

Composing Basic Camera Shots

A new take on home movies: the "grammar" of video.

In written expression, the basic building block is the word. The video equivalent of a word is a camera shot. I'll be defining the various types of shots and showing you video examples of each soon. For now, let's define a shot as whatever the camera records after you press the record button and before you hit pause. Using that definition, many traditional "home movies" would consist of only one or two shots, even though they might last five minutes each.

Don't be a hoser!

That style of shooting is often referred to as the "garden hose" approach. As you water your shrubs, the water continually flows while you wave the hose nozzle from side to side, up and down, concentrating the spray here and there, making sure the whole garden gets a good soaking.

The "garden hose" video maker will stand in one spot with tape running, wave the camera from one side of the scene to the other, up and down, merrily zooming in and zooming out, trying to capture the whole scene in one shot.

If that shot were a written sentence, it would run on . . . and on . . . and on and onand on

Good writing is composed of well-chosen words, combined into thoughtful sentences and logically organized paragraphs. Good video follows a similar structure.

Shoot to edit.

The ability to edit what you shoot gives you access to the same compositional tools as the pros. It also requires you to think about how your shots will be combined together *before you take them*. That doesn't mean that every single edit needs to be planned in advance, but it *does* require that you have a sense of what shots you'll need later when you sit down at the computer. I'll be exploring that subject more in the **sequences** section.

Also, record your shots for a longer amount of time than you think you will use, adding time at the start and the end of each shot. That will give you more flexibility in editing, where you can always trim the excess.

Basic camera shots.

Shots are usually defined by how much of the scene you show in your frame (what you see in your viewfinder). This can be controlled a couple of different ways. One would be to change the distance between the camera and your subject by physically moving the camera closer or farther away. The other would be to change the **focal length** of your lens, which controls the **angle of view**. A zoom lens, which virtually all camcorders have, is a combination wide angle, normal and telephoto lens. You change the angle of view by **zooming in** to a narrow angle of view (telephoto) or **zooming out** to a wide angle of view. Here are the basic shots:

Long Shot (LS)

A **long shot** frames a wide field of view of your subject and its surroundings. It usually requires a greater distance between your camera and your subject. Most likely you would choose a wide-angle lens setting (zoomed out).

Long shots are also referred to as wide shots or **establishing shots**. An establishing shot establishes the subject's location for your viewers by revealing its surrounding. It might also be used to cover broad action involving several people in a large area.

Use long shots sparingly! Details are lost in long shots. Overuse of long shots is boring.

Medium Shot (MS)

A **medium shot** frames more of your subject while still revealing some of the background. If your subject is a person, a medium shot would show the person from about the waist up.

Medium shots provide more detail than long shots, which makes them more interesting to your viewer.

Closeup Shot (CU)

A **close-up** focuses your viewer's attention on specific details. It demands that the viewer concentrate on the information you are giving them. In storytelling, close-ups have great emotional impact. They can also be used to give the audience information the characters in your video don't have. For example, showing a close-up of a sign reading "wet paint" right before a medium shot of your character in the process of sitting down on a painted park bench, would build anticipation and set up the audience for the laugh.

You will most likely need to use a camera support, like a **tripod**, in order to get a steady shot.

A **close-up of a person** would frame the subject from the top of the head

to the top of the shoulders. Human emotions are best revealed in close-ups!

Extreme Closeup Shot (XCU)

An **extreme closeup** shot frames only a portion of your subject. It is a very dramatic shot that can generate great visual excitement. XCUs might be used to show the face of a wristwatch or words being typed on a computer screen. Like the long shot, extreme closeups should be used sparingly, when it is important that your viewers see great detail. In most instances you'll want to choose a wide-angle lens setting (zoomed all the way out) and move the camera lens as close to the subject as necessary. Use of a camera support, like a **tripod**, is a must.

An extreme close-up of a person's face would detail the eyes, nose and mouth. When framing an **extreme closeup of a face**, be sure to include the chin and sacrifice the forehead. The reason for this has to do with how our imaginations fill in spaces we can't actually see on the screen, using something called **psychological closure**. When framing human subjects, proper closure can be achieved by avoiding putting **natural cutoff lines** of persons at the bottom of your frame. Instead, frame your shots to include the area slightly above or below these natural body joints. Your shot will look awkward if you don't supply enough visual information for your viewers to project what lies outside the frame.