

TIPS FOR SHOOTING A STORY

Wonbo Woo / CUNY Broadcast Coach, Fall '09

Before you start shooting:

- **Research** the story and figure out your angle.
- Find **voices** for the piece. Pick your voices carefully. Find the most knowledgeable “experts” that you can – pre-interview them and find people who are both experts in their fields and strong communicators. Even more important: get great **characters**. These are different from your experts – they’re people who are sympathetic and help illustrate the *impact* of a story rather than simply providing analysis. You’ll want to set your characters up, providing details that get the viewer interested in their story, as opposed to the experts, who are simply there to provide analysis. (There are some cases in which your experts will be your characters, but not many).
- Make a list of **questions** to refer to *in case you need them* (think of it as a checklist to refer back to at the end, just to make sure you’ve covered your bases).
- Make a **checklist** of all the elements you know you’ll need: broll and setup, file picture, any wallpaper-y images (street scenes), think about any graphics you may want – and whether there’s a way to make the more visual than text-based CGs.
- Make a **shoot schedule** – include contact info, locations, and a rough schedule for shooting. If you’re working with someone else (if one of your classmates, or a member of the broadcast staff, is helping you shoot, for example) – make sure you get them a copy of the shoot schedule. Include some background if they’re not familiar with the story.
- **Check all your equipment:** make sure all your batteries are charged and that you have plenty of tape stock.

Once you start shooting:

Get good **BROLL**. Get more broll than you think you’ll need. Things change when you start writing – and you’re always better off with more options in the edit room.

Tips:

Keep your eyes – and ears – open. Watch for any opportunity to capture a “moment” – or a detail that you can write to. If you’re with a street vendor, listen for the customer who calls him by name – or gives him a familiar “heeeeeeeey” – that two seconds of sound will save you a line of track. If you’re profiling someone, watch them carefully: you can’t shoot everything they do, but if you keep an eye out, you can capture expressive moments – interesting facial expressions, like when your energetic character uncharacteristically stops to shut her eyes for a moment – or a simple gesture – a father crouching slightly to hold his daughter’s hand while walking. Writing

to those details will make the difference between a good piece and a great one – but you have to have the visuals to back them up.

Shoot **sequences**. When you're starting out, shoot static shots rather than moves – and build sequences when editing. (Moves are HARD to shoot well). Make sure you shoot wide, tight and medium shots. Think about how those shots cut together: if you're shooting a waitress bringing drinks to a table, a shot of the drinks being poured, a shot of the waitress picking the drinks up from the bar, a shot of her carrying the drinks, a tight shot as she grabs a glass off the tray, a tight shot as it lands on the table, and a shot of a customer's face. Make sure you have continuity – e.g. if you're shooting broll in an office, and someone has their head down in the wide shot, their head should be down in the tight shot, too, so they'll match.

Change up your **angles**. For example: crowd shots are great from above – climb some steps or look for a store window or balcony that has a view of what you're after and try to get access. Low angle shots are great for a different perspective. Get down close to the ground and shoot up at buildings, objects or crowds to get a different kind of framing (this works best with a wide angle lens).

Think about **foreground and background**: Look for visual cues in the room that help tell the story. If you're in a classroom, and there's an apple on the teacher's desk, bring the camera close to the apple and frame your shot with the apple in the foreground, and the classroom behind. This will also give you things to write to (“These students...love her.”)

Hold your shots **steady**. Use a tripod whenever possible – and especially for interviews, buildings, street scenes and moves. If you don't have a tripod with you, look for objects you can use to prop the camera on – the edge of a trash can; the top of a parking meter – anything to help with balance. If all else fails, try using your free hand to steady your camera by supporting your camera hand with it – try holding on to your forearm or elbow for support.

When you're trying moves:

If you are zooming, tilting, or panning, Hold your shots for at least 10 seconds before and after any moves. That way you have more choices: you can either use the shots static or with the move.

Try moving yourself rather than the camera. It's hard to zoom at a steady pace, without abrupt stops and starts. It's often easier to move yourself rather than the camera: keep the shot focused wide and step forward and direct the lens to zoom in on an object.

Shoot your **INTERVIEWS**:

Frame your shot carefully. Pay attention to:

Location: Pick a location that makes sense given the subject. If you're interviewing a realtor, try shooting your main interview outside a home they've listed – standing in front of the “For Sale” sign, with the home in the background. If you're interviewing a widow, interview her in her home, where she'll be most comfortable. If you're

interviewing a professor, try to interview them at school – and schedule it on a day when they have class, so you can get broll.

Backgrounds: An interview shot against a blank wall looks dull. Look for a background that has texture without being busy. Bookshelves, flowers and lamps are common props that get used in backgrounds. The typical student interview is shot at someone's desk in a cramped office – with file folders, a computer screen, or a blank wall right behind the subject. Ask if there's a conference room you can use – somewhere you can arrange objects, and have more room to play with your shot.

Light: Even when you're not using a lighting kit, be sure your subject is lit. If there's a window, place them opposite the window, so that the strongest natural light will be on their face. Make sure that there isn't a strong light source behind them (a lamp or the hint of a window in the background is ok, but don't put them squarely in front of a window, for example, or else they'll be *backlit* and appear to be in silhouette.)

Depth: Look for depth of field – get as much distance between your subject and any objects in the background as possible. The more distance there is, the softer the background objects will be – giving you a rich, textured shot. As long as noise is controlled, the bigger the room the better – shoot a professor in their classroom or lab rather than their office; shoot a reporter in the newsroom rather than at their desk. If there's a door to another room, you might try framing them with the open door behind the subject – whatever's in the other room will become the background – and it will be further away.

Tip: Try to get – and listen for – short, pithy nats – e.g. “incredibly frustrated,” “not what I expected,” “I'm really excited,” “I drove 600 miles to get here,” little sentence fragments that get at what your piece is about. Listening for – and using - short snippets of sound like that will help give your piece rhythm.

Tip: If you're doing a series of interviews, alternate framing them on the left and right side of the frame. It'll help you cut back-to-back between bites if you want to build a montage – or when presenting opposing viewpoints.

ALWAYS get cutaways of the interview. A “dirty two” – e.g. a shot of the person shot from behind your head. A listening shot. If they use their hands a lot, use a shot of their hands. You may need these to cover sound edits.

Reminder: Get *contact info* for each of them in case you have follow-up questions. (Get in the habit of starting each interview by asking each interviewee – oncam – to say (for pronunciation) and spell (for spelling) their full names, second-line (title), and contact info (in case, God forbid, you lose your notes or want to use this footage again months or years later and want to follow up with them.)

Make sure you shoot some **SETUP** of each of your characters. Do whatever you can to make the setup shots look different from each other – it will give your piece more energy. If you're at an event in Washington – people at a march: get shots of one character walking through the crowd; shoot another walking past a monument/memorial; shoot closeups of a third as s/he watches a speaker; etc.. Bonus

points for visual elements that are narrative – things you can write to: e.g. “got up at dawn to get a good spot,” (shoot lines of people predawn) “squeezed into a car with five friends to get here,” (shoot them getting in/out of their car), “came with my wife and three kids” (family shot), etc..

Tip: If you’re shooting a walking shot – make sure the subject walks OUT OF FRAME – let them go all the way out of the frame at the end of the shot, or else you’ll have problems cutting from the setup to a bite.

Tip: Ask about any file picture they may have that’s relevant to the story: e.g. wedding videos if you’re talking to newlyweds; pictures of an injured soldier during her tour in Iraq; a family photo showing the father that changed a man’s life.

Shoot your **STANDUPS**. If you’re shooting on location, you may need to shoot them before you have a script. Try for 3 different bridges: something that doesn’t need to be at the beginning or end of the piece – but rather, marks a turn in the piece. Think about the elements that will be relevant to the piece no matter how you end up focusing it and plan your standup accordingly.

Tips:

Think carefully about the look of your standup. For starters, pick an interesting background that is *relevant* to the standup. An interesting framing with a lot of depth behind you. A lot of people say they don’t like standups because they feel stiff – if you feel that way: loosen it up.

If you’re in a crowd, get the camera above the crowd. You’ll be looking up at the lens, while the crowd is not – it’ll help make you stand out. Start tight and pull out – slow and steady (it may take a few tries to get both a smooth motion and a strong read – make sure you flag it on camera when you’ve got a good take to make screening easier).

Do a show and tell.

Relate to your environment – you can get on-camera doing a POV shot – with the photog walking alongside you as you walk and talk, describing the scene. Get creative. (Although I’d suggest making sure you have a more traditional take, too, just in case).



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