

B-ROLL

MC 4324: VISUAL STORYTELLING

OVERVIEW

Unless you are shooting for a Sunday talk show, the prime value of a video journalist is to provide **NARRATIVE** content. It is in the words of the subject that the story line is laid down. However, that “talking head” in actuality is rarely seen on the screen. The video of the interviewee is generally only shown either to introduce him or herself or to make a point, where you want to emphasize the attribution of the comments.

So, what does the viewer see, while the subject is talking? The answer is that they see **WHAT THE SUBJECT IS TALKING ABOUT**, the B-Roll versus the actuality.

B-ROLL is what we call everything that happens on the screen other than the “talking head”. At least 80% of what you will cut onto the tape will be B-Roll, and less than 20% interview. It is the B-Roll that shows the viewer what the story is about. Getting good B-roll is at the heart of your education as a video journalist.

In still photojournalism, the “Decisive Moment” is king. Video on the other hand will swallow a great decisive moment whole without burping. Video is more about the “Expanded Moment”. Video is made up of a series of still pictures that happens to move, and when edited together provide a “Sequence”.

One of the most common mistakes that amateur movie makers fall into, is to roll on a single shot forever. We have all seen those tapes that friends have made of their vacation, in which the subject is lingered on, for interminable minutes, under the mistaken impression that simply because the subject moves, it must be a “movie”.

This is called “Real Time” coverage, in that it takes the viewer the same time to view the scene that it took the cameraperson to shoot it.

Professional video on the other hand, consists of series of brief moments that allow the cameraperson to condense time, and pack maximum information into as little time as possible. These series of brief shots are edited into sequences, and when combined with the narrative of the interview in the background, create a story.

B-ROLL HISTORY

One use of the term B-roll or B roll relates back to the older form of linear-based editing and the common naming conventions used by most television production facilities. Traditionally, the tape decks in an edit suite were labeled by letter, with the 'A' deck being the one containing the main tape upon which the interview material was shot. The 'B' deck was used to run tapes that held additional footage that often supported comments or descriptions made by

the interview subject. Before the advance of nonlinear editing systems, most editors only had precise control over two decks — their record deck and one source deck, which was typically the 'A' deck. Whenever an editor wanted to do a live dissolve from material on the 'A' deck to footage on the 'B' deck during an edit, he often had to manually roll (i.e. play) the 'B' deck at the appropriate moment before the dissolve was made — hence the term B-roll was born.

Other historical references to the term relate similarly back to traditional camera naming conventions. The 'A' camera and crew ran the main interview camera while the 'B' camera and crew typically shot the additional support material. The term may have evolved then through the listing of tapes a single camera crew shoots — with the 'A' tape containing the interview footage and the 'B' tape containing the support material.

WHY DO I NEED B-ROLL?

B-roll is the secondary footage collected to intercut with the primary footage. It is usually video only, as it is most often used over the A-roll audio, in place of the A-roll video. B-roll is usually shot at the same time the primary footage is collected.

You can collect B-roll at a time other than when you shoot your original footage, and you may need to if you forget to capture it on the shoot day, but then continuity needs to be considered. For example, if you shoot a segment of workers outside their factory on a sunny day and then return a week later to collect B-roll while it is raining, it's extremely likely that your footage won't cut together gracefully. If time allows, even if you are tired and ready for the end of the day, put in the extra half hour and collect a bunch of B-roll shots.

Certainly, collecting B-roll is not a very technical pursuit, but it is a discipline that must be learned and practiced. If you get in the habit of collecting B-roll on every shoot, it will become second nature, and you will always have a "box" full of B-roll Band-Aids for the lacerations that form in the edit. Here are a few examples of common shooting problems and their possible B-roll solutions.

PROBLEM A

You are taping an elderly woman who lives in a retirement home for a documentary about American families. The 90-year-old woman keeps talking about her grandchildren, but they live 2,000 miles across the country. The budget and time won't permit a trip to visit the grandchildren. What do you do?

Look over your right shoulder, up on the wall. Who do you think those three, individually photographed and framed kids are? Tape the pictures and shoot them in a couple of different ways. For example, tape a 'still' or a shot on a tripod without movement, maybe a fifteen-second shot to be safe, of each framed photo, and then shoot a 'still' of all three together. Then shoot a slow pan of each individually and then a pan of all three together. This will give you more options at the edit bay.

PROBLEM B

You are taping an interview of a soldier who has just returned from Iraq. He is telling you some incredible war stories, but you know you can't fly to Iraq to collect the B-roll. Your mind starts working quickly. You ask him if he has photos from his deployment, but he didn't have a still camera. You ask him if you can get access to go shoot in the local military base, but he says no way. What do you do?

You notice the soldier is wringing his hands and shaking his foot nervously while he is talking about a particularly crazy battle scene. When you are finished collecting your A-roll footage, tell your subject you want to shoot some random video without audio. Disconnect your external mic and zoom in on his foot. Keeping half an eye on the framing of your shot on the LCD, ask him to tell you some more detail of one of the crazier battles. Tell him you are not recording audio, which may relax him, enabling him to get deeper into details which he may have been more careful about previously. Hopefully, he will start wringing his hands and shaking his feet again, and these gestures will make great cutaways. Best-case scenario, and less intrusive, would be to use a dedicated cameraperson while you talk with your subject.

PROBLEM C

The opposing political party in your town has won control of government, and they are going to enact a host of new, exciting initiatives that include employment for more local citizens, building new buildings and changing social services. You call the government offices, and they tell you they are too busy to meet with you for an interview before your deadline, but they can give you pre-recorded speeches and audio sound bites to use. Now you need a whole lot of B-roll. This one is easy.

After listening to the audio and assembling a rough audio cut, you head out and shoot various government buildings, construction workers on the job, happy-looking business-looking people walking during rush hour, and all the other general B-roll shots you can think of to show this new beginning. But your piece is missing that certain something, that pizzazz. What do you do?

Think outside the obvious 'new beginning box' of people, government and society. Get poetic. Think of analogies for new beginnings. How about extreme close-ups (XCU) of dew hanging off vibrant green buds on a tree that viewers will recognize as a local breed. XCUs make excellent B-roll footage. Maybe you can acquire, or better yet shoot, if your camera has the ability, a time-lapse shot of a spring flower sprouting from the ground. Think of the analogy of springtime to show a new beginning and creatively cut the shots into your work.

In the world of Hollywood and network television, it is rare that a cameraperson is also the editor. On the other hand, in our world, it is the rule, with few exceptions. B-roll is a subject that both cameraperson and editor must be conscious of. But if the director and/or shooter do not collect it, you (as the editor) are in big trouble. If you are solely the editor and not involved in the shooting of a project, make sure the director and/or shooter collects an ample amount of B-roll. If you come onto a project after it is shot, I would suggest you make sure there is plenty of B-roll.

Professional film and TV productions often use two cameras to capture their A and B footage sources. For many of us, though, a second camera and another skilled pair of hands to operate it can be hard to come by. The single-camera shooter can just as easily gather footage for A/B-roll editing if he prepares in advance.

THE SINGLE CAMERA SOLUTION

Just because most people use a single camera to shoot their video stories doesn't mean they can't enjoy the nifty effects and variety available from a multi-camera shoot. The trick for the single-camera videographer is to shoot two different tapes of footage with the same camcorder. One tape (the A-roll) typically captures the main subject. The other type (the B-roll) typically records peripheral "effects" shots like close-ups, reaction shots, and establishing shots that add drama, variety and context to the primary footage.

STEP 1: THINK IT THROUGH

Preproduction planning is the first step toward a successful A/B-roll shoot. To shoot a scenario for an A/B-roll edit, you would need to approach the shoot a little differently. First, you would need at least two tapes: one exclusively for A-roll and the other exclusively for B-roll. The A-roll would still capture the high points, but the B-roll would serve to add texture and perspective.

STEP 2: WRITE IT OUT

For single camera A/B-roll shooting, a shooting plan or script is important to make sure you acquire all of the footage you might need. The plan can be anything from a simple handwritten form to a detailed storyboard. To help expand your compositional horizons, borrow a trick from the book of great Hollywood directors and try to pre-visualize the entire shoot beforehand. Try to establish a mental picture of what the finished production will look like before you start. Now write it down. Even though every videographer will "see" an event differently, certain shots are essential to ensure proper coverage of the story and a script will make sure you don't miss any shots in the confusion.

As you consider an event, try to break it into logical scenes. This will help determine what you must shoot for A-roll and what you can fit in for B-roll. A good way to begin many videos, for example, is with an "establishing shot," which is usually an extreme long shot that sets the scene for the viewer. This first shot quickly orients the viewer, gives context to the scene and allows a smooth "entrance" into the tape. Include this in the script, along with all the critical elements of the story. Now go back and brainstorm other B-roll shots that relate to the main action and that can transition well in between. For single camera A/B shooting, try to choose transition scenes that are easy to get and that you can shoot before or after the main action at your leisure.

STEP 3: SHOOT THE A-ROLL

Great B-roll won't do you much good if you miss critical parts of the A-roll. B-roll can be used to cover camera moves, but will never replace footage that is critical to the production.

Breaking down a production or event into its component parts allows the single-camera shooter the opportunity to decide which parts of the event are most important. Your interview makes up your A-roll, and you don't want to leave any out. Practice good framing, good lighting, good angles and other solid composition rules with your A-roll. Save the experimentation for the B-roll, where it's easier to cover up a miscue.

STEP 4: GET ENOUGH B-ROLL

One of the keys to remember when planning your shoot is that each segment of tape you plan to use as part of an A/B-roll transition must be long enough for editing. ***Each shot must last at least 10 seconds to cover usable footage.***

Often, you must look beyond the main action of a scene to find the details that make for interesting A/B-roll transitions. You need shots that allow for creative A/B-roll editing without causing concerns about continuity.

THE BASICS

Don't overlook the basics of good shooting technique in your quest to get A/B-roll footage. When you are planning your production, in addition to planning the transitions, try to visualize the "look" of the transitions as well. We've all witnessed an awkward cut in a program where, for whatever reason, things just don't go together right. The same can happen with dissolves, wipes and fades.

Mismatched lighting can make for the most unpleasant transitions. A low light long shot of a scene that dissolves into an over bright outdoor shot will appear jarring. Try to maintain a similar light level between A/B-roll shots, unless, of course, you purposely want a visual shock.

Camera movement can also throw off a transition. If the some footage features a slow pan from left to right, you want the other footage to feature a similar movement in direction and speed. Remember, while zoom-in/zoom-out combinations can work together, too much movement can confuse a viewer.

Finally, don't discount sound in your productions. The addition of sound segues, musical transitions and voice-overs all help to elevate the professional feel and polish of an A/B-roll edited production, whether you are shooting with one camcorder or five. Put at least as much time into developing the sound portion of your tape as you do the video. We'll get to that in a future class.

THE KITCHEN

Video is really a series of still photographs. However, movement takes place **WITHIN** the frame. The question you now face is how do you recognize the elements and shoot them in a way that will create a sequence?

A useful exercise is to take a room in your house or apartment that you probably use more than any other and pretend that you are going to tell the story of your life, **USING ONLY THOSE ELEMENTS THAT CAN BE SEEN IN YOUR KITCHEN**. At first this may seem crazy, but let's walk into your kitchen and see what we can see.

1. You are standing at the door of the kitchen, looking in. What do you see? Well, your first glimpse will no doubt be a wide angle (WA) view of the room. Fine, let's shoot that. Hold the camera steady and roll tape for 10 seconds.
2. Now your vision starts to zoom in (**NO! NO! NO ZOOMING!** Remember, vision doesn't work that way) and you start to look at things in the kitchen. Let's start with the refrigerator. Oh, look here is a nice shot of you with your (girl/boy) friend, on a beautiful summer's day. Let's grab a shot of that. We can use that still/photo button on your camera to do that.
3. Oh, here is a wonderful picture of your family taken a year ago. Let's shoot that.
4. And here is a shot of you on horseback on that trail ride you took. Let's get that.
5. Let's see what is in the refrigerator...Geez, not much--a six-pack of beer and leftover take-out Chinese food. You must be a student. Let's shoot that.
6. There's a calendar on the wall...let's see...it says April 5th, participate in NPPA Workshop, then, May 20th, summer break with parents Europe? Hmm, let's look over on the counter...Oh! An airline ticket...where to...Paris! Wow! Let's grab that.
7. Hmm...a camera bag with a still camera in it, and what's this? A video camera...must be one of those video journalists! A Valentine's Day card...How nice...Who's it from?...a notepad by the phone. Time Magazine wants you to forget the Paris trip with your family and go to the Sudan to cover the ongoing conflict instead...better shoot all of those items!
8. Let's take a look by the stove...Hmm, a cookbook. Julia Child's Art of French Cooking and a half-finished bottle of wine. Let's shoot that.
9. The TV set is on; tuned to CNN...a press card sits on top of the TV set. The phone rings, an answering machine picks up...a recorded message...the voice tells the caller, I'm sorry, I'm not at home right now...I'm at Texas State University taking a video journalism class. STOP TAPE!

Well, I just counted 20 shots, which when cut together; even with no sound tells a story about a life. These are called sequences!

Ok, so this is a pretty boring example, but it makes the point. It is about learning to **SEE** story telling elements.

THE FIRE DRILL

Now let's take something more exciting...how about a fire?

You are walking through downtown San Marcos; it's 5:00 PM on a clear Monday afternoon. People are getting off work...SUDDENLY YOU HEAR SIRENS. Fortunately you have your GL-2 with you. Let's start to tape!

1. A fire engine swings around the corner, its sirens blaring. Roll tape...nice, steady, medium shot as the truck rolls to a stop right in front of you. SHOT 1
2. Firemen jump off the truck, doors slam Medium shot (MS). SHOT 2
3. FIREMAN'S HANDS pull hose off truck. Close Up (CU). SHOT 3
4. HANDS slam hose fitting on hydrant; wrench tightens it on. Extreme Close Up (ECU). SHOT 4
5. CROWD starts to build (MS). SHOT 5
6. BATTALION CHIEF on two-way radio. Yelling..."This is deputy chief McIntyre, I am calling a second and third alarm on building. Tenants may be trapped. Dispatch high tower on my order, okay?" (CU) SHOT 6
7. SMOKE starts to billow from upper floors of building, as floodlights come on. Long Shot (LS). SHOT 7
8. WATER starts to blast from hoses (CU) SHOT 8
9. FIREMEN wrestle high-pressure hoses (MS) SHOT 9
10. Water mist begins to form on firemen's helmets (ECU) SHOT 10
11. MORE EQUIPMENT ARRIVES (WS) SHOT 11
12. ON 4TH FLOOR, PERSON appears at window with flames behind him. Telephoto lens (TS). SHOT 12
13. SURVIVORS start to walk from building, wrapped in blankets (MS) SHOT 13
14. HIGH TOWER is extended to upper floors as firemen start to climb (TS) SHOT 14
15. BATTALION CHIEF tells reporter who has just arrived that he has now declared a fourth alarm, they suspect that maybe a dozen people are trapped on the 4th floor. SHOT 15.
16. FIREMEN bring out victim on stretcher. SHOT 16
17. VICTIM is loaded into ambulance. SHOT 17
18. WATER CANON blasts water into 4th floor windows (TS). SHOT 18
19. PEOPLE can be seen climbing down ladder with Firemen's help (TS). SHOT 19
20. CROWD APPLAUDS. SHOT 20

In the above scenario, you see how a story is broken down into sequences. In addition to the 20 shots listed above, you would also be shooting each shot from as many angles, and as many focal lengths as possible.

In general, if you can get 20 shots with three variations on each, (wide, medium, and close-up) you will always have the basis of a cuttable piece.