than most of the ones above — the names are up top, while the date stays at the bottom.

What I want to speak to is all the information added on by the camera assistant using tape. For instance, in the bottom right, they have added "NIGHT" and "INT" to the slate, even though there wasn't provided space for it. You can also see where the AC taped "Roll #" in the far left section of the middle of the slate. My guess is this slate was designed for a different method of slating and there was something like "Tape" or "Scene" engraved instead of Roll.

The lesson here? Don't be afraid to make the slate your own and list the information your production needs most.

8. Lysol

photo credit: Evan Long

Just like the Lysol you use to wipe your furniture, this clapper is clean as a whistle. The text is big, bold, and — most importantly — easy to read. Don't underestimate the value of that.

In the bottom right, you can see certain areas of the slate blacked out using tape. This is a common method to designate properties of the scene like DAY/NIGHT or INT/EXT. Basically, whatever is readable is true. In this case, we have a DAY, INT., MOS shot being filmed at 40 frames-per-second.

The last thing I want to point out is how the camera assistant has formatted the date in the bottom right. They have (smartly) printed out just the month and year (likely using a P-Touch) and then used a Sharpie to fill in each day instead of filling out the entire date each day. Will it save you hours of time? No. But why not be efficient when you can afford to?

9. You May Not Kiss the Bride

photo credit: Jai Mansson

Two things you need to takeaway from this production's clapperboard:

1. Do not write this messy!

It can be difficult to read for editors. Remember that sometimes they are logging clips with a tiny screen in their editing program. Big, bold, clear numbers are important.

In shots with low-light or where the slate is far away, having skinny writing, multiple colors, and a mess of black on the slate — like this one — isn't helpful.

Although, in his defense, the photographer says, "My slates don't usually look this bad; everything was so wet that none of my pens would write on the wet surface of the slate."

2. 180 Degrees is referring to the shutter angle.

Is shutter angle/speed something you should always put on a slate? No. Not unless you're constantly changing it, in which case, it would be useful to differentiate the shots. But shutter speed/angle is something camera reports usually cover and, thus, the slate wouldn't have to.

10. I-House Skits

photo credit: Jeff Hitchcock

Who said slates have to be made of wood and board?

With iPads and iPhones, it's not unheard of for productions to use digital software slates (though I'm not the biggest fan). The most popular slating app is MovieSlate, which is what is pictured here, and it is fairly clever substitute for a real, physical slate.

And, I would venture to guess, it allows you to customize certain sections — because having a "Skit" part of the slate (see the top left) is not orthodox. Nor is having a smiley face under "CAM."

Still, if this iPad slate works for Mr. Millar, then it's done its job.

11. Mrs. Mullberry

photo credit: Kathryn McGrane

When your slate ends up looking like the one in this photo, it's time for you to add some fresh markers to your toolkit.

As I mentioned above, messy writing is counter-productive for slating. It makes the editor's job logging the clips difficult and, frankly, it comes across as unprofessional. I've heard horror stories of 2nd AC's getting reamed out by their 1st's after sloppily filling out the slate.

And I can see why. You need to take pride in your work and, seeing as the clapperboard is one of the few major responsibilities of the AC that ends up on screen, you need to get it right. Plus, it doesn't take much extra time to write clean, clear lettering.

12. Kissing Strangers

photo credit: Â°Florian

In stark contrast to the previous slate, I like "Kissing Strangers" because it is no-frills. That is the kind

of slate I like to keep and one that I urge 2nd AC's who work for me to keep.

While adding extra info to the slate is sometimes necessary, it's not always needed or useful. I'd rather record specific details or notes into the camera reports which get passed off to the editor.

My philosophy is to keep only what you need to see on the slate on there. Most of the time, all that "EXT/INT" stuff isn't really useful. At some point, you're just collecting that data for the sake of having a slate "filled out," but it's just as easy to cover over those sections with white tape.

Bonus: Old School Hollywood Slates

While searching through Flickr, I found several "old school" movie slates that I *had* to share with you.

Most of the movies are classics or cult-favorites. Seeing those films with these slates — dirty, beat up and weathered — is a nice reminder that even our favorite films go through some brutal productions.

I'd rather not taint the pictures with my commentary, so just take a look at them and enjoy!

photo credit: Dex1138

photo credit: GAME.co.uk

photo credit: Phil Guest

photo credit: University of Michigan

Sealing Your Slate and Completing the Clapperboard

Learning what to write on a film slate isn't hard. After all, labels are engraved onto it. As long as you're consistent, it's fairly straightforward (as we discovered in Part 1 of this slating series).

But things get tricky when you account for the nuances of different film productions. In Part 2 of

Deciphering the Film Slate, for instance, we talked about how you may have some shots without sound, some reshoots, pickups, or a VFX plate.

Now we've put everything together.

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. Nowadays, with several productions under my belt, I still find it interesting and helpful when I discover a new trick or method.

So don't be afraid to look at these pictures for awhile and study them and, as always, share your questions in the comments below.

Finally, thank you for reading through this series! You can find the other parts here:

- Deciphering the Film Slate Part 1: What to Write on the Clapperboard
- Deciphering the Film Slate Part 2: Pickups, Plates, MOS, and More

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Evan Luzi 🐦 g+ 📌 🔗

Editor and founder of The Black and Blue. Freelance camera assistant. French fry fanatic. Learn more about Evan here.

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DECIPHERING THE FILM SLATE

(PART 1): WHAT TO WRITE ON A CLAPPERBOARD

All of the advantages of the slate in post-production start in the camera department with the camera assistants who step in front of the lens with the clapperboard. And it's crucial you fill it out properly to prevent bottlenecks in post-production. Once you grasp what each section means, it makes it easier to leverage the slate into the useful cinematic tool that it is.

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

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Avatar   **Teddy Smith, SOC** · 11 months ago

You should see the digital slate I used for 3D training at Sony. I think the slate was custom made by 3ality as it synced up to the 3d rig automatically and relayed valuable 3d specific information. It was a work of art. I see if I can find a picture of it.

3 ∧ | ∨   Reply   Share ›

Evan Editor → Teddy Smith, SOC · 11 months ago

That'd be cool to see!

∧ | ∨   Reply   Share ›

Avatar   **Keith** · 11 months ago

Is using serif'd letters and numbers pretty standard? I see it occasionally, especially with bigger productions (like that Argo slate). Just wondering how handwriting comes into play. Obviously, it should be clear and legible (and all-caps).

1 ∧ | ∨   Reply   Share ›

Evan Editor → Keith · 11 months ago

It's a preference thing. As long as it is clear and legible, it's up to you.

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Avatar   **Keith** · 11 months ago

Also, I hope Jai Mansson wasn't chewed out for spelling Malick's name wrong...

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Evan Editor → Keith · 11 months ago

If I had to guess, he wasn't. Seems like he was on a 2nd Unit or VFX unit shoot. Malick probably had no idea.

∧ | ∨   Reply   Share ›

Avatar   **Victor Lazaro** · 11 months ago

One thing I'd love to see here as well is the slating procedures (how long before rolling, how long after, when to speak it and how), and also the shot specific (tail sticks, etc...)
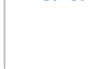
2 ∧ | ∨   Reply   Share ›

Evan Editor → Victor Lazaro · 11 months ago

There's a lot of that peppered around the site and within other posts. Here's a good start: http://www.theblackandblue.com...

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Avatar   **Dana Kupper** · 11 months ago

I used a blank slate and made my own template on my computer, printed on clear acetate, sprayed some adhesive on the plastic, stuck the acetate to the slate, and then a little more spray adhesive, then a clear report cover, trim, and voila! Actually, really easy, quick and very neat looking. I really liked that I could put my own categories on there, frame rate, etc. I also

had a template for the TC slate, but printed that on stiffer paper, covered it with the plastic report cover, and in the morning all I would have to do is tape it to the slate with some camera tape on the sides. (More work on the trimming, I always liked to trim away the portion over the timecode numbers so there wasn't a reflection.)

Another trick that is worth passing along is for slating in the rain, we used a 'Doodle Pro', so the numbers weren't washed away. It's very difficult to use a regular slate in a rainstorm.

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Evan Editor → Dana Kupper · 11 months ago

That's pretty cool Dana. Do you have any pictures?

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Dana Kupper → Evan · 11 months ago

Doubtful! Sorry, but I could dig up the templates?

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Dana Kupper → Evan · 11 months ago

I have a picture, and I also have the templates, but don't know how to send them to you?

∧ | ∨   Reply   Share ›

Evan Editor → Dana Kupper · 10 months ago

You could upload them to imgur.com and post the link in the comments here :) or you can just email them to me personally via the contact form on this site

∧ | ∨   Reply   Share ›

Joe Trimmer → Evan · 11 months ago

Found it hahaha....http://ecx.images-amazon.com/images/I...

1 ∧ | ∨   Reply   Share ›

Evan Editor → Joe Trimmer · 10 months ago

Don't underestimate the Doodle PRO

∧ | ∨   Reply   Share ›

Avatar **Steven Cook** · 11 months ago

The Friday Night and Saturday Morning slate is from a Little City Pictures short film, AC George Eustice. No idea who Capsy2003 is or where she got the pic from. Thank you for using our

board as an example however. S.Cook D.P

1 ∧ | ∨   Reply   Share ›

Evan Editor → Steven Cook · 10 months ago

Hey cool! Thanks for stopping by Steven and for the mark of approval :)

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Alex Herter · 11 months ago

Hey Evan, Thanks for the guides. I was wondering if you had any good recommendations/website resources for smart slating/time code jamming.

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Evan Editor → Alex Herter · 10 months ago

Hey Alex -- thanks! Not sure what you're looking for. How to jam time code?

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Mav · 10 months ago

What I didn't see on these posts (maybe in the comments though) was turning the board vertical for the slap, after a normal horizontal calling of the shot, when using very long lenses just incase slight movements cause you to move the actual clap out of frame. Thus not having to initiate the dreaded second sticks. Although better to use the smaller insert slate in this case. Also, why no Endboard procedure? Very informative nonetheless my man!

∧ | ∨   Reply   Share ›

Evan Editor → Mav · 10 months ago

Hey Mav -- Thanks! The reason those scenarios weren't included is because this series was more about what to write on the slate rather than how to physically slate. How to slate (stand in front of the camera, do tailslates, etc.) is a whole series unto its own that I'm not quite ready to do yet!

∧ | ∨   Reply   Share ›

DIYFilmSchool.net · 10 months ago

Wow! What a comprehensive post. I've never seen anyone take this much time and put this much detail into distinguishing not only the kinds of slates that are available and what they do, but give practical tips as to what to include and not include. Nice work.

∧ | ∨   Reply   Share ›

Evan Editor → DIYFilmSchool.net · 10 months ago

Thanks! It's a lot of info about something very specific, but I find most editors and ACs are very specific about their slates. And with something like logging clips, that isn't a

bad thing.

∧ | ∨   Reply   Share ›

DIYFilmSchool.net → Evan · 10 months ago

Absolutely! The most recent feature I worked on had some slate issues (one in a volume of issues) and at least a few editors and the director himself couldn't find some of the footage because of that.

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Avatar   Alex · 10 months ago

I know the guys who made Orpheus (it's far from professional - it's a school production)

Here's the BTS - https://vimeo.com/26133904

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Evan Editor → Alex · 10 months ago

Cool! Thanks for sharing that. I hope you/they weren't annoyed about my assessment. For a school production, it's good they were slating at all.

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Avatar   **M.A.** · 10 months ago

question regarding slate.

How do you put the names of the director and the DP ?
the complete first name and last name or.... just first letter of their first names and their last names ?
I was told once just the first letter then last name, but sometime people could have same last names at times and I found it more useful to have their complete names.

It also happened to me when I was doing 2nd AC (not just one time), the first AC and the scripty told me different thing about the take number and scene name. Technically, the first AC is my boss, but the scripty is the one who's in charge passing those infos to the editor and slates info are for the editor. Whom should I follow ? (and I know this sounds stupid qs).

About IPad slate, I haven't tried it yet, but seems like too complicated.
As second AC I know how to work with regular slates and still having your 2 full working hands and not worry too much about the ipad got broken.
I think Ipad slates are more fragile than smart slates and any regular slates.
But this is just me saying who haven't tried Ipad slate.

∧ | ∨   Reply   Share ›

Avatar   Elliot Sutherland   10 months ago

Elliot Sutherland • 10 months ago

I recently ACed for a RED EPIC vs. BMCC camera test. I've ACed for multi-camera shows before but in this case the DP wanted so much info on the slate... F-stop, ISO, shutter angle for BMCC, shutter speed for EPIC, fps, RC, color temp, proxy... for two cameras. Things got sort of overwhelming. Below is a pic of the back of my slate after the shoot ended.

Have you every done anything like this? How did you keep things organized?

Also, is there a standard way to slate for A and B cam if there is only one 2nd AC?

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