

# Montana Film Office

## What's a PA?

### Job Description

A production assistant (PA) is the entry-level position on a film crew. PAs provide support and assistance to almost all areas of the production. Although the following is by no means an all-inclusive list, here are a few examples of what your duties as a PA may include:

**Set PA:** works on the set, and may perform the following duties—assist security with crowd control; escort actors to and from their trailers; deliver film to the airport or the processing lab; and may help load and unload equipment. Set PAs assist in every department as needed and that's a great advantage. Your varied experiences can help you decide if you want to specialize in a particular department.

**Office PA:** works in the central production office and may perform general office work; answer phones; make copies of scripts, contracts and other documents; run errands; and assist with scheduling, shipping and other office duties.

**Transportation PA:** drives a rented van, car, or truck; delivers/picks up packages all over town; takes actors and crew to and from the set; runs errands.

**Art Department PA:** assists set decorator with office duties; assists with construction of props; runs errands.

**Wardrobe PA:** assists with costumes for extras; organizes and labels costumes; assists with making costumes; run errands.

**Location PA:** delivers contracts; puts up signs to direct workers to the set; makes and distributes maps to locations; cleans up locations after filming; runs errands. Depending on the production, may also photograph locations.

### Skills Needed

- **Dependability** is the most important skill of all.
- **Punctuality** is absolutely essential. No excuses.  
If you're early, you're on time  
If you're on time, you're late  
If you're late, you're fired
- Ability to follow directions precisely.
- Willingness to work long hours. 12 to 14 hour days are the norm.
- A cheerful and professional attitude.
- In-depth knowledge of your town (directions, etc.)

- Ability to "think on your feet," that is, to make a quick decision when you have to, rather than waiting helplessly for someone else to take over.
- *Another important skill:* if you made a mistake, own up to it and take responsibility.
- *And here's another really important one:* a thick hide. Sooner or later, you're going to get yelled at, whether or not you deserve it. Don't take it personally—get over it—everybody else does.

### Qualifications to work as a PA

- Previous experience is not necessary. You will be told what to do and how to do it.
- A dependable car is an asset. If you have one, say so on your resume.
- PA's do a lot of driving. If you have a good driving record, keep it that way and say so on your resume.
- Have an answering machine and make your outgoing messages short and professional. If you have a silly message, that's the first impression that sticks with your (maybe) employer.
- If you have a pager, put the number on your resume.

### Education

A PA doesn't have to have a college degree, though it can be helpful. With or without a degree, you greatly increase your chances of being hired if you have a usable skill and a lot of enthusiasm. Although you may have made straight A's in college in directing, lighting and editing, the fact is, production companies don't hire beginners to direct or edit—they hire them as PA's.

On the other hand, time spent in film school or making films and videos of your own puts you in touch with other people with similar goals. In many cases, your paying jobs happen because of someone you know, so it's worthwhile to spend your time with people who are already in the business or are already headed in that direction.

Beneficial courses at high school or college include film/video production and theater. Learn as much as you can about the technical side of theater (lighting, makeup, set construction, etc.) because much of this knowledge is directly applicable to film production, too. Other worthwhile studies, depending on your interests, may include computer classes, art, photography, sewing, carpentry, and metalworking.

Almost any professional skills can be used to some degree in film production—accounting, interior design, architecture, fashion design, music, computer programming, sign painting, aviation, hairdressing, welding, catering...it's a long list.

### Work environment

*Weather:* An Office PA usually works indoors in the production office but runs outside errands, too. Set PA's spend most of their time out in the weather, just like the rest of the crew. So whatever the department, dress appropriately for spending time outdoors, no matter how rotten the weather might be. Shorts and t-shirts are the norm, but look at what others on the crew are wearing and follow their example.

**Hours:** Very, very long. Sixteen hour days are common. You *will not* have any social life while you're working on a film.

**Job Mobility:** The necessary skills for a PA are the same anywhere you live. However, a lot of work comes from the people you know (that's the value of networking) so it can be difficult to start over in a new city. And if you plan to make your living in the film industry, you have to live where the business is. Don't expect to support yourself working on productions in Montana—there just isn't enough year-round work. While there may be a few people in the state that do this, they are the exceptions and the majority who make a living from production live outside Montana, many of them in California.

**Job Security:** Nope. PA's are almost always hired as "locals." Production companies do not pay hotel/living expenses for locals so there's not much travel for PA's. However, if you have a friend, grandma, or someone else who will house you in another city, you can always apply for PA jobs in that city as a local. If you do, it might be a good idea to change your resume and show a local address.

**Advancement opportunities:** Many, many crew members started out as PA's and moved up through the ranks. Of course, once you're known as a PA, you're more likely to be offered PA jobs than any other positions. However, low-budget films may offer the chance to work at a higher position than you'd qualify for on a big-budget film.

**Earnings:** This can vary greatly depending on *where* you work, *how much* you work, and the *budget* for the film you're working on. Entry-level PA positions in Montana for independent films are generally around minimum wage or slightly higher. A PA working *outside Montana* could expect to earn between \$20,000-\$25,000, assuming they work most of the year. Lately, Montana is seeing an increase in independent films with low budgets as opposed to studio-backed films with large budgets.

**Benefits:** Time off between jobs, whenever you wish. (But if you're not working, you're not being paid.) Three free meals a day while you're working, plus snacks, fruit, and soft drinks. Great connections, great friends. The job is never boring! Very casual dress is the norm.

## Why work as a PA?

It's lively, fulfilling, fascinating work, and it's about as far from an 8-to-5 office job as you can get. You have a great deal of personal freedom in making career choices and there's plenty of room to advance into positions with more creativity and responsibility. Many people who work in film production love the work they do and wouldn't want to do anything else.

## Current production information in Montana

To hear about projects filming in Montana, call our production hotline number at 406-444-3960 or log on to our website at [www.montanafilm.com](http://www.montanafilm.com) and click on News 4 Crews on the home page. The hotline and website will list any current projects that need crew. Unfortunately, they aren't always as informative as we would like since information can only be included on our hotline or website after a production company gives permission. Often production companies are reluctant to release information about their project during its early phase.

## Recommended reading/resources

There are many good books available on the topic of working in film production. Any library, bookstore, or on-line bookstore can help you find appropriate titles. Listed below are a few publications that have specific information for PA's.

- ***"Breaking and Entering: Land Your First Job in Film Production"***  
by April Fitzsimmons, 204 pages  
Lone Eagle Publishing Co.  
[www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com)  
[www.barnesandnoble.com](http://www.barnesandnoble.com)
- ***"Careers in Film and Video Production"***  
by Michael Horwin, 206 pages  
Focal Press  
[www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com)  
[www.barnesandnoble.com](http://www.barnesandnoble.com)
- ***"Get A Reel Job"***  
by Philip Nemy, 309 pages  
Angel's Touch Productions  
<http://www.reeljob.net>  
[www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com)
- ***Internet Movie DataBase***  
[www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com)

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