

Creating a Shot List

Even when making a five-minute camcorder short, the kind where you are the writer/director/producer/cameraman/editor, you can still prep for bigger shoots, and develop good habits. One of these habits is creating and maintaining a shot list.

A shot list is a list of all the camera angles for a shoot, including coverage and cutaways. This can be done from the script, on the fly during a shoot, or even AFTER the shoot, using the footage and just naming the shots that were obtained.

Shot lists in pre-production usually only blueprint a shoot. Part of directing is deciding what shots best tell your story and which ones will elicit an emotional reaction from viewers. Storyboards are a great second step for a shot list, but not everyone can draw or create storyboards, so a written list of shots can still achieve the real goal of organization.

Usually, on the day of the shooting, a prepared-in-advance shot list will go through a number of changes. New shots can come up, two shots get fused into one, and often times you just don't have time to get them all "in the can." During a shoot, LOGGING the shots can be a valuable way to think ahead about post-production.

A "script supervisor", the person checking off the shot list and reading the script who verifies everything from the script gets shot, can scratch off each shot as it is completed. Additionally, the script supervisor can make notes about each take and each shot, including details such as which take the director liked, merged or changed shots, audio problems, time code, and whatever else that will assist later in post production. Having a person functioning as a script supervisor will greatly increase the speed and organization of post-production.

Now after the shoot, the editor (or the writer/director/producer/cameraman/editor) needs to be able to take all these shots and make editing choices from them. Again, if this is a small, simple shoot with the same person writing/directing/shooting/editing, you may not have made a shot list, but now that you have a tape full of shots that have to be captured to a hard drive – you have to name the files and the shots in the computer in order to edit them. So no matter what, you still have a "shot list."

If you created a shot list from the script, you can carry the same names through pre-production all the way through post-production. This can be any way you feel like organizing it. I can't tell you how to best organize your shoot, but the only thing that matters is that everyone understands it, from writer to cameraman to editor. A basic shot list can consist of just saying "scene 04, take 02 Camera A" (abbreviated "So4To2A"), or any variation therein. Make up your own systems, whatever ways seem best to you.

The reason to be so detailed and to make consistent notes is because as your projects get bigger and more people get involved, there is a system in place for everyone to know what everything is in every department. You can find out where you are in the screenplay based on a shot list, or if one shot needs a title, or there was a slightly different angle – all of that information is systematically (and subsequently, anally) organized and easily found. So shot number "So4To2A" is the same from screenplay to shoot to file on the editing computer. It's easy to find everything as there is a roadmap that everyone can follow.

Having worked as a post-production supervisor and lead editor on a feature film, I dealt with a director who was the only person who had the notes and shot lists, but they existed in his memory. When capturing the footage and trying to synch audio to his 16mm film transfers, I was trying to find shots like "George gets in car" or "Jenny at apartment." So where in the script does that happen? How many times is George in a car? It became impossible to do anything without the director present at all times. We then devised a system and naming and assigned scene numbers, creating shot lists after the fact. Thus we were able to successfully synch audio for the entire movie.

On big movies and TV shows, the whole production team synchronizes by a shot list from the beginning all the way to the end. Even when you're doing it all yourself, you can prepare for eventually delegating to people like a different editor or cameraman by being organized with a shot list, and making it something everyone can understand. It makes it possible for everyone to be on the same page.

Peter John Ross - Sonnyboo Productions
© Copyright 2003 by microcinemascene.com