

HOME VIDEO HINTS

by Jim Stinson

Good composition requires more than just a high-quality camcorder and some nice scenery. There are rules.

Ever notice when you take two shots of the same subject - say, a landscape, a city street, a group of people that one shot often looks, well, better somehow, though you can't quite give the reason? That reason is usually composition, the craft of making images look good. If you're a casual shooter, you don't need to be Rembrandt J. Da Vinci, but you probably shouldn't turn down some quick and painless secrets for making great looking shots. So, here are four ways to spruce up the composition of your video images: the Rule of Thirds, subject placement, varied angles and muy suave camera movement. If you pick up only the first of these tips, you'll improve your compositions dramatically; and if you master all four, it's hello, Hollywood!

The Rule of Thirds

To apply the hallowed Rule of Thirds to an image, compose it so those important elements align with the lines and intersections of an imaginary tick-tack-toe grid that fills the viewfinder frame.

Why does this simple trick work so well? First, because the lines and crossing points mirror and balance one another, but not a single one is centered in the frame. (Centered equals boring.) The grid organizes the parts of your image without lining them up like toy soldiers.

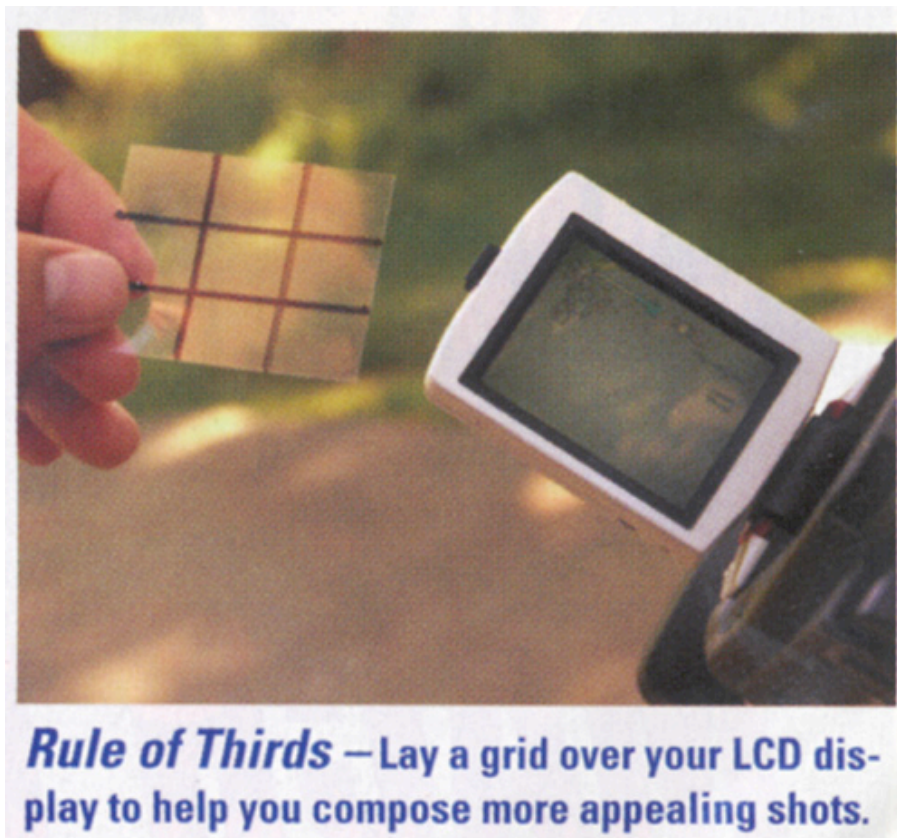
The system also works because so many subject elements are horizontal (horizons, cross streets, floor or ceiling lines) or vertical (wall edges, buildings, light posts, trees). To test this system, try setting the horizon one-third from either the top or bottom of the frame. You'll see an immediate improvement.

Now for some fine print. First, you don't have to align everything on your grid, nor do you have to hit every line and every crossing. A single tree and the horizon can provide both vertical and horizontal organization. Place your subject where those two lines cross and you'll have a pleasing image.

Also, don't try to obey the Rule of Thirds every blessed second of every shot, because that just isn't practical. Instead, look for compositions that begin with that organization and then follow the action where it leads you.

Finally, remember that the Rule of Thirds wasn't handed down through a cloud on a clay tablet; it's merely a set of (literal) guidelines. Many good compositions don't follow the rule. So, just remember, to paraphrase Duke Ellington: if it looks good, it is good.

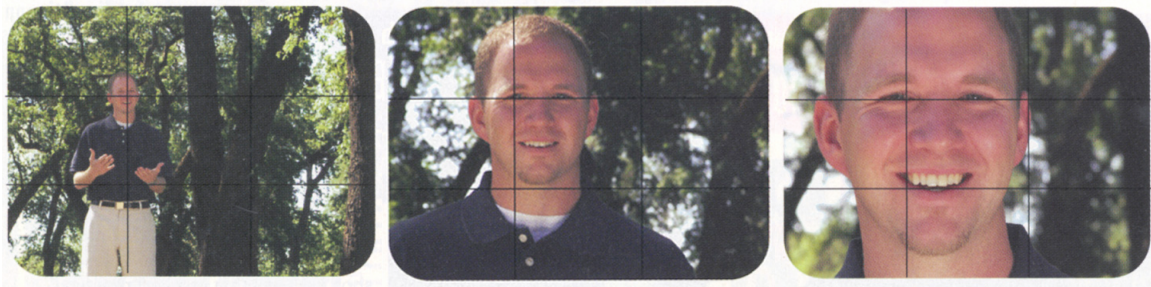
To practice the Rule of Thirds, try this trick. Cut a piece of plastic the size of your external viewfinder and ink a ticktack-toe grid on it with a black marker. A blank overhead transparency is the ideal material for this purpose. Tape the plastic over the finder and start composing. Some folks discard the overlay after getting the feel of the system; others use it permanently.



Head, Chin, Look, Lead

One subject element especially profits from the Rule of Thirds: your subject's eyes. Centering them in the frame as so many beginners do looks amateurish and dorky. Instead, make it a rule to place eyes no lower than the top third of your frame. This is the easiest way to compose your subject.

The Eyes Have It



Place your subjects eyes on the top 1/3 line to insure proper framing. The rule works whether you shoot extreme wide shots or tight closeups.

The top-third rule works with every camera angle, from tight closeups through full shots (head-to-foot, with a skosh of room above and below). Obviously, if you try this with a long shot (subject filling less than half the frame height) or an extreme closeup (eyes and nose only), the results will look peculiar.

This brings us to hair and chin room. For some reason, it's quite all right to cut off a subject's hair, but not the chin. If the chin continues out the bottom of the frame, it looks strange when at rest and even stranger when the subject's wagging it while speaking. Don't ask why, but try it and you'll see.

The Rule of Thirds also works well for the subject's whole body. Generally speaking, subjects should be offset to leave more space on the side of the frame that they are facing. If looking frame-right, for example, place them left of the centerline. This is called "giving look room." By keeping subjects away from the direction of their looks, you prevent the vague claustrophobia that results from crowding the frame.

Of course, you don't always need to spot your talent on a one-third vertical grid line. Often, it's enough to displace them just a tad off-center. Nor does it matter whether the subjects are in full profile or looking barely to one side of the lens. The composition will improve if you give them extra air ahead of their look.

The same is true of moving subjects, only this compositional trick is called "lead room." The idea is to give them extra air on the side toward which they are moving. The offset may be subtle in close shots, but in full shots (full-length) or longer, I prefer to keep moving subjects on a one-third vertical line.

Incidentally, this rule applies to absolutely anything in motion, from racing cars to hamsters. It can be perhaps the hardest rule of composition to apply, because of the old gunsight reflex; you instinctively want to center your subject as if to shoot it.

High, Low, Far, Near

High angles offer useful perspectives over the heads of crowds, but from a composition standpoint, they're great for making patterns within the image. Imagine a bird's-eye angle on a dance and you'll see how the subjects weave designs on the screen.

Because high angles also confer a feeling of distance and detachment, it can help to shoot them with telephoto lenses (if you can get high enough to make this work). As we'll see in a moment, the flattened perspective of long lenses enhances the sense of patterns drawn on the screen.

Low angles are, of course, the opposite, imparting feelings of dynamic engagement with the action. For this reason, they often work best with wideangle lens settings, which exaggerate apparent depth.

High and low angles are hard to corral within the Rule of Thirds grid, because horizontal lines are more difficult to find and vertical ones are rarely straight up and down in the viewfinder. In the same way, close shots can be harder to ticktock because they may offer fewer clean horizontals and verticals. Again, the exception here is subjects' eyes, which naturally fall on the upper horizontal line.

Longer shots are the opposite. Establishing shots in particular lend themselves to formal composition because they contain many compositional elements. A camcorder set up for a slightly high angle enhances their formality.

Pan, Tilt, Dolly, Zoom

Moving shots have their own compositional rules, whether you're panning horizontally, tilting vertically, moving the camera by foot or dolly, or zooming in or out.

First, you should have a strong composition at both ends of the move. Start with a good-looking image, make your move smoothly and then come to rest with an equally pleasing frame. In fact, when practical, it's better to have the ending composition even stronger than the starter.

To follow this plan, preset both your opening and closing compositions. Then, rehearse the movement between them until you can hit the ending image right on the money. Nothing looks crummier than a move that ends with a mis-frame, or even worse, wobbles around trying to correct the final composition.

If you move in order to follow a subject, be sure to allow adequate lead room throughout the move.

The second rule of moving compositions: roll the camera for several seconds on the initial composition before moving; then continue rolling for several more on the final composition. This gives the editor more flexibility in cutting in and out of the shot.

These rules apply to zoom shots, with a few additional points. First, decide whether you want the zoom in the edited program (because it is often a waste of screen time). If you don't, then snap the lens as quickly as possible from zoom start to finish and don't hesitate to correct the ending frame, knowing you'll cut this out.

If you do intend to keep the zoom, determine how fast to make it, since slow and fast zooms deliver different dramatic effects. If your zoom control permits, a zoom looks best if you accelerate the speed at the start and decelerate to a stop at the end.

And here's a final hint for zooming in. Instead of centering the ending composition in the wide-angle opening, place it off-center and pan/tilt while zooming to reframe for your ending. The result will look very professional.

Contributing Editor Jim Stinson is the author of the book, *Video Communication and Production*.