

**Workshop for**  
**GOLD COAST VIDEO CAMERA CLUB**  
March 2008  
**CAMERA TECHNIQUES**

Your camera is your basic and most important tool for making a good video. We all get a bit lazy now with computers – they can correct so much – we tend to forget that using your camera correctly is paramount to creating a good video. It needs to be understood and used with confidence to achieve its full capabilities. . Each camera is a little different, it is up to you to get to know yours thoroughly. Handle it and get to know where to find each button and adjustment, even without looking, so that when you are shooting, your full concentration can be on framing and capturing the shot.

Today, I wanted to remind you of some tried and tested techniques, together with some ideas to keep in mind. We are all now using computer editing to compile our finished video, and it is helpful when capturing footage to remember exactly what your editing system can do and shoot to edit.

When videoing any subject, take plenty of shots, long shots, several medium shots and importantly close ups and if possible extreme close ups from several different positions, and above all take plenty of cutaways. This gives you plenty of choice when you go to edit.

Of course the old tried and tested rules still apply, no matter what sort of fancy editing can be done. This has been said so many times before, but there is nothing like a good steady shot to give your video that professional look. Glenda and I often look back at footage taken many, many years ago and mourn the fact that we never used tripods in those days – it might have looked fine on our little old 16 inch television, but when you see it projected up on our big screens of today, shots dance all over the screen!

Wherever possible – use a tripod, **especially** if you are using a telephoto setting. Having said that, here **are** many occasions where it is not practical to have your camera fixed to a tripod. For example, if you are shooting children or animals, their movements are unpredictable, so free holding a camera allows you to quickly re-position yourself to get the shot you want. Many locations are just not suitable for a tripod.

If you have to go without a tripod, the golden rule is to **stay wide, and get in close**, that means set your camera to wide angle and get as close as you can to your subject. Remember, if your camera is set on wide angle and focused, it will be in focus from virtually a few inches to infinity.. If you have “steady shot “on your camera, it should **always** be turned on when the camera is off the tripod. Use any means you can to give stability to your camera, rest it on a rock, a tree, a fence, the ground - at least brace yourself against something solid.

Computer editing enables you to correct or cover up many faults in your footage, but we should be careful not turn into bad photographers with a “she’ll be right “ attitude and expect the computer to correct all our faults. Computers certainly cannot correct bad focus, and sharp focus is absolutely essential.

Most cameras today have excellent automatic focus, and for the average shots, this can be quite satisfactory. However, for the situations where manual focus is needed, remember this rule for quick foolproof focusing -

- 1 Zoom in on your subject to extreme close up
- 2 Focus
- 3 Zoom back and then compose your shot
- 4 Shoot it.

(Some cameras will do this for you with a push of a button.)

With computer editing it is possible to correct bad framing of a shot, but although things can be corrected on the editing desk to a certain extent, it will mostly involve cutting down the picture, and you might find that you have to cut out the very thing you wanted to have in the shot. A video made up of shots all well framed will stand out. A good still photographer goes to a lot of trouble to make sure he gets an artistically framed shot, and so should a videomaker, and you have the added challenge of capturing movement as well. Unlike focus, framing is where your artistic ability can really shine. Don't just aim and shoot – always think about what you are taking.

Take a simple object – see how many ways you can frame up a shot of it. Then take a simple view and do the same thing. Here you have distance - a tree close up, green fields and mountains in the background. Notice the difference if you have that tree featuring in the foreground, say to one side, with a branch framing the scene of green fields and mountains. It will give interest and depth to the shot.

Try not to get a single object in the dead centre of your shot – always try to position it to one side. When framing people, if you are taking a long shot, never have the person standing in the middle of the picture, position them to one side. When it comes to a close up, it is OK to have them centred if they are looking straight at the camera, but if it is a profile shot, it is important to have them slightly to one side, with “talking room” in front of them. Likewise if an object is moving, it is important to frame it with “moving space” in front of it.

If you have a natural artistic flair, this sort of thing comes easily, but if not, remember the tried and tested “rule of thirds” which is drummed into all prospective photographers and painters.

Always remember to take more than one shot, framed in different ways. When editing you then have the choice to pick the most artistic one. Some shots will not work, but now and again you will surprise yourself and capture a “beauty”

If you have forgotten to take a close-up for a cutaway, you can zoom in with your computer on to an object that will be just right for that cutaway to break a boring scene, or you can cut out unwanted things in your picture. However, one thing a computer cannot do is change the angle or the position from where you take the shot.

Most people don't give much thought to camera angles, but as you become more expert in using your video camera, their true importance becomes more apparent. Camera angles can change the whole tone of your story, and possibly we would do well to study professional movies or indeed still photographs taken by experts to see just where the camera is positioned.

Most of us are using fairly small cameras that are held with the hand under the safety strap. This tends to make the operator hold them up at eye level (this is what is commonly known as the “five foot syndrome”). Even using a tripod most people set it up at eye level to avoid having to stoop down (*OK – we're all getting older!*)

For general shots, particularly distant scenes, this is great, but quite often you need to vary your shots by getting down low or into the midst of the action. Again with children and animals, or even flowers, getting down to **their** “eyeline” level, can achieve the right perspective, and the puppy or the flower will not look distorted.

Small objects shot from above can sometimes look quite strange and out of proportion. Then again, this might be the very feeling that you want to create, so there are certainly no hard and fast rules, but use your imagination to create the mood or feeling that you are after.

By getting the camera lower than the normal “eyeline” of a person, or indeed any object, and shooting up, you can give the impression of dominance and power. Conversely, by aiming the camera down, the person or object can be made to look more insignificant.

With the small cameras, hold them with two hands like the old fashioned box cameras, with the viewfinder standing up and the LCD screen out. I find this very comfortable and with your elbows in against your side easy to hold steady. The LCD screen in the newer cameras are much brighter and can be used in most cases, except in very bright sunlight. Sometimes an umbrella or some sort of shade held by a helpful partner could solve this problem,

A shot right on ground level is very effective and can be achieved fairly easily this way, without having to virtually lie on the ground – (no easy feat for some of us!)

If you have one of the mini cameras with a fixed viewfinder, you have to use your LCD screen if you do not want to get into impossible positions.

The camera is an important tool to get the viewer involved in the action.

When shooting the Club video “Some Daughters Do Have ‘em” (*and I know I have used this example before, and some of you would know the video well – if any of you haven’t seen it, I can show it again*), the camera was on a tripod - with the microphone held just out of view - to capture all the scenes in the first part. This allowed medium, close-up and cut-away shots to be rock steady. But in the final party scene, the camera, with microphone attached, was hand held, set wide and taken right in among the “guests “ to capture the true feel and sound of the party. This made the audience feel as if they were there. If the camera had been mounted on a tripod and positioned outside the party, the sound would have been more distant and the viewer would have felt like an eavesdropper,

Another example of becoming involved is shooting two people having a personal conversation across a candle-lit restaurant table.

To capture such a conversation, you could take a shot of the two of them from perhaps a 45° angle, and then move the camera and take over the shoulder of one, with the other person facing the camera, reversing the position as required (making sure not to “cross the line”) With this technique you would capture the conversation very well, but the viewer would feel that they were a third person eavesdropping on the conversation.

Alternatively, after an establishing shot of the two sitting at the table, the camera could then become one or other of the people, in turn. By using extreme close-ups you can capture the expression of the eyes and face, as they speak to their friend, and the viewer then actually becomes that friend.

If you are shooting a football match or a dance sequence or a children’s party – get right in amongst the action and try to let your camera actually become the footballer or the dancer or the child, and dance like the dancer does. (Did you see Titanic – the dance sequence in the steerage where the camera became the dancer) This is probably one instance where camera shake is acceptable, but don’t make the sequence too long – it can become quickly unacceptable then.

This type of videoing may not be for everyone, but by giving a little thought to these examples, you may be able to adjust the way you position your camera to make your video more exciting.

Tripods are essential when shooting stationary objects like buildings. The natural tendency is to stand in front of the building, centre it nicely and keep all the walls vertical, but this can make rather boring footage. However, you can be much more imaginative.

Move to the side and shoot across it to capture the perspective of the building. Try a shot with the camera tilted – a shot of an angled corner can look very effective - an archway shot from below framed against the sky, or perhaps framing a tower flared by the sun.

Try to refrain from panning up and down a building, better to change your shooting position – the combinations are endless and well worth some experimentation – they mightn't all work, but with practice, you can spot the shot that will work.

This same technique can work on a shot of a flat photograph or painting. Take it straight on, then position your camera to one side and take it from an angle of about 45 degrees, and you can get a real feeling of perspective. Try it. It at least will give you two shots to choose from when editing

In most cases it is important to keep your camera level, this is especially true when taking seascapes and landscapes – nothing is worse than the horizon not being level. This can be corrected with your computer, but it is better to get it right in the first place. The truth is, sometimes when taking seascapes, you have to tilt your camera to make the horizon look level, to counteract the natural perspective.

There are other times when it is perfectly acceptable to tilt your camera – perhaps to mimic the way you would tilt your head to look at something, a spider in a web, or a flower on a tree.

A few more tips to remember as you become more expert in using your camera

You can pick up the pace of a video by taking a number of quick shots at different angles of a subject – a racing car would be a good example, or a sailing boat – lots of shots at different angles give a feeling of excitement. This type of video is quite the “in thing” at present, watch TV on any night and you will see boats and cars going at all angles in the most ordinary “lifestyle” type programs.

Video is a very two dimensional medium. If you have ever taken a shot of a very steep road or a walking track, you would probably have been a little disappointed to see that it didn't look nearly as steep on the screen. If you want to show the steepness of a track it is best to shoot from the side, and preferably from a low angle. (You **can** always cheat a bit here, by tilting the camera a bit, or tilting when editing – but you have to be careful that your trees don't end up growing at 45 degrees!)

Video cameras are designed to catch movement and action, but the camera can also move, as long as it is controlled movement and not shaky. If these moving shots are done well they contribute greatly to the professional look of a video.

“Tracking” and “Dollying” shots are used a lot in professional video productions, using expensive equipment. We can do something similar, maybe not quite as smoothly, but still effectively, with the use of a car, wheel chair, shopping trolley..

Camera “tracking” is going along with the action. Camera “dollying” is going around a subject to change the perspective.

With a bit of practice you can do this on foot, by walking sideways, crossing one foot over the other, with your knees slightly bent to minimize the jarring. You can walk right round a subject like this – reframing as necessary as you go. Needless to say, these sorts of shots are best if you have “steady shot” on your camera and maybe have somebody with you so you don't fall over something.

Like anything else you want to master, practice makes perfect. Try out ideas when using your camera, watch professional documentaries and current affair programs – you will find that mostly they are done fairly simply – We can use these same techniques

Enjoy your Hobby!

**Garth**