

How to book a colorist.

Happily I often get asked how much I charge. Unfortunately, many of these requests do not include enough information to provide a competitive quote. Here are a few relevant questions that can help when booking a colorist.

- Where do you intend to grade?
- When do you expect to grade?
- How long is the project?
- How is it shot?
- What format will be used to grade from?
- What format is the main deliverable?
- Will the color session include conforming?
- Will the program contain vfx or animation?
- Why are we here?

Where do you intend to grade?

Travel is not a problem, I work all over the world, it just takes time and incurs cost. The question is really intended to determine if this is

- an in house job where you provide the equipment
- a job at a facility company where they provide the equipment
- a job done by remote correspondence where I provide the equipment

Owning your own equipment is cost effective and generally allows the grading process to start earlier and be more involved.

Working at a facility house needs to be more structured, but there will be plenty of ancillary equipment and personnel to take care of unforeseen problems. A facility will also have properly calibrated monitors and usually takes great pride in making the suite comfortable.

Letting me work on my own system keeps the cost down, but I am not calibrated for film recording and I cannot cater for client attend sessions. The process takes longer and we communicate by internet or phone.

Wherever the grading is done it is important to specify the grading system and its version, options and hardware.

When do you expect to grade?

It is always best to plan ahead. The usual procedure is to make a “pencil” booking as early as possible and then re-schedule it if necessary. The pencil booking means that I can give advice before the grading sessions and if other bookings wish to confirm the same time, the pencil has the first refusal. More often than not the initial dates change, but everyone works together to keep the schedule as tight as possible. Getting a request to start a big job tomorrow implies bad planning, or an unforeseen problem, neither of which are good recommendations. Of course, post-production is often unpredictable and we are here to solve problems, this advice is just a preventative measure!

The booking needs a start date and duration. The duration will depend on many, many things, but here are some guidelines.

- Feature Films: Typically 1-4 weeks, but ranging from 2 days to 6 months!
- Broadcast : Typically 30-60 minutes of material per day of grading
- Commercial Selects: Typically 1/2 – 2 days
- Music Videos: Typically 1/2 – 2 days

Be realistic about the length of time you need, or would like, because it not only affects availability, but also determines the best deal I can offer.

How long is the program?

In the days of telecine transfers we always used to laugh at the number of times people tried to book 1 hour for 60 minutes of film, insisting that it could somehow be squeezed in.

Remember to allow for roll changes, shuttling, finding shots, grading, decision-making, previewing and recording for telecine transfers. If it is a DI session there are no roll changes or shuttling but make sure that all the material is already online, and conformed. Some systems will also need to render at the end.

If in doubt, make a note of how long the program lasts, how many reels or episodes it is made up of and if possible an estimate of the number of cuts. If it is a conforming project be sure to mention the number of tracks as well.

How is it shot?

If it is shot on film we will need a telecine or a scanner. If it is 16mm it is more likely to need grain reduction than if it is super 35mm.

If it is shot on SD or HD video the process is very straight forward, but the dynamic range is often limited and that will impact the grading possible.

If it is shot with any of the newer data style cameras, it is important that a suitable workflow is in place. Cameras that have their own proprietary formats or characteristics include (but are not limited to) Viper, Genesis, D21, F35 and Red.

Personally, I always like to know if the source material is available as log. Images that are sourced as log and are kept that way have a greater dynamic range and we have more control over them in the color grade. I have often come across material that was shot in a proprietary log format but was then transferred to a more universal format such as .dpx and converted to linear in the process.

There are other workflows that can compromise image quality even though sometimes that cannot be helped. It is never too early to discuss workflow, but it is often too late.

What format will be used to grade from?

Often this is determined by the previous question. With DI grading the source material for color enhancement might depend on the editing system or another part of the post - production pipeline. In software suites the source format can affect the performance of the machine, but the main reason for specifying the grading source is to check compatibility.

What format is the main deliverable?

Most jobs are primarily for a film or a video finish and this determines the monitoring setup. Video jobs require a broadcast quality monitor, which is expensive but relatively straightforward to setup. Film jobs must be done on a properly calibrated screen or ideally a calibrated projector otherwise it can take weeks to get a matching print. In the best case having to make multiple prints takes time and costs money, but in the worst case the finer points of the grade are lost and never seen outside of the suite. Calibrating a digital projector for film recording is a lengthy process, but once it is done the match can be remarkable.

Will the color session include conforming?

Working from a timeline conformed in the grading system has many big advantages, but it usually takes a bit longer. Make sure that the conforming is properly checked as early as possible. Ideally the editor would supervise this part of the process before the actual coloring begins, but that is not always practical.

Grading from a flattened timeline is probably quicker and safer, but the accuracy and latitude of the color correction is sometimes compromised, particularly over transitions and composites.

Will the program contain vfx or animation?

If there are vfx or animated elements, there might also be mattes, which can save a great deal of time during grading. There are many ways to optimize these special effects elements and it is worth making sure that everyone agrees on a single solution. A post production supervisor would naturally do this, but a good team can work it out between themselves providing that they have the opportunity to discuss it.

Why are we here?

Insert fun philosophical insights here! Seriously though, color grading is fantastic production value, everything looks better no matter how small the budget is. The principal benefits are

- To correct continuity
- To stylize the images
- To match or add effects

All projects involve all three of the above goals, but it helps to know which is the main concern. It probably will not affect the quote much, but it helps to have an understanding of what is expected.

If you would like further advice or indeed a quote please contact me at kevs@finalcolor.com or telephone +44 142 561 5690.

Kevin

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