

# Language of Video

## Image Composition

### Rule of Thirds

Traditionally visual images are thought to look better if they divide the picture into thirds vertically and horizontally. The subject, the eye-line, or any obvious features should be placed a third of the way across, or up, the screen rather than centrally.

Sky is an exception on video. If the skyline is one third down the screen, the image is likely to be backlit, so reduce sky to a minimum.

### Framing

Framing should not restrict the subject. Leave enough room around the subject's head, avoiding chins on the bottom of the screen and foreheads bashing the top. Also leave looking space if the subject is facing sideways, and space to move into if they are in motion. However, the subject will look lost if there is too much room around them. Frame reasonably tightly to concentrate the viewer's attention.

### Distracting objects

Avoid plants, telegraph poles, or other distracting objects appearing to grow out of the subject's head or shoulders.

### Shot Sizes

Shot sizes are defined according to the proportion of the subject contained in the frame. Long-shots, mid-shots and close-ups are the basic shot categories. They are not exact divisions but aid communication during production planning.

## Camera Angles

The camera height changes the camera angle. Positioning the camera at eye-level to the subject is neutral. If the camera looks down at them, they look weak and vulnerable. If it looks up, they look imposing, threatening, or powerful. Setting up the tripod for operating convenience only, may create these effects inadvertently.

## Perspective

A lens with a standard focal length produces the same perspective as the human eye. The zoom lens on a video camera is normally standard at the wide-angle end of the zoom. Therefore, shots look more natural if the camera is closer to the subject, rather than zoomed in from a distance. In addition, working at the wide-angle end of the lens makes focusing less critical, and the effect of any camera shake is reduced.

Telephoto flattens perspective, squashing the subject against the background, and making movement appear slow. Use it to create crowd scenes. A true wide-angle lens (wider than the wide-angle end of the zoom), exaggerates perspective, emphasises depth and space, and is more dramatic. Use it to fit more background into the frame, or to emphasise foreground gestures, but remember it can distort the subject.

## Camera Movement

Keep the camera still most of the time, letting the action in the scene provide the movement. Wandering camera work, that looks jerkily around, and zooms randomly in and out, is not easy to watch or to edit. Conventionally the aim is that viewers see the image created not the camera's presence.

The main function of the zoom lens is in shot preparation. If you must zoom when recording, do so extremely sparingly and with good reason. Also refrain from panning across a still scene.

Panning to follow action works because it reproduces the way the eye locks onto movement and follows it. The picture movement also helps to disguise any camera vibration.

Tracking involves the camera moving position in relation to the scene, often parallel to, or staying the same distance from, the subject. Some tripods

attach to wheels (dollies) for smooth tracking. Shopping trolleys or wheelchairs are effective alternatives.

Moving camera work has become more acceptable with the increased use of news camcorders. It creates a true to life feel but is hard to do well with lightweight camcorders. Any camera movement is a special effect, so don't overdo it.

## **EDITING GRAMMAR**

Video editing is the process of putting together a sequence of moving pictures and sound. The purpose is to communicate information clearly to the audience. The editor directs attention by combining images so that the storyline unfolds consistently and coherently.

Video editing is an art that takes considerable practise to master fully, but the basic principles are quite simple. Editing grammar defines how to combine shots logically. The aim is to maintain continuity so that the editing process is unnoticed by the viewer. Following the rules of editing grammar results in effective image sequences and avoids common errors.

### The Editing Process

The editing process is one of selection and elimination. Each shot must have a purpose to be included. Ideally only images that are essential to the narrative are used, and meaning is conveyed in a minimum number of shots.

### Shot Sequences

The basic unit of video language is the shot sequence. A sequence is a number of connected shots that together create an impression, represent an event, tell a story, or communicate an idea.

Usually, a sequence begins with one or two long-shots to establish the location. They are followed by a mid-shot that focuses the area of interest within the wider scene. The remainder of the sequence is in close-up, concentrating the audience on details of the action or interaction. If the area of interest within the wider scene changes a mid-shot is used before more close-ups.

This standard pattern is followed in both drama and documentary. It is only changed for effect; for instance, starting close-up, and only later drawing back to reveal the setting, to create suspense.

### Compressing Time

One of the major reasons for editing is to compress time. If the representation of an event takes as long as the actual incident the viewer's interest is not sustained (at least in western culture). It is only necessary to show enough for the audience to take in what has happened. For instance, if a character travels from A to B, footage of the entire journey is not needed. Adequate illustration is provided by seeing them leaving, briefly during the journey, and arriving, possibly using a mileage signpost to show the journey length.

### Shot Length

A shot should be long enough for viewer to take in its purpose and meaning, but no longer. Beginners are often tempted to prolong shots. The exact length of each shot depends on the pace of the sequence, and the feeling desired. However, 2-3 seconds is usually sufficient for a still shot, and 5-10 seconds for one containing movement. 15-20 seconds is plenty for a talking head.

### Pacing

Shot length and sequence rhythm contribute to the pacing of a programme and the impression it establishes. Regardless of the subject the more cuts there are the faster the pacing, the shorter the programme seems, and the more interest it creates.

### Cutting Visuals

Good editing is seamless. Cuts from one image to the next are invisible because they happen at moments when the audience is naturally ready to see the next shot.

To compress time and stimulate interest through constantly changing visuals, whilst giving the impression of an unbroken flow of images, a number of techniques are used:

### Insert Shots

Insert shots show a central part of the action in close-up to concentrate the viewer on something important. For instance, in a detective drama, the cut to a hand hiding that vital piece of evidence.

### Cut-aways

Cut-away shots cut from the action to something or somewhere else. They are vital to creating continuity when compressing or expanding time. For instance, they are used to cover the visual jump caused by editing together two different sections of an interview. Cut-aways should show something connected to the subject, or at least something that seems relevant.

### Points of View

One of the great things about communicating on video compared to say through theatre, is that the audience sees a range of viewpoints. Frequently a comment or action is followed by another character's reaction to it. This technique is used to define relationships and bring out emotions.

### Parallel Action

Editing aims to get across maximum information, in an understandable form, in the minimum time. The more experiences provided, the more engaging the programme. Parallel editing is a technique used to develop two plots simultaneously by cutting back and forth between them.

### Breaking Grammatical Rules

There is a discontinuity in the smooth flow of images if the rules of editing grammar are broken.

## Jump Cut

A jump cut occurs when the camera is switched off, and then switched on again without changing the shot. Some time has elapsed between one shot and the next, so people in the picture have changed position. The recording time discontinuity causes them to jump from place to place in the frame at the cut. Although this effect is deliberately created in the 'Disappearing Game', it is undesirable when editing.

It most commonly occurs when two soundbites from an interview are edited together, or when cutting out part of an event to compress time. It can also be produced if the same person appears in a different location in two consecutive shots, or if successive shots of two people are too similar in size and composition.

Jump cuts can be avoided in several ways:

- Consecutive shots show completely different people and places
- A cut-away is inserted between the two shots
- The angle to the subject and/or the size of shot changes considerably between one shot and the next

## Crossing the Line

Another common discontinuity is in direction of movement. The subject (person, car, ball) appears to be moving in one direction across the frame in one shot, and the opposite way in the next.

To avoid this a line is visualised along the direction of movement. As long as the camera stays on the same side of the line from shot-to-shot, continuity of direction is maintained. If the camera crosses the line the direction changes. Head on shots and those from behind are neutral. To cut from one shot to another that has crossed the line, insert a neutral shot between them.

## Other jarring cuts

Editing mid-action always looks odd. Let the movement finish before cutting to the next shot.

Edits also jar if the shot doesn't make sense in the context. Every shot should be used for a reason.

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