

# Videography 101

Composition

Ben Ellis, September 25, 2022

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## How to Improve Your Shot Composition & Framing

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**Framing and composition are essential concepts to understand if you want to get incredible footage. Learning these tools will not only help the visual appeal of your production but will also help you to convey a clearer message in your video.**

## Rule of Thirds



The rule of thirds is well-known, and chances are you're already familiar with it. The basic principle is that your shot will look better if you put points of interest on the thirds of your frame. You can visualize these points when imagining lines dividing your screen into nine blocks: three sections vertically, and three sections horizontally.

There are many theories about why the rule of thirds works. One reason is that a shot can have so many competing points of interest, and adding points of interest on the thirds will help eliminate any unnecessary distractions. It also helps position the shot in a way that shows what the character is thinking and feeling. Overall, it provides an intuitive feeling of balance and context that's helpful for your viewer.

## Symmetry



Alternatively from using thirds, the next composition rule is to create symmetry. For some reason, human brains respond well to symmetry. It simply looks and feels good, and once again, creates a sense of harmony and balance.

Using symmetry is a great way to get your point across in these scenarios:

To convey the beauty of a scene.

To help your audience focus on your subject.

In fact, symmetry is the one time when breaking the rule of thirds works. If you want your subject to stand out, you can put them dead center in the frame. Symmetry is often used in moments when a character is experiencing a powerful moment. It draws the viewer's attention to them in a unique way.

But do use it sparingly. It's definitely best kept for a handful of poignant moments. You run the risk of giving your audience conflicting messages if it's overused.

## Leading Lines



Visible lines in your shot will subconsciously tell your viewer where they should be looking. Lines are everywhere: the stair railing, the picket fence, a river running past, roads, railways, and so on. It's a subtle way of guiding your audience in the direction you want while also adding an element of depth to your footage.

It's worth scoping out locations where you may be able to use leading lines in your shots, such as in the example above. Once you start looking, you'll be surprised at how easily you find them!

## Leading and Headroom



Typically, this rule is used in combination with the rule of thirds. Basically, head room means that you want the top of your character's head to be in the frame at all times. If your subject's head is cut off, it creates a feeling of being cramped and uncomfortable, as well as just looking a bit bizarre.

When you want to break this rule, though, is during a close-up and you want to focus on your subject's eyes. This is impossible to do while still keeping their head entirely in the frame and sticking to your rule of thirds at the same time.

Leading room refers to the amount of space next to your character while they're looking in a particular direction. If your character is facing the left-hand side of the screen, you'll want them to be more on the right-hand side, to provide space between them and where they're looking.

If they're too close to where they're looking, it may come across as though they're looking off the screen, which creates confusion in the minds of your viewers. More space in front of your character also helps the viewer to put the world in context better, and understand where the subject is and what's happening around them.

## Depth



Every shot has a foreground, midground, and background. What you choose to show (or not show) tells a lot about what's in your shot.

Sometimes, you'll want nothing at all in the frame except for your character. But most of the time, you're going to want to establish your character in the world you've created. You'll want to show how your subject relates to this world, including what's out of focus.

The depth of your scene is affected by:

Location: where you shoot.

Lens: what lens you use and its capacity to provide depth. Your lens choice is critical and determines your depth of field. A wide-angle lens will have more space in focus, which will make it more difficult to focus on your subject by blurring out the background. The distance between the subject and the background will also be exaggerated in how far away it looks.

A lens with a longer focal length will make it easier to achieve a shallow depth of field (even if you use the same F-stop). Essentially, it will allow your subject to stand out more from the background. It also makes background objects appear closer than they would with a wide-angle lens.

Your choices here will help your audience determine what they focus on, what they find important in the scene, and how your character relates to the world around them.

## Size Equals Power



The size equals power rule sounds simple, but it has huge implications for your project. If an object takes up a large amount of the frame, viewers will see it as important. If it only takes up a small amount, then it's insignificant in the bigger picture.

The rule applies to inanimate objects as well as characters. Framing also comes into play here — for example, if you choose a wide-angle shot of someone standing in an open space, it can give the feeling that they're somewhat insignificant. The same shot closer up can imply a sense of control.

Camera angles also play a big role. Viewing your subject from below can create a feeling that they are dominant, as the audience (and the characters are literally are looking up to them). The opposite is true, too. A view of the subject from above causes us to feel that they are weaker or smaller subconsciously.

## Break the Rules



We all love being given permission to break the rules! While these six rules are essential when it comes to composing a pleasing image in your viewfinder, you don't need to stick to them religiously. Get creative!

Remember, it's all about getting your message across. If the rule of thirds moves the story forward, then awesome! That said, there may be an instance where doing something completely opposite to the composition rules would be the best course of action to convey your point.

Don't be afraid to do something different. If you aren't sure if something would work, try shooting the same scene in a few different ways. Your test shots will give you a better understanding of what works best for your film. And of course, have fun with it!

## The 180 Degree Rule



As a viewer of a film or video, we feel like we are watching the action. In doing so, the camera will sometimes cut to a closeup of one subject matter, then another, like two people talking for instance. It may then cut to a wide shot where we see body language and more surrounding objects. You can imagine a line running across the scene through the subject matter.

This imaginary line represents the 180 degrees that the camera views in the scene. Once it has been established, that the viewer is looking on from one side, it's poor composition to jump to the other side of the room. Doing so will make the subject matter appear to jump across from each other and be looking in the wrong direction.

The effect of breaking the 180-degree rule can be used if the goal is to be jarring, but in order to maintain a sense of order, it's best to stay on one side of the action as if the camera was the viewer looking on.

## Up/Down Angles



Many times, you want to shoot your subject matter at eye level to give the viewer a sense of being a part of the scene. But you can also achieve dramatic effects by shooting at up and down angles towards your subject matter.

Shooting a down angle from above the subject gives the viewer a sense of power over the subject. It makes the subject appear weaker and smaller in stature. It can also be used in a more positive light to make the subject appear more docile or friendly.

While shooting the subject from a low up angle gives the power to the subject. It makes the subject seem larger or looming. It can be imposing and threatening. It can also be looked at as something to reach for or achieve, like a shot looking up at a mountain peak.

The use of up and down angles can be quite dramatic in frame composition, or it can be subtly used to make a character seem slightly taller or shorter just to enhance your story.

Find ways to incorporate these angles to help subconsciously inform your viewer what to feel about the subject matter.

# Camera Shot Types

There are many ways in which you can frame your subject, from seeing their entire body to only their eyes. Generally speaking, we can break this down into three main shot sizes: Long, Medium, and Close. Long shots (also commonly called Wide shots) show the subject from a distance, emphasizing place and location, while Close shots reveal details of the subject and highlight emotions of a character. Medium shots fall somewhere in between, putting emphasis on the subject while still showing some of the surrounding environment.

It's important to note that the following shot types only relate to subject size within the frame, and don't directly indicate what type of lens is used to capture the scene. The choice of lens—and, thus, the distance of the camera from the subject—remains an artistic decision for the Director and/or Director of Photography.

## Extreme Long Shot



Extreme Long Shot (aka Extreme Wide Shot) Used to show the subject from a distance, or the area in which the scene is taking place. This type of shot is particularly useful for establishing a scene (see Establishing Shot later in the article) in terms of time and place, as well as a character's physical or emotional relationship to the environment and elements within it. The character doesn't necessarily have to be viewable in this shot.

## Long Shot



Long Shot (aka Wide Shot) Shows the subject from top to bottom; for a person, this would be head to toes, though not necessarily filling the frame. The character becomes more of a focus than an Extreme Long Shot, but the shot tends to still be dominated by the scenery. This shot often sets the scene and our character's place in it. This can also serve as an Establishing Shot, in lieu of an Extreme Long Shot.

## Full Shot



Full Shot Frames character from head to toes, with the subject roughly filling the frame. The emphasis tends to be more on action and movement rather than a character's emotional state.

## Medium Long Shot



Medium Long Shot (aka 3/4 Shot) Intermediate between Full Shot and Medium Shot. Shows subject from the knees up.

## Cowboy Shot



Cowboy Shot (aka American Shot) A variation of a Medium Shot, this gets its name from Western films from the 1930s and 1940s, which would frame the subject from mid-thighs up to fit the character's gun holsters into the shot.

## Medium Shot



Medium Shot Shows part of the subject in more detail. For a person, a medium shot typically frames them from about waist up. This is one of the most common shots seen in films, as it focuses on a character (or characters) in a scene while still showing some environment.

## Medium Close-Up Shot



Medium Close-Up Falls between a Medium Shot and a Close-Up, generally framing the subject from chest or shoulder up.

## Close-Up Shot



Close-Up Fills the screen with part of the subject, such as a person's head/face. Framed this tightly, the emotions and reaction of a character dominate the scene.

## Choker Shot



Choker A variant of a Close-Up, this shot frames the subject's face from above the eyebrows to below the mouth

## Extreme Close-Up Shot



Extreme Close Up Emphasizes a small area or detail of the subject, such as the eye(s) or mouth. An Extreme Close Up of just the eyes is sometimes called an Italian Shot, getting its name from Sergio Leone's Italian-Western films that popularized it.

## Shots Indicating Camera Angle/Placement

In addition to subject size within a frame, shot types can also indicate where a camera is placed in relation to the subject. Here are some commonly used terms:

## Eye Level



Eye Level Shot taken with the camera approximately at human eye level, resulting in a neutral effect on the audience.

## High Angle



High Angle Subject is photographed from above eye level. This can have the effect of making the subject seem vulnerable, weak, or frightened.

## Dutch Angle/Tilt



Dutch Angle/Tilt Shot in which the camera is set at an angle on its roll axis so that the horizon line is not level. It is often used to show a disoriented or uneasy psychological state.

## Over-the-Shoulder Shot



**Over-the-Shoulder Shot** A popular shot where a subject is shot from behind the shoulder of another, framing the subject anywhere from a Medium to Close-Up. The shoulder, neck, and/or back of the head of the subject facing away from the camera remains viewable, making the shot useful for showing reactions during conversations. It tends to place more of an emphasis on the connection between two speakers rather than the detachment or isolation that results from single shots.

## Bird's-Eye View



**Bird's-Eye View (aka Top Shot)** A high-angle shot that's taken from directly overhead and from a distance. The shot gives the audience a wider view and is useful for showing direction and that the subject is moving, to highlight special relations, or reveal to the audience elements outside the boundaries of the character's awareness. The shot is often taken from on a crane or helicopter.

## Bird's-Eye View



**Establishing Shot** Usually the first shot of a scene, this is used to establish the location and environment. It can also be used to establish mood and give the audience visual clues regarding the time (night/day, year) and the general situation. Because they need to provide a great deal of information, Establishing Shots are usually Extreme Long Shots or Long Shots.

**Question/Comments**

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