



7 steps to good production work

Pete Fraser, author of Pete's *MediaMag* Blog, examiner and joint co-ordinator of the BFI/NFTS Film Academy, has seen more student production work than most, and is the go-to expert on how to both avoid the pitfalls and pratfalls and produce superb coursework. Here are his essential steps to success – and he's got them down to a mere seven!

Dave Brailsford, the coach of GB cycling at the 2012 Olympics and Principal of Team Sky cycling has a catchphrase that's actually not very catchy, but which sums up his philosophy: 'the aggregation of marginal gains'. It refers to the idea that if you improve lots of little things by a tiny bit each, it all adds up to something significantly bigger, which can give you the edge and win you the race.

It's my philosophy with student production work too. If you get all the little elements of it right, your work will be that much better. So, let's break it down into seven steps...

Aggregating your marginal gains – in seven steps!

1. Before you start a project, do your **research**. The best student work always comes out of a clear understanding of what a real media

text is like – how it is constructed, how stories are told, how editing works, how things are laid out on the page, what goes where in a media text and in what order. For a piece of assessed work, it's important to keep a record of this research, the evidence for your project and its gestation. It's often worth quite a few marks. And it doesn't end when you start your production. Research should be seen as an ongoing element, continuing the process of refinement at every stage. Audience feedback throughout the process is part of your research and can be of immense benefit to your project.

2. **Plan everything**. Just like research, planning needs to be evidenced. Artists have their sketchbooks. Most professional media creatives do too, always drawing things,

noting down ideas, coming back to fragments that may have been noted ages ago but suddenly become useful. Ideas can come from anywhere, but they most often come from observation – both of things in daily life and in elements from media texts which you might be able to steal and re-shape. If it strikes you, note it down; it may come in handy. Once you start a project, you need to plan every detail to minimise the risk of things not working or going wrong. From scripting, storyboarding and flatplanning to costumes, locations and actors, everything should be planned so that nothing is left to chance. Planning involves rehearsal and preparing your performers so that they understand what they are expected to do. Planning involves scouting your location



and checking what it is going to look like from every angle, being certain that it will be available at the time you actually need it; planning means remembering every prop that will be needed and working out where you are going to get them and who is going to be responsible for bringing them along. Planning means being as organised as you can possibly be, thinking ahead about every little detail. Remember: on every project, things will go wrong. Planning minimises the number of things to go wrong – and also minimises the impact when they do.

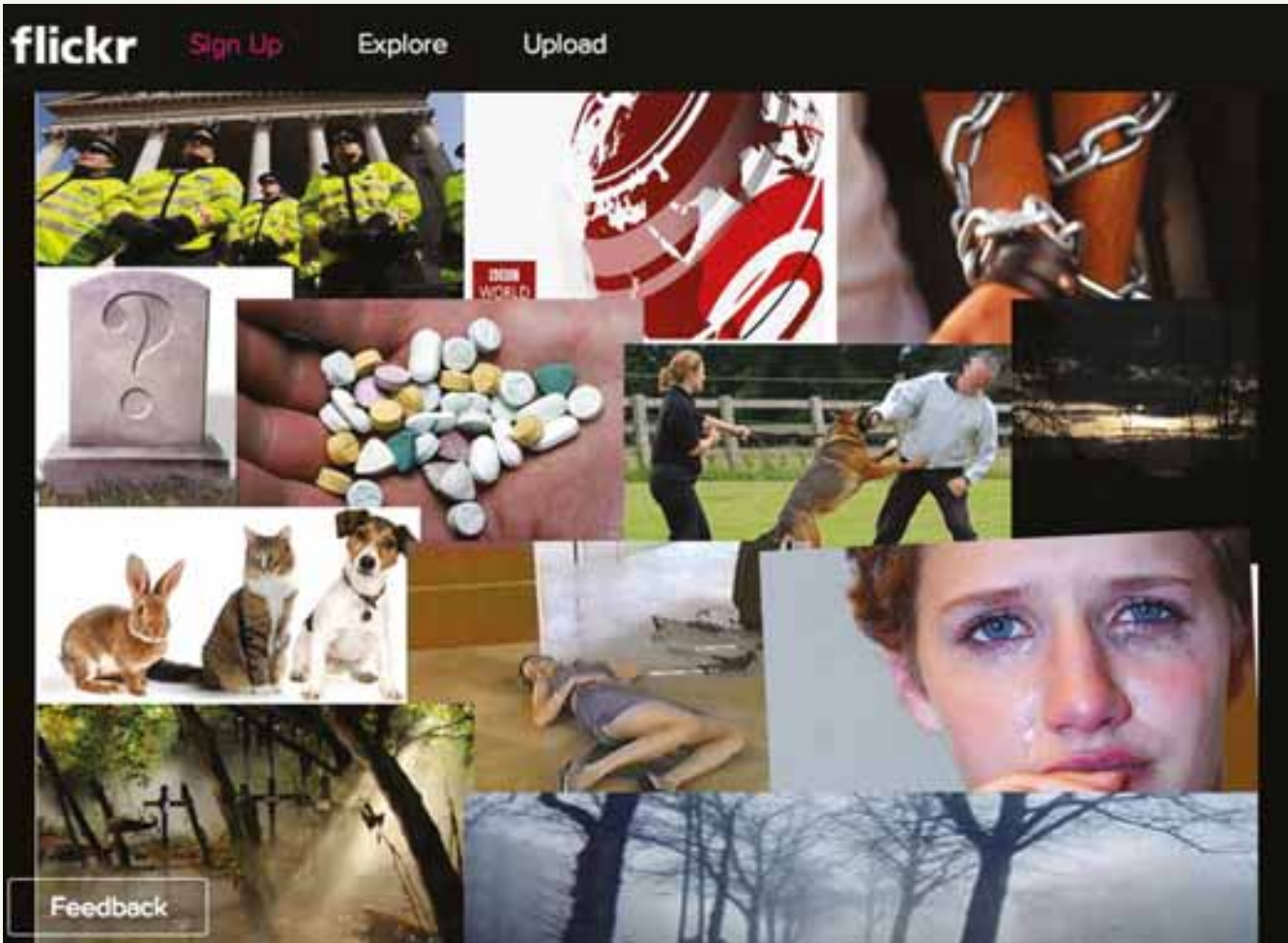
3. Most real world media production involves **teamwork** and the same is true of most student production. Even if you are doing a solo project, the chances are you are going to need people to appear in it, even if it's just posing for photos. If it's a group project, your teamwork will be vital to its success. Everyone will have a role to play in shooting a video and you'll all need to have input into editing. And at the end of it all, your assessment will depend on how well you have worked together, so you might as well make the most of it. Forget any idea of blaming each other for what might go wrong, and all take responsibility to make it a positive experience. Media is one of the few subjects where



you get marks for anything other than individual work, so pulling together to maximise the project is very important. Even if you divide up roles, like a good sports team, always be there to back each other up. It's not about leaving someone to get on with it and then coming back to moan at them when they don't do the work the way you would have done it; it's about having someone on the line ready to head the ball away if it gets past the defender! Communication is crucial to such a team ethos and you should all be open to consider your work in progress and to take on board constructive criticism from each other in a positive way. Remember, there is no 'I' in 'team'; the project belongs to you all and you all need to contribute. In my recent blogposts, I've looked at some videos which illustrate the importance of teamwork and everyone doing their job.

4. **Know your kit.** Whatever equipment you are using, you need to practise with it so you are clear what it can and can't do, how it works, and how to make the most of it. Don't be tempted to jump straight to its special features and tricks, which are only there to disguise bad work: learn how to use the basics properly. This goes for cameras, edit programs, image manipulation, tripods, everything! You cannot expect to do your best work the first time you use the equipment – everyone needs time to train, to make mistakes, to build up skills and to get better, to master the art and to master the kit. My recent blogposts highlight some good learning activities or challenges, such as 're-makes' which are very good for helping to prepare for projects.

5. **Get the big picture right,** then home in on the detail. Often students will spend loads of time perfecting one tiny little detail, like cutting at precisely the right moment in their video, but fail to see that they haven't got the overall structure of the video sorted out at all, so it doesn't make any sense. This is particularly the case in texts like music videos, which need to have all the synched footage in place before starting to deal with cutaways, but it is true of all media



production. You might have a lovely highlight on that font on the contents page of your magazine, but if your columns aren't lined up properly, the page looks rubbish.

6. **Learn from your mistakes.** It's the best way to learn. Everybody makes mistakes and gets things wrong but the best learning takes those mistakes on board and thinks about them next time. If you keep

making the same mistakes – be it technical errors, bad timekeeping, communication or whatever – then you are not learning from them.

7. **And finally, take time over your work.** A good media project is much harder to do and much more time consuming than any essay. If you don't care about your mark and don't want a piece of work of which you can be proud, fine –

do it quickly. But if you want the satisfaction of a really good piece of work, you have to be prepared to commit to it and put the hours in. Aim for it to be as good as possible – seek feedback from people who will be honest with you – stand back from it and cast a critical eye. Be a bit of a perfectionist but stick to the deadlines – aim to finish early so you have time to tweak it.

And if you follow these steps, your work *will* benefit from that 'aggregation of marginal gains'. Every little bit of improvement will help to make your work good production work.

Pete Fraser taught Media for many years at Long Road College, Cambridge. He is Chair of the Media Education Association, leading the BFI NFTS Film Academy Residential course this Easter and writes Pete's MediaMag Blog (<http://petesmediablog.blogspot.co.uk/>).

Images Long Road Sixth Form and NFTS/BFI Talent Campus, supplied by Pete Fraser

It Starts With What You Know: PREPARING FOR PRODUCTION



All A Level Media students will need to complete a number of practical productions during their studies. This work will make up a significant percentage of the marks that contribute to your final grade. Blogger and lecturer Steph Hendry talks you through a series of preparatory stages with the AQA coursework tasks in mind.

The exam boards all have different requirements for production work so you should check with your teacher and/or the specification to be sure you know precisely what is expected of you.

You will need to ensure that you can show your examiner the extent of your technical skills, of course – whether it's in the use of cameras to take still or moving images, your use of software to create print and e-media products, or in the post-production process when you edit your video work or enhance your photos. The choices you make during production will also show your creativity. This is also an important part of the marks you achieve.

But making the right technical choices and being able to take a creative approach to your production work depends on the knowledge and understanding you bring to the task. Even though most marks will usually be awarded for the quality, accuracy and scope of your production, your

pre-production work (research and planning) will also impact on your potential to achieve well.

Getting started

Depending on the structure of your coursework unit, you might be able to choose what you are making or this may have been decided for you. Either way, before you start production work you should be able to answer the following questions:

- What platform is your production to be accessed on?
- What form of media product are you making?
- What genre?
- Who are the target audience?
- What do they find appealing?
- What do they like to do?
- What are their interests/concerns?
- What do they expect from this type of media product?

- What is the product's function? (What is it trying to do or achieve?)

Once you are clear who your audience is, what you are making and why, you can have a look at existing media products to find out how real media products are constructed. You should look for the way real media products try and create audience appeal and how media producers attempt to make sure the products are successful. The knowledge and understanding you gain when researching should then feed into the practical and creative choices you make when completing your practical work. Asking the right kinds of questions can help you make the most out of your research.

- What are the codes and conventions of the platform you are working in?
- What are the codes and conventions of the form you're creating?



your product will be presented on – is it a print product, an e-media product or a broadcast product (moving image or radio)? Or is it a broadcast product that will be hosted on e-media – a promotional video on a website, for example?

- What are the codes and conventions of the genre of your product?
- Who is the target audience and how do media producers attempt to:
 - reach them
 - attract them
 - appeal to them
 - persuade them to act?
- What is the function of your production and what techniques do media producers use to help them achieve this?

After you have looked at real media products, you should be able to answer the question that will allow you to start planning your own work:

- How can all this knowledge be integrated into the practical production? What media language choices will work best?

Codes and conventions: platform, form and genre

Before you start your practical work, you need to consider precisely what it is you will produce. Your decisions will be very different if you are creating a website, a poster or a TV advert. The first important decision (and it may be made for you if you've been told what to make) is to identify which platform

SHOT TYPES - MEANING & MOTIVATION



Medium shot (MS)
To watch. Provides information on the body language and context of the objective.



Wide shot (WS)
Watch or establish shot. Establishes location after-ward of the opening of a scene and again at the end. Helps to see the physical property of the space and set-up arrangement.



Medium long shot (MLS)
Including the torso. Provides some physical information than the MS shot, but less clear up detail.



Close up (CU)
Helps create a stronger relation with the character and actor than the MS shot. Can also be used to suggest emotion or being followed or watched by an unseen character.



Long shot (LS)
Full figure. Establishes character in their full body. Can often be used for showing the audience information or suggest emotions or actions.

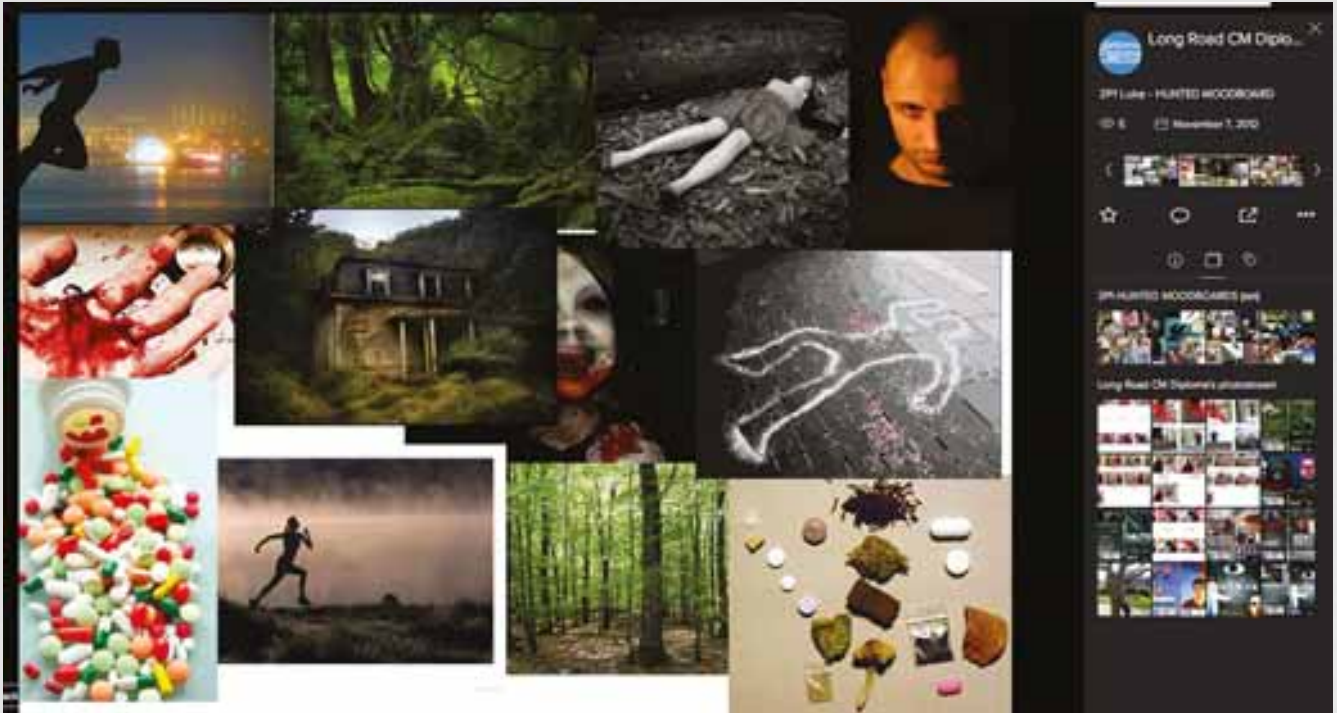


High shot, Over the top (OT, OTS) or High angle shot (HAS)
By looking down at the character in the upper shot, it gives off the idea that the character is weak or being looked at in a way that suggests a lack of respect or admiration.

Platform

This is an important consideration as each platform has its own codes and conventions – often based on the way an audience would access the product and the technologies available in the presentation of information (see p11).

Print	E-Media	Broadcast
<p>Print products rely on text and visual illustration.</p>	<p>Whilst e-media has the capacity to provide text-based information, it is largely a visual form.</p> <p>Information can be presented in many ways including audio, moving image and animation.</p> <p>Information can be presented in non-linear ways (using hyperlinks, pop-up info, metadata etc.).</p>	<p>Broadcast texts present information using audio and sometimes visual information. Broadcast texts can carry complex information efficiently to the audience and because they are accessed over time there can be a development of an argument or the construction of a narrative within the product.</p>
<p>Layout and design of the pages should be considered to ensure legibility and effective communication of information/ideas.</p>	<p>Visuals in e-media can be varied from still photography, illustrations, animations and moving image.</p> <p>Web page design is intended to increase appeal and legibility.</p> <p>Moving image and audio work should be carefully considered, just as it is in broadcast work.</p>	<p>The framing of images, and the use of sound, lighting, costume, make up, props and location are essential considerations when constructing a moving-image product. Editing and post-production are used to construct narrative and can help enhance the visuals.</p> <p>Audio recordings can use music and sound effects as well as dialogue to communicate information. Post-production effects can also be used to enhance the product.</p>
<p>Audiences will often not have much time to access print so key information should be given as quickly and efficiently as possible. Where space is available detail should follow further down the page/into the document.</p> <p>Some print is designed to consider portability (e.g. 'handbag' sized magazines) and other forms need to allow for the fact that audiences need to access information quickly (e.g. billboard advertising).</p>	<p>Audiences have the ability to contribute and interact with e-media. This can take many forms from online games and activities to chat rooms and social networks. Audiences can be part of the production in the encouragement of citizen journalism, the use of user-generated content and the way that social media activity can impact on text production.</p> <p>E-media is increasingly dominant and these products are often tailored to be accessible via mobile technologies. More and more audience members are using smart phones and tablets to access e-media content</p>	<p>Audiences are often assumed to be more passive recipients of information/entertainment when accessing broadcast texts. TV and film products demand attention although non-traditional methods of accessing these products are growing. More and more people watch TV and/ or film online, and mobile devices with ever-improving screens allow audiences to take selected broadcast texts out and about.</p> <p>Podcasts are available online and can be downloaded. Radio is both an analogue and digital form.</p>
<p>Print imagery often has to compete with large volumes of information (e.g. multiple front covers in a newsagents; three or four stories on each page of a tabloid newspaper) and so layout and design is used to draw attention to the print product or show importance on the page.</p>	<p>E-media needs to offer its audience more than simple print media. Contemporary audiences often expect to be part of the product in some way and they also expect some form of enhanced experience. This can be achieved by offering them music to listen to, videos to watch, interactive games, areas where they can comment etc. This is a particularly important part of e-media's success as neither print nor broadcast can offer interactivity and variety in the same way.</p>	<p>Radio can be used as a secondary medium – it is often listened to whilst the audience member is doing something else. Visual broadcasts usually expect that the audience will give their full attention to the text but with changing technologies this may not always be the case.</p> <p>Advertising products have to fight very hard for attention in a media landscape where audiences have the ability to avoid adverts.</p>



Form, genre and audience

Of course, not all print, e-media or broadcast products are the same. Within each platform there are different forms. For example: a print product could be a newspaper, magazine or display advert; TV programmes and films are different forms and as such have different codes and conventions. Within each form there are likely to be different genres – again each with their own codes and conventions. Further, where there is a specific target audience, this too may create a set of specific codes and expectations.

Platform – print	Platform – e-media	Platform – broadcast
Form – newspapers	Form – lifestyle and entertainment sites	Form – TV advertising
Genres – tabloid, 'broadsheet', national, regional, specialist newspapers (sport, finance etc.)	Genres – men's interest, general female interest, 'mum's' interest, sport focused sites, pop music focused sites, film focused sites	Genres – food adverts, Christmas adverts, hair-care adverts, car adverts
Audience – Are they predominantly male, female, young, old, holders of traditional values, 'middle class', holder of left-wing values?	Audience – closely linked to genre (see above)	Audience – some adverts are targeted to appeal to women, children, teens, drivers, homeowners, the health conscious, lovers of luxury etc.

So, for example: it is a convention that:

- TV adverts (a form of the broadcast platform) are either 30 or 45 seconds long and use medium to slow editing techniques
- food/supermarket adverts (genre) use close-ups of food... usually showing some form of movement such as steam, condensation or stretchy cheese
- supermarket adverts (genre) use a celebrity as a 'spokesperson'
- the spokesperson will be chosen specifically to appeal to the store's customer base (audience).

Function

Finally – make sure you are sure what you are trying to achieve with your production! Does your product need:

- to create awareness of a brand or an issue?
- to entertain? inform? persuade? offer a lifestyle?
- to identify a location? identify character-types? create enigma?

- to create a reaction such as fear? laughter? shock? guilt? outrage?
- to encourage your audience to do something? go to the cinema? buy something? donate to a charity? get involved? pass information on?

Of course, the answer to these questions may be included in the requirements of your task but once you are clear on your production's form and function, the genre you are working in and the nature of your audience, you can start to consider how you will attempt to replicate the appropriate codes and conventions and make an



appropriate and successful product. Investigating how existing media work should provide you with lots of ideas that you can integrate into the planning of your own work. Of course, you should try to think creatively too and see if you can come up with ideas and approaches of your own.

Common errors to avoid

Some errors in practical productions come up time and time again and they are often caused by paying insufficient attention to the way existing media texts are constructed. Here are some common pitfalls to look out for.

Print

- Pages that are the wrong size. If you are emulating an existing print product, accuracy in the height and width of the page you are creating will have an impact on the success of your work.
- Pages where the design elements are too big or too small. During research, check the font size used in the publication you are emulating, as well as the proportion of image to text. Also check the way columns are used (count the number and measure the width of columns used in real publications).

E-media

- E-media that is dominated by text. In web construction, a common error is to fill the page up with dense paragraphs of text. Even newspaper sites try to ensure that lengthy stories are broken up visually with lots of images, illustrations, videos, pull quotes, etc.
- E-media that is difficult to navigate through. E-media productions should consider the ways audiences will need to navigate around the site. Links should be logical and clearly visible. Try to avoid creating dead-ends where the audience have to use the back button on the browser to move away from a page.

Broadcast

- Over-reliance on mid-shots in moving-image work. Consider ways of integrating in a range of different camera shots. Think about using long shots, close-ups, as well as shots composed from different heights and angles. Don't vary your shots simply for the sake of it, but be aware that a common error is to over-rely on mid-shots. This can lead to moving-image work that is visually repetitive and dull.

- Inconsistent sound levels. Keep an ear open for sound levels in both video and audio work. Your audience should never need to alter the volume when accessing your work. A common error is to have music very loud and dialogue very quiet in the sound mix. This can ruin the effect you are aiming for.

The production units of your course are essential, and will feed into the overall grade you achieve. Show the examiner you are considering the ideas you are learning in the classroom and that you have a good knowledge of how professional media producers approach the production of commercial media products – and you'll make it easy for them to give you a great grade!

Steph Hendry is a Lecturer in Media Studies at Runshaw College, and a freelance writer and trainer. Follow her on Twitter @albionmill.