

## The Language of Video Editing

<http://www.videomaker.com/article/2988/>

by Dave Welton, *Videomaker*, September 1997

*The content of your video is important, but so is the way you put it together.*

One of the best ways to learn the art of video editing is to watch the pros. So before you begin your next editing project, I have a homework assignment for you: watch broadcast television. Carefully note the types of transitions the pros use to weave together their images. Take inventory of the types of transitions used and the context in which each transition appears. During your observation, you'll see that different kinds of productions use different types of editing transitions. A news story is likely to use different editing "language" than a dramatic production or a documentary.

In this month's column we'll explore the visual language of the edit. You'll learn to use these tools to improve your videos. You will discover how to make edits so natural and unobtrusive that they're virtually invisible to your audience.

**Editing With Your Eyes** The real challenge of videography is to translate human experience into the language of video. Though audio is very important, there is no dispute that a large part of video's power is visual.

The best video presentations are modeled after the way humans process visual information. Observing what we do with our own eyes provides useful tips. Let's look at a few human experiences and translate them into the language of video.

Humans often blink their eyes when glancing from one object to another. In video, we reproduce this phenomenon by cutting--instead of panning, for example--from one image to another. We use the word "cut" to describe an edit that is an instantaneous transition from one video image to another.

A "dissolve" is a gradual transition from one video image to another. This transition suggests how the mind's eye registers the blurring of one image into another, such as we might experience while dreaming or drifting from one idea to another.

A "fade" is a gradual transition from a video image to a solid-colored background, usually black. On awakening from rest, we slowly open our eyes. The on-screen equivalent is the fade-in from black. Conversely, the fade to black suggests a transition into a period of rest. Used together, a fade to and from black gives the viewer a feeling of passing time.

Hollywood provides great examples of how to craft elegant edits. In the 1944 Humphrey Bogart classic *"To Have and Have Not,"* cuts are the transition of choice between images within a scene. The dissolve often denotes a change in scene within a short time during the same day. A fade to and from black marks a change in scene over a longer time.

The editing language used in the Bogart film over a half century ago remains current today. These simple editing techniques communicate important information to the viewer without distracting him from the story. They are so universally understood that they go almost completely unnoticed. Let's take a closer look at these basic editing transitions: cut, dissolve and fade.

**Graceful Transitions** Much of the terminology used in videography originated in the earlier arena of film production. Early film producers physically cut out the sequences of film they didn't want, and then joined the "keeper" sequences together with strips of clear tape. The transition between such film sequences is the "cut," where the last image in sequence A is followed by a totally different first image in sequence B. If the first B image is a logical successor to the last A image, the transition is as natural to humans as the blink of an eye and the edit goes virtually unnoticed by the viewer. The cut remains the most used--and the simplest--type of transition today in both film and video.

The term "cut" has also become a synonym for the word edit. We might hear a comment like: "The person who *cut* that production really knew what he was doing." The translation: "The person who *edited* that production really knew what he was doing."

During a "dissolve," both images appear on the screen for a time, as one gradually replaces the other. The "overlap" time, the duration of the transition, can zip by in a few frames or it can last several seconds.

A "fade" to and from black only lasts a second or two, but usually communicates to the viewer a fairly long passage of time. Fades have their roots in theater, where stage lights turn on and off to start and end the acts of a play. Be careful not to use the terms dissolve and fade interchangeably--they refer to quite different effects.

**Building Video Bridges** We think of an edit in video as a bridge that connects two images. The transition is both a visual and contextual bridge. A good highway bridge connects two pieces of land in a way that is visually pleasing. A bridge that looks like a stark freeway overpass is pretty uninspiring, but one that is a work of art--like the Golden Gate--inspires awe. Videographers, like bridge builders, should design transitions that not only span the distance but are also aesthetically pleasing.

In a video "cut" edit, if the first image in sequence B is not a logical successor to the last image in sequence A, the viewer becomes disoriented because the visual meaning is ambiguous, even contradictory. There is no logical connection between the two images. This is a "jump cut."

A jump cut connects two images that are at odds with each other. A jump cut can make a person's head appear to spin 90 degrees instantaneously, or make a football team suddenly rush in the opposite direction.

Jump cuts can also result from cutting together two shots that are just slightly different in framing or angle. The resulting edit makes the subject appear to suddenly jump to a new position on the screen. (See figure 1.)

Occasionally, you may find yourself forced into a situation where you must edit two shots together even though the resulting transition is a jump cut. What can you do? Try inserting a short "cutaway" shot between the two sequences to cover the jump cut. Although cutaways interrupt the visual flow of the main story, they don't disturb the meaning in the viewer's mind. The cutaway hides the rough edges of the jump cut. (See figure 2.)

Usually, you don't want to draw attention to your edits. But if you purposely want to disturb, startle, or make the viewer uneasy, the jump cut will certainly achieve this result!

**Other Effects** The "wipe" is another transition option. During this effect, a portion or all of one image becomes replaced by another: the second sequence simply wipes the first one from the screen. Baseball instant replays often use the diamond-shaped wipe (mimicking the shape of the field) as a transition from live action to the replay, and back again.

In other contexts, the wipe can show the passage of time or convey a "meanwhile-back-at-the-ranch" concept by showing a change to another simultaneous story line. Often times the music played during the transition gives us additional information that helps us interpret the effect.

We also see the wipe used to split the screen into two parts. This technique is handy to show two people in different locales having a phone conversation.

**Equipment Requirements** No discussion of the language of editing is complete without a few words about the equipment necessary to perform transitions.

The cut is the easiest transition to perform. All edit controllers and nonlinear editors will perform the cut either by controlling a playback deck and a recording VCR or by manipulating images on a computer's hard drive.

Early filmmakers wanted to do more than just a cut. They wanted to combine two images and have both images appear on the screen simultaneously. A process called the "A/B roll" made this possible. A film A/B roll combines two images from separate

rolls of film onto a third roll. The same term, when applied to video, describes combining the signals from two playback VCRs and recording them on a third recording VCR. In both film and video, the combination of multiple image sources requires synchronization.

It's relatively easy to synchronize two rolls of film. Sprocket holes on both sides of the film mechanically link the machines. With video it isn't so easy. The synchronization signals that keep video signals running on time are invisible. It takes complex electronic circuits to keep two video signals running in step; each video frame in both signals must begin at precisely the same instant. The device that performs this magic is a frame synchronizer. It allows us to seamlessly combine the two video sources required to perform a dissolve, wipe or other transition in which two video images appear on screen at the same time. Many special effects generators (SEGs) have built-in frame synchronizers.

One editing caveat: just because you can make wipes and dissolves doesn't automatically mean you should. Make sure you have a good reason for each effect. A slow dissolve builds a nice bridge between scenes. But endless use of effects for no apparent reason will tire or annoy your viewers.

If you have a "cuts-only" editor, don't feel handicapped. The cut is the edit of choice in most situations; its invisibility is a strength, not a weakness. Remember: the goal of videography is to enable viewers to focus on the content of your message, not the content of your edits.