

DOCUMENTARY MAKING

For Digital
Humanists

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10. Composing a Shot — Tips and Techniques



Fig. 23. Watch the video lesson on shot composition. <http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12434/18da6176>



Just as there are grammatical rules that govern how we write, so too are there grammatical rules that govern how we film (and process) visual information. Composition is a powerful tool, allowing filmmaker-scholars to communicate core ideas and themes without having to articulate them directly. These techniques can also be used to create shots and sequences that appeal to your audience’s learned appreciation for the grammatical conventions more than a century of cinema have instilled within them.

The ‘rule of thirds’ is an important compositional rule, but there is more to the creation of an effective frame than this rule alone. Head space, looking room, and camera placement will all have a significant impact on the shots you are framing and the impression they make upon your audience. Of course, there are always times when the rules in this chapter should be broken — but even if you choose not to adhere to these rules, understanding them will assist you in breaking them in the most effective ways possible.

Head Room

How many times have you handed your camera to someone to capture a special moment or meeting, only for them to return it with the top of someone’s head missing? This is bad composition for obvious reasons, but there is more to ‘head space’ than simply ensuring that no one is photographically decapitated.



Fig. 24. The subject’s head is pressed against the top of the frame, giving the shot an unsatisfying feel.

In Figure 24, much of the subject is visible but their head is touching the top of the frame. Even though the top of their head has not been cut off, the framing of this image feels awkward, as if the subject is being confined by the frame. There are, to be sure, instances when a filmmaker might do this deliberately, but for a standard interview, such a shot

might convey an inappropriate impression to viewers. The shot is not zoomed-in enough to be stylised, nor is it far enough away to place the subject comfortably within the frame.

A better way to compose this same shot would be to adjust the camera's height, providing a degree of space between the top of the subject's head and the top of the frame. This type of framing places the subject carefully within a field of view without giving the impression that they are trapped within an enclosed space. Head space should not be excessive, however, as seen in Figure 25.

Too much head room can leave an audience feeling similarly dissatisfied with the shot. If more than a third of the frame is given to headroom, a subject can feel lost amidst their surroundings; it is spatially and visually unclear. Headroom should, then, not draw attention to itself — either as a result of its absence or because of its overabundance (see Figure 26).



Fig. 25. An over-abundance of head room is similarly unsatisfying to the eye.
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Fig. 26. A small space between the top of the head and the top of the frame, however, feels appropriate.



Fig. 27. A lack of looking room makes a frame spatially unclear.



Fig. 28. Despite the subject not having moved position, the addition of looking room makes greater visual sense.

Looking Room

Like head room, looking room is one of those compositional rules that audiences unconsciously demand. Looking room is all about achieving an intuitive, spatially clear shot — in this case, providing space into which a subject can stare, or look. Consider the shot above in Figure 27. The subject is looking to the left of the shot but their face is pressed up to the edge of the frame. Despite the fact that we know there is space into which the figure must be able to stare, the composition of this shot does not communicate that clearly to the audience. To imply distance between the subject and their surroundings, the filmmaker must include distance in the frame: a space between the subject and the edge of the frame. Figure 27 should thus be reframed to provide distance into which the subject can stare, as per Figure 28. This creates a scene that is compositionally and spatially clear.

The 30° and 180° Rules

Speaking of spatial clarity, capturing an object or subject from multiple angles offers many possibilities when it comes to editing. One could, for instance, set up multiple cameras in an interview situation, allowing the

filmmaker to cut between different shots of the same subject. Shooting the same scene from multiple angles is called 'coverage' and the more coverage you capture, the more freedom you will have during the editing process. Coverage of the same event (such as an interview) will also allow you to cover mistakes or other errors captured by any one camera by cutting to a different angle.

Capturing a significant amount of coverage requires you to learn some important compositional rules. The first is the '30° rule', which stipulates that at least 30° of separation must exist between camera angles that you intend to cut together. If a film cuts between two cameras that are not at least 30° apart, the audience will likely realise that a cut has been made. As a result, they will remember that they are watching a film and the immersion of the moment will be broken.

At least 30° of separation should sit between shots that are to be edited together. See Figures 30 and 31.

The '180° rule' will similarly help you to shoot footage that will be spatially clear. In a conversation between two people, such as an interviewer or interviewee, imagine an axis drawn between them, as in Figure 29.

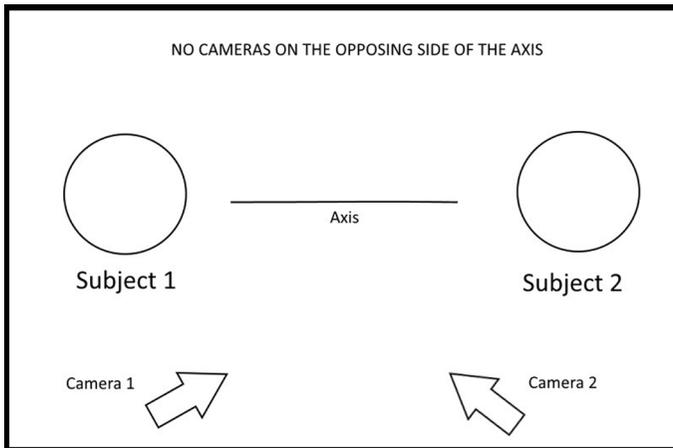


Fig. 29. When shooting an interview, cameras should be positioned on one side of the 'axis' only.

All cameras recording this conversation should be placed on the *same* side of this axis. If cameras are placed on opposite sides of the axis they

will create a spatially confusing scene in which both subjects appear to be facing the same direction, not one another. Whenever you are in a situation in which two objects or subjects are meant to be shown facing one another across different cuts, the 180° rule should be rigorously observed.

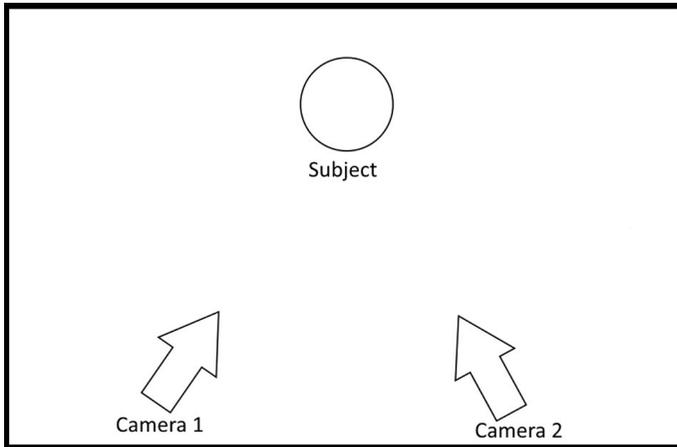


Fig. 30. Two cameras photographing the same object.

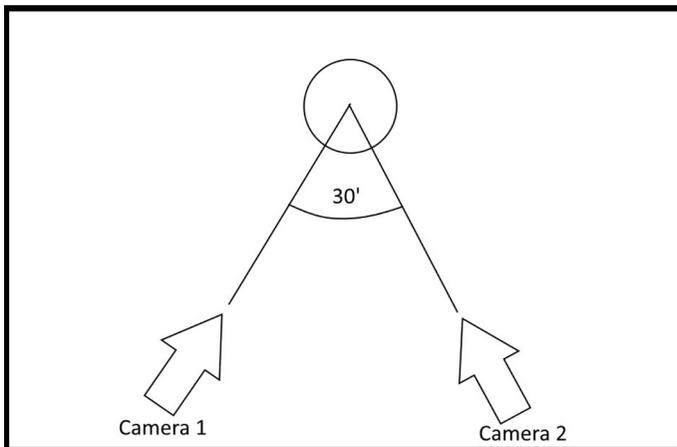


Fig. 31. The cameras should be at least 30° apart, or the audience may become aware of the cut between these different angles.

Fundamentals

Over the course of the past two chapters, you have learned the fundamentals that will allow you to begin shooting effective footage. There is, of course, a lot more than can be said — and yet with these foundational rules thoroughly internalised, you will have a solid basis upon which you can start to build your project. If you learn nothing else, memorise the rules and techniques in these opening chapters.

Re-read these rules and techniques on a daily basis — and imagine how you might employ them. Print out these specific pages and put them with your equipment if need be. Gather your equipment and hit the streets. Take these pages with you. Re-read them on the way to your destination and, if it helps, create a best-practices checklist which you methodically work through as you gather footage and experiment with these ideas.

Commit them to memory; utterly internalise them. For quick reference, see chapter seventeen which summarises most of these rules in an easily accessible manner that can easily be used as a quick reference guide in the field.