

“Fit & Trim: A Foolproof Method for Storing Film Trims”, THE INDEPENDENT, July, 1999

TRIM STORAGE SYSTEM FOR FILM EDITING

(This was published in the July 1999 issue of "The Independent" with illustrations, which are kind of helpful if you can find the mag...)

At the risk of sounding like an infomercial: Have you ever lost a film trim? Have you ever had to spend more than 20 *seconds* finding a trim? If your answer to either of those questions is, "Yes, goddamn it!", then I have news that will change your life, or at least your life in the editing room. If you're anything like me, that's a good portion of it. Moreover, if you're anything like me, you still love to cut on film and are slightly peeved at the bragging rights that AVID/Media 100 people think they can claim for being able to work so much faster than us.

In all seriousness, anyone who cuts film knows that storing, and then trying to find lost or misplaced trims, is the biggest drawback in editing (besides coming up with a good structure!) I've found that the scheme I chanced upon, after twenty years of trying out every other method, has made an enormous difference in my speed and peace of mind while I work. Of course, once I figured it out it seemed so obvious that I wondered why it took so long--but that's life. At any rate, it's really easy and, like most systems, it works without fail as long as you abide by it.

For you gadget freaks in the group, it even involves some "equipment": a ring binder notebook (the kind whose rings snap open) and a pack of loose leaf paper. You also need a black sharpie and two colors of tape--two *complementary* colors, because the system is based on the concept of those leaders that Rafik sold me: head is green (go) and tail is red (stop). I've been using blue & orange lately because I can't find red & green; either combo is fine.

Here's how it works. You begin by organizing your material in whatever way is best for the project. A narrative or documentary is usually based on scenes; an experimental film might not be, but it still can and should be broken into manageable units. For the ease of understanding what follows, let's think of them also as scenes; I've used this system for all types of film.

So you title and number each scene on the top of a loose leaf page, e.g. FLEA CIRCUS/1. You then list your shots however you plan to string them together and attribute a letter to each in order, A, B, C, D, etc. down the alphabet. One caution: only use either the letter I or H, not both, because one reads like the other sideways and it can lead to confusion. And since you're working with the alphabet, which has 26 letters, it helps to keep your scenes down to 26 shots or less. But there's no reason to be restricted; if a scene has a lot of shots, you just continue on using AA, BB, CC, etc.

You then make a tabbed page for your ring bound notebook with the scene number (or title) on the tab. I usually use numbers because they're quicker to write and easier to read. I do each one as I go along, but if you want you can set up all the scenes ahead of time. Perhaps it goes without

saying, but the tabbed pages let you easily flip to the scene you're working on.

So then you start to cut the scene...but allow me to digress for a moment. If you're doing an assembly and cutting several feet off a shot, that trim will go back into the reel of dailies it came from. But it can also be hung on the bin with a piece of tape with 1D or 3G or whatever scene/shot it is, if you think you'll want to get it to it soon. And since I'm digressing, here's another groovy tip: I've started to cut small squares of cardboard, about 2" square, and make a hole punch on the top and then write the scene number on it. I hang these on the bin hooks in front of the outtakes for that scene; when you want to access a shot, they lift off easily and they also prevent the shots from popping off the hooks and dropping into the bottom of the bin, never to be seen again.

But back to the main topic. The only trims we're talking about storing with this system are the critical ones: the short ones. When I started using this method, I only kept the ones that were short enough for the length of the loose leaf page, but then I began to cheat and put longer ones in and let them hang over. This works fine if you're keeping the notebook in one place, but not if you're constantly traveling to & from an editing room--the stray ends will get crushed.

So now you're editing and you have your first short trim from scene 1. You look up at your scene list, which should be hanging easily in sight (my speaker sits on top of the screen, so I hang them on that), and see that it's shot D. The trim is from the head of the shot, so you take a piece of green (or blue) tape and write D (or 1D--see below) on it with a sharpie and attach the trim to the side of the flatbed. Then you make another cut and it's the tail of shot G. Time for a red (or orange) piece of tape with G (or 1G) on it. And so on.

When I'm finished editing a scene, I pull the trims off the flatbed and put them into the notebook in their tabbed scene section. I don't bother keeping all the head trims together or all the trims from a given shot--it's so easy to find them within the scene that it isn't worth the extra time to do that.

It's best to put away all the trims from a scene before you start a new one, but you might not want to do that or you might be pressed for time. If you're working frantically and taking bits off from various scenes without stopping to put them away, then all you have to do is add the scene number to the shot letter on the tape (for example, 1A, 1K, 1P, etc. for the various trims from Scene 1). That way you'll always know which scene the trims belong to when you finally put things away. I combine the two: when I'm starting to edit, I only write the letter because I know I'll be putting away all the scene 1 trims when I'm finished that scene. Later on, when I'm skimming back and forth between scenes in the fine cutting, I tend to write the scene number as well as the shot letter on the tape so I can let things pile up on the flatbed before I have to put them away in the notebook.

Does this sound time-consuming? You have to tape your trims to the flatbed anyway, right? And the split second it takes to find out the shot letter is a lot less than the 15 minutes, or 15

hours, it takes to find that trim in your box or envelope or on some trim bin hook. And it takes less time to write 1D or 3G than to write "guy walks across room" or "dog eats grass".

And here's the beauty of it: 5 weeks or 5 months later, when you go back to recut the FLEA CIRCUS scene because it isn't funny enough and you want to add in 2 frames from the head of shot D, you open to that scene in the notebook, skim through looking only at the green tapes for every one with D on it, and there you are. Less than a minute, I promise.

Okay, all systems have refinements, so I want to describe a few things I've run into, especially doing more complicated edits. First of all, you might decide that you want to drastically reorder the shots in a scene: "A" moves to the end, "G" is now first, "K" is after "M". No problem. All you do is rewrite your shot list but keep the letter designation of each shot. Remember, if you change the letters, your trim tapes--your whole system--becomes meaningless. But if you maintain the original letter designations, you can do this endlessly. I first used this system for editing "Hide and Seek", which took ten months and involved 20,000 feet of film. I never lost a trim and never spent more than a minute finding one, even though I endlessly reordered the shots within scenes and the scenes within the whole.

Secondly, you might decide to put a cutaway in the middle of shot G. In order not to lose track of that shot as a whole, I give the first part the simple letter G and then second half becomes GA. Then if I subdivide again, the next becomes GB, GC, etc. That way, you always know which part the trims belong to, and you can easily reconstitute the whole.

If you've gotten white/yellow edge coding put onto your film, it can be helpful to write the head number of that coding alongside each shot in your list. Given the craziness of the editing room and the possibility that you might mislabel a trim, it's a backup way to find your material. And while we're on the subject of mislabeling: I've done that a few times. But what I discovered is that I can take the pages out of the notebook and hold them up to the light and easily see what all the trim images are, so I've always been able to quickly find the bit I'm looking for.

For the experimental filmmakers in the group: there's another way to work that I just started using on my new film because I don't have scenes, I just have lots of disparate shots and I'm not sure where they'll go in the film. I always write out a list of all the shots in each roll of original, so I sat down with those lists and gave them each a thematic name and then a number in the order they appeared (the reel of Religion shots became R1, R2, etc. while People shots were P1, P2, etc.). I'm using these letters/numbers as the way to define the shots in my scene lists. That way, if I rearrange the order, I can always find the trims. I'm still creating "scenes" so that I don't have tons of pages of trims to sort through, but if I move a shot from the YESTERDAY scene to the WEATHER scene, I can move the trims as well. (If you're just using the alphabet, you might start having lots of A's or G's in one scene and that won't do.)

This is as much as I've figured out so far. After the trial run with "Hide and Seek", I cut a 25 minute experimental narrative film for someone and it still worked, and now it's proving itself to

me once again as I cut my new film.

I hope this is helpful to those of you who decide to adopt it. Even if you're suspicious and think it sounds like more trouble than it's worth, give it a try. You'll see that it's simple and logical, and is easier to understand in practice than it might be to read about here. The pay off is that it will give you a lot more time for the good parts of editing and then you'll have more time to go home and write that !%#@&* grant proposal. By the way, if you've figured out a good system for curing that headache, please let me know!

--Su Friedrich