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How to Stop Training Videos from Being Boring

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How to Stop TRAINING VIDEOS from Being Boring

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ABOUT THESE NOTES
These notes are a summary of what we’ll be exploring in my session at Learning Solutions 2018. The best way to learn about video is to watch and make it, rather than read about. So, bearing in mind the limitations of reading about something we need to see, these notes do not attempt to be comprehensive. Rather, to provide a high-level reminder of what we watched during the session.

We know that emotional engagement is a key part of successful learning. So why do so many training videos lack this engagement? Or more aptly, why are they soooooo boring? Today’s session explores a selection of editorial techniques that TV professionals use to keep audiences emotionally engaged. We’ll also reflect on what these mean for training videos.

During the session, we’ll look at real examples and explore what this means when you make your next training video. We have sixty minutes, so in many ways we’re just touching the surface. But we’ll focus on easy things you can do right away to make your videos interesting.
4 WAYS to Increase Visual Engagement

People remember what they see in video more than what they hear. That’s why documentary-makers adopt a ‘picture-first’ mindset, thinking about what viewers will see, before writing voiceovers. The ‘picture first’ mentality goes against the grain - we were taught to ‘tell’ and ‘write’ for most of our school years. ‘Telling’ works great for podcasts and on the radio but for video, ‘showing’ is best. So for many of us, we need to learn a new language. Here are 4 ways to ‘show’ rather than ‘tell’.

1. Use Camera Angles and Shot Sizes to Show Your Story

Videographers use shot sizes to convey different types of messages. For example, a wide-shot is great for showing context. A close-up is ideal for showing emotion or small details. Don’t just aim your camera, press record and hope for good video. Think carefully about your content and plan shot sizes to better convey your ideas.

Likewise, we can use camera angles to subtly show power. Low angle shots show people to have power – perfect for subtly showing the view that this person is a leader, for example. While high angle shots show them as having less power.

The key to using these is subtlety. We don’t want people to be distracted from our message by clumsy use of these techniques. OK, shot sizes and camera angles are traditional techniques that pros use intuitively to make great television and cinema.

How about learning? We know from studies that when we package learning, it’s important to start with an overview, or context to give perspective. And we need to relate nuggets of learning with the big picture. We can use shot sizes to tell our viewers when we’re giving context or getting into the weeds. And camera angles allow us to add subtlety to the message.
Frame Each Shot Carefully

The way we frame each shot can more powerfully draw viewers to the screen and keep them watching. This comes down to where you position key people or objects on the screen and the symmetry of where the eye is guided.

The ancient Rule of Thirds can help us each shot. Many folks are tempted to position key people or objects in the center of the screen. This is predictable and boring. The rule of thirds creates a sense of suspense and incompleteness by positioning key visual elements at the intersection of the lines. This keeps people watching for resolution.

Change Shots Constantly

People don’t last long when they watch a talking head video. It’s maybe ten or fifteen seconds before they start thinking about whether to buy a carton of milk on the way home from work. Unless the video features action or things changing on screen, people will lose interest. If you’re serious about keeping people’s attention, regularly change the shot.

This comes from the Universal Principle of Change. If nothing changes on the screen, viewers zone out. There are many ways to change shots. Change shot sizes and camera angles. Or, change camera positions using the 3 Shot Formula.

In a way, changing shots is like changing things up in a classroom, only its much more intense. If learners sit in a chair all day and have to listen to someone talk or watch a series of PowerPoint slides, we know they’ll fall asleep. That’s one reason we change our learning methods and get people moving around. Changing shots regularly every 8 to 15 seconds will keep eyeballs and help viewers stay awake.
Shoot better pictures

While it’s important to think editorially how you frame a shot and construct a sequence, we shouldn’t forget the importance of making the shots clear and easy to see. Blurry over-exposed shots will undermine your message.

So, while shooting pictures is, strictly speaking, more of a technical than editorial issue, it’s still important to pay special attention to it because poor shots undermine and distract from your message. Here are five things to pay attention to, to get professional looking shots:

- Stability
- White balance
- Exposure and light position
- Focus
- Audio levels (and microphone position)

‘SLICK’ VS ‘AUTHENTIC’

There’s been debate over the years about “slick” versus “authentic” video. Should training videos look as perfect as a TV production or is poor lighting and shaky cam (otherwise known as queasy-cam or jitter-cam) OK? Well, we’re not in the business of making video to be like a TV show. Spinning wheels and extra effects— or video bling as I call them— are not necessary. We’re in the business of helping people learn. If shaky cam and poor lighting help people learn, I’d say “authentic” is OK. But I suspect that 90 percent of the time, poor quality video doesn’t put our best foot forward. In fact, I often think the word ‘authentic’ is used as an excuse for ‘lazy’.

Taking an extra 90 seconds to set white balance, exposure, focus and audio make crisp and clear shots. Crisp and clear shots make it easier for learning. Here’s the rule I follow. The techniques we deploy should be so invisible that viewers are focused only on the learning. None of this means we need to go over the top. But I humbly suggest it means we need to do our best to shoot footage that is crisp and clear.
4Ways to Produce Better Sequences for Learning

When we communicate “by telling” we use words. Words don’t always say a lot on their own, so we put them into sentences to deepen our message. And sentences don’t always stand on their own either, so, we put related sentences together in the form of paragraphs.

We kinda do the same with video. Shots are like words, although often more powerful. (But often imprecise.) And just as a single shot tells only part of the story, we need several shots to complete a richer message. I could show you a picture of a woman looking at her phone, but it doesn’t tell us much. What’s she looking at? Why? Where?

We need more pictures to build out the story. So, we add a shot of a sports match which tells us she’s checking for the latest score.

Every shot you add to a sequence is powerful. It could change the whole story or add a subtle nuance. For example, if we replaced shot two with an airliner, the message is now that she is checking for delays.

In a way, we could say that shots are like words. Sequences are like sentences. And scenes are like paragraphs. It’s slightly clunky as a set of similes but it works. Seasoned videographers think in terms of shots and plan in terms of sequences. Their goal is to put the right shots in the right order and hold them long enough on the screen to get a message across. The reason many training videos are boring is because someone aims the camera, hits record and hopes for the best. As you plan your training video, think about how you can use shots and sequences to keep eyeballs engaged. A lot of the magic of making awesome sequences happens in the ‘edit suite’. Here are four things to consider which will give your training vids extra oomph.
Cut Out Redundant Footage

One of my favorite writing quotes is from Crawford Killian who said when it comes to writing a sentence for web content, “Every word must fight for its life.” I like this because when we write, we’re not celebrating the words or a fancy turn of phrase. We’re celebrating the story. As important and often aesthetically pleasing as shots are to the video we create, the content is what’s important to people watching training videos. The video is here to help people learn. Shots are a tool to help this.

So, to borrow Killian’s wonderful phrase I suggest that for video, every shot must fight for its life. It’s easy to add shots to a sequence because we like them. Or because we think they’re a work of art. But if they don’t support the learning, what’s their value? Likewise, we must not waste the viewer’s time by showing more of the shot than is necessary. There’s a fine nuance to getting this right and some important techniques to pull it off. We’ll explore those during the session by watching some video.

Follow the 3 Shot Formula when Filming

When we edit training videos, it gets tough to keep things visually engaging if we have a limited number of shots. We can get around this by following the 3-Shot formula when shooting the action. This is often used in documentaries. In a nutshell, the formula requires that we take three shots of every action. Each shot is taken from a different location, or a different aspect of the action.

Consider you’re showing a worker coming into the office one morning. Rather than film a wide-shot of her coming through the door, walking to her desk and sitting down, have her do the same action three times and shoot it from three different positions. With each position, use a different shot size. It’s important to ensure at least one shot is a wide shot of the whole action. You could also include a close-up – perhaps of her feet shuffling - and a mid-shot – shot from behind her computer so she’s walking to the camera. You now have three shots you can swap between to make it more visually engaging.
Cut on Action

There’s an old editing rule called, **Cut on Action.** It helps you cut from one shot to another without breaking the flow of your video. It states that to have a seamless transition, the camera change should happen at the end of the action of Shot A and beginning of the action in Shot B.

There should be no lag. This is easier to demonstrate than describe and we’ll look at some examples during this session.

Use Text Graphics

One of the common struggles in our profession is that many instructional designers and trainers do not have the resources or backing from their bosses to go beyond producing talking head videos. We all know that talking head videos are the most boring form of video and there’s good reason to question if anyone stays awake after a minute. But what do we do when we have no option but to make talking head videos? One thing we can do is add text graphics.

If we cut between the talking head and a text graphic that summarizes a key point, we create change which in turn makes viewers feel they’re missing something. An alternative to a single text graphic is adding a caption, also known as a lower third. This can be distracting because we have both the text and video itself competing for attention. I suggest cutting from the talking head to a blank screen with text on it. Or a graphic. Keep it simple to just one or two clauses. Use an easy to read font and left justify it.
SOME GIVENS

There are a number of underlying assumptions to what we’re discussing today. And the thoughts I share are based on them. Here are the important ones.

1. The purpose of training videos is to help people learn – we’re not in the entertainment biz or here to express our thoughts. We’re learning focused.

2. Every training videos needs to start with a concrete learning objective.

3. Each video is best when there is only one objective.

4. Creative repetition is important to reinforce learning.

5. Production techniques, whether they be how you use the camera or edit the footage, need to be ‘invisible’ so they don’t distract from the learning.

6. Video is good for topics where learners need to see to learn. Not where they need to be told to learn.

4 THINGS to Consider About Different Devices

When we watch a movie at the cinema, the experience is totally different to watching it at home. At the cinema, we move our head from left to right to see everything on the big screen. At home in our living rooms, we just move your eyes. It’s the same for video viewed on different devices – each provides a totally different experience. While training videos are today viewed mostly on desktop/laptop computers, tablets, phones and in the classroom - projected on a wall, they will be accessed on many more devices in the future – it’s going to be fun. Often, we’ll know how learners mostly access our videos. When this is the case, we can plan and produce our content to work well for that device.

Without digging too deep into UX for different devices, here are four ways to think about video for different devices. It’s based on thoughts from my friends in the publishing industry.
Consider the Desktop Provides a Library Experience.

Looking for video and viewing it on a computer at your desk is like going to the library and pulling a book off the shelf. You’re usually focused on finding specific information and generally you don’t have too many distractions. While you won’t watch the video forever, you’ll still spend a good amount of time watching it. The experience could be hampered by connectivity, but the screen will give the video good resolution.

When you produce video for a desktop experience, avoid too much camera movement, such as pans, zooms, tilts and dolly shots. Significant camera movement appears jerky over the internet because streaming isn’t always constant. Avoid too many fancy transitions – simple cuts look the best. Keep the video short – less than 3 minutes if possible. 2 minutes is even better.

Consider the Tablet provides a Magazine Experience

People tend to view content on tablets in much the same way as reading a magazine. They’re likely to be less focused than at work and they’ll be looking for more of an immersive experience. Some of my colleagues in the publishing industry call the tablet experience a magazine experience. Viewers sit back and enjoy the content.

When you produce video for the tablet, you can get away with a more aesthetic piece of content and allow it to run longer than for desktop. Avoid camera moves – these are especially jittery on tablets because Wi-Fi and data connections are often dodgy. Avoid extreme wide shots as screen sizes are smaller than desktop computers and you’ll lose lots of detail. Take extra care with captions and text because they can lose their clarity on some of the smaller tablets.
Consider the Smart Phone Provides a Help Desk Experience

You know how it goes. You’re on the run and need an answer to something so you whip out your phone and plug the question into Google. It’s like calling the help desk. When people view video on their phones, they look rather than listen. Therefore, some of the world’s leading newspapers create videos for phones without any voice-overs. People are much more impatient with content over the phone and the screen makes it harder to see finer details.

When you produce for phones, keep content super short and highly focused. Get straight to the point. Don’t rely on narration or audio to get your message across – rely as much as you can on the visuals. Use text graphics for facts and figures. Avoid wide shots and stick to mid-shots and close-ups. And think about where the video is being hosted. Some social media sites display video as portrait rather than the traditional landscape (16:9) so you’d need to set the project up accordingly.

Consider the Classroom Provides a Communal Experience

Yes, video is still viewed in a classroom. And in meeting rooms at large conference centers. If your video is to be projected on a wall, you can afford captions and extra wide shots. However, make sure you render the video at high resolution, so those extra details are not pixelated.

Expect the picture to be washed-out as most data projectors in training rooms have fading bulbs because projectors are often maintained poorly. And room lighting is often tricky. Consider increasing the contrast in the edit. You have the luxury of going longer than just a few minutes because often you have a captive audience.
4 Reflections on Opportunities & Limitations of Video

We’ve been talking about the craft of video. But the craft exists for a reason, as does our decision to use it. We’re not using video to entertain – although it might be entertaining. And we’re not using video as a means of self-expression – although some of our personality may come through in our production style. No, we’re making video to help people learn skills they can use in the workplace. As someone who has worked in the professional media world and as a learning professional for almost 30 years, here are some of my humble thoughts on training videos.

Video is Not Great for Every Topic

Video is a lot of fun to make and it’s easy to make more video than we need. But we should think carefully about when it will help learning and when it will not. Video is about showing not telling. Some topics lend themselves to telling while others require showing. Showing someone how to make a cup of coffee is better than telling someone how to do it. And telling someone why a new policy has been enacted is often easier than showing why. Be clear on what’s best for your topic before investing time and money to produce some video. Your topic might be better suited for a podcast or written text.

Video Needs to Exist Within the Ecosystem

Video is great for showing people stuff they need to learn. But in the bigger scheme of workplace learning, skills development requires more than just showing. We know from empirical studies that learning happens through deliberative practice. Interleaving, spaced-learning and elaboration for example. Video doesn’t always cause this – it’s more informational. So, the more we plug it into broader strategies the more powerful it will be. So don’t forget to use video to get people talking, set up coaching or provide information before and after a workshop. We talk a lot about just in time learning – or microlearning which is the current buzzword for this – and video is great for this. But it’s also incredibly powerful to embed video within the broader learning strategy.

One of the bigger challenges I see for our profession, based on my experience running workshops, strategy sessions and train the trainer programs in organizations around the world is aligning what we do as learning professionals to business needs, explaining how we do it and showing the results of what we do. I’ve seen a lot of talent departments get excited by using video but getting lost in the razzle and dazzle of production, forgetting this alignment piece. This is a big conversation we can’t tackle here but worth starting the conversation. Video shouldn’t be an island – it needs to exist in connection to all our other development initiatives.
In today’s session you’ll see video examples of these things. If you wish to see these videos again, they will be posted for one month at www.trainermojo.com/learningsolutions

Video is a Fabulous Tool to Support Learning

I went to some measure to say video isn’t the only answer because it’s easy to get sucked in to all the excitement. I see a lot of people making video for the sake of video. When you ask them how it causes learning they are unable to explain either the pedagogy or the business link. But when video is used well it is a phenomenal tool to drive learning. It is available anywhere the learner has a connection, available anytime the learner needs it, and available on any device that suits them. That dovetails nicely into so much adult learning theory – self-paced learning, self-directed learning, easy access. Learners can watch your training videos at their desk or in the field when they need it to do their job.

Trainers are Media Producers

My final reflection on this, and you’ll see this in my books, is that the skills of media producer will be a key part of tomorrow’s trainer’s job description. As well as facilitating or coaching learning, designing it, and being a business partner; trainers will be media producers, called to create and curate content. A lot of college graduates are coming our way with many of these skills already. To stay up-to-date, current trainers need to ‘skill-up’. Especially, they need to have the skills to ensure content is engaging. Skills that enable them to make it fast and efficiently. And skills to make it awesome using affordable equipment.

IT BEATS WORK

More than two decades ago, I earned my bread and butter as a talk show host. It was a lot of fun but very hard work. In the studio at 5am, on the air until 9am. Doing prep for the next day usually until 5pm. Breaking news and staying current kept me and my team on our toes. But we loved it. At the end of each show, though, I’d be exhausted. And often, as I sat there listening to someone else go live on the air from another studio, my boss would wander in, see me look exhausted, grin and say, “Beats work, huh?”

Making good content and doing it well is hard work. If you’re not tired at the end you might not be doing your best work. But no matter how hard it is, it’s exhilarating. So much so it beats regular work. You may already know this and be making good training videos. Or you may be just starting out. Enjoy the exhilaration and keep up the great work!