

TIPS ON EDITING

Wonbo Woo / CUNY Broadcast Coach

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Have purpose: Every shot, every edit, every transition should have a reason.

Think about your visuals: It sounds simple, but it's really the number one rule in television. Write to your best pictures. Avoid what we call "wallpaper" – generic shots of neighborhoods and street scenes and building exteriors. If you need footage of generic *things*, shoot and select shots that depict them in active ways. A POV following a busy stock broker is infinitely more interesting than a wide shot of the floor. Use a doctor examining a patient rather than a hospital exterior.

Sequence: Shoot and edit in sequences whenever possible. A well-edited sequence in an edit is almost always better than a move or a series of unrelated shots.

Sequences are series of shots that depict an action or scene. Sports plays are a good example – every play is a sequence: in baseball, for example, the play starts with a wide shot from up high or from center field, showing both the batter and pitcher in the same shot (an establishing shot); followed by a shot of the pitcher pitching; a shot of the bat hitting the ball; a shot following the ball until it's caught or hits the ground; and a shot of the batter running to base. The series of shots depicts a single sequence of events; remove any of them, and you have problems with continuity.

Things to keep in mind:

Continuity: Does the sequence make sense? It doesn't have to be exact, but make sure that you're not missing logical steps in the action. If a waitress is walking out from the kitchen in one shot with no drinks in her hand, the second shot in the sequence cannot be of her delivering drinks to a table. You'll need to insert shots of her stopping by the bar to pick up drinks – or rethink the sequence. Sometimes, you can get away with inserting a cutaway – in the first shot, you see her walking into the dining room; in the second, you see people at the table talking; in the third, she delivers drinks. Think about the order of the shots you use.

Finish the motion: If someone in the frame starts an action, let them finish it. If you see a pedestrian crossing the street, let them go in and out of the frame – whether you use one shot or two (a low angle shot and a headon, for example), you should see them get to the other side of the street or walk out of the frame.

Your shots don't have to be static: Just because you're cutting in sequence doesn't mean you have to use static shots. You can sequence using POV or handheld shots – or even pans and tilts, in some cases.

Rhythm/pacing: Visuals have rhythm, too. Just as you want to vary your sentence structure when writing, you want to vary the pace of your package with short and long shots, moves and sequences, and a variety of focal lengths. A couple of tips:

- **Cut off the line:** Try changing shots mid-sentence. Unless there's a specific list of things in the track ("apples, oranges, and bananas," "health, education, and technology") you don't have to follow the rhythm of the track: syncopating the shots will give the piece better energy.
- **Let the shot guide you:** A lot of people get bogged down in picking the section of the track they want to cover with a particular shot. If you're using a shot you really like, mark the shot in its entirety and pick either a start or an end point in your track – not both. Lay it in and see what happens – it often works just fine.

Natural sound: Smart use of natural sound (NATS) can mean the difference between a good piece and a great one. Use active sound – and when you're able to, break for NATS – insert a bit of sound before, after, or in between track lines to punctuate the rhythm. Here are some good reasons to break for NATS:

- To introduce a new section of the piece. Think of it as a transitional device – a few seconds of NATS to flag a new idea. At the end of a track line about retail sales, you might use insert a little bit of sound from the cashier – "thanks – come again!"
- To break up a long sentence. Look for a natural break in the sentence and open for a beat of sound. In that same piece – about retail sales – you break in the middle of the line to insert the sound of a cash register drawer shutting. Keep mid-sentence breaks short, though – you don't want to lose the flow of the line.
- To give yourself more time in a fast sequence. If you're covering a line like "19 Fortune 500 companies have their headquarters in Minnesota - businesses like 3M, Best Buy, and Target" – you don't have a lot of time to show each of those businesses. Using a half-second of manufacturing NATS after 3M and the sound of a cashier's drawer shutting at Target will give you a little breathing room.

Note: If you're opening for NATS, try to use good, distinct sound: a door shutting, a person typing, a car horn honking. If it's someone talking, use a short, clear phrase ("Can I help you?").

Cover soundbites: If you're using a long soundbite, cover part of it as though it was track.

Dissolves: Be wary of dissolves. Dissolves are used to soften transitions – but in so doing, they often muddy the rhythm of a spot. Here are three reasons that are commonly given for using dissolves, and my admittedly subjective responses to them:

1. "The moves weren't finished" – or, you're using the dissolve to transition between moving shots – e.g. a pan and a tilt down, in which the motion hasn't finished by the time you choose to make an edit. This is probably the most common reason given for using dissolves – and for a lot of people, it becomes a crutch. Time the shots differently or pick different ones. And if the moves are very slow, you may be able to cut them together anyhow - don't assume it won't work without the dissolve.
2. "It was about the past" – you're using the dissolve to introduce a track line about something that took place in the past. Viewers aren't that stupid. If you say it happened thirty years

ago, they'll get it. Try opening for natural sound to introduce the transition instead – if you're describing the Vietnam War, use some chanting from an anti-war rally or gunfire / chopper NATS from Vietnam to introduce the track line.

3. "It needs a softer tone" – you're looking for softer transitions in an obituary or a piece about nature. This is the best argument for using a dissolve. But maintain a high bar.

Effects: Don't overuse them. Page turns, push wipes, picture-in-pictures – they all have their place. But people often use them as whistles and bells. Have a reason for using them – don't just do it to "jazz up" your piece. There's a piece called "Batman" in my Media folder which I think is an example of well-used effects – we used push wipes to mimic reading a comic book, and a treatment for the interviews that was meant to provide a contextualized visual style.

Music: Hard news pieces don't traditionally use recorded music to add tone or "mood" – but morning and magazine shows frequently do. I'd encourage you not to – but the notable exception to the rule is in a piece that is about music (say, a profile of a musician or a piece about orchestras) or in which music figures prominently (at a memorial service, for example).

The one major rule of thumb: follow the phrase.

Don't use NATS just for the sake of it – listen for the beginning and end of the line. It's not easy to do – especially when you're cutting a short-form piece – but you should include complete phrases rather than fragments, which will leave the piece feeling stilted.

Try cutting to the rhythm of the music, too: if it's a track with a percussive beat, change shots on the up or down beat.



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