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Framing Good Shots



Composition is one of the most fun and accessible aspects of videography.

The images you record are the building blocks and foundation of your video productions. As your foundation, some thought and planning should go into how your shots are composed. A well-composed shot grabs and holds your viewer's attention. It also influences the mood of the scene or the comfort level of the audience.

When done right, the composition will not draw attention to itself. Instead, it will instill a sense of normalcy and stability. On the other hand, a poorly composed shot will have the opposite effect. It will distract the audience, or worse, make a scene entirely unwatchable.

In this article we'll give you some basic composition guidelines that experts use as their foundation, as well as some common pitfalls you should try to avoid.

The Rule of Thirds

A basic rule of composition is the rule of thirds. This guideline gives you ideas on where to place your subject within the frame. Though your tendency may be to position your subject dead center on the screen, the rule of thirds will give you a more compelling picture.

First, imagine that two vertical and two horizontal lines divide your viewfinder into thirds. (Think of a slightly elongated tic-tac-toe board). The rule of thirds suggests that the main subject in your shot should fall on one of the points where these imaginary lines intersect. The resulting image will be much stronger than if you simply place your subject in the crosshairs.

When videotaping a person, that person's eyes are your main focal point. Whether using a wide shot or a close up, compose the shot so that the person's eyes fall on one of the uppermost imaginary intersections. The intersection you choose depends on which direction the person is looking. Frame someone looking screen left on the right third of the screen. This places the subject slightly off center and builds in another element of composition called "look room."

Look Room, Lead Room and Headroom

Look room is the space that you leave in front of someone's face on the screen. This space gives the person room to breathe, as well as gives the impression that the person is looking at or talking to someone just off screen. If you don't leave enough look room, your subject will appear to be boxed-in and confined.

Be aware that the amount of look room necessary is dependent upon the angle of the subject to the camera. A person looking directly toward the camera will require less look room than someone shot in full profile.

Moving objects such as cars require a similar buffer called "lead room." Allow extra space in front of a moving car so that the viewer can see that it has someplace to go. Without this visual padding, the car's forward progress will seem impeded.

Headroom is another element you should consider when framing your subject. Headroom is the amount of space between the top of someone's head and the top of the frame. If you leave too much space, the person will appear as if sinking in quicksand. If you don't leave enough room, the person will seem in danger of bumping his head. By positioning the subject's eyes on the top third imaginary line, you will be building in the proper amount of headroom.

When considering head- room, be sure the shot is loose enough so that you see part of the subject's neck or the top of the shoulders. If not, you'll end up with what looks like a severed head on a platter. However, don't be as concerned with cutting off the top of someone's head. Viewers do not perceive this as abnormal as long as you frame the actor's eyes where they should be.

The Background

Many composition pitfalls lie in the subject's environment. Trees and phone poles, vases or pictures on walls may all cause problems.

Be aware of lampposts, trees or other such objects that are directly behind your subject. A flagpole protruding

from the top of an actor's head looks ridiculous, as does a vase that may seem to be balanced on someone's shoulder. Likewise, a power line running through the frame may appear to be going in one of your subject's ears, and out the other. It's best to steer clear of any such visual distractions.

Even if these objects are not directly behind your subject, they can still cause problems. A lamppost running vertically through the middle of the frame will not only disrupt the balance achieved by the Rule of Thirds, it can also isolate or box-in the subject. It may also take away the look room that you've built into the shot. Be aware of these background objects, and work to avoid them whenever possible.

Framing Using Objects

While objects in the background can cause problems, objects placed in the foreground can lend a hand. This technique can add depth and character to your shot.

Try using something in the environment to obstruct part of your shot. Place a piece of furniture in your foreground and shoot past it by framing it to the extreme right or left. You can shoot through open doors, where the doorjamb frames the edges of the screen.

Be careful, however, not to over-do it. Using the environment to frame your shots should not be so blatant as to distract from what is happening in the scene.

The Ultimate Goal

Good composition is a means to an end. When it's done well, the audience should not notice it. Instead it should help create a mood, or at the very least, a sense of normalcy and stability. The next time you watch a movie, pay attention to how the cinematographer frames the shots. You'll notice that they use the rule of thirds as their foundation, and build from there.

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Brian

Pogue

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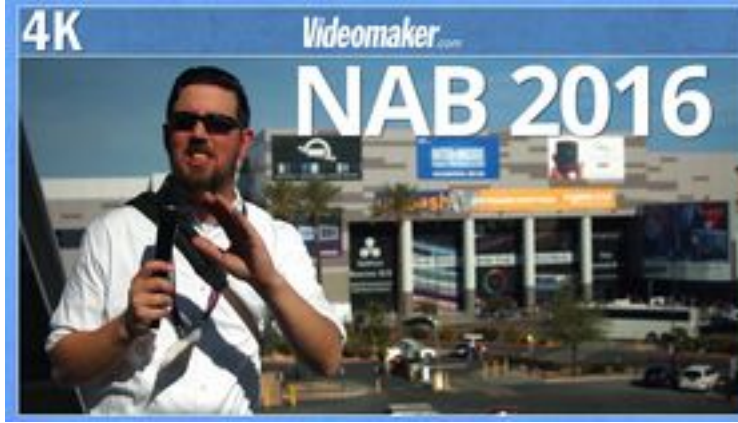
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