What is editing?

Editing for motion pictures is the process of organizing, reviewing, selecting, and assembling the picture and sound " footage " captured during production. The result of these editing efforts should be a coherent and meaningful story or visual presentation that comes as close as possible to achieving the goals behind the original intent of the work — to entertain, to inform, to inspire, etc.

When you write, you select words from your vocabulary and string them together in a
particular fashion to construct sentences that will inform, entertain, or evoke emotional responses within the reader. When you edit a motion picture, there is a similar process. You have to select shots and string them together in edited scenes to inform, entertain, or evoke emotional responses within the viewer. For your written sentences to make sense to readers you must follow the known and accepted rules of grammar for your written language — spelling, word order, phrase structure, tense, etc. There is also a similar visual grammar for the language of motion pictures — how they are shot and how they are edited together. In the companion text, *Grammar of the Shot*, these basic rules of structure and form in shooting the individual pictures are discussed in detail. This text, *Grammar of the Edit*, presents the basic rules of visual construction that will allow you to take these same shots and assemble them together into a meaningful story. As a creative entity, you may choose to edit your visual elements however you wish, but it must be understood that there are certain basic rules and guidelines that are commonly accepted in the entertainment and visual communication fields. The chapters of this book are designed to help you understand the grammar behind the editing process and set you on a path to good editing practices.

A Little Editing History

Long before the existence of digital videotape and computer editing software, people used emulsion film to create the illusion of motion pictures. Over one hundred years ago, the nascent technology of emulsion film strips and hand-cranked moving film cameras only allowed for roughly one minute of any event to be photographed. Many of the original movies were just roughly one-minute long recordings of events in real time. Very quickly the technologies advanced and the use of motion pictures moved from straight documentary presentations that amazed to more elaborate fictional narrative stories that

entertained. Longer strips of film allowed for longer recording times. As film's visual language began to develop, more shot variety was introduced and motion pictures became grander in scope. Editing the larger amount of photographic material grew out of the need to trim the visual " fat " and to better structure the story shown to an audience. Within just a short few decades, a more complex visual language of motion picture photography and editing had evolved. Films were quickly becoming the largest entertainment and information medium on the planet. They were held in high esteem by many and defamed by others. Motion pictures and how they were perceived by audiences became a source of study. Many theories about the impact of filmmaking, and the editing process especially, emerged from different cultures around the world. When the editor cut the film and how the various shots were joined together were seen to have an impact on the viewing audience above and beyond the actual story. Editing was no longer just a means to physically trim the excess footage from a series of shots, but it had become recognized as a powerful tool in the filmmaker's toolbox. The machines used to take the pictures and to perform the cuts have evolved over time, but most of the basic rules of visual grammar have remained the same. Differing editorial styles have come and gone, but the core methods and intent behind the practice are unchanged even today.

The Basic Edit Transitions

Let us begin our discussion of editing with the edit point itself.
There are four basic ways one can transition from one shot or visual element into another:

● **Cut** — An instantaneous change from one shot to the next. The last full frame of picture for one shot is immediately followed by the first full frame of picture for the next shot.

● **Dissolve** — A gradual change from the ending pictures of one shot into the beginning pictures of the next shot. This is traditionally achieved via a superimposition of both shots with a simultaneous downward and upward ramping of opacity over a particular period of time. As the end of the first shot " dissolves " away, the beginning of the next shot " resolves " onto the screen at the same time.

● **Wipe** — A line, progressing at some angle, or a shape, moves across the screen removing the image of the shot just ending while simultaneously revealing the next shot behind the line or the shape. The wiping shot replaces the previous shot on the screen.

● **Fade** — (1) A gradual change from a solid black screen into a fully visible image (fade from black or fade-in). (2) A gradual change from a fully visible image into a solid black screen (fade to black or fade-out).

The grammar of the edit has evolved in some ways since the early days of cinema, but
these four basic transitions have remained the same. No matter what type of program you are editing or what tool you are using to make it, a cut is still a cut. A dissolve is still a dissolve no matter what pictures you dissolve from and to. A wipe will literally wipe a new shot over the old shot. A fade-in still comes out of black and a fade-out still goes into black. They have remained the same because their individual purposes have remained the same, and, for the most part, everyone around the world understands their grammar — or

what it means when they see one being used as a transition. Later in this text you will be able to explore a more in-depth analysis of these basic editing transitions. For now, let us place them aside and focus our attentions on a much broader topic — a general approach to the entire editing process. Your goal is to have a finished piece that plays for your audience and provides as much entertainment or information as it can. To achieve that finished piece, though, there are several stages of the editing process that you will, most likely, need to follow.

Stages of the Editing Process

The editing process, more generally referred to as **post-production** or sometimes just **post** , can range from being rather simple to extremely complex. The post-production period really encompasses any and all work on the project that comes after the shooting (the **production**) is completed. Picture and sound tracks are edited together to show and tell the story, special visual effects are generated, titles/graphics/credits are added, sound effects are created, and music is scored during post-production. On smaller projects, one person can do all of this work, but on larger productions, several teams of women and men work in various departments to complete each element and join each phase of the post-production workflow.

The following is a low-level listing of the major steps involved in a post-production workflow that stresses the editing process for the visual elements of a project.
- Acquire
- Organize
- Review and select
- Assemble
- Cut — rough
- Cut — fine
- Picture lock
- Master and deliver

Acquisition — Simply put, you must acquire the footage shot by the production team. Motion picture and sound elements, whether on emulsion film, analog tape, digital tape, or digital files, must be gathered together for the duration of the post-production editing process. The medium of choice depends on the method of editing and the physical devices used to perform the edits. If you are using a computer-aided digital non-linear editing system to perform the edit, then you will have to import, capture, or " digitize " all materials as media on your storage drives. These media files must remain accessible by your editing software for the life of the project for you to complete the work.

Organization — All of the minutes, hours, feet, reels, or gigabytes of picture and sound elements should be organized in some way. If you do not have a clear system of labelling, grouping, or sorting all of the material needed for your project, you will eventually have a difficult time finding that good shot or that good sound effect, etc. Organization of source materials is not the most glamorous part of the edit process, but it can certainly make the difference between a smooth

post-production workflow and a slower and more frustrating one. Many of the better editors and **assistant editors** are highly prized for their organizational skills. Tame the chaos into order and craft the order into a motion picture.

Review and selection — Once you have acquired and organized all of your elements, it will be necessary to review all of this material and pick out the best pieces that will work for your project. You will " pull the selects " and set aside the good stuff while weeding out the junk that you hope you will not have to use. You would be wise to not actually throw anything away, however, because you will never know what might come in handy a day or a few weeks into the editing process. That one scrap of footage of the flag waving in the breeze may just save the entire edit, so keep it readily available even though you know it is not one of your original selections.

Assembly — This process calls for assembling all of the major pieces of the project into a logical **sequence** of picture and sound elements. If you are editing a scripted story, you would follow that script as a blueprint for assembling the best selections of the various shots of the scenes that make up the motion picture. If you are creating a documentary or even a music video, there is always some story that is trying to be shown to an audience — assemble those raw parts into this skeleton version. No matter what genre the project, the story, in its longest and most rough-hewn form, takes shape now.

Rough cut — This is a stage of the project's development where the majority of the " fat " has been trimmed and you are left with a presentation that is complete in its narrative flow but has many rough edges. Perhaps not every cut is perfectly timed yet, there are no finalized titles or graphics, simple or more elaborate effects have not been created, and the audio mix certainly has not been completed. You do have the timing of the main elements down to a good pace, however, and you, and others to whom you show the developing work, like how the story unfolds, although restructuring of scenes may still occur.

Fine cut — You have worked and re-worked and massaged the material of your project into a tight and finely tuned presentation. There will be no major renovations from this point forward. You, and the majority of the people to whom you show the piece, all agree that no further tweaks are required. This cut is fi ne.

Picture lock — You have reached picture lock when you are absolutely certain that you will not make any more changes to the picture track(s) of your edited piece. The timing of all picture elements (shots, titles, black pauses, etc.) is set. Once you have locked the picture tracks (sometimes literally but mostly figuratively), you are then free to address your audio mixing needs. Once the audio tweaks are finalized and your music is in place, then you are ready for the last stage.

Mastering and delivery — All of your efforts in creating a well-edited piece will mean very little if you cannot deliver the show to the audience that needs to see it. These days this process may mean recording your final cut onto videotape, creating an optical film print for projection in a movie theatre, converting your story into a computer video file, or authoring the piece onto a DVD. Each medium would require a unique process, but the end result is that you have a fully mastered version of your show and an audience gets to view all of your hard editing work.

So we now have a pretty good idea of what the basic editing, or post-production workflow is for any project large or small. You certainly may encounter projects that do not call for all the stages of editing to be executed in a clearly delineated manner, but, for the most part, you will touch upon some combination of each of these stages as you work toward your finished piece.

Basic Shot Types

Most editors only get involved with a project during post-production. Although many professional editors may have worked in production on a fi lm set or in a studio at some point in their careers, it is not that common for them to work both production and postproduction
jobs. What is common, however, is the need for all editors to know certain production concepts and terminologies and be well-versed in the visual grammar of filmmaking. Knowing the basic shot types and how to best juxtapose them during the edit is a key responsibility for the editor. He or she must know how to best " show " the story. So as a review, we will present the following section which highlights and illustrates the main building blocks of film language — the basic shots.

- Extreme close-up (XCU or ECU)
- Big close-up (BCU)
- Close-up (CU)
- Medium close-up (MCU)
- Medium shot (MS)
- Medium long shot (MLS)
- Long shot (LS) or wide shot (WS)
- Very long shot (VLS)
- Extreme long shot (XLS or ELS)
- Two shot (2S)
- Over the shoulder (OTS)
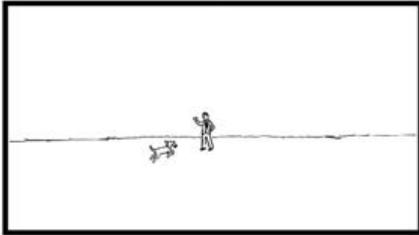
Extreme Long Shot : XLS / ELS

Medium Close-Up : MCU

Very Long Shot : VLS

Close-Up : CU

Long Shot : LS

Big Close-Up : BCU

Medium Long Shot : MLS

Extreme Close-Up : XCU / ECU

Medium Shot : MS

2-Shot

Over-The-Shoulder

Big Close-Up (BCU)
1. Human face occupies as much of the frame as possible and still shows the key features of eyes, nose, and mouth at once.
2. Such an intimate shot puts the audience directly in the face of the subject. Every detail of the face is highly visible, therefore facial movements or expressions need to be subtle. Very little head movement can be tolerated before the subject moves out of frame.
3. This shot is about who and how that " who " feels — angry, scared, romantic, etc.

Close-Up (CU)
1. Sometimes called a " head shot " because the framing is primarily the face, but it may cut off the top of the subject's hair. The bottom of frame can begin anywhere just below the chin or with the neck and a little upper shoulder visible.
2. A very intimate full face shot of a human subject showing all detail in the eyes. It conveys the subtle emotions that play across the eyes, mouth, and facial muscles of an actor. Health conditions and facial hair in men and make-up use in women are clearly visible.
3. An audience member should be totally focused on the human face with this framing.
4. This shot shows who but not so much where or when.

Medium Close-Up (MCU)
1. Sometimes called a " two-button " for the tight bottom frame cutting off at the chest, roughly where you would see the top two buttons on a shirt. Definitely cuts off above the elbow joint. Adjust bottom frame slightly for men or women depending on costuming.
2. Character's facial features are rather clear. Where the eyes look is obvious, as is emotion, hair style and color, make-up, etc. This is one of the most common shots in filmmaking because it provides so much information about the character while speaking, listening, or performing an action that does not involve much body or head movement.
3. An audience is supposed to be watching the human face at this point in the framing so actions or objects in the surrounding environment should hold little to no importance.
4. Depending upon general lighting and costuming you may discern general information about where and when.

Medium Shot (MS)
1. May also be called the " waist " shot because the frame cuts off the human figure just below the waist and just above the wrists if arms are down at the side.
2. Human torso is most prominent in the frame. However, eyes and the direction they look, clothing, and hair color and style are all plainly visible.
3. Subject movement may become a concern since the tighter framing restricts the freedom of gesture. Be careful not to **break frame** (have an actor's body part touch or move beyond the established edge of the picture frame).
4. Certainly shows who and may provide generic detail about where (inside or outside, apartment, store, forest, etc.) and when (day or night, season).

Medium Long Shot (MLS)
1. First shot where surrounding environment occupies more screen space than the subject. Traditionally framed such that bottom of frame cuts off the leg either just below, or, more common, just above the knee. The choice for where to frame the leg may depend on costuming or body movement of the individual in the shot. If you cut bottom of frame above the knee, it is sometimes referred to as the " cowboy. " (In classical Hollywood Westerns, it was important to get the obligatory " six gun " strapped to the hero's thigh in the shot.)
2. Human figure is prominent and details in clothing, gender, and facial expressions are visible.
3. Shows more of who than where and may still show when.

Long Shot/Wide Shot (LS/WS)
1. This is usually considered a " full body " shot, wide but still in close to the figure often framing feet just above bottom of frame and head just below top of frame. It may often be noted as a generic wide shot (WS) as well.
2. The tall vertical line of the human figure attracts the viewer's eye away from the surrounding environment; however, a fair amount of the character's surroundings are still visible and should be considered in the composition.
3. May not work well for an **establishing shot** because it may not show enough of the environment to provide the required information to the audience.
4. Shows where, when, and who. The gender, clothing, movements, and general facial expressions may be seen but real facial detail is lacking.

Very Long Shot (VLS)
1. Proud member of the wide shot family.
2. May be used in **exterior** or **interior** shooting when enough width and height exist within the studio set or location building.
3. The human figure is visible but only generalities of race, mood, clothing, and hair may be observed. The environment within the fi lm space dominates much of the screen.
4. May be used as an establishing shot where movement of character brings the figure closer to the camera during the action of the shot.
5. Shows where, when, and a bit of who.

Extreme Long Shot (XLS/ELS)
1. Also referred to as a very wide shot or a very wide angle shot.
2. Traditionally used in exterior shooting.
3. Encompasses a large field of view, therefore forms an image that shows a large amount of the environment within the film space.
4. Often used as an establishing shot at the beginning of a motion picture or at the start of a new sequence within a motion picture.
5. Shows urban, suburban, rural, mountains, desert, ocean, etc.
6. May show day, night, summer, winter, spring, fall, distant past, past, present, future, etc.
7. May show the lone stranger walking into town or massive invading army. Most often the human figures in the XLS are so small that details are indistinguishable. General, not specific information will be conveyed.

Two-Shot (2-Shot/2S)

1. Contains two subjects who generally either face toward camera or face each other in profile to camera.

2. Framing depends on whether the subjects are standing or sitting, moving or static, or making gestures and performing actions. A medium 2-shot (M2S) is common but allows for little gesturing or body movement. Medium long shot or long shot two-shots will allow more room around the subjects for movement or action.

3. Framing for tighter shots (MCU, CU) would entail extremely close proximity of subjects' heads implying intimate connectivity or aggressive posturing like two boxers in a clutch. To see both faces of the subjects in a tight 2-shot, you would have to " favor " one body before the other, literally overlapping the people within the frame. The person closest to camera and seen fully by the viewer is given favor.

4. Adding persons creates a three-shot (3-shot), a group shot, or a crowd shot depending on how many individuals are clustered together in the frame.

Over-the-Shoulder Shot (OTS/OSS)

1. A special 2-shot in which one subject is " favored " facing camera either frame left or frame right and the other subject has his or her back turned toward camera on the opposite side of the frame. The non-favored subject creates an " L " shape at the edge and bottom of frame with the back of their head and their shoulder; hence the name. The camera shoots over one subject's shoulder to frame up the face of the other subject for the viewer to see.

2. Due to the " shoulder " subject partially cut off at the edge of frame, the shot type used for the OTS may be as tight as a medium close-up. Anything closer and the composition would alter the balance of the frame and the shoulder may get lost creating what some may call a **dirty single** .

3. It is often helpful to have a decreased **depth of field** so the portion of the " shoulder " subject visible in the corner of the frame is blurry while the face of the favored subject is well-focused. Having a well-focused back-of-the-head may prove to be distracting for the audience.