

Excerpts from:
Digital Filmmaking Handbook,
“Shooting”

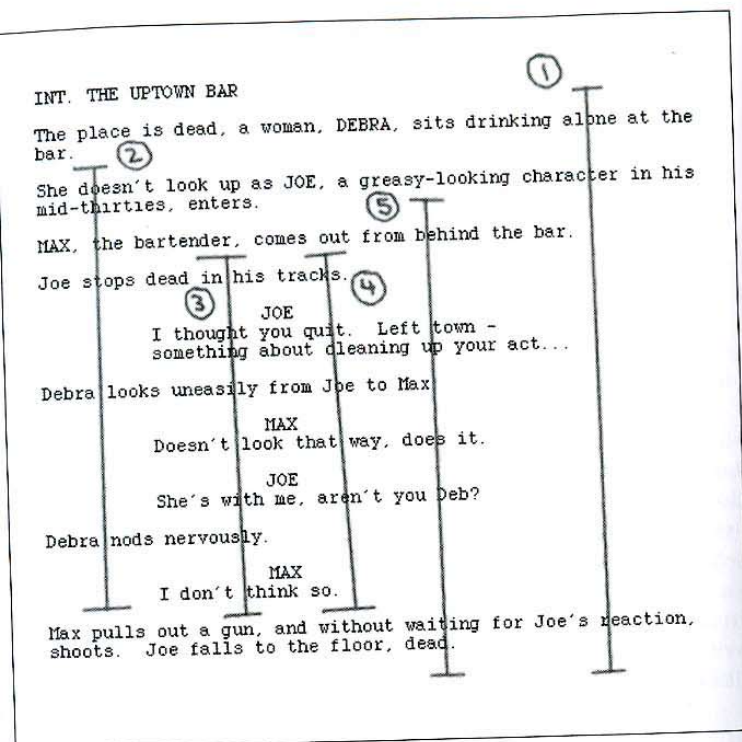


FIGURE 7.16 A lined script and script supervisor's marks.

script supervisor lines the script, drawing lines with arrows to show the portion of the script that each shot covers (Figure 7.16).

Clearly, script supervising isn't necessary for every shoot, but the longer your project and more complicated the shoot, the more valuable this information can be later on.

After all of that writing, previsualizing, scheduling, planning, and preparing, there will (believe it or not) come a time when you'll be ready to start using your camera to shoot some footage. In many ways, shooting is the best part of the entire movie-making process. You get to go out to fun locations, you get to boss people around, you get to use cool gear. It's also the first time that you can start to see the ideas in your head turn into something real.

Unfortunately, shooting can also be really difficult. Many things can go wrong, there are many things to keep track of, and you're usually working against the clock. During the shoot, you're going to have to muster all of your artistic sensibilities to create a good shot, and all of your directing skills to make that shot happen.

In this section, we'll cover how to deal with all of those concerns, as well as learn how to get the best-looking, most usable footage that you can manage.

Composition

Composition is simply the way an image is put together; that is, which visual elements are included in the image, and how they're arranged. While shooting, you'll *frame* your scene in your camera's viewfinder to build a composition. Composition is essential to creating video images that are attractive, and that serve to tell your story.

Good composition skills let you do far more than simply create pretty images. By carefully crafting your compositions, you can convey important information to your audience. For example, look at the images in Figure 7.17.

In the upper image, the man looks confident and powerful, while in the lower image, the same man looks lonely and possibly afraid. In both of these images, the man is striking a similar pose and a somewhat neutral expression. The sense that you have of how powerful or weak he is comes mostly from the composition and framing of the shot.

In the upper image, he has been shot from below and framed so that he fills the frame. In this image, he is a very strong-looking, imposing figure. By contrast, the lower image shows a man who seems small. He is literally lower than us, and therefore appears to be overwhelmed and weak. When used well, these compositional differences can add a lot to your story.



Watch the companion QuickTime movie located in the Chapter 7>resources folder of the companion DVD to learn more about different types of compositions.

Composition is a complex subject that requires not only study, but practice. Great camera operators are able to compose beautiful shots on-the-fly, a skill that's necessary for documentary-style shooting. Nevertheless, there are some basic compositional rules that you can learn fairly quickly:

Headroom. One of the most common mistakes that beginning photographers and cinematographers make is that, simply enough, they

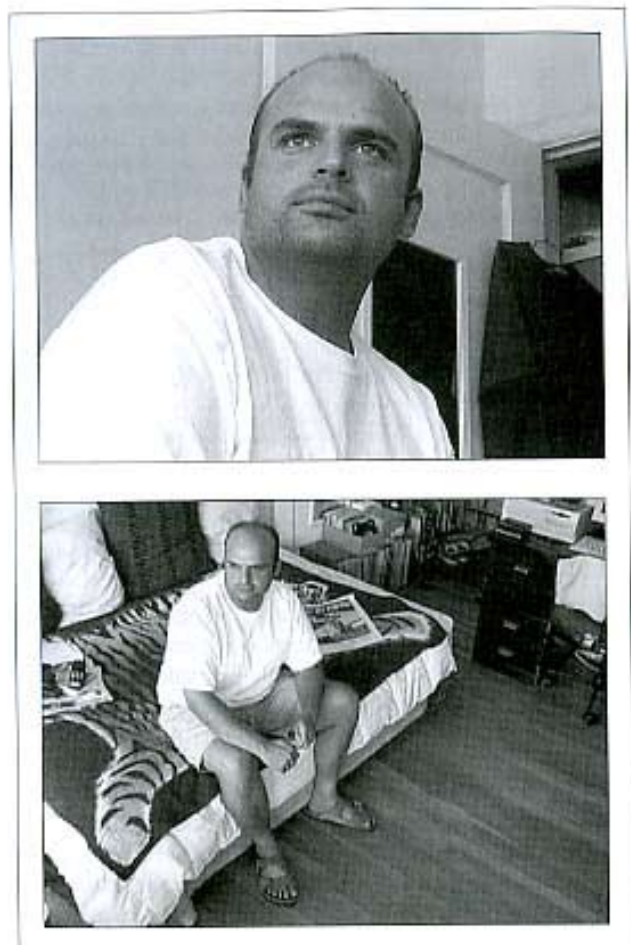


FIGURE 7.17 The different compositions of these two images present two very different impressions of this man.

don't pay attention. The problem is, your brain has an incredible ability to focus your attention on something. If you pay attention to what your brain is "seeing" instead of what your eyes are seeing, you might end up with a shot like the one shown in Figure 7.18a.

If you were intending to show a wide shot of the entire scene, then this shot might be okay—boring, but okay. If you were intending to

show the person in the scene, though, you'd be better off with something like the image shown in Figure 7.18b.

When composing a shot, it's very important to get in the habit of looking *at* the image in the viewfinder, rather than looking *through* the viewfinder at your scene.

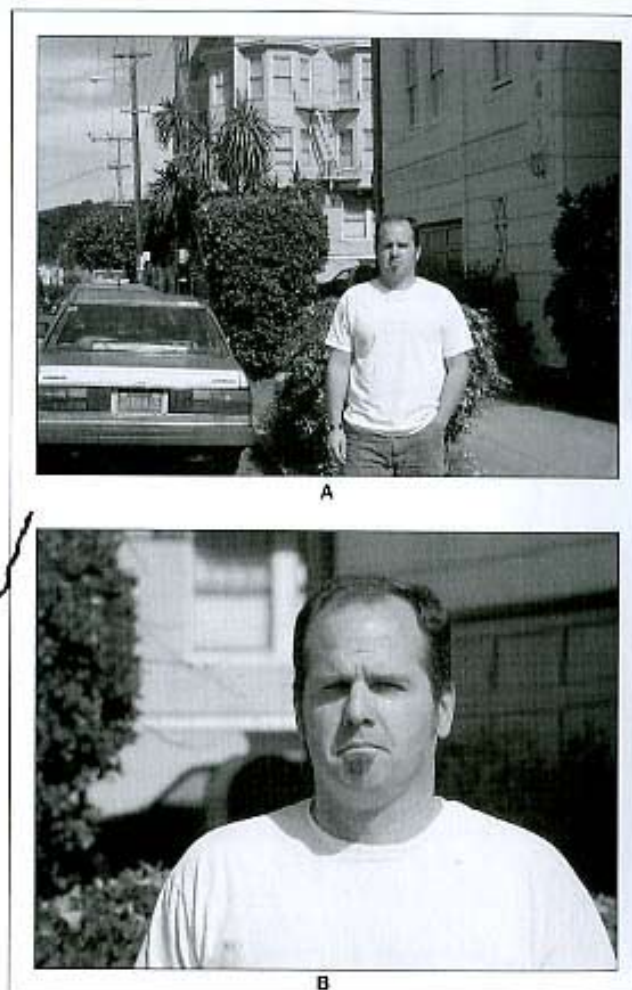


FIGURE 7.18 (a) Framing with too much headroom is one of the most common compositional mistakes of beginning cinematographers. (b) Less headroom brings more focus to your subject.

Figure 7.18a has too much extra space around it—its subject is not clearly presented and framed. If you get in the habit of checking the edges of your frame when you're composing, then you'll force yourself to notice any extraneous space that needs to be cropped out.

Lead your subject. Composition and framing can also be used to help your audience understand the physical relationships of the people and objects in your scene—to help them better understand the space in which your scene takes place. When you have a single shot of someone speaking, you should usually “lead” them by putting some empty screen space in front of them.

For example, Figure 7.19 shows a person talking to another person who is off-frame. If we put the blank space in front of them, we get a much more comfortable sense than if we put the space behind them.

Don't be afraid to get too close. Although it's important to have the proper headroom and leading in a shot, there are times when a shot calls for something more dramatic. Don't be afraid to get in close to your actors and to crop their heads and bodies out of the frame, as shown in Figure 7.20.

This is a very “dramatic” type of framing. In this case, it's being used to heighten suspense. In a more dramatic moment, it could be used to give the audience time to see an actor's mood change or develop.

Eyelines. If you're shooting a conversation between two or more actors, you need to make sure the eyelines in each close-up match, so that when the shots are edited together, the performers appear to be looking at each other (Figure 7.21). It's also usually a good idea to shoot separate close-ups within a dialog scene using the same focal length lens and from the same distance, so that the focal length distortions are the same in all close-ups.

Clearing frame. When framing a static shot that will be used to start or end a scene, it's a good idea to have your actors enter the frame from off-screen, perform, and then exit the frame entirely. This will make editing the shot easier. You might not need to use the part of the shot where they enter and exit frame, but you'll at least have the option.

Beware of the stage line. Crossing the 180° axis, also known as the *stage line*, or *axis of action*, is jarring. If you think of your set as a theatrical stage, the 180° axis falls along the proscenium (the front of the stage). Once you've set up your camera on one side of the axis, avoid moving it to the other side or you might end up with camera angles that don't cut together (Figure 7.22). Be aware that this primarily concerns action and dialog shots. Cutaways and establishing shots can often get away with crossing the stage line.

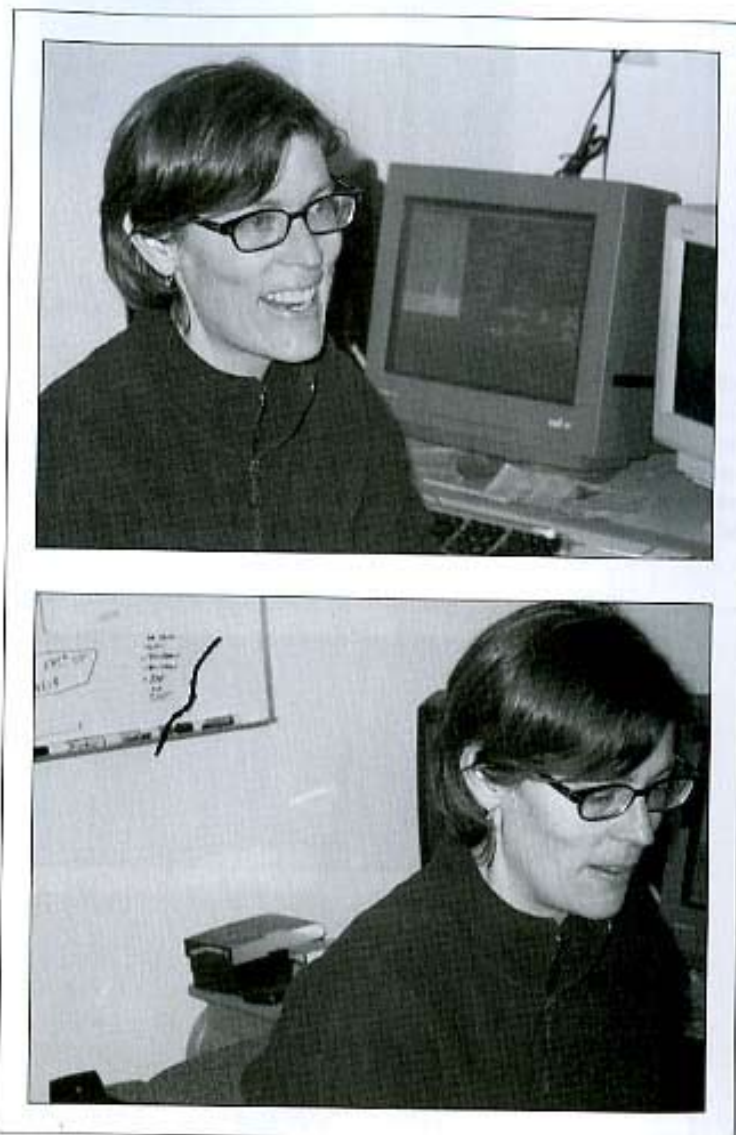


FIGURE 7.19 By “leading” your subject with empty space, you give your audience a better understanding of the physical relationships of the actors in your scene.



FIGURE 7.20 You can increase the drama and suspense of a scene by getting in really close to your subject. Although this “tight” framing cuts off some of our actor’s head, it’s still a well composed, effective image.



FIGURE 7.21 The upper image has eyelines that are incorrect, they don’t match while the lower image has matching eyelines.

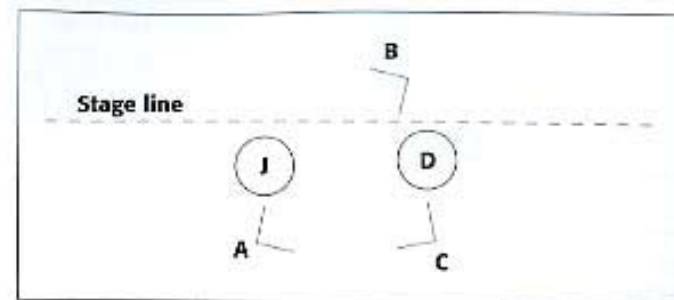


FIGURE 7.22 This camera diagram corresponds to the images in Figure 7.21. Camera angle B is on the wrong side of the stage line, which results in the mismatched eyelines in Figure 7.21.

Breaking the rules. In Western culture, our ideas about good framing are heavily dependent on the tradition of fine art painting. The shape of the film and video frame is similar to that of a traditional landscape painting, and the concept of how a medium close-up should be framed is similar to a traditional portrait. Breaking from these traditions can be interesting and exciting when it looks intentional, but beware: it can be disastrous when it looks like you didn’t know any better.

SHOOTING FOR THE WEB

Delivering video on the Web requires a huge amount of compression. If you plan your shoot with this in mind, the outcome will be much more successful. Here are some things that compress poorly:

- **Motion:** This means both motion of the subject and motion of the camera. Use a tripod to lock down your shots, and keep the movement of the actors to a minimum.
- **Visually complex images:** Keep the images simple and iconic—close-ups work best.
- **High-contrast lighting:** Compression algorithms for the Web don’t seem to handle high-contrast lighting very well, resulting in clipping of darks and lights. Try for a brightly and evenly lit look.
- **Fine lines, stripes, and other patterns:** Again, simplicity is the key.
- **Shooting fine details:** If you have fine details that the audience needs to see—written words, for example—then be sure to shoot these in close-up. Remember, your Web-based video image will be very small.