GUIDE TO BASIC SOUND WORK

GETTING STARTED

To get started, make sure you are working with good headphones. You will need to carefully listen to each sound cut to decide the best way to deal with the cut. Also, since you are only working with sound, you should not be making any changes to the picture (you should be PICTURE LOCKED at the point that you start to do sound work, which means you are only changing audio tracks and not modifying picture at all). In order to be able to work separately with sound and picture, make sure the MASTER LINKING button above the timeline is turned off / grayed out.

You also want to make sure you can see and modify your audio levels. Use the “clip overlays” button on the bottom left of the timeline to turn on the pink lines that show audio levels for each clips.

SELECTING TRACKS

Now, before you work on audio transitions, you need to decide which set of audio tracks to use (for scenes that still have both the camera audio and the external recorder audio). Start by listening separately to each set of tracks.
Use the mute buttons on the left side of the timeline to selectively switch off tracks. For the example above, turning off / muting the A3 track will allow you to listen to only the camera sound. Next, turning off the A1 and A2 tracks will allow you to listed to only the external audio recorder sound. You will need to either choose one set of recordings that sounds the best, or, if you think a mix of both works best, you can set a mix of levels on each audio track that produces a nice result.

SETTING GOOD AUDIO LEVELS

Generally speaking, each clip should have levels between -12 and -20 on the audio levels meter (the meter is on the right hand side of Final Cut and displays levels as you play through clips. Nothing should ever be triggering the red on the meter. Very loud scenes (like amplified music) might be a little bit louder (into the yellow on the meter), and very quiet scenes with no talking might be a bit under -20, but the -12 to -20 is good ballpark range for most dialogue.

If your levels seem too high or too low, move the pink level line up or down on the audio clip and play the clip again. Levels should be monitored for every clip in the timeline.

CREATING AUDIO TRANSITIONS ON CUTS

Basically, for every chunk of the project that represents continuous time and space (i.e. within a scene picture cuts are meant to create an illusion of seamlessness), there should be some kind of audio transition on every cut. These audio transitions help smooth jarring picture cuts and create a stronger sense of continuity. When working on audio for a scene, you will need to play through the scene cut point by cut point, and for each cut make a decision about what kind of sound transition will work best.
If you have clean sound extensions on both sides of the cut, or if you are cutting ambient sound to ambient sound, you can usually just make a simple 30-frame audio dissolve on the cut.

To make a basic 30-frame dissolve, control-click on an audio cut to activate the menu below:

Selecting “add transition cross fade (+ 3 dB)” will place a basic 30-frame dissolve on the audio cut. Do this for each audio track:

Then listen (with headphones) to the cut with the new audio dissolves. In many cases, this will work fine, and you can move on to the next cut.

However, sometimes you will encounter a situation where your extensions aren’t clean on both sides (or sometimes, if you are using a whole camera shot, you may not have
an extension at all). You might hear the beginning of someone starting to say something in the dissolve, or some other awkward sound overlap that doesn’t work.

In this case, you might try playing with a shorter dissolve length (15 frames, 10 frames, or even 5 frames can work). To edit the length of the audio dissolve, shift-click to select the dissolves on both audio tracks (if you are working with more than one track), and then double click on the highlighted dissolves. This will open a new window where you can edit the length of the transition.

![Duration window screenshot](image)

If you are still having trouble making the transition work with a simple dissolve, OR if you want to do something more creative with the sound transition and play with different transition lengths on each side of the cut, then you probably want to SPLIT TRACKS for the cut. This is a common strategy for a situation where you have a problematic sound extension on shot A (someone starts speaking right away), and a clean extension on shot B. In this situation, you want to put shot A and shot B on two different tracks so that you work with the two tracks separately.
In the picture above, I’ve moved Shot A and Shot B onto alternating tracks. TIP: to move an audio clip onto a higher or lower track, hold down the shift key while dragging the clip to maintain the clip’s sync position precisely.

Now, I can work with the two clips separately. If the sound extension on Shot A is completely unusable, maybe I can’t extend Shot A at all, but I can extend Shot B back a bit to help transition the audio, and I can put a dissolve on the head of Shot B:
A dissolve on the head extension of shot B will cover the fact that there is no extension on shot A.

Every time you make this kind of edit, listen carefully to the transition. Making these audio transitions work can take a few tries and some fine tuning.

Lastly, you can use KEYFRAMING and the PEN tool if you want more control over exactly how each audio transition works. On the keyboard press P to activate the pen tool, or, on your screen, find the pen tool on the menu to the right of the timeline:
Once you turn on the pen tool, any point that you click on the pink audio level line will turn into a keyframe. You can click on any keyframe point to drag it up or down (making the level higher or lower). This allows you to make customized audio transitions, very long transitions, etc.

In the example above, both split tracks / checkerboarding AND audio keyframes are used to create customized sound transitions from shot to shot.