Video Composition Rules

Start out playing by the rules.

Some people feel that rules restrict them too much. However, if you're trying to control the visual messages your video is sending, you need an understanding of traditional rules of composition. Then when you go about breaking the rules, you'll be able to do so with purpose and intent! Many centuries ago, artists developed rules to guide them when painting or positioning objects in a rectangular frame. They discovered that certain placements were more pleasing and that the eye was drawn to some areas of the canvas more readily. You can use what they discovered to help tell your stories more effectively.

The Rule of Thirds.

An offshoot of those artistic rules, used in still photography and video, is called the rule of thirds. The **rule of thirds** states that you should mentally divide the frame (what you see in the viewfinder) into thirds, both vertically and horizontally. What you get is like a tic-tac-toe board overlaying your screen. When you shoot your video, according to this rule, you should place your key subject elements along those lines. Where the lines intersect will be the best place for your subject. That means that centering your subject in the frame will create a less interesting composition. In most cases you will have control over where you are with your camera.

When framing your subject, move the camera so that the prominent subject elements fall along one of the third lines, preferably at a point where those lines intersect. If you can't move the camera to a good spot, try to move the subject (kind of tough if you're shooting a mountain!) A case in point would be the placement of the horizon line in an outdoor shot. Don't center the horizon on your screen. Place the horizon on either the top or bottom third line. Which one will depend upon your subject. If you're shooting a sailboat on the ocean, do you want to show more of the ocean or more of the sky? That would be your artistic choice! Which one looks the best to you? The point is to take control of the situation and try to frame the most appealing shot. Don't just accept whatever happens to appear in your viewfinder!

Room at the top.

Headroom refers to the amount of space between the top of a person's head and the top of your frame. Too much headroom makes the person appear to be sinking. Most novice photographers and videographers will frame shots of people with too much headroom. Take a look through some old family photos if you don't believe me. Too little headroom places visual

emphasis on the person's chin and neck. When framing shots of people, pay attention to where the eyes appear. Follow the **rule of thirds** and place the subject's eyes on the upper third line.

Reminder: When framing shots of people, don't forget to avoid placing the edge of your frame at one of the body's **natural cutoff lines**: neck, elbows, waist, knees and ankles.

Lead them on.

Lead space refers to space in front of your subject. Leave extra space in the direction your subject is looking. You might also see this space referred to as look space or nose room. Leave extra space in front of **a moving person or object**, like a runner, bicycle, or automobile when following the action. Not doing so will make it look like your subject is in danger of running into the edge of your frame!

What's in the background?

Most of your shots will include background elements that are part of the location where you're shooting. Make sure what's in the background of your shot doesn't draw your viewer's attention from your main subject. We've all seen live TV interviews, shot on location, where somebody in the background is waving or making faces at the camera. This is one type of **distracting background** you need to try to avoid. Always check what's in the background of the shot you are framing. Background clutter or distracting objects, like an overflowing garbage bin, can usually be avoided by repositioning your camera (moving it left or right, framing a tighter shot, changing the camera angle) or moving your subject. You might also be able to put the background out of focus by decreasing the **depth of field** in your shot.

Mergers are another form of distracting background. Background objects or strong **vectors** that visually merge with your subject can not only be distracting, they can be down right humorous. Again, reposition the camera or the subject to avoid mergers.