

# 10 Rules for Video Editors

by Jerron Smith

Note: This list is not only based on my own thoughts and ideas. Art rarely if ever occurs in a vacuum and creativity never does. Parts of this list are based on a similar series of concepts that I picked up from Gretchen Siegchrist in an article on Video Editing on About.com. Other parts are inspired by Walter Murch's great essay on editing *In the Blink of an Eye*. Other parts are based on conversations I have had over the years with fellow editors and graphics pros such as Bill Byrne, Roger White, Branislav Bala, and Terry Snyder.

I hope that some people can find some useful information in this list and that even more people can come to enjoy the craft of editing. One note on the order of this list, I specifically didn't add numbers to the entries since I don't want to imply any particular order. I specifically don't want to suggest that one of these ideas/theories/beliefs is more important than the others. And to be completely honest they are a lot more like guidelines than rules anyway...

## Stay Motivated

Every cut should have a motivation. There should be a reason that you want to switch from one shot or camera angle to another. Sometimes that motivation is as simple as, the camera shook, or someone walked in front of the camera.

Ideally, though, your motivations for cutting should be to advance the narrative storytelling of your video. One of the most obvious signs of amateur editing are cuts and transitions that have no motivation behind them. Adding a cube spin transition may look cool to you but ask yourself, "does this advance the narrative or is it merely distracting".

## Match the Scene

The beauty of editing is that you can take footage shot out of order or at separate times, and cut it together so that it appears as one continuous scene. To do this effectively, though, the elements in the shots should match up. For example, a subject who exits frame right should enter the next shot frame left. Otherwise, it appears they turned around and are walking in the other direction. Or, if the subject is holding something in one shot, don't cut directly to a shot of them empty-handed. If you don't have the right shots to make matched edits, insert some b-roll in between.

## Cut on Motion

Motion distracts the eye from noticing editing cuts and is the most common way of achieving the much sought after match cut. Cutting on motion helps to establish a motivation for the cut. So, when cutting from one image to another, always try to do it when the subject is in motion. If you have a shot of your subject turning, then cutting to a shot of a door opening (or someone approaching, etc.) at the height of the subjects motion provides motivation for the previous action and makes the cut seem natural and seamless.

## **B-Roll is your friend**

A-roll is your main footage, your main subject or the main elements of your narrative, while B-roll is everything else. B-roll refers to video footage that sets the scene, reveals details, or helps illustrate or enhance the narrative. For example, if you are editing an event like a show opening you can use footage of the building exterior, or the attendees arriving. These clips can be used to cover any rough cuts, or smooth transitions from one scene to another.

## **De Plane boss, De Plane**

For this one to work it requires that when the footage is being planned and shot you keep the rule in mind. Imagine that there is a horizontal line between you and your subjects. Now, stay on your side of the line. By observing this 180-degree plane, you keep a perspective that is more natural for the audience. Changes in perspective that break this 180 degree plane can be jarring for the audience because they make it impossible for the audience to establish their positional relationship to the scene.

## **Whatever you do don't Jump, unless you really need to of course**

Usually, editors strive for match cuts, seamless changes from one scene or camera angle to the next, editing that is completely transparent to the viewer. A jump cut occurs when you have two consecutive shots with dramatic differences. These differences can be based on movement, screen position, etc. Jumps cuts can occur in any type of project. Often when editing interviews you will want to cut out some words or phrases that the subject says. When the remaining clips are placed side-by-side, the slight repositioning of the subject will be very jarring to the audience. Cutting to b-roll can cover this jump.

By definition, Jump cuts are not seamless, they create a disconnect for the audience, it makes the cut very obvious and makes them take notice. Sometimes this is in fact the intention though. Films such as Alfred Hitchcock's Psycho and Goddard's Breathless purposely use jump cuts to create a dynamic uncomfortable experience for the viewer.

## **45 Degrees**

When editing scenes shot with multiple cameras, always try to use shots that are looking at the subject from at least a difference of 45 degrees. Otherwise, the shots may be too similar and appear like a jump cut to the audience. If your shots are within that 45 degree arc you may still be able to make use of them if the camera had two different levels. A close-up can usually be cut to a long shot without worry.

## **Change your Level**

This requires multiple cameras to achieve but is often worth the effort. When you have multiple shots of the same subject, it's easy to cut between them without creating a jarring experience for the audience. So, when shooting an interview, or a lengthy event such as a wedding, it's a good idea to occasionally change focal lengths. A wide shot and a medium close up can be cut together, allowing you to edit parts out and change the order of shots without obvious jump cuts.

## **Look for Similarity**

This principle is the key to the much sought after match cut. There's a cut in Apocalypse Now from a rotating ceiling fan to the blades of a helicopter. There is a similar cut at the beginning of Stanley Kubrick's 2001: A Space Odyssey, in which a scene of a bone spinning in the air is cut to a scene of a space station in orbit around Earth. The scenes change dramatically, but the visually similar elements make for a smooth, creative cut.

You can do the same thing in your videos. Cut from a flower on a wedding cake to the groom's boutonniere, or tilt up to the blue sky from one scene and then down from the sky to a different scene.

## **Wipe, Wipe, Wipe**

There are three transitions you will see with regularity; the cut, the cross dissolve and the wipe. At weddings, I love it when people walk in front of the camera. They are apologetic, but unless it happened during the vows or the first dance, I am grateful for the wipe they gave me to use during editing. When the frame fills up with one element (such as the back of a black suit jacket), it makes it easy to cut to a completely different scene without jarring the audience. You can set wipes up yourself during shooting, or just take advantage when they happen naturally.

## **About the Author**

Jerron Smith likes to describe himself as an Editor, Animator & Educator. A multi-faceted artist and video producer with nearly two decades of experience, Jerron works with a wide variety of different media. He has experience in both digital video/television production, and post-production as well as extensive knowledge of the Web and Print Design industries. He serves as an adjunct instructor in the Communication Arts department at the New York Institute of Technology, where he instructs courses in Computer Graphics and Video Editing. He served as the lead author on Photoshop Elements 7 Digital Classroom (2009) and a contributing author on Flash CS4 Digital Classroom(2009), in addition to serving as a contributing author or editor on several other book projects. Jerron can be reached through his website: [www.thepixelsmith.com](http://www.thepixelsmith.com)