

Video Editing : Plan A: B-roll

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Don't be caught without cover. Your B-roll should be Top Priority. Here are some tips to enhance your A-list video projects by planning your B-roll better.

If you are a documentary filmmaker, and this definitely includes you wedding videographers (yes, you are definitely documenting something), B-roll should be on your 'A list.' Collecting B-roll wouldn't hurt you narrative or fiction storytellers either, even if it's not in the storyboards.

The Video Jack-of-All-Trades

"I don't remember him picking his nose during the shoot." If you have been an editor of interviews for some time, you know exactly what I'm talking about. When our video crew is understaffed, and the cameraperson is also the director, lighting person, audio person and continuity person, it is easy to miss a visual or audio gaffe during production. In post, you may need to edit out a sneeze, a clearing of one's throat or a sound that occurs off camera. When you run into this problem, who you gonna call? B-roll.

This is why B-roll is also called 'safety footage' or 'back-up footage.' It can save your project by covering a jump cut caused when you need to cut that sneeze or nose-mining segment out. B-roll can be preplanned as well, as it could be used, premeditatedly, to enhance your fiction or non-fiction story. If you are going to interview a group of factory workers for a documentary about a plant closure, you may plan and collect shots of the factory itself, maybe unemployment lines, working class neighborhoods, perhaps demonstrators and so forth. This is B-roll as well, but for this article, let's stick with B-roll as a Band-Aid to fix a "cut."

Why Do I Need B-roll?

B-roll is the secondary footage collected to intercut with the primary footage. It is usually video only, as it is most often used over the A-roll audio, in place of the A-roll video. B-roll is usually shot at the same time the primary footage is collected.

You can collect B-roll at a time other than when you shoot your original footage, and you may need to if you forget to capture it on the shoot day, but then continuity needs to be considered. For example, if you shoot a segment of workers outside their factory on a sunny day and then return a week later to collect B-roll while it is raining, it's extremely likely that your footage won't cut together gracefully. If time allows, even if you are tired and ready for the end of the day, put in the extra half hour and collect a bunch of B-roll shots.

Certainly, collecting B-roll is not a very technical pursuit, but it is a discipline that must be learned and practiced. If you get in the habit of collecting B-roll on every shoot, it will become second nature, and you will always have a "box" full of B-roll Band-Aids for the lacerations that form in the edit.

May I Present Exhibit B (-roll)

Here are a few examples of common shooting problems and their possible B-roll solutions.

Problem A

You are taping an elderly woman who lives in a retirement home for a documentary about American families. The 90-year-old woman keeps talking about her grandchildren, but they live 2,000 miles across the country. You just read an article in Videomaker about

the need to collect B-roll, but you'll need to fill your gas tank about ten times for the round trip. The budget definitely won't permit that. What do you do?

Look over your right shoulder, up on the wall. Who do you think those three, individually photographed and framed kids are? Tape the pictures and shoot them in a couple of different ways. For example, tape a 'still' or a shot on a tripod without movement, maybe a fifteen-second shot to be safe, of each framed photo, and then shoot a 'still' of all three together. Then shoot a slow pan of each individually and then a pan of all three together. This will give you more options at the edit bay.

Problem B

You are taping an interview of a soldier who has just returned from Iraq. He is telling you some incredible war stories, but you know you can't fly to Iraq to collect the B-roll. Your mind starts working quickly. You ask him if he has photos from his deployment, but he didn't have a still camera. You ask him if you can get access to go shoot in the local military base, but he says no way. What do you do?

You notice the soldier is wringing his hands and shaking his foot nervously while he is talking about a particularly crazy battle scene. When you are finished collecting your A-roll footage, tell your subject you want to shoot some random video without audio. Disconnect your external mic and zoom in on his foot. Keeping half an eye on the framing of your shot on the LCD, ask him to tell you some more detail of one of the crazier battles. Tell him you are not recording audio, which may relax him, enabling him to get deeper into details which he may have been more careful about previously. Hopefully, he will start wringing his hands and shaking his feet again, and these gestures will make great cut-aways. Best-case scenario, and less intrusive, would be to use a dedicated camera- person while you, as director, talk with your subject.

Problem C

The opposing political party in your town has won control of government, and they are going to enact a host of new, exciting initiatives that include employment for more local citizens, building new buildings and changing social services. You call the government offices, and they tell you they are too busy to meet with you for an interview before your deadline, but they can give you pre-recorded speeches and audio sound bites to use. Now you need a whole lot of B-roll. This one is easy.

After listening to the audio and assembling a rough audio cut, you head out and shoot various government buildings, construction workers on the job, happy-looking business-looking people walking during rush hour, and all the other general B-roll shots you can think of to show this new beginning. But your piece is missing that certain something, that pizzazz. What do you do?

Think outside the obvious 'new beginning box' of people, government and society. Get poetic. Think of analogies for new beginnings. How about extreme close-ups (XCU) of dew hanging off vibrant green buds on a tree that viewers will recognize as a local breed. XCUs make excellent B-roll footage. Maybe you can acquire, or better yet shoot, if your camera has the ability, a time-lapse shot of a spring flower sprouting from the ground. Think of the analogy of springtime to show a new beginning and creatively cut the shots into your work.

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