

The Rules of Video Editing

This is by no means a definitive and complete guide to video editing!

However if you just work your way through each point and most importantly, add it to your editing routine you will start to see better results... with hopefully less stress!

The tips contained here are not specific to any kind of editing program or any particular brand of editing software so you will be able to use them regardless of what system you are editing on.

So let's get started!

The Number One Rule!

➤ **Shoot to Edit**

Your ability to create a project that both you and your intended audience find satisfying depends on whether or not you have the raw material with which to build that project.

If you don't have the video assets to do that then you will always be struggling. So the key to editing is having a sufficient quantity of the right shots you need to do that editing.

This is why the shooting stage of any major movie production is given such attention to detail regarding every shot and every aspect of the project.

The rule is: **Garbage in, garbage out!**

Getting Your Ducks in a Row

➤ **Read the Manual!**

Every year, every video editing software maker on the planet undergoes a process of development in order to enhance and improve their product.

They don't do it because they are nice guys (even if they are!). They do it because everyone else is doing it so they can't afford to NOT do it!

Part of that development process is the expensive and time consuming task of writing a manual for the new release.

So if you want to edit smoothly and in a stress-free way, read the manual... **a couple of times!**

And as you are making your way through that manual, have the software open in front of you and actually do the things the manual is describing.

After that, practice, practice, practice!

Humans learn and retain information best by being exposed to a small amount of theory which is then used in the real world over and over again until it becomes second nature.

➤ **Learn to Use Keyboard Shortcuts**

Editing as an activity tends to be quite repetitive in nature and because of that, it gets real tedious, real fast!

Pointing and clicking icons and objects on the screen as well as clicking on controls is a very inefficient way of moving about the interface and the pro's rarely do it.

Each brand of software will have a little map available to you that shows keyboard shortcuts for some of the most common tasks you will perform.

Things like stepping through the timeline, making cuts, selecting clips etc.

At least learn these basic shortcuts and if you find there is an action you keep repeating, either find the keyboard shortcut for it, or map one for yourself.

How do you map a task to a keyboard shortcut? Read the manual!

It is a good idea to map all shortcuts to the left side of the keyboard which leaves your right hand free to operate the mouse.

➤ **Organize Your Assets**

(Definition: Assets - Video clips, audio clips, images or anything else that you will be using in a project.)

Before you begin any project you need to have two things in place and this is vital.

The first is an excellent knowledge of how the library in your software works and can be organized or rearranged to suit you.

You need to be able to access any part of the library or all of it and know exactly what you are looking at when you do.

The second step is that once you have become a library ninja you absolutely **MUST** organize your source materials for a specific project.

This means all your video footage, your music, your voice-over tracks, your sound effects, your graphics and your images.

It is absolutely vital that all these things are placed in the library where you can easily and quickly find them **BEFORE** you start editing.

Part of this may be that you need to rename all or some of these assets so that when you see each one in the library you know exactly or at least roughly what each one is.

Failing to do this will result in you endlessly opening and closing files trying to find what you are looking for.

➤ **Story Boards**

You may think that your project is too small for a storyboard or too simple but that is slightly misunderstanding the concept of a story board.

Yes, a story board for a full length feature movie is an incredibly complex and detailed document covering every aspect of the production and will be used by every department in the movie making process.

For a home editor the story board is nothing like that but just as vital anyway.

A story board does not actually have to be a set of little pictures outlining every scene or shot or editing choice.

In fact at the home user level or amateur level the story board is simply an outline of what the final project is going to look like and what assets you think will be needed to achieve that result.

The difference between a good video and a bad one is usually that the good one was worked out **BEFORE** any shooting or editing took place.

So at the very least have reasonably detailed notes prepared that will outline what the final product will look like so that you are going somewhere rather than just making it all up on the fly.

➤ **Train Your Software**

As you are working on projects and find yourself using the same settings or effects over and over, use the library to save them to a special folder so you can access them faster in the future.

For example if you find you are using a transition over and over but each time need to adjust it the same way, save that adjusted transition to a folder so you can just add it instead of adding and then adjusting again and again.

Do this for transitions, masks, moving paths, audio effects or whatever.

Most editing software these days allows for a huge amount of preset or newly created effects to be saved for later use.

➤ **Editing Basics**

Most beginning editors think of edit as a process of taking everything that was shot or is available for a project and then engaging in a process of removing everything that doesn't look good or is unnecessary.

The hope is that by cutting out all that stuff and rendering to a new file, movie magic will ensue!

It quite simply doesn't work that way.

Cutting out unwanted or poor quality shots from your original footage represents only a fraction of the entire video editing process.

Although it could be said that editing in this way is better than no editing at all, the only outcome will generally be a reduction in the length of time that your audience feels the pain.

If you change that idea and go to a different strategy it is surprising just how much better your videos can be without having increased technical ability or having learned some new tricks.

So think of video editing this way:

Video editing is the process of working out a goal (the final product) and then formulating a plan as to how you can achieve that product. It is a process of adding elements (not taking them away) in such a way as to build towards what you have already decided you want.

Your raw materials are video files, audio files, images etc. and your tools are all packaged together in your video editing software.

If you can at least get that concept before you start, the whole process begins to make much more sense and will give you much better results.

➤ **Start with the Story Board View**

Most modern editors have two ways to view any project you are working on.

One is the timeline view that lays everything out in a linear manner left to right.

The second and usually not the default, is the story board view.

This view shows all the clips that have been added as a series of thumbnails and because of that you can get a broad overview of your project.

Once you have roughly arranged everything in that view you can then switch to the timeline and start working on more precise actions.

Even at that stage try not to get too involved in tiny little details.

Just keep refining the rough cut until the whole project looks OK then go into the details.

➤ **Work That Interface**

Most video editing software these days has to deal with the problem of making the user interface as uncluttered as possible yet still allowing access to the many features they offer.

This is not such an easy task and generally speaking the fuller featured the editor, the busier the interface becomes.

Visually this results in a kind of unseen confusion occurring on the part of the person editing.

There is an enormous amount of information being presented onscreen at any time and often most of this visual information is unnecessary.

To save your sanity, go into your software manual and work out how you can modify the interface to suit your own needs.

Learn how to hide and unhide sections of the interface so that when you are working on one particular type of action you can get rid of everything that is unnecessary.

In addition to this learn how to zoom in and out on the timeline so that you can more easily do those finer cuts and adjustments.

This allows you to more closely focus only on what you are doing rather than leaving yourself open to distractions.

➤ **Assorted Tips in No Particular Order**

OK, if you have made it this far and are actually implementing the ideas written above then you will be more closely working like a professional editor does.

The remaining tips are in no particular order and don't necessarily apply to every possible project.

Check them out and use them as you see fit or as you think they may apply.

➤ **You are not documenting events, you are representing them.**

The example I give of this on my website is of a children's party and it is worth repeating.

From start to finish if a child is attending a kid's party then we are looking at about a 4 hour time frame.

If you are going to shoot everything and try to include everything then you will end up with a 3 hour video!

This would be documenting the event.

Representing the event would be showing just the main points so the audience knows what's going on and sees lots of activity.

Something like this:

- Child was invited to birthday party of friend. - One or two shots showing it happening and any reaction - 1 minute.

- Child was prepared for attendance on the day of the party. - Maybe a little longer sequence of shots on the day, reactions conversations etc. – 1 minute.

- Child travelled to the party. - A few shots inside the car, maybe some conversation if you have it, maybe set to music. - 1 minute.
- Child attends the party. - Lots of shots of kids playing and activities at the party itself, parents reactions, kids reactions etc, games, cake cutting or candles being blown out. - 10 minutes
- Party Ending. - Leaving, saying goodbyes etc. 1 - minute.
- Child travels home. - Anything of the trip home if you get it, possibly child asleep or any final shots at home, any conversation with the child regarding the party etc. - 1 minute.
- End.

There you have it, a four hour adventure represented in 15 minutes of fast paced "moving along" video that won't make your audience want to stick a fork in their leg!

➤ **You Are the Master of Time!**

One of the tricks that a lot of people miss in editing is that time inside any project runs according to how you want it to.

It can seem to go quickly or slowly, you can jump from one point in time to an earlier or later point, you can do anything you want!

By compressing time you can maintain interest through sections that have little or no action or an action that is repeated.

For example a road trip video does not have to have endless shots of everyone in the car just driving on and on and on!

On the other hand you can increase interest by slowing time spent on something important to emphasize it.

The simplest way to manipulate time is by following the basic idea that shorter shots with fast cuts speed up time and longer shots with slower cuts extends time.

➤ **Why Am I Doing This?**

When you are editing a scene or scenes always make sure that you understand why that scene is being included, why it is there and how it contributes to the

completion of the plan you had at the beginning. (You had a plan at the beginning right?)

Evaluate each shot within each scene the same way as to how it contributes to the completion of the scene.

➤ **Use reaction shots if possible**

If you have video of something happening then someone's reaction to that can be just as interesting as the event itself.

Imagine you have a shot of your father torturing innocent hamburgers on the barbeque which is kind of funny in itself.

But if you can get mother's reaction to that, now you are talking!

Remember! ANY shot of your mother rolling her eyes at ANYTHING at ANYTIME that you have, can be inserted as a reaction shot.

It doesn't even have to come from footage shot on the same day.

➤ **Transitions**

A transition is simply a word used to describe the change from one shot to another. The type of transition used is determined by the cut you are making.

Are we staying in the same scene, are we moving to another scene, how much time is passing if any at all?

All of these factors are controlled by the transition you use.

Watch some movies and some T.V. shows and check out how the editor cuts from one shot to another to see how the pros use transitions.

The first thing you will notice is that they pretty much don't use transitions of the type that most video editing software seems to be packed with!

Given that the average video editing program comes with about 50 or so transitions, all of which can be adjusted in many way you have to ask yourself what's up with that!

The real purpose of transitions in video editing software is to make you want to buy it. Other than that there is not much else they should be used for!

Here are the basic transitions and the effect they achieve:

➤ **A Cut**

This is just a straight cut from one shot to another. It is used to change the angle of the shot on the subject to maintain interest or to switch to another subject. Either way it communicates to the audience that we are still in the same scene and time is passing normally.

➤ **Fade to Black**

A fade to black indicates to the audience a closure of the current scene, an end point.

It is usually only used by itself at the end of the entire project as it presents finality to the action.

➤ **Fade Through Black**

A fade through black is when the current shot fades to black but at the same time the next shot begins to appear from black.

This means that the audience never really views complete black so the finality of the fade to black is never fulfilled.

It also communicates an ending but as the second scene begins to appear it also carries with it the introduction of a new scene with the added sense that time has passed.

➤ **Dissolves and Cross fades**

A cross fade can communicate time passing or a change of subject or scene but it is generally not as strong as the fade through black.

For example let's say we have a family walking along a path and that the real time spent on the activity was 30 minutes.

Obviously 30 minutes of everyone walking along the path is going to get a little boring.

So we can organize our shots of that activity so that we have about twenty shots in total.

Each shot shows a different angle or aspect of the walk and we can pretty much keep the shots in the sequence that they occurred.

We can use straight cuts from shot to shot but to communicate that the activity occurred over a period of time we can occasionally use a cross fade instead of a straight cut.

For example: Cut, cut, cut, cross fade, cut, cut, cut, cut cross fade, cut, cut, cut, cross fade and at the end a cross fade through black to a new scene or a fade to black to end the project.

This keeps the actual running time of the sequence short but injects a sense of time passing to convey it was a long walk.

➤ **Cheesy Transitions**

There is almost nothing more you can do to brand your video project as amateurish than by using cheesy out of the box transitions in any part of your project.

Unless you are trying to go for a specifically kitsch or retro look, there is never a need to use them.

➤ **Cuts**

When and how to cut one shot and go to another is an art in itself so here are a few basic pointers.

➤ **Match Cuts**

These are actually effective for both video and audio and are pretty much as described.

You try to find something that visually matches both the last frames of the first clip and the first frames of the next clip and cut at that point.

The most obvious example of this is a close-up of an eye cross fading to a shot of the sun where the sun matches roughly the size of the eye.

Another example is a shot of a light that cross fades to a shot of another light only the second one is a reflection of a light close up then the camera pulls back and the new scene is revealed.

Basically you are trying to find a shape in the first clip that matches a shape in the second and generally speaking a cross fade is used.

You can do the same thing with audio where the final words of a sentence being spoken in the first clip are spoken by someone else in the second clip.

If you have ever seen an Austin Powers movie then you will have most certainly seen this used to an extreme.

Every episode of that movie franchise has one scene entirely devoted to a sequence of audio match cuts.

You can watch one here on YouTube to get an idea:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WOZYoa_pod0

➤ **Dialogue Pauses**

If your video has people speaking then you can use logical endings to what they are saying as cut points.

➤ **Cut on Movement**

Probably the most common cut point in pro editing, you can use a hand or body gesture, a head turning, a car pulling up to a halt, just about anything goes.

The reason they are so common is that the viewer is engaged in whatever is happening onscreen (because humans love that movement!) so by cutting there they don't notice the cut.

➤ **Look for Reasons to Cut**

Another point at which it is effective to make a cut is when it makes sense... makes sense really!

So if your subject is looking at a view then you automatically have a great cut to a shot of the view they are looking at.

➤ **Jump Cuts and Varying the Camera Angle**

OK, this one takes a bit of explanation but is quite important.

Take a little walk around your environment and instead of looking at whatever is in front of you, take note of HOW you are looking at it.

Human beings rarely fixate their attention on one thing for more than a second or two.

What they are generally doing is visually scanning the environment on a constant basis.

Your gaze automatically flicks around from left to right to foreground to middle ground to background on and on.

At the same time your mind is processing the information as it is gathered and is evaluating importance's, unimportance's, noting things ignoring things also on and on.

This is the natural way in which we look at things and the world around us.

In creating a video it is very unnatural to expect your audience to remain constantly fixed on one thing or another.

So the first rule is that every time you cut on a similar scene (and you must cut to maintain a natural feel) the angle of the camera shot must change by at least 45 degrees.

Imagine you have a shot of a scene in your backyard of a family gathering. You start with a wide shot of that scene then cut to a closer shot of that scene but from exactly the same angle.

To an audience this would feel completely unnatural and quite strange as they would feel that for no reason they suddenly jumped forward ten feet or that there had been some kind of camera malfunction.

If you did exactly the same thing but this time the second shot was closer by the same distance but from a different angle then it feels and looks totally normal to the audience.

➤ **Now that you know the rule it's time to break it!**

There are situations especially these days where a Jump Cut is not necessarily viewed as a mistake.

Jumps cuts can be used in action scenes, scenes where breaking reality is part of the point, comedy or just as a way to add a quirky style to you projects.

Just remember a little goes a long way!

➤ **Long Shots, Medium Shots, Close Ups and Extreme Close-ups**

At the beginning of this report I mentioned the importance of having a plan and actually formulating that plan as best you can before you start shooting.

Probably the number one difference between the pro and the amateur is that the pro's editing process starts before the shooting begins!

In other words, they shoot to edit so when they get to editing they have the material they need at hand.

There is a similar rule as the one above regarding cutting from one type of shot to another.

The rule is: There should be a substantial change in distance when going from a long to a medium shot or medium to close up etc.

➤ **The Long Shot**

The long shot is always taken from a distance and provides a wide field of view of either the surroundings of the subject, the subject in its surroundings or the setting in which the story will take place.

Long shots can also be referred to as wide shots or establishing shots.

An establishing shot or series of shots sets the scene for the beginning of the story or next chapter in the story.

It allows the viewer to see where we are or where the story will take place or finally, where we are now in contrast to where we were before.

➤ **The Medium Shot**

The medium shot moves closer to the subject while at the same time leaving some of the background still visible.

A typical medium shot of a person would be from the waist up.

The medium shot can be used to begin the process of centering in on the subject after the long shot has established where the action is taking place.

➤ **The Close-up**

The close-up shot has the effect of closing the viewer's attention down on to a more specific thing.

It forces the viewer to only see what you want them to see and allows you to eliminate all other information.

The close up has the most powerful emotional impact on the viewer and demands that the viewer concentrate on the information you are giving them.

A close-up of a person generally includes the person from the shoulders up to the top of the head inside the frame of the shot.

➤ **The Extreme Close-up Shot**

The extreme close-up shot can be one of the most powerful or dramatic shots within a sequence of shots.

One of the easiest ways to see this in action is to find any scene in a movie or TV show where you have the hero/heroine talking to the bad guy/girl.

You will notice that almost always the person you are supposed to like is shot in extreme close-up and the person you are supposed to dislike is shot in close-up.

The constant switching back and forth throughout the conversation is repeatedly taking you closer to one and away from the other and your emotional response to this will be always to "like" the subject shot closer.

It can also be used to show very fine detail in smaller objects and in most cases can be effectively achieved by zooming all the way out and moving the camera lens as close to the subject as possible.

➤ **The Ken Burns Effect**

Often in video projects you may need to use still images in with the video clips. Simply inserting a still image has the effect of dramatically stopping the viewers expectations of movement occurring in front of him and can be jarring.

To avoid this simply apply (gently!) a little motion to the image using a filter that adds simulated camera movement.

Most video editing software programs call this Pan and Zoom.

Usually it is enough to just take the edge off going from moving to still pictures.

➤ **Some Audio Tips**

There is an old saying that the most important part of video is audio so we had better take a look at audio as a subject here.

Failing to apply a lot of the tips in this section usually results in "moments" in a project that just seem wrong yet no-one can quite put a finger on what it is that is wrong.

Poorly handled audio is possibly the most common source or error in video editing but because you and the audience are actively looking and not actively listening, they often go unnoticed.

➤ **Parallel Edits**

A parallel edit is when the audio and the video are cut at exactly the same time.

From a technical viewpoint this is usually a problem because the adjoining audio tracks probably don't match, so there is a sudden unseen jolt that occurs breaking the attention of the viewer.

This is usually further amplified by the fact that the visuals also changed at exactly the same moment.

To get around this the usual way to incorporate an audio cut and a video cut is to use a J cut or an L cut.

Imagine you are sitting with two other people having a conversation.

You are looking at one person who is speaking, that person stops speaking and the other person starts speaking.

At the sound of the other person's voice you will switch your attention from the first person to the second.

In real life the visual information being received almost always changes at a different time than the audio information is being received.

When you are editing it is almost always better to make the visual cuts at a slightly different point to the audio cuts.

This is simply what is meant by J cuts and L cuts. Either the video cuts then the audio or the audio then the video.

➤ **Cross Fade Your Audio**

Carrying on the subject of cuts in your audio, most editing software these days allow you to very easily apply a cross fade transition to the audio track.

This prevents sudden changes in the nature of that audio from distracting the audience.

➤ **Don't Forget the Ducking**

Ducking is a term in editing that describes the action of reducing the background music or general audio at those times when someone is speaking.

This could be narration or dialogue, it doesn't matter.

If the spoken words are difficult to understand because they are being drowned out by the general audio or even are just being made difficult to follow easily, again, you lose the audience.

➤ **Use the Audio Tools**

Most consumer video editing software these days comes with at least some basic audio effects for enhancing voiceovers or spoken dialogue tracks.

Get to know them and introduce yourself to compression.

You can make yourself and others sound so much better!

➤ **Check Your Levels**

By the time you are at the end of a project make sure you do a final check of the audio levels and use any included tools to make sure the volume is consistent throughout.

Look for peaks in the audio that may cause points of distortion and if you have recorded narration look for microphone noise.

➤ **Play it Loud**

When you are doing final checks on your project's audio make sure you are able to play it at a healthy volume.

Turn it up so you can really hear what is going on.

➤ **It's Quiet, a Little Too Quiet!**

There is no point in anyone's existence where they are in an environment of total silence.

So the minute you subject the audience to more than just a moment of total silence they are immediately on edge and have a sense that something is wrong.

Even if it is just a little background music or noise there should rarely be total silence in your projects.

➤ **Make the Music Match**

If you are using music as part of a project take care to make sure that the music matches what is happening on the screen.

Don't just use tracks you like, use tracks that are suitable to what is going on visually and add to the project not distract from it.

If the music track is being played at full volume for a scene or series of scenes pay attention to the beat and how it synchronizes with the video cuts you have made.

Often a track with strong beats set against visuals that are cutting off or near off that beat can get distracting or make the audience uncomfortable.

Final Thoughts

I certainly hope you find that some or all of these tips are useful to you, but remember, **no tip is of any value unless you actually implement it!**