

Building an Inclusive Doc Edit Room: Associate Editor Initiative

OVERVIEW:

This initiative re-imagines the edit room to address systemic diversity issues with an eye to the long term and to engage and support the next generation of BIPOC editors.

The main pathway to becoming a documentary editor is being an assistant editor. While this position used to involve direct, creative contact with the lead editor and director and functioned as an apprenticeship, now the AE is more likely than ever to work in isolation with little to no creative work, team interaction or input. AEs typically handle transcoding, uploads, syncing and IT tech work, instead of doing work that would prepare them to be a doc editor. AEs often have little meaningful connection with the main editor besides technical to-do lists and they are not in the room to learn how editors and directors work together or to learn how to give feedback. In this situation, AEs are not learning the art of storytelling or experiencing the practice of the craft, and they are not building crucial relationships.

Increasingly emerging BIPOC talent who want to become editors are hired for these AE roles but are then isolated and left out of the creative conversations and network-building. There is a huge chasm between being an Assistant Editor and full Editor that is often an impossible leap, especially for emerging talent without industry connections. Relationships with veteran editors, directors and producers are the key to advancement in the doc industry which almost entirely hires via personal connections and word-of-mouth. This has led to an overwhelming system of White creatives hiring/promoting other White creatives who are already in their circles. Without a fundamental and intentional change to how the edit room is set up, these systemic issues will remain.

To help address this diversity problem in the edit community, the Associate Editor Initiative is a proposal to redefine the entry-level editing jobs with a focus on building and diversifying the next generation of top editors. We need to create a real professional ladder that lets emerging talent gain skills and relationships that will lead to full edit jobs. Right now, many edit rooms only have an upper rung and a lower rung. Our proposal creates a standardized middle rung, the Associate Editor, with a specific codified junior creative role.

The technical and logistical work of transcoding and syncing, sending out QT files for transcripts, doing uploads, drive maintenance, etc. would be handled by an Assistant Editor, the first rung of the ladder - an entry level position. Directly above this role would be the "Associate Editor", an apprentice-type position with a specific role focusing on creative and real-world edit experience. The Associate Editor's work would focus on creative work like organizing footage, pulling selects, logging footage, making stringouts, roughing out early scenes, polishing a scene cut by the editor with direction, etc.

Associate Editors would work closely with the editor in a dialogue and at the direction of the editor. It is important for the Associate Editor to receive notes and feedback on their

work from the editor and then be given the chance to implement those notes and go through subsequent drafts and revisions with the editor. Learning how to take notes, implement them, and develop a scene over time is a crucial skill for Associate Editors to hone. Associate Editors would also have regular opportunities to observe and listen in the room with the lead editor and director as creative decisions are hashed out and argued over - the best way to learn. They would be given the opportunity at specific occasional points to provide their own critical feedback on cuts to the editor and/or director.

It is important that Associate Editors and Assistant Editors be given a clear picture of schedule, goals, and deadlines, working with the producer and editor. It is also important that the expectations and type of work that the Associate Editor will be performing with the lead editor be clear and understood up front by all parties.

Each project is different, and the specific creative work and support the Associate Editor will be doing may change from project to project, based on the needs of the editor and the skills of the Associate Editor. In general, for each project, the editor will structure and direct the kind of work the Associate Editor is doing, staying in close communication with the Associate Editor about how the process is going and what their goals and creative ambitions are. In some cases, if the Associate Editor ends up doing major edit work on the film, they may, at the recommendation of the editor and the approval of the producer and/or director, have their credit promoted to Editor for the final film.

This initiative aims to create a work environment where a great Assistant Editor would no longer be stuck in a dead-end job and could, after a few jobs, be comfortably promoted to Associate Editor. And a great Associate Editor would then have the chance to demonstrate real story-telling skills, gain true editing experience, and gain relationships that could lead to full editor jobs. Each position in this three-rung ladder helps train the position below them and will be trained by the position above them.

It's important to note that this initiative is not a separate "training program" that would slow a production down or encumber the edit. It folds in new talent in an organic and enriching way that will improve the quality and richness of the final films. Associate Editors can help speed up the edit process and save money and time for productions. Associate Editors would bring a lot of new ideas and discussion to the lead edit team while also giving emerging talent the skills, experience and relationships to advance their careers and, in the future, get hired as full editors through these skills and contacts.

This type of Associate Editor role is already happening in some productions and with great success. This new standardized role would benefit all assistant editors and up-and-coming editors, and with an intentional focused effort, can especially support BIPOC editors looking to break in and gain skills on their way to become the next amazing veteran editor.

GUIDELINES FOR PRODUCTIONS:

The Associate Editor is an apprentice-style creative position. The Associate Editor's work includes creative tasks like:

- organizing footage
- pulling selects
- logging footage
- making string-outs
- roughing out early scenes
- polishing a scene cut by the Editor with direction
- cutting a scene with direction from the Editor

The Assistant Editor is an entry-level position. The Assistant Editor's work includes technical and logistical tasks like:

- transcoding and syncing
- exporting QuickTimes
- doing uploads
- drive maintenance
- deliverables prep

The Assistant's work can also include more creative, editorial tasks that overlap with the Associate's like:

- organizing footage
- pulling selects
- logging footage.

The Assistant Editor is mentored by the Associate Editor and the Associate Editor is mentored by the Editor.

Associate Editors should pass along AE tips/skills to the Assistant Editor, and make sure they are informed about tasks and duties.

When an Assistant Editor or Associate Editor is hired, the Producer and Editor should ask about their career goals, what creative skills they want to learn, and then help to support those goals.

Work requests sent to Associate and Assistant Editors should be filtered through one person (i.e. a lead Editor or Post-Supervisor) and all parties on the edit team should be cc:ed

Producer and Edit Team should have a meeting at the start of the edit to go over the post workflow from start to finish, including delivery to posthouse and creating deliverables to the broadcaster/streamer.

Standard hours should be set and mutually agreed upon. Overtime should be paid when those hours are exceeded. Working longer hours and weekends usually leads to burn out, not better work.

Throughout the production, the Producer and Editor should maintain clear and regular communication with the Assistant and Associate Editors about schedule, goals, workflow, expectations, deadlines, and overall timeline. A regular weekly full team meeting is a great way to keep everyone up to speed and offer a forum for questions.

Producers and Editors should ask Assistant and Associate Editors how long they think tasks will take to prevent unrealistic deadlines.

The Assistant and Associate Editor should be given a clear and safe place to go if there are problems or concerns they need to report. Producers and Editors should periodically check in with Assistant and Associate Editors to see how things are going and give space to critical feedback.

Associate Editors work closely with the lead editor in a dialogue and at the direction of the editor. It is important for the Associate Editor to receive notes and feedback on their work from the Editor and then be given the chance to implement those notes and go through subsequent drafts and revisions with the Editor. Learning how to take notes, implement them, and develop a scene over time is a crucial skill for Associate Editors to hone.

Associate Editors should have regular opportunities to observe and listen in the room with the lead Editor and Director as creative decisions are hashed out and debated. They should be given the opportunity at specific occasional points to provide their own feedback on cuts to the Editor and/or Director.

Assistant Editors should sometimes be brought into the team notes sessions so they can be in the loop and can learn how notes are given and discussed.

Associate Editors should attend and observe rough cut screenings. Their notes should be given to the editor with a follow-up discussion after the screening.

At the end of production, producers should re-evaluate the work done and the credits to assess a fair allocation of credit. If the Associate Editor ends up doing major edit work on the film, they may, at the recommendation of the editor and the approval of the producer and/or director, have their credit promoted to Co-Editor or Editor for the final film.