Polish Your Shows: Finishing Techniques with FCP

With RICHARD M. HARRINGTON

Richard M. Harrington

Author's Bio/Description

A certified instructor for Adobe, Apple, and Avid, Rich is a practiced expert in motion graphic design and digital video. His producing skills were also recognized by AV Multimedia Producer Magazine who named him as one of the Top Producers of 2004.

Rich is a member of the National Association of Photoshop Professionals Instructor Dream Team, and a popular speaker on the digital video circuit. He is also an instructor at the Art Institute of Washington and the American University in Washington, D.C.

Rich is an internationally published author. His book, Photoshop CS for Nonlinear Editors, was the first of its kind to focus on Photoshop's application in the world of video. He is also a contributing author for Final Cut Pro On the Spot, After Effects On the Spot, Broadcast Graphics on the Spot, After Effects at Work, and The Photoshop World Dream Team Book, Volume 1.

A Masters Degree in Project Management fills out Rich's broad spectrum of experience.

RHED Pixel – www.rhedpixel.com

Photoshop for Video – www.PhotoshopforVideo.com

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The Finish Line

Spit and polish! That's the difference between an average show and one that shines to your client. You've slaved over the creation of you opus and are ready to take it to the world. Often it is the last 5% of effort that elevates your show and your editing skills from the rest of the pack.

It is all in the details. Are your video levels legal, is your audio balanced, do your renders need rendering? We took you up to the finish line...now we are going to show you how to cross it with style.

In this race it best to take a break…before your sprint into the home stretch…a rested editor with some time and distance will see mistakes that an exhausted editor will miss after the 22nd hour of editing.

So take a time out…Go get yet another cup of coffee, watch a cartoon, take 5, listen to "Take Five" (every good editor should know classic Jazz) and come back to your show with fresh eyes.

Little Things

When finishing a show, it is the little things that make all the difference. The difference between good and great can be as small as 5%. If at all possible, never finish a show at the end of your shift. After several weeks (or even months) worth of work put into the average project, it's worth tackling it fresh in the morning.
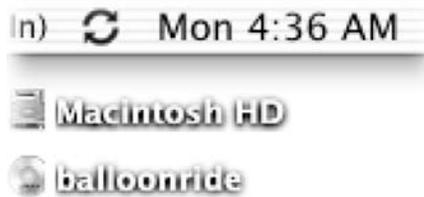
Check for flash frames.

Before we print to tape we step through our finished shows one edit at a time, just to make sure I don't have any black flash frames. Use the up and down arrow keys…to take you from edit point to edit point. If your canvas shows a black frame (or unintentional frame) you have a flash frame. Switch to trimming and you can take the offending frames out.
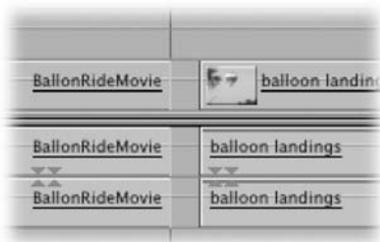
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Learn to Cut with L-Cuts

Experienced editors know that changing picture and sound at the same point (a straight cut) can be very jarring. It is more noticeable when both elements change suddenly, and this can be very jarring to the viewer. A much better method is to try and use a L-cut (so called because of their shape in the timeline). In this case the picture edit happens before or after the edit.

These are especially helpful when editing dialog as it allows the editor better control over pacing and reaction shots. An L-cut can also be used to hide a continuity error. While the difference may sound small, you'll soon discover what an impact they have on a professional edit.

1.   Move through your timeline and select edit points with the rolling edit tool.
2.   Double-click to enter trim mode.

Use the , and . keys to make minor 1-frame edits. Better yet, click the dynamic trimming box and you can use the J-K-L keys to quickly trim your show.

Bad Dissolves

It's very easy to get flash frames in transitions. They can be caused by a shot change at the end of your clip. This happens a lot when editing together previously cut material. It's not your 'fault' really, you can't always know that a transition will use parts of the clip you couldn't see when you started the edit.

1. The easiest way to check is to enter trim mode. Double click on an edit to enter trim mode. You need to be right on the cut or just let your fingers do the work by pressing "option – 7"

2. Press the space bar to review the edit. Watch it closely looking for a scene change mid-transition. Often a one or two frame roll edit will solve the problem and not change the feel of the show.

3. Press the Down arrow to move to the next edit or the Up arrow to move to the previous edit.

Don't get bored...

Don't let bad transitions happen to good sequences. We often see editors get 'bored' by a show because they have spent too much time on it. They lose any sense of judgment and resort to using "one of everything" from the transitions menu.

Constrain yourself when using wipes. A few wipes go a long way. Transitions should only be used when needed to show a change in space or time. It's also a good idea to follow a directional transition with an identical transition in the opposite direction. As a cinema classic once said… "Wax on… Wax off."
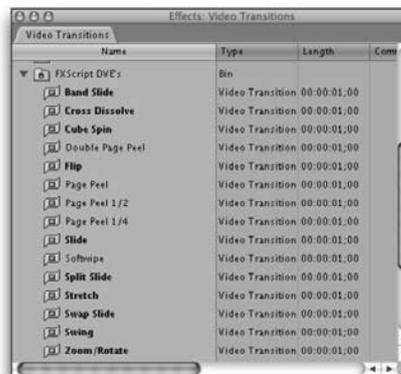
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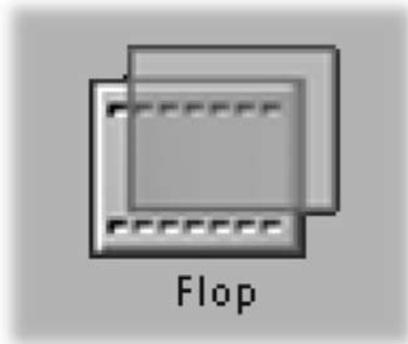
Visual Contrast

While watching your show, are you noticing that almost every person is looking the same way? This seems to happen a lot, unless producers and DP's pay conscious effort to screen direction. Sometimes, this is beyond their control as several different sources may be used to build a show.

Don't worry; a simple built-in effect can save you. Use the Flop filter to reverse screen direction (Effects> Video Filters> Perspective> Flop). You don't need to maintain a L-R-L-R-L-R visual order throughout, but try to get some visual intercutting by changing the direction your subject looks.

Be careful not to flop a screen with text elements or a clock in it. Also try to keep someone looking the same way throughout the piece.

Veja Dupe

Ever get that feeling like you've seen a shot before? It is very easy to lose track of EVERY shot cut into your show. It is an unintentional gaffe to repeat a shot in a show unless it's for special storytelling purposes. But how can you find those sneaky dupes?

Don't worry; Final Cut Pro 4 makes it easy.

1.   Check your Dupe Detection settings. Press Option + Q to call up your User Preferences. Unless you're working in film when you should use at least one frame of handle, you can set the threshold up to 15 frames.

2.   Open Sequence>Sequence Settings (Cmd + 0) and select the Timeline tab and specify Show Duplicate Frames. This can also be accessed more quickly from the Track Layout Menu at the bottom of the timeline.

3.   Six different colors are used to mark duplicated frames: red, green, blue, white, black, and purple. Final Cut Pro will mark the duplicate frames along the bottom edge of a clip in the timeline. If you have more than six duplicated clips, the colors are re-used. If a duplicate clip has a motion effect applied, duplicate frame indicators will NOT appear.

4.   You can contextual click on a clip with duplicate frames to see a shortcut menu. One of the options is Duplicate Frames. It will show you a list of all repeated clips and an indication of how many frames were repeated.

5.   You can choose an item from the list and the playhead will jump to that point of your sequence. This way you can review each shot and decided if changes are needed.
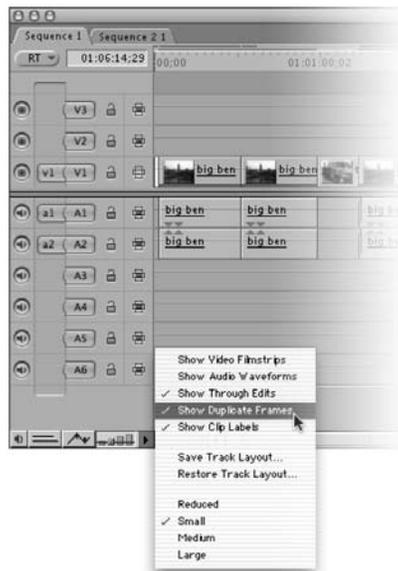
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Jamming Out in the Edit Suite

I have had online sessions where getting the audio mix finalized was virtually impossible. Not because of the material, but rather the fact that the client and producer just kept talking about where to order lunch. As I turned the volume up to hear more, they just kept talking louder. Finally they asked me to turn the speakers down… at which point I pointed out that I was happy to go take a break and return when I could finish my audio edit.

My more recent solution is to block the noise out. While you might look funny to others in your office, a good pair of studio monitoring headphones goes a long way. Block out the environmental noise and focus on your audio edit. Plus you'll no longer have to worry about your client's habit of talking on their cell-phone during the session.

I also like some of the new high-end noise-canceling headsets. They filter out all of the machine hum (computes, desk, AC, etc.) and let you focus on the shows audio.
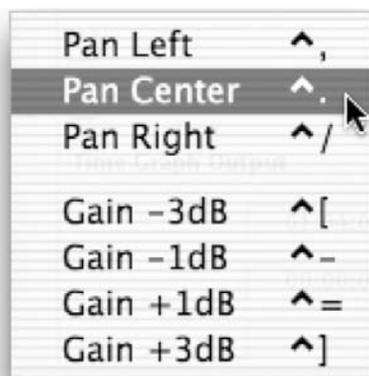
Using Both Mics

Oftentimes a tape will have sound on both channels. However it's likely that two different microphones recorded the sound. Using a camera mic and combining it with a lavaliere or boom mic often accomplish this.

You will want to control which mic is used. Sometimes it will be both, sometimes only one. Be sure to adjust the levels of the two mics until things sound right. Most importantly, pan both of these mics to the center so your speakers reproduce the sound evenly.

Narrow Your Focus

Trying to 'trouble-shoot' your mix. Most editors will intently listen to their video, as if intensity alone could move the edit from a "fine" cut to a "final" cut. Intent focus is a good thing, but make things a little easier by narrowing your focus. Problems will stand out in your audio track when you listen to the elements separately.

• Turn off your audio monitors to listen to tracks (or pairs) individually.

• If you've added audio edits to your music, do things transition smoothly, or are you trying to hide your music edits.

• Are there any loud breaths, gasps, or 'guttural' sounds in your narration or sound bites. Throat clearings and coughs can be easily cleaned up.

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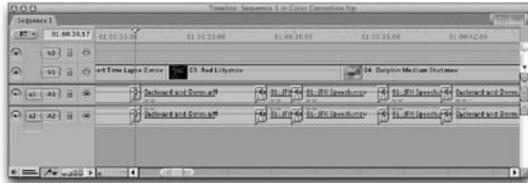
Little Upcuts

No matter how good of an audio editor you are, the more edits in your vocal tracks, the more likely you are to have small pops in your track. We usually add several four or six-frame audio dissolves on to all audio edits on a narration track. These short dissolves go a long way to smooth things out in your vocal track.

After adding the dissolves, be sure to listen to your mix. You want to make sure that when you add that dissolve you're not picking up extra audio clips (random words and double breaths) from the media in the clip's handles.

Why is there that shot at the end of my tape with the boom mic in it?

If you've ever asked this question (and its okay if you have) here's the answer. At the end of shooting at each location, a good audio engineer will record room tone or natural sound. This sound is meant to be used in your timeline to fill in any gaps.

Why? Well there's a BIG difference between computer silence (the absence of any audio in the timeline) and 'true' silence. All locations on this planet have some sort of noise. Whether it is the whir of machinery, the pumping of ventilation, or the birds chirping in the background. Use the room tone between sound bites. Better yet, lay a continuous bed of it below all of your bites from a particular location. This goes a long way to smooth out the rough spots.


The Road Test

One of the final steps in mixing an audio CD is the road test. Audio engineers and producers will often burn a CD and pop it in a car and drive around town. Why? Well it's to see how the mix sounds in a 'real-world' setting.

What does this mean for you? Well you should really try out your mix in its intended viewing area. A video meant for playback in a sports stadium will have a very different mix than one going to an in-store kiosk.

Go Low...

Before you finish your show, try to clean the timeline up. Get your show back down to as few of tracks as possible. Editors have a tendency to build their shows upward. Unfortunately, a 'tall' show is often harder to move though because of all the scrolling. This compounds itself making it more difficult for future revisions. If you want to drag a track straight down, simply hold down the Cmd key when dragging.
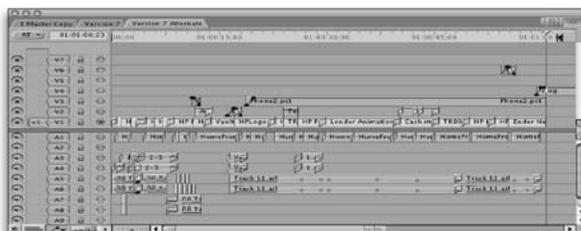
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Slow Down

Why take a chance of missing something. Proof your graphics while the video is not playing. Pause on each graphic and carefully review it. Match it to your script and carefully look for errors. A misspelled or missing word can be enough to send your 5,00 dubs rushing back to you with a change order. No matter who made the error, you were the last to 'touch' it. Look very carefully at your titles and lower-thirds.

When spell checking….read the copy on screen backwards (no not in a mirror….just from end to beginning!)…you'll be less likely to scan to fast, and miss a misspelling.

How to use your Mac's built in Spell Check

Cruising through your show titles and bumpers one last time for spelling errors? It is nice to have a word processor around, but you can't afford $500 per edit system on "office" software?

Don't worry, OS X has a spell checker built right in, you just need to use TextEdit.

1. Copy your text to your clipboard.
2. Switch to TextEdit and paste the text into a new document.
3. Choose Edit>Spelling>Spelling… or press Cmd + :.
4. Use the pop-up palette and press the Find Next and Correct buttons to navigate through and correct your mistakes.
5. When finished, Select All (Cmd + A) and Copy the Text to the clipboard (Cmd + C).
6. Switch back to Final Cut Pro and paste the new text back into your graphic.
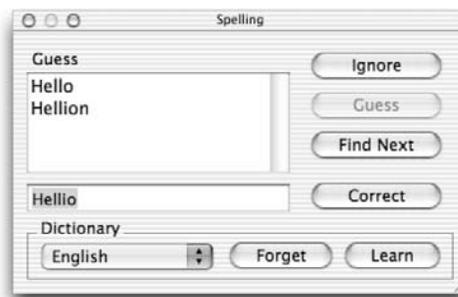
An LCD TV

One of the final techniques used to check our videos is playback on an "LCD" TV. We don't mean a fancy flat-screen set. Rather the "Least Common Denominator" television set. We keep a $150 TV/VCR combo unit around just for these purposes. It's a good idea to watch your show like the rest of the world. Joe & Jane Public DO NOT have high-resolution monitors with a Blue-Gun for professional calibration. See things through your customer's eyes every once and a while.

This low-tech approach should not REPLACE a broadcast monitor, but rather complement it. We keep both a calibrated high-end broadcast monitor AND a cheap TV set in our edit suites. That way we can see both the highest and most likely denominators while we are editing our shows.

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Don't Stop

Often times you'll want to play a sequence through to get the producer or client's feedback. This is a great way to get important comments to improve the show. Often times however they'll want you to stop on each 'error.' This is bad for several reasons. You will often lose any sense of timing or rhythm to the edit. Additionally, its common to stop for a change, only to discover that the 'missing' shot in question happens 10 seconds later.

Instead of stopping, encourage your suite mates to watch the show all the way through. Tell them you'll mark all the 'problem areas'

1.   Agree on a word like mark to signal that a shot should be flagged for review.
2.   Position the playhead at the start of the video track and press play,
3.   Tap the M or ` key to add a marker on the fly.
4.   Afterwards you can move between markers rapidly. Press Shift + the Up or Down arrows to jump between markers.

Window Burns

You've sent your client a dub and are waiting for feedback. Eventually you get a call that goes something like this.

CLIENT: Just got that dub and its great… I've just got a couple of changes.
EDITOR: Okay... no problem.
CLIENT: That one shot with the guy in the blue shirt… it needs to come out.
EDITOR: You mean just after Jane's sound bite?
CLIENT: No… It's after the shot with the kids in it.
Repeat the above conversation until both sides think significantly less of the other.

Want an easier way to get client feedback on a show? Make a window burn. Put the timecode across the bottom of the screen so you and your client can look at the actual timecode and be referencing something far more accurate than a VHS counter.

To see Sequence Timecode

1. Create a New Sequence with the same settings as the sequence you want to output. This will be your output sequence.
2. Drop your edited Sequence into the output sequence.
3. Apply the Timecode Print filter to your media clip (Video Filters>Video>Timecode Print).
4. Control Click on your video track and choose Open in Viewer.
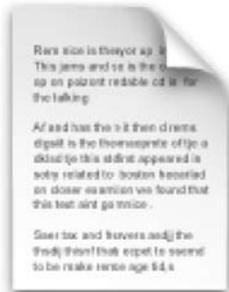5. Change the mode to Reader and it will pick up on your sequence time.
Adjust size and position so it is easier for your client to view (be sure to keep safe title area in mind).

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Client Text.txt

Lower Thirds and titles

Your best insurances against misspelled lower thirds and titles is to get a document directly from your client with all the correct spellings or names, rank, and serial numbers…well you know what we mean

…or create one yourself and have them review and sign off on it.

Now all you need to do is copy and past the text back into Final Cut Pro and you are insured that you have the clients "approved" spellings of everything!

Offline-Online

There's nothing worse than getting a Media Offline screen in the middle your show. Want a quick way to check your sequence for offline media? No problem.

1. Press Cmd + F to launch the Find dialog box.
2. Select the correct project and choose Used Media. Specify that the want to Replace Find Results.
3. Click Find All.
4. Look in the results box for any clips with a red line through them. You'll quickly discover any offline clips that are used by that sequence.

Change Your Viewpoint

If you are watching your videos in the same edit suite every day, you'll eventually develop 'blind spots.' Try moving things around a bit. Lay off a VHS and take it to the conference room (or even home with you). Put a copy on your laptop and watch it there. They key is to test it in different environments.