

## The writer's camera

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Imagine this scene in a film: A man offers a woman a drink. She accepts. (I can already hear you saying 'boring'.) But what if he has just poisoned her brother, or she is a member of Alcoholics Anonymous, or (this one gets everyone's attention) what 'if we have already seen the man's roommate use the Cutty Sark bottle for a urine sample' [\[1\]](#)? We are bored by disconnected details, but intrigued by the larger scene, the one that connects to our imagination or experience. It is human nature.

Now, think about how you visualised the couple. Were they centre screen? If you imagined any other movement, or music or voices, were these in the background, and muted so that you could focus on the couple? I am guessing that the couple were standing or sitting quietly in the foreground, that your camera made no sudden swings or 180-degree jump-cuts, and that you visualised none of the actual apparatus of film-making. No microphone hung from an overhead boom, no director leapt into view and re-arranged the set, addressed the audience, or handed the woman pages of script. In fact, before I mentioned these possibilities, I will bet they never crossed your mind.

Of course, a real film would have had all of those things, and cameras and cables and lighting and dozens of technicians and service personnel. The scenes would almost certainly have been shot out of sequence, with more than one camera running at a time, giving you, as director, a choice of angles as well as a choice of takes. You might have had your actors rehearse scenes from the first part of the film on the same day you film the ending. You might leave a scene out, try different endings, or even be on the set with the actors, explaining or demonstrating particular gestures or actions. What you already know (or suspect) about the difference between making a film and watching one can be used directly in your research writing.

Writers are like directors, and drafts are the unedited film. In drafts, we are often right there on the page with our subjects, working ideas through and moving the actors about. Information (like actors who might be needed for the next scene, or the previous scene, or a different act altogether) may be wandering around, waiting for direction. Some characters that start out looking useful turn out to be irrelevant. Some relationships become clear only as the work develops.

Some parts are rehearsed and re-rehearsed because they have not gone 'right'. And the writer-director in charge is - and should be - concerned with assembling everything needed for the performance. Film-making combines production with rehearsal (editing comes later) so the



director-writer can build and change and discover along the way, using the cameras to record the result.

In cinema, the camera aims directly at the main event. In text, *the camera is always aimed directly at the subject of the sentence*. Once you know this, rules like 'use the active voice' or 'avoid "we"' are irrelevant. Just turn your camera towards the thread that holds everything together:

*Farmers* perform grassland management and make decisions on grassland use on a per-cut and per-parcel basis. *They* need...  
or:

Decisions on grassland management and grassland use are made on a per-cut and per-parcel basis. These decisions  
If you have filmed yourself in the draft (and who does not?):

Next we will describe the three main factors influencing the healing of simple fractures.  
First...

then change the angle for the final version. Get off the stage. Redirect the camera toward the main message, the critical actors and the key dialogue:

Three main factors influence the healing of simple fractures. First...  
Use the camera to 'zoom in':

*Modern farmers* are constantly under pressure to reduce fixed and variable costs per output of their production systems. *Farmers in dairy production* are trying to produce more milk and calves with lower labour and housing costs, and higher feed conversion rates. *Dairy producers in the Nordic countries* are ...  
or to 'pan' across a landscape (or through time, or through a cause-effect chain) or to show a group of elements or a contrasting pair of alternatives. If you really need to be on camera, be there. It does not happen often, but it can if we are in a direct debate:

Where Singh relied on [x]... we found that better results could be obtained using [y]...  
because...

Otherwise, Singh is debating with an empty chair! If you are part of the movie, make certain that you are. If you are not, make certain that you do not appear. If you are unsure, try writing yourself out of the scene and see what happens to the message (often, it moves to centre screen).

Do not be discouraged if your draft has sections that seem to have the 'drunken uncle with video' effect, in which every sentence starts from a new perspective: oh, that was the bride; here are someone's shoes; was that the cake? No... it is Aunt Renée's hat... no... who was *that*? Oh, is it the cake after all? That must be the corner of a table... Nice manicure... *Whose* wedding did you say this was?

As author, you have a perspective that allows this. True, your audience can only see what you show them, but editing allows you to 're-shoot' important scenes so that the camera work is smooth. Besides, with some events, like weddings (and abstracts and article introductions) the plot is well known, and the audience can make some of the necessary links (assuming its members are from the same family and already know the plot by heart).

Editing, the process of controlling the audience's perspective, is much more than merely correcting, because we visualise as we read. (We may not be visualising what the author expects us to, but we visualise nonetheless.) The writer-director, working on a first draft, can approach the subject from any angle. In the final version, though, basic rules of cinematography apply - focus, continuity, camera control:

*The poultry and swine industries* consume most of the world's fishmeal.

*These industries ...*

*Most of the world's fishmeal* is consumed by the poultry and swine industries.

However, *a significant and rapidly increasing share* is going to fish farming (aquaculture)

With the camera aimed correctly, 'only' 15-20% of a typical materials and methods section will be active, and about 75-85% of the rest of the paper will also be active. This is exactly as it should be, because unless you are one of the factors being studied, readers do not need to look at you: 'samples were taken', not 'we took samples'.

So, in your draft you might have yourself as the subject:

I need to say that this ties in to earlier research, and Hopster, Munksgaard, and Ladewig (1989) have all done something relevant to this point: in various ways they all showed that the ability of a cow to adapt to environmental change is dependant on the functionality of its hypothalamo-pituitary-adrenal-axis (HPA-axis).

And for a draft, this is fine, because you knew you needed to gather them together to make a point; but first of all, you are on stage. Start by editing yourself out:

Hopster (1998), Munksgaard (1996) and Ladewig (1989) have shown that the ability of a cow to adapt to environmental change is dependant on the functionality of its hypothalamo-pituitary-adrenal-axis (HPA-axis).

This is better, but we are still being asked to look at a group of people standing around in a room - and that is all they are doing. They are *not* talking with each other. No matter how brilliant they might be, since I have not met Hopster, Munksgaard, and Ladewig, I cannot visualise them - and even if I could, in the final paper this scene really belongs to the *cow*:



cartoon by David Alexander ©

The ability of a cow to adapt to environmental change depends on the functioning of its hypothalamo-pituitary-adrenal-axis (HPA-axis) (Hopster 1998, Munksgaard 1996, Ladewig 1989).