

AV Basics - A Guide for Starting Out in AV

A lot of video workers will have a digital SLR that takes movies as well as stills, so you will probably have some great photographs. Why not have a go at making an audio visual presentation?

Types of AV

First of all I'm assuming that what you want to do is present your pictures with one song or piece of music (using more than one piece of music is the subject of another article, and in fact I shall probably revisit many of these areas in this article in future issues). This isn't real AV of course, but it is a perfectly valid medium and a wonderful way of showcasing your excellent photographs or making a record of a memorable holiday to show to family and friends. It's how a lot of people start, and maybe that's all they want to do. Presenting pictures with music as a "photo essay" is easy to do. It's not easy to do *well*, and we see many examples of poorly programmed and presented productions which have sometimes given AV a bad name.

Select your pictures

I'm also assuming you've already chosen your pictures. If you haven't please don't show them all. Select the best and reject any that are not quite sharp, out of focus, poorly composed, or have distracting elements, as these will stand out in the final presentation. Resist the temptation to show three versions of the same picture, or the viewers will start comparing them. It's your job to choose the ones that go together well, although sometimes you have to be brave and exclude your finest photos as they stand out as being "different".

Prepare your pictures for projection

Do not use 20 megapixel images straight from your camera, it just gives the computer more work and some computers won't cope. Projectors will only show images of 1400 x 1050 pixels (Canon) or 1920 x 1080 pixels (Optoma or any HD home cinema projector) so stick to one or both of these resolutions. If your images are "widescreen" (16x9), make them all 1920 x 1080 pixels. If they are 3x2 you could make them 1400 x 933 but I would recommend going for 1920 x 1280 pixels to make sure they will look their best on any projector.

Picture format

Rule Number 1 - all pictures should be the same size and format, as on TV or in the cinema.

Try not to mix landscape and portrait pictures as the constant changing of size and shape is disagreeable to the viewer and reinforces the impression that you are looking at a set of individual images rather than an audio visual sequence. In most cases you will have enough landscape images to avoid using vertical pictures at all.

If it is absolutely necessary to use portrait format pictures there are several workarounds you can try.

- (a) group your portrait pictures together to minimise the number of changes in shape on screen.
- (a) crop a portrait picture to create a new landscape image from just part of it.
- (c) place your portrait picture on a background of normal landscape format, often a copy of the preceding image, perhaps given some blur to diffuse it. This often works very well.
- (d) make a composite image of two or more vertical pictures on the same (landscape) background.

White borders

These might be OK for a single projected image or print, but it doesn't work in an AV. The white border will be the brightest part of the image, so the effect is to draw the viewer's eye to the *outside* of the picture, exactly the *opposite* effect to that intended which is to focus the viewer's attention on the main subject of the photograph.

Music

Choose music you like, after all you will be listening to it many times while making your programme. But make sure the type of music is appropriate for the picture content and the mood you wish to create. For example, use orchestral/pastoral music for dreamy landscapes, electronic beatty music for city buildings.

Use the start and end of your chosen music. Don't fade it out before the end, or, even worse, cut it off before the end. If the music is too long cut a bit out of the middle in Audacity. If it is too short, lengthen it by copying and pasting a phrase in, or, even better, remove some pictures. Nobody knows what you have edited out. Less is more.

Start and End

Always have a blank (black) slide at the beginning and at the end.

Make sure the first picture appears as the precise moment the music starts. And the last picture should normally fade to black as the music ends.

Programming your slides

Do not be tempted to "auto-arrange" your slides on the timeline. OK maybe as a starting point in putting your show together but not for the audience, it's boring. Listen to your music and programme your images and transitions to harmonise with it. Most music has a definite structure, rhythm or beat. Go with it.

Transitions

Make sure your default transition is a straight dissolve or fade. If you use anything else it should be for a reason. For example, use cuts to match the beat of rock music. Use soft edge wipes to lead the viewer's eye from left to right. If the audience is thinking more about the transitions than the images you haven't succeeded. Keeping it simple is usually best.

Effects

The same principle applies with effects. Think very carefully about using any video or animation effects.

Zooms in should focus our attention on a specific part of the picture, such as a face. Zooms out should be used to reveal more of the scene and give us a sense of the scale. The "Ken Burns" effect of gently zooming into an image often works well but avoid the "see-saw" effect of alternately zooming in and out unless you issue sea-sickness bags to your audience.

Care should also be taken with pans. Enduring a lengthy pan from left to right can be like watching paint dry. Sometimes it's better to select and show us a series of images in succession. Pans up or down, while used to good effect in video often don't work in AV with still images. For example, a pan from the ground to the top of a church spire may be what you hope to achieve but to the viewer the effect is exactly the opposite, the church looks as though it is sinking into the ground.

Animation

Avoid trying to animate inanimate objects such as aeroplanes or pictures of birds. The resulting effect of a plane or a bird "sliding" across the screen is comical. Birds flap their wings, and planes get smaller as they get further away.

Video?

As with any effect or transition, it should be used subtly and for a reason. If your audience is thinking more about the movement than the content it hasn't worked.

Structure

Always have a clear beginning, middle and end. With a "holiday" AV try to avoid the notion that "it's Wednesday so it must be Belgium". We were not there so we don't necessarily need to see your ferry, your hotel, your breakfast... It doesn't have to be chronological. Think in themes rather than dates.

Titles and Fonts

Titles are important. "*My Mediterranean Cruise*" is what I call a "working title". A title like "*The Churches of Norfolk*" fills the viewer with dread - are we going to see all 700 of them? Try to be imaginative and think of a title that will make the reader intrigued and want to see what it's about, "*The Mystery of Madeira*" or "*In Search of a Currant Bun*" for example.

Choose a title typeface of a style, colour and size that is appropriate to the picture content. For example use a sans serif font like Arial for a modern look. For a historical series use a serif font like Times New Roman. Avoid fancy highly decorative fonts as **they are harder to read** in the short time they are on screen. **And please don't use Comic Sans as it just looks childish.** Maybe pick out a font colour from the picture on which your title appears. Titles at the top of the screen are easier for people at the back to see. And don't make the lettering too big, it's like shouting.

Voiceover or Text?

Many people find the idea of doing a voiceover a step too far, so adding some text to the pictures is a good way of conveying essential information. Keep it concise but don't tell us what we can see for ourselves. How long should you allow for the audience to read it? A good rule of thumb is for you to read it through *twice*. Then, we who are unfamiliar with it will have enough time to get to the bottom.

The End

You haven't seen a caption "THE END" at the end of a film since 1940, so why would you do it in an AV today? You the producer should make it clear to the audience that the presentation has finished, by the music coming to a climax, by having a strong final image, or by programming a definite fade out of both music and picture.

Want More?

If you want to see some good examples of Photo Essays or Photo Harmony AVs, have a look at the Bridgend 5 to 8 Photo Harmony Competition website, where many of the winning programmes from previous years can be viewed or downloaded:

[\[www.bridgendcameraclub.co.uk/5to8Comp_Results.html\]](http://www.bridgendcameraclub.co.uk/5to8Comp_Results.html)

Join CAMRAV, the Campaign For Real AV.

Malcolm Imhoff FRPS FACI(M).