Q - What is a Film Editor?

Eddie – The editor is the person who takes the footage shot by the crew and cuts the shots together to tell the story in the best way possible. Working shot by shot, one scene at a time, making sure the cuts flow smoothly and the audience understands the story and emotions being communicated by what they're watching. It's all about story, character and overall tone.

Editors have the responsibility to ensure that everyone's best work gets up on screen – a combination of the best performances, lighting, makeup, costumes, and sets. The editing process is also the last chance to correct any mistakes made during the shoot. If the script has problems, you have to fix them with re-structuring or ADR (lines recorded by the actor in a studio after the shoot). Similarly, if an actor's performance is disappointing, you have to cut around it.

George Lucas says that editing is the most important part of the film making process. You can radically change a film for the better in the cutting room. If there is life in the rushes and you have a good story to tell, taking the time to find the moments that work and then piecing them together to create a decent movie (even if it is totally different from the original script) is very rewarding.

So it's very creative, but it also requires an immense amount of organisation. Every single frame of film or video has to be carefully logged when it arrives in

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THE MARATHON BEGINS

Whether you hire an editor or cut your project yourself, the cutting process can be both rewarding and frustrating. You will love seeing your film come to life, but may also cringe at shots or sequences that don't work, or at bad acting (that you let go on the day of shooting). You could blame the actors but now you suspect it's more to do with your script! Maybe you should have spent more time on that one final rewrite?

The key here is to keep on going through your first cut. Then have a few unbiased people watch it so that you can get feedback, make changes and schedule reshoots to fix problems that you could not see (as you are so close to it). Then repeat these steps over and over until you get the cut nice and tight. While the length of editing varies by budget and time constraints (one month to a year), a general rule of thumb for low budgets is 12-16 weeks for picture lock. Remember that the editor hasn't been on set and therefore isn't aware of how painstakingly long it took to set up your shots, or how difficult it was to get that perfect take. This is great news. They have perspective. Let them be brutal.

the cutting room so that it can be found at a moment's notice. Any inaccuracy can cause problems and if not spotted can cost a lot to put right.

The editor is also an ambassador of diplomacy. Sitting in the same room as the director working on their masterpiece for months takes its toll – emotions get charged, especially if there is a producer who disagrees with the director. The editor should serve the director's vision, but must speak up if he thinks the director is mistaken. It's important to try and stay objective and see the film fresh each time. Sometimes you have to be ruthless with the cut to improve the film. It's not personal. Everyone wants the best film at the end of the day.

Q – What should a film maker do BEFORE the shoot begins?

Eddie – Make sure you have your entire post production workflow mapped out in front of you, so that on day one of the shoot, you are not trying to problem solve unforeseen issues. As an example, I am advising on another film right now where

1. Label the tapes as they're returned from set. Organisation is your best friend.

2. If shooting to files, such as MP4 or RED, make backups of ALL media BEFORE taking into the edit system.

3. Digitise the material onto the editing system. Ensure that you correctly digitise timecode.

4. Break down the footage into the various shots and takes and sort them into bins for easy access. Make sure you can read and easily understand the labels.

5. Once digitised, store originals in a safe place.

6. For first assembly, order the scenes the same way as the screenplay had planned.

7. Don't worry about your first assembly being overly long, badly

they began the shoot using 'time of day' time code (to help sync sound between camera and sound), so every time they stopped the camera, they created gaps in the timecode on the tape. This creates all manner of problems in post production, and yet it was easy to avoid by either recording black on all the tapes in advance or by assemble editing each take one after another. If you can, find another film maker who has used the same technology and post route that you propose and see how they managed and what problems they encountered.

Q – What kind of space should you use for an edit suite?

Eddie – Normally as big a room as you can find, ideally with a window (and a great view doesn't hurt). It's great to have a large TV for the director, and a sofa too, as you will be spending many long days and months in this one room.

Q – What makes a 'good edit'?

Eddie – Well, there is no simple answer to this – whole books have been written on this very topic by people who've had a lifetime of experience editing films!

Q - OK, so what makes a cut between two shots work?

Eddie – The cut should be fluid (unless deliberately being obtuse). The flow, rhythm and emotion of the cut should not interrupt the audience's passage of concentration. It should feel natural. For me, it's a gut reaction, some kind of instinct. As you play through a take you feel the cut should be HERE, or you sense an edit needs a

couple more frames on the outgoing shot. When you watch it back you just intuitively sense if a cut is working or not.

There are some grammatical rules to follow (though these should have been taken into account when shooting the film). When cutting between shots try not to cross the line (the imaginary eye line between the actors on screen). If you do, it will feel wrong. Just try it. You can sometimes get away with it if there's no option and you're careful but generally it's a bad idea (unless it's a deliberate directorial choice as in '*Moulin Rouge!*', for example, where Baz Luhrmann crosses the line constantly).

When cutting dialogue I often find a natural place to cut to another character is on punctuation, where there's a natural pause in the delivery. I have read a theory that says it takes at least two frames for the audience's eyes to travel from one part of the screen to another between cuts. I would tentatively agree with this – if I'm editing a conversation I tend to trim the incoming shot back a couple of frames and find the cut feels smoother. Another tip, all subconscious emotion is shown through the actor's eyes. Even the subtlest movements give away a character's thoughts.

Lastly, make sure each cut is *motivated*. If the scene is playing well, don't cut for the sake of it.

Q - What makes an edited scene work?

Eddie – As you have no doubt discovered when writing or reading a script, most scenes have a beginning, middle and end and are designed to carry the plot forward, developing the characters along the way. This may seem obvious, but you

paced, or tonally off. These will be fixed in the next passes.

8. Re-edit, reorder, screen, then help with the reshoots. Do this until you truly have the best edit of the film (this stage could take many months)

9. Lock the edit.

10. Tidy the sound and co-ordinate with the sound editors. Or perform the sound mix yourself. Get good speakers!

11. Redigitise picture at full HD res, or recompile from orginal files at highest possible quality.

12. Take the edit to a facility for grading, or grade the film yourself. Make sure you have a true and accurate monitor if you are grading yourself.

13. Final lay off of sound and picture to broadcast videotape such as HDCam of DigiBeta.

14. Make DVD for screenings and festivals.

1. Hire your editor during production and have them begin editing from day one of shooting. The editor will see your movie come together and can inform you of problems as you go along (such as needing more coverage or cutaways).

2. Ensure your editor has the paperwork needed - camera reports, continuity reports, sound reports etc.

3. Generally, it's a good idea to keep the actors out of the cutting room. Scenes may not have gone as planned, and insecurities may flare up which may adversely affect future performances.

4. Kill your babies. That scene, the one that looked beautiful, with amazing acting... If it doesn't advance the story, then you need to leave it on the cutting room floor.

should take it into account when cutting a sequence together. How does the scene start? Where are we? Who's here? Has time passed? Subconsciously the audience will be asking these questions when the scene starts. Unless you're setting out to confuse them, you should try and set the scene as soon as possible so that they can get on with digesting the plot and characterisation.

Sometimes you can start with an exterior of where we are (e.g. a crowd outside the cinema for a premiere before cutting inside to show who's attending). Or maybe start on a detail and reveal the situation, (e.g. a digital counter counting down from 30 seconds, track out to reveal a small bomb under a table, track out to reveal two characters having dinner unaware of their predicament). These are obvious examples but the audience immediately knows what's what.

Now consider what the function of the scene is. Which character do you want the audience to identify with? Whose story is this? What plot details must the audience understand so that we don't lose them? For example, consider a scene where a woman is asking a man to marry her. She might beat around the bush a bit, nervous. At the start of the scene we might stay on a medium two shot showing both the actors. Then she plucks up courage – do we go in for a close up? Maybe. Do we want to show her extreme anxiousness? Or do we want to see the man getting intrigued about her emotional turmoil?

The answers are never clear cut, but if you know what the audience needs from the scene, it can certainly point you in the right direction. All the time you're listening to your gut feeling about

whether the flow of the cuts feel right. At the last minute, the woman can't do it. She's trying to win a bet with a friend by getting engaged before the week is out but decides it's not worth it. The scene builds to this moment and without an explanation she leaves. The man is left standing wondering what he did wrong. Do we stay on a close up of his confusion, do we see his POV (point of view) of the woman walking away, or do we cut out to a wide shot of him standing alone and bemused? Any of these will work, depending on what you want to say. But for sure, the scene has drawn to a close. We've had a beginning, middle, and end. Very few, or even no words have been exchanged, but we've understood and the edited scene has done its job.

Q - What makes a movie work as a whole?

Eddie – When you've finished the first cut of a film, the fun really starts. Just cutting the scenes and putting them in script order is only 20% of the battle. If I'm cutting during a shoot I normally have a first assembly ready a couple of days after the wrap party. The editor and director will watch this and as a general rule it's very average and probably poor – it's too long, the pace is all over the place and there will probably be sections missing such as special effects or second unit shots. But this is to be expected – every editor I've spoken to says the first assembly always looks terrible. However, it's also exciting because it's the first indication that all the work so far has been worth it.

First you work through the film with the director getting the scenes how he or she wants them. You've been cutting alone so far; according to

5. If you're not sure about a scene, take it out and see if you miss it. You can always put it back in.

6. If you have to make major changes, note the scenes on index cards and stick them to the wall. This will keep you from getting lost.

7. Music and sound effects will enhance a scene that is tedious, but they will not fix the heart of the problem.

8. Dropping the end of a scene sometimes helps. It can create a question in the audience's mind - what's going to happen next?

9. Don't be afraid of inventing new scenes, or lines of dialogue, then getting the actors back and having a mini pickup shoot. If the audience doesn't understand something fundamental, you can fall back on the blunt instrument of explanatory dialogue.

10. Take a break before locking picture. When you come back to it, you will see the movie with new eyes and increased energy.

11. If you are faced with a long and dull scene or a shot that you can't cut away from, try hacking it with an unusual cut. It might work.

12. Listen to the people who view your rough cuts. While they might not know exactly what is wrong, they know what is working for them and what isn't. Don't fall into the mistaken position of believing you know better because you are the filmmaker.

13. Don't take anything personally. It isn't worth losing a friendship over.

14. Most Important! Sort out your entire planned post-production route before you shoot.

what you think works. Of course it's their film and they may have other ideas about how to approach a scene. It's a long process of going through the rushes re-working each scene according to the director's taste – but incorporating your input where necessary. Then you take a look at the film as a whole. Are the characters introduced correctly? Is the plot working? Is the tone of the film consistent? Does the pace lag anywhere? Is it too fast? As a rule, the film is probably too slow. How many people have seen a film that's too slow? Then ask yourself if you have ever complained about a film because it was too fast or too packed. Sometimes what worked well in the script seems redundant on screen. Sometimes the performances are lacking something. Maybe the relationship between the two lead characters is misfiring somewhere. Maybe a character is unnecessary now. Maybe some of the jokes just aren't funny.

What do you do? Well, work through the problems. Can I move some scenes around to get the pace more even? Can I intercut some scenes? Can I cut out this joke altogether? Can I shoot some pickups to act as clever cutaways or help with the plot? Slowly but surely you'll work out the answers over several weeks and months of cutting. Then screen your cut to a select audience of articulate people whose opinions you value and who aren't afraid of being brutally honest about the film. You want to fix problems, not have your ego stroked. Watching your movie with an audience is like watching it afresh. You suddenly sense when they begin to fidget. You sense when they're gripped. You know if a joke has hit the mark. Ask them questions afterwards. You'll soon find out what the problems are. There'll be comments like – *But isn't he her brother?* – when in fact the characters aren't

related at all! The audience will come back with all kinds of comments that you hadn't even thought of because you're too close to the film.

Then it's back to the cutting room for more changes, more careful honing. You will probably have to cut some scenes you love because they just don't "play" to the audience or aren't needed in the film any more. Then screen the film again for a larger number of people. Get them to fill in a questionnaire. Read the forms and listen to what they're saying. Don't take them as gospel, but don't ignore them. Gradually you will get closer to the day when you lock picture.

There is a saying that films are never completed, just abandoned. This is partially true because you will never be 100% happy with the end result. The director will have had this vision for the film that can never be matched. You will always have to compromise. But with patience and creativity you will find the movie hiding in those rushes and it will take on a life of its own. The audience will watch it and forget that they're seeing dozens of cuts flickering across the screen – they will be engrossed in the story being told and then you'll know you've done a good job.

Q – What if the director is editing, maybe they can't afford an editor?

Eddie – There are directors who edit, but part of the fun of working with an editor is having someone to bounce ideas off, so you don't feel lonely while undertaking this monumental task. If you are editing alone, try to keep an open mind about changes that may need to be made. For many reasons, you may need to restructure the story. So when people give you feedback, be open to that feedback and don't try and constantly talk yourself round to your own point of view. Every audience opinion is valid and most of the time, if you get consensus in those opinions, you should listen to it and deal with it, no matter how hard it feels. It's tough when you end up cutting out entire days worth of work from the shoot, but that's the process and every film goes through it.

Q – What if an editor changes mid edit?

Eddie – It is possible that an editor leaves your film, especially if it's low budget, as they may get other paid work. Organisation is therefore very important, the new editor will need an organised project or they will spend a great deal of time just unpicking what has been done. Everything should be meticulously labelled and organised in the bins so it makes sense. Keep an archive of every version of

PICKUPS AND RESHOOTS

For the most part, it's best to get all your shots during principal photography. However, there might be some that you can't get due to time constraints, some that you realise after viewing your first assembly or a test screening that you now need, or some that were screwed up the first time around and need to be redone. Going back to "pick up" or "reshoot" shots is common and should be budgeted for both in cost and time.

Some pickups, such as close ups of fingers on a keyboard, a wide establishing shot of a location, a match igniting, or a coffee mug being placed down are very simple and can be done over a long weekend with a minimal crew. Even getting a certain look from an actor that resolves a loose end is fairly easy; only complicated by time schedules and continuity issues (making sure they are wearing the same shirt they wore the day of the original shoot). Larger reshoots of whole scenes or sequences can be more complex and more expensive (you'll need most of your full crew), but getting your film right is so much more important both creatively and psychologically.

the edit, organised by date, so that anyone can go back and watch previous versions of the edit.

Q- What is grading?

Eddie – Grading, or "color correction" as it's known in the US, is something that may appear unimportant, but it is crucial to your movie. Grading is when you choose a look for your film, and apply that throughout so that if feels like a unified artistic vision. At its most basic, it is making sure that all the shots in one scene match. Some exterior shots may be lighter than others because of the change in sunlight during shooting, and grading will even out all those differences to achieve a uniform look. Aside from that, you may want to give the whole film a visual feel, maybe darker and desaturated for a horror film, or a bright and colourful bubblegum feel for a romantic comedy. You can use the powerful image grading tools in Avid or FCP to do this (the "help" files in both Avid and FCP are very good). On bigger budget films, you would take the film to a post production company whose grading experts would do the picture grade for you.

Q – How should you master a film for sales?

Eddie – If you are just making a DVD or uploading your film to the internet, you can easily do that at home. But if you intend to enter the international sales market, sales agents and distributors have stringent technical specifications that must be adhered to. Unless you know exactly what you are doing, it would be expensive to do at home, and very easy to get wrong. In this situation, it's better to try and find a post production facility that will do it for you, ideally using your hard drives and opening your project on their machines. If you plan to do this, you must run short tests in advance to make sure everything works as expected. They will take your film and make sure all the sound and picture elements are 'broadcast legal', and make a tape for you, probably on HDCAM SR.

Q – Can you mix the sound at home?

Eddie – Yes both Avid and FCP offer very good sound mixing tools. When mixing the sound, make sure the sound meters never go into the red. With time and experience you can do a very effective job. I have done that myself on many projects. You will need very good speakers though, and even then, when you hear your film played in a cinema, everything you thought you could get away with when mixing at home, will be magnified.

The main stumbling block is that of cleaning up dialogue tracks. This is the removal of background noise and mixing it so that it sounds like it was recorded at the same time and in the same place. For instance, it may be windy on one shot and not windy on the other - cutting between the two will create an audio edit which audiences will hear. The people who do dialogue mixing like this are very skilled, and though doing this at home is possible, it would take time to get it right.

Q – What about music use?

Eddie – The bottom line is, don't use any music unless you know you can purchase all the rights you need. Audio Networks is a great place for cost effective music online. Or you could get a composer to record a score entirely on a piano – I cut a short film recently where the score was performed on a piano and it went on to win many awards.

HOLDING A TEST SCREENING

1. Showing your movie to an impartial audience is a vital way to tell if the mechanics of your story are working. Hold a test screening with a DVD-R, pair of speakers and video projector.

2. Have your editor copy the whole movie with all the sound, sound effects, temp music onto DVD-R. Where titles or scenes are missing, put up a card explaining what should be there. This is what you will screen.

3. Pure human emotion is always the best indicator of how things are going, so watch and listen to your audience during the film.

4. You may have several test screenings to check work as you keep refining and updating. Avoid family as viewers as they may not tell you the truth (they may lack objectivity).

Very often, film makers use too much music and rely on it as a crutch. I watch some films and wonder: "Why have they used music there?" Because it works perfectly well without it. And I am sure it's because the editor and director have lost sight of the power of the scene to play on it's own. Don't feel the need to use music if the scene already has strong dramatic drive.

Q – What mistakes do you see regularly?

Eddie – I think you never truly understand film making until you have experienced life in a cutting room. The understanding of how to structure a film and how to pace a story is so fundamental to film making that everyone should try editing at some point. It will give you a new respect for the art.

Don't rush into production without really working on the script and developing it until you know it's the best it can be. Many people don't plan post production properly and so end up in trouble very quickly. I can't emphasise enough how important that is.

If shooting and editing in Europe (PAL world) shoot at 25 progressive frames per second (aka 25P / 25PsF). If shooting and editing in the USA, shoot at 24 progressive frames per second (aka 24P / 24PsF), or 23.976 frames per second (because it downconverts to NTSC perfectly).

Editorial mistakes that I see often are that films are too long. They haven't screened the film enough times, or only screened to people who have an emotional connection to the project or the director, so they will never give honest feedback on what is and what isn't working. The director will be living in

a fantasy world where they think that their film is better than it actually is.

It is very, very difficult to make good films. Out of the several hundred films released every year, there are only ever a handful of really good ones. Even the films nominated for best picture at the Oscars are hotly debated. So don't be under any illusion, making good popular successful films is very hard. If you have not been editing very long and you think you have created a masterpiece, you probably haven't. Keep working on it, keep screening it, keep thinking of ways to rework the movie and do pickup shoots to improve it.

Get out there and start shooting something. Shoot some video footage and start editing it together and try and tell a story. When you do that, you can call yourself a film maker.

5. Remember a test screening is all about finding the problems. Invite them to be as harsh as possible.

6. If you can't afford a video projection venue, then find someone with a huge TV and buy everyone pizza. Try to create as much of a theatrical experience as possible, so take the phone off the hook and switch off the mobile.

7. Draw up a questionnaire and ask them to fill it in. Do this before you get into a general discussion in order to reduce 'group think'. Have a big box of pens at the ready.

8. Hold a freeform discussion at the end of the screening, and ask questions about the things you suspect may be a problem.

9. This can be harsh for actors and directors. Don't let actors attend, and warn the director that it's going to be rough.