EDIT LIKE A PRO

50 Film Editing Tips You Must Know
The 50 Most Useful Video Editing Tips
You Will Ever Read

The 50 video editing tips that follow are a product of many years of editing practice, hours of research and learning from countless mistakes.

The suggestions and techniques mentioned in each tip could easily be expanded upon to take up many pages of discussion and example. However, for the sake of this tip sheet, we tried to keep things brief and to the point.

We hope that you will be able to apply these tips to your own editing projects to improve the quality of your work and increase your speed and efficiency.

Please enjoy!

- Film Editing Pro
1. Keep the pace appropriate — too fast and you’ll lose people, too slow and you’ll bore them.

As a general rule, it's better to cut a scene too fast than too slow. There's nothing worse than boring your audience. That said, confusing people by playing a scene too fast is a close second.

2. Determine what drives the scene and start by editing it.

When you begin to edit anything, figure out what element is going to propel it forward and use it as the backbone of your piece. Sometimes it's the rhythm of the music, sometimes it's a dialogue conversation, sometimes it's a sequence of shots and other times it's a motif like an insert shot of a ticking clock that appears every few seconds. Whatever it is, lay the "driver" into your timeline first and let it inform the rest of the editing process.

3. Use reaction shots.

Reaction shots do more than just show what a character thinks or feels about a particular event. They also suggest what the viewer themselves should be feeling - whether it's fear, shock, lust etc. Additionally, reaction shots allow the viewer a moment to digest things as they occur. If the footage just showed two boxers slugging it out in a ring without cutting to the occasional audience reaction
shots, the viewer would quickly become either overwhelmed by the constant action or simply immune to it.

Neither is good. This applies to comedy, horror and just about every other genre you can think of.

4 **Compress time to prevent boredom.**

Nobody wants to watch somebody walk all the way across a room, climb an entire flight of stairs or eat an entire meal. Cut between various camera angles to compress time and get the action done more quickly.

5 **Expand time to intensify a dramatic moment, joke, action bit etc.**

Sometimes, a moment is so interesting, important or powerful that it makes sense to drag it out a bit. In the same way that cutting between different camera angles can compress time, it can also be used to expand it. Showing the same event from multiple angles allows you to effectively play it out in a way longer than it actually took. A good example of this might be a baseball player stepping up
to the plate and hitting a home run. The time and excitement of the whole event can be extended by using many different shots of the batter, his facial expressions, the pitcher, the crowd, and numerous angles of the pitch, the swing and the hit. Much more exciting than playing it in "real-time".

6 Remember the story and character arcs.

As you're editing and selecting lines and takes from your characters throughout a film, always remember what has happened, what is currently happening, and what still hasn't happened. Make sure that a character's development flows appropriately through the story.

For example, you don't want a character to appear too confident when he hasn't yet developed that trait through the events of the film. If you ever need a little help in keeping track of how your story is flowing and your characters are developing, here's a suggestion. Find all the scenes you've already cut together with the character you're working on. Lay them out side by side in the order you have them in the film and watch them. This way, you can see a character's progression and development very quickly, without having to watch your entire film. You'll quickly get an idea of whether the progression and development makes sense or should be adjusted.

7 Just keep cutting.

Sometimes the ideas don't start flowing until you start to see something on your timeline. When you hit a creative roadblock, don't give up. Just keep editing and trying different ways of tackling a scene,
promo, whatever. Eventually you'll do something that will inspire you and set you down the right path.

8 **Match cuts work for both picture and audio.**

Everyone has seen a picture cut from one scene with a close-up on an eyeball to another scene with a similarly-sized shot of the sun — or some variation of this type of picture match cut. But don't forget that you can also match cut audio. Here's an example.

In scene A, a woman states, "I would never steal something from your store, sir. Why, the only person I even know who has stolen anything is..." — cut to scene B where a man yells, "Fletcher!", pointing at the woman's younger brother as he runs out of a store carrying a TV set. Match cuts for audio are a great way of connecting ideas between scenes. Get creative — there are lots of possibilities.

9 **First cut rough, then refine.**

Don't worry about working on the tiny details of a cut as you're first laying it out. Get your rough structure figured out first and then start fine-tuning frames and audio. This will allow you the most creative speed and flexibility as you're editing the piece, without becoming bogged down in minutiae.
Cut shots in a dialogue scene between clauses, breaths or right before intense deliveries.

Make use of peaks in intensity during a dialogue scene, as well as moments of pause or contemplation. They are all good, natural points to cut from one character to another where the cut will go largely unnoticed.

Cut on movement.

This is one of the most fundamental video editing tips out there. The easiest way to make a cut invisible is to cut during some sort of movement. This can be the movement of a character, such as a head turn, hand gesture, or a punch. Or, you can cut on the movement of the camera itself. Often the camera will pan, dolly, tilt and whip around the screen. Cutting on these movements will help to mask your edits and create a more seamless experience for the viewer.

Motivate your cuts.

When cuts are motivated, they will seem more natural and won't jar the viewer. Use this to your advantage to create a smoothly-flowing piece. A simple example of this is a close-up on a character's face as their eyes look off screen, thus motivating a cut to something that they're looking at.

Use insert shots.

Insert shots are close-up shots of items in a scene (a set of keys on the counter that the main character just forgot to bring with him as he ran out of the apartment in a hurry) or very particular actions that are happening (a hand picking up a glass of wine from the table). Insert shots can help to transition scenes, more fully define what's going on by focusing a viewer's attention and provide information
about an environment by showing the details that are present in it. Inserts shots also provide great diversity in shot compositions within a cut, breaking up the monotony of medium shots that can tend to plague a piece.

14 **Watch an actor’s eyes to know when to cut.**

Generally, an actor’s eyes will give you a good indication when it’s time to cut away to another character, an object in the scene or simply to a different camera angle. An eye movement can be thought of as a small version of cutting on movement, as well as a way to motivate an edit. When unsure of when to cut, look at the eyes!

15 **Utilize camera movement for faster pacing.**

A great way to give the impression of intensity and action is to make use of camera movement. Obviously, the availability of shots with a moving camera is determined during filming, but if you’ve got them available to you and want to rev up the action a bit, don’t forget to use them. Additionally, when you cut from one moving shot to another, you’re automatically always cutting on movement and thus will have more opportunities to make smooth edits. As a result, you’ll be able to reduce the duration of individual shots and quicken the pacing that way as well.

16 **Jump cuts aren’t always bad.**

Audiences are more forgiving now. A decade or two ago, it used to be a hard and fast rule that you were never to make a jump cut. Not so anymore. Sure, a jump cut in an emotional, dramatic scene might still be a bit awkward and distracting. But jump cuts in action, horror, even comedy have
become much more acceptable than before. Jump cuts can give your piece an edgy, stylistic feel and also serve as a device for scaring or surprising the audience. As with most things though, the trick is not to overuse them.

17 **Cut when your viewer is distracted.**

This tip is a bit general, but I wanted to include it because it illustrates an important overarching concept. Whether you’re cutting on movement, big sounds or intense moments, the key is to generally cut when your viewer is distracted. Think of it like a magician who distracts his audience with flourishes and stories, diverting their attention from the sleight of hand going on behind the scenes that sets up his trick. This tip will guide you extremely well in countless editing situations.

18 **Fades to black start new scenes — cross-dissolves indicate time passing.**

This is a pretty basic tip, but good to remember. There are many editors who try to avoid using either one of these effects — as they believe that a good edit can be made with properly-motivated
straight cuts. However, I believe that fades and dissolves still have their place in the right circumstances. Just be sure to use them sparingly and correctly.

13 Vary camera angles between similar shots by at least 45°.

If you have to cut from one shot to another shot of the same subject, try to make sure that the angle of the new shot is at least 45° different from the first. Otherwise the cut will be jarring and look like a mistake. If you can’t cut to a different enough angle, try to cut away to another subject — or bridge the gap with an insert shot.

20 Vary your camera distance when cutting shots of same subject.

This is similar to the previous rule. Unless you’re cutting something stylistically, it’s best to have a substantial change in camera distance when cutting in or out from the same subject. For example, try not to cut from an extreme close-up to a close-up. Try going from an ECU to a medium or wide shot instead. It will feel a bit more natural and help to keep the cut closer to invisible — which is usually the goal.
21 Use dissolves on heads and tails of audio to prevent popping.

Almost all editing software has a fairly quick way to apply audio fades and dissolves. Use these on the edges of your audio clips to smoothly fade in and out of sound effects, dialogue, room tone, music etc. Even if you only have space to apply a 1 or 2 frame dissolve after a word is spoken, use it. These dissolves will smooth out your audio mix and prevent "popping".

22 Dip music and sound effects under dialogue.

If your dialogue and narration is difficult to hear, the viewer is going to be momentarily confused as they try to make sense of what was just said. This is tiring to the viewer and ultimately causes frustration, loss of interest and difficulty becoming immersed in the piece.

23 Don't use cheesy VFX.

Nothing screams "amateur" more than star wipes, glittery flares and page curls. Unless your video is mean to look retro/cheesy, avoid these effects like the plague.
Time your music editing for maximum impact.

Save your music until moments of importance and then begin playing it — or edit the music so that the biggest, most intense sections of it occur at the proper moments in the cut. It will cue the viewer and let them know that what they’re watching is significant in some way, whether it’s because a moment is suspenseful and something scary is about to happen or what they’re seeing is an important part of the story.

Of course, there are plenty of exceptions to this rule, but if you can make an effort to use music a bit sparingly, it will have much more impact in your piece.

Use compressors on dialogue and narration as needed.

Compressors serve to even out the highs and lows of a piece of audio. They have many uses but one of my favorite it to apply a slight compressor to dialogue and narration lines that might otherwise be difficult to hear in sections with a lot of other sound effects or music. The compressor will boost some of the lower levels in the dialogue, ensuring that words are not lost or misheard. Just be careful not to turn up the compressor too much, otherwise you'll end up with very artificial-sounding robot speech.

Make sure your audio levels aren't peaking.

This is one of the more basic film editing tips but it’s easy to lose track of. Pay particular attention during scenes with a lot of action or scares, as the inevitable multiple tracks of audio can push your mix into the red very quickly.
Always mix in stereo or better — never mono.

Mixing in stereo gives you the ability to pan audio left and right for cooler sound effects (cars driving by, a voice calling from off-screen, etc.). Stereo mixes also generally tend to get less muddy sounding and give you a bit more audio headroom before it starts peaking.

Use reverb and d-verb to create ring-outs on music stops.

This is a really cool trick used all the time in the trailer industry but it's useful across all types of editing. If you need your music to stop at a point before its natural end but don't want it to sound too abrupt, try this. Find a downbeat of the music in the area where you'd like the music to end. Lift out anything in that music track after the beat and apply a d-verb or reverb effect to the now-final beat. Change the length and type of the verb effect depending on how long you'd like the ring-out to be. This will give you a nice clean music stop that resolves and doesn't sound abrupt. Great for stopping on a moment of impact or right before a punch-line is delivered.
29 Use audio to transition scenes.

A great video transitional tip is to prelap audio from the next scene underneath the end of the current. For example, as two people end a conversation in their apartment and decide to take a trip to Paris, gradually fade up the sound of an airplane landing under the video of their conversation ending. Then you can cut to the airplane touching down in Paris without it seeming too sudden or unexpected. This is very similar to motivating a cut, in the sense that it cues your viewer and lets them know what to expect so they are not confusing or unintentionally surprised.

There are many more creative ways to use audio to transition between scenes, but this is one of the most basic and useful.

30 Use sound design to shape moments and build and release tension.

You don't always have to rely solely on your music to develop the mood of a scene. Don't be afraid to use drones, hits, metallic groans and other useful sound design elements to help build the atmosphere of a scene and guide your viewer's emotions. Using sound design effectively takes a bit
of practice, but it allows you to essentially act as a music composer while you’re editing and really gain control over mood and tone.

Customize and use keyboard shortcuts.

Everybody has their own way of working with a computer — but some are just faster. I have always found that using keyboard shortcuts when editing — or doing anything on the computer — will DRASTICALLY increase the speed at which an editor can work.

Over the years, I have gradually fine-tuned my method for setting up my hot-keys in a particular software package. Now, the general rule I try to follow is to map all of my shortcuts to one half of the keyboard. That way, my left hand can stay in the same location on the keyboard and have access to all my keyboard shortcuts without having to move. My right hand will always be on the mouse, clicking and dragging around the timeline as needed. For maximum speed, I try to eliminate 95% of mouse clicking whenever possible. It takes a bit of getting use to but you’ll be amazed how much more quickly and effortlessly you can work.
Organize your source materials.

This is crucial.

Unless you’re working on a very small project, you MUST organize your source materials. This includes all your video footage, your music, your narration, your sound effects, your graphics and anything else you might need. Particularly with the footage, you'll want to organize it either by scene, character, location — whatever makes the most sense depending on your project and the type of piece you’re cutting. For a feature, it makes the most sense to organize by scene numbers. For promos, you'll probably want to organize by types of shots and characters, since the footage will serve as more of a painter’s palette than a chronological storyboard.

However you choose to do it, just make sure you’re organized. Otherwise you'll quickly become overwhelmed, make weaker editing decisions and miss out on editing opportunities that you may have seen if you had better access to your source materials. Trust me, it’s worth the initial time investment.
Mark your favorites.

As you look through and organize your footage, keep notes of your favorite lines, takes, shots etc. Your initial reaction to seeing these materials will often be the most genuine and unbiased, most closely-reflected how the audience will perceive it. It's important for you to make notes on your thoughts and impressions during this objective phase to help guide you later on in the process when things get a bit more...messy.

Save commonly used effects and plugin settings to a bin.

Often when working on a project, you'll find that you need to use the same types of effects multiple times. These could be time-warps, picture zooms, white flashes, audio effects etc. Rather than recreate them from scratch each type, create a bin or folder contain the presets for each of these effects so you can just drag them onto your clips as needed. This will save you quite a bit of time while editing, allowing you to focus on more important things.
Zoom in on the timeline.

A common mistake many editors make is forgetting they can zoom in on their timeline. To properly fine-tune a cut, a music edit, whatever...you need to zoom in. By trying to work on a section of your piece without focusing the timeline on it, you'll create two main problems.

First, you'll become distracted by everything else that's going on within your field of view. Sounds crazy, but it's true. Editing can be very overwhelming at times because of the large amount of materials and edits that you'll have going on. Zooming in not only focuses your timeline but your attention as well. Second, in order to make the small adjustments and tweaks to picture and audio you need to have a fine level of control. You don't have that frame-by-frame accuracy when zoomed out and you'll end up making incorrect adjustments to things and messing with an edit far longer than you need to.

Even after editing for many years, I still sometimes catch myself forgetting to focus in on a section I'm working. Get into the habit of zooming in and you'll be surprised how many problems it solves.
36  **Use two monitors when possible.**

For a long time, I edited using only one monitor. I crammed my timeline, my bins, audio meters, and video windows all on the same screen. When I finally decided to add a second monitor and space things out a bit, there was no turning back. A good two-monitor setup involves placing all of your clips, music, bins, audio meters and other tools on the left monitor. On the right monitor, put your timeline and your video windows. The extra screen space will help you with organization as well as provide more room to manipulate the materials on your timeline.

On many projects, I end up with up to 5 video tracks and 24 audio tracks. While the extra monitor is not a necessity, without it things would get a bit tight!

37  **Avoid parallel edits.**

This is one of the classic video editing tips that bears repeating. Cutting from one shot to another at the exact same moment you cut the associated audio is often a bad idea. Since the goal of most edits is to create a smooth, uninterrupted experience for the viewer, you want to minimize jolts and
bumps along the way. By cutting both picture and audio at the same time, you're causing the viewer to adjust to two changes at once, which they'll often notice. Instead, do what's referred to as an L cut or J cut — also called pre-lapping and post-lapping.

This means, start the audio for the next shot slightly before you cut the picture to it. Or, cut to your next shot, slightly before the audio begins — this is good to capture reactions of the listener during a dialogue scene. It takes a little practice to get right but will give your cuts a much more professional feel.

Use multiple camera angles and shots with fast cutting to build intensity and impact.

A great way to create a frenetic and fast-paced sequence is to show the action from multiple angles. Cut quickly from wide to medium to close shots as movement occurs to give a sense of speed and impact. This is particularly important in action scenes like fights or car chases. Just make sure to give your viewer a chance to rest every once in a while by cutting to a wide shot or the reactions of other people watching the action.
Vary your pacing and sound levels to create contrasts.

A great deal of what makes things interesting in life is contrast. Video editing follows the same rules. By varying the pacing of scenes or the intensity of moments, you'll create a rhythm in your piece that prevents the viewer from becoming over or under-stimulated. Audio works the same way. A loud scene or moment will have more impact when it follows a quiet one. Conversely, a whispered comment between characters will seem that much more intimate and personal when it follows loud action or music.

Use contrast to accentuate moments and really carve out the peaks and valleys of your cut.

Duplicate your timeline and save multiple versions.

Any time you're going to make substantial changes to a sequence — which might not end up working well — try to remember to duplicate your sequence. There's nothing worse than making a bunch of edits, realizing that you just messed up something that was already working and finding that you can't "undo" back far enough to restore it. If you make multiple copies of your sequence, you'll rarely lose work and will have less fear of trying new things. And don't forget to label them with what's unique about them. A simple note like "different opening scene - no music" will help you remember what is different about the sequence in case you need to reference it later on.
41  **Fake camera movement when necessary.**

Sometimes you really wish a shot had a slow push in on a character’s face during a dramatic moment but it wasn't shot that way on the set. Don't be afraid to add a slow animated resize or zoom to the clip to fake it. Something like 100% zoom to 103% zoom. Just make sure you don't zoom in so far that the quality of the image starts to degrade. Experiment with faking lots of different types of camera movement.

You'll be surprised at how much production value and impact you can add to shots that were otherwise a bit boring.

42  **Use cross-cutting to build intensity.**

A great way to create suspense and anticipation is to make sure of cross-cutting. Cross-cutting is simply when you cut back and forth in between two events occurring in different locations or at different times. A great example of using this technique to build intensity would be to show a burglar creeping around outside a house at night and breaking in. In between shots of him approaching, entering and stalking through the house, you'd cut to shots of the homeowner asleep in their bed or perhaps in the shower, unaware of the danger that's approaching.

43  **Use room-tone and ambiance to smooth out your dialogue.**

When a character has finished delivering a line and another character is about to speak, there is often a bit of space or "dead air". Depending on how the audio was recorded, there can be a noticeable absence of background hum and noise.
in between the lines. A good way of smoothing out these gaps is to find a section of the recorded audio track where the characters aren’t speaking but the microphone still picked up the general ambiance of the room or environment. Take a piece of this background noise and cut it in between the lines from the two characters and put small audio dissolves in-between everything. This will create a more seamless transition from one line to the next.

**44 Turn up the volume when mixing.**

When it comes time to mix your audio, turn up the volume a bit. You shouldn’t be straining at all to hear your piece. In fact, you’ll want it to be pretty loud so you can really feel the impact of certain moments and make sure they’re playing as you intended. If you don't want to disturb those around you, invest in a good pair of closed-ear headphones.
Give the audience time to laugh or think after jokes and important moments.

After a funny joke is delivered, the audience will probably laugh a bit. In the case of really funny moments, the laughter might be so loud that any lines occurring directly after the joke will go unheard. Be sure to allow ample time for the audience to regain composure before presenting any additional important information or dialogue. The same goes for moments that might require the audience to think about something or realize what's going on. For example, if a boy gets an angry phone call from his girlfriend and she breaks up with him, give the audience a chance to watch his reaction to the news and discover whether he's upset — or relieved.

Total silence feels unnatural.

Silence is anything but silent. When you're mixing audio, remember that there is almost always some sort of noise in the real world and a complete absence of sound in a section of a cut will feel very unnatural.
A great example of this would be a war scene when a grenade explodes close to a character. It doesn't injure the soldier but it's so loud that he temporarily goes deaf. A complete absence of sound here would feel strange, but a high-pitched ringing in his ears and the muffled, quiet, echoed sounds of gunfire and yelling around him would give the impression of silence but in a much more natural way.

Even when human beings are placed in completely quiet anechoic chambers, they can still hear the high-pitched sound of their own nervous system and their heartbeat. To human perception, is no such thing is 100% silence.

**Scene audio and sound effects should describe the setting or further the story.**

When deciding which elements of a scene's audio to include in your mix, remember you don't have include everything. Only include the ambiance and sounds needed to establish your environment and also to give the viewer clues as to the story you are telling.

If the scene opens in a room with a woman sitting in a chair looking uneasy and mildly annoyed, we might hear the sounds of traffic outside her window and the clock ticking. What we would soon find out is that she has been waiting for her husband to come home for dinner for over an hour and the passing of time is the relevant story point we should be aware of.
Edit a documentary with only audio at first.

A great video editing tip when editing a documentary is to almost treat it like a radio cut at first. That is, find the narration and dialogue lines that tell the story you're trying to get across and assemble them all on your timeline. Once you've got your story told effectively, then you can start adding in video footage of the interviewees on camera, b-roll of related imagery, graphics and beauty shots. By editing a documentary with only audio at first, it allows you to focus on what's most important, the message.

Stay objective.

Remember what your audience knows and doesn't know. It's easy to get so familiar with your material that you forget your audience might need a bit of extra information and hand holding to know what's going on. Providing too little information will leave your viewer confused and important moments won't have the desired impact. Conversely, too much information will make your film or piece feel unintelligent or made for children — so find the right balance.
Carefully sync your sound and music to picture.

The human brain is amazing adept at detecting mismatches between audio and video. Even the difference of 1 frame — or 1/30th of a second — is noticeable under certain circumstances.

Be very careful when using sound effects and music that have very sharp attacks or well-defined beats. When these sounds and beats are meant to sync up with a particular visual such as a punch or a baseball hit, being off by even a frame can feel strange and detract from the impact of the event. Some software will even allow you to edit audio on the perf level, which can be as fine as 1/4 of a frame.

These details may seem insignificant but a sync problem causes your viewer to lose focus on the scene and takes them out of the immersive experience of your cut — which is a big problem.
Wrap Up

Thanks for taking the time to read through these tips!

We hope these rules will be as useful to you as they have been to us over the years. It may be helpful to print out this list and keep it somewhere near your editing computer to refresh your memory as you work.

Do you have any great video editing tips you'd like to share with us? We are always interested in hearing about the cool tricks and techniques our readers have figured out.

Please email Chris, our lead trainer, at chris@filmeditingpro.com and we'll try to include them on the site with credit to you!

- Film Editing Pro