**Production Roles: Focus on Editor**

Lesson Objectives

In this lesson, the student will focus on the challenges associated with the role of editor on the short film project.

Last Lesson in the Focus Series

This lesson concludes this module's ongoing exploration of the major production roles. Chances are, your film production is heading into [**post-production**](https://courses.pamojaeducation.com/shared/Courses%20M2016/M2016%20Film%20SL/Semester%204/week50/50_03.htm?_&d2lSessionVal=2dicqRFpCLeBUUxjQHoBQLex9&d2l_body_type=3) now (or, it should be!), so this is the perfect time to reinvigorate your understanding of what editors do.

Just as in the other focus lessons, this one will pre-suppose you have selected [**editor**](https://courses.pamojaeducation.com/shared/Courses%20M2016/M2016%20Film%20SL/Semester%204/week50/50_03.htm?_&d2lSessionVal=2dicqRFpCLeBUUxjQHoBQLex9&d2l_body_type=3) as your chosen production role, but is intended to be useful for all IB Film students, regardless of specialization.

Some Inspiration

One of the foremost editors (both audio and video) in the field is [**Walter Murch**](http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0004555/). Be sure to carefully review his IMDb entry.

Jump Cut

If you are serious about editing, then Murch's book, [***In the Blink of an Eye***](http://www.amazon.com/Blink-Eye-Revised-2nd/dp/1879505622), should be considered mandatory reading.

If you do not have the time or inclination to read his entire book, you can watch a condensed version of his theory about [**The Rule of Six**](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q2WGP4dofgQ) on YouTube.

Murch makes a compelling case that a cut serves more than just a practical purpose of giving the audience more information or another view of the scene. The edit carries much of the meaning of a shot, at least as much as the [**framing**](https://courses.pamojaeducation.com/shared/Courses%20M2016/M2016%20Film%20SL/Semester%204/week50/50_03.htm?_&d2lSessionVal=2dicqRFpCLeBUUxjQHoBQLex9&d2l_body_type=3) or [**composition**](https://courses.pamojaeducation.com/shared/Courses%20M2016/M2016%20Film%20SL/Semester%204/week50/50_03.htm?_&d2lSessionVal=2dicqRFpCLeBUUxjQHoBQLex9&d2l_body_type=3) or any of the other visual and audio elements of the[**mise-en-scene**](https://courses.pamojaeducation.com/shared/Courses%20M2016/M2016%20Film%20SL/Semester%204/week50/50_03.htm?_&d2lSessionVal=2dicqRFpCLeBUUxjQHoBQLex9&d2l_body_type=3).

Another source of inspiration for you could be the work of [**Thelma Schoonmaker**](http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0774817/), who has been [**Martin Scorsese**](http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000217/)'s editor for decades. Her work has been such an indispensable component of his films, such as[***Raging Bull***](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0081398/) (1980), ***[Goodfellas](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0099685/" \o "Goodfellas at IMDb - will open in a new window" \t "_blank)*** (1990), [***Gangs of New York***](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0217505/) (2002), [***The Departed***](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0407887/) (2006), and [***Shutter Island***](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1130884/) (2010), just to name a few. One might ask the question, What is the most distinctive feature of Scorsese's style?" and conclude it is the editing, in which case, the credit for that properly belongs to Schoonmaker. Their partnership represents one of the most fruitful cinematic collaborations of all time.

Jump Cut

Schoonmaker discusses her craft in a [**longer interview**](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KgXcpZqQy8M) on YouTube.

Schoonmaker also works through a specific example of a scene from *Raging Bull*, which she considers one of the more difficult scenes of her career. She discusses the challenges of editing a scene which has been improvised by two acting titans—[**Joe Pesci**](http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000582/) and [**Robert DeNiro**](http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000134/)—and how she eventually managed to make everything work seamlessly. View **[Editfest NY 2010 with Thelma Schoonmaker](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6enMrxbpI-w" \t "_blank)** on YouTube.

Jump Cut

If available in your area, or you can otherwise acquire, view [***The Cutting Edge: the Magic of Movie Editing***](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0428441/), which provides an excellent overview of the editor's art, and features Walter Murch discussing his craft in greater detail.

By now, you have achieved a good amount of experience as an editor, as you have worked on a variety of short projects and exercises in this course. This lesson will not delve into fundamentals, therefore, and will instead focus on some methods of how an editor can experiment with a scene, in order to achieve the greatest possible emotional and intellectual impact.

Shot Order

In practical terms, it is usually a good idea to lay down your [**master shot**](https://courses.pamojaeducation.com/shared/Courses%20M2016/M2016%20Film%20SL/Semester%204/week50/50_03.htm?_&d2lSessionVal=2dicqRFpCLeBUUxjQHoBQLex9&d2l_body_type=3) first and get it situated properly in the context of all the other scenes in the overall [**narrative**](https://courses.pamojaeducation.com/shared/Courses%20M2016/M2016%20Film%20SL/Semester%204/week50/50_03.htm?_&d2lSessionVal=2dicqRFpCLeBUUxjQHoBQLex9&d2l_body_type=3). Since your master shot is usually your [**wide angle**](https://courses.pamojaeducation.com/shared/Courses%20M2016/M2016%20Film%20SL/Semester%204/week50/50_03.htm?_&d2lSessionVal=2dicqRFpCLeBUUxjQHoBQLex9&d2l_body_type=3) of the scene, with all the essential elements in the [**frame**](https://courses.pamojaeducation.com/shared/Courses%20M2016/M2016%20Film%20SL/Semester%204/week50/50_03.htm?_&d2lSessionVal=2dicqRFpCLeBUUxjQHoBQLex9&d2l_body_type=3), it will provide your anchor, or visual base, for the scene. Although you will be cutting away from it often, it never hurts to return to this angle from time to time, just so the audience will not get disoriented. Once you have the master shot in place, lock that track. This way, no matter what you do afterwards, you will not mess up the overall continuity of the action. As usual, save this version of the project (e.g., “Scene020a\_MasterShotDone”) so you can always revert to it, if you really mess things up (and you will).

  
© 2012 Photodisc / Andy Sotiriou / Thinkstock

Now, the fun begins. If your [**director**](https://courses.pamojaeducation.com/shared/Courses%20M2016/M2016%20Film%20SL/Semester%204/week50/50_03.htm?_&d2lSessionVal=2dicqRFpCLeBUUxjQHoBQLex9&d2l_body_type=3) and [**cinematographer**](https://courses.pamojaeducation.com/shared/Courses%20M2016/M2016%20Film%20SL/Semester%204/week50/50_03.htm?_&d2lSessionVal=2dicqRFpCLeBUUxjQHoBQLex9&d2l_body_type=3) have done their jobs, then you should have a full assortment of angles and[**cutaways**](https://courses.pamojaeducation.com/shared/Courses%20M2016/M2016%20Film%20SL/Semester%204/week50/50_03.htm?_&d2lSessionVal=2dicqRFpCLeBUUxjQHoBQLex9&d2l_body_type=3) with which to play. The question arises, "When do I use one angle and not the other?" Walter Murch's advice will serve you well here. What is your intention with the cut? What effect do you want to create?

Try and remember we do not always need to have an angle on the current speaker in the dialogue. Experiment.

* What is the effect if we see the other person's reaction to the words instead?
* Which is more important at this point in the scene? The words or the reaction?
* Who has the power at this moment?
* Who is the aggressor and who is the victim?

Try to anticipate what an audience wants to more closely look at and at what time. Imagine from what they might want to distance themselves and at what time. The perfect cut happens right at that moment when the audience thinks, "Oooo, I wonder what he's thinking now...?" Cut. Close-up.

Feel free to entertain a variety of possibilities. What happens when you change the shot order more radically? What happens, for instance, if we see the start of a scene in which bank robbers are planning their upcoming robbery of a stagecoach and then, cut to the robbery in action while we still hear the audio of the planning? Conversely, what if we see the robbery going all wrong and then, cut to the planning where one character offers an objection to the plan, but is shot down, figuratively, by the leader's response. Then, cut back to him being shot down, literally, as his worst fear comes true. An editor need not be beholden to literal space and time. Just experiment. Change the order around randomly. The beauty of [**non-linear editing**](https://courses.pamojaeducation.com/shared/Courses%20M2016/M2016%20Film%20SL/Semester%204/week50/50_03.htm?_&d2lSessionVal=2dicqRFpCLeBUUxjQHoBQLex9&d2l_body_type=3) is you can allow yourself room to play. You never know, you just might stumble across a happy accident that leads to a great effect.

Pacing

If an audience grows restless and bored, then the responsibility falls on you. You are in charge of the pacing and the rhythm of the narrative. Always keep the maxim, "Enter late; leave early" in mind as you cut the footage. Enter the shot at the last moment, and leave before everything resolves. The audience will fill in the missing pieces, and their active engagement keeps them interested and involved in what happens next.

  
© 2012 Ablestock.com / Hemera  
Technologies / Getty Images /  
Thinkstock

As a connection to the Theory of Knowledge, it is worth noting that Film, like many of the arts, relies absolutely on the ability of an audience to act as co-creators of the aesthetic experience. Whether this is through what Coleridge, the British Romantic poet, called "the willing suspension of disbelief" or through supplying the missing pieces of a cinematic narrative, the audience brings itself into the act of creation. Trust that process instead of spoon-feeding them the experience.

Pacing works in both directions. Not only can you speed things up, you can also slow them down. Slowing down the action might be done digitally, through a slow-motion effect, or it can be done practically through actual edits. A 10-second dialogue exchange can be stretched to a minute or more with a liberal sprinkling of cutaways and reaction shots. You could also show the same action from multiple angles to elongate time. For instance, if you wanted to show the intensity of a frontier settler's response to the news of her husband being shot in cold blood at the bank, you might include several angles of a vase dropping from her hands, including multiple angles of the shatter moment, in order to emphasize just how much her whole world has just broken apart.

Controlling the pacing, in other words, really does mean not taking a one-size-fits-all approach to the task of editing. Some of the best scenes in the history of cinema involve no cuts at all.

Eye-tracing

Quick Tip

If your cinematographer did not have the editing in mind in regards to eye-tracing, then there is a simple cheat you can try. If you zoom in on a shot digitally, this will give you room around the borders to slide the shot slightly on the horizontal or vertical axis. This way, you can line up the eye-tracing a bit better and improve the seamlessness of the cut.

Seamless, invisible cutting requires you pay attention to what the eye of the audience is likely to be focusing on at the time of the cut. This is why it is important for the editor to understand the craft of the cinematographer. Knowing composition rules like the [**rule of thirds**](https://courses.pamojaeducation.com/shared/Courses%20M2016/M2016%20Film%20SL/Semester%204/week50/50_03.htm?_&d2lSessionVal=2dicqRFpCLeBUUxjQHoBQLex9&d2l_body_type=3), for instance, helps the editor recognize where the eye will be drawn in any particular frame. You reduce the momentary disorientation an audience experiences with every cut if you make the focal point of the frame in roughly the same position in the preceding shot as in the one that follows.

Try a simple exercise, just to demonstrate for yourself the importance of cutting with eye-tracing in mind. Find a good sequence with plenty of cuts in it. An action or fight sequence works well. Now, put your finger physically on the screen wherever you are looking. Pay attention to your finger position after the cut. More times than not, your finger will already be in place for the focal point of the next shot, after the cut. Pretty amazing, huh? If you need an audience's eye to move to a new location, then you need to make sure you give the shot enough time for the eye to wander. The audience will go to the dominant first, and then to the subsidiary contrasts, so leave enough time for that to occur.

Cutting to Sound

Yet another aspect of editing to consider is the relationship of the visual editing to the soundtrack and [**score**](https://courses.pamojaeducation.com/shared/Courses%20M2016/M2016%20Film%20SL/Semester%204/week50/50_03.htm?_&d2lSessionVal=2dicqRFpCLeBUUxjQHoBQLex9&d2l_body_type=3). Editing, like music, has a rhythm and a beat. As soon as sound elements are available, edit them in, or allow the sound editor to do so. Once the audio clips are in the timeline, you can adjust the timing of your cuts so they relate better to the audio.

A common example of matching video editing to audio editing is with a montage sequence that is timed to the beat of a song. Wherever the strong beat lands, that is where an editor can easily cut to a new shot, often without any further motivation. Because the beat makes such an impact, the usually jarring effect of a cut feels actually quite appropriate. This technique appears all the time in music videos.

The audio clip for the next scene can often be heard prior to the cut. This is called a [**split edit**](https://courses.pamojaeducation.com/shared/Courses%20M2016/M2016%20Film%20SL/Semester%204/week50/50_03.htm?_&d2lSessionVal=2dicqRFpCLeBUUxjQHoBQLex9&d2l_body_type=3) or [**L-cut**](https://courses.pamojaeducation.com/shared/Courses%20M2016/M2016%20Film%20SL/Semester%204/week50/50_03.htm?_&d2lSessionVal=2dicqRFpCLeBUUxjQHoBQLex9&d2l_body_type=3). Once you have the sound clips available, this can also help you determine how long to hold on the final shot of a scene before you cut to the next one.

Sound effects themselves can also be used for transitions if well placed. A nice wipe transition, for instance, can be accompanied by a whooshing sound effect to add some flair to an ordinary visual effect.

Production Timing

Post-production will continue for a bit, so take your time. Just continue to make forward progress, and you will save yourself the stress of last-minute editing mayhem. Remember, you have an Independent Study that deserves your attention and soon, a Presentation in the works as well. If you wait until the final moments before deadline, then you are simply asking for trouble and unnecessary anxiety. Manage your time. Happy editing!