



RAREly Told Stories Workshop

Rarely Told Stories - B-roll basics 2023

What is B-roll? When should you use it? How to shoot it. What to do if you don't have any.

B-roll footage.

You can think of this as footage where the audio matters less than the visual. Especially compared to the audio in your interviews. B-roll footage is in fact very often used without sound. Its role in your documentary edit is to supplement or complement what gets said verbally in the interviews or narration.

You may hear of lifestyle footage or archival footage (old home movies or news coverage), these can be types of b-roll.

If you made a documentary with zero b-roll someone might criticize it as "it was all just talking heads."

Picture this example:

Joe is seated for an interview. He mentions getting a call from a neurologist while on the soccer field for his daughter's game.

The above interview scene might be approved if you have the b-roll footage of a child's soccer game. This could be edited into his remarks preserving the audio from the interview but adding a "layer" of video above the interview for the part of it where soccer is mentioned.

Of course you may not have this exact shot in your video footage. Is there another game scheduled soon? Could you go get the shot(s) you need? If not maybe something similar can be arranged. Perhaps a close shot of a green lawn and a soccer ball rolls into the shot.

As you build your film making and editing skills, matching the mood of your b-roll to key moments in your interviews will feel like second nature. In this example was the neurologist delivering good news? Perhaps a shot on the goalie goes in and players high five.

The utility of b-roll.

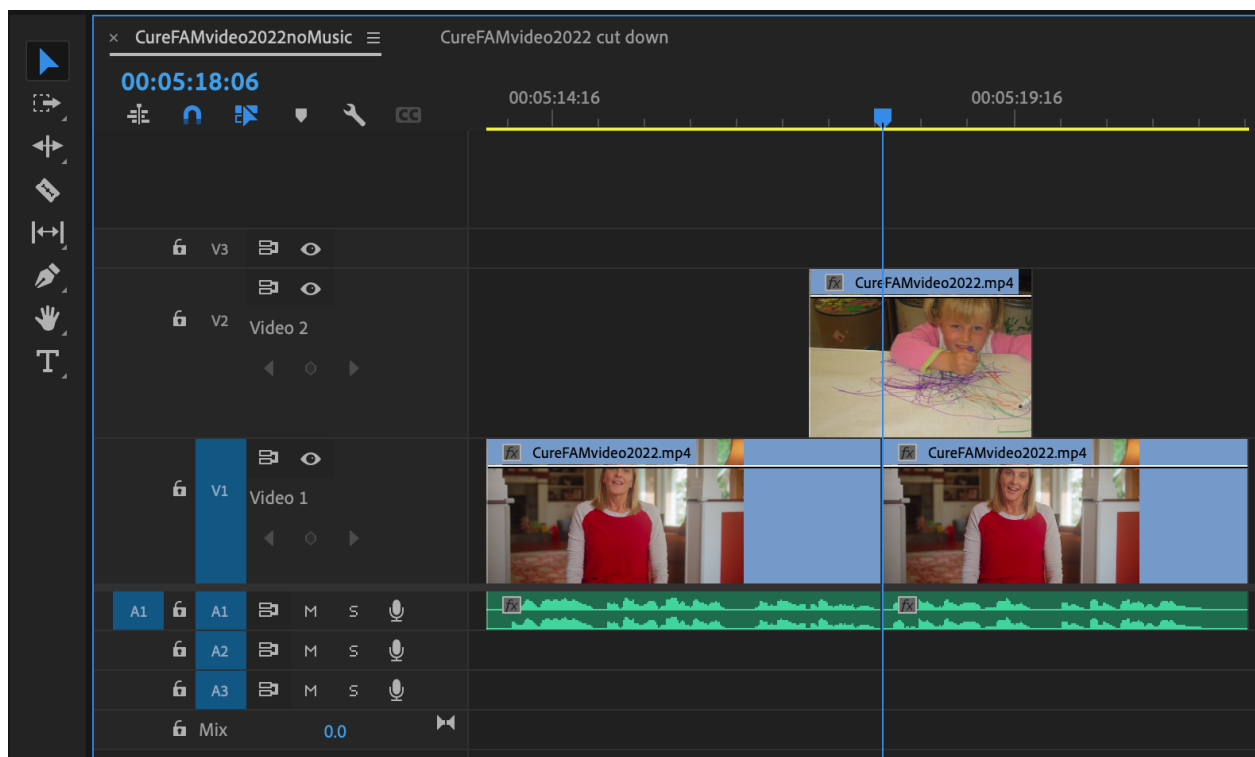
B-roll is ideal for covering up an edit that would otherwise be a jump cut.

Imagine an interview with Jane. She described the best doctor's visit she had. Then she mentions her car needs gas. Next she elaborates on what made this doctor helpful.

You probably want to cut out the part about her car. When you do you'll be left with a jump in her visual since her head and shoulders will have moved from the first part before you cut to the second part after the cut.

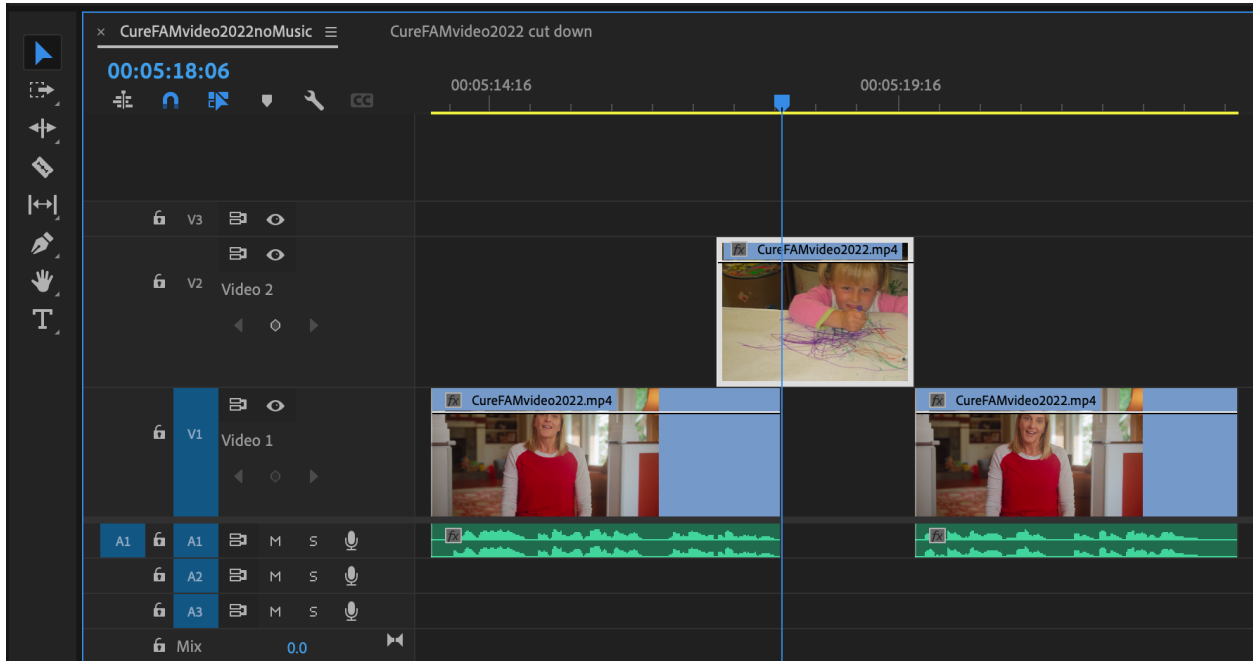
Youtubers and social media videos have made these jump cuts a bit more acceptable recently. But traditionally film and video have tried to avoid them. And even if you embrace including them as a style choice you may find your edit creates too many of them too frequently. B-roll is ideal for covering these jump cuts. By cutting away to footage other than the interviewee your audience will not be distracted by a jump cut. They won't even notice there was a cut.

Here is a quick video [lesson in avoiding jump cuts](#) in your edits.



Above two clips of Jill talking are cut together. On the left is one of her early remarks. On the right is something she said later on. These sit on video layer 1. By using a photo of her daughter on video layer 2 as b-roll we can hide the cut (the blue line) from the audience. They will not see a jump in the video of Jill.

B-roll can also help change the pace of your film. If your interviewee did not pause long enough before she switches subjects, that can feel too abrupt to your audience. By adding some b-roll in between her two topics with some music the audience has a moment to digest what was just discussed and gets prepared for a new topic.



Above is a variation on the earlier example of how two clips of Jill talking are cut together. Using the same footage but here the b-roll allows for 1-2 seconds of pause between Jill's first remark and her second thought.

Too much b-roll?

Some documentaries make the choice to never show a person interviewed. You could say these films are 100% b-roll and the audio from interviews feels more like narration.

This is a valid choice but you can imagine a lot more footage is needed and a greater variety of footage too. For my tastes I want to see the person speaking on camera when there is emotion or expressiveness on their face.

I'd also caution against going to b-roll if it is not interesting. Suppose in our original example of Joe's interview he was not on the soccer field but at the office. Unless Joe has a very impressive workspace or an interesting job, I would not edit in a scene of him taking a call in his office. For me Joe sitting in an office is not more interesting than Joe seated talking to the interviewer. However sometimes you're a bit desperate and you use what you can get. But even then can you get more inventive? Could you shoot an extreme close up of an office phone with the "call holding" light blinking? That might create a feel of suspense "what will this phone be about?"

Stock footage can also be b-roll

If you pay for stock footage, or find a legitimate source for free and royalty-free footage, it may serve as b-roll in your edit. On a low budget you aren't likely to capture epic shots like a helicopter's view of flying across the river toward Manhattan. But stock libraries have shots like these.

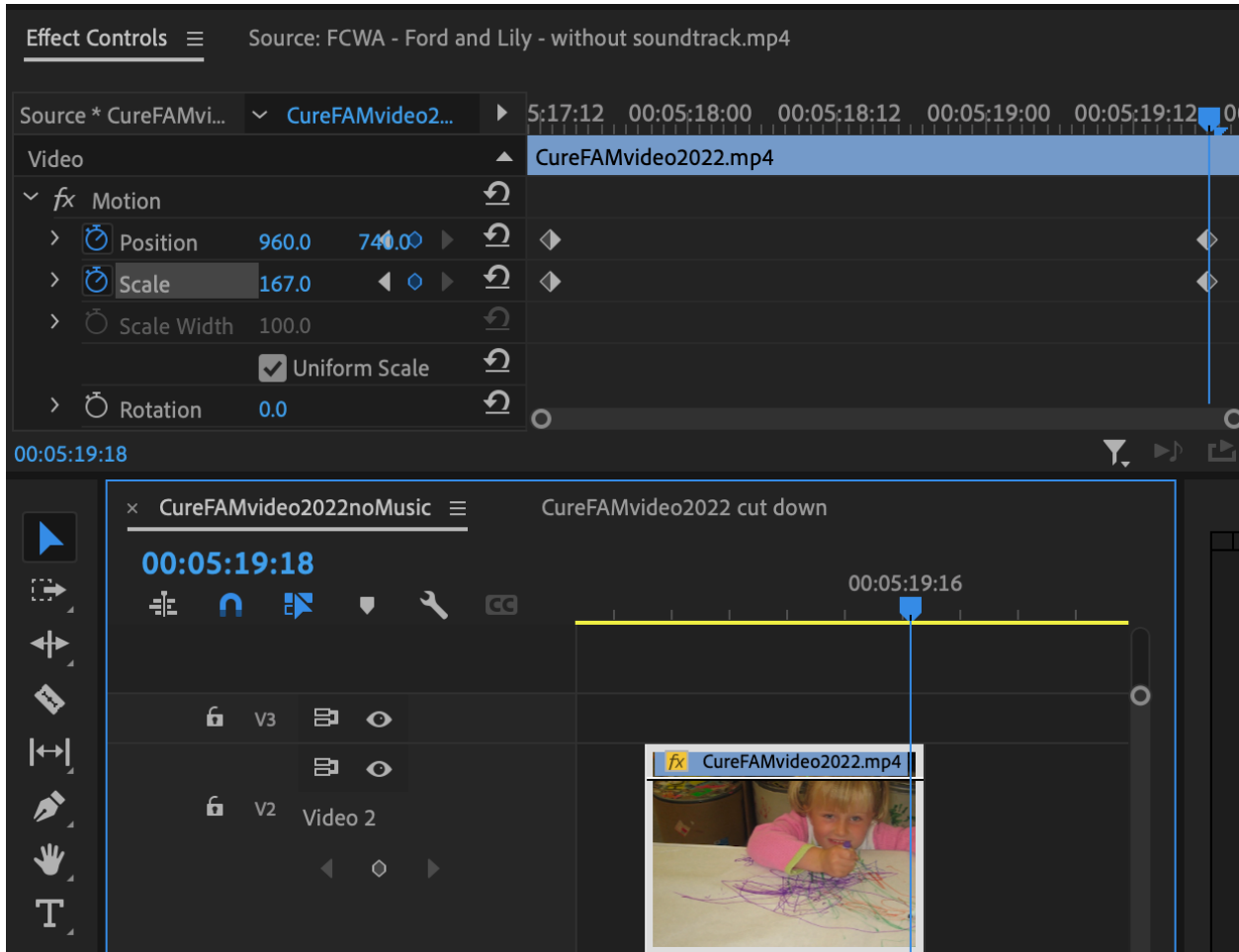
One caution here is to consider if the look of the stock footage feels like a match to the look of your other footage. Perhaps your interview footage all has a warm yellow glow to the light and if the stock footage shots are lit cool blue it may call attention to which shots were not made for this film. Often this can be fixed by adjusting the colors of the footage. This is called color-grading, color correction or color-timing.

Another downside is if you found that perfect stock shot a bunch of other people did too. You maybe end up with the great shot of a Doctor reading an x-ray only to see it used in seven other documentaries too.

Still photos can be b-roll.

Your b-roll doesn't have to be moving video. You can bring still photos into your edit and use them the same way. If you have an interview where Janice mentions her daughter's third birthday party, she may not have film or video of that event, but she likely has a photo.

To avoid the look of a slide show you might want to zoom in or pan across the photo slowly while its on screen. This is called [The Ken Burns Effect](#) or kinestasis. In his documentary The Civil War, Burns of course had no archival motion picture film to work with as b-roll. He had to rely on photos and paintings. But knowing these static images could benefit from some motion he employed a style of moving the picture within the video frame. Some edit software (iMovie for example) now comes with a preset effect called The Ken Burns Effect. Other software programs might call it Drift. If your software doesn't have an effect like this it is easy to achieve manually if you know how to set key frames to animate scale (size) and position. [This video shows you how.](#)



In the image above the key frames set for position and scale at 5 minutes 17 seconds set one set of values. At 5 minutes 19 seconds a second pair of key frames set new values that are zoomed in closer to the girls face. The software interprets the change over time animating the photo to move from position and size 1 to position and size 2.

Shooting b-roll

Take your time. You'll want at least ten seconds of each shot you think you might use. Shoot the same shot a few ways. Can you get the same scene from different angles? Close up and long shot? If your camera moves to land on the shot, also shoot a version that is more still. Having these variations will help you in your edit. YOU might use the same idea twice or more with using the exact same shots more than once. Or you might put two angles of your shot side by side in the edit starting on a close up detail and then showing the wider context of that same scene.

Shoot in slow motion sometimes. Most phone cameras can do this well now. Slow motion can make even ordinary things seem more important. Happy scenes can be made to feel more somber or even ominous or menacing if they are in slow motion.

Unique requirements in rare disease documentaries.

With anything you shoot for film or video you'll need permission from anyone you show. For rare disease documentaries it's likely you may want footage from a hospital or Doctor's office. But asking for this permission can be a long bureaucratic process which usually results in an answer of "no".

But if your camera is as commonplace and unobtrusive as your cell phone you can likely get away with shooting some footage during your appointments. Be certain to only include your own family or people who have given you permission.

Beyond this, be mindful of including anything on camera that might reveal personal health information. Don't include a Doctor or Nurse's name on a door, or document or a white board. If you want the shot of you signing your release papers be sure no one else has paperwork nearby that could be seen in your shot.