How to represent your work digitally: film, audio and photography best practice
Filmmaking, audio and photography best practice

Filmmaking and audio

Introduction
If you would like to capture your work through film, audio or photography, this guide offers some useful tips and tricks. Filmmaking is a highly varied and collaborative process that combines multiple disciplines and crafts to tell stories and communicate ideas. However, there are some key considerations that will help to ensure that what you produce is engaging and succeeds in its aims.

Planning
Before embarking on a filmmaking project, it’s essential to have a clear picture in mind of the following:

- What is it that you want to communicate?
- Who is the audience?
- Why are you making it?

The answers to these three questions will help to inform the choices you make throughout the filmmaking process. Many filmmakers use storyboarding to help visualise the sequence of shots required. This may not be useful for everyone, but it can help to keep track of what you have completed and what you still need to capture.

Useful links on storyboarding:

- BBC Academy
- Tubular Insights
- Cinephilia & Beyond

Framing
Composition in filmmaking is how everything that appears in the frame is arranged. Good composition creates meaning between subjects and tells the audience where we are and what is happening. The shape of the frame in a film is called the aspect ratio. The standard 16x9 aspect ratio is the frame size that you will encounter in most contemporary TV productions.

Useful links on aspect ratios:

- No Film School
- The Beat
Shooting video on a phone

If you are using a phone to shoot your film, use landscape (16x9) mode rather than portrait (9x16) mode. By using the wider option, you will have more useful space to work with, to the left and right of the subject. This can also be a particularly useful space if you intend to incorporate text into the composition. It will also look better when played back on any device other than a phone.

You might wish to use the camera on the back of your phone, rather than the front (screen side), as this is usually the superior quality camera on your device.

Consider the ‘rule of thirds’

The rule of thirds suggests that an aesthetically balanced image is one where important compositional elements appear at the intersections of the four lines that create the grid, as you can see in the example below.

The ‘rule of thirds’ helps to create a balanced and harmonious image. You can also deliberately ignore the rule, if your intention is to distract the viewer from the subjects within the frame.

Vary your shots

In filmmaking, variety can be a very effective tool in helping to maintain the attention of the viewer. Different types of composition of the same subject also convey different information to the viewer. Moreover, by cutting to a shot of the same object or subject, but from a different angle, the viewer is invited into the space of the film, creating an illusion that helps to make the audience feel present. Shot types generally fall under the following categories:

- **Wide shots** - often used as an establishing shot (i.e. the opening shot of a story or sequence which sets the scene). This type of shot tells the viewer where we are, but not much detail about any of the subjects within.
- **Medium shots** - in this type of shot, the subject becomes the point of focus in the composition – where we are is now less obvious to the viewer, but the details of the subject are more pronounced.
- **Close ups** - close up shots direct attention to the fine details of the subject. In the case of a human subject, this might be used to convey the subtle emotion in a face.
**Depth of field**
If you would like to focus the viewer’s attention on a particular subject/object, rather than the backdrop, don’t film against a wall. Ensure there is plenty of space behind what is being filmed.

Try not to rely on Auto Focus – the focal point of the image is one of the key aspects that will direct the viewers' attention. Allowing the camera or lens to make this decision means you do not have full control of the image. A neat trick if you are using a manual lens on a camera is to move only the focal point, rather than the camera, to guide the viewer’s eye from one point to another, without changing the original framing of the composition.

**Camera angles**
The most common angle to shoot a subject is at eye level. This creates the sense that we are 'with' the subject, and equal to them. However, we may want to use the camera angle to communicate something else. A high camera angle will create a sense of vulnerability in the subject. A low camera angle creates the opposite effect, elevating the subject into a position of power. The language of film is loose, so there is plenty of room to play with different angles, but your decisions may powerfully affect the viewer’s understanding of what they are watching.

Useful links on composition:
- Fstoppers
- The Beat

**Lighting**
One of the most essential factors in filmmaking is lighting. How much and what kind of light we shine from different directions creates extremely different images.

**Exposure basics**
Using a lot of light will create an overexposed image, while using little light will create an underexposed image, which may be your intention. If we film our subject in front of a window with daylight coming in from behind, they will appear silhouetted, unless balanced with light from the opposite direction.

**Natural light**
Using natural light can be tempting as it is readily available and doesn’t need ‘setting up’. However, be aware that direct sunlight is very powerful and will cast a hard light with hard shadows. If using sunlight in this way, you might want to use a reflector (such as a large piece of white card) to bounce the light back onto the object and fill in the shadows cast by the light source. This allows filmmakers to maintain the use of the shadow while still capturing details within the darker areas.

Using natural light can be risky as it is unreliable, and swings between levels can occur quickly and dramatically (especially in cloudy countries like the UK). Our eyes easily adapt to this shift and it can happen without us even noticing the change, but a camera’s iris will not adapt to this* and will record the shift that occurs between dramatically different images. If this is not your intended effect, this may cause difficulty whilst editing. If you
want to cut from an early part of the filming to a later part from the same shoot, the images may appear completely different if the light has not been controlled.

If you are determined to use natural light, you might prefer to film in the morning or the evening, when the light is softer, or on a day with heavy cloud cover – this will give you a consistent and soft light source. However, these images will lack the heavy contrast of those captured in hard light.

*Auto Iris is not a remedy when using natural light. Deciding the settings of your camera and lens are key decisions when crafting images. Tiny adjustments in these produce very different images. Allowing the camera to decide this means you have less control of the image.

**Controlled light**

Ideally you will have at least two light sources available that you can adapt (move) and reflect (bounce) as necessary. Make adjustments in the arrangement of these lights to find the type of image you are looking for.

Useful links on lighting:
- Wistia
- The Beat – shooting with or against the sun
- The Beat – low budget lighting
- The Beat – filmmaking tips to create dramatic lighting
- The Beat – low key high key lighting

**Motion**

There may be instances where, rather than a series of fixed shots edited together, we want to have the movement of the camera change the composition of the shot. This could be utilising a ‘pan’ horizontally, or a ‘tilt’ ‘vertically’, or by moving the camera closer or further away from the subject, or zooming in or out using the lens’s zoom function. These can be tricky to pull off without drawing attention to the filmmaking process, especially if working alone.

Tips:
- Use a tripod or steadying clamp (if available)
- Don’t force yourself to attempt things that you don’t have the resources for
- Keep the camera movements steady and smooth

Remember, a series of fixed shots of varying types, as discussed in the composition section, can create lots of movement within the frame. It might be safer and easier to move the objects or subjects, while varying between shot types, than to attempt to move the camera.

Useful links on camera movement:
- The Beat – how camera movement conveys emotion
- The Beat – forced perspective
- Story Blocks – basic camera movements
Moving the attention of the viewer
As with the variety of compositions, a cut from one shot to another is an opportunity to move the gaze of the viewer. A useful trick is to move the viewer’s gaze around the composition from one cut to another. If the subject of shot one is on the left side of the screen, consider cutting to a shot where the subject is now on the right side. This creates a moment of movement (in the viewer’s eye, not the image) that creates a sense of fluidity.

Cutting on moments of action
Another useful trick in editing is to cut away from a shot at a moment of movement within the frame (e.g., someone walking past the frame, or an arm gesture), and into the next shot at a moment of movement in that frame. This creates a sense of fluidity and helps to hide an otherwise abrupt edit.

Recording audio
If recording a voiceover, find a quiet place to record, and if possible hang soft fabric around the area where the recording is taking place – sound bounces off surfaces in rooms and this rebounding effect can be picked up by a microphone a second time, causing a reverberation or echo effect. These are very difficult to remove afterwards without causing damage to the quality of the recorded audio.

If you are thinking of recording a voiceover but you cannot meet these requirements, consider using text in place of the voiceover.

Music
Using music to create atmosphere in a film can be very effective. However, if you do not have permission to use a piece of music, don’t use it. Music licensing can be complicated and very expensive. It can also be disappointing if your work is taken down because you are infringing copyright laws.

Explore the countless options of tracks available with a Creative Commons License.

Useful links on music:
- Creative Commons
- Free Music Archive
- Epidemic Sound

Editing
This can be the most time-consuming part of the filmmaking process. Whether a project has been shot to a strict storyboard or not, the process of arranging images and sounds is one that must be given plenty of time to deal with.

Keep it simple. Too many quick cuts and effects in the editing process can draw attention to the edits, distracting from the subject.
Tools
It may be tempting to use software that is ‘simpler’ to use or easier to access than professional tools. However, where possible, use professional software such as Adobe Premiere, Da Vinci Resolve, or Final Cut Pro. UAL students can currently access Adobe software for free from home. These tools may seem daunting to a newcomer, but you don’t need to understand everything that the software does. With the correct approach and little bit of self-training it will become clear what you need to understand to achieve certain goals. Using these tools will give you some insight into the professional world of editing and colour correction.

Useful links on tools:
- The Beat – films edited with Premiere Pro
- The Beat – 5 quick tricks

Delivery
Unless you are making a film to be shown in a cinema (i.e. a very large projection/presentation screen), you will want to make an encoded version of the video for presentation and playback via a web-based host like YouTube or Vimeo. H.264/MPEG-4 is the most commonly used format for the compression and playback of high definition video.

Creating an H.264 file will require using encoder software. Try to use a professional encoder such as Adobe Media Encoder. You can use these quickly and easily for simple jobs.

Useful links on delivery:
- Shrinking files for submission
- The best export setting in Premiere Pro

Useful links for general filmmaking guidance:
- Linkedin Learning
- Academia
- No Film School
- Fstoppers
- Vimeo

Photography best practice

Lighting
Before taking photographs of your work, consider how the light hits the object(s). You can experiment with different angles and rearrange the composition of your objects. The ‘rule of thirds’ also applies to photography – read more about this in filmmaking and audio best practice section.
Scale
Consider the scale of your image. Some may be large and become the focal point, and others small to create a dynamic balance.

Credits
Always credit your references and collaborators, where you have images from a collaborative project.