

Shooting guidelines v.2

David Tamés, d.tames@neu.edu, 617.216.1096

Good video is not the result of having the latest camera, fancy support gizmos, etc. Ultimately conceptualization, good composition, smooth movement, and clean sound are the most important components of the production process. Here are some guidelines to assist your production practice and reflection on the results:

- Do not keep your distance and zoom into get different shots, instead, discover the normal to wide range of the lens and get in close to your subjects. You will **discover the beauty of the close-up and the mobility of the camera**, getting really close with interesting and unusual angles as you develop your own visual style.



- Work on getting an **interesting foreground and background elements in your shots**. Position yourself to get the “angle plus angle” so that you show the three dimensionality of your image. This may mean ducking down or looming above your subject, if appropriate, play around until you find the most pleasing angle. It’s not just your subject in the frame, the background plays an important part of the story too, you need to be aware of frame, angle, foreground, and background at the same time. In most cases avoid shooting subjects in front of a white wall unless you want a “floating in limbo” effect.



- Consider what your camera-to-subject distance, camera angle, and composition implies about **your relationship with the subject**. Are you on the level? Are they above you? Below you? Are you in the position of a social actor (participant) or a distant observer?

- **Fill the frame with what is significant**. The size of the object in the frame is relative to its importance. This also means that the space around the subject should be significant, so don’t float your subject in a lot of space if you don’t need to. Do not be shy of using partial images of an object, as this suggests that the image continues offscreen. Use the standard shot sizes for the human figure, but remember that due to the size of the screen on which many people will watch videos (mobile devices and



computer screens) you should favor the close-up side of the spectrum. Use a close up if in doubt. Avoid the natural divisions of the body, e.g. don't give a "lollipop" shot of the head, try to include a hint of shoulder. Avoid excessive headroom.

- Cover the action using a **variety of different shots** in terms of both shot sizes and positions relative to the subject, and make sure you have points of overlapping action or good starting and end frames when there is camera movement so that it will be easier to edit them together.



- **Use the rule of thirds** to make sure you obtain well composed images. This may require that you zoom in to focus the frame with the central object in the middle to enable correct focus, and then zoom back out and shift the camera position to attain the best composition.

- **Plan your shoots for good lighting.**

Open curtains. Choose to shoot scenes outside during the morning or evening when lighting is best because the sun is at an angle instead of directly overhead. A key light coming from the side or behind the subject is more pleasing than harsh overhead light. Don't shoot someone in front of a window unless you're using it as side lighting, or when you can provide sufficient interior light to compensate for the window. If it's too sunny try to find a position in the shade, away from direct sunlight.



Dark skinned people should preferably not wear white tops as that will wreak havoc with trying to set a balanced exposure, since you should favor proper skin tone exposure and let everything else fall into place. Side lighting and back lighting are often more beautiful, position your subjects so that they are lit by the natural light coming from a side window if you can when shooting interiors.

- Realize that under most circumstances, the **audio from the built-in camera mic is going to be terrible** unless you are shooting really close to the subject in a very quiet room. If you're not using an external microphone, plan your video so that you can use sound that you recorded afterwards in a quiet location. But always get the best ambient sound you can. The built-in stereo microphone on the camera is good for capturing ambient sound from the camera's perspective, for everything else, consider the use of a shotgun or lavalier.
- **Position your microphone as close to the sound source as possible.** If you are placing a lavalier microphone on a subject, place this in the upper chest area. When you record dialogue on location, always make sure the background is quiet. If you can ask people to stop making a noise, go ahead and take this extra step. When shooting outdoors, shield the microphone with a windjammer to avoid wind noise. When shooting indoors, close windows and doors, switch off sources of noise like air conditioners. You can also check out shotguns, lavalier microphones, wireless lavalier microphones, windjammers, portable audio recorder, pistol grip, booms, etc. from the Media Studio.
- Probably among the most important rules, always **keep the camera still while you are shooting, but if you do move the camera, move from one well composed shot to the other,**

and make sure the move is smooth and motivated. Why are you moving? Provide each shot with a “head” and “tail” to make editing easier. Editing means the action is revealed primarily in the cut, not in the movement of the camera. Avoid the firehose technique: searching left and right with the camera never still for a moment. Avoid your natural instinct to dart left and right and up and down and discipline yourself to count for seven seconds “one thousand, two thousand...” until you have your shot. It’s OK if your subject enters or exits the frame, those will provide you with great cutting points later. Resist the urge to always follow your subject.

- **Video is about time**, movement, color, shapes, texture, dimension, etc. so when you tell a story, find ways to incorporate the spectacular visuals that are available to you. Look for those shots that help tell your story in a visual manner. Take time to appreciate the wonder of the visual landscape that surrounds you.
- **Video is also about sound**. In addition to shooting interviews and cutaways, record sound effects and ambient sounds that help create the aural texture of a place, situation, or event. Take time to appreciate the wonder of the aural landscape that surrounds you.
- If you have your own video-capable smartphone, D-SLR, or video camera, shoot with that too! You should shoot most of your footage with the Panasonic GH4, however, it’s good to mix footage shot with different cameras to **add a variety of textures to your work**. In addition, since each type of camera has its own strengths and weaknesses, it’s good to understand the differences while expanding your visual palette, there’s a lot to learn, each type of camera has its own characteristic look and feel.
- **Be meticulous and shoot everything with proper white balance and perfect exposure**, which makes it easier to do post-processing effects. You should plan to make image manipulation decisions in postproduction rather than while shooting. In most cases, it is better to start with a perfectly exposed and color balanced image, and then take care of looks and effects processing during the postproduction phase where you can try things and back out changes all the while having more creative control. Over exposing or under exposing video results in the permanent loss of highlight or shadow details, respectively. Incorrect white balance results in the permanent loss of essential color information. White balance and make use of the exposure tools including the waveform monitor, the marker (spot meter), and the multiple Zebras which you can configure in the menu to activate in the viewfinder or LCD screen anywhere from 50 to 100 IRE.

Video tutorials

These and many other tutorials are available through lynda.com via the link <http://lynda.northeastern.edu/>

- “Foundations of Video: Cameras and Shooting w/Anthony Q. Artis”
- “Video Production Techniques: Location Audio Recording w/ Anthony Q. Artis”
- “Video Production Techniques: Location Lighting w/ Anthony Q. Artis”
- “Foundations of Video: Interviews w/ Anthony Q. Artis”

Books

- *Visual Storytelling* by Nancy Kalow, Center for Documentary Studies, Duke University, 2011, PDF, <http://tinyurl.com/vba-text>
- *The Filmmaker’s Handbook: A Comprehensive Guide for the Digital Age*, 4th ed. by Steven Ascher & Edward Pincus, Plume, 2012.
- *The Filmmaker’s Eye: Learning (and breaking) the rules of cinematic composition* by Gustavo Mercado, Focal Press, 2011.

The fine print

The text of this document is released to the public domain. Special thanks to Alette Schoon (Lecturer in Television Production, Rhodes University, South Africa), this document builds on a list of his guidelines. Frame stills from *Farm and Red Moon*, © 2013 Audrey Kali and David Tamés, all rights reserved. This document was set in Baskerville and Myriad Pro.