

A WORKING DIRECTOR'S GUIDE

Designing Your Coverage

The shot list as a set of decisions, not a grid you fill in out of habit.



CRAFT GUIDE
SEVEN NOTES & A WORKED EXAMPLE

DECOUPA.FILM

You already know how to cover a scene. This is not a tutorial on what a close-up is. It is a way of keeping the thinking sharp, so the shot list stays a record of decisions instead of a grid you fill in out of habit.

The shot list is where you direct the film before the camera rolls. Everything after it, the set and the edit, is shaped by the choices you make here on the page. So it is worth treating those choices as choices.

01

Start from the scene, not the camera

Before you think about lenses, read the scene for what it is doing. Every scene worth shooting turns. Robert McKee puts it plainly in *Story*: a scene “turns the value-charged condition of a character's life on at least one value.” If the charge is the same at the end as at the start, “nothing meaningful happens... It is a nonevent.”

So the first question is not how do I cover this, but what changes here, and where. The moment a character learns something, decides something, loses something, that is the turn, and the whole scene exists to set it up and let it land. Find it first. Your coverage is then in service of that one moment, not spread evenly across the page.

Find the turn first. The coverage serves that one moment, not the page evenly.

02

Shot size is language, and size is relative

Every size says something before a word is spoken. A wide places people in a world and, held long enough, withholds, keeping us outside and watching. A medium is behavior and relationship, the conversational ground a scene lives on, which is why moving off it means something. A close-up is pressure and intimacy, the strongest image in your kit. An insert says *this matters* by giving a detail its own frame.

The catch is that none of these mean anything on their own. A close-up reads as close only because of the wider shot before it. Meaning is made across the cut, not inside the frame, which is why the close-up is the easiest thing in the kit to spend carelessly.

Close-ups should be used sparingly so when they do appear, they have the most impact. If every shot in a scene is a close up, they might lose their effectiveness.

STUDIOBINDER

Held that way, withholding becomes a tool. Leone teases Harmonica's motive across the whole of *Once Upon a Time in the West*, then pushes slowly to an extreme close-up of his eyes for the revelation. Spielberg holds on the actors' faces at the first sight of the Brachiosaurus in *Jurassic Park* before he ever cuts to the dinosaur, because the awe on the face is the story, not the animal. Stay wider than feels comfortable through the setup, and cutting in at the turn does the work on its own.

03

Coverage is decisions, not insurance

The habit worth breaking is shooting the whole menu, wide, medium, medium-close, close, on every scene, just in case. Cinematographer Shane Hurlbut names it bluntly: "Over-coverage is a common problem." It costs you twice, once in set time and crew energy, and again in the edit. But the real cost is creative. When you shoot every beat from every size, you hand the scene's decisions to the cut, and the version you believed in on set becomes one option among many. Authorship quietly moves from you to post.

Walter Murch's Rule of Six, his criteria for a good cut, lists emotion first and three-dimensional continuity last, and he is unambiguous about the order: "Emotion, at the top of the list, is the thing that you should try to preserve at all costs." If the emotional read of a beat outranks everything else, then designing coverage means protecting that read first, with the smallest set of shots that carries it. Often that is a wide to place people, a medium to live in the exchange, and one close-up held back until the turn. Three setups doing exactly what they are for. A reverse close-up shot for safety does not make the scene safer. It makes the close-up you were saving worth less.

A safety close-up does not make the scene safer. It makes the close-up you were saving worth less.

04

Line the script

The oldest tool for this still works, and it predates software: line the script. You mark each camera setup in the margin and draw a line down the stretch of text it covers, a wavy line where the speaker is off screen. StudioBinder describes the point exactly: it is “to ensure enough coverage has been shot for each scene. No director ever wants to wind up... in the editing room and realize they forgot to shoot coverage of an actor for a line of dialogue.”

What lining gives you is sight of the whole plan at once. You can see the beat with three angles stacked on it and the beat with none, the moment you care about most buried inside a master you will struggle to cut to. It is not a shot count. It is a map of which moments deserve an image of their own. And it keeps the plan tied to the text, so when a line changes you can see which shots just went stale.

05

Dialogue scenes: shot, reverse, repeat

Shot/reverse-shot is the reflex for two people talking, and often it is right. But it is one option. A held two-shot keeps both people accountable to each other in frame instead of letting either hide in a single. Aoner lets the exchange play without release. And sometimes the strongest choice is to stay on the listener and never cut to the speaker at all, because the reaction is where the scene turns.

A listener will blink at the precise moment he or she gets the idea of what you are saying, not an instant earlier or later.

WALTER MURCH

The comprehension is the event. Cover it. Whatever you choose, the constraints are real. Keep to one side of the line so screen direction holds, and match size, distance and lens across reverses so the cut is clean. Break the line when you mean to, never by accident.

A worked example

THE SCENE

A new hire is shown to her desk by a colleague who, almost in passing, mentions the company is failing.

Read it first. The beats run: arrival and orientation, which is mundane; the casual revelation, which is the turn; the newcomer taking it in, which is the landing.

SETUP 1 · WIDE

The room

The worn office and the distance between the two women. Context, and something quiet about the place.

SETUP 2 · MEDIUM

Orientation

Behavior, not drama. The audience should feel the ordinariness of it.

SETUP 3 · CLOSE

The turn

Saved for the revelation, more for her reaction than the line. The size that presses us into her face.

SETUP 4 · INSERT

If earned

The overdue notice the colleague sets aside without a word.

Four setups. The scene is covered, because each angle carries a specific part of the meaning, and nothing is there out of nerves. That is the whole method: find the turn, give it the size it needs, and shoot the smallest set that gets you there.

The shot list is a living thing

A shot list is not a long list. It is a list where every shot can answer one question: which beat are you here to serve? If a shot cannot answer that, it is there to reassure you, not the scene. Keep that question next to every row, keep the rows tied to the script, and the list stays what it should be, a set of decisions you can defend, right up until the moment on the day when the room shows you something better.

You are the director. The plan exists to carry everyone to the place where your instinct can take over, not to replace it.

FURTHER READING · THE REAL CANON

- Steven D. Katz, *Film Directing: Shot by Shot*
- Sidney Lumet, *Making Movies*
- David Mamet, *On Directing Film*
- Bruce Block, *The Visual Story*
- Walter Murch, *In the Blink of an Eye*
- Hollywood Camera Work, *The Master Course in Blocking & Staging*



This is the way of working we built Decoupa around: a shot list that keeps the reasoning next to every choice and stays tied to the script. [DECOUPA.FILM](#)