



10 Ways to Improve Your Video Storytelling

1. Do not zoom or pan unless the movement is motivated.

When the eye and the ear compete, the eye wins. Movement causes distraction and the viewer will pay attention to the distraction more than what is being said in the video. A “motivated movement” is when the photojournalist is following a motion by moving the camera, such as capturing a football touchdown or a family running to greet a returning soldier. Resist panning across stationary objects like buildings. Instead, build a series of wide medium and close-up shots into sequences. If you do pan, allow the subject to exit the shot to provide a clean edit to the next shot.

2. Compose on the Thirds.

Imagine that your image has a grid cutting the image into thirds. The most important parts of the images should fall on one of those markers. In the image below, the video camera is the focus of the image.



In the image below the vertical and horizontal grid lines fall on key elements of the photo. By placing these elements on the grids, the photographer pulls the viewer’s eyes around the frame not allowing them to linger solely on the center of the frame.

In this photo the most important elements fall on or near the grid lines. The key element, the video camera, falls directly on two grid lines which makes it the focal point of the image.
Photos by Al Tompkins

3. Hold Every Shot for at Least Ten Seconds.

Count the time off in your head. A shot that is less than ten seconds will not likely be useful in editing.

Why ten seconds?

Because when you are capturing a remarkable shot, you will most likely not be paying attention to your camera's counter. You will think your shot is longer than it really is.

When you begin editing, you will see the shot you thought was plenty long enough to use isn't. Generally you will use shots that are an average of six seconds long for a news story. A 10-second shot will give you plenty of extra if you need the shot to run longer to cover an audio narration track. Even seasoned pros count off the seconds while they record.

Objective Copy, Subjective Soundbites

4. Seek Subjective Soundbites

Your viewers will remember how your story makes you feel long after they forget even basic facts. So, the soundbites that will make characters memorable are usually feelings not facts. In general, let the voiceover (objective) copy serve as the factual material that leaves the opinions, feelings and personal observations (subjective) to the characters.

Objective questions include:

"Do you...?"

"Don't you...?"

"Do you agree...?"

"Do you mean...?"

Subjective questions include:

"Why do you...?"

"How do you...?"

"What do you mean by...?"

"Why don't you agree...?"



5. Use Cutaways, Sequences and Visual Cues to Transition From One Shot or Scene to the Next.

A cutaway is a tool that editors use to smoothly transition from one shot to the next. Often it is an edit from an action to a reaction. The reaction is the cutaway. You are "cutting away" from one action to get to the next action. Without the cutaway the editor would have a "jump cut" an illogical sequence where the subject is shown in one position then another without anything in between.

For example a subject had her right hand raised then the next shot shows her left hand up. The edit would be a "jumpcut" because there would be no way to explain how the right hand got lowered or the left hand raised. A cutaway shot to the teacher's face calling on the class to respond to a question would be just what the editor needs to move from shot to shot.

Sequences include wide, medium, closeup and super closeup shots.

This variety of focal lengths not only provides a smoother visual look but it also adds significant "visual cues" for the viewer that the copy does not have to explain.

The visual cues can be a high wide shot that shows how large a room is or a setting sun the imply a peaceful place. Visual cues can save time without compromising information. A chirping bird shot could signal dawn, a honking car horn can be a visual cue that traffic is congested. Even backgrounds can send powerful messages that the narrator does not have to explain.

Imagine a video shows an interview with a subject who says, "Man oh man, I just love this place." In one version the man is sitting with a glass of tea and a beautiful green golf course behind him. The viewer will take that as a visual cue that the subject is leading an easy life. But if the background is filled with construction cranes and earthmovers, the viewer takes a very different visual cue. It might be reasonable to think he is building right there on that special spot. Visual cues help viewers fill what is going on in the narrative.



6. Choose Backgrounds and Settings that Enhance The Viewer's Understanding of the Character.

The above image, for example, shows what appears to be flowers growing out of the subject's head. The flowers compete with the subject's face. Simplify the background.



A simple clean background allows the viewer to focus on the face. The uncluttered background gives the feel that the interview is taking place in an office setting. Working close to the subject allows a deeper depth-of-field too. Notice that the image is not tilted as the first one was.

7. Seek Clear Closeup Natural Sound.

Filmmaker George Lukas said that the music and sound in Star Wars and Raiders of the Lost Ark accounted for at least half of the power behind the films.

Natural sound, the sound that you gather while capturing the images you use, tells the viewer how close to the action you were. The sound of rushing flood waters speaks to the force of the flow. The sound of winter ice melting off a roof implies a warming spell.

Rich closeup sound can become audio cues that displace the need for additional narration. Rich sound can help storytellers "write short" without sacrificing information or experience.

To capture the best sound, use the right microphone.



Shotgun microphones are highly directional and sensitive while omnidirectional microphones capture a wider arc of sounds and are useful at news conferences or events where the action might be all around the microphone.



Wireless microphones are useful when the subject is moving around while talking. The wireless microphone gives the subject the freedom to act naturally even while being

8. Use Shadows. Put the "Shadow Side" toward the Camera

The single biggest difference between amateur and professional video is how pros use light and shadows. Even with today's light-sensitive cameras, it is rare for professionals to attempt to capture video without adding light. At the same time, shadows are important to great video because shadows add dimension and texture to the image. You add light to create shadows sometimes.



In the above image, the camera is on the "shadow side" of the statue.

Because the viewer's eyes generally look at the lightest part of an image first, the shadows guide the viewer toward the solid side's eyes. That's where the emotion of the image can be found.

The shadows run from the hat down the left shoulder, but there is a touch of light on the front of the neck and half of the moustache is light. The shadows add depth. Of course this shot is taken from far away so the background is out of focus due to a shallow depth-of-field.

Images are best when they are not captured in bright overhead light. The magic hours of one hour after sunup and one hour before sundown produce ideal photo conditions because the color temperatures of the sun at those times are warm reds and oranges.

While shadows add texture, avoid deep shadows that distract from the content.

The Backpack Journalist's Survival Guide



9. Keep Your Shot Steady.

Tripods or monopods are more important to professional looking video than most amateurs realize.

When the viewer sees movement in an unsteady shot, it distracts from the message you are trying to tell. And the more the photographer is zoomed in on a shot, the more exaggerated the movement will appear to be.

If you don't have a tripod or monopod handy, you have other options.

Get Wide and Get Close. Suppose you are shooting a flower without a tripod. Get close to the flower and zoom out wide. Whatever hand movements that you cannot avoid will be minimized by zooming wider and working close.

The world is your tripod. Find something solid to prop your camera on. In the picture above, the photographer on the right is steadying his camera on the ground while the photographer on the left is relying on her left hand to be a steady enough to hold her camera while zooming in. He will be far more successful than she will capturing a steady shot.

If you have to hold the shot with your hands, hold the camera close to your body and brace your elbows to your chest. Keep a wide stance breathe deeply and hold your breath while capturing the 10 second shot.

Steady video is even more important now that most photographers are capturing video in a 16 x 9 narrow digital frame that is wider and more narrow than the 4x 3 analogue frame which is wider and more square.

10. Tell the Truth.

Don't allow your editing, lighting, sequencing or cropping to mislead the viewers. Ask yourself if what the viewer will see and hear is what you saw and heard when you captured the image.

Be especially careful when using slow-motion or other special effects that can distort the truth. Victims shown in slow motion tend to appear even more victimized while suspects appear more guilty.

Music can add subjective emotions to a story. Music can be a cue to a viewer about how they should feel about what they are seeing.

Generally, in news reporting, live by the "Do not add, do not alter" rule of thumb. Seek truth and tell it as fully as possible.

Manage your time.

Set deadlines throughout the day so that you stay on schedule, and budget extra time for what takes you the longest. It doesn't matter how great your video is if you don't have time to edit it together well.

Shoot stand-ups first.

Do this whenever possible. You look the best before you've been lugging the camera around in 90-degree heat all day.

Park close.

Whenever possible, nag security guards, building owners and people you're interviewing for help in getting the closest parking spot. Don't lug all your gear through an entire parking lot if you don't have to!

Capture what is going to go away first.

When working alone, the Backpack Journalist has to keep his/her eyes and ears wide open. Listen for the story, don't just look for it.

Survey the scene and consider what will go away first and capture it. The fire trucks and hoses aren't going anywhere. You can always capture images of flashing lights and leaking hoses.

Think About Social Media and Web Early On.

You are not just filing for television, the web needs material too. A still photo and an iPhone video will be just fine initially. Remember the best web images are peak action closeups. Most web shots should be horizontal.

Online needs an image and outline.

Get Focused and Communicate.

The assignment desk needs to know a few things fast:

- Did you capture the story?
- When will you file something?
- What additional backup do you need such as a live truck, another crew or additional information not available at the scene?
- Promise only what you can deliver.





Two-time winner of the National Press Photographers Association Photographer of the Year Award, Darren Durlach, says, especially when he is working alone, he has a saying that he plays in his head over and over:

“Tight, Medium, Wide, Action, Reaction, Tight, Medium Wide, Action, Reaction..”

“That is what I say to myself constantly,” Durlach tells young journalists getting started in the business. It is a way to remind himself what shot he should capture next so that he gets the video he needs to tell the story but also minimizes the amount of time he will need to put it together.

Durlach says his method of shooting shots in sequence, is a way of “editing in the camera,” so when he is pressed for time in the editing process, and Backpack Journalists or Video Journalists as they are often called, usually are pressed for time, he won’t have to search through his video.

If you capture images in the same order that you might use to edit, you will have shots that you need right next to each other and it will cut your editing time because you won’t search for the shots you need.

If you shoot a tight shot then a wide shot, they can easily edit together. If you shoot a ton of tight shots, then a lot of wide shots, you will find yourself searching through your video as you edit and that eats up precious time on deadline, Durlach says.

Durlach also captures key shots as he walks up on a scene. He looks for wide “establishing shots” as he approaches a scene, using the moment to be sure he understands what is happening. The wide shots become more valuable in the editing process because a wide shot can be used between nearly any other set of shots without interrupting the flow of the story.

Durlach says he is constantly “listening for the story” too. He keeps one ear covered with a headset and another listening for the actual sound of the story unfolding around him.

“It can be dangerous to just listen through a headset because you might not hear a danger or development that is right next to you, are only hearing what the microphones are picking up. If they are facing in front of you, you might miss whatever is behind you.”

Durlach says he keeps his left eye open while shooting video. “If you only see what you are looking at through the viewfinder, you might be missing what is closer to you or is off to the side.

“For every action you capture, look for a reaction.”