

Reporter's Guide to Multimedia Proficiency

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This booklet comes directly from a series of 15 blog posts I wrote in 2009. My intention was to offer some guidance for journalists who are ready to learn how to transform themselves into multimedia journalists. This series should demystify many of the new options for storytelling that have been made possible by digital tools.

If you are a journalist (or a journalism student) who feels like you need to catch up and upgrade your skills, I suggest that you do more than simply *read* these posts. Put the advice into use immediately—the same day, if possible. Don't wait! (You've waited long enough already.)

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1. Read Blogs and Use RSS

February 5, 2009

<http://mindymcadams.com/tojou/2009/reporters-guide-to-multimedia-proficiency-part-1/>

Even if you are already reading blogs regularly, I urge you to add some blogs that are not strictly about journalism or news. Two that I recommend strongly:

- [Mashable](#): If you were one of the last people to hear about **Twitter**, or you still don't know how **Facebook** works, then reading this frequently updated news blog will put you into the loop. All the **Web 2.0** and **social networking** trends, tools, and sites are covered here.
- [ReadWriteWeb](#): Although this blog is similar to Mashable (and they are often redundant), you will find some good stuff here that Mashable will not have—[NYTimes Exposes 2.8 Million Articles in New API](#), for example.

Why read these blogs? Because you will better understand how (and why) the media world around us is changing if you stay up-to-date on the changes. People who understand what is happening are less likely to become road kill.

You certainly don't need to read every post closely. But scanning these posts daily will definitely help you become more savvy about digital media, online and mobile.

Using an RSS reader

If you have not started using an RSS reader yet, *please* do that right away! Our former student Megan Taylor wrote a very clear, simple [introduction to RSS](#). I suggest that you give no thought to which RSS reader you should try—just start with [Google Reader](#). It's free, easy to use, and ubiquitous. This YouTube video gives you a one-minute tour of how it works: [Google Reader in Plain English](#).

If that's not enough for you, then learn "[how to use Google Reader like a rock star](#)"—from a post at Mashable.

Why take the time to set up and learn to use Google Reader? First and foremost, it's 100 times more efficient than using your browser bookmarks (or favorites). It's like your customized Page One, ready for you on any computer with Internet access, at home or at work, and even on your phone. It's better than an aggregate of all the wire services—because YOU set it up to bring you what YOU want.

How to find blogs that are worth your time

Of the millions of blogs that are updated frequently, only a few are really going to help you become smarter about the changing landscape of journalism—or your own beat, or your local community.

Generally one good blog leads to another. Just look at the **blogroll**—the list of blog

links in the sidebar. This blog has one. Almost *every* blog has one. Try a blog out before you add it to Google Reader. Be selective. Your time is valuable.

If you want a place to start sampling, try [Best of the Journalism Blogs](#), from Journalism.co.uk.

2. Start a Blog

February 6, 2009

<http://mindymcadams.com/tojou/2009/rgmp-2-start-a-blog/>

Today's topic might seem mundane to many of you, but I always say that writing a blog with commitment, on some kind of regular schedule, makes you smarter.

The advantage for a journalist who needs to catch up, who needs to learn new skills for a digital and online world, is that having a commitment to a blog drives the blogger to search out new information. It's kind of like taking a college course for credit instead of auditing the course. If you're just auditing, when the rest of your life gets busy, you'll just quit going to the classes. Some people abandon their blogs, of course. But those who make a commitment and stick to it soon find that the blog connects them to new developments and kindred spirits in ways they had not anticipated.

Now, before I get to the nitty-gritty, the key to having a blog that makes you smarter is *reaching out*. A blog should not be seen as a soap box for your personal posturing. Blogs are great vehicles for sharing information and knowledge, and *sharing* travels in two directions.

A blog is one node in a giant network of nodes, with a human being behind each one of those nodes. Your blog gives you a way to see and be seen—but *only* if you use it with a spirit of sharing and connecting.

These two practices are essential:

- **Link out.** That is, link to other blog posts. Not just blogs, but individual posts. This makes you visible to other bloggers and also (via [trackbacks](#)) to other blog readers.
- **Comment on other people's blogs.** Particularly blogs with subject matter similar to yours. In the comment form, *always* type your real name and your blog's URL in the boxes provided—this allows anyone who reads your comment to click your name and go to *your* blog, bringing more readers to you.

Your blog posts can be short. About 300 words is plenty for most blog posts. Right now WordPress is telling me I'm at 372 words (whew!), so I'd better insert a subhed.

What to blog about

You can blog about your beat (if you have one), but if you're reading this because you want to boost your online skills and digital tools savvy, I suggest you choose a more personal topic. Here are some examples:

- [Multimedia Reporter](#): Ron Sylvester was a 40-something courts reporter when he started this blog to chronicle his own learning experience in online and multimedia. Although he quit

writing this blog and moved to [another one](#) in 2007, **Multimedia Reporter** still stands as a fine example of a journalist’s journey into a new set of skills and practices.

- [Meranda Writes](#): Another reporter’s blog, but from the younger generation. Meranda Watling started this blog about the same time she started her first full-time daily newspaper job (in Indiana), straight out of college (Kent State). I love this blog! I feel like it’s better than most textbooks in demonstrating how to be a reporter.
- [The Linchpen](#): Student journalists write blogs too, and while the quality and content varies widely (as you might expect), this one by Greg Linch, who studies at the University of Miami (sorry, Gators!), is consistently interesting and professional in tone. It’s raised Greg’s visibility tremendously, and I expect it will help him get a job when the time comes.

How to start blogging

I recommend [WordPress.com](#) above all the other free blogging platforms, for various reasons. One big reason is the vast number of tutorials and lessons and support (see an example: [a one-minute video](#) that shows you how to save a draft of a new post). See this overview of [WP features](#) if you need to be convinced.

Just go there and click the big button that says *Sign Up Now* (it couldn’t be any easier). I wrote a post last month about [how to get started](#) with WordPress.com.

To summarize the steps as simply as possible:

1. Register at WordPress.com (you cannot change your user name later, so choose wisely).
2. Start a new blog and give it a URL (e.g., *myblog.wordpress.com*); this also cannot be changed later, so what you pick for “myblog” matters a lot.
3. Read [Getting Started](#) if you feel nervous about this.
4. Modify [Settings](#) (change your blog’s title, etc.; lots of stuff can be changed any time).
5. Choose a Theme (how your blog looks); you can change this as often as you like (cool!).
6. Write your first new post—and publish it.
7. Delete the “Hello World!” post that WordPress gave you.
8. Edit your new post and [add a hyperlink](#) (then Update Post).
9. Test your link on the live blog! Does it work? If not, go back to the Dashboard and fix it.
10. Customize your sidebar(s) with [widgets](#)—this is fun!

Resources for bloggers using WordPress.com include [how-to videos](#), the official [WordPress.com blog](#), and—best of all—[the official support site](#), where typing your question or the name of a feature into the huge search box at the top of the page will bring you a clear answer to almost any question. (Trust me, I have used it many times.)

The weekend is coming up. Why not make a late New Year’s resolution and start your new blog this weekend? What are you waiting for? This is not rocket science. Any writer or reporter can do it.

Closely related: [5 tips for blog beginners](#) (July 17, 2008)

From Paul Bradshaw: [Starting a blog? 12 ideas for blog posts](#)

3: Buy an Audio Recorder and Learn to Use It

February 9, 2009

<http://mindymcadams.com/tojou/2009/rgmp-3-buy-an-audio-recorder-and-learn-to-use-it/>

As a journalist or journalism student, it's likely you already have an audio recorder. It's also somewhat likely that the one you have is not suitable for gathering audio that can be listened to online by people other than you. So read this earlier post—[A few words about digital audio recorders](#)—and give some thought to that.

What you need, at bare minimum, is a recorder that can connect to your computer and upload an audio file that is NOT in some crazy file format that cannot be converted to WAV. If your recorder saves files as WMA, or as MP3, or as WAV, it is okay.

One thing I've discovered is that many people who use a computer every day have no clue about file formats. If you're a journalist, you probably know that your MS Word files are in the DOC (.doc or .docx) format. You may be familiar with plain-text format, TXT (.txt). Well, audio files have their own formats. You've probably heard of MP3 (.mp3) because of the iPod, podcasts, Napster, etc. MP3 is a compressed format. It saves space on the device (such as the recorder, or your iPod) because a compressed file is smaller. That means it has fewer megabytes. For example, I have a WAV file

that's 6 min. 30 sec. long. File size: 65.3 MB. With no editing, I *convert* it to the MP3 format. File size: 4.4 MB.

So, uncompressed files are larger. But you *want* to edit an uncompressed file so that you have all the audio data available and unadulterated. When you finish the editing, you'll *export* a new MP3 file.

Learning to use your recorder

I know journalists are all macho (even the female reporters—well, not macho, but tough), and macho people never read the manual.

That's just stupid. The manual that comes with an audio recorder is short and simple. The main thing you need to read is the part about the menus. Every audio recorder has a crazy menu that's a pain in the neck to navigate. But you need to set things correctly on those annoying menus, and I promise you, it will be 100 times easier if you RTFM (that's an old computer programmer term; it means Read The F'ing Manual).

So set the date and time, for certain. And set the recording quality to the highest possible quality. (This is extremely important! You need to get the best-sounding recording possible, and this is an essential part of doing that.) If you have a choice between stereo and mono recording, choose mono. (The file size will be smaller.)

Some recorders, like the new Olympus VN-5200PC, have different recording modes for the built-in microphone. On that model it's called Mic Sense, and the two choices are Dict (Lo) and Conf (Hi). It will be called something else on another

recorder. Read about the mic sensitivity setting for your recorder, and experiment. Take it into your kitchen, for example, lay it on the counter, and walk around saying, “Testing, 1, 2, 3, testing.” Then change the setting and do the same thing again. This is how we learn how to use our gear. You spend the time, and you figure it out.

Learning to conduct the interview

As a journalist, you already know how to interview someone. But you need to change a few small things if you want to get clean audio that can be added to a slideshow or used in a podcast.

1. How you hold the microphone, or the recorder, can make noise that interferes with the words of your interview subject. Get comfortable, and then, don’t move your fingers, hand, or arm during the interview.
2. Laying the recorder on a table can also allow unfortunate noises. What if your interview subject smacks the surface of the table to make a point?
3. Figure out the proper distance between the mic and the subject’s mouth. This can depend on the mic sensitivity setting (see above).
4. How will you know if the recording is clear and clean? WEAR HEADPHONES. Listening through headphones is the only way to ensure that you know what the recorder is recording. Sometimes you will hear a hum or buzzing through the headphones that you would not notice with your naked ears. But guess what? That noise is in your recording. Wear the headphones

and save yourself the heartbreak of bringing back unusable audio.

5. Don’t say uh-huh. The reporter needs to shut up and listen. Learn to nod and smile, instead of saying, “Yes, uh-huh, yes.” Give the subject *visual* encouragement, not audible.
6. You will cut out all of your questions in the editing. So you need to learn how to phrase your questions in a manner that encourages the subject to give a complete answer. Especially, avoid yes and no answers. You can’t use those replies.
7. The reporter always holds the mic. NEVER give the mic to the subject! YOU control the mic.
8. Use strong eye contact to keep the interview subject’s mouth from pointing down at the mic and blowing on it. If the subject’s breath hits the mic, you will hear pops for the P sounds and hisses for the S sounds. Not good.

Practice makes perfect, so don’t expect your first couple of efforts to be free of errors. You will improve rapidly. Gathering clean audio is a very easy skill for print journalists to acquire. It is absolutely necessary for you to EDIT your own audio, or else you’ll never improve your interviewing technique. That will be our topic in the next chapter.

One final tip for interviews

There’s a simple technique I call “the questions after.” This frees you to conduct a longer interview and record the whole thing without worrying about the

background noise, etc., when you want to take written notes while your subject is talking.

When you've finished, stop the recorder. Put on your headphones. Start a new recording, and explain to your subject that you need to put some audio online, and you will now repeat two (or three) questions, and would the person please answer as before (but don't worry about saying exactly the same thing).

This way you can re-ask only the questions that yielded the most interesting or relevant answers the first time around. There are two benefits: (1) The subject's answers are often more compact and organized the second time. (2) Your job of editing is easier, because the short (second) audio file will take less time to cut.

4. Start Editing Audio

February 12, 2009

<http://mindymcadams.com/tojou/2009/rgmp-4-start-editing-audio/>

Today you'll learn how to put that audio on a computer, edit it, and export an MP3 file.

Uploading the file

First you'll need to connect your audio recorder to the computer. This should be via USB. If there's no way to connect the recorder (some dictation recorders have no connector), your recorder is useless, and you need to buy a different one.

1. **Windows:** A bunch of messages will pop up in the lower right corner of the computer screen until the device connects. At that point, you should see a window that asks you what to do. Scroll to the bottom and choose to view the files and folders on the device.
2. **Mac:** Most recorders will mount as a drive on your desktop. Double-click the drive icon, and you'll see the contents of the recorder.

If one of the two things above does not happen, your recorder is probably not good for this work. Read this earlier post —[A few words about digital audio recorders](#)—and buy one that works. Some recorders try to download some crap software when you connect them. I do not recommend those recorders.

Most recorders have several folders in which they stash your audio files. If a folder name ends in the letter A or the number 1, that is probably where your files are (unless you changed it; *read the manual!*).

Find your audio files. If the filename ends with the file extension *.mp3* or *.wma*, you will need to convert that file to *.wav*. If the file is already *.wav*, you can skip the conversion stage. If you are on Windows and you do not see the file extension at the end of the filename, [follow these instructions](#).

Converting the file

For converting one audio file type to another, I strongly recommend the FREE VERSION of Switch. Make sure you download the FREE version. Download it

[here](#). It works on Windows and Mac. After you download it, you will need to install it. Say no to all the options during the install.

After Switch is installed, launch it. Then drag and drop the audio file into the big window. There are three steps:

1. Check and make sure you know where the new, converted file is going to be saved. There is a menu labeled “Output Folder”: Use this to select a folder on your hard drive.
2. Change the “Output Format” to *.wav*.
3. Select the file in the big window (click it once), and then click the big Convert button.

Getting your files and folders in order

It will be important, always, to keep all your files for one audio project in ONE folder. This should NOT be a folder with other stuff in it. So create a new folder, name it something like “My First Audio Project,” and then copy and paste your new *.wav* file into that folder.

I advise you to keep the original audio file safe in some other location.

A few words about your computer

Editing is, in fact, the easiest part of this entire process. I have found that a large number of print journalists are very unfamiliar with their computers. They are not comfortable downloading files, installing software, converting file formats, copying and moving files, etc.

This creates a huge problem—some journalists are stymied in their efforts to learn multimedia skills because they lack basic, fundamental computer literacy.

If this describes YOU, then you might need to get extra help. You need to be able to perform these basic file management tasks without screwing things up. You might need to take a community college course or buy a “Dummies” book. This is quite important—you can’t continue saying you’re not very good with computers in 2009. *Get some help*. The computer is your primary tool.

Installing the editing software

I recommend that you use [Audacity](#) for editing audio, because it’s completely free and open source, and you can use it on any computer (Windows, Mac, or Linux). I have written three Audacity tutorials. You can download the PDFs from this page—[Audio: Journalists’ Toolkit](#)—under the subheading “Editing.”

Please read the installing instructions on page 1 of the first tutorial, “Super-Fast Guide to Audio Editing.” (I’m giving you the instructions this way because I can update that tutorial, but I will not come back and update this blog post.) It is very IMPORTANT that you read and follow the steps, because there are two parts to installing Audacity. The second part concerns something called the LAME encoder, and I can assure you, about 25 percent of journalists and journalism students mess this up because they do not follow the frigging instructions!

So please, just follow the instructions. And if you have a computer literacy problem, then please get someone to help

you. Don't give yourself an excuse to fail by saying, "I'm not very good with computers." That simply is not acceptable.

Editing the file

Once Audacity is installed, you can begin editing your little *.wav* file. (At last!) But hey, you only have to do all that stuff above ONCE.

Starting on page 3 of the first tutorial, "Super-Fast Guide to Audio Editing," you will see step-by-step exactly how to DELETE something out of an audio file—such as your interview subject saying, "Um ... um ..." It is as easy as using MS Word to delete a sentence.

On page 4 of the tutorial, you will see how to CUT and MOVE some of the audio to a different part of the file—such as your interview subject identifying herself. Maybe that's at the end, and you would like to move it to the beginning. This is as easy as using MS Word to cut and move a sentence.

While you are working on the audio file, you will repeatedly save a "project file." Recall how I told you to keep all files for one audio project inside one folder (perhaps you named it "My First Audio Project")? The first time you save this Audacity project file, MAKE SURE that you save it into THAT folder. The same one that already contains your *.wav* file. If you keep that folder intact, and save all parts of this project into it, then it will be portable. You can copy the entire folder (not its contents—the *folder itself*) and carry it to a different computer, if need be—and it will still work. But if you save things all over the damn place, your audio file project will not be portable.

Some tips for editing:

1. Use your headphones! *Never* edit audio using the computer's speaker(s).
2. Cut out all "ums" and "ers."
3. Cut out your own voice in all cases.
4. Rearrange the subject's sentences to make a coherent story or anecdote.
5. *Take care not to change or dilute what the subject meant.* (This is the same as writing print journalism, of course.) Preserve the subject's intended meaning in all cases.
6. Don't cut too much "dead air" out from between two statements. That will sound unnatural.
7. Don't cut the ending too abruptly. Leave a smidgen of dead air at the end.

Exporting the MP3 file

To export the MP3 file, the LAME encoder must be installed. There are instructions about this above, under the subheading "Installing the editing software."

The following instructions assume that LAME has already been (a) installed, and (b) located for Audacity on the computer being used.

1. Save the Audacity Project file (*.aup*) one last time.
2. Check all the Audacity settings for export (see the [tutorial](#)). If the proper settings are not used, the MP3 file *will not work* in Flash or in Soundslides.

3. File menu > Export for MP3. Please PAY ATTENTION to WHERE you are saving the file and what you have NAMED it. (Inside that folder with all your *other* files for this audio project would be a very smart place to save it.)

If you have followed this plan, you now have a fine MP3 file that can be uploaded to the Web or played in QuickTime, iTunes, Windows Media Player, etc.

5. Listen to Podcasts

February 15, 2009

<http://mindymcadams.com/tojou/2009/rgmp-5-listen-to-podcasts/>

Today I'm going to encourage you to invest some time in *hearing* good audio stories—because while journalism is basically the same across all presentation and delivery platforms, *the way we tell the story* needs to be appropriate to the medium of delivery.

Radio journalism in the style of National Public Radio offers some of the best examples of how to *transport* your listeners—take them inside the story and provide for them an *experience* of the place, the situation, the people of the story.

I used to scoff at people who raved on and on about podcasts.

All the podcasts I had listened to (then) were either deadly boring, or straight-up radio (and what was *new* about *that?*). I wasted time sampling around, and I

listened to a number of dreadful podcasts produced by newspaper reporters who sounded like they were reading—with someone twisting their arm behind their back while they did it.

But gradually, I discovered some independent podcasts that I really enjoyed. I wrote about this in [an earlier post](#) and recommended these two podcasts (neither of which features journalistic stories, by the way):

- [Coffee Break Spanish](#): Learn to speak Spanish while you're drinking one latte a day.
- [SCTRCST \(Scootercast\)](#): About once a week, DaveM talks about scooters—you know, those two-wheeled vehicles that are smaller than a motorcycle and bigger than a moped.

I urge you to take note of how they are *promoted* and *archived*: You see, podcasting is not only about sitting down with a microphone and talking. For journalists who are now without a salary and a corporate home, developing a podcast (in conjunction with a blog, of course) might provide the foundation of a new freelance career.

Before I get to the radio journalism examples, I'm going to point to two other successful podcasts:

- [The Digital Story](#): Tips and techniques for digital photography, from [Derrick Story](#). My colleague Craig loves this podcast—he's a avid amateur photographer.
- [Buddhist Geeks](#): Another truly niche product—this podcast features American Buddhist teachers, writers,

and the like, being interviewed by assorted hosts; part of the [Personal Life Media](#) network, which carries a vast variety of podcast shows.

I'm not saying you should sit down today and plan a career in podcasting—but I do see podcasts as another way for journalists to build up some multimedia savvy. Particularly if you're a person who often says you're not very good with technology.

Ways to listen to podcasts (without an iPod)

Many folks think you need an iPod to listen to podcasts. NOT TRUE. Most podcast home pages have a "Listen Now" button. All you need is a decent pair of speakers connected to your computer, or headphones or earbuds. You don't have to subscribe. Just choose an episode and start listening. You don't need to download anything.

Another common misconception is that iTunes is only for iPod owners. Also not true! Anyone can download and use iTunes (free), on a Windows computer or on a Mac. [This simple guide](#) shows you how to subscribe to podcasts in iTunes—which I recommend, because it takes all the work out of the process. You set a subscription, and then, every time you open iTunes, it goes out and gets the latest episodes for you.

[This page from Apple](#) can help you answer any questions you might have about using iTunes.

One of the best times for Americans to listen to podcasts is while driving in cars. Again, people who have no iPod (or other

MP3 player) might think there is no way for them to listen to podcasts. Wrong again! You can burn an audio CD from iTunes. You don't need any equipment other than the CD player that is already in your car. Apple has [a help page](#) just for Windows users who are having trouble burning a CD.

The best radio journalism

Now that we're past the usual hurdles, let's look at how to find *great audio stories* to listen to. National Public Radio offers all its programming, plus programming from other public radio entities, via one handy online page: [NPR Podcast Directory](#). Some of the best journalistic stories can be found in [Driveway Moments](#), a title that refers to the kind of story you just can't turn off, even though you've arrived at home and are sitting in the car in your driveway.

Another source of wonderful stories is [This American Life](#). The latest episode is always free for downloading at the Web site, and you can listen there to anything from the archives (but downloading old episodes costs 95 cents each, via iTunes). If you subscribe at iTunes, you'll get every episode free and can listen whenever you have time.

For additional insights into making great audio stories, I heartily recommend the book [Sound Reporting: The NPR Guide to Audio Journalism and Production](#) (2008). Unlike the majority of journalism and reporting textbooks, it speaks to the readers as if they are already journalists, and intelligent. And it's all about the work, the journalism.

Finally, the best 17 minutes you will ever spend thinking about how we tell stories:

- [Ira Glass on Storytelling #1](#) (5:23)
- [Ira Glass on Storytelling #2](#) (4:02)
- [Ira Glass on Storytelling #3](#) (5:19)
- [Ira Glass on Storytelling #4](#) (2:46)

These are on YouTube; while Glass (host and executive producer of *This American Life*) is not talking about podcasting per se, he *is* talking frankly (and with heaps of experience) about how a journalist gathers good audio and transforms it into a real story.

And that, after all, is the magical, marvelous thing a print journalist needs to learn how to do.

6. Post an Interview (or Podcast) on Your Blog

February 17, 2009

<http://mindymcadams.com/tojou/2009/rgmp-6-post-an-interview-or-podcast-on-your-blog/>

Today I will show you how to post audio on your blog. You'll need to follow the link above to see how cool this is. Go ahead, get online and go have a peek.

Woo-hoo, can you do that? Yes, you can.

1. You'll need **an MP3 file** that you have created (do not violate copyright laws by using recorded music).
2. Upload the MP3 file to a **Web host** (more about that below, never fear).

3. Create a new blog post and embed the MP3 in a player. (a) If your blog is **at WordPress.com**, here are the [simple instructions](#) for how to do it. (b) If you have a **self-hosted** WordPress blog, install [this WP plug-in](#). (c) If your blog is somewhere else, [see this tutorial](#). (Sorry, I can't help with that.)

We covered how to record, edit, and export an MP3 audio file in the previous posts (see above).

As for hosting, well, you could store your MP3 files at WordPress.com if you paid for the privilege. But instead, for your first effort, you can upload the file to a free server. All you need is the exact URL of the MP3 file *after it is online*—on the Web server.

If you have no idea what I'm talking about, you could get started at [WebNG](#), a free Web hosting service. Here are the [details](#) about the free service. After you sign up for an account and log in, you should go to the WebNG "File Manager." (There is a button.) From there, you can upload your file directly (it's all done on the Web page). The URL of your file will be something like this:

`http://yourusername.webng.com/nameofaudiofile.mp3`

After you have uploaded the MP3 to the host, and you have the URL, you can write your blog post and embed the audio player in the post (as explained above in No. 3—a, b, or c).



7. Learn How to Shoot Decent Photos

February 19, 2009

<http://mindymcadams.com/tojou/2009/rgmp-7-learn-how-to-shoot-decent-photos/>

Today I will explain how you can improve your photojournalism skills (assuming you're not *already* a photojournalist, in which case you know more than I do).

Every journalist should be able to capture a decent photo in a breaking news situation. You might be the only journalist on the scene. Sure, today it's likely that 100 people with cell-phone cameras will be on the scene too—but why shouldn't YOU be the one who captures the Page One image that gets picked up by Reuters or AFP and zapped around the world?

Being able to capture good images will expand your skill set in four ways:

1. You can combine your good photos with audio and produce slideshows. (Some clients will pay a freelancer big bucks for these.)
2. Practicing to obtain good still images will make you a better video shooter. It's faster and easier to learn good composition while shooting stills.
3. You will gain new perspectives on your stories. Developing your eye to seek out a good image will also lead you to aspects of the story that you might have missed, in the past.

4. Working to get a good set of photos from a story will make you a better partner when you work with a photojournalist. Your appreciation for what he or she does will enhance your cooperation—resulting in a better story package.

Your camera

I've written about the benefits of a relatively inexpensive point-and-shoot before. You do not need a large, expensive camera to capture great images. Most photojournalists will tell you, in fact, that the camera does not matter. It's the *person* who gets a great shot—not the *device*. Of course, a totally blurry or completely dark shot is worthless. But most of an amateur's clear, sharp, well-lighted shots are *also* worthless, because they are poorly composed (more on that below).

You cannot *get the shot* if your camera is at home. One of the benefits of a point-and-shoot is that you can have it with you at all times. Make sure you do. Don't leave home without it!

RTFM (read the manual): The auto mode will work nicely, yes. But you can vastly improve your chances of getting a good, clear shot in all kinds of lighting conditions if you learn how your camera works *in manual mode*. Many of these point-and-shoots have three different groups of settings that affect lighting and speed of movement:

- Named conditions such as "Beach," "Snow," and "Night"
- ISO—e.g., 100, 200, 400, 800

- Lighting types, such as sun, cloud, incandescent, fluorescent

To learn how to use these modes, EXPERIMENT. Use the camera's manual to figure out how to set them, and then go out into the world and *use* them. Take 500 pictures at your kid's next basketball game. (DO NOT use flash!) You'll learn a lot about what your camera can do.

If you're going to buy a new camera, I have some suitable models linked [here](#). Check the manufacturer's specs and make sure the camera meets or exceeds these:

- 7 megapixels or better
- Image stabilization (essential)
- Video at 640 x 480 at 30 fps (absolutely essential); video must include audio
- 3x OPTICAL zoom or better
- USB 2 output

Make sure also to buy a 2 GB (gigabyte) high-speed SD card, or larger.

What to teach yourself

Putting the subject of the photo smack in the *center* of the photo—every amateur does it. Professional photographers almost *never* do it. So the first and biggest step to improving your images is to learn about *composition*. Here are seven simple lessons:

1. [Introduction](#)
2. [Simplicity](#)
3. [Rule of Thirds](#)
4. [Lines](#)
5. [Balance](#)
6. [Framing](#)
7. [Avoiding Mergers](#)

It's all about WHERE you stand and WHEN you push the button. Just about every photojournalist will tell you that. What separates the greats from the wannabes is that the great ones *know how to figure out* where to stand, and almost by instinct (but really, it's just a matter of practice, practice, practice), they *know* when to push the button.

The tutorial site Digital Photography School has various [clear tutorials for shooting in specific situations](#), such as "[Tips for Better Candid Photography](#)" and "[How to Photograph in Direct Sunlight](#)."

Learn from examples

You owe it to yourself to get an education in photojournalism. I think it will be one of the most enjoyable investments you'll ever make in your career. Here are my favorite sources of good examples we can study:

- MSNBC's [The Week in Pictures](#)—a new set of about 10 pictures each week, selected by awesomely talented photo editors
- [Magnum Photos](#)—a wide variety of photojournalism stories and photographers, free to view online
- *Photojournalism: The Professionals' Approach*, 5th edition. Focal Press. \$8 and up (used), by Ken Kobré (2004). There is a newer edition, but the old one is quite cheap, and packed with fantastic examples and advice. See [Amazon.com](#) for used copies.

Practice, practice, practice

I will get to video later in this series, but before I do, you really ought to work on your basic visual skills with some serious practice in still photography.

Shoot lots of photos of EACH thing you think is worth shooting. Since photojournalism is real life and not posed, your subjects will be moving and changing. Part of the trick to getting a good shot is to shoot *waay* more pictures than you ever did on your summer vacation. Move up, move down, move left and right. Stand on a chair. Lie down on the floor. Shoot medium, close, and super-close. Get extra close-up detail shots (these work great in audio slideshows).

If you bring back 10 to 20 photos of one single person, action, dog, bicycle, etc., the chances are that ONE of those images will actually be quite good!

I tell students always to take at least 10 shots of each subject they are shooting. The longer you stand there, clicking the shutter, the more likely people are to ignore you. Then they relax and act naturally. Click! That's your shot.

8. Learn How to Crop, Tone, and Optimize Photos

February 22, 2009

<http://mindymcadams.com/tojou/2009/rgmp-8-learn-how-to-crop-tone-and-optimize-photos/>

Today I will discuss basic photo editing for online use. We don't handle photos

exactly the same way for print and for online.

First, I need to point out that Photoshop is the industry standard for photo editing. If you're a journalism student, you *must* learn to use Photoshop. Even if you do not own it (and it's damned expensive, even with the education pricing), you need to haul your butt into a computer lab and learn it. The good news is, you *don't* have to learn all the million and one things Photoshop can do. I always say that photojournalists know more about what Photoshop can do than I will *ever* know—because it's their primary software tool, and they use it every day.

That said, it *is* possible to perform basic photo editing tasks with other software. I'm going to discuss Picasa below; it's a free program from Google ([see information](#)) that's available for Windows, Mac, and Linux. Another good option is [Gimpshop](#), which works very much like Photoshop but is completely and legally free ([background](#): Wikipedia). It also works on Windows, Mac, and Linux.

5 things you should know how to do

(1) Cropping: This is cutting around the best part of the photo and throwing the rest away. In most software applications, there is a tool called the Crop tool. You select it, click and drag, and thereby make a rectangle within the larger rectangle of your photograph. Then you double-click (usually), and the outer part is eliminated. Professionals don't have to crop every picture—they tend to get exactly what should be in the frame!

Here's a good tutorial about [using the Crop tool in Photoshop](#).

(2) Toning: Sometimes the image is too green, too red, too bright, or too dark. Our ethics as journalists require us to represent reality as accurately as possible, but you know the scene you photographed wasn't really that green or that dark—the camera made it that way. In most photo editing programs, we can make adjustments to the image to shift it back closer to the real thing. Most people know about contrast and brightness controls in these applications—but you'll get much better results if you learn how “levels” work in Photoshop.

Here's a good tutorial about [adjusting the color and tone of a photo](#). It's pretty sophisticated, but it will help you understand how to use levels in Photoshop.

This tutorial explains [how to dodge and burn](#), another aspect of correcting a photo. You need to use these tools *with great care* in photojournalism so that you don't substantially change the image as it really was.

And just so you *understand the ethics* of editing journalistic photos: Here's the [Code of Ethics](#) of the National Press Photographers Association.

(3) Resizing: A photograph from a 7-megapixel camera might have print dimensions of, say, 10 inches by 8 inches. But inches mean *nothing* online. What you need to see are the width and height in *pixels*. Pixels will determine whether the image will fit neatly on a Web page. Generally you cannot use a photo wider than 1,000 pixels—that reflects the majority of Web users and their computer

screen resolution. Before you change the dimensions in pixels, you will need to change the image resolution itself. Print resolution might be 180, 300, or even 600. Online screen resolution is 72 ppi (pixels/inch).

After selecting the correct resolution (72 pixels/inch), change the width (for horizontally oriented photos) *or* height (for vertically oriented photos) of the image. Maximum width: 1,000 pixels. Maximum height: 550 pixels.

Here's a good tutorial about [resizing correctly in Photoshop](#).

(4) Sharpening: After you have resized an image—and *only* after you have resized!—you might see that it seems a bit less distinct and sharp than you would like. Most photo editing programs have a filter or dialog box that allows you to improve the sharpness of the image. This effect can be badly misused—it can make the photo look quite unnatural! But used properly, the sharpening filters can really improve a photo.

Here's a good tutorial about [Photoshop sharpening effects](#). (Note that two other good options in Photoshop are the Unsharp Mask and Smart Sharpen.)

(5) Saving in optimized format: The file format for photos online is JPG (that means the file extension is *.jpg*). But saving as a JPG alone is not enough. The JPG can be saved at maximum, high, or medium quality. The resulting file size will be larger for higher quality. The trade-off is often not visible to the average Web user (that is, the photo looks no worse at medium quality), but the savings in file size—and thus the download time for the whole Web page—

can be huge if you choose *medium* instead of high or maximum.

Usually (but not always) we use Photoshop's "Save for Web" option when we have a photo destined for online. (The one exception is if we want to preserve caption, credit and copyright information embedded in the JPG file itself.*) The reason that "Save for Web" spawns a much smaller file size than simply saving a JPG is that "Save for Web" deletes everything *except* the image data. This is what we want for most Web images.

If you're going to use your photos in a slideshow application, such as Soundslides, you need to *keep* that textual data. Your photo file sizes will be larger if you do. For example, "Save for Web" might produce a 40 KB file, and simply saving the JPG directly might produce a 120 KB file—from the same photo, with the same width and height in pixels. This can add up to a lot of *unnecessary download weight* on a page displaying 20 thumbnail images, for example.

Here's some information from Adobe about ["Save for Web" in Photoshop](#).

Using Picasa

Picasa provides only simple editing tools, but they will get the job done, and they are insanely easy to use. In addition, Picasa gives you a non-invasive way to manage all the images AND videos on your computer. That is, it provides an automated organizing system that does

* Open the Photoshop File menu and select "File Info" to see this information. You'll get a dialog box where you can view, add and edit data about the photo: author, description (caption), copyright information, and more.

not change where you have saved your photos or how you have named or arranged them. (I have more than 3,000 photos on my MacBook, and Picasa catalogued all of them in about 15 minutes!)

You can download Picasa [from this page](#). There is a good introductory video [for Windows users](#) (5:02) and another one [for Mac users](#) (2:29). The Mac video explains why you might prefer Picasa over iPhoto (I won't use iPhoto; it's quite annoying, in my opinion).

Managing photos

You want to make sure that you *never overwrite* your original photo file after editing. Why? Well, the edited version for the Web will be smaller and not suitable for printing, for one thing. *What's gone is gone*. So I suggest you take care to "Save As" at the beginning, when you first start to edit a photo. That will create a *new copy*, leaving the original untouched. (Picasa has an "Export" button; using it gives you the option to resize the photo by choosing a width, in pixels. The optimized photo is then stored in a new folder created by Picasa, preserving your original.)

Another wise practice is having a master system for storing your photos. Even if you use Picasa or another photo manager, the way you keep the photos on your hard drive can make it easy (or hard) to back up photos for safekeeping and to find images you want months or years after you have saved them.

Although some of my photo folders have names as bland as "February 2009," I try to always make *specifically named* folders

for travel, conferences, holidays, events, and so on. There's no need to rename individual photos—just stash them in appropriately named folders on your hard drive.

Finally, cull your photos—but do it wisely. Professional photojournalists delete a large number of pictures from the camera before they even upload to a computer. I don't do that; I just upload everything, because I don't typically shoot hundreds of photos in a day like the pros do. But I do take the time to delete the absolute losers after I have uploaded.

9. Add Photos to Your Blog

February 27, 2009

<http://mindymcadams.com/tojou/2009/rgmp-9-add-photos-to-your-blog/>

Now that you have some practice editing photos, it's time to post a few on your blog ([see RGMP 2](#)). Most blogging platforms (e.g., WordPress, Blogger, TypePad—curious about the most popular platform? [Read this](#)) make it dead easy to insert a photo.

So, what's to learn? First, you'll need to learn how to insert a photo on your own blog. In most blogging platforms, you'll find a small button or icon above the big area where you write your post. In WordPress, for example, you'll see the words "Upload/Insert," and immediately to the right of those words, you'll roll over a little rectangle and see a tool tip pop up: "Add an Image."

The next step involves a choice: Will you upload a photo from your own computer,

or will you paste in a URL for a photo that is already online somewhere?

You might choose to upload an image from your computer as the easiest way to get this done. But consider: Where is that photo being uploaded? Who controls the storage of that photo file? And if someday in the future you want to move your blog to a new platform, or simply to a new URL, what will happen to all the photos appearing on your original blog? These questions are especially important for photojournalists.

So, I suggest that you *take control* of your online photo storage and upload your photos to a Web space that you can control. Among many options, my suggestion is for you to [make an account on Flickr](#); you can upload photos, write captions, and organize them in a free account, or gain additional options for an annual subscription fee. If you're logged in to Flickr, go to one of your individual photo pages and click the link to "All Sizes" above a photo ([see example](#)). You'll go to a page that provides a link directly to the photo—not the Web page that contains the photo.

To link to this photo on other websites you can either

1. Copy and paste this HTML into your webpage:

```
<a href="http://www.flickr.com/photos/macloo/58391513_9225feb9e7_o.jpg" title="Street by macloo, on Flickr"></a>
```

2. Grab the photo's URL:

http://farm1.static.flickr.com/32/58391513_9225feb9e7_o.jpg

Remember! [Flickr Community Guidelines](#) specify that if you post a Flickr website, the photo must link back to its photo page. (So, use Option 1.)

You need to have that URL that points directly to the photo file—see No. 2 in the

illustration above. The filename will end with *.jpg* because that is the photo file format.

If you have Web server space (with a hosting service), of course you can just FTP your photos to that space and thereby control your URLs as well. (Curious about Web hosting options? [Read this.](#)) But if you want to stick with free stuff, I think Flickr is your best option for online photo management.

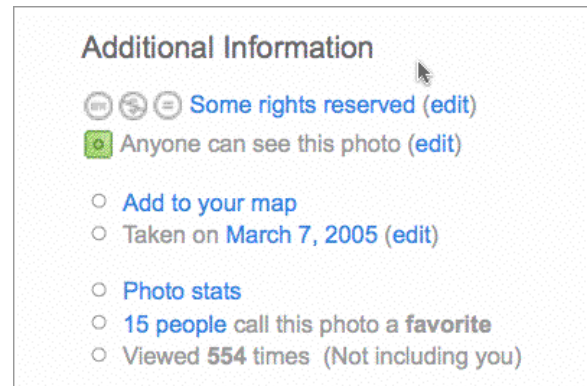
An important word about using other people's photos

U.S. copyright law does apply to ALL IMAGES you see on the Web, on any Web page. So it is absolutely NOT okay to copy an image (photo or otherwise) from somewhere online and use it in your blog. It is still NOT okay if you add a link to the original and/or a photo credit line. Those do NOT constitute *permission* from the owner of the photo.

In fact, the [U.S. Copyright Office bluntly says](#): “Acknowledging the source of the copyrighted material does not substitute for obtaining permission.”

The image does NOT need to have a copyright symbol or a copyright notice to enjoy this protection. All published works are automatically protected by this law—and that includes ALL images online.

Some people have chosen to allow limited use of their Web-published work—that is, they have given you permission *in advance*. They do this by posting [a Creative Commons license](#); on Flickr, for example, you'll see this link below the tags on the right side of an individual photo page:



If someone has attached a Creative Commons license to an image online, then you are allowed to use it *in the manner specified* by the license. There are different types of Creative Commons licenses—some allow you to remix the material, for example, and some forbid it.

Linking photos on your blog

In the dialog box where you upload your photo or paste the URL to the photo file (in the blogging system), you'll most likely find an option to provide a link URL. This is different from the photo URL.

The photo URL tells the blog system *where your photo file resides*, online. The link URL indicates *a Web page that will open* when the user clicks your photo in the blog post. Obviously, the photo can be linked to something related to the photo. If you use someone else's image, it's polite (and proper) to provide a link to the original page where that photo appears; see the example of this [on my original blog post](#).

However, as demonstrated by the first two images in my original blog post, you do not *need* to link an image.

So, when *should* you link the image, and when should you *not* link it? I think

there's a clear logic to linking in most cases. First, it's *always* good to link to the original source. Second, if you've captured a zoomed-in detail, it's really appropriate to link to the full image. Third, if there's more information about the content of the image, or the photographer, it's probably appropriate to link to that.

In short, if you can think of a good reason to link the photo to another Web page, do it. But always make sure your "good reason" is adding something for the benefit of the user, the viewer of your blog post. Don't add a link that would confuse or annoy the users.

10. Learn to Use Soundslides

March 2, 2009

<http://mindymcadams.com/tojou/2009/rgmp-10-learn-to-use-soundslides/>

In this post I'm going to introduce you to Soundslides, an inexpensive (not free) program for creating audio slideshows on Windows or Mac computers.

Please do not think Soundslides will take a long time to learn. It will not. It's much, much easier than you probably imagine. Can you find a spare hour, or maybe 90 minutes? That's enough. Try it. You'll see.

Your first step will be to go to the [Soundslides](#) site and download one of the versions of this program. On the left side of the page, you'll see four download links: Soundslides Plus: (1) Mac, (2) Windows. Regular Soundslides: (3) Mac, (4) Windows. Choose one and click to download. It will function normally as soon as you install it; you can buy it later.

At the bottom of that page, you can read "Which edition is right for me?" to help you decide between Plus and regular.

Soundslides does not produce video files, and you cannot import video into Soundslides. It is a simple tool that builds simple audio slideshows. That's all. But that's actually quite a lot—especially because Soundslides is almost ridiculously simple to use.

Before you begin

Soundslides cannot be used to edit photos ([see RGMP 8](#)), and it cannot be used to edit audio ([see RGMP 4](#)). This means you will need to have your photos selected *and edited* before you begin to work in Soundslides. You will also need to have a final, finished MP3 file with [the correct audio settings](#) before you begin to work in Soundslides.

- Have all your **photos** for the slideshow cropped, rotated, toned, and stored in **one folder** *with no other photos*. They must be in the JPG file format. (You cannot edit the photos inside Soundslides.)
- Have your finalized **MP3 file**. (You cannot edit the audio inside Soundslides.)

Note that the **length** of your MP3 file will determine the length of your slideshow. This is part of what makes Soundslides such a simple tool. If your audio lasts 1 minute and 25 seconds, then that's how long your slideshow will be.

Another thing to consider is whether you have too many photos, or not enough, to match the length of your audio. A very

good rule of thumb for audio slideshows is *about* 5 seconds per image. You can change this while working within Soundslides, but using this guideline helps you decide how many photos you will need to edit (if you know the length of your audio), or how long to make the audio—if you have very few photos, for example.

A 60-second slideshow needs about 12 photos, and a 2-minute slideshow needs about 24 photos. (If you have too few photos, the viewers will get bored!) You do not need to be overly rigid about the 5-second rule, but do be aware that after 6 or 7 seconds on one single image, the viewer is likely to lose interest and quit. To the other extreme, seeing the photos flash past too quickly is also unsatisfying for people watching your slideshow.

Get started now

If you have an MP3 and a dozen or more photos (make sure the photos are isolated in one folder), you're ready to go.

1. Launch Soundslides and name your new project (more about this below!).
2. Select the "Custom" option: Choose the width and height of the slideshow based on the size of *your* photos.
3. Import your photos (click the big JPG button, and then show Soundslides that folder containing your photos).
4. Import your audio file (click the big SND button, and then show Soundslides the location of your MP3).

And now, you're ready to put the photos into an order that matches your audio.

Just drag and drop the thumbnails on the right side to change the line-up. Use the player controls at bottom left to review the results. Click the Save button at bottom right often, to save your work.

To alter the timing of any photo, go to the timeline at the bottom of the window. Use the mouse to grab the border line between two photos. Drag the line left or right to make a photo visible for more or less time. (Wider thumbnail: more time. Narrower thumbnail: less time.) **Save** and **Test** (buttons, bottom right) to see the results.

Captions, credit information, and headlines

These are all controlled via the tabs at top right in the Soundslides application window.

- To write captions for each photo, click the **Slide Info** tab. The Back and Next buttons let you move to each one of your photos so you can write cutlines.
- To write a headline for the slideshow, and/or to include credit information, click the **Project Info** tab.
- To return to editing the slideshow image order and timing, click the **Slides** tab.

Publishing your slideshow on the Web

At the Soundslides site, see [Uploading a slide show to a Web server using an FTP client](#). I know, I know—some of you have never seen the abbreviation *FTP* before in your life. Don't panic. It stands for *file transfer protocol*, and really, it just means



“upload.” The Soundslides manual recommends an FTP program called FileZilla; I prefer FireFTP (see [tutorial](#)), but it really makes no difference which one you use.

If you work for an organization that has a separate Web production staff (or person), you can simply copy the *publish_to_web* folder that Soundslides generates and give it to the Web producer, who will upload it for you. However, if the Web producer has been living in a cave for five years and has never heard of Soundslides, you’ll need to emphasize to him or her that the *entire folder* needs to be uploaded. The folder *can* be renamed, but *nothing* inside the folder should be touched. (One exception: The *index.html* file can be edited or replaced by someone who knows HTML.) Some smarty-pants Web folks will upload only one file from inside the folder, but that will not work!

There’s a lot more information about how to upload (publish) your slideshow at the Soundslides site: [Publishing](#).

Tips for keeping your work safe and organized

- Name and save the “project folder” carefully. Know where you saved it, and what name you gave it.
- Don’t forget to save AND export the Soundslides.
- The *publish_to_web* folder must be uploaded to the Web in its entirety.
- KEEP the **PROJECT FOLDER INTACT** in case you need to make changes to the slideshow later. If all you have is the *publish_to_web* folder, you cannot edit the slideshow.

Adding or deleting photos after the initial import: This can be done (**Slides** tab: click +Add Image, or drag to Bin, lower right), but if you have *already adjusted the timing* of any images, this change will alter that timing, and you'll have to adjust everything again. It's adding extra work for yourself. So it's really *best* to have your exact set of photos chosen in advance.

Changing the audio: You can replace the audio file you imported with a different one (or an updated one)—click the **Audio** tab, and you'll see how. But like adding or deleting photos after the initial import, replacing the audio file with a new one is going to disrupt any timing changes you have made and add extra work for you.

See the Soundslides [Forums](#) for tips, help, and examples. The [Soundslides user manual](#) is online.

Soundslides uses the [Flash player](#), which is a Web browser plug-in that most Internet users already have. In other words, most people will not need to download anything to view your slideshow on the Web.

There are many examples of elaborate, cinematic Soundslides online, but even a print reporter can combine an interview and some on-the-scene photos to produce a story with both audio and images. [In this example](#), I happened to be present when an American writer was signing copies of his book, freshly translated, for Vietnamese journalists. I shot a lot of pictures at the signing and then interviewed the writer the next day about the subject of his book. (Note that you can hide and show captions using the link below the image, on the right. You can also pause the slideshow at will.)

11. Tell a Good Story with Images and Sound

March 18, 2009

<http://mindymcadams.com/tojou/2009/rgmp-11-tell-a-good-story-with-images-and-sound/>

I was going to title this “Produce a feature story with Soundslides, using an interview and natural sound,” but that seemed a tad too long. Besides, it doesn't necessarily require the Soundslides application (although I am going to frame this in terms of a slideshow, rather than video).

Chuck Fadely of the Miami Herald was dead right in his earlier [comment](#) when he said: “The goal should be to learn to tell stories visually, with audio that complements the images, edited with a pace and rhythm appropriate for the piece. Dumping a folder of pictures over top of some bad audio does no one any good.”

In this post I'm going to talk about how to ensure you have a story that's *worth telling in this manner*—with photos and audio—and how to construct it, story-wise, to make it communicate effectively.

What do you intend to communicate?

This might be the most common mistake that journalists make: Often we give little or no thought to this question and its answer.

Much of the time, we go out and cover an event, and then our (text) story is simply

what happened and **who was there**. In the time-honored tradition of humans telling stories to one another, this is at the low end of the scale—unless the event was, say, the Battle of Troy (which was rather more exciting than the average charity fund-raiser).

If you want to tell a story with photos and sound **about an event**, what do you want to communicate? In addition to what happened and who was there, you should be trying to convey **a sense of the experience**. If it was a party, we need to **hear** the music, the glasses clinking, the murmur of voices, the laughter. We need to **see** dancing, if there was dancing, and people having fun. Or people looking bored. It's got to be more than a set of society-page candids that show people standing around, all shot from the same distance. (See an example, from a beauty pageant: [Bellezas Hispanas](#).)

If the event was so mundane that your photos show only people just sitting and staring, or talking (for example, at a panel discussion), then I suggest you abandon the idea of doing a slideshow about that. It's just too boring. You can *write that story* in a more interesting way and forgo the multimedia.

A typical type of feature story tells us about a person and something interesting (or unusual; same thing) that he or she does. Collecting old postage stamps: Not a lot of action or emotion there, but perhaps the stamps are quite various and cool-looking, and they would make good visual material for a slideshow for that reason. A more likely candidate story would be about a person who performs some kind of **activity**—builds custom motorcycles, creates stained-glass windows, works with animals, etc.

What do you want to communicate? The stamps really are interesting—if you look at them super-closely. The guy building the motorcycles does it because he loves to see his customers get exactly what they dreamed of. The stained-glass artist has a passion for light and color. The animal rescue worker talks to each dog and cat as if it were a person who could answer back.

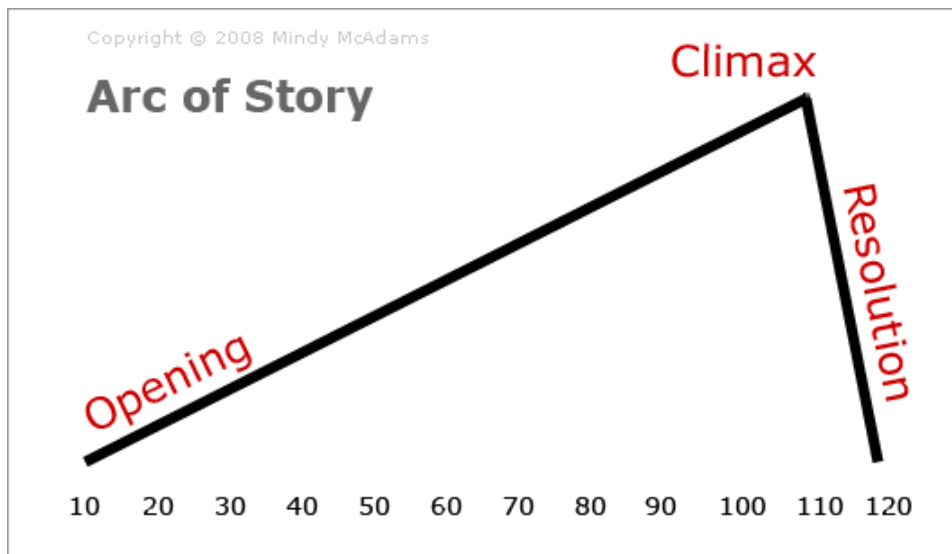
You need to ensure that you *do* communicate the most interesting aspect, the thing that *sets this story apart*.

If you went out to do the custom motorcycle story thinking, “Motorcycles will make nice pictures,” that’s okay. But if all you got in the interview and photos was pretty motorcycles ... well, you don’t have a story. And if you got the guy on your audio saying, “What really keeps me doing this is the way someone’s face lights up when he sits on his custom for the first time,” but you *didn’t* get any pictures of that moment—when the buyer’s face is aglow with happiness—then you don’t have a slideshow.

You can easily get dozens of pictures of the animal rescue worker romping with the cats and dogs, but that’s *not enough*. You need to walk with her, with your microphone, while she’s doing her everyday job. You need to become *invisible* with the mic and stay with her *long enough* so that she forgets about you and slips into her routine. That’s when she’ll start having her conversations with the animals. That’s when you’ll capture the audio that will communicate the real story.

Opening and closing

Most multimedia stories run about two minutes, maybe two and a half. Limiting yourself to that length imposes discipline. Not only do you need to know what you intend to communicate; you also need to ruthlessly cut away anything that does not advance the story. Keep it simple. Don't try to do more than one thing in two minutes.



A few years ago, my friend Regina McCombs told me that once she knew what her **open** and her **close** were for a story, the rest was easy. Her approach was informed by 10 years of TV news experience, translated to the online audio slideshow. Since then I've seen many, many proofs that she was correct.

When I'm watching a slideshow that starts out strong and clear, I'm hooked immediately. If it wanders or fumbles, loses its way, I quit in the middle. But if it follows a straight track to the conclusion, I'll stick with it.

To create this straight, clear path, *you've got to have your ending firmly in mind.*

You have to know *exactly* what the closing is before you edit the rest of the material for the slideshow.

The ending can either wreck the story or take it to a sublime level. Sometimes the ending trickles out to nothing. Sometimes the story seems to be cut off too suddenly, or arbitrarily. A solid, satisfying ending has two parts. They can be called the climax and the resolution, and even

though that sounds a bit overblown for a two-minute story. I think you'll tell a *better* story if you think of the ending in those terms.

The **climax** is the destination, the place you're taking the audience, in a straight line from the opening. It will come near the end

of the story, but afterward, you also need to provide *closure*. Make it feel *complete*. That's the **resolution**. It's the cherry on top of an ice cream sundae.

One of my favorite examples is [Guitar Lessons at the Central Area Senior Center](#). This is a very simple story about some elderly women who are taking guitar lessons. The opening is strong and clear—we **hear** a guitar playing and we **see** an old woman with a guitar case getting into her car. Then she says she's always been interested in music, but she was too busy to learn to play an instrument.

At the climax of this story, one of the women says, "We're not just sitting home watching TV," and another says, "It's the

best life, after retirement.” We see one woman smiling broadly, playing her guitar in the class. After that, the resolution: We hear the guitar students sing the line “I’m back in the saddle again,” and then we hear a delighted laugh from one of the women. We see two of students getting into their car to go home. It’s gentle and happy, in keeping with the overall tone and mood of the story.

The middle carries us cleanly and simply from the open to the climax. We see the various students in the class. We hear them playing and singing together. They tell us why they are in the class. Their young teacher tells us why he teaches the class. We see their sheet music, and we see them pay their fees.

The middle expands the story, but it’s really quite inevitable if you have decided on both your opening and your closing.

The technical bits

Gathering the assets for a slideshow takes time. You have to hang around the scene long enough to shoot about 200 photos (or more). You need to shoot *a lot of* variety (distance, angle, and subject), including a heck of a lot more detail (extreme close-ups) than you ever would for print.

While the quantity of photos gathered tends toward excess, the quantity of audio should go in the opposite direction. I suggest that you consider the normal interview as a kind of dress rehearsal for the “real” interview—the one from which you will draw the audio content. Decide what you intend to communicate, start recording a fresh file, and *re-ask* the

questions that will tell the story in the slideshow. Don’t *ever* tell the subject what to say or how to say it—but you *can* explain that you will now ask some questions a second time so that you can record for the slideshow.

If you record too much audio, you make a ton of extra work for yourself. When I wanted to make a slideshow about a group of newspaper reporters in a video training workshop, I wanted to interview six people (about one-third of the group). I knew the final slideshow would last about two minutes (in fact, [it’s 2 min. 17 sec.](#)). Divide 120 seconds by six interviews, and you realize you’ll use no more than 30 seconds from each interview. So I decided on two questions to ask each of my six subjects, and that made the audio really easy to edit. I gathered about 25 minutes of audio in six interviews.

Gather as much natural sound as possible. Make sure to get at least one minute of the “silent” room (it’s never actually silent) to use as needed while you are editing. Record any natural sound that relates directly to the story—including your interview subject talking *apart from* the interview (e.g., the motorcycle builder chatting with his customers).

When you sit down to edit, be patient. Accept that this is a repetitive process. You can start with either the audio or the photos, but you’re going to go through each set of assets more than once. Decide on the open and the close first. Choose the sound and the images for one, making sure they pair together well. Then choose the sound and images for the other. (Sometimes your close is more obvious to you than the open; sometimes it’s the other way around.)

A key element in building the middle of the story (connecting the open to the close) is choosing pictures with *a good mix* of various angles and distances. Photojournalists call this *spacing*. It doesn't mean time (fast or slow) in the sense that a slideshow lasts two minutes, and some photos may be seen for four seconds, others for two, others for five, etc. Spacing means a kind of balance between tight, medium, and wide shots, as well as subject matter. Too many medium shots makes the spacing poor. Too many shots that are similar in composition—also poor. Any kind of *redundancy* cultivates boredom in the viewers, so it's best to avoid it—scrupulously.

One of the best how-to articles ever written about producing audio slideshows is Colin Mulvaney's [How to make your audio slideshows better](#).

Use of music

It's easy to use music to cover up the lack of audio you should have gathered, but didn't. It's a lazy option, often used by people who don't care enough to conduct interviews and do real reporting. In many cases, music in a slideshow plays on our emotions in a way I would say is distinctly un-journalistic. For that reason, I'd advise *against* using music, unless your story is about people playing music or dancing.

Use of narration

Narration can be wonderful, but only if it's both well-written and well-voiced. Few things are more boring to hear than a reporter obviously reading from a page. If you can allow the subjects to tell their own story, do it.

Use of title cards

You can insert cinematic-style titles (and credits) into a Soundslides simply by making a new JPG in Photoshop. These can be used at any point in the slideshow, not just at the beginning and end. (For examples, see my slideshow about [an author book-signing in Hanoi](#).) Make sure the JPGs are exactly the dimensions you selected for the images so that the text is not distorted.

Captions

While many viewers will not look at the captions in an audio slideshow, *those who do* will expect to find correct, factual information in the captions—not just a repeat of what they already saw in the photo (that's a lazy reporter's caption). As in a newspaper, people in photos should be accurately identified by first and last name, as well as some other identifying information, such as hometown or profession. Every person who is *prominent* in a photo should be fully identified in the caption.

Date and location

I am amazed by how many audio slideshows at newspaper Web sites have no information about the date or the location (town/city, state) of the events depicted. If they do include a date, it is often lacking the year. Come on, folks—this is not a birdcage liner! It's the Internet! That slideshow is going to be online for a long time, so plug in some context, please.

12. Learn to Shoot Video

April 9, 2009

<http://mindymcadams.com/tojou/2009/rgmp-12-learn-to-shoot-video/>

In the previous post, I wrote about how to ensure that you have a story *worth telling* with photos and audio, and how to construct it, story-wise, to make it communicate effectively. In this post I'll discuss how to translate those principles to video, and I'll also go over shooting techniques for Web video.

First, let's consider the story. Do you in fact *have* a story? It seems to me that a lot of journalism students (and even a surprising number of working journalists) wouldn't know an interesting story if it fell on their head.

A Web video is not going to be interesting if it merely relates facts or information. The inverted pyramid (text) or news bulletin (radio and TV) are not *story* forms—even though in journalism, we call *everything* “a story.”

So make yourself remember what a story really is: Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, Harry Potter, Star Wars, Aladdin and his lamp, the tortoise and the hare, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. A story is not a mere relaying of facts—that's a report, not a story.

Finding a story

What I learned [from Ken Speake](#), who worked in TV news for almost 40 years, was that a reporter who follows his curiosity can find interesting stories

everywhere. Ken has a way of seeing the world almost like a child—you know how little kids are always asking “Why?” They can drive you crazy—they ask about the most mundane things. How does it work? Why does it look like that? What does it do? Why is that man on a ladder? How did it get here? Where did that come from?

These questions can lead us into back alleys and backrooms, behind the scenes, into people's hearts and into the hidden places in their souls. I would suggest that those places are where stories live, and you have to *go there* to find them.

To go there, you have to be curious—and you have to care. No one ever opens up the door to his inner sanctum if you're sticking a camera in his face and pummeling him with questions.

Cultivate the ability to recognize a story

Last year a few of my students went to a tattoo parlor to make a story for an audio slideshow, and they missed a great chance to tell a *fresh* story. As all you journalism educators know, tattoo parlors are a favorite spot for students to go, seeking a story. Usually they don't find one—they bring back a very dull interview with the owner of the shop, who tells us about his customers and shows us some of his designs. Yawn!

Why is that a boring non-story? *There's no hook*. There's nothing unusual, nothing we can't assume ahead of time. The interview lacks an emotional connection, [what Ira Glass calls](#) the “moment of reflection.” This is the *reason* for the story. This is what makes a story *a story*.

At the time when my students were inside the tattoo parlor, an 18-year-old girl was getting her first tattoo. The students brought back some nice photos of her tattoo in progress. They did a brief interview with her too. She said her dad had come to the same tattoo parlor a while back to get a tattoo, and she had watched. This was part of what made her want to get a tattoo herself.

My students had a photo of the dad chatting with one of the tattoo artists in the shop. “Did you interview the dad?” I asked. No. “Did you get a shot of his tattoo?” No. “Did you ask him to show you his tattoo?” No.

Like I said, some folks wouldn’t know an interesting story if it fell on their head.

But wait, there’s more. I was looking through their photos, and I saw one where the 18-year-old is on the table, the tattoo guy is leaning over her with the needle, and a 40-something woman is watching. “Who’s that woman?” I asked.

“Oh, that’s her mom.”

“The girl’s mom?” I squeaked. “Did you interview her?”

No.

I’ll never tell my students they can’t go to a tattoo parlor to look for a story—there are fascinating stories in there, and maybe some student will find one, one of these days. But if you don’t approach the scene and the people there with genuine curiosity, and a willingness to discover *something unexpected*, you will fail to see the story that’s right in front of you.

Look for visually interesting material

When [I took a four-day video workshop](#) with Michael Rosenblum in 2007, he told us something that I have heard many print photojournalists say as well: First go in without your camera.

Walk around and *look*, with just your eyes. Talk to people. Ask questions. Don’t record anything, don’t stick a microphone in anyone’s face. You might take some handwritten notes about what you see or what you learn, but that’s all. What you’re looking for is the action and activity that will make *interesting video images*. Remember, this is not breaking news—this is a story. People will be doing these things later; it’s not a one-time action that you are going to miss without your camera.

Talk to people as much as possible, and ask a lot of “Why?” and “How?” questions. This is not the interview for tape. This is your legwork. This is the foundation of your story.

Before you go back to the car to get your camera, or take it out of the bag, you need to know what the story is.

Don’t expect the camera to find the story for you. It won’t.

Shoot first, interview after

I also learned this from Rosenblum, and I find that it runs against the grain for most TV reporters and many print journalists who have learned to shoot video. To me, however, the logic is simple: If you first shoot what’s interesting, then you’ll ask questions about it later in the interview. If

you interview first, you're likely to only go around "shooting to cover"—that is, you will point your camera at stuff your interview subject spoke about.

But your interview subject speaks about *what you ask questions about*.

If you allow your curiosity to be your true guide, you are more likely to ask unexpected questions—and thus to get interesting, revealing answers. If you have gathered the visuals with an innocent eye, an uninformed eye—the eye of a curious child who always asks "Why?"—you are more likely to have a fresh story, a memorable story, a story that's worth watching.

Say you shot some footage of a boy at the farmers market, sitting on the ground behind the sales table, trimming the broccoli stalks with a knife. Then you interview his mom, who's standing at the table, selling the vegetables. Knowing that you have some nice shots of the boy, you're sure to ask about him. If you have no shots of him, you're likely to be focused on just the woman and the table.

I've seen a dozen or more very boring stories about local farmers markets, where all I hear is completely expected stuff about being a farmer, coming to the market, selling produce. There's no point in doing those stories if everything the audience sees and hears is *exactly* what they can already see and hear when they call up their own past impressions of and assumptions about farmers.

Shoot action, emotion, and the third thing

The boy trimming broccoli stalks is action, activity. The woman standing at the table is not. Even when she's selling, bagging vegetables, and taking cash from a customer, that's pretty damned dull.

I recently saw some student footage of a woman choosing a cantaloupe in a supermarket. It was actually pretty interesting, because the camera position was very close to her hands as she wrapped them around one cantaloupe and then another. It was close to her face as she held a melon up to her ear and shook it a little. Then there was a high shot from behind her that gave us a good view of the array of piled-high cantaloupes. She appeared to be rather intent on her task too. Not bad.

I got this handy trio of *things that work well* in video [from Angela Grant](#), who shot video for a newspaper in Texas for several years. She called them "lots of movement and action"; emotion; and "something people just want to see." I like to call them "action or activity"; emotion; and "you've got to see it to believe it." Angela is also the person who pointed me to the best example ever of the third category, from The Spokesman-Review newspaper in Spokane, Washington: [the paraplegic dog video](#), by Dan Pelle. In fact, that video is really a hat trick, because it's got all three goals covered.

Choosing a cantaloupe at the supermarket is not very exciting action—but you can make it interesting, visually, if you shoot with care.

The five-shot method

So you've identified an activity that's worth recording with video. Great! Now be sure to get five different shots of that one activity:

1. Extreme close-up of action detail, e.g., hands fondling a cantaloupe
2. Close-up of the face of the person doing the action
3. Medium shot, face and action together
4. Over-the-shoulder view of the action (point of view of the person doing the action)
5. One more different angle—be creative!

It's not that you will necessarily use all five shots in the final edit, but *if you've got them*, you'll find that editing is immensely simplified. You always have enough shot variety to put together something decent. (See [a BBC training video](#) that illustrates the five-shot method.)

Colin Mulvany's [post about shooting sequences](#) spells out why this method makes your video story better.

If you're shooting one event, such as "Sarah buys ingredients for fruit salad" (part of a longer story, such as "Sarah takes fresh food to the homeless"), you will shoot *several* five-shot sequences. Cantaloupe is one; buying bananas might be another; loading the grocery sacks onto her bicycle might be another. Another *event* is making the fruit salad (peeling, chopping, assembling). A third *event* is taking the paper cups of fruit

salad to where the homeless people congregate.

Camera movement

It's quite important to frame the shot carefully *before* you press the Record button to start shooting. If you're moving around, you'll find the footage very hard to edit later. Train yourself to frame the action, then freeze solid. Press the button. Count silently to 10, at least (this ensures that you have enough to allow clean cutting)—and then press the Record button again to STOP RECORDING. *Never* swing the camera around to the next thing. *Always* stop the recording.

These rules are particularly important for Web video, but also, they are really good for helping a beginner to progress and learn how to shoot well. When you're vastly experienced at shooting, then you can break the rules (because then you'll know when it's okay to do so).

1. Don't pan (don't move the camera horizontally)
2. Don't tilt (don't move the camera vertically)
3. Don't zoom
4. Press the "Record Off" button—often

You can see an example of this shooting method (albeit with some camera movement) in this video from the Detroit Free Press: [More than a mailman to struggling customers](#). Pay attention to how short the shots are and how much shot variety there is.

NEVER ask the subject to perform actions for you. You'll need to learn how to anticipate the action and run ahead to get these shots.

How? Practice, practice, practice.

13. Edit Your Video with iMovie or Windows Movie Maker

June 16, 2009

<http://mindymcadams.com/tojou/2009/rgmp-13-edit-your-video-with-imovie-or-windows-movie-maker/>

In this post, I will explain how to edit video in a very simple editing program. Let's take a quick look at the steps:

1. Capture or import clips
2. Trim the clips and put them in order
3. Add and/or adjust audio (narration, interviews, music)
4. Add title(s) and credits
5. Export movie file

This set of steps is basically the same no matter which program you use for editing video. I will explain each one below. But first ...

Which editing program is best?

This is usually the wrong question—or the wrong way to ask it. There is no

reason to delay your video editing education just because you do not have a fancy, expensive program. Every Mac has iMovie. Every Windows computer has (or can get) Windows Movie Maker. Both of these are free. This also means that every university, college, and high school has them too. Everybody can learn how to edit video!

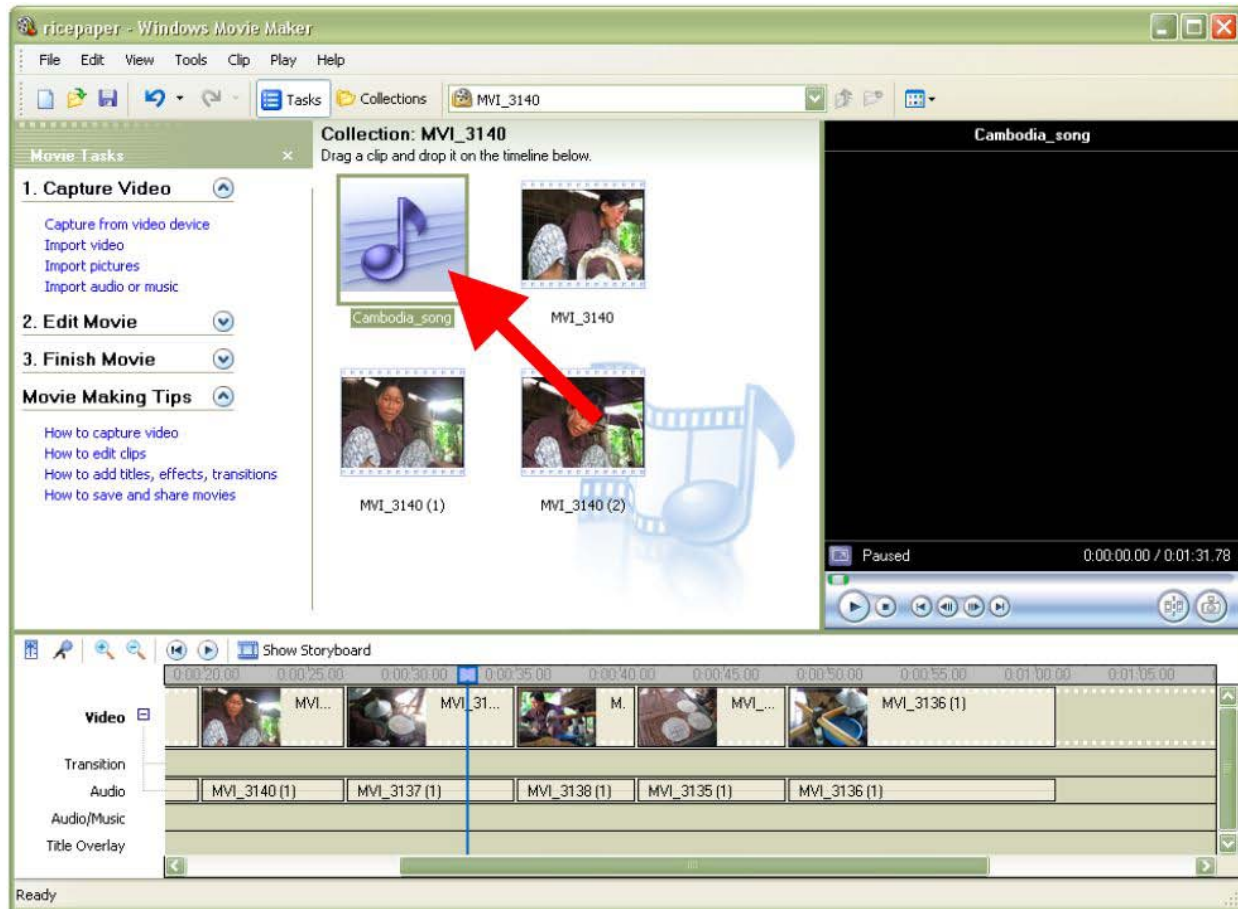
Some people prefer to buy a top-of-the-line software program with a big price tag—for all kinds of reasons. This is fine if you are really going to learn how to use it. But what if you find it to be too much work? The learning demands of a high-end program are greater than those of a simple program. You can always upgrade later, if you find out you love editing video.

Rather than invite a big flame war over which program is better, I'm going to stick with the basics. Remember that Web video is often shot with cheap cameras (even cell phones), and it's not going to look like a Hollywood blockbuster no matter what you use for editing.

The computer you're using

Some computers are under-equipped for video editing. If you buy a new computer, pay close attention to: (1) processor speed; (2) amount of memory; and (3) capacity of the hard drive. If you start editing video on your old computer and it locks up, freezes, or crashes a few times, that is the computer's way of telling you it is too old and tired to handle the task.

Another thing you need to check is the transfer method from your camera to the computer. Some cameras use USB 2.0 for transferring video; your computer can



probably handle that, unless it's ancient. Some cameras use FireWire (also called IEEE 1394) or FireWire 800 (IEEE 1394b) —note these are two different standards! —and your computer *may not* have that built in. If not, you can add a FireWire card to a desktop computer for very little cost. You probably *can't* add it to a laptop that lacks it.

Capture or import clips

“Capture” refers to transferring the video directly from your camera to the video editing program. “Import” is what we do when the video files are already on the computer's hard drive. For example, if you shoot video with a little point-and-shoot still camera, or with any of the Pure Digital video cameras (such as the Flip),

you can easily copy the files over to your hard drive. In that case, you would later *import* the clips into your editor.

When you *capture*, your camera is connected to the computer, and you have two general choices: Bring in everything you shot, or use the editing program to select the good footage (clips) and then bring in *only* the good stuff. The “everything” method sounds easier, but in fact the “select good stuff” method is more efficient—plus it takes *less space* on your hard drive.

The simple editing programs will automatically split your “everything” into shorter clips unless you select an option to prevent it. When you are a beginner, you might as well accept the splitting. You

will find it harder to work with one gigantic file—trust me.

Trim the clips and put them in order

Here's where the technical action is simple, but the cognitive action is challenging. Clips are separate pieces of video ([see RGMP 12](#)). Your clips are visual vignettes that propel the story. If they are redundant or overlong or simply dull (e.g., lots of talking heads), they will not hold a viewer's interest. If they are random or seemingly unrelated, they will alienate the viewer.

The old rule “garbage in, garbage out” applies: *What you shot* is all you've got. Is it enough? Is it the right stuff? Can you tell the story with these clips? Some video news stories are visually very uninteresting, because basically all we see are some people talking (reporters, witnesses, officials) and some pathetic B-roll (empty streets, yellow police tape) to fill in the gaps. (Don't forget [the five-shot method](#) from RGMP 12!)

(You might want to review [RGMP 11: Tell a good story with images and sound](#) and think a bit about the structure of your story.)

The good news is, you will get better at shooting the right stuff after you've *practiced editing* a few times. Your failures in editing will teach you what to look for the next time you go out to shoot.

Now, for the technical part: As a beginner, trim something off the beginning and something off the end of *each* clip. Do not try to get more than one thing out of any

single clip. (You can break this rule later, when you are more experienced.)

So, when you play the clip, before cutting, you're looking for the best bit in that clip. After you have decided on the best bit, cut twice: Once to discard the part *before* the best bit, and a second time to discard the part *after* the best bit. In Windows Movie Maker, you'll see three thumbnail images where there used to be one (the middle thumbnail is the one you drag down to the Storyboard). In iMovie 09, you'll drag a yellow frame around the best bit, excluding the two discarded parts (before and after). When the yellow frame is positioned as you want it, you'll drag the framed bit into the Storyboard.

How long should an edited clip be? That depends on the content of the clip, but in general, a lot of clips are good at 4 to 6 seconds. Beginners tend to leave in too much material. However, when you're trimming, be careful NOT to cut into the *middle* of an action. If you have a tight close-up of someone pouring water into a glass, for example, start with the glass *before* the pouring begins, and end it *after* the pouring stops.

A common newbie editing mistake is the *jump cut*. For a good example of a bad jump cut, and suggestions on how to avoid jump cuts in your editing, [see this post by videographer Angela Grant](#).

Another newbie error occurs when you fail to cut *matching action* correctly. [This article at Videomaker](#) explains matching action—make sure you click through the photos at the top to see and understand the visual sequence.

Add and/or adjust audio

In addition to the audio that is part of your clips, you can add other audio on a separate track in both iMovie and Windows Movie Maker. However, there is *only one* separate track for audio in these editors. (In a sophisticated video editing program, you will have more than one audio track to work with.)

When you have added audio that overlaps with the audio in your clips, you will usually need to *adjust the volume* of the audio in the clip. Instead of muting it completely, it usually seems more natural if you just lower the volume sufficiently so that it *does not compete* with the added track. If there is natural sound such as a door slamming or a fire truck's siren in the video, then leave it alone, or increase the volume if necessary.

Music. Many beginners like to take the easy way out and just lay down some music in this track. I'll admit I've done it myself, for vacation videos. But that's NOT journalism! In fact, a lot of journalists say any added music is ethically questionable in a journalistic video. Obviously, music is almost always used in professional documentaries, so there's still debate about this. But my advice to new video journalists is: *Do not add any music!*

Narration. Beginners are often very reluctant to add narration to their videos—but narration can really enhance some stories. You should *script* your narration and *practice* reading it before you record it. It will be better to record it in a stand-alone file and add it to the video, instead of using the narration tools included in the editor—this allows you much more flexibility.

Interviews. It's going to be difficult to cut to and away from a talking head in iMovie or WMM, because you have *only one* video track. (In a sophisticated video editing program, you will have at least two video tracks to work with.) You can compensate for this by conducting your interview with a good-quality digital recorder, editing the best sound bites and saving them as individual audio files ([see RGMP 4](#)), and importing these audio files to the video project. By creating discrete audio files, you will be able to slide them left and right on the audio track and position them with precision so that they match the visuals well.

Note: To add these discrete audio tracks in iMovie, treat them as if they were sound effects. Add your audio files to the "iLife Sound Effects" folder ([see video tutorial](#)). In WMM you can just import the files as you would any other audio ([see PDF tutorial](#)).

Add title(s) and credits

All video editing programs have a variety of options for adding a title (at the beginning) and credits (at the end). You can change the background color, the font family and its size and color, and the animation effects. To give your video a journalistic feel, you should avoid cheesy effects. Keep it simple, and your work will appear more professional.

You can also choose to lay the title or credits over your video or over an imported still image (or a sequence of stills) instead of having a solid-color background.

You can stretch the width of the title or credits *on the Timeline* to make them stay

onscreen for more (or less) time. Everything on the Timeline is a little rectangle that can be manipulated by clicking and dragging. (*Note: iMovie 09 does not have a Timeline per se.*)

A word about typos: How stupid do you think you look when you have an error in spelling, punctuation or grammar in your video titles or credits? (You can always type the text into MS Word if you are a total pawn to spell-check—and then copy and paste it into the editor.)

Transitions and effects

Avoid these for Web video. First, they usually look unprofessional for journalism work. Second, they will increase the file size of your final video file—sometimes by a lot! Just use straight cuts between clips.

If you import still photos, keep the zooming and panning to a minimum. These effects are trite and amateurish most of the time, and again, it makes your journalism work look unprofessional.

Export the movie file

While you are editing, you must save the project file often. I suggest that you can never save often enough! If your system or the program crashes or freezes, you will lose your edits. (*Note: iMovie 09 will auto-save your project.*)

Note that your original video files are NEVER changed by the editing process. This is because the *project file* you are saving (when you are editing) is essentially a small text file that saves information about your editing actions. The project file does not contain ANY

video or audio. Thus if you gave the project file alone to someone else, that person would not be able to see your video.

You will create the actual video file *after you have finished* editing the project. (Make sure to *save the project* one last time!) In iMovie 09, you'll open the Share menu and select "Export Movie." In Windows Movie Maker, you'll open the File menu and select "Save Movie File" (in the Windows Vista version, select "Publish Movie").

The best practice is to save the video file at the *highest possible quality*. Ignore all the options for "Web," "YouTube," "iPhone," etc.—these will be *lower* quality video files. After you have exported the highest quality file, you can then convert it into any low-quality type you might need. The high-quality file *can be* uploaded "as is" to YouTube, Vimeo, etc. Exporting the high-quality file might take several minutes—even if your project is only about two minutes long.

The final video file out of WMM will be in the AVI format. The final video file out of iMovie will be in the MOV format.

Tutorials and tip sheets

For a short list of video editing tutorials and other help, see [Journalist's Toolkit: Video](#). There are links to very nice step-by-step tutorials for both iMovie and Windows Movie Maker.

Project file management

Many of us move around from one computer to another, working on the same project on different machines. This

can cause a huge problem with any project-based editing program (including Audacity and Soundslides, as well as most video editors).

Remember that the project file does not contain any of your video or audio. Therefore, you cannot take the project file *alone* to another computer and continue working. You need to take ALL the related files every time you change to a different computer.

Equally important: The video clips and audio files must have the same relationship to the project file whenever you open the project file to start working. This means, basically, *keep it all in one folder, together*. The project file AND the clips. That way you will be able to make changes to the project on a different computer.

If you have blank or missing thumbnails in your project—or in WMM, red X's—it means you didn't follow this advice.

14. Publish Your Video on Your Blog

July 16, 2009
<http://mindymcadams.com/tojou/2009/rgmp-14-publish-your-video-on-your-blog/>

In this post, I will explain an easy method for embedding your video in a post on your blog. (What, you don't have a blog? Shame on you! Go back to [RGMP 2](#) for remedial work!)

First, of course, you need to shoot some video (see [RGMP 12](#)) and edit it (see [RGMP 13](#)).

The easiest way to get your video online is to **upload it** to one of the free video viewing sites, such as [YouTube](#) or [Vimeo](#). (Those two seem to be the most popular; for more options, see [this list at Mashable](#) or [this list at Top Ten Reviews](#).) Sure, you could upload the video to your own server, but then you miss out on the chance to tag it, link it, and associate it with other people's video about similar topics.

In other words, do you want people to *watch* your video—yes or no? If you answered yes, then put it where people can *find* it—okay?

These instructions are going to follow the procedure for YouTube—for two reasons: (1) YouTube is still the king of online video sites. (2) The [WordPress.com instructions](#) for embedding a YouTube video in your blog post are foolproof, and [RGMP 2](#) told you exactly how to get started with a WordPress.com blog. (If you're not using WordPress.com, you'll need to find the equivalent help page for your blogging platform.)

Another cool thing about YouTube is that it's easy to create your own [playlists](#) and [channels](#) there. For example, I created a YouTube channel just for [videos made by my students](#). You can send or embed a link to a playlist—for example, here is my playlist of [videos about journalism topics](#).

How to upload the video

You'll need to have a YouTube account. It's free. Just [sign up](#). (You can have more than one.)

YouTube will accept a variety of [video file formats](#).

Log in to your YouTube account. Then find and click the yellow button near the top right corner of the page—it says **Upload**.

You will start the upload process by clicking the obvious button (“Upload Video”) and then browsing on your computer to find the video file. After the file starts uploading, you will be able to assign a title, description, tags and category to your video. Make sure to click “Save Changes” at the bottom (you may do this before the upload is complete).

The upload might take a long time, or not—it all depends on unknowable factors, so just be patient. You might have to give up and try again later, or even try again another day. But if you’re lucky, your video will be online in just a few minutes!

Do not close the Web page before the upload is complete!

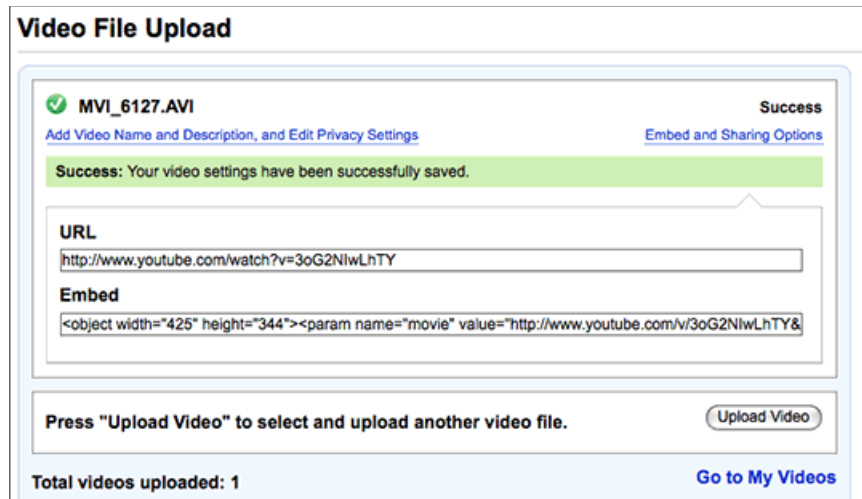
How to embed the video in a blog post

After the video is ready on YouTube, start a new blog post the way you normally would. You will need the URL of the video (at YouTube) to embed it. If you don’t have that URL, go to “My Videos” on YouTube—if you are logged in, that would be here:

http://www.youtube.com/my_videos

Click the video to open it, and copy the complete URL from the address bar of your Web browser (including *http://*).

Then simply follow the [WordPress.com instructions](#) for embedding a YouTube video in your blog post.



Save the post and publish it as you normally would. The video should be visible and playable. If it’s not, then open the post in edit mode and review the WordPress.com instructions! (They really do work, I promise.)

Note for self-hosted WordPress users: The plugin I’m using for YouTube videos on my blog now is [Smart YouTube](#).

Note about my video, if you care: Shot by me with my Canon PowerShot SD700 IS (still camera). Edited in Final Cut Pro. Music from a CD of Cambodian folk music, produced in Cambodia:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X1F88mDW_oM

(Please select “HQ” for high quality.)

15. Maintain and Update Your Skills

August 5, 2009

<http://mindymcadams.com/tojou/2009/rgmp-15-maintain-and-update-your-skills/>

I made a list of 15 topics in multimedia journalism one day in February 2009; from that list came this series of blog posts titled “Reporter’s Guide to Multimedia Proficiency.” With this, the 15th post, we have come to the end of the road, six months later.

In this post, I will explain how I maintain and update my own proficiency in all of these skills.

I find that a lot of journalists I meet during training sessions make an assumption that I have some kind of computer background. This is not correct. Like Joe Weiss (the affable creator of Soundslides) and many other journalists who are seen as multimedia adepts, I am self-taught. And I’m no rocket scientist. I hated math classes when I was a kid. I disliked science. I had no aptitude at anything, really—except writing and copy editing.

Get over your fear

So the first step, I think, is to let go of your self-defeating ideas about how you are “not a computer person,” or how “computers don’t like me.” These attitudes are killing you—and your future in journalism.

The second step is to let go of all other rigid ideas (and even pigheadedness) you might harbor in regard to technology

skills. Technology is fluid and ever-changing, and so, learning it and using it are an ongoing process. Accepting this and making peace with the idea are really helpful. There WILL be a new version of every software program you ever learn to use. The new version WILL be different. You WILL have to spend time learning the new features. Likewise, you WILL need to invest time in learning how to use each camera and recording device you take out into the field.

You can’t speed up time. Trying to learn something too quickly leads only to frustration and mistakes.

You must relax and accept that all of this—learning and improving—requires you to put in the amount of time necessary. There are no shortcuts.

Learn how to fail

Practice, of course, is your best teacher. Practice what you have learned. Try it out. The first try need not be journalistic—use some family photos, your hobby, something that’s fun for you. For the second and third try, please do not promise a product to your editor. Do not impose a deadline on yourself. While you’re still finding your way, give yourself room to fail.

Failure is your second best teacher. Our failures present us with puzzles to solve. They send us back to the instruction manual, back to the Google search, back to our mentors. Find out what went wrong, and your next attempt will be better. (Students *hate* to edit and revise and rewrite their own stories, but the great writers know that rewriting is what *makes* them great.)

The Web is a treasure trove of free advice. For every single one of these tools and software programs, there are discussion forums where experts answer the questions of newbies just like you. The more you practice searching for answers, the quicker you will become at finding the *best* answers.

Finding the best tutorials

In addition to forums, there are loads of free tutorials online. One of the most effective ways to find really good, current tutorials is through [Delicious tags](#). People are not going to bookmark a tutorial unless it's helpful. For example: [imovie+tutorial](#). Another example: [photoshop+layers+tutorial](#).

Once when I was in a session with journalism educators, I suggested they need not create original tutorials for their students. If they can find good tutorials on the Web, they can just send their students to those links. One of the educators asked if I could give him a list of Photoshop tutorials. Well, tutorials for Photoshop can be pretty darned specific, and I don't know which skills he wants his students to know. So I told him he should find the ones that are best suited to his own courses, using Google and Delicious. He seemed a bit angry, as if I had asked him to do unnecessary work.

What I suggest, though, is that this is like teaching a man to fish, instead of giving him one fish to eat now. *You* will make *yourself* independent, knowledgeable, and self-sufficient if you put in the time to search the Web and find tutorials and answers to your own questions.

And yes, your early attempts will be extremely frustrating. You will find bad tutorials, outdated tutorials, advertising-bloated tutorials, spam sites, and all manner of junk as you search. But with practice, you will become quite good at finding exactly what you need—quickly.

When to ignore the manual, and when to RTFM

In the very early 1990s, one of my copy desk colleagues asked my advice for buying her very first home computer. When the computer arrived, she excitedly informed me at the office, but she hadn't opened it yet—the box had arrived just before she left home.

After the weekend, back at work, I asked her how she liked her new computer. She still had not set it up!

Nervous about making mistakes, she planned to read the whole manual before using the computer. It took her about two weeks to find the time.

Now, personalities differ, and many of you would no doubt do the opposite— rip the box open, set everything up, and maybe even break something. But no matter which type you are—"I don't need no stinkin' manual!" or the other extreme—there are times when you really ought to *go the other way*.

Counteracting your natural tendency is one of the most important things you can do to increase your technology mastery.

Manual-lovers: You can save a ton of time by just playing with the controls, or buttons, or menus. Jump in and handle the tool without fear. Never use brute

force, and generally, nothing will break! Turn to the manual only when this practice fails you. Give it some time. Learn how to learn by trial and error.

Manual-haters: You can save a ton of time by using the manual to tell you what is possible. This is particularly effective when something is really new and alien to you. Turn straight to the pages about menus or set-up or controls and scan for an overview. (This is especially helpful with audio recorders, which have some of the most diverse and cryptic menus for functions and settings.)

Don't forget what you learned!

Once you have *mastered* a skill, it's like riding a bicycle—you might be a bit wobbly at first, if you have not used your skill in some time, but you will be okay after a short while. You won't fall off.

However, this is NOT true for skills you have not *mastered*. One of the most disappointing things I hear as a teacher is this: "I took your Flash class, but when I tried to make a Flash project six months later, I couldn't remember how to do it." Yes, six months of inaction can *erase* four months of learning.

Practice, practice, practice—even if you have no chance to use the new skill in your job. If you don't practice, you **WILL** forget. Practice your software skills (video editing, Flash, etc.) with your laptop while watching TV. (That's one of my own most common practices.) Use any family outing or other travel as an opportunity to gather audio, video, and still images, and then edit them together within a week after returning home. Re-allocate some of your daily news-reading

time to keep up with new developments in the technology sphere.

The less time you have spent using your new tools and skills, the more important it is for you to make time to practice—*frequently*. An eight-hour marathon once a month will be less helpful than frequent, repeated tasks to keep your memory intact and to add new skills, one at a time.

Stay up to date

In [RGMP 1](#), I provided links to two sites you should scan *every day* to stay abreast of new developments in technology and journalism. In addition, you should check out the sites below about once a month to treat yourself to some innovative approaches to online journalism:

- [New York Times multimedia](#)
- [Washington Post video and photos](#)
- [Interactive Narratives](#): Links to examples
- [MediaStorm](#): Independent multimedia storytelling

Don't ever kid yourself by thinking you have all the skills you need to succeed in journalism. That will never be true. By ensuring that you understand what audiences are using and viewing, and what other journalists are producing for multiple digital platforms, you will be able to make sensible decisions about your own continued learning and training.

Trim, cut, prioritize

Back in the day, about 1994, it briefly seemed as if CD-ROMs would be a great

new platform for journalism projects. This turned out to be completely wrong, as the free Netscape Beta propelled the World Wide Web toward mass audience penetration. But for that nanosecond when CD-ROMs appeared to be the next big thing, I was eyeing an application called Director. It was expensive and had a very steep learning curve. I was reluctant to take on learning it. I dragged my feet a bit.

Then the Web became irresistible, and I taught myself HTML instead. While some interactive projects for the Web were created with Director, the files were quite large and took a very long time to download. The more the popularity of the Web increased, the more apparent it was that large, slow things would not be popular and would not be viewed by large numbers of people. Director remained useful for kiosks and other non-downloadable projects, but it became clear that it was unnecessary for Web developers to use Director.

Consider that example when you are thinking about learning a new skill—and deciding which one to learn *first*. What will you use it for? How well does it fit with your other skill sets? And above all—is it a skill that is going to be relevant for a long time?

A reporter who is always out doing interviews should certainly learn [how to gather clean, clear audio](#) for use on the Web, but a Web producer who never interviews anyone might have no need to learn audio gathering. A graphic designer should know how to use Flash to create animated information graphics for the Web, but most reporters [have no reason to learn Flash](#).

So, keep a list of the skills you think you ought to learn or improve, but revisit your list often and revise it from time to time. Keep the top three items up to date—but not out on the cutting edge, where today's hot new item might follow the path of the CD-ROM.

Acknowledge that you will never have *all* the skills you need—but at the same time, keep working to add new skills one at a time, step by step.

And don't neglect your *older* new skills—time spent learning is never wasted, unless you have to re-learn what you carelessly allowed yourself to forget. This is a very real danger. So protect your original investment of time and effort by practicing your skills, even on small exercises, to ensure that you do not lose them.

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