There are two parts to editing: the physical task of putting separate cuts of video together and the conceptual task of conveying a scene or an idea. Part I of this book dealt with the physical means of stringing several cuts into a video segment. This part of the book uses those same skills to explain the larger task of using images to express ideas and tell stories. Chapter 6 discusses the language of film and television. Chapters 7, 8, and 9 lead you through the processes of weaving a visual story and creating montages. Chapter 10 shows you how to add spark to your productions with special effects.
learning to edit is not unlike learning to play hockey. First, you have to learn how to skate, then you can start learning how to play the game. Likewise, you need to get comfortable with the basic steps of editing before you can begin to work on the conceptual level of telling stories.

Three Styles of Editing

All the various types of video segments fall into one of three categories: those created with continuity editing; those with montage editing; and those produced with a mixture of techniques, loosely called mixed format editing. Continuity editing is used to tell visual stories, but montage editing involves the use of a collection of images to convey an emotion or idea. Mixed-format editing borrows techniques from both montage and continuity styles to convey ideas and stories.

In continuity editing, the emphasis is on telling a story that contains characters and action. There is usually a clear sense of progression—a beginning, middle, and end. The story develops through the interactions of the characters with their surroundings and each other.
As the editor, you are trying to create a reality that the audience will believe; so, special care must be taken to present scenes so that they are understandable and seem normal to the viewer. There are plenty of examples of continuity editing. In fact, most of the editing you see in feature films, television movies, and sitcoms is of this type because these presentations are telling a story.

In montage editing, the emphasis is on conveying an idea or concept. The images are chosen for their conceptual and emotional value, not for the way they convey a scene. There generally isn’t a plot, dialog, or a storyline, although a well-edited montage builds several ideas into a larger concept.

Montage editing is the easiest kind of editing to do because you are not constrained to assemble shots into a scene, as you are in continuity editing. Any one shot can go before or after any other. But montage is the hardest type of editing to do well, because you don’t have the structure provided by a storyline. You are dealing only in concepts.

Examples of montage editing are found in impressionistic television commercials and music videos and some sports segments. The appeal of montages is that they operate on an emotional level, not an intellectual one. They can also present an idea quickly. The disadvantage is that the idea can’t be too complex or elaborate and still reach a large percentage of the audience.

Mixed-format editing is like montage editing in that the basic goal is to convey ideas; there’s no attempt to fabricate a reality. But a mixed-format piece is less impressionistic than a montage. It can often include dialog and/or descriptive narration. Elements of a story can be included (without distinct continuity). Examples of mixed-format pieces are political commercials, most product commercials and music videos, and informational videos.

You already edited in the montage style when you edited the examples in Chapters 4 and 5 (although if you look back you see that the cuts weren’t linked by any concept); so in a sense, you already know the basics. A more involved discussion of montage and mixed-format editing is given in Chapter 9 after we cover the basics of continuity editing.

**Continuity Editing—Fabricating Reality**

The central goal of continuity editing is to create an artificial world in which your story takes place. This world is artificial because you, the
editor, decide how the world is put together. You can have someone drive from one part of a town to another in seconds (even though in reality the locations are separated by 20 miles). You can slow down and speed up time. You can rearrange the order of cuts and completely change the meaning of a scene. You can create a scene where two people are talking to each other by telephone, yet in reality, they are in the same room. You can combine elements of the real world with animation and still make it believable.

Sound like fun? It is. But there’s a catch. You have to make this world believable to the viewers. If the viewers don’t buy the world you’ve fabricated, or they become lost and confused, then you’ve wasted your time (and probably a lot of money).

The easiest way to make sure your world is believable to make it exactly match reality—one to one. That is, in fact, how the first filmmakers operated.

The first silent films were made by simply placing a camera at an event and then rolling the film. The camera captured the action from one perspective in its entirety (or until the film ran out). The film was a verbatim recording of the event from the viewpoint of an onlooker.

Then, around the turn of the century, a new form of film emerged that showed reality, not as it was but as the director-editor wanted to portray it. The Great Train Robbery (1903) by Edwin Porter was one of the first films to connect seemingly dissimilar shots into a unified story. Porter combined three scenes: a band of robbers riding away on their horses, a bound-and-gagged telegraph operator, and a group of townspeople swarming to form a posse. Without sound (these were still the days of silent films), Porter conveyed the drama and excitement of the story—a story that existed nowhere but in the final film.

D. W. Griffith took this new editing technique a step further in his film The Birth of a Nation (1915), which used different camera angles of the same scene (in essence, different perspectives) to heighten the drama of Lincoln’s assassination. By interweaving these different perspectives, Griffith was able to manipulate time to increase the tension of the scene.

These landmark films and those that have followed in that tradition (i.e., most films and television programs) present a new reality—one created by the combination of individual, dissimilar images, a reality that is unlike anything else in the real world.

The real world around us is continuous; that is, there are no abrupt changes. Events proceed smoothly in time; people don’t suddenly
appear and disappear. But in the reality of film or video, the viewers are confronted with abrupt changes at every edit. The reason this style of presentation works at all is that the human brain is capable of looking past the edits (if they're done correctly) and assembling the individual cuts into a larger story.

The goal of continuity editing, therefore, is to add continuity to these discontinuous images so that the viewers can create the story in their heads. Many times, the images themselves don't tell the whole story, so the viewer fills in the gaps with his or her own experiences and knowledge of the world.

**Taking Apart an Edited Scene—Car and Driver**

Let's go back to one of the examples mentioned in Chapter 1 to see how a series of shots can tell a story. The scene of the man driving up to the house involved three shots:

- **Shot 1:** Car driving up (five seconds)
- **Shot 2:** Car door closing (three seconds)
- **Shot 3:** Close-up of a man's finger pressing the button of the doorbell (three seconds)

When a viewer watches this scene, he or she subconsciously fills in the parts not shown (the driver turning off the ignition, opening the car door, walking up the front walk) to complete the story. Figure 6-1 shows how the real situation is compressed in the edited segment and then recreated when the viewer watches the video.

If these shots were edited in a different order—for example, the car driving up, the doorbell being pushed, then the car door closing—a different story would be told. (If the driver is already out of the car, who closed the door?) The images are the same, but the viewer fills in the gaps with other information to make sense of the shots (i.e., there was someone hiding in the back seat).

So it's not just the information in the images but their placement within a scene that creates the story. One of the most useful means for keeping the viewer in tune with your story is providing a sense of progression with the shots.
Taking Apart an Edited Scene 2—Baseball Game

The baseball game example discussed in Chapter 1 also illustrates the use of progression, so we take another look at it here.

In this example, time is compressed in the beginning of the scene, but because the action is boring (the pitcher walking around the mound), there isn’t much for the viewer to fill in. Still, each shot moves the story along so that the viewer doesn’t get bored. Figure 6-2 shows the camera positions for this scene, and Figure 6-3 shows the view from each camera:

**Shot 1 (camera 2):** Pitcher gets the ball back from the catcher.

**Shot 2 (camera 1):** Batter kicks the dirt off his shoes.

**Shot 3 (camera 3):** First baseman yells encouragement to the pitcher.

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**Figure 6-1.** Editing condenses a scene down to its key parts. As viewers watch the edited scene, they recreate the story in their minds.
Shot 4 (camera 2): Pitcher raises his arms over his head to start his windup.

Now, several different perspectives of the same event (the pitch and hit) are combined to slow the action down. Even though the shots don’t actually follow the real sequence (see Figure 6-4), their placement in the edited scene shows a sense of progress:

Shot 5 (camera 1-A): The batter wiggles his bat waiting for the pitch.
Shot 6 (camera 2-A): The pitcher continues his windup.
Shot 7 (camera 3-A): The first baseman crouches down ready to field a ball hit his way.
Shot 8 (camera 1-B): The batter steadies his bat.
Shot 9 (camera 2-B): The pitcher completes his windup and throws the ball.
Shot 10 (camera 3-B): Close shot shows the tense expression on the first baseman’s face.

Shot 11 (camera 1-C): Batter swings and hits the ball.

Shot 12 (camera 2-C): Pitcher’s head turns as the ball flies toward first base.

Shot 13 (camera 3-C): First baseman leaps up and catches the ball.

Compare the editing diagram of the second part of this scene (Figure 6-4) with the one for the man and car scene (Figure 6-1). In this case, several simultaneous perspectives are interwoven, or intercut, to produce the story.

There are several things to note in this baseball scene. Some of the shots could be deleted without ruining the story (e.g., shots 10 and 12);
they merely increase the tension. Other shots could be moved into a different place (e.g., swap shots 9 and 10). The overall effect would not be all that great. These are subjective choices that each editor makes.

Another thing to notice is that the scene depends on the viewer understanding the basic layout of a baseball diamond and the respective positions of the pitcher, batter, and first baseman. If you were editing this scene for people who didn’t know baseball, you would need to add a full shot of the infield to establish the scene, then show a similar example of a pitch so that the viewer understands the climax.

Creating Continuity with One Camera

Few people can afford the luxury of using several cameras to shoot a scene. The common alternative is to shoot a scene several times (several takes) from different camera angles. However, this introduces the problem of matching the motions or positions of people from one take to the other.


**Continuity of Position**

Figure 6-5 shows the layout for a scene of a man and a woman talking at a table. There are five basic shots that can be taken from the three camera positions:

**Camera Position 1:**
A full shot that establishes the scene (Figure 6-6a)

**Camera Position 2:**
A medium shot of the man showing a bit of the woman’s shoulder (Figure 6-6b)
A close-up of the man (Figure 6-6c)

**Camera Position 3:**
A medium shot of the woman showing a bit of the man’s shoulder (Figure 6-6d)
A close-up of the woman (Figure 6-6e)

Figure 6-7 shows how four of these shots might be edited together to form a scene:

**Shot 1 (camera 1):** Full shot of man talking and woman listening
**Shot 2 (camera 2):** Medium shot of man talking

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**Figure 6-5.** Camera layout for conversation example
Five shots can be taken from three camera positions: (a) two-shot of man and woman from camera 1, (b) medium shot of man from camera 2 (this shot often includes a portion of the person in the foreground, in this case, the woman), (c) close-up of man from camera 2, (d) medium shot of woman from camera 3, and (e) close-up of woman from camera 3.
In the baseball scene, you were always cutting, or editing, from one person to a different person (i.e., pitcher to batter). In this case, you are cutting between different shots of the same person; for example, the man is seen in both shot 1 and shot 2 but from different angles.

For this edit to work, for the viewer to accept it and not get confused or distracted, the man must be in about the same position; that is, there has to be continuity of position. If he is resting his arm on the table in shot 1, then shot 2 must show the same thing.

If instead, he has raised his hand to his chin in shot 2 (Figure 6-8a), then when the shots are edited together, the man’s hand jumps from the table to his chin (Figure 6-8b). This type of edit, called a jump cut, distracts the viewer and should be avoided in continuity editing.

The best way to avoid jump cuts is to choose shots where the position of the main character doesn’t change. The positions of secondary characters don’t matter (the position of the woman’s shoulder in shots 1 and 2 isn’t particularly important because she isn’t the center of attention).
There are a few general rules regarding which kinds of shots can be edited together. These rules have as much to do with how shots are directed as how they are edited. Here are two of the main ones.

You shouldn’t cut from one shot of a person talking to a shot of the same person from the same camera position and framing (focal length). This is invariably a jump cut (people never remain in exactly the same position). This is why it’s important to shoot the scene from different angles. If the shot changes enough (different angle, background, etc.), the viewer won’t notice subtle differences in a person’s position.

Another jump cut occurs if you cut from a medium shot of a person directly to a close-up of the person taken from the same camera angle. Although this type of cut is done often in television news pieces, you should try to avoid it. Television camerapersons are under tremendous time pressures and sometimes don’t have the option of shooting sev-
eral takes from different angles. If you want to use a medium and close-up from the same angle, insert a shot of the same person from a different angle between the two shots.

You can cut from a long shot of a person talking to a close-up shot of him or her. The framing is different enough that the slight jump of the person's head position between the shots won't be noticed.

**Continuity of Motion**

When people move during a shot, maintaining continuity is a bit more difficult. However, this doesn't mean you should avoid having your characters move—far from it; video loves motion. It's one of the things this medium does better than any other. And it turns out you can use the motion to your advantage when editing.

Let's change the scene with the man and woman to introduce some action. This time, after the woman is talking for a while, the man gets up and gestures (Figure 6-9). One way of editing this scene is shown in Figure 6-10:

- **Shot 1 (camera 1):** Full shot of man talking and woman listening
- **Shot 2 (camera 2):** Medium shot of man talking
- **Shot 3 (camera 3):** Close-up of woman listening and then talking
- **Shot 4 (camera 1):** Medium shot of man starting to stand up
- **Shot 5 (camera 2):** Close-up shot of man finishing the action and gesturing

**Figure 6-9.**
Frames from a medium shot of the man standing up, from camera 2’s position
The scene includes the additional shot from camera 1 (shot 4) to show the beginning of the man’s action. The action is split up and shown in two shots because this makes the edit smoother: The motion attracts the viewer’s eye and de-emphasizes the edit (Figure 6-11). In Chapter 7, we’ll go into the details of how to match motion between two cuts. The main thing to realize here is that the motion must appear smooth when viewed in the edited scene.

**Using Cutaways**

The previous two sections discussed how to maintain continuity when the same person is shown from two different angles. If for some reason you can’t match a person’s position or

**Figure 6-10.**
In this edited scene, we cover the man’s movement with two shots (4 and 5).

**Figure 6-11.**
Matching the movement of the man in shots 4 and 5 creates a smooth edit because the movement attracts the viewer’s eye.
motion between two shots, then insert a shot of someone or something else to hide the problem.

In the first version of the man and woman scene (Figure 6-7), the shot of the woman (shot 3) comes between two shots of the man (shots 2 and 4). In this case, you wouldn’t have to worry if the man moved his hand from the table to his chin. Because of the intervening shot of the woman, the viewer won’t remember exactly what the man’s position was in shot 2 and won’t notice the change. This is a very common way of getting around continuity problems.

We’ve all seen the shot of a television news reporter listening intently to a person being interviewed. Chances are that shot is being used to hide a jump cut (like 90 percent of the time). The shot of the reporter allows the editor to connect two different quotes, or sound bites, and then hide the edit with the cutaway of the reporter. These shots are so useful for editing interviews that it’s standard for television producers to shoot a reporter cutaway even if they don’t think they’ll use it. Sometimes, these cutaways are shot without the person being interviewed even in the room! A production assistant substitutes for the interviewee, and the reporter looks at and listens to the assistant. The reporter can also ask questions of the speaker-assistant. When edited with the interview, the question seems natural (that is, if the reporter is any good at acting, which most of them are).

When there is motion in the scene, and you have continuity problems in matching the motion, you can use the actions of other characters to solve the problem. To go back to the second version of the man and woman scene (Figure 6-10), let’s say the woman looked up as the man stood up. This would allow us to edit the scene in the following way:

**Shot 1 (camera 1):** Medium shot of man talking and woman listening
**Shot 2 (camera 2):** Medium shot of man talking
**Shot 3 (camera 3):** Close-up of woman listening; then talking; and after a few seconds, looking up
**Shot 4 (camera 2):** Medium shot of man finishing the action of standing up

The motion of the woman’s eyes and head indicates that the man stood up. This unseen but implied action is completed in shot 4. Because the motion is implied, you can make actions happen faster than they
typically would. The trick is to include some part of the motion in the final shot to complete the action.

**Continuity of Place**

The man-and-woman scene starts off with a full shot showing both characters. This is called an establishing shot because it lays out, or establishes, how the characters are positioned in their surroundings and with respect to each other. This helps orient the viewer, which is why most scenes start with an establishing shot.

Once you establish the scene, you then have to stick to that layout. If the man appears on the right side of the screen and the woman on the left, as in Figure 6-6, then they have to appear that way in all the shots for that scene (or until you reestablish the scene). Notice that even though shots 2 through 5 (Figures 6-6b, c, d, and e) were taken from a different angle than shot 1, the man is still on the right and the woman is still on the left.

**Defining the Line of Interest**

The man and woman stay on the same side of the scene because all the different camera positions lie on the same side of the line of interest, an imaginary line running through the central characters in a scene (Figure 6-12). Every scene has a line of interest; once you select a camera position, all other camera positions must lie on the same side of the line. Moving the camera to the other side of the line of interest, crossing the line, causes the characters to switch sides (onscreen) and that confuses the viewer. For example, let’s say you added another camera position (camera 4 in Figure 6-13). A shot from this angle would show the woman on the right and the man on the left:

If you were to edit this shot together with a shot from camera position 1, the man and woman’s positions would suddenly flip.
Figure 6-12. The line of interest is an imaginary line that determines the geometry of a scene. Once you’ve picked a camera position on one side of the line, all other camera positions must be on the same side of the line of interest.

Figure 6-13. Crossing the line with camera 4 confuses the viewer because the man and woman suddenly switch positions on the screen.
Staying on the same side of the line of interest is particularly important when there's movement in the scene. Let's say you're editing a scene from a football game (the camera positions are shown in Figure 6-14). Shots from camera 1 show the red team on the right and the blue team on the left (Figure 6-15a). Shots from cameras 2 and 3 show the same orientation, but the shots from camera 4 show their positions reversed (Figure 6-15b).

Now, let's say the red team quarterback heaves a long pass. You start with a shot from camera 1, with the ball traveling from right to left. Then, you cut to a shot from camera 4. Which direction is the ball traveling? From left to right. In shot 1, it was traveling right to left. Besides violating the laws of physics, this thoroughly confuses the viewer.
Using a Neutral Shot

Fortunately, there is a way to cross the line without confusing the viewer and that is to use a neutral shot, a shot that lies right along the line of interest. The shots from camera 5 (Figures 6-14 and 6-15c) are neutral.
in that the red team and blue team aren’t on any particular side (they’re on the top and bottom of the screen). This allows you to cut to any of the other cameras and reestablish the scene on the same side of the line of interest (cameras 1, 2, or 3) or on the opposite side (camera 4). Here’s how the scene might be edited:

Shot 1: Camera 1
Shot 2: Camera 3
Shot 3: Camera 5
Shot 4: Camera 4
Shot 5: Camera 5
Shot 6: Camera 2

The shots from camera 5 act as transitions between the shots on opposite sides of the line of interest.

Neutral shots are invaluable when editing material shot by a director who doesn’t know about the line of interest. If you are going to be working on someone else’s stuff, look for neutral shots, and remember where to find them.

Editing for Peak Effect—Choosing the Right Shots

If you follow the grammar laid out in the previous sections, your videos will be understandable and coherent to the viewer, but they won’t necessarily be exciting. It’s the same thing with writing—a grammatical sentence isn’t enough to inspire the reader.

Creating an exciting video segment involves making lots of decisions, most of them subjective, about which pieces of video to include. The grammar of editing spells out what edits you can’t make (i.e., jump cuts), but that still leaves you with a lot of options.

A general rule is that, when possible, a shot should include motion or emotion. A shot of someone talking blandly gets boring after a few seconds; a shot of a person fighting back tears holds the viewer for 20, maybe even 30 seconds. Likewise, a scenic outdoor shot, although it’s
interesting, holds the viewer’s attention a lot longer if there is some kind of action in it.

This applies to almost all shots. If you are using a shot of a person listening to someone else, choose a cut where the person is moving his or her head (even subtly) or where he or she shows some emotion. If you using an establishing shot of people at a table, start the cut when one of the people moves in some way (raises his or her arm, leans back, etc.). Every time you have to decide which part of a shot to use, which cut to take, look for motion or emotion. The final video segment will be much more interesting.

Another way to introduce motion into an otherwise boring shot is to move the camera. This is one reason why Hollywood directors go to such lengths to make the camera move (by putting it on a car, using cranes, etc.).

Becoming a Better Editor

At this point, you’re probably not an expert editor, but you are an expert watcher, and all those years of staring at the boob tube are now going to pay off. But first, you have to learn a new way of watching television (or movies for that matter).

Try the following exercise sometime while you’re watching a television movie (or a sitcom):

1. Record the movie as you’re watching it.
2. Get a piece of paper, a pencil, and a watch.
3. Rewind the tape to any particular section of the movie.
4. Play the movie and make a mark on the paper each time a new shot appears. Don’t look at the paper while you make the marks, or you’ll miss what’s happening on the screen. (The marks don’t have to be beautiful, only clear.) Don’t try to follow the story; you’re looking for edits.
5. Do this for two minutes, then count the number of marks on the paper and divide that number by two. The result is the average number of edits per minute. Depending on what you’re watching, the edit rate can vary from 10 to 30 or higher.
6. Calculate how long the average cut lasts by dividing the average number of edits per minute into 60 (60 seconds per minute). If the edit rate is 30 edits per minute, then the average cut is only 2 seconds long.

You’ll probably be surprised at how short an average cut lasts. That’s because when you’re casually watching television, you are following the story that’s being created in your head, not the individual shots that help create that story.

Now rewind the tape and watch the same section again, only this time don’t make any marks. Instead, try to notice each edit and try to follow the story. It’s hard at first, but it gets easier with practice.

Congratulations, you’re now analyzing the video instead of just watching it—one of the first steps toward becoming an expert editor! You’ve broken the illusion and are seeing the individual parts that make up the story.

Practice this new way of viewing television by looking for the different kinds of shots used in a scene. Try to notice the editing pattern used. Look for the establishing shot and try to pick out what the line of interest is. They’re all there; they’ve always been there. Only now, you have the skills to pick them out.

**Wrap-Up**

This chapter covered some of the basic rules of video-editing grammar and showed a few short examples of how the rules are used. The next two chapters show you, step by step, how to edit several real-world situations.