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How Are Script Notes Used In The Editing Room?

A Conversation With Assistant Editor Carrie Puchkoff

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Background

Carrie didn't go to film school but has a Masters in Fine Arts in painting and printmaking with art history. She always wanted to get into editing but thought it was an unattainable goal until a family friend, who was in the industry and making the transition from Assistant Editor to Editor, brought her on to a project. She then started working as an Apprentice Editor on productions shot on film. Early on in her career while working on the TV show *Ed*, she became friendly with the Script Supervisor and came to shadow her on set and ended up script supervising some miscellaneous shots. This led to a brief excursion as Script Supervisor on a short, which confirmed she was best suited to the edit room! However, she still enjoys occasions when she visits set and meets the Script Supervisor in person.

Having always been very interested in television, Carrie began working as an Assistant Editor on the third season of *Sex And The City* after having worked on many features. TV credits since include: *The Wire*, *Nurse Jackie*, *The Americans*, *The Slap*, *Marco Polo*, *The Breaks* and *The Looming Tower*. Features she has worked on are: *Things We Lost In The Fire*, *Sex And The City*, *The Reader*, *The Smurfs*, *Premium Rush*, *Admission*, *Money Monster* and *Before I Fall*. Recently on *The Breaks* for VH1, she began the transition from Assistant Editor to Editor.

*Note: Abbreviating the title of Assistant Editor to "AE" originates from reality television and is generally frowned upon within the feature world and should be avoided. Like the term "Scripty" for Script Supervisors, it is taken by many to diminish and disrespect the position and experience.

Hiring process

Editors normally hire their Assistant Editors, but increasingly, the Studios are getting more and more involved. As an Assistant Editor, Carrie is usually brought on one week prior to principal photography, but sometimes it can be as short as a few days before. There used to be longer lead time and advance preparation to set up protocols with the lab and communication with set.

In the days of film, edit rooms were staffed with Assistant Editors and Apprentices. One of the Apprentice's main duties was to go to the lab to pick up the developed film and run it back to the edit room. With the advent of digital workflows, Apprentice positions are now quite rare - when Carrie worked on *Marco Polo*, they had three Apprentices which was very unusual. Since an Apprentice is a union position, Studios are reticent about paying for it; also, the description in the contract is vague and that makes it easy for the studios to drop the position. (Union Post contracts are outdated and are still based on projects shot on film.) Instead, the role tends to be covered by a Post PA and in this digital realm, duties and responsibilities have become less clearly defined. The Post PA helps with the paperwork and sometimes other tasks that would traditionally (not contractually) been done by an Apprentice or Assistant. As a general rule, if the Editor is going to work with the material directly, it must come through the Assistant and if there happens to be an Apprentice, they can assist the Assistant, but not the Editor.

On a TV show, the best set up is one Assistant per Editor; typically there are two or three Editors depending on the number of episodes and format. On *The Americans*, they had three Editors and two Assistants (3/2) which was not an ideal balance. Unfortunately there is no staffing requirement in the contract regarding Editor/Assistant Editor ratio.

As the Assistant, Carrie manages the media and assigns tasks to a Post PA or Apprentice. Crucially, they must be able to efficiently manage and organize all the paperwork that comes through the edit room. Carrie evaluates a Post PA's performance this way. She finds that a lot of PAs or Apprentices who want to make the switch from reality TV to narrative often don't know what to do with a Script Supervisor's notes having never encountered them before! Not understanding a lined script and continuity page is a huge setback in the edit room - everyone uses them.

Workflow

Setup of workflow for a job is usually a two-day process. A workflow meeting is usually held before Carrie is on payroll, and many times she must volunteer her time to attend (if she knows about the meeting at all). These meetings (usually conference calls) culminate in a Dailies Workflow Memo issued by the lab or the Post Supervising team and is issued to all applicable departments including Editorial, Camera, DIT, Sound, Script Supervisor. This memo details how the media will be processed and lays out the responsibilities and specifics of all departments in relation to this.

It is often not mandatory for a Script Supervisor to attend these conference calls (although some shows may invite you to call in) but it's important to stay in the loop as the memo can dictate many things that affect production workflow such as slating standards, naming conventions, film breaks and note distribution. At the very least, you can request a copy of the memo or any directive regarding production workflow.

The memo may also detail dailies information distribution. That is a good opportunity to make sure you are added to relevant email threads such as dailies stills and dailies morning reports, the latter being a report from the lab with an inventory of all media transferred that day. This is a great double check for discrepancies with slating, camera rolls, sound rolls or if anything should go missing that requires follow up. It is also good ammunition to show mislating ACs, as all these errors are usually listed!

Production

The Post PA or Apprentice helps organize the Script Supervisor's script notes for the Assistant Editor. A huge part of post is to make sure that every take logged is there. The Assistant Editor organizes the media after it has been uploaded for editing using the Script Supervisor's notes. Bins (folders) are organized per the script notes. They verify with the Editor's Log that all logged media exists with a corresponding clip. If something is missing, they will usually check the Script Supervisor's notes first, then the dailies report, before trying to resolve the issue with the Camera department. The script notes are the first documents to be referenced when looking for footage or correcting mistakes and are trusted over camera and sound reports. However, going over the camera reports with the Camera Department to circle takes and reconciling discrepancies is still incredibly important. Circling sound reports has become less common, but some post production workflows may still request that the Script Supervisor go over them with the Sound Mixer. It's also a good way to cross-check discrepancies with camera reports.

Over the years, the transition from film to digital has made her job of an Assistant Editor more challenging. Digital is not faster, but more complicated. Deadlines are tighter as the media itself doesn't require being processed the way film does. Waiting for the lab used to give you time to catch up and stay on top of the footage. With digital, many filmmakers like to "Keep Rolling!" between takes resulting in extremely long clips. Multi-camera shooting leads to an excess of footage to track and sort through.

Multiple units, second units, pick up/insert/reshoot units only add to that as there is a high volume of media files to manage, re-label and add information to. Multi units tend to cause confusion as it is not always possible to maintain consistency and uniformity with different Script Supervisors. The Main Unit Script Supervisor should always know what the other units are shooting, however it's a frustrating experience where that is not always the case. In situations where there may not be clear notes, slates or even a Script Supervisor present, it creates more set up and organizational work for the Assistant Editor. Though it makes her job difficult, Carrie agrees with "no script supervisor, no notes", and lobbies to hire a Script Supervisor for additional units.

Carrie may get involved with slating on multi-unit productions, e.g. if different units are shooting in different cities, care must be taken to avoid duplicate camera rolls and ensure unique metadata files with consistent naming conventions. When shooting across the globe, sometimes it can take two days to rectify a mistake because of the time difference, by which time the shooting situation may be over!

Script Notes

Carrie never used to have to ask for things in pre-production (introductions, annotation keys, breakdowns, etc.) from Script Supervisors but over time is finding this to be more of an issue. In many cases, a Script Supervisor may not have even been hired yet but if they are, she reaches out to let them know if post has any preferences. Unless well-known and obvious, it would be good for Script Supervisors to indicate what their abbreviations are, as this tends to vary across the board and across countries!

Carrie works on an Avid. When she comes to work, she first opens the bins and cross references with the dailies report. She looks over a Script Supervisor's daily progress report (yes, she reads the notes or comments at the bottom) and edit log from the day before to make sure all the footage is accounted for. On the edit log, she likes to see everything - not just the circled takes - then she dives into the rest of the notes.

It goes without saying that notes should be legible – including digital notes. Once because of the program formatting for an extra column, the ScriptE line labels generated were so small it was almost impossible to read. It was tolerated for some time, until the Editor eventually requested for it to be fixed. The Script Supervisor was finally able to remove an element in the program and adjust the notes, but the program does not correct retroactively and manually correcting the notes would have been too time-consuming. This rendered the prior notes almost useless.

Similarly, handwritten notes should be Xeroxed with good contrast. If the production office is in charge of notes distro, it is good practice to check that what they are sending out is up to standard.

Consistency in slating along with clear, accurate notes are the most appreciated. With handwritten notes, Carrie finds it helpful to see things underlined, circled, or starred to draw her attention. She likes the clarity of a circled take. She admits it may be a generational thing, but finds digital notes very uniform and has to search harder for relevant information.

Bumped slates can cause confusion in the non-linear digital workflow. Each time the camera records and stops, a new file or clip is created, hence when a slate is bumped for identification (e.g. at the head for a MOS shot or when a tailslate is missed), it is no longer attached to the content it is identifying, resulting in a lot of random single frame files. (In film, this was not an issue since the physical material was linear.) Despite this, it is still important for Carrie to have every single file because then she KNOWS she is not missing any potential action, as the timecode will be referenced in the Avid bin. She still wants slates, but she knows she is not missing one if she has all the individual pieces (files) and the timecode is fluid. When a slate is missed and the picture really has no identification, the Script Supervisor should note that the take was not slated.

Too much information in the shot description isn't always helpful in the edit room (they may be more useful to the Script Supervisor on set). She would like to see the original intention clearly at the top of the set up and then add small notes for each take if that evolves. Often shot descriptions are copied and pasted into bins and pertinent notes tagged using locators (now called "Markers") to the edit timeline. She finds screen grabs in the script notes redundant.

A lot of Script Supervisors in TV are no longer recording lens info, but Carrie finds it sometimes helpful. Lens info can be useful for matching on set or for VFX purposes (although if needed, this information should also be found on the camera reports or in the VFX supervisor's reports). Indicating which camera support (Handheld, static, sticks, dolly, Steadicam, crane, HH on dolly, lock off, etc.) was used for a setup is helpful to have in the shot description, particularly if VFX are involved.

Timings are helpful because they can indicate a series or a pick-up, etc. Timecode is not something she really refers to; she prefers the Script Supervisor stays on top of tracking the takes/passes within a series (if a Director

flags a moment within that, a simple time marker or a “6mins in...” will suffice”). Timecode may be more commonly used in commercials or unscripted television to log significant points in the footage. Some commercials forego slating altogether (this seems to be the practice on the show *House Of Cards* too) and timecode is often the only reference to work from, especially when the camera keeps rolling. However, you still need to note set ups and coordinate with Sound.

Clip number logging is not necessary to track, though some post departments have been known to request it from either Camera or the Script Supervisor.

Carrie has been coming across a lot of script notes lately that are heavy on technical notes like color temperature, ASA, etc. These are unnecessary as they are already in the metadata and just create superfluous information to slog through. Minimal tech info is preferred – a take blown for focus is about as technical as it needs to be. Ideally, she would like to see only the really important information and no more. What went wrong with the take? What was done differently? What was the Director’s thought process? She doesn’t feel as though comments from other departments are too important (e.g. camera notes about take was best for focus, or wardrobe notes about a loosened tie not matching – if it’s that bad, she can see this for herself). She cares almost exclusively about what the Director likes and doesn’t like, regardless of continuity or minor technical errors. An actor’s performance always takes priority.

In the remarks section on the daily report, she expects a note only when there is a problem or something unusual, e.g. a camera roll that was skipped or corrupted.

She understands how challenging it is when the camera keeps rolling and every take is different. In these situations, it is extremely helpful to note resets, missed lines of dialogue, pickups, zoom-ins or zoom-outs to a different frame size, covering a different actor than before, tagging pertinent props, etc. She agrees that with things moving faster and faster on set, and with multiple cameras being the norm, it’s ok to save yourself time by noting “same but tighter” in a shot description rather than rewriting out the whole shot description again, and to use the same lines on the script for different set ups if they cover the same characters and dialogue. It saves her time too, to not have to sort through so many similar notes.

Changes in dialogue are very important to note! Cross out the original line and note the alternates/changes next to it. Carrie finds that Script Supervisors do not always do this.

Wrap

Often at the end of a job, Post will have a round table discussion (often called a Post Mortem! 🤔) to diagnose problems, discuss what takes up time unnecessarily and how the workflow might improve for the next round/season. If the Script Supervisor has been overwhelmed, or there has not been enough supervision on other units, Carrie has sometimes advocated for more support.

Wrap book: Even though Editors are sent notes daily, they still need a hard copy of the final script and notes at the end of the shoot whether the Script Supervisor has been working paper or digital. Carrie usually asks the Main Unit Script Supervisor to collate all the units’ notes together in one book. It’s a helpful back up reference and considered good housekeeping to make sure everything is in order and everyone has everything they need. More and more she is asked to provide a PDF version of the lined script to Sound Post Production. If one has not been provided to her, she will keep the hard copy and give Sound with the PDF pages by shoot day.

In some cases, integrating Second Unit script notes into the main script book may create more work for the Assistant Editor if they want to easily differentiate between units. But this may be case-by-case situation and up to each Editorial Department. As always, it’s always good to check!

Carrie’s most important takeaway: good communication with your editorial department before AND during a project!