



# 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.

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 EVAN LUZI

 CAMERA ASSISTING



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Slating: it's [a staple of filmmaking](#), [it's an art](#), and it requires [a certain amount of subtlety](#).

It's also one of the most recognizable duties a [2nd Assistant Camera \(AC\)](#) is expected to fulfill.

There's a reason why a 2nd AC is also known as the "clapper/loader."

When we think about slating, we tend to focus on the clapping aspect of it or the protocol that leads up to the slamming of the sticks. But just as important as hitting the sticks is [getting the correct information](#) on the front of the slateboard — things like scene, take, roll, and the production's name.

If the information on the slate is incorrect, it could anger an editor (which you don't want) or it could be mistaken as correct and cause confusion in post-production (which you definitely don't want).

So before you ever [step in front of the camera to slate](#), you need know how to fill it out properly.

## The Sections of the Slate and What They Mean



In a sense, the slate is like the form they hand you when you visit the doctor's office. There are areas for your name, for your insurance, and checklists for you to provide additional information. All of the information you supply serves to help people (usually an editor) have a better understanding of what the scene is about — just like you help the doctor understand your level of health.

The most common pieces of information conveyed on the slate are:

- **Production:** The name or title of the movie
- **Timecode:** Digital timecode synced to the audio
- **Roll:** The roll that you're currently shooting on
- **Scene:** The scene number/shot you're shooting
- **Take:** The current take of the shot
- **Director:** Name of the director of the production

- **Camera:** Name of the director of photography/cinematographer of the production
- **Date:** The month, day, and year that you're shooting

All of these sections of the slate can be further categorized into two main types of info:

1. **Production Specific:** This includes the name of the movie, the name of the director, cinematographer, and producer, as well as the date or shooting day.
2. **Shot Specific:** The roll, scene, and take are the most obvious shot-specific pieces of information, but this also encompasses further details like MOS, Day/Nite, and Int/Ext which we'll talk about later.

When you fill out a slate for the first time, you'll have to fill out both production-specific and shot-specific information. But as you continue on a production, you'll be making changes almost exclusively to shot-specific areas on the clapperboard.

So you have a full comprehension of what each of these sections mean, let's explore them further.

*Note: Because I work in the United States, the slating system I will be referencing is the American system. There are several alternatives from other countries that I am not an expert on. If you are, please share their differences in the comments!*

# Production



In this area you want to write the name or the title of the production you're working on. Most of the time this is obvious, especially in narrative work.

But it doesn't have to be a real title — it can be a working title, a nickname title, a shortened title, or a descriptive title – as long as there is *some name* for the production. There are times where you will work on projects that don't have a name, such as commercials or industrial shoots. In these instances, simply use a descriptive title.

For instance, I was working as part of a [behind-the-scenes crew](#) for a commercial shoot (odd, I know) and had to put something on the slate. [The commercial was for the Virginia Lottery](#) so I wrote “BTS VA Lottery” and that was that.

If you aren't sure what to write, it's always a safe bet to [ask the director of photography](#) (DP) or a

producer what their preference is.

Don't stress too much over this, but do take it seriously. It's ill-advised to change the name of the production on the slate *after* shooting has begun or you'll lose the consistency of the name which can cause confusion later in post-production.

## Timecode

On some slates — called “Smart Slates” — there may be a digital screen that displays a shot's timecode. The slate is synced to a timecode generator or the audio recorder via a cable and then is maintained by the slate itself via battery power.

Not all slates feature timecode and, in many cases, it isn't necessary (it can be useful, though).

*An example of a  
timecode slate*



As a camera assistant, it will be your job to keep the timecode in sync, but it's generally something you sync a few times a day and [check periodically](#) to make sure it hasn't drifted.

Because you don't have to change it as often as other things on the slate (and since you technically don't “write” it on there), I don't want to spend too much time getting into the details of syncing timecode — I just wanted to list it here for posterity.

## Roll / Tape



The part of the slate that says “Roll” is a bit complicated within the context of [film versus digital](#).

[In the film world](#), the roll number is fairly literal. Everytime a new magazine is loaded into the camera — filled with a fresh roll of film — that is a new roll.

[In the digital world](#), the roll number is a bit more abstract and is usually determined by the preference of the camera assistant. [I always treat each new memory card on a digital shoot as a new magazine](#) and thus a new roll. So each time a new memory card is reformatted, it’s considered a new roll.

In the tape world, a new tape would be reason to increment a new roll number. In fact, some video slates have “Tape” engraved on them in place of “Roll.”

In all cases, the roll number is preceded by a letter which designates which camera the roll is for. On

multi-camera shoots, cameras are assigned letters starting with “A” for the main camera, “B” for the second, and so on and so forth. The reason you specify which roll corresponds to which camera is to help organize shots in post-production, but also because “B” or “C” cameras aren’t used on every shot and so the roll numbers between the cameras can be wildly different.

Even if you’re shooting with one camera, it’s good practice to include the letter as it eliminates any potential confusion. (Though it’s implied that a roll number without a letter is for the “A” camera).

As an example, if you were shooting on Roll 23 on the “A” camera, you would write this: A023 or A23. If you were on a multi-camera shoot, but using one slate for all cameras, you would list each camera with its letter and roll number (i.e. A23, B15, C05). If you were on a multi-cam shoot, but have one slate for each camera, you list only your camera’s letter and roll number.

## Scene / Slate





In the American style of slating, scene designation is actually [a combination of a number and a letter](#). The number correlates to the scene you are shooting while the letter correlates to the shot you're on.

So, when starting a brand new scene, you simply write just the scene number and it stands on it's own (i.e. 24). Whenever a new shot is setup — usually [when the camera changes position](#) or [changes lenses](#) — you add a letter (i.e. 24A).

You continuously add letters for as many shots as there are in a scene. So if you shoot a master, two closeups, and a medium shot, by the end of the scene you will have reached the letter “C”

The slating would go like this:

1. **Master** – 24

2. **Closeup One** – 24A
3. **Closeup Two** – 24B
4. **Medium** – 24C

What happens if you go all the way through the alphabet? You double-up on the letters (i.e. 24 AD).

As a quick warning: I see a lot of [2nd AC's make the mistake](#) of assuming that just because the camera hasn't changed positions, that they shouldn't change the slate. But the slate changes whenever you move onto a new shot regardless if the camera itself moves. Sometimes the changes are subtle: [the camera pushes into a subject](#) instead of from them; or a lens change punches in for [a tighter closeup](#); or the camera pans a bit to [focus on a different subject](#) in a scene.

**Remember that whenever the shot itself changes, you increment a letter.**

There will undoubtedly be grey areas with this. At any point you are unsure, it is best to defer to the script supervisor. As 2nd AC, you must work closely with the script supervisor to make sure their notes line-up with what is being slated. Between you and them, you figure out a solution.

# Take



Each time a shot is repeated and the camera cuts, it is considered a “Take.”

Do not re-slate another take if the camera doesn’t cut because, technically, it is still on the same take. The exception would be if you’re told to re-slate it while keeping the camera rolling.

But more often than not, I guarantee the director will just shout, “Don’t cut, just do it again!”

Do not re-slate in these instances because [you will only waste time and film](#) (if you’re shooting on it) by doing so. If the director wants to make the editor’s job harder by having multiple tries on one take, that’s their prerogative.

(Though you could lightly suggest shooting a “series” or “pickups” — which we’ll discuss later — when appropriate.)

Takes always start at 1, count upwards, and are tied only to a particular shot.

Let me reiterate that: Takes are tied to particular shots, **not** to scenes. So whenever there is a new shot — like when 24A becomes 24B — you should start with Take 1 again.

As a final note, **even blown takes** that are cut early **because of mistakes** count. So if an actor comes into frame and messes up their first line, that counts as a take. Don't ever re-slate the same take for any reason! It's much easier to just move on up to the next number.

## Names, Dates, and Miscellaneous Information



The names on the slate are, to be honest, [somewhat out of vanity](#). It isn't really necessary to list the director and the cinematographer, but out of tradition, respect, and a small amount of useful reference, it is done that way.

**The only piece of advice about this is *absolutely do not misspell either of those names*.**

If you misspell those names, the minute you throw the slate into frame and the director sees their name butchered on the monitor, they aren't going to be very happy.

And [neither will your department](#) for making them look bad.

It is not out of poor taste to ask a director or cinematographer how they prefer their name on the slate if they go by a nickname or shortened version. Some will want a professional name on there, while others will have no preference.

To make sure you spell the name correctly, [use a call sheet](#) when writing it and double check with somebody who has worked with the director or knows them that the name is correct.

For the love of God, [if you misspell those names](#), you aren't going to have a fun shoot.

In terms of the date, my only advice is to [use permanent marker on the slate](#), or [use a piece of tape](#) so you aren't constantly having to rewrite it throughout the whole day. Just make sure you remember to update it every morning. People are sticklers about detail on the slate – trust me.

The rest of the information you see listed on the slate (things like MOS, NITE, DAY, etc.) are specific designations that help to further categorize a scene, but aren't always necessary.

You can use this section of the slate, if you wish, but it is not required or mandatory.

The only important piece of the info is MOS of which there are better and more prudent ways of notifying an editor of. This is something we'll talk about in much further detail in the next post of this three-part series.

# Next Up: 5 Unique Slating Scenarios

This post is the first in a three-part series I'm writing about deciphering the film slate. The next two dive even further into what goes on the slate and what it all means.

To outsiders looking in, [slating may seem like a film-set stereotype](#), but there's good reasons it takes place: it helps streamline the editorial workflow and sync audio in post.

But 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.

Being able to successfully fill out a film slate means understanding what's on it in the first place. Once you grasp what each section means, it makes it easier to leverage the slate into the useful cinematic tool that it is.

**So continue reading this series to further explore what to write on a clapperboard:**

- [Deciphering the Film Slate Part 2: Pickups, Plates, MOS, and More](#)
- [Deciphering the Film Slate Part 3: Twelve Examples of a Completed Slate](#)

*I'd love to hear your thoughts on filling out the slate. Specifically, it'd be useful to hear from readers who use a different system than the American system I described here. Share in the comments please!*

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**Evan Luzi** [Twitter](#) [g+](#) [Pinterest](#) [Link](#)

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 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.

DECIPHERING THE FILM SLATE (PART 3): TWELVE EXAMPLES OF A COMPLETED SLATE

TOOKIT DIY: HOW TO BUILD A TAG BOARD FOR A SLATE/CLAPPERBOARD

FIVE TIPS FOR HOLDING THE SLATE PROPERLY WHEN MARKING A SHOT

PUT DOWN YOUR SLATE AND QUICKLY WALK AWAY

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**Mike** · 11 months ago

I was working on the feature White House Down in DC two weeks ago as a camera trainee. We were shooting plate shots and were split into a couple crews so I was actually working as a 2nd AC. The AC gave me the tip to skip over the letter "I" when labeling takes on the slate since it can look like the number "1" (obviously if the scene has the letter "I" in it, you need to use it). I don't know if that was the AC's personal preference, or if that's industry standard

Reply Share &gt;

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

Hey Mike! That's pretty industry standard. You skip the letters "I" "O" "Y" and "Z" for their tendency to look like numbers themselves. I talk about it more in this post:

<http://www.theblackandblue.com...>

Pretty cool you were shooting in DC -- right in my backyard!

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**Norman** → Evan · 11 months ago

I get that I = 1, O = 0, and Z = 2, but what does Y end up looking like?

Reply Share &gt;

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

I misspoke sort of -- Y isn't included because it can end up looking like "X" too easily if you write it hastily. You can include it if you want though - it's mostly preference

Reply Share &gt;

**Mike** → Evan · 11 months ago

Yeah man...I've seen you posting that you're in the DC area. I am too....live in Vienna

Reply Share &gt;

**Mike** → Evan · 11 months ago

I'm surprised I've never run into you on a production before haha



^ | v Reply Share ›



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

Haha it's pretty weird isn't it? Although I end up doing a lot of my work in Richmond or out of state.

^ | v Reply Share ›



**Roland Jacobs** · 11 months ago

I recently had a 13 day shoot with a skeleton crew. It was only the director, a producer, myself and 3 actresses. We each had multiple roles to fulfill. The director also operated the camera, the producer did the sound recording and I was clapper, script supervisor, animal handler and PA.

In those 13 days I slated almost every shot except when I needed to do some PA work like holding an actress off screen so she wouldn't fall etc and we used a different method to number the scene's. We don't use the letters for each new shot. We do it like: "Scene 23.1" and go up in numbers for each new shot. We use a letter to distinct between different shot framings on the same camera position.

Example:

Scene 23.1 = wide shot of scene (position 1)

Scene 23.2 = medium close of actor #1 (position 2)

Scene 23.2A = Close up of actor #1 (position 2)

Scene 23.2B = Close up of hands actor #1 (position 2)

Scene 23.3 = medium close of actor #2 (position 3)

etc etc etc

This was in The Netherlands btw.

Fun fact: we use the "roll" part of the slate to draw a little image of the shot that's being shot

^^

^ | v Reply Share ›



**Evan** Editor → Roland Jacobs · 11 months ago

Interesting method. So if you change a lens, but dont move the camera, that increments a letter?

^ | v Reply Share ›



Vince · 11 months ago

Quick question regarding the date,

If you end up shooting into the next day Ex: Call is on Saturday, and wrap is on Sunday, do you change the date once it's Sunday or leave it on Saturday given that was the day you started shooting on?

^ | v Reply Share ›



AR → Vince · 11 months ago

Leave it on the date you started shooting on. Its more so that the editor knows which shooting day he's looking at when he's referencing the camera log and looking up specific footage.

^ | v Reply Share ›



Vince → AR · 11 months ago

Thanks!

^ | v Reply Share ›



Brian → Vince · 11 months ago

You should really check with the scripty or AD though to make sure you are doing the same thing that the scripty is doing.

^ | v Reply Share ›



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

As AR said above, I would leave it on the date you started shooting on. It would get confusing, for instance, if you shot until 1 AM. For the last hour, do you change the date?

But, to echo what Brian says below, you might want to check with the script supervisor just in case.

^ | v Reply Share ›

Avatar

Stuart · 11 months ago

I'm not a big expert myself, but from what I've seen (in the UK and Finland) the European system tends to use separate scene, 'slate' and take numbers. This isn't set in stone, though; I've seen people in Finland also use the American system. Clapperboards made in the UK have an extra field which the Clapper Loader must fill in: Slate. See an example here:

<http://clapperboard.net/colour...> So four different angles for the same scene may be written up like this:

Scene: 24

Slate: 76

Take: 1

Scene: 24

Slate: 77

Take: 1

Scene: 24

Slate: 78

Take: 1

---

[see more](#)

^ | v Reply Share ›



**Ralph** → Stuart · 11 months ago

Yeah, we do the same in the Netherlands. It also enables the opportunity to have a slate 111 or 222 etc celebrations :D

^ | v Reply Share ›



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

In the US, we have a celebration on Roll 100. It's called the "Champagne Roll." Once you hit it, everyone stops on set, gets a glass of champagne, and there's a toast to the production.

^ | v Reply Share ›



**Ralph** → Evan · 8 months ago

hehe that's what i ment with celebrations. Doesn't matter if is 8 in the morning.. champagne!

1 ^ | v Reply Share ›



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

You're awesome Stuart! Thanks for sharing such detailed info on this. It's a great, clear overview of the UK style of slating.

^ | v Reply Share ›

Avatar

**Darryl** · 11 months ago

I've only really used what I believe to be the UK slating which is scene, slate and take so

scene: 5

slate:1

take: 1

though the oddest way I've ever had to slate was when a production had each shot numbered on the shot list and had to link up the slate with the shot list so it would be

scene: 10

shot: 40

take: 1

though the shots would go up in order though out the scenes and wouldn't start back at 1 with each new scene. that was the oddest way I've ever had to slate with

^ | v Reply Share ›



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

Thanks for sharing Darryl. I've done something similar to what you described. Often on commercial shoots, you're working with agencies that may not have a lot of production experience, so they want their shots slated like they numbered them on the storyboard - which is cool if everyone is on the same page.

It's really all about making sure whoever has to deal with the mountain of footage in post-production is able to wade through it without getting confused.

^ | v Reply Share ›

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**Joel Phillips** · 11 months ago

Ptouch labelers are a nice touch, that way all the permanent info is standard and not subject to sloppy hand writing..also I prefer chisel tip dry erase markers. You can get more artistic with your handwriting that way.

1 ^ | v Reply Share ›



**Evan** Editor → Joel Phillips · 11 months ago

I held out for so long on getting a P-Touch, but am so happy I finally did. In terms of the markers, I like to use the Chisel tip to get even fatter letters, but I know others who add serifs and other fanciness to their writing. Sometimes a 2nd AC just has a bit of extra time and one slate will look particularly awesome!

^ | v Reply Share ›

Avatar

**Jeremy Widen** · 11 months ago

Great post Evan. As someone who does a lot of scripty work, I can't emphasize how important communication between the 2nd and Script Sup is; both for the camera logs and the script logs. Thanks.

1 ^ | v Reply Share ›



**Evan** Editor → Jeremy Widen · 11 months ago

Thanks Jeremy! I agreed. The 2nd and the Script Supervisor have to be best buds at

times. If there's no communication there, the paperwork can end up being useless.

^ | v Reply Share ›

Avatar

Jordan · 11 months ago

I've seen many camera teams load up tape tags with the roll number and stick them to the side of the camera so they can rip off the tag with the current roll number, stick it on the card when it comes out of the camera, and bring it to the DIT, who will know exactly what roll it is and that it hasn't been downloaded.

We just moved that stack of tape tags to the slate's Roll section, made the tags a little bigger, and now, it's impossible to ever forget to change that roll number when you do a dump, which seems to be an easy thing to forget when you're rushing back to set after delivering a card.

^ | v Reply Share ›



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

Yeah this is a great practice to partake in. It's something I briefly talk about in this post: <http://www.theblackandblue.com...>

Generally, I make mag/roll tags and put them on the back of the slate. The current roll tag goes on the camera body itself so when the 1st AC reloads, they rip it off, wrap it around the card, and then asks me for a new one.

1 ^ | v Reply Share ›

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**Ty Stone** · 11 months ago

Great post. You had me at film slate. I love what you do for people and keep up the hard work.

1 ^ | v Reply Share ›



**Evan** Editor → Ty Stone · 11 months ago

Thanks Ty! "You had me at film slate" -- that's what the ladies tell me all the time ;)

1 ^ | v Reply Share ›

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**MiguelFranco** · 11 months ago

Our clapping method (Portugal) is something like:

Scene: 1 2/4

in which 1 stands for the scene number, 2 for the shot (distinguish between framings, lens changes, etc) and 4 is the take. Any other indication is written by a person taking notes (that come in very handy, when editing, or even on set if you forget about somethin) that is usually the continuist. I think this comes from the french cinema school, because a lot of terms are derived from there as well (ex: amorsee).

We've also used the ipad as a slate and its very good. Makes the job real simple.

I'm also looking forward to see the BlackMagic CinemaCamera's capability of recording the metadata into the files and how it will work with the slating.

^ | v Reply Share ›



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

That's really interesting, Miguel. I've never heard of that style of slating so thanks for sharing. It's different, but makes total sense.

I too am excited to see what effect BMCC will have on people using metadata. At some point, there needs to be a slate that communicates with the camera and shares the same data.

^ | v Reply Share ›

Avatar



**Edward Smith** · 11 months ago

As 1stAD on smaller productions, I find myself slating quite a bit.

I tend to write 12.2A, which represents SCENE:12, SHOT 2, and the 'A' would represent the version of that specific take.

Find that pretty useful.

I got laughed at on a shoot once, because the director and DOP kept throwing new shots at me and the slate ended up reading something like '23.11AA'. But at the end of the day I was the one doing my job properly, and the editor thanked me afterward.

^ | v Reply Share ›



**Evan** Editor → Edward Smith · 11 months ago

Hey as long as the system works! But does that mean you ditched take numbers? Instead replacing them with the letters?

^ | v Reply Share ›

Avatar



**Mike** · 11 months ago

Actually the slate should be synced to the timecode of the audio recorder, not the camera. Timecode slate is most useful when the camera doesn't have any timecode features (DSLR's, film cameras etc...)

1 ^ | v Reply Share ›



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

Good point, Mike. I changed the post to reflect that. Thanks!

1 ^ | v Reply Share ›

Avatar

**slateboy83** · 11 months ago

Hey Evan, great post as usual! I currently work in Spain and Italy and this is our method:

if you're shooting the first take of the shot number 4 of the scene 24 you would write in the "scene" section 24.4 and 1 in the "take" section. Whenever the director or the DoP or whoever can do it introduces a change in the shot without changing the camera position nor the lens we add a letter (i.e. 24.4A).

In Spain, after shooting the 1.1 take 1 the director shall buy a beer for the whole crew, but they are doing it less and less lately, it's because of the economical crisis, they say ;-)

Cheers

^ | v Reply Share ›

Avatar

**lucastukas** · 11 months ago

thanks for your work!

^ | v Reply Share ›

Avatar

**Einar Karl Gunnarsson** · 4 months ago

Hi there does anyone have any good tips on cleaning really dirty slates? I had some scots tape on it and then a mate of mine took it to the beach and now I've put in the dishwasher multiple times yet nothing works..

^ | v Reply Share ›

**DaveRossAC** → **Einar Karl Gunnarsson** · 2 months ago

I use Goo Gone or an equivalent product for tacky material like tape residue. Let soak in for a minute, then wipe off with a rag or paper towel.

Evan's mentioned the trick of using a dry erase marker to erase old writing or permanent marker. Just scribble a dry erase marker over old, "burnt-in" writing, then wipe away cleaning. Works 60% of the time... every time.

^ | v Reply Share ›

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**DaveRossAC** · 2 months ago

I saw a behind the scenes video this week of a production in Spain. The 2nd AC was using a slate that was formatted upside-down, with the clapper at the bottom. Weirdest of all, when they clapped the slate, they didn't just clap it and leave it closed.... they clapped the slicks AND opened them again quickly, probably to keep them closed only for a single frame.

But why?? Wouldn't the editor hate that?

^ | v Reply Share ›



**Bill Hornbeck** → DaveRossAC · 21 days ago

Yes, although they key is holding them steady. I have AC's who drop their hands as the sticks claps which puts them out of focus, you never get a good focus frame to set the mark on.

^ | v Reply Share ›



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