

THE 7 DEADLY CAMERA SINS



Camera Sinners, Repent!

An in-depth look at seven suspect shots you should avoid when shooting your footage.

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Here at **Videomaker**, we refer to basic shooting errors as "The Seven Deadly Camera Sins." Today's sermon spotlights these camcorder transgressions. To cut to the chase, the dreaded seven deadly camera sins are Firehosing, Snapshooting, Headhunting, Backlighting, Motorzooming, Upstanding and Jogging. Since sin's always fun to talk about, read on for the juicy details.

To avoid snapshooting, roll camera at least five seconds before the start of the important action.

★ I. Firehosing

Firehosing means pointing your camcorder vaguely at one thing after another during each shot, without lingering to frame anything properly or give viewers a good look at it: *birthday cake... pan to daughter opening gifts... pan to gifts... pan to guests watching... pan back to daughter... while your sea-*

sick viewers think, *pan to exit... invent excuse for leaving.*

To avoid this truly amateurish look, just follow a few simple rules:

- Move the camcorder to follow action, but not to switch to a different subject (unless you plan to snip out the move during editing).
- Move the camera only once per shot — though that single move may be long or even continuous when following subject action.
- Unless shooting documentary-style grab-and-run, pre-compose both starting and ending frames, then move smoothly from one to the other.
- Instead of moving immediately, hold the opening composition for several seconds, make the move, then hold the closing compositions for several seconds more.

★ II. Snapshooting

Snapshooting means recording bursts of action too short for

editors to use and viewers to decode. To avoid snapshooting, roll camera at least five seconds before the start of the important action and five seconds more after you *think* that action is complete. This will give the editor leeway in selecting the in and out points of the shot.

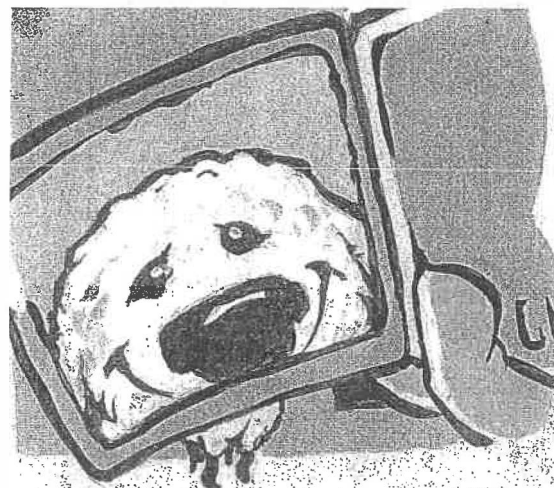
In-between the opening and closing footage, roll a substantial amount of footage — say, five seconds at least. (Even in still frame mode, my Mini DV camcorder automatically lays down seven seconds of each frame.)

You may want to shoot an even longer opening to set up your shot. Start rolling, settle your body for steady imaging, touch up the composition to your satisfaction, and then start the five-second count intro to the shot. That way, you can cut out the goofs and adjustments when you edit.

★ III. Headhunting

Headhunting is centering the subject's eyes in the frame, as if through a gun sight. This is a natural mistake because that's how we look at people. As a result, your subjects appear to be standing in a hole.

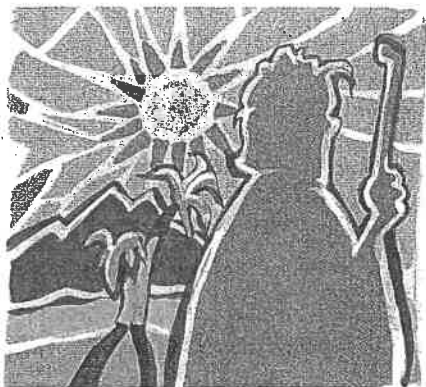
To avoid this ludicrous look, place your subject's eyes anywhere in the top third of your frame. This is easy if you're using the Rule of Thirds method of com-



Headhunting — It's easy and tempting, but boring to center everything in the middle.

position, aligning important picture elements with an imaginary tick-tack-toe grid. This trick works for all subject sizes from big closeups to full shots, though it may not be practical for long shots.

While using the Rule of Thirds, let's sneak in a couple of bonus tips: look room and lead room. Unless subjects are looking right at the camcorder, they look better when placed off-center, *away from* the screen direction in which they're looking (look room). When people or horses or cars or centipedes are moving across the screen, keep them in the side of the frame opposite their destination. This lead room avoids the impression that they're crowding the edge of the frame as they move.



Backlighting — Unless you really want that sunset, adjust your exposure or move to a different location.

★ IV. Backlighting

Place a subject in front of a bright sky, ocean, window or light building wall and, *voilà*. You've just created a silhouette, which may be artistic, but doesn't show a lot of the subject. This backlighting happens because your auto exposure system exposes for the bright background, rather than the darker subject in front of it.

You've got several options for avoiding this problem. In descending order of preference, they are:

- Move your camcorder and/or subject to lose the bright background.
- Step in for a closer angle, making the subject big enough in the frame so that

the auto exposure system reads it instead of the background.

- Adjust exposure manually to optimize it for the subject, though this technique may unpleasantly burn out (i.e. overexpose) the background.

- Use the backlight compensation button, which arbitrarily increases exposure to lighten the subject (but rarely with the exact amount that is needed for a particular situation).

In addition, some camcorders enable you to combine options, like this:

1. Zoom in to fill the entire frame with your subject.
2. Allow the auto exposure to set perfectly for said subject.
3. Lock off the exposure (usually by just switching to manual).
4. Zoom back out in order to frame your original composition.

★ V. Motorzooming

Motorzooming is zooming unnecessarily and too often. Face it, most zooms are nothing more than a way to change subject size. Normally, it's quicker and better to achieve this with two shots and an edit instead of one shot with a zoom. So here are some quick rules for better zooming.

First, try not to zoom more than once in a single shot. Moving in and out and in and out looks amateurish and can grow subtly irritating to viewers. If you want to change image size, use a snap zoom to move as fast as your zoom motor will take you to the new composition, adjust it, and keep shooting. If the subject is static, you can simply edit out the zoom

Parades, dances and car chases work best from high angles.

between the two compositions. With moving subjects, it's better to shoot a cutaway (a related shot that excludes the subject) to replace the missing zoom and prevent a jump cut.

When you really, really *do* want a zoom, make sure that it's motivated. Ask yourself why the subject should slowly grow or shrink on screen. Example: MEDIUM SHOT: the mail carrier holding out a letter. SLOW ZOOM IN to show the return address is Harvard Admissions Office.

As with any move, line up your starting and ending frames before actually shooting the zoom, for more satisfying compositions. If your zoom features variable speed, decide how fast the change should be and rehearse controlling the speed.

Finally, never zoom directly into digital zoom mode if you intend to keep the zoom in the finished program. Since digital zoom degrades image quality, the coarsening of the image will be obvious and unattractive.



Upstanding — To avoid tedium, do like James Brown does and "get on up" (or "get down").

★ VI. Upstanding

Upstanding means composing every shot from the eye level of an upright adult, again a natural mistake. But a good director knows that every subject has an ideal perspective. Children, pets and radio-controlled toy dune buggies want low angles to show the world from their height. Parades, dances and car chases work best from high angles to show off the patterns they weave on the screen.

Most modern camcorders include external LCD viewscreens, which make it easy to hold the camcorder away from your eye and still compose your images. (Outdoors, I shield mine from glare with a fabric box-frame.) Always use the external finder when possible, holding its outer edge with the fingers of your left hand and rotating it as you raise or lower the camcorder so the screen always faces your eyes.

Then go high, go low, go to whatever perspective the subject seems to want.



Jogging — You may think that you need to move to get that shot, but more often than not, the resulting footage will be worthless.

By the way, low- and high-angle shots are often more dramatic at wide-angle settings, which enhance the feeling of depth in the composition.

* VII. Jogging

Jogging means making shaky hand-held shots. To combat this and smooth-out your images:

- Always use a tripod or monopod whenever practical.

When you really, really do want a zoom, make sure that it's motivated.

- Always enable the camcorder's image stabilization feature, if your particular unit offers one.
- Look for natural camera dollies like escalators and moving sidewalks.
- Move the camcorder to follow action. The moving subject will distract attention from any slight frame jiggles.
- When walking while shooting, use your elbows and slightly bent knees as shock absorbers. Use the external screen or keep your forehead slightly away from the viewfinder tube and just pretend that your camcorder is an almost overflowing cheap foam cup of scalding hot coffee.

Good shooting! ■

The 7 Deadly Camera Sins

- I. **Firehosing:** Thou shalt not wag thy camcorder about whilst shooting.
- II. **Snapshooting:** Thou shalt not record shots too short to edit or view.
- III. **Headhunting:** Thou shalt not aim thy camcorder at a victim's eyes like a rifle.
- IV. **Backlighting:** Thou shalt not expose silhouetted subjects in front of bright backgrounds.
- V. **Motorzooming:** Thou shalt not zoom in or out without a darned good reason.
- VI. **Upstanding:** Thou shalt not shoot everything from standing eye level.
- VII. **Jogging:** Thou shalt not jiggle thine images while hand-holding.

