

Grammar of the Shot

SECOND EDITION

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Chapter One

The Shot and How to Frame It

QUESTION: What is a shot?

ANSWER: A shot is the smallest unit of visual information captured at one time by the camera that shows a certain action or event.

So you want to shoot a feature film, a funny short for the web, or candid interviews for your cousin's wedding video, but you are not quite sure how to go about it? Well, this book will be a good place for you to start learning. And just as you learned in school how to properly read and write your primary spoken language, you will have to become familiar with the standard and accepted rules of motion picture visual language. Unlike the many complex and seemingly contradictory rules of grammar for spoken languages around the world, the grammar of the shot, or film language, is the same for all cultures of the globe. It is a common language. It is a globally accepted way of depicting people, things, and actions such that they become instantly understood by all who perceive the images.

If we are going to be discussing the grammar of the shot, then we are going to have to define what we mean by grammar and what we mean by shot. Well it should be understood that grammar in this sense of the word refers to the basic rules governing the construction and presentation of visual elements that are created for inclusion in a motion picture. These are the commonly accepted guidelines that define how visual information should be displayed to a viewer. Viewers, all of us who have grown up watching films and television, have been trained over the years to observe, decode, and comprehend the various elements of the various shots used in motion picture creation. In other words, we may not consciously express it, but we know what certain images mean and how they make us feel. An adept filmmaker uses this dynamic between the shots and the viewer to tell better stories.

A shot is the recording of one action from one particular point of view at one time. Even though the action may be repeated several times (or **takes**) from that same angle or camera position in order to get it right, as with fictional narrative shooting, it is still that one shot. If you were to change the **camera angle**, camera position, or lens **focal length** (all covered in more detail throughout the book) then the result of that recorded

image would be a different shot—a different way of viewing the action—even if the exact same action from a previous **camera setup** is repeated and captured. Each shot, when originally recorded, will be unique.

So we will explore what the basic types of shots are and what goes into their creation. We will also see what information and meaning can be pulled out of these shots by the viewer. Remember, filmmaking is simultaneously a creative and technical craft, and the extent of your success often depends upon how well you communicate your vision to your audience. It is an audience who must consume, digest, and understand your pictures; if you confuse them with bad film language or improper visual “grammar” then they will most likely not respond well to your work.

In order to keep things simple, we are, for the most part, going to try and use generic terms for discussion and explanation. For instance, the term “motion picture” will be used to represent any work, show, project, or program that is made up of individual images that, when displayed to our eyes very rapidly, appear to move. The term camera will refer to any device that can record these moving images—whether it is emulsion film, video tape, or direct to hard drive. The terms **camera person** or **camera operator** will refer to anyone, man or woman, who operates the camera that is recording the moving images.

The Basic Building Blocks—The Different Shot Type Families

We know that a **shot** is the smallest unit of photographic coverage of a person, action, or event in a motion picture. We also know, from watching movies and television programming, that the persons, actions, and events we see are not all shown from the same exact angle, perspective, or distance. Therefore, although each shot represents a unique way to cover or frame the action, it is clear that there are a variety of common **shot types**. Perhaps the terms close-up, medium shot, and long shot are already familiar to you, but let us take a look at an example of each shot type. Keep in mind, we are going to first explore the simplest of shots (static, **locked-off** shots) of a person (the subject within the frame) and then build in complexity of content and composition. So let us begin at the beginning.

Medium Shot

The medium shot (also abbreviated MS) is the shot type that nearly approximates how we, as humans, see the environment most immediately around us. Imagine that you are in a room with another person and the two of you are engaged in conversation. Typically there would be several feet of space between you (unless you were particularly close friends or the room was extraordinarily tiny) and, as a result, you would most likely be viewing each other in a medium shot. Then imagine that you are holding a camera and you record the other person’s image. The resulting frame would most likely yield what is known as a medium shot. So it would seem that proximity or distance from the observer (you or the camera) can help dictate what is seen in the frame. A moderate distance then (let us say 5 to 10 feet) may lead to a medium shot. We will explore other factors, such as actual object size and focal length of lens on the camera, later in the text. What it really comes down to, though, is how much of a person, object, or environment is included in the frame. A viewer watching a medium shot should feel very comfortable with the image because it should feel like a normal observation (see Figure 1.3).

Close-Up

The close-up (CU) is the intimate shot. It provides a magnified view of some person, object, or action. As a result, it can yield rather specific, detailed information to the viewer. If we continue the example from earlier, imagine that person with whom you are having the conversation in that room holds a picture of their new car. In that medium



FIGURE 1.3 A medium shot with a single human subject.



FIGURE 1.4 A close-up with a single human subject.

shot, you would most likely only be able to see that it is a photograph, but certain details would be lacking. Then, if you take that photograph and hold it closer to your eyes you would see it much better. You just created a close-up of the photograph so that you could observe more detail and get more precise information—you clearly see the photograph of a new car. Again, object size, proximity, and magnification (lens optics at play) will help you generate this frame filled with a larger rendering of the object (see Figure 1.4).

The Basic Building Blocks — The Different Shot Type Families



FIGURE 1.5 A long shot with a single human subject.

Long Shot

The long shot (LS) is a more inclusive shot. It frames much more of the environment around the person, object, or action and often shows their relationships in physical space much better. As a result, the environment may take up much more of the screen than the person or the object included in the frame. To continue our example, the person who just showed you the photograph of their new car gestures toward the window and tells you to look outside at the actual car parked out on the street. When you view the car from the window, you are seeing it in a long shot. The car is far away, small in your frame of view, and surrounded by more information from the entire environment. The long shot may also be referred to as the wide shot (WS) because it traditionally encompasses more of the filmed world within its frame. A viewer is presented a wider field of visual information, often shot from a long distance away (see Figure 1.5).

These three major types of shots—MS, CU, and LS—will be the basic building blocks that you will use to start capturing your moving imagery. It will be up to you, the filmmaker/camera person, which shot type you use to cover the various persons, objects, or actions in your visual story. To help you decide, you may find it useful to ask yourself,

"If I were watching this motion picture, what would I want to be seeing right now?" Remember, it is the audience who ultimately watches all of your shots edited together, and their experience viewing your piece is based, in large part, upon the quality and variety of shot types that you can present to them. Next, we will elaborate much more on the other, numerous derivations of these three basic shots. So do not worry, you will have plenty of shot variety to cover all of the action.

The Extended Family of Basic Shots

Basic shots represent the most straight forward depiction of a human subject. The illustrative examples presented here are an introduction to the various magnitudes of shots that you will be able to create in each category. In order to keep things as simple as possible, the illustrations will assume a single subject in a plain environment with the recording camera placed roughly at the same height as the subject's eyes (this camera placement is a relatively standard way of shooting a person from a neutral position). For now we will maintain a character stance central in the frame, and looking straight to lens. This basic presentation is just for training purposes, you will later understand more numerous and much better ways to compose the images.

The following is a list of the basic shots (Figure 1.6):

- Extreme long shot
- Very long shot
- Long shot/wide shot
- Medium long shot
- Medium shot
- Medium close-up
- Close-up
- Big close-up
- Extreme close-up

Extreme Long Shot

1. May be abbreviated as either XLS or ELS
2. Also referred to as a very wide shot or a very wide angle shot
3. Traditionally used in **exterior** shooting
4. Encompasses a large field of view, therefore forms an image that shows a large amount of the environment within the **film space**
5. Often used as an **establishing shot** at the beginning of a motion picture or at the start of a new sequence within a motion picture
6. Shows where—urban, suburban, rural, mountains, desert, ocean, etc.
7. May show when—day, night, summer, winter, spring, fall, distant past, past, present, future, etc.

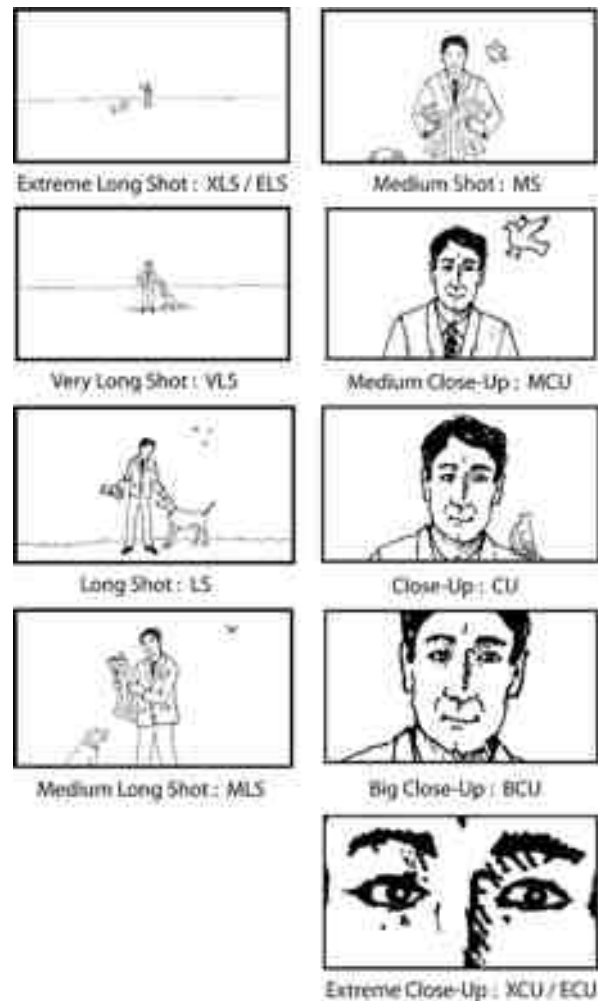


FIGURE 1.6 Examples of the nine shot types.

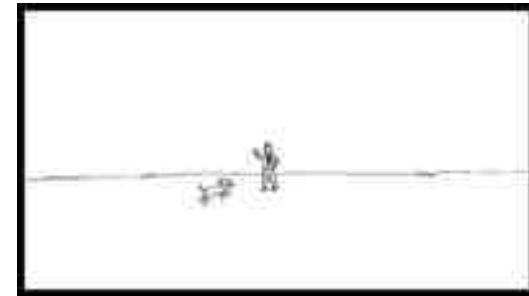


FIGURE 1.7 Example of an XLS.

8. May show who—lone stranger walking into town, massive invading army—most often the human figures in the XLS are so small that details are not distinguishable—general, not specific, information will be conveyed (Figure 1.7)

Very Long Shot

1. May be abbreviated VLS
2. Also in the wide shot family
3. May be used in exterior or **interior** shooting when enough width and height exist within the studio set or location building, such as an open warehouse
4. Environment within the film space is still very important as it fills much of the screen, but the human figure is more visible and clothing detail may be observed
5. May be used as an establishing shot where movement of character brings the figure closer to the camera
6. Shows where, when, and a bit more of who (Figure 1.8)

Long Shot/Wide Shot

1. Abbreviated LS and/or WS
2. This is usually considered a “full body” shot, wide but in close to a figure with head and feet visible in the frame
3. Interior or exterior shooting
4. Larger human figure takes attention away from the environment; however, a fair amount of the character’s surroundings is still visible



FIGURE 1.8 Example of a VLS.



FIGURE 1.9 Example of a long shot.

5. May not work well for an establishing shot
6. Shows where, when and who—the gender, clothing, movements, and general facial expressions may be observed more easily (Figure 1.9)

Medium Long Shot

1. Abbreviated MLS
2. First shot in increasing magnitude that cuts off a body part of the subject—traditionally framed such that bottom of frame cuts off the leg either just below or, more commonly, just above the knee. The choice for where to cut may depend on costuming or body movement of the individual in the shot. If you cut off above



FIGURE 1.10 Example of a medium long shot.

the knee, it is sometimes referred to as the “Cowboy” because in American Western movies there was interest in being able to show the firearm in the holster strapped to the thigh of a cowboy.

3. May be interior or exterior shot
4. Human figure is prominent; details in clothing, gender, and facial expressions are visible
5. Shows more of who than where and may still show when (Figure 1.10)

Medium Shot

1. Abbreviated MS
2. May also be called the “Waist” shot, as the frame cuts off the human figure just below the waist and just above the wrist if arms are down at the side.
3. Interior or exterior
4. Human figure is most prominent in the frame—eyes and the direction they look, clothing, hair color, and style are all plainly visible
5. Subject movement may become a concern, as the tighter framing restricts the freedom of gesture—be careful not to **break frame** (have an actor’s body part touch or move beyond the established edge of the picture frame)
6. Certainly shows who and may provide generic detail about where (inside or outside, apartment, store, forest, etc.) and when (day or night, season) (Figure 1.11)



FIGURE 1.11 Example of a medium shot.

Medium Close-Up

1. Abbreviated MCU
2. Sometimes called a “two-button” for the tight bottom frame cutting off at the chest, roughly where you would see the top two buttons on a shirt. Definitely cuts off above the elbow joint. Adjust bottom frame slightly for men or women depending on costuming
3. Interior or exterior
4. Character’s facial features are rather clear—where the eyes look is obvious, as is emotion, hair style and color, make-up, etc. This is one of the most commonly used shots in filmmaking because it provides so much information about the character while speaking, listening, or performing an action that does not involve much body or head movement
5. An audience is supposed to be watching the human face at this point in the framing so actions or objects in the surrounding environment hold little to no importance
6. Depending on general lighting and costuming, you may discern general information about where and when (Figure 1.12)

Close-Up

1. Abbreviated CU
2. Sometimes called a “head shot,” as the framing may cut off the top of the subject’s hair and the bottom of the frame can begin anywhere just below the chin or with a little upper shoulder visible (costuming and hairstyle dependent)



FIGURE 1.12 Example of a medium close-up.



FIGURE 1.13 Example of a close-up.

3. Interior or exterior
4. A very intimate full face shot of a human subject showing all detail in the eyes and conveys the subtle emotions that play across the eyes, mouth, and facial muscles of an actor—health conditions and facial hair in men and make-up use in women are clearly visible
5. An audience member should be totally focused on the human face with this framing, especially the eyes and/or mouth
6. Who but not so much where or when (Figure 1.13)



FIGURE 1.14 Example of big close-up.

Big Close-Up

1. Abbreviated BCU
2. Human face occupies as much of the frame as possible and still shows the key features of eyes, nose, and mouth at once
3. Interior or exterior
4. Such an intimate shot puts the audience directly in the face of the subject—because every detail of the face is highly visible, facial movements or expressions need to be subtle—very little head movement can be tolerated before the subject moves out of frame
5. This shot is about who and how that “who” feels—angry, scared, romantic, etc. (Figure 1.14)

Extreme Close-Up

1. Abbreviated ECU or XCU
2. Purely a detail shot—framing favors one aspect of a subject such as his/her eyes, mouth, ear, or hand
3. Lacking any points of reference to the surrounding environment, the audience has no context in which to place this body part detail, so understanding will stem from how or when this shot is edited into the motion picture—it may be helpful if the subject whose body detail is displayed in the XCU is first shown in a wider shot so context may be established for the viewer



FIGURE 1.15 Example of an extreme close-up.

4. This type of extremely magnified imagery can be used in documentary work, such as medical films or scientific studies, and may be used in fictional narrative, although sparingly, and experimental art films (Figure 1.15)

Horizontal Camera Angles

As mentioned earlier, when you photograph a person directly from the front of their face, it often yields a rather flat, uninteresting image (depending on lighting, which we will touch upon later). An easy fix to this is to ask the talent to angle their face/eyes away from the camera lens. Keep in mind, however, that the camera, instead, can also be moved around the subject. Let us imagine that the talent is at the center of a circle, like the hub of a bicycle wheel laying flat. The camera, facing inward, can then move around that circle's center, at the circumference, or the end of the spokes where the rubber of the bicycle wheel would be. As there are 360 degrees in a circle, let us use the degrees to help define how far along the circumference we can move the camera and what kind of shot that would create (see Figure 2.13).

With the camera facing the talent at the zero degree mark, we would have a full frontal shot—flat and often uninteresting, but factual as in a news report. If the talent remains stationary and the camera begins to move around the subject along the arc of the circle to the talent's left side, then we go through the positive degrees (+45, +90, etc.) until the camera comes to the backside of the talent and sees only the back of the head at +180 degrees (Figure 2.14). The same type of arc can be made around the circle on the talent's right side and the degrees would progress the same but in negative values (−45, −90, −180) (Figure 2.15).

It might be easier to think of the degrees of the circle like the face of a clock where the actor is at the center of the hands and the camera is at the outer ring of numbers.

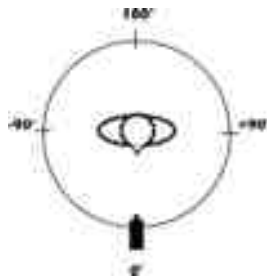


FIGURE 2.13 Camera's horizontal circle divided into degrees.

In this case, you could use the call outs of six o'clock for full frontal, three o'clock for left profile, nine o'clock for right profile, and twelve o'clock for full back of head (Figure 2.16).

Many people simply use a family of rough camera positions around talent, such as frontal, 3/4 front, left or right profile, 3/4 back, and from behind (Figure 2.17).

Remember from our earlier discussion that frontal shooting is used a great deal in non-fiction production as with news reporters and talk show hosts, but you will see it used often in fictional filmmaking when the talent walk toward camera or when they are driving a car with a **hood mount** and stare straight out past the camera as though they were actually driving. Although the audience gets to see the entire face, the overall image (depending on style of lighting used) can seem flat and lack a dynamic dimension, but shooting from the front is often necessary and appropriate—you just would not have the talent address the camera lens directly.



FIGURE 2.14 Camera's horizontal arc along positive angles.



FIGURE 2.15 Camera's horizontal arc along negative angles.

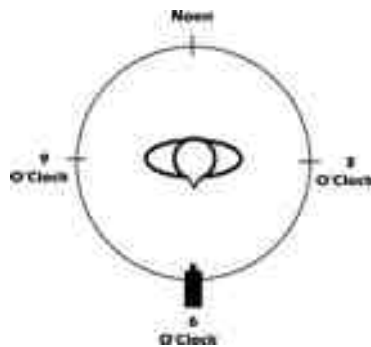


FIGURE 2.16 The numbers of the clock face can represent camera positions around the talent.



FIGURE 2.17 Frontal camera angle.



FIGURE 2.18 The 3/4 front left camera angle.

The 3/4 front, or 3/4 profile as some call it, is the most common angle on talent in fictional filmmaking. It provides the audience with a clear view of the front of talent so that facial expressions, hand gestures, and the like may be plainly seen. It also provides the frame with an increased degree of dimension. In closer shots of the human face, it brings out the contours and depth of the facial structures (eyes, nose, mouth, cheek bones, brow, jaw, ear, etc.). Note that we placed the camera around the circle to achieve the 3/4 frontal view of talent, but also placed the head and eyes along the line of thirds, yielding appropriate headroom and ample look room (Figure 2.18).



FIGURE 2.19 Talent in profile.

What kind of information can you get from the profile shot? You see if it is a man or a woman. You see the hair. If the person speaks, you will see the mouth open and close from the side. But unless your talent can migrate both eyes to one side of his head, like a flounder, the audience will not be privileged enough to see what the character might really be thinking or feeling. Since the eyes are the windows to the soul, not showing your audience the eyes (and full facial expressions) of an actor can generate feelings of duplicity, distrust, emotional disconnect, or secrecy. If this is the desired result you seek, then by all means use the profile shot, but otherwise, keep it reserved for these special occasions (Figure 2.19).

Now the 3/4 back shot should seem familiar to most of you. When used in tighter shots like we have here, it is getting to look more like what is called an **over-the-shoulder** shot (OTS). The camera gets to peek over the shoulder of our main talent and assumes a point of view like that of our talent (Figure 2.20). The camera (and therefore the viewing audience) sees directly what the main talent sees. Granted, the face of the actor is hidden from view, so we do not know what he or she may be thinking or feeling from this angle, but since the audience is placed into the shot from the character's **point-of-view** (POV), the audience is encouraged to do the thinking and feeling for the character or as the character more directly. This is sort of an objective–subjective shot type where you get a privileged point of view from what is usually a more neutral camera angle.

You may rarely have a need to frame a shot of an individual from fully behind them, but if you do, remember that the usual rules apply—headroom, look room, rule of thirds, etc.



FIGURE 2.20 The 3/4 back camera angle on talent.



FIGURE 2.21 Full back camera angle on talent.

As you may have already guessed, this type of shot totally obscures the talent's face and therefore keeps hidden the real thoughts, feelings, and intentions of this character. If, however, this is a known character placed in a suspenseful situation in the narrative, then this type of shot takes on a very subjective point of view, as though someone or something were following our hero from behind and is just about to strike. Scary stuff (Figure 2.21).

Vertical Camera Angles

In our examples thus far, the camera has been on an even plane with the object of interest—our actor's head. In other words, if his head is 4 feet off the ground then our camera and the **taking lens** (the lens that is actually recording the image) are also 4 feet off the ground (see Figure 2.22).

The general guideline to follow is that the camera and its lens should be looking at the subject from the same horizontal plane as the subject's eyes. This generates a neutral angle on action. The camera is positioned to observe the people, actions, or events from the same height as where the people exist or where the action takes place. An audience can better relate to the characters as equals. Once you raise the camera position above your actors or actions, or drop the camera below them, you begin to create a privileged point of view that results in a power dynamic within the shot. Let us explore both options (Figure 2.23).

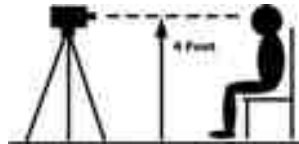


FIGURE 2.22 Camera height and angle of coverage traditionally fall at same height as talent's head for a neutral angle on action.

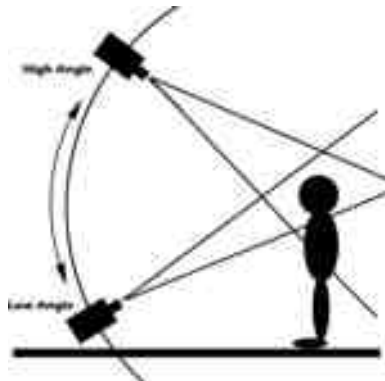


FIGURE 2.23 Vertical camera angles: high and low.

High Angle Shot

Covering any shot of a person or action from a higher vantage point immediately informs the audience of an implied meaning. The grammar of a high angle shot often yields an understanding within the viewer that who they are seeing on screen is smaller, weaker, subservient, diminutive, or is currently in a less powerful or compromised position. Through **foreshortening** and through “compressing” the character into the floor or ground around them, the camera keeps the subject down and makes him or her physically appear shorter or smaller (Figure 2.24).

If the high angle shot represents a point-of-view shot from another character, then the implied meaning is that the character that is up higher in the film's world is looking down on the other character both literally and figuratively. This POV may come from many entities such as a king, a giant, a flying creature, or an alien ship. An up/down power dynamic is created. Of course, there are few absolutes in film grammar and it is quite possible that when a character is seen from above, they may simply be occupying a physical location lower in the film space and therefore below the camera's placement. One will also find that a slightly higher camera angle down on talent yields a more pleasing line of the nose and jaw, and as a camera person you will often strive to make your talent look as good as possible.



FIGURE 2.24 A high angle view of talent.

Low Angle Shot

Let us now go in the opposite direction and drop the camera and lens below the neutral point and shoot from a lower angle up onto our person or action. As you may have already guessed, this angle on action usually generates the reverse feeling in your audience member. The character seen from below becomes larger, more looming, more significant, more powerful, and, of course, also physically higher in the film space. It is part of the accepted film grammar that a shot from below implies that the person or object you observe from that angle has a substantial presence, is considered larger than life, or may, at that point in the narrative, have the upper hand (literally and figuratively) (Figure 2.25).

The low angle as a POV shot also implies that the person (camera) doing that low angle observation is smaller, weaker, or in a more compromised position (think of someone who fell into a pit trap looking up at the person who set the trap for them—clearly a situation where the film space and narrative allows for the use of these shots—a low angle up to the higher person and then a reverse from the high shot down to the lower person). Again, it should be pointed out that sometimes a character is just at a higher elevation than other characters and it may not imply great importance, simply higher elevation.

It would be good to draw a distinction between a low angle shot and a shot that has a neutral angle but is taken from floor or ground level. The tilt of the actual camera lens determines what the shot becomes. If a baby sits on the floor and the camera is placed



FIGURE 2.25 A low angle view of talent.

on the floor at the same height as the baby and the lens on the camera is parallel to the floor, then you have a neutral angle on the subject—even though the legs of adults walking behind the baby may seem like those of large, looming giants (Figure 2.26). If the baby stays seated on the floor and the camera drops even lower and angles the lens up and away from the floor (any angle above the horizon line), then the camera has assumed a low angle position shooting up on to the large, looming giant adult legs, yielding that more diminutive sense of POV from the baby's position (Figure 2.27).

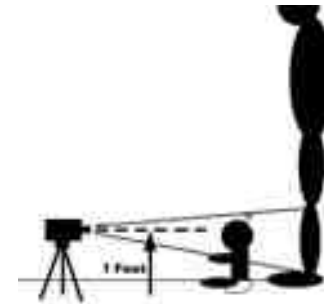


FIGURE 2.26 Camera lens parallel to ground is a neutral angle.



FIGURE 2.27 Camera lens is tilted up away from floor and becomes a low angle shot.

The Two-Shot: Frame Composition with Two People

So far our basic shot types have been composed around one person. What happens when you need to include two people in a single frame? Well, as you have probably already guessed, you follow the same rules used for the single subject. Headroom, look room, rule of thirds, balance of weighted objects, and so forth all apply to a shot that must encompass two people having some interaction. The nature of the physical interaction, of course, also helps dictate what type of framing must be used and what type of **two-shot** will be composed.

The Profile Two-Shot

Perhaps the most common variety of two-shot, the profile two-shot, is used quite often to help set up a dialogue between two people in a scene. A long shot or medium long shot will most successfully cover all of the action during the meeting of the two characters. As the figures are smaller and the environment is more prominent, the setting can be established and larger body movements may be covered from these shot types. Common scenarios where the profile two-shot may be appropriate might be a meeting of two old friends on a street (Figure 2.28), a confrontation between two feuding characters, or a romantic dinner for two over a small, candle-lit table (Figure 2.29).

When using a tighter framing to compose a profile two-shot, you alter the implied meaning of the encounter by enclosing the characters in a much smaller space. A medium close-up or a close-up will force the faces of the characters together in an unnatural way, unless there is an obvious aggressive intention or an intimate overtone. Based on our previous examples, the confrontation (Figure 2.30) and the romantic dinner (Figure 2.31) may be good candidates for the medium close-up profile two-shot, but the meeting between the two old friends may not be well served by that framing. Forcing the faces of two characters together in a tight frame, when there is no real reason to do so, can make the viewing audience feel subconsciously uneasy.

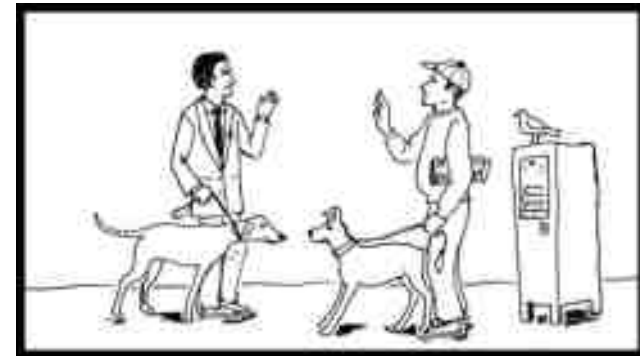


FIGURE 2.28 Profile two-shot as composed for the long shot.



FIGURE 2.29 Profile two-shot as composed for the medium long shot.



FIGURE 2.31 Medium close-up serves to unite the romantic couple within the tighter frame.



FIGURE 2.30 Medium close-up brings the feuding characters very close together in this profile two-shot.

The Direct to Camera Two-Shot

Whenever two people stand side by side and face the camera, you generate a more subjective shot. Their attention is toward the lens and not necessarily toward one another. An example of a truly subjective direct to camera two-shot would be two news anchors or sportscasters sitting side by side, addressing the viewing audience directly. A less subjective example would be two characters walking side by side down a city sidewalk approaching the camera (Figure 2.32) or perhaps two characters sitting in the front seats of a motor vehicle (Figure 2.33). These players have their bodies and faces



FIGURE 2.32 The medium long shot allows for ample room to move in this direct to camera two-shot.



FIGURE 2.33 A very common type of direct to camera two-shot. The confines of the car interior dictate the distance between the two characters facing the same camera.

opened up to the camera but, thanks to the conventions of fictional narrative objective shooting styles, they are not directly addressing the camera's lens or speaking directly to the viewing audience.

Either way, the framing for this type of shot must be wide enough to accommodate the shoulder width of the two people. The 16:9 wide screen aspect ratio of HD video will certainly help with this, but a medium shot may be the closest shot type that could be used to adequately frame for a direct to camera two-shot. Attempting to frame any tighter will necessitate the use of overlapping one body behind the other and establishing a visual "favor" for the character in the unobstructed frontal position. In this case, "favor" may establish a more dominant character in the story or it may just prove a convenient way of seeing a more intimate view of faces within one shot.

The Over-the-Shoulder Two-Shot

Most often edited into a scene after the audience has first viewed the wider profile two-shot, the OTS two-shot favors one character's face by shooting from behind and slightly to the side of the other character's head. Because the profile two-shot establishes location and the two characters involved in the dialogue, the OTS shot allows for the audience to focus more attention on the one favored individual's face and script line delivery. In both previous versions of the two-shot, an audience member would have to choose between which character's face they would look at and when, but the OTS decides that for them.

An over-the-shoulder two-shot may be composed appropriately within a variety of shot types ranging from the long shot to the medium close-up. The most commonly used framing, however, is the MCU (Figures 2.34 and 2.35). It allows for good body composition, equal headroom and maintains the screen direction of look room from one character to the other. The wider aspect ratio of 16:9 may allow for a tighter framing of an OTS, but it runs the risk of compromising good composition in favor of more facial detail—a standard single close-up may be more appropriate, as the audience benefits little from seeing the possibly blurry slice of the back of the other character's head in the corner of the shot.

Often, as a filmmaker, you will have to ask your talent to stand unnaturally close to one another in order to achieve the two-shot framing you are seeking. This holds especially



FIGURE 2.34 Standard, medium close-up over-the-shoulder shot.

true for the over-the-shoulder shot. In real life it may look strange, but on the recorded image it will look appropriate to the viewing audience. Just be aware that in film language, proximity and grouping equate a unity between characters. The family of two-shots covers some pretty standard shots though and is often the best choice for recording different angles of the same conversation between two characters.



FIGURE 2.35 The tighter framing takes away from the efficacy of the over-the-shoulder shot.

Wrapping up the Basics of Composition

So the basics of frame composition are relatively simple. We have demonstrated them using several simple shot types covering one person placed “properly” within the frame. The two-shot brings into the frame a second subject but still follows the same rules. The basics of composition will apply to any of the wide variety of shot types and to any objects that you need to record. A vase with flowers should follow the same guidelines of composition—headroom, look room, rule of thirds, camera angle, etc. Once you know the shot types, the basics of framing, and the power behind camera angles, you are well on your way to using good film language and making well-balanced images for your motion pictures.

End of Chapter Two Review

1. Provide appropriate headroom for each shot type.
2. Decide if a subjective (to camera) or objective (not to camera) shooting style is more appropriate for your project.
3. Create ample look room for your subject to balance the weight of the frame.
4. Follow the rule of thirds and place important objects along the one-third lines within the frame, both horizontally and vertically.
5. Choose a horizontal camera angle around your subject for more meaningful coverage (the 3/4 profile being the most popular).
6. Shoot from a neutral, high, or low vertical camera angle to inform an audience about a character’s “power dynamic.”
7. Profile and direct to camera two-shots work best from long to medium shots, but over-the-shoulder two-shots will work best from the medium close-up.

Dutch Angle

You will most often strive to keep your horizon line stable and level, thus ensuring an even viewing plane for your audience. A shift in your horizon line is also likely to cause shifts in your vertical lines—any tall building, tree, door frame, and so on will look tilted or slanted, not upright and even. When horizontal and vertical lines go askew it causes a sense of uneasiness and a slight disorientation in your audience. If this is done unintentionally, then you get people confused. Done on purpose and you have created what is called a **Dutch angle**, a **Dutch tilt**, a **canted angle**, or an **oblique angle**. When a character is sick or drugged or when a situation is “not quite right” you may choose to tilt the camera left or right and create this nonlevel horizon. The imbalance will make the viewer feel how unstable the character or environment really is—visuals underscore the story (Figure 3.6).



FIGURE 3.6 Examples of Dutch angle or canted angle shots. Note how the slanted horizontal and vertical lines skew the balance of the image. Something is not quite right within the story at this point.

Basic Character Lighting: Three Point Method

How one uses hard light and soft light to gain selective exposure on talent and on set is the fun part of creative lighting for composition. There are innumerable ways for you to place light on your actors, and hopefully, over your career as a filmmaker, you will have the opportunity to experiment with many of them. Starting off on solid ground is useful, however, so we are going to explore the most basic standard in subject illumination—the **three point lighting method**.

The three points actually refer to three distinct jobs that lighting fixtures have when put into particular placements around the film set. Rather than describing the light's properties, these terms define their purposes.

KEY—Key light is the one light source around which you build your lighting scheme. It is usually the main provider of illumination to your film set or location. You “key” your other lights (quantity and quality) off this main source. The key light may live anywhere around your subject, but it traditionally is placed 45 degrees (horizontally and vertically) off the axis of the camera's lens and above the height of the talent's head.

FILL—Fill light is a light source used to help control contrast. The light energy that it emits “fills in” the shadows often created by the brighter key light. The physical placement of the fill light is on the opposite side of the subject from the key light, roughly 45 degrees (horizontally) off lens axis.

BACK—Back light is the light that defines an edge, or halo effect, around the backside of the subject. Because it lives behind the subject (opposite side of the film set from the camera's lens) and provides a light “rim” to the outline of the subject, the back light serves to separate objects from the background and enhance the illusion of depth within the film frame.

The quantity of light from these three lights must be enough to achieve exposure on the scene. Clearly the key light will provide the most illumination. The fill light will contribute varying degrees of additional illumination depending on how low or how high a contrast difference you would like to have (how much or how little shadow). The back light need only apply enough glow to the edge of the subject to “read” or be recorded by the medium (Figures 3.26 and 3.27).

The lighting contrast specific to the human subject is a relationship known as the **contrast ratio** or the ratio of the fill + key side of the face to the fill side of the face. The



FIGURE 3.26 The evolution of the three point lighting method in practice.

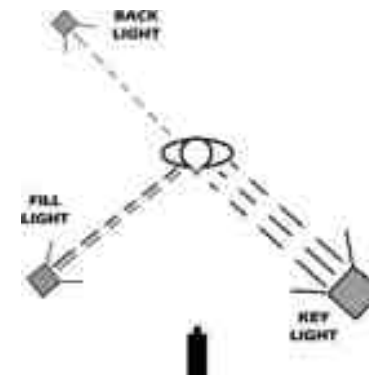


FIGURE 3.27 An overhead schematic of the three point lighting fixture placement.

quantity of light can be measured with a handheld light meter, but you really should develop your “eye” to gauge the relative amounts of light on each side of the face. Even light levels on each side would be a 1:1 lighting ratio and would create a high key scene of even and flat lighting. Differing quantities of light on each side may yield a higher contrast ratio, such as 8:1 or 16:1, and would be described as a low key scene with more deep shadow regions (Figure 3.28).

Continuity of Screen Direction

We all know that the rectangular screen upon which we watch a motion picture is not the place where the actions are actually taking place. Movies can pretty much be shot anywhere and in any direction, yet to the viewing audience, that screen is their one window onto the world of the film. As a result, the filmmakers have a responsibility to the audience to present a knowable world that conforms to some constant, physical world rules such as up, down, left, right, near, far, and so forth such that when the audience watches the motion picture they do not get confused spatially. The horizon line mentioned in Chapter Three is a helpful clue, but there are other ways that you can keep your audience grounded (Figure 4.2).

The frame that confines your selected shot type actually helps keep your audience sure of the location. As we know, the camera occupies the “**fourth wall**,” allowing the audience a privileged view of locations and actions within the film’s “space.” The top, bottom, left, and right edges of the frame therefore become references of direction for the audience. The character looks off frame left—the car drives away and exits frame right. The viewer associates the directional attention of a character or the movement of subjects in the film world to the edges of the frame. It should be clear then that **screen direction**—the left or right movement of a subject—must be maintained from one shot to the next. Figures 4.3 through 4.5 should help illustrate the concept of continuity of screen direction.

The audience member viewing these recorded actions on the screen (Figures 4.3 to 4.5) assumes that there is a larger “film world” beyond the confines of the four edges of the frame. Because this film space exists in its own version of reality, the rules of physical



FIGURE 4.2 The motion picture frame has four edges and corresponding areas of interest: frame left, frame right, top of frame, and bottom of frame.



FIGURE 4.3 Action shows a person walking toward and exiting frame left.



FIGURE 4.4 Holding on empty frame for a bit just after the person has exited.



FIGURE 4.5 Cut to new shot of the same person continuing their walk, but this time they are entering the shot from frame right. Action follows a continuity of screen direction.

movement must be obeyed as in reality—if a person moves away to the left they must keep moving away to the left until we see some change in the movement happen on screen. That is, if during a shot, a person walks out of frame left, you could assume a continuance of movement in that direction until the next shot picks up their ongoing journey. The character's leftward motion, however, dictates that in this new shot they would have to be entering from frame right in order to maintain that direction of leftward movement within the film's space.

The Line—Basis for Screen Direction

Not all screen direction is based on large, physical movements. A good deal of important narrative information and spatial relationship data can be discerned by the viewing audience just through their observation of the directions of **attention**. Most often, each subject within the film space pays attention to some other subject or object within the same film space. The child looks after a lost balloon (Figure 4.6)—the dog looks at the burglar (Figure 4.7)—the hungry man looks at the pie in the baker's window (Figure 4.8). The



FIGURE 4.6 The child's attention follows the ascending balloon. A line is created.



FIGURE 4.7 The dog looks in the direction of the intruder. A line is created.

audience is keen on observing these attentions and, as a result, uses these connections between people and people, people and objects, and so on to establish **lines of direction**, which are also called **sight lines**. Good filmmakers know that an audience desires these connections, wants to follow these lines of attention, and uses this phenomenon to help establish narrative meaning and shot composition and to reinforce spatial relationships within the film space.



FIGURE 4.8 The hungry man eyes the baker's fresh pie. A line is created.

The Line—Basis for Screen Direction

The Imaginary Line—The 180 Degree Rule

The lines of attention need to be understood, established, and respected by the production team. As the audience relies upon these to receive and maintain spatial cues, it is very important that they remain consistent throughout the editing of a scene. To help maintain lines of attention and screen direction from shot to shot there is a popular filmmaker's concept known by several names: **180 degree line**, **imaginary line**, **action line**, or **axis of action**. As some of the names imply, it is an imaginary line drawn through the shooting location, roughly where all of the main action occurs, and it is established by tracing the sight line of the talent within the shot (Figure 4.9).

This concept's other name, the **180 degree rule**, will surely help clarify how this all works the way it does and why it is so important. Much like we discussed the horizontal camera angle circling around your stationary subject back in Chapter Two, we will once again imagine that your subject(s) is at the center of a large circle. For your first shot, the camera is once again positioned at the outer ring of the circle facing in toward the center where your action is occurring. Now superimpose in your mind the action line cutting across the diameter of the circle from frame left to frame right (Figure 4.10).

Once you have established this first line, it pretty much stays locked in place, but there are ways to alter it while shooting coverage. Of course, to get other shots of your subjects you will have to move the camera around the film space, but now you will have to respect this initial axis of action. The line has cut an arc out of the imaginary circle that is 180 degrees around from side to side. Your camera must now operate within that 180 degree arc when you set up for your new camera angles and coverage shots (Figure 4.11).

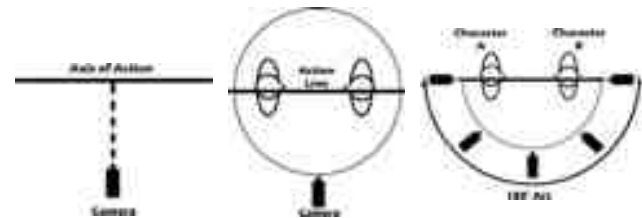


FIGURE 4.9 Overhead of 180 degree line along the axis of action.

FIGURE 4.10 Bird's-eye view of the action line.

FIGURE 4.11 Keep your camera setups within the 180 degree arc on the near side of the established action line.

The first shot establishes frame left and frame right and also establishes the lines of attention throughout the film space. Character A is talking with character B. A is sitting frame left and his sight lines are pointing frame left to frame right. B is sitting frame right (receiving A's attention) and is looking back at A (sending sight lines from frame right to frame left). When you frame your shot for a single CU of A you would need to maintain screen direction and continuity. A is still frame left with attention pointing frame right (even though B is no longer physically visible within the frame). Cutting back to B in her CU would necessitate a similar treatment. B is framed toward the right, looking out frame left. The series of shots and overhead diagrams in Figure 4.12 should help solidify this practice.

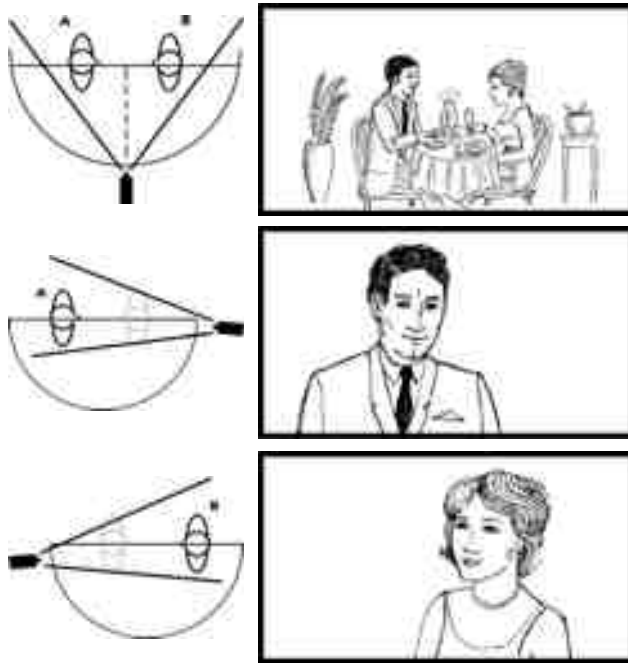


FIGURE 4.12 Respecting the imaginary line and staying within the 180 degree arc will result in correct continuity of screen direction across the shots of this dialogue scene.

The Imaginary Line—The 180 Degree Rule

“Jumping the Line”

It does happen from time to time, but most filmmakers do not notice it until they get into the editing process. To “**jump the line**” or “**cross the line**” means that you placed the camera on the opposite side of the action line and recorded coverage shots from the wrong side of the 180 degree arc—effectively reversing the established directions of left and right and inverting the film space on the unaware viewer. In the series of shots shown in Figure 4.13, the first two are repeated from our example given earlier, but the third shot is taken, by mistake, from the far side of the arc. The result is a nice

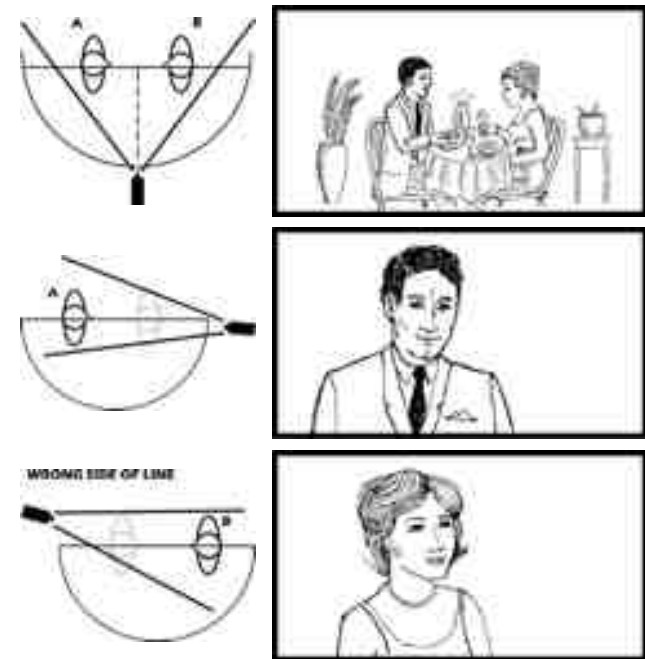


FIGURE 4.13 Only when edited together does one see the incorrect screen direction of character B's attention in the close-up. The camera had jumped the axis of action.

CU of character B, but the real mistake is not apparent until the three shots are edited together. B's screen direction and line of attention are reversed and therefore the cuts make no sense because it now appears that both A and B are sitting in the same fashion looking off frame right, not looking back and forth at one another as established in the wider two shot.

Crossing the line is acceptable under certain circumstances, which are explored in more detail in Chapter Six. For now, just think of how you would have to cover a couple slow dancing cheek to cheek on a dance floor. You would have one face on one side of a head and the other face on the opposite side, with the axis of action cutting through each. In order to see both faces, you would have to cross the line to set up your shot. As you may have picked up by now, there are very few absolutes when it comes to the guidelines and "rules" presented in this text. Remember, if you have creative reasons to execute a certain shot or group of shots a certain way, then do it, even if it flies in the face of convention.

The 30 Degree Rule

Grounded in the execution of the 180 degree rule is another important guideline called the **30 degree rule**. Simply put, when you are seeking various angles on action for a variety of shot types within your 180 degree arc, you should ideally move the camera at least 30 degrees around the semicircle before you begin to frame up a new shot of the same subject. The angle of view or perspective on the same subjects is considered "different enough" when the camera is moved away from the previous setup by at least 30 degrees. Because each shot or view of the action is supposed to show new information to the audience, it makes sense that you would not wish to create two separate coverage shots that are too similar to one another. Following this 30 degree rule can help prevent this similarity in repeated shots when the edit process is underway. This will avoid what is known as a **jump cut**—two shots with similar framing of the same object cut together causing a visual jump in either space or time within the film's world (Figures 4.14 and 4.15).

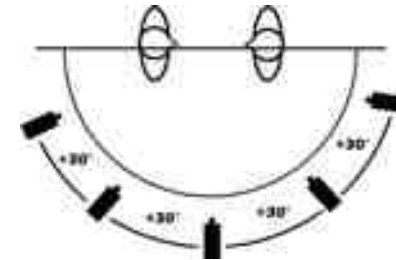


FIGURE 4.14 A 180 degree arc from the action line broken down into 30 degree slices.



FIGURE 4.15 The same subjects as seen through the camera at five 30 degree slices around the 180 degree arc. This maintains the action line and achieves a new angle on action appropriate for the edit.

The 30 Degree Rule

Reciprocating Imagery

Our recent example of shots cutting from a wider two-shot to two singles in a medium close-up serves well to illustrate our next point. Whenever you shoot one type of shot to cover one character in a scene you should create the exact same corresponding frame for the other character in the scene. They call this **matching shots** or **reciprocating imagery** (Figure 4.16).

Tradition holds that an editor might normally show a scene from the outside in, where the shots of the action start off wider to show environment and characters and then, as the action progresses, cut together tighter and closer shots in order to show more intimate detail by the end. Each new camera setup with new framing should match for object size and object placement. Of course, you may have to make allowances for actual subject size, hairstyle, hat, or other accessories that may require slightly different framing. Your main goal, however, will be to provide the editor with equal numbers of shots and matching framing for each character. When it comes time to cut, he or she can progress along shot size or type from one character to the next.

The same can be said for the camera angle itself. Generally speaking, when you cover two separate characters with single shots from the same scene, you should take care to match the camera height, camera lens angle (tilted up or down or neutral), and overall camera



FIGURE 4.16 Shooting matching shots for medium close-up coverage is best. Providing an editor with an MCU of one character but only a BCU of the other may cause issues during the edit. The shot types do not match.

angle on action. Of course, because you must take your storytelling needs into account, not every aspect may match exactly. The overall camera angle on action, though, is tied in with the 180 degree rule and the associated geometry really helps keep everything organized. If you shoot character A from a 45 degree angle around your 180 degree arc, then you should swing the camera around to the other end of your arc and shoot character B from a corresponding 45 degree angle. Provided that you keep the same camera height and lens focal length, you should be able to easily generate the reciprocating image of the second character that matches the framing of the first shot (Figures 4.17 and 4.18).

When two subjects appear in the same frame, the same matching shot rules apply. For example, the **over-the-shoulder** shot allows the audience to keep track of the physical placement of each character in the scene. Lines of attention and screen direction are still required to maintain spatial relations. When you establish a frame that favors character A's face, you include a portion of the backside of character B's head and shoulder.

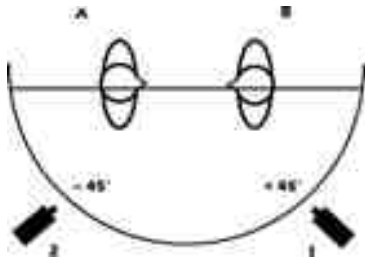


FIGURE 4.17 Camera setup 1 records MS of character A from 45 degrees on the arc. Camera setup 2 records MS of character B from -45 degrees on the opposite side of the same arc.



FIGURE 4.18 The resulting matching MS shots of characters A and B.

For consistency in editing purposes, the reverse shot, favoring character B's face, must also be recorded. The audience will often expect that reverse shot to be matching in subject size, subject composition, camera height, angle on action, and so forth, unless you are providing purposefully altered framing for storytelling reasons. When cutting from one OTS to another, any differences in these image factors will be very apparent and the mismatch will cause your audience, perhaps just on a subconscious level, to have an unfavorable reaction to the scene (Figures 4.19 and 4.20).



FIGURE 4.19 Matching over-the-shoulder shots for characters A and B.



FIGURE 4.20 Mismatching over-the-shoulder shots for characters A and B. Note how the subjects framing, size, and angle are not consistent.

Eye-Line Match

Another important notion associated with shooting for editing is the concept of **eye-line match**. This takes the line of attention or sight line from one shot and ties it directly with an object in a new shot after a transition. Eye-line match usually involves a character isolated within a frame (perhaps illustrated most easily with an MS or an MCU shot) when their attention is directed somewhere outside the four edges of that frame. The audience traces an imaginary line from the character's eyes to the edge of the frame where they are looking.

The filmmaker, most often, is then obliged to have to show the audience what the character is looking at. The next shot should be that object of interest revealed to the audience. And it's not just revealed in some arbitrary shot. It should be shot from a similar direction, angle, and height that closely match what the perspective would be from the vantage point of the character observing the object in the first shot. This does not have to be a direct, subjective POV shot, but it does have to maintain and respect the eye-line established with the observing character so that the audience feels adequately informed that they, too, are seeing the same object as the character in the film.

Eye-line match is a "setup and then payoff" scenario maker. The first shot sets up an expectation and then the second shot fulfills that expectation. The important thing is to frame the second shot from a corresponding vantage point so that the illusion of connection and character association is made by the audience (Figure 4.21).



FIGURE 4.21 The first shot sets up the subject and the eye-line of interest. The second shot, presented from a correspondingly subjective viewpoint, reveals the object of interest.

End of Chapter Four Review

1. The shots you create must be edited together so plan for that process.
2. Watch for continuity of action in performance.
3. Maintain continuity of screen direction from one shot to another.
4. Let the line of attention connect objects for the audience.
5. Use sight lines and the action line to maintain proper screen direction while shooting coverage for a scene.
6. Move the camera at least 30 degrees (or more) around your shooting arc and change your focal length so no two shots of coverage seem to come from the same angle on action.
7. Always match your shots for framing, angle, focal length, and so on when shooting a multicharacter scene, unless you have a creative motivation to do otherwise.
8. An eye-line match keeps your audience informed and grounded. Expectations are set up in one shot and paid off in the next.

Chapter Five

Dynamic Shots—Talent and Camera in Motion

QUESTION: How do you keep the camera steady?

ANSWER: Any way you can.

The answer to this question is a bit glib, but it clearly illustrates the importance of maintaining a steady image. What good would it do to prepare a well-composed shot only to have its image blurred or confused by an unstable camera? Not much good at all. The same would go for talent that suddenly moved around your shot, compromising your carefully planned composition and depth of field. Now this does not mean that all shots need to be static, but it does drive home the point that your movements should be well planned, well executed, and even designed as part of the overall “character” or “mood” of your motion picture.

We began our exploration of the grammar of the shot with very simple, single subject, static shots. Static means no movement, but because we are shooting motion pictures it will be a good idea to incorporate more movement into the shots and scenes. Next, with a camera still “locked-off” we introduced talent movement: people exiting or entering the frame and so forth. Let us briefly touch on this topic of talent movement while we are at this point.

Handheld

Perhaps the best place to begin a discussion of camera movement is with the most challenging—going **handheld**. You may find it convenient to hold a smaller camera in your hand, but just because it is a readily available mode of shooting does not mean that it is appropriate and it certainly does not mean it is easy to do well. The first factor involved is a technical one: what camera you are going to use to shoot your project. Modern digital video technologies have allowed for cameras to be quite small and quite capable; they can weigh a few ounces to just a few pounds. If you are working on an emulsion film motion picture, the nature of the medium requires much heavier and much bulkier camera equipment—often weighing in at 20 to 50 pounds or more. This is not necessarily conducive to handheld shooting, although they do have specially designed cameras for just such a purpose.

The smaller, more lightweight handheld camera is simultaneously a blessing and a curse. It allows for easy movement, but that often leads to too much movement. Having and using a tripod is always encouraged, especially if you are new to shooting motion pictures. Remember, everything you do with your shots should have a purpose and choosing to shoot handheld should not come about because you lack the appropriate **camera support**, but rather because you know that your story will benefit from the kinetic energy that a well-controlled handheld camera can bring to a project. Perhaps it would be best to compile a brief list of advantages and disadvantages for the handheld camera option.

Advantages

- Easy to readjust framing on the fly
- Creates sense of personal immediacy within the scene (subjective POV)
- Allows operator to move freely around the set or location
- Imbues shots with energy of motion

Disadvantages

- Easily becomes too shaky or causes swaying on the horizon line
- Difficult to manage focus
- Difficult to cut with static camera shots
- Too subjective, may be inappropriate for neutral voice of the motion picture
- Generally limits focal length usage to wider fields of view because the more environment visible within the frame, the more “stable” the image will appear

Pan and Tilt

Pan and **tilt** refer to the horizontal and vertical repositioning of the camera lens. A pan (or panoramic shot) keeps the camera anchored to the center of an imaginary circle but rotates or swivels the camera lens horizontally such that it views the outside of the circle in an arcing motion. Pan shots are often referred to as “sweeping” because they can encompass large swaths of wide open landscape with only a few degrees of sweep along the arc of the panning circle (see Figure 5.2). A tilt rotates or swivels the camera’s lens along a vertical axis during the recording of a shot. If a balloon floats out of a child’s hand and drifts up to the clouds, the shot can start with the lens pointing down toward the ground and end tilting up toward the sky in order to follow the path of the balloon (see Figure 5.3).

There is also a combination shot that combines a pan with a tilt where the camera lens is simultaneously panned across the film space and tilted up or, conversely, the camera is tilted down while panning across. Either way this results in a diagonal motion through the film space in front of the camera. An example could be two people who are about to enter a large building—as they pause (frame left) to look at the imposing façade (currently out of the frame), the camera sweeps up and across the location to the right in order to end the shot on the building itself. An upward diagonal **tilt-pan** has been executed to cover both the people and the building.

The action of a pan or a tilt is actually an unnatural experience for the human visual system. Our eyes and brains do not make smooth pans or tilts while viewing our surroundings. Instead, the eye travels along the space locking onto points of interest, registering with the brain, and then shooting along quickly to the next point of interest. It becomes a very rapid series of starts, stops, starts, stops with the resulting illusion that



FIGURE 5.2 Overhead of camera panning horizontally during a shot.

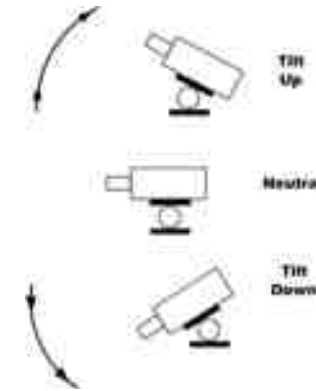


FIGURE 5.3 Profile view of camera tilting from neutral position to up or down positions.

we have panned along the environment or tilted our eyes up the building or mountain-side. Because a motion picture camera lens is not as selective, everything that it “sees” throughout the duration of the pan or tilt gets equal treatment. The smooth execution of a pan or tilt and the speed of that execution directly impact how the human audience receives the information within the movement of the shot.

To help the audience accept the camera’s panning or tilting movement, it is often good to motivate the move. In our examples so far we have provided these motivations. The upward movement of the lost balloon motivates the camera to follow the action tilting up toward the sky. The audience would like to see what happens to the balloon so they would naturally wish to follow its motion upward. Then we have the two characters who stop and stare up at the imposing structure of the building. Their eye-line from frame left across to upper frame right motivates the diagonal camera tilt-pan to **reveal** the façade of the building. The camera fulfills the expectation in one shot by showing the audience the object of the characters’ interest.

Remember that an audience member often places him- or herself in the position of your camera—identifying with the role of that observer. When the camera moves, it then takes on a sort of intelligence, following action or seeking information or resolution. Motivating your camera moves (pans and tilts especially) helps keep the flow going. There are times,

however, when you creatively have no visible motivating action for the camera to follow on a pan or a tilt. Perhaps you wish to shoot a long, slow pan of photographs depicting several generations of a family or maybe there are many different pairs of shoes in the front hallway of a home you would like to shoot—there is no motivating motion of these subjects, but the camera, when moved slowly, can still record the images and not disturb the audience. The slow speed of the camera's progression is a great way to help smooth over the panning or tilting action.

Dolly

The original motion picture cameras had a hand-cranked film transport mechanism, which meant that one hand (often the right) of the camera operator was constantly engaged in turning the crank during the actual recording of the shot. The camera was mounted on a tripod and the entire apparatus did not move during the shooting. The desire for camera movement quickly led to experiments where the camera and tripod were attached to a four-wheeled cart. The operator would stand on a platform, cranking the camera, and other crew members (now called **grips**) would push or pull the entire apparatus around the film set or location. This, in essence, evolved into the modern-day film **dolly**.

At their roots, all dollies are wheeled platforms. Some have three wheels, some have four wheels, and some have many small ball-bearing wheels like those on a skateboard. Many dollies have thick rubber or air-filled wheels that allow it to be pushed or pulled around relatively flat surfaces like a gymnasium floor or along the tiled hallway of a school building. Other dollies have grooved, hard rubber wheels that fit on tracks on the ground. These tracks (or rail) are like small railroad tracks and come in straight or curved sections and you can assemble different lengths to create a path for the dolly to follow (Figure 5.4).

Each of these different dolly types also has different ways to mount the camera to them. Some simple ones are just flat beds that let the tripod and the operator sit on top. Others have a built-in pedestal that can be raised or lowered via hydraulics. Still others have a **boom arm** that sits atop the pedestal and the camera and head are mounted to the end of the boom, allowing for wheeled movement and camera height and angle changes all at the same time.

The most basic job of the dolly is to smoothly transport the camera across short distances. As with most occasions of operating a motion picture camera, you would want the dolly, whether it is on the floor or on tracks, to run through its course as smoothly as possible. The slower the movement of the camera across space, the more visible every little bump will be. The faster the movement the easier it is to hide bumps, but the more difficult it becomes to capture meaningful visual information in your shot. Just as the pan and tilt had three components, so too does a dolly move have the static start frame, the camera dolly movement, and finally the static end frame. Let us take a look at the two major movements of direction that can be accomplished with a dolly.



Dolly

FIGURE 5.4 Various styles of camera dollies and booms. (Photos courtesy of Chapman-Leonard, Inc., J.L. Fischer, Inc., Matthews Studio Equipment.)

Crab

Much like a crab on the seashore walks sideways, a dolly can be pushed left or right parallel to the action being recorded. In this case, however, even though the dolly is physically moving parallel to the subjects, the camera is facing the action in a perpendicular fashion. Traditionally, during the **crab dolly**, the camera moves at the same pace as the walking talent. Picture a person walking down the sidewalk of their urban neighborhood greeting the many people he encounters along the way. The camera and dolly would be set in the street and pushed along the street at the same pace as the actor as he progresses down the sidewalk. Parked cars may make up the foreground, the man and the neighbors would make up the middle ground, and the store fronts and stoops of the apartment buildings would make up the background (see Figure 5.5).

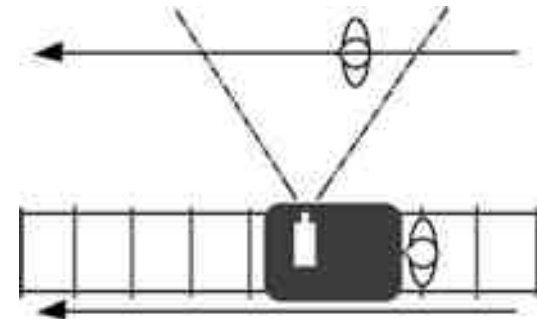


FIGURE 5.5 Although the crab dolly rides parallel to the action's direction, the camera lens is actually perpendicular to the movement.

Truck

If you need to push the camera into the set or in toward a subject being recorded, then you are “**trucking in**.” If you need to pull the camera out away from the set or the subject being recorded, then you are “**trucking out**.” These movements may also be referred to as **tracking in** and **tracking out**. This type of dolly move usually entails that the dolly and the camera are pointing in the same direction. The one axis glides deep into the set or out of the set in a straight line.

When done slowly, you achieve a barely noticeable change in shot type: a long shot becomes a medium shot and a medium shot ends as a close-up. This is a way to alter framing or shot type without having to perform a cut during the edit process. You basically alter the framing and composition of the shot over space and time during the recording of the shot. Unlike a zoom, which alters magnification and perspective on objects, this movement appears much more natural to an audience member as the moving camera lens acts like our own visual system and maintains perspective on the changing field of view. When done slowly enough, the dolly movement is barely apparent to the consciousness of the viewer—things have just changed somehow but no one “saw” how. This trick is also achievable with a very slow zoom where the framing and perspective changes are too subtle to be overtly observed (Figure 5.6).

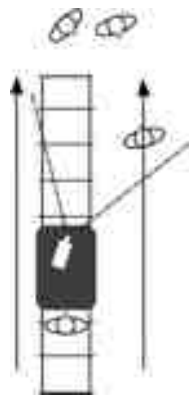


FIGURE 5.6 Overhead showing the dolly trucking in to the set along the tracks.

One can certainly combine several of these movements discussed so far in order to create a more complex shot that is sometimes called a developing shot. You could have talent move through a set as the camera dollies along the ground to follow the action and have the camera boom up the pedestal to alter the lens height during the take. A focal length change could even be introduced during a developing shot. The movement of the dolly and the possible pan or tilt can help disguise the zoom factor as the unnatural focal length change occurs. It can be very visually interesting to the audience but each element has to be accomplished correctly or all these moves only serve to befuddle the action and confuse the viewer.

We have not mentioned it during any of this movement discussion, but it should be made apparent once more that **focus** is going to be a major concern of any camera operator engaged in these sorts of movement shots. Camera to subject distances will change where focus falls on the set and it is the job of the camera assistant and camera operator to keep these consistent throughout the duration of the shot. This can become quite difficult and requires a great deal of preparation and organization on the part of both talent and crew. It is often best to run through the action for several rehearsals so that talent, camera operator, camera assistant, and dolly grip all understand what the timing of the shot is going to be like. These complex developing shots that involve talent movement, camera movement, focus changes, and possible focal length changes can eat up a lot of time on set so be careful with your scheduling on that shoot day.

Steadicam

For the most part, dollies are limited in the direction of their movements (left, right, in, out). Handheld camera work can be liberating but you constantly run the risks of bad framing, bad focus, and too much shaky movement. Luckily, a device called the Steadicam was invented in the 1970s that allows a camera to be mounted to a spring arm that mounts onto a body harness that is worn by a walking camera operator. This clever device makes it possible for a camera to achieve dolly-like smoothness as it is maneuvered on foot with a super-steady handheld immediacy. Focal length and focus are controlled remotely by an assistant, but composition and movement are controlled by the operator wearing the vest harness. Because the camera is freed from having to follow dolly tracks, the Steadicam allows for rather long and intricate tracking shots as talent moves into and out of sets or locations, up or down stairways, and over rough terrain.

Cranes and Such

Sometimes your motion picture project calls for a grand, sweeping shot of an exterior location. A camera at ground level, regardless of how wide your lens, just cannot encompass as broad a section of your film space as you would like to see. This is where the use of **cranes** comes in. Much like large cranes allow construction equipment to work up high, cranes employed for film use allow the camera to work up high. There are many different types and sizes of cranes, but the general idea is to lift the camera (and often the camera operator as well) up in the air over the set or location to achieve a very high angle view down on the action. Many crane-like devices called **jibs** also have the ability to “boom” the camera from ground level up to higher elevations during the actual recording of the shot. This movement, although not a natural move, is fluid and graceful and has become accepted by viewing audiences over time. Crane shots will help you show a lot of information from a high angle or even a bird’s-eye view and can add mobility that energizes the shot for the viewer. You will often see crane or jib shots used as establishing shots to open a scene or summation shots that close out a scene.

Grammar of the Edit

SECOND EDITION

Roy Thompson

Christopher J. Bowen

<http://home.fa.utl.pt/~cfg/Bibliografia/Realiza%E7%E3o%20Cinematogr%E1fica/Grammar%20of%20the%20Edit%20-%20Roy%20Thompson.pdf>



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The Five Major Categories of Edit Types

So far we have explored three categories of shot types, eleven kinds of basic shots, six elements that help make a good edit possible, and four different major transitions. Now we are going to examine five major categories of edit types. None of these lists are exhaustive and these five types of edits are no exception, but in giving them these named categories, we are touching on most of the major kinds of edit that can be performed with most material. There may be no industry standards for the terminology, but the definitions will still apply across the board. Granted, the type of project you are editing will help decide which kinds of edits you will be able to execute. Certain genres call for certain editorial treatments, but most programs could absorb one or more of these edit categories and do well by them.

Our five categories for the different types of edit are

- Action edit
- Screen position edit
- Form edit
- Concept edit
- Combined edit

As mentioned earlier, all edits can benefit from possessing attributes or addressing conditions found in the list of six elements that make edits stronger. Our five categories previously listed are all edits, therefore it would hold that each type of edit should also benefit from the same six elements. Let us examine each one and provide some examples.

The Action Edit

The **action edit** is nearly always a straight cut. As its name implies, this category encompasses edits between shots that depict continuous action or movement of subjects or objects. As a result, this type of edit is also sometimes called a movement edit or a continuity edit. The first shot in the series will show a person performing an action — cut — then the second shot continues that action but with a different framing. Time is unbroken. Movements appear to be smooth and continuous.

As a simple example, in a long shot we could see a man sitting at a library table. He leans forward and picks up a book to read it. In a medium close-up we see the man

holding the book so we can read the title on the cover and watch his eyes scan the pages rapidly. (see Figure 4.5)

1. Information — The long shot provides the audience with important information about the location, the subject, potentially the time of day if we see windows or lights on, how the man is dressed, and what his actions are like — slow, quick, normal, abnormal.
2. Motivation — In the long shot, the man will pick up the book in front of him off the library table. The action of lifting the book will be a good place to make the cut. The action is the motivator. Of course, you also have the option of delaying the action edit a bit and using the placement of the book, over the man's face, to motivate a cut in to the medium close-up of the book's title and the man's eyes.
3. Composition — The arrangements of subject, objects, and set dressing within the frame of the long shot create a strong diagonal interior space. There are **foreground**, **middle ground**, and **background** layers. The close-up shot offers a centrally weighted frame with the details of the book taking up most of the space. Although framing the man toward the left may have been more in line with his placement in the wider shot, the title of the book and the appearance of the man's eyes are the most important thing in this new shot, so the centralized framing is working better for the conveyance of narrative information in this case.
4. Camera angle — In the long shot, the camera angle is on a three-quarter profile of the man's right cheek. In the close-up, the camera has moved around the arc and approaches his face from a much more frontal framing. The difference between the camera angles of these two shots is more than adequate for the cut.
5. Continuity — The most important aspect of the action edit is the continuity, and the continuity of movement really should match at this cut point. The coverage in

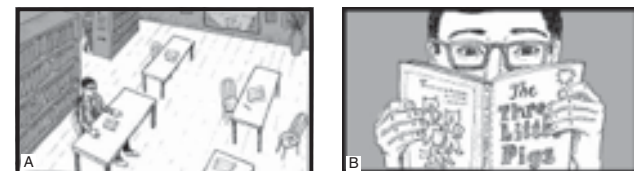


FIGURE 4.5 The motion of raising the book to read it motivates the cut on this action edit.

the long shot does provide the action of the man raising the book up off the table and opening it in front of his face. The close-up repeats that same overlapping action of the book raise and open, plus it continues along with the man's eye movement across the pages. As the editor of this action edit, you would be free to cut and match the movement of the book at any point during the action. Since you cut on action, the audience is not perceiving the cut, but merely registering the presentation of new information about the book and about the man's eyes.

6. Sound — Because this is a library scene, the ambient sounds will be rather sparse, but there should always be some sounds associated with the background of the location; perhaps a “sniff” or a “clearing of the throat” here and there, plus the “hum” of the light fixtures. You could even address the sound of the book pages turning once you move in to the close-up shot.

The action edit is quite common and can be used in very elaborate action hero chase scenes or in very quiet, slow-moving melodramas. As long as there is a continuous action or movement in the frame, the editor can use that to match the same action from another shot of coverage in the scene. If the cut addresses the six elements listed above, it should be smooth, unobtrusive, and allow an uninterrupted visual flow for the story unfolding on the screen.

The Screen Position Edit

This type of edit is sometimes called a directional edit or a placement edit. “Directional” because the edit helps direct the viewer's eyes around the screen, and “placement” because it is the unique placement of subjects or objects in the two shots cut together that make the viewer's eyes move around the frame. The screen position edit can be either a cut or a dissolve, but it is usually a cut if there is no passage of time implied by the edit.

The way the shots of a scene are originally conceived (through storyboards or script notes), composed, and recorded will help an editor to construct a screen position edit. Two shots in the coverage were designed to lead the audiences' eyes around the screen. Usually one strong visual element occupies one side of the frame and casts its attention or a movement toward the other side of the frame. Cutting to the new shot, the object of attention is usually shown on that opposite side fulfilling the viewer's need to see something occupy that visual space.

Serving as the most basic example of a screen position edit is the traditional two-person dialogue scene. Beginning with a medium long shot, two people, in profile to camera, face one another and have a conversation. The standard coverage would call for solo medium shots and maybe medium close-ups of each of the two characters. When it comes time to edit, you could go from the wider two-shot into the solo medium shot of character A who is shown standing frame left. While speaking he gestures with his hand toward frame right. You cut to a matching solo medium shot of character B who is shown standing frame right (see Figure 4.6).

The new, closer shot of character B yields new information for the audience. The gesture by character A, or even the line of dialogue being uttered would be a fine motivator for the cut. The mirrored **composition** is truly the linkage to the screen position category, since the audience had their eyes over on frame left for character A and then had to move them across the screen at the cut point to observe character B in the new shot. The camera angles around the shooting arc are significantly different. Continuity of dialogue delivery is met by the cut, which also means the sound is continuous as well. Not every screen position edit will address all six of the edit elements, but the more the merrier.

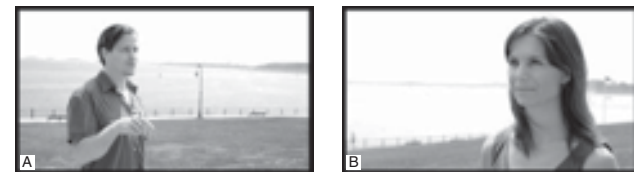


FIGURE 4.6 The screen position edit in its most basic form. One subject stands frame left while the other occupies space over on frame right in the next shot.

The Form Edit

The form edit is best described as a transition from a shot that has a pronounced shape, color, dimension or sound, to another shot that has a matching shape, color, dimension, or sound. These types of edits are usually preconceived during the writing or pre-production phase because the visual elements that will match require the correct treatment of composition and, sometimes, screen direction. Rarely is the form edit just blind luck on the part of the editor.

If using sound as the motivation, the form edit can be a straight cut, but in most cases, the transition will be a dissolve. This is particularly true when there is a change of location and/or perhaps a change in time from one shot to the next. The term **match dissolve** is often used to describe this type of form edit.

A simple scenario will serve to demonstrate a form edit. In a story about a man returning to his small, rural village, a series of close-up shots were taken of a jet plane tire, a car tire, a bicycle tire, and a wagon wheel all spinning counterclockwise as they travel over the ground. The four round shapes are framed roughly the same size with a central placement in the shot composition. Essentially they all match. As the editor, if your goal is to condense the man's travel time, you could dissolve from one tire shot into the next until you ended up with the close-up of the wagon wheel. You could then cut to a shot of the man sitting among some goats and dried corn stalks in the back of a mule drawn wagon (see Figure 4.7).

The audience will understand that the dissolving transitions are condensing time. The technological de-evolution of the wheel shapes will show the audience that the man is moving further into the rural area of his home village. The consistency of shape and composition helps keep the viewer's eye trained on the center of the screen and allows them the focus needed to understand the meaning. The sound elements will also digress from very loud to rather quiet as they cross fade into one another under the corresponding dissolving pictures supporting the audience's sense of location and "climate" change.

Form edits are also often used in advertising and television commercials. In thirty seconds it becomes difficult to say your message, so most often advertisers try to show their message in more easily understood graphical ways. Take, for instance, a commercial for an anti-smoking campaign. The **spot** calls for a studio shot of several cigarette packages standing up on end in a field of endless white. One package is the most prominent standing up in front of all others. During the spot, this shot dissolves into a shot of headstones at a cemetery. Each cigarette package was standing in the exact spot where a grave marker is standing in the second shot (see Figure 4.7).

An audience will most likely draw one conclusion from this form edit — that smoking cigarettes may lead to an early death. Whatever the perceived message of the advertisement, the use of the form edit (match dissolve) is what helps the audience to interpret meaning. The shapes are simple rectangles. The compositions match exactly. The juxtaposition and the imagery "union" during the dissolve generate a rather clear meaning and convey the advertiser's message smoothly and succinctly. Provided the duration of this form edit's dissolve was long enough, and the audio tracks worked together, the audience would flow easily from one shot into the next thanks to the matching forms.

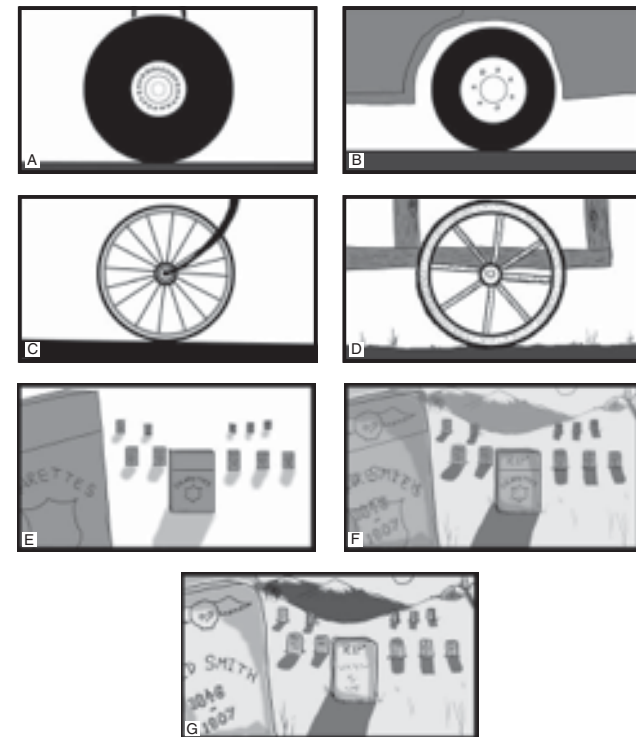


FIGURE 4.7 (A–D) The form edit of the wheels dissolving quickly takes the audience to new locations. (E–G) The form edit of the packages and the headstones generates a meaning in the mind of the viewer.

The Concept Edit

The concept edit may stand alone as a purely mental suggestion. These types of edits are sometimes called dynamic edits or idea edits. The concept edit can take two disparate shots of different content and through the juxtaposition of these visual elements at that particular time in the story, they can generate implied meaning not explicitly told in the story. This type of edit can cover changes in place, time, people, and even in the story itself, and it can do so without any obvious visual break for the viewer.

Most often, the concept edit is planned by the filmmaker from an early stage of picture development. He or she already knows that the two separate shots, when joined together in the narrative at a certain point, will convey a mood, make some dramatic emphasis, or even create an abstract idea in the mind of the viewer. It is rare, but not impossible, for an editor to create a concept edit from footage that was not intended to form a concept edit. Be forewarned though that these types of edits can be tricky, and if the intended meaning is not clear to the viewer then you just may have contributed to an unwanted interruption of the visual information flow.

The previous example of the cigarette packs and the gravestones is very much like a concept edit. The idea that smoking may be bad for you stems from the picture of the cigarettes dissolving into the gravestones. Using one may lead to the other.

Another example of a concept edit would be the following scenario. Two couples are out on a date and one woman announces to the group that she and her boyfriend are now engaged to be married. One man turns to the newly engaged man and asks, “So how does it feel to be getting married?” — CUT TO — close-up of a television screen. An old black and white prison movie is playing and the inmate wears shackles around his ankles — CUT TO — wide shot of engaged man and woman, sitting on a couch watching the movie (see Figure 4.8).

Neither shot has anything to do with the other. The group shot of the couples at the restaurant is, in no way, connected to the close-up shot of the old prison movie. The six elements need not be applied here. It is not the elements in the shots that make the concept edit, but the effect of what happens in the viewer’s mind when these two shots are joined together at that time. Clearly the engaged man is having some second thoughts about the concept of marriage.

The Combined Edit

The combined edit can be a difficult edit to come by in edited programming because it requires a good deal of pre-production planning on the part of the filmmaker. It would be rare that two, unplanned shots, could be massaged into a combined edit by the editor alone. The combined edit combines two or more of the four other types of edits. One transition may be an action edit combined with a screen direction edit, and there may be a form edit and concept edit all in one.

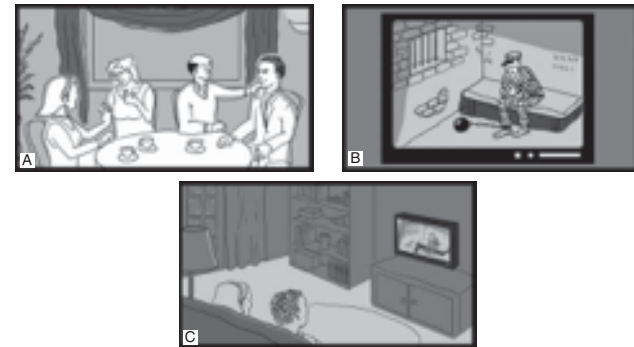


FIGURE 4.8 The concept edit conjures an idea in the mind of the viewer through the juxtaposition of seemingly unrelated shots.

Consider a children’s fantasy story where young brothers are playacting in their pajamas just before bedtime. They are pretending to fight off some goblins with a flashlight and a pillow. One brother tosses the flashlight to the other — CUT TO — a sword landing in the hand of the second brother, now clad in battle armor, standing on a narrow ledge in a cave fighting off real goblins (see Figure 4.9).

If planned well and shot properly, this scenario has many elements that will make it a good candidate for a combined edit. First, the action of tossing the flashlight across the room makes this an action edit. Second, the screen position of the flashlight and sword is similar. Third, the forms of the two objects are similar — the flashlight and the handle of the sword. And lastly, the concept of the power of imagination may be gleaned from this edit. The boys at play actually transition into the heroes of their fantasy.

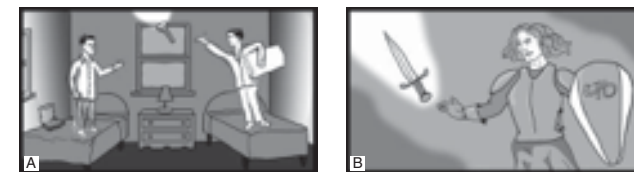


FIGURE 4.9 The combined edit takes on multiple attributes of several other edit categories.