

WRITING *with* IMAGES



Film editor Carol Littleton describes film editing as being a lot like writing: “You become a writer, but you’re writing with images...” Editing allows the filmmaker to utilize the tools of the novelist—flashback, cross-cutting, and the like—to guide the viewer’s attention.

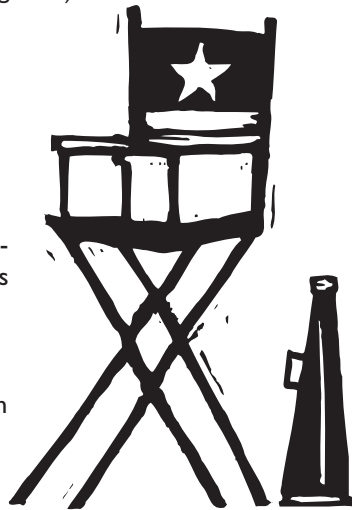
PART A. On a separate sheet of paper, write a scenario about something that commonly occurs at school.

Then, draw stick figures within a series of boxes depicting the same scenario, this time emphasizing the visual portions of the scene you think require attention at that particular time.

In what ways are writing and editing similar? What differences do you notice in communicating with words and communicating with pictures?

PART B. The 1920s Soviet filmmaker Lev Kuleshov discovered that when he combined different shots of unrelated objects without allowing viewers to see the entire context (the establishing shot), viewers assumed a connection among the shots and created their own context.

In his most famous experiment, Kuleshov took one shot of an actor’s expressionless face and intercut it with several different images, including a bowl of soup, a dead woman in a coffin, and a little girl. When audiences viewed the segment, they mentally connected the images and perceived the actor’s face as responding to the appropriate emotion for each image—hunger for the soup, sorrow for the dead woman and affection for the child—even though, in each case, the facial expression never changed. Viewers also assumed the actor was in the same physical space as the other images. This phenomenon is known as the Kuleshov effect. Can you identify ways in which the Kuleshov effect worked in the scene you viewed for Activity One?



PART C. Editors know that viewers will assume connections between intercut pictures; however, when the images *move*, a new set of rules comes into play. A long shot of a man sitting down that cuts to a close-up of the man sitting probably has a few frames of that action missing in order to make the action appear smooth or “match.” There usually must also be an appropriate change in distance for the shot not to seem like a mistake or “jump” cut.

The direction in which things move across the screen is also an editorial concern. A car that exits the screen on the right is expected in a subsequent shot to reappear on the left, otherwise the car could be perceived as a different car coming from the opposite direction. Scenes featuring characters in opposition to each other (a hero and villain, for example) usually feature one character continually facing one direction with the other character continually facing the other direction in order to keep the two “sides” clear. This becomes particularly crucial when various characters or locations are being intercut.

Examine a scene between two or more characters, or perhaps a chase scene from one of your favorite films, or the scene you viewed for Activity One. Write a “shot list” or outline that examines how the editor has constructed the sequence to make the location, characters, or two simultaneously occurring events clearly understood. Describe the details of direction, position, distance, continuity, or relationship that is communicated with each cut between shots. Feel free to illustrate your outline with small drawings or directional arrows. Perhaps you’ll find an example of a clever editor who has broken the “rules” and still has the action clearly understood, or has broken the rules to deliberately confuse. Describe why each edit works or why it is confusing.
