How To
Edit Dialog

for

"Morning Coffee"

The secrets of editing a conversation for a motion picture or TV drama

How To Edit Dialog

Editing dialog is very different from all other forms of film editing. When you edit a conversation, the spoken words are more important than the picture.

When people talk to each other, their conversation has a natural pace or rhythm. To edit dialog, you must recreate the natural timing, pace and rhythm of the conversation.

That is why I find it easier to edit the audio first and the picture second. It is much easier to edit the picture once the audio perfect.

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"Morning Coffee"
Scene #15

In this scene, the daughter asks the mother for advise over a cup of coffee early in the morning.

This is a simple scene which is an excellent demonstration of how to dialog. This scene has five clips filmed from five different camera angles plus an exterior shot to establish time and place. There is also a separately recorded audio track for some of the words of the dialog.

4

15-A2A

15-2

15A-1

15B-1

15C-1

15D-1

15 Wild

Scene 15 - A2A

The Exterior Shot

Before this scene starts, the audience needs to see the time and place of action. To do this, you simply show the exterior of the house early in the early morning sunlight. I think that this movie clip should fade in, play for three seconds while birds chirps and warm music is heard in the background and then the picture should dissolve to the conversation between the mother and her daughter.

This clip is marked "15-A2A MOS". MOS means there is no audio for this clip. MOS is from the German for "without sound".

15-A2A

15-2

15A-1

15B-1

15C-1

15D-1

15 Wild

Scene 15 Take 2   1074

Scene 15, Take 2
The Establishing Shot

The first movie clip of the scene is the establishing shot. This clip establishes where everything is in the room and the clip runs from the beginning to the end of the scene. That is why it is called the establishing shot.

By filming the establishing shot first, this gives the actors the opportunity to practice their lines before they have to do their close ups. If the actors make mistakes in their dialog in the establishing shot, it does not matter because most of the scene will be replaced by the close-up shots.

As you can see, the actors make almost no mistakes. Before the scene was filmed, the actor's carefully memorized all the lines for the scene and the actors practiced this scene many times. When you film your own movies, your actors must be just as prepared before you turn on the camera.

Note: The scene name and frame number are written on the bottom of each frame to help you identify each movie clip. You will find this very useful as you edit.

6

15-A2A

15-2

15A-1

15B-1

15C-1

15D-1

15 Wild

Scene 15A Take 1   616

Scene 15A, Take 1
The Mother's Over-The-Shoulder Shot

The next clip is the over-the-shoulder shot of the mother. In this shot, you see the back of the head of the girl and the face of the mother. An over-the-shoulder shot shows the relationship between the two actors.

This clip is much shorter than the establishing shot since this clip only shows the conversation of the mother and daughter at the breakfast table.

Notice that all of the mother's shots are done before the shots of the daughter. This is because mother is the more experienced actor so she does not need as much time to rehearse. The daughter can continue to rehearse her lines while her back is to the camera.

The letters "A", "B" and "C" after the scene number indicate a new camera setup (a new camera position.)

7

15-A2A

15-2

15A-1

15B-1

15C-1

15D-1

15 Wild

Scene 15B Take 1   438

Scene 15B, Take 1
The Mother's Close-Up Shot

Next is the close-up shot of the mother. Again this clip does not run the full length of the scene but only as long as the dialog of the mother at the breakfast table.

Notice how the audio is softer and more natural. This is because the overhead microphone is now closer to the actor so she does not have to speak as loud during the close-up shot.

8

15-A2A

15-2

15A-1

15B-1

15C-1

15D-1

15 Wild

Scene 15C Take 1   521

Scene 15C, Take 1
The Daughter's Over-The-Shoulder Shot

Next is the over-the-shoulder shot of the daughter.

By now, the actress playing the daughter is very familiar with her lines so all goes smoothly on the first take.

9

15-A2A

15-2

15A-1

15B-1

15C-1

15D-1

15 Wild

Scene 15D Take 1   533

Scene 15D, Take 1
The Daughter's Close-Up Shot

Next is the close-up shot of the daughter. This movie clip includes only the lines spoken by the daughter at the breakfast table.

Even though this clip is very short, it is vital to the success of this scene because it brings the emotions of the daughter closer to the audience.

15-A2A

15-2

15A-1

15B-1

15C-1

15D-1

15 Wild

```
06:42:40.28

W-15
SOUND REEL #17

WILD LINE FOR SCENE 15

Scene 15 Wildtrack        145
```

Scene 15 - Wildtrack
The Wildtrack Audio

The last film clip contains only sound. The picture is just a sign board.

This movie clip has the dialog that must be replaced in the establishing shot.

Since this dialog is not synced to the picture, it is called a "wild track" or wild sound.

Scene 15 - A2A   278

Scene 15 Take 2   1017

Scene 15D Take 1   317

The real thing!

These are the seven clips that were given to the film editor in Hollywood to edit this scene. No more. No less.

Load these into your computer and work along with me as I edit this scene. Now you are editing an actual TV special filmed in Hollywood. This is the real thing.

If you want to become a film editor, you must practice, practice, practice. That is why the scenes on this disk are so important. They give you a chance to practice editing scenes that are fun to edit. And they give you the chance to be a real film editor.

So let's get started!

Scene 15B Take 1   228

Scene 15C Take 1   493

Scene 15A Take 1   1344

12
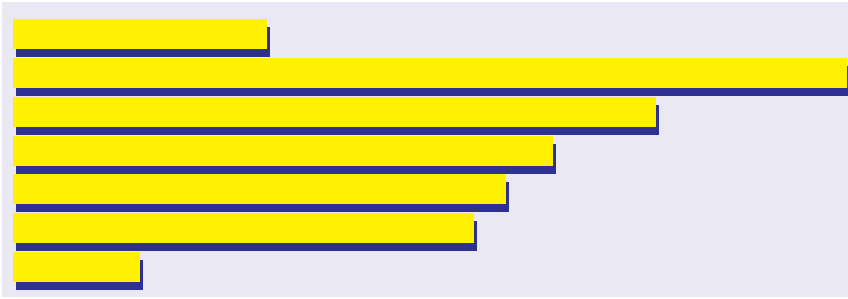
Getting Started

To get started, copy all the clips for the scene to your hard drive. Then import all the clips from your hard drive into your editing program.

All of these clips are ready for editing with Final Cut Pro and other professional editing program. If your editing program will not accept QuickTime movie clips, you must use a program like Apple's QuickTime Movie Player (which requires QuickTime Pro) to convert the clips to a format (codec, frame rate and audio file format) that your editing program will accept.

To edit dialog, you select a clip, trim it, and then put it into the time line, placing it after the previous clip. It is very easy.

The challenge is deciding which clip to use. If you are not sure which clip is best, you must look at all possible alternatives before you can decide which clip works best. That takes time!

To help you understand this process, I will show you all the steps that I did to edit this scene. Follow along and you will see one way to edit this scene. There are probably 1,000 different ways to edit this scene so mine is not necessarily the best. Will yours be better?

15-A2A MOS

Scene 15 - A2A   207

Scene 15 - A2A   290

In
Frame 207

Out
Frame 290
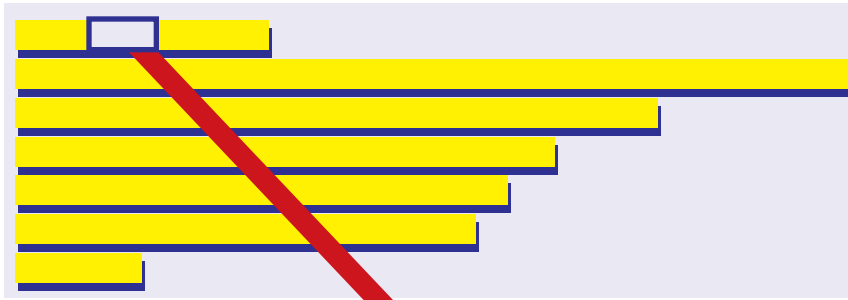
Trim clip 15-A2A

I want to start with a view of the exterior of the house. About three seconds is a good length of time to see the house.

I add extra frames for the fade in (from black) and for the dissolve to the next clip. Therefore, the total length of the clip is three and a half seconds.

Start with frame 207 and end after frame 290.

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15-A2A MOS

Scene 15 - A2A   207

Scene 15 - A2A   280

Place this clip in the timeline

Once I have set the in and out points, I place this clip in the time line.

Since this is the first clip in the scene, I apply a 6 frame fade-in effect at the beginning of this clip so the scene fades in quickly but gently.

Since I want to fade into the interior of the house, I apply a 6 frame dissolve at the end of this clip and the beginning of the next clip.

Because this clip is MOS, there is no audio to put into the timeline for this clip.

Picture

Audio
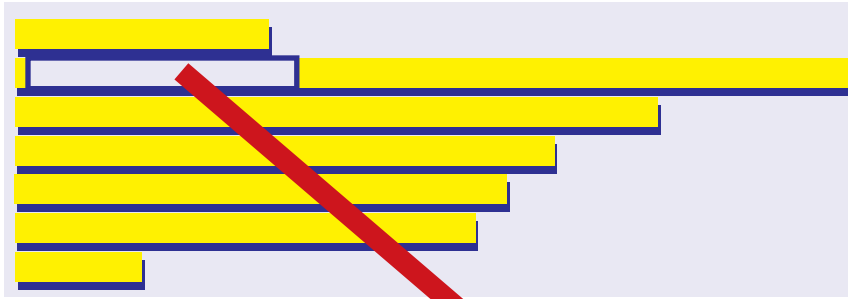
I smell coffee?

Oh! Good morning. It's from Switzerland. I brought it. Here. Sit down and I will get you a cup.

We talked so late last night, I thought you'd be sleeping in all morning.

It is called jetlag. Got my days and nights mixed up.

Glamorous. Jetlag!

Here you go.

Thank you.

15-2

Scene 15 Take 2   126

Scene 15 Take 2   1017

In
Frame 126

Trim clip 15-2

Out
Frame 1017

The mother comes down the stairs and sits down while her daughter fetches a cup of coffee. Soon the daughter also sits down and begins a very serious conversation with her mother.

This is the only shot which shows the mother's entrance. Therefore, I have no other choice. I must trim this establishing shot and use it as my first shot.

Start with frame 126 and end after frame 1017.
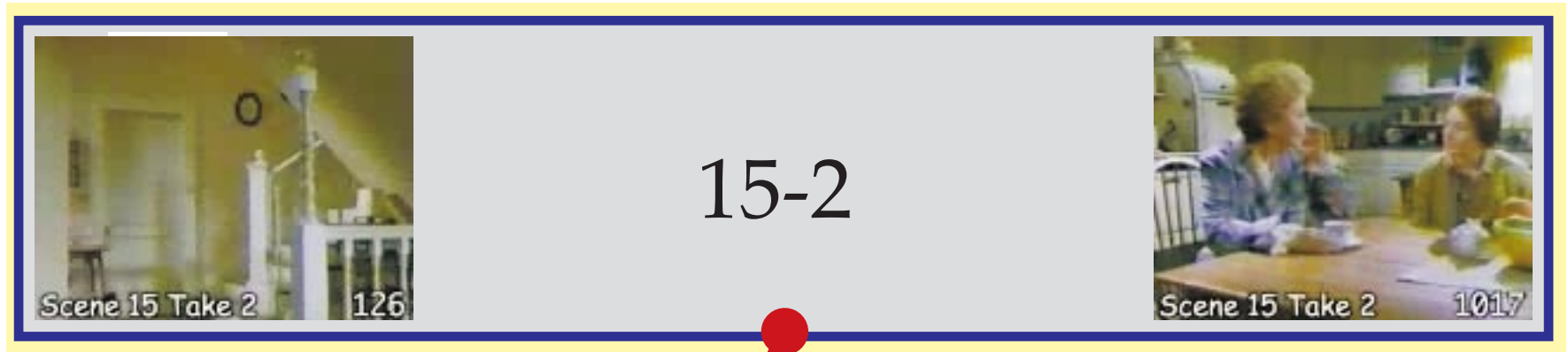
16

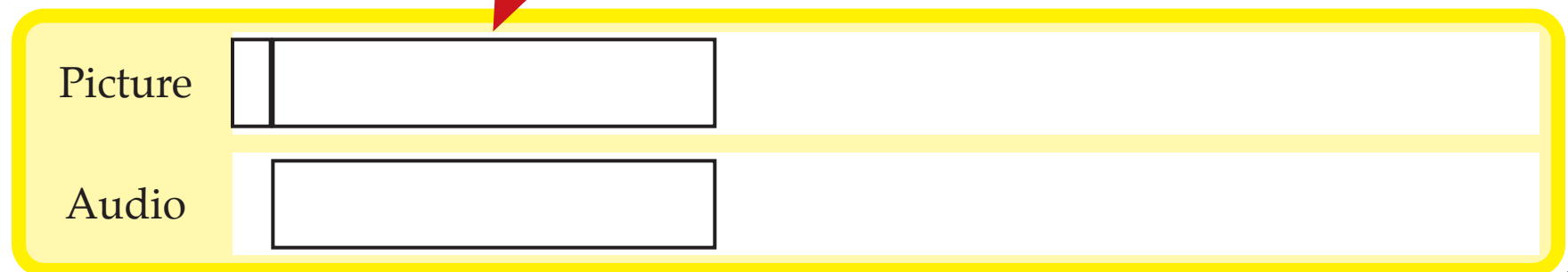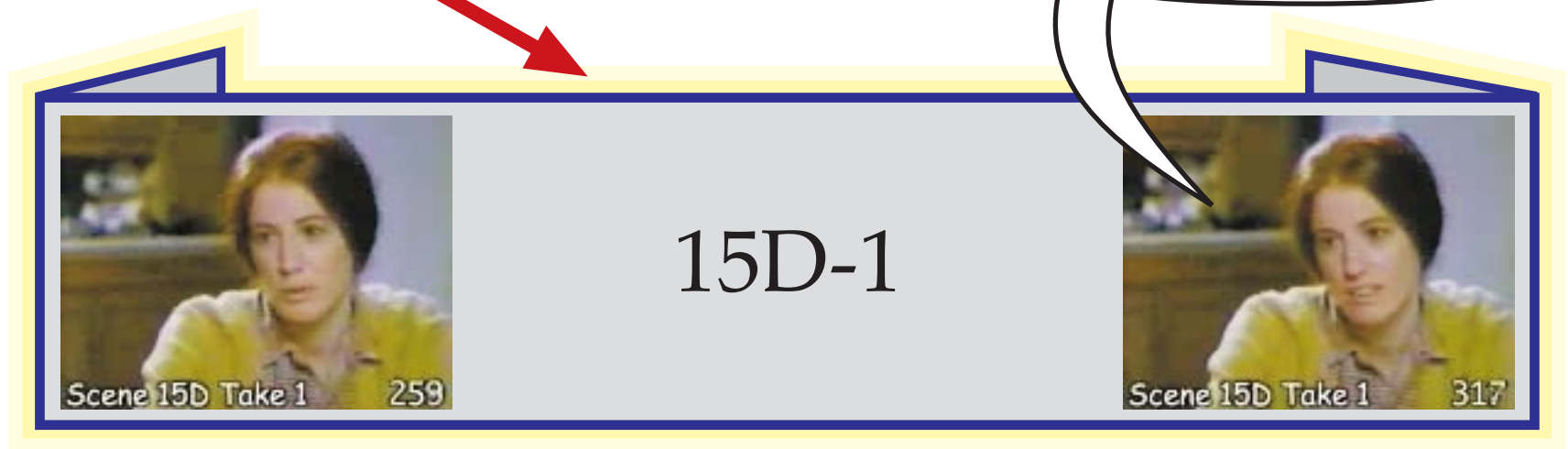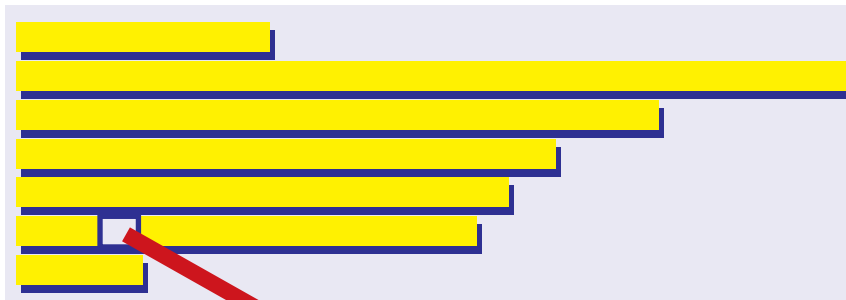## 15-2

Scene 15 Take 2 126

Scene 15 Take 2 1017

Place this clip in the timeline

Once I set the in and out points, I place this clip in the time line. Simply by placing the clip in the timeline, both the picture and the audio will be added to the timeline.

To make the transition from the exterior shot less abrupt, I need to have a 6 frame dissolve effect between the two clips. That means the second clip overlaps the first clip by 6 frames.

Picture

Audio

When you were my age, did you know what you wanted out of life?

15D-1

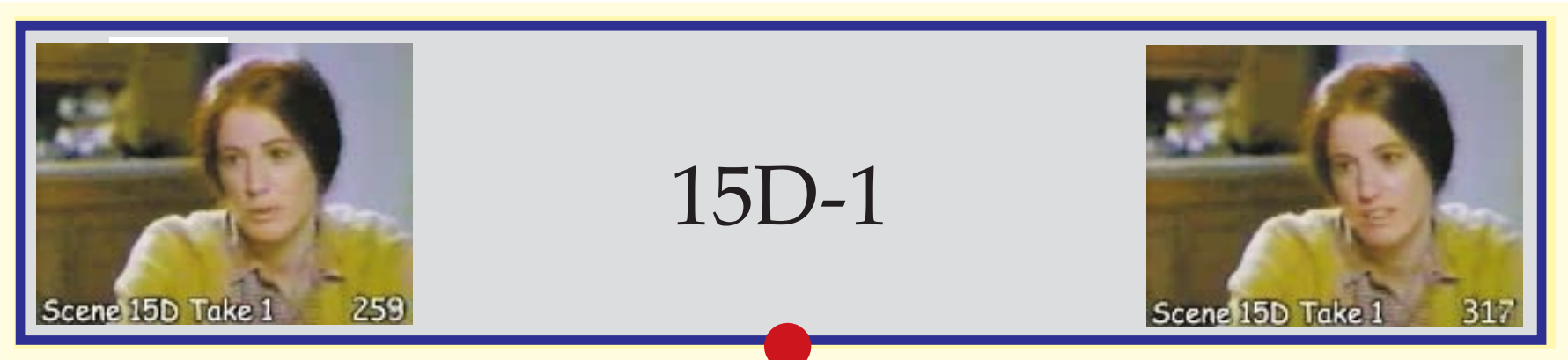Scene 15D Take 1   259

Scene 15D Take 1   317

In
Frame 259

Out
Frame 317

Trim clip 15D-1

I prefer the dialog in the close-up clip of the daughter (15D-1) rather than the dialog in the over-the-shoulder clip (15C-1).

Therefore, even though the picture looks better in the over-the-shoulder shot, I use the close-up shot.

Start with frame 259 and end after frame 317.

15D-1

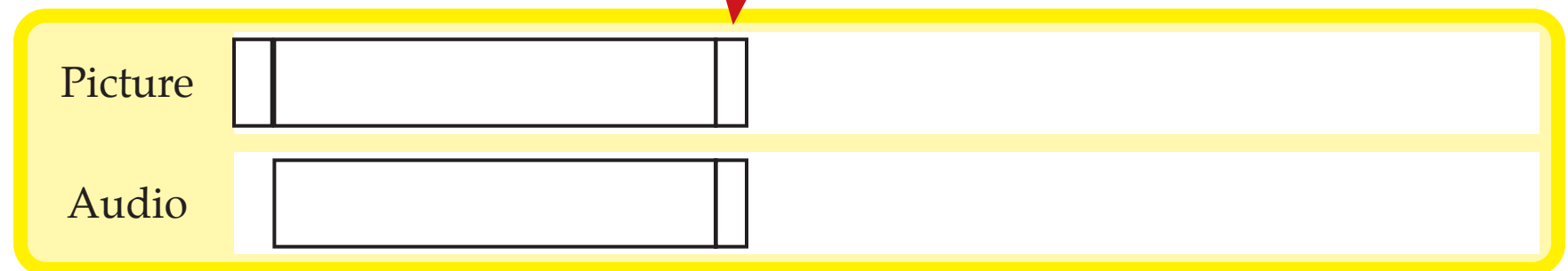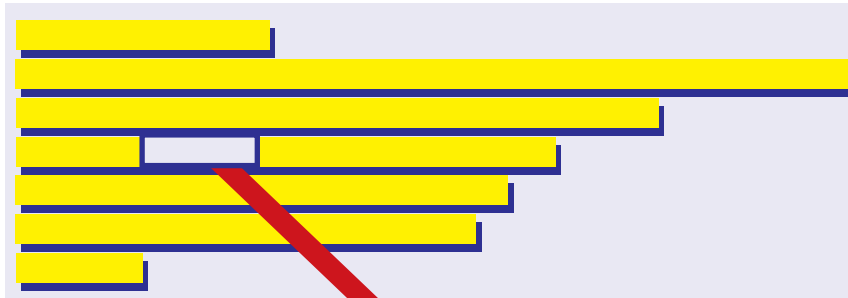Scene 15D Take 1   259

Scene 15D Take 1   317

Place this clip in the timeline

Once I set the in and out points, I place this clip in the time line.

As you can see, this is very easy... as long as I edit based on the spoken words.

Now I play the scene up to this point. The dialog sounds natural... as it should. That's great!

Picture

Audio

> I had seven children when I was your age. The thought of flying off to some foreign country was as strange to me as going to the moon.

15B-1

Scene 15B Take 1 — 228

Scene 15B Take 1 — 452
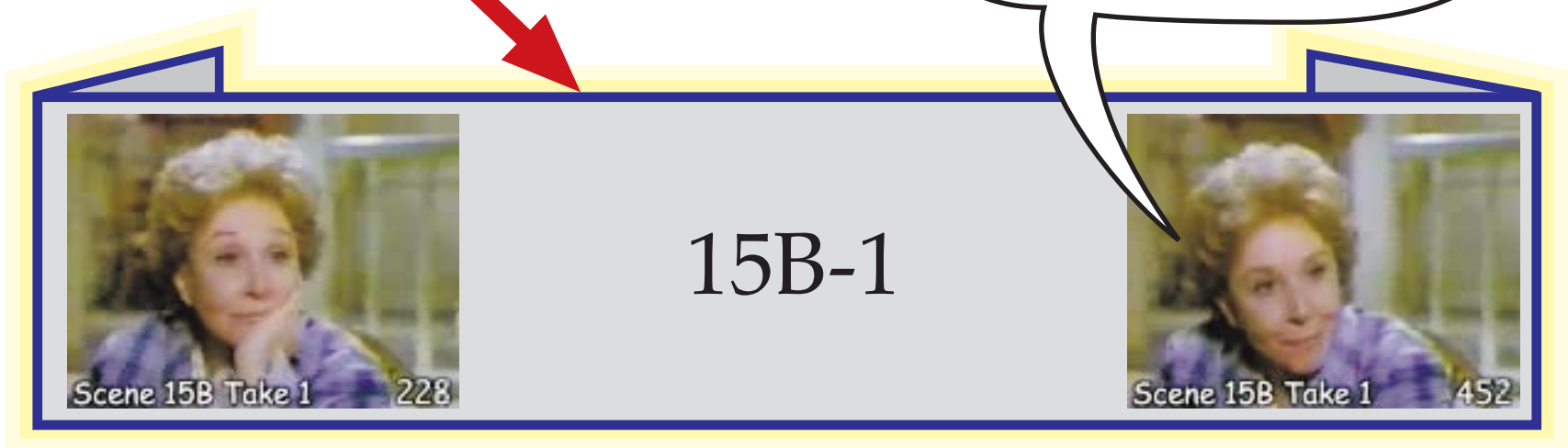
In
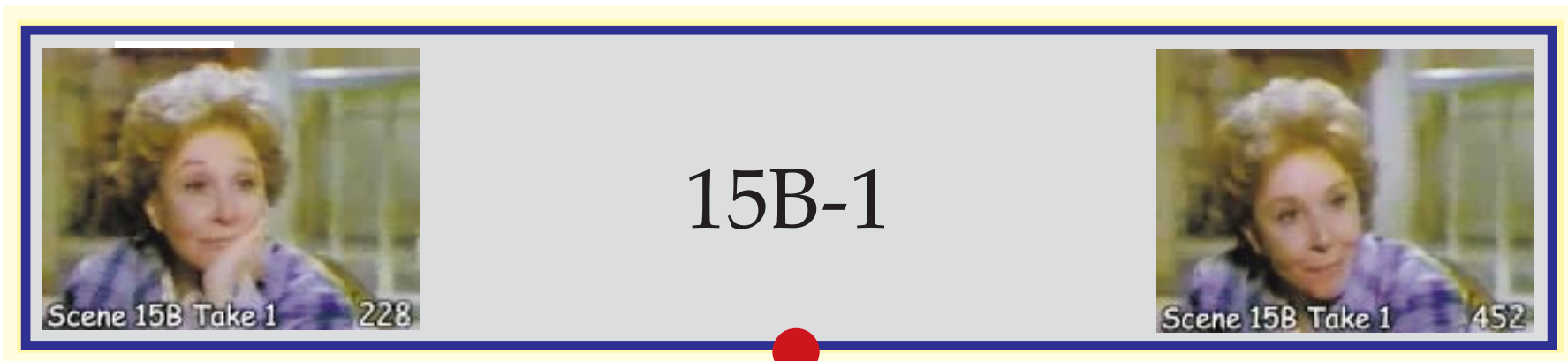Frame 228

Out
Frame 452

Trim clip 15B-1

I prefer the dialog and the picture in the close-up clip of the mother (15B-1) to the dialog in the over-the-shoulder clip (15A-1).
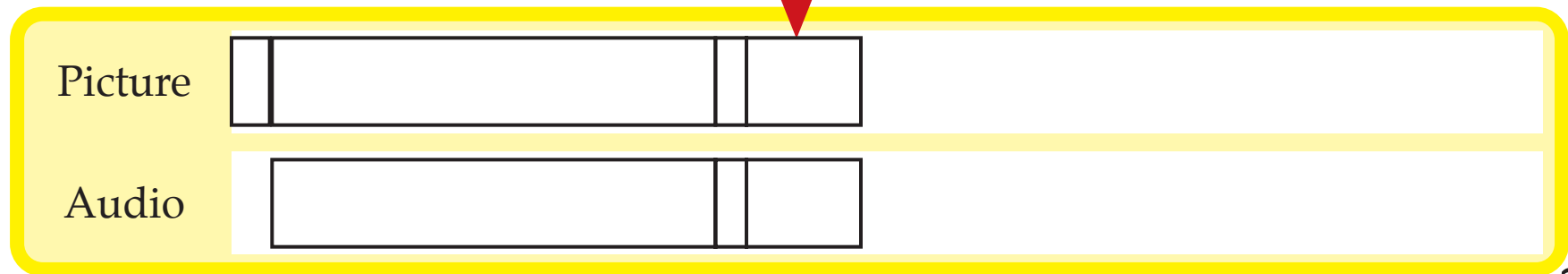
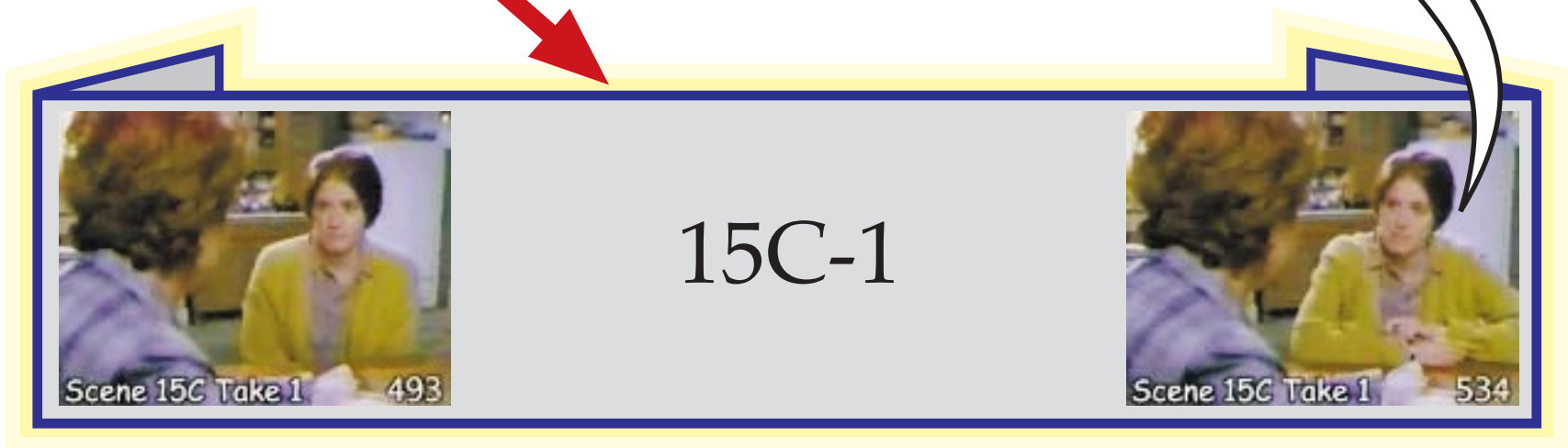Start with frame 228 and end after frame 452..

20
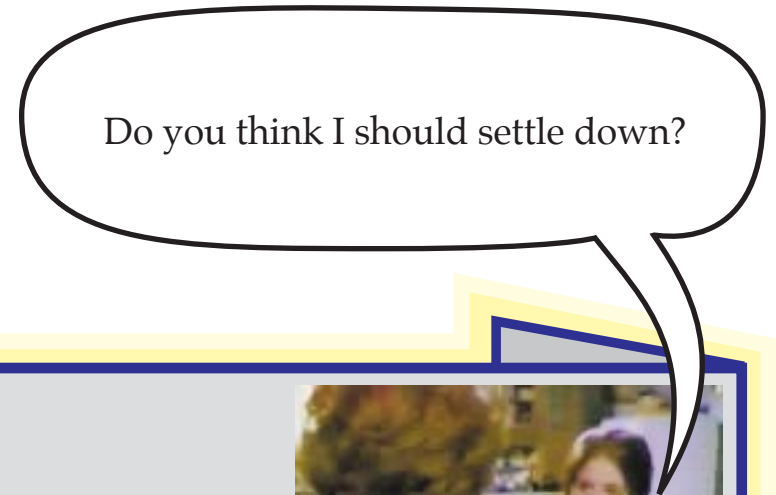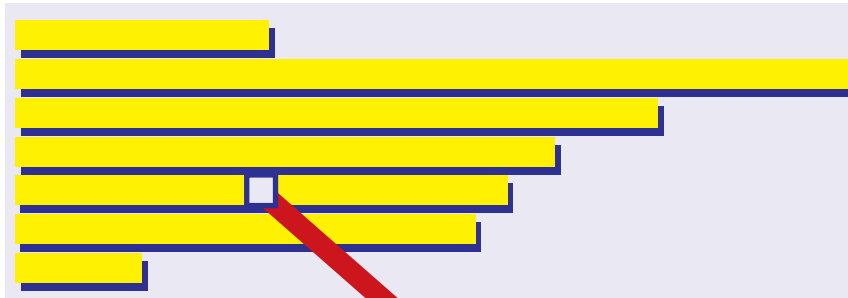
15B-1

Scene 15B Take 1   228

Scene 15B Take 1   452

Place this clip in the timeline

Once I have marked the in and out points, I place this clip in the time line.

Again, I listen to the dialog up to this point. Again, the timing, pace, and rhythm sound natural. It's amazing!

Picture

Audio

Do you think I should settle down?

15C-1

Scene 15C Take 1   493

Scene 15C Take 1   534

In
Frame 493
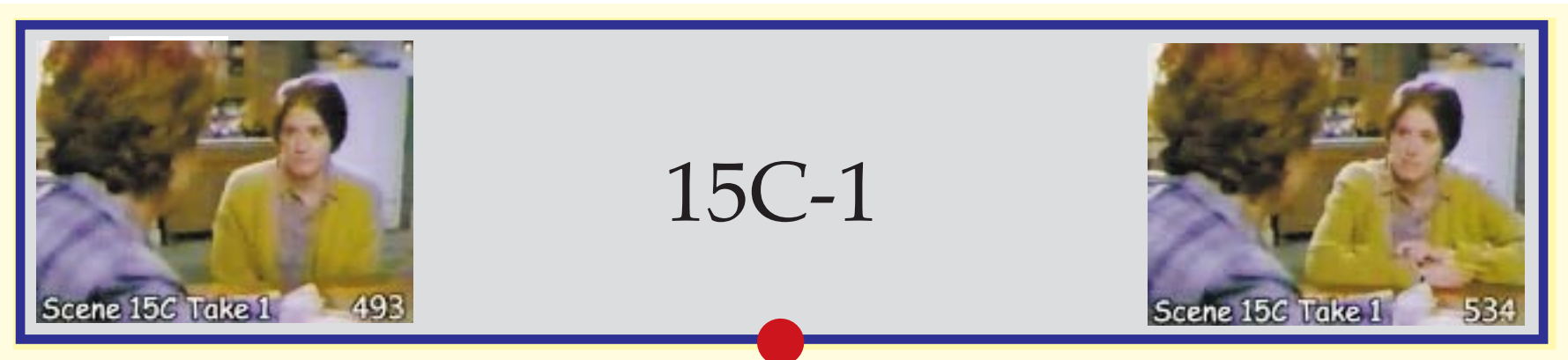
Out
Frame 534
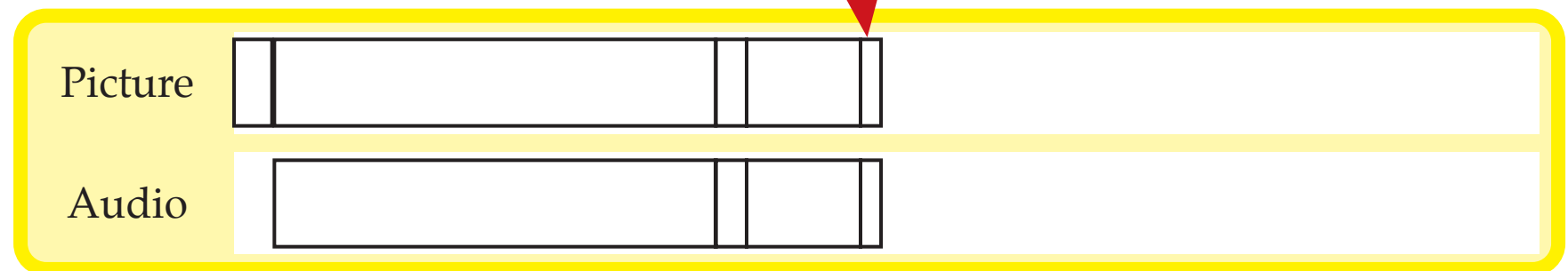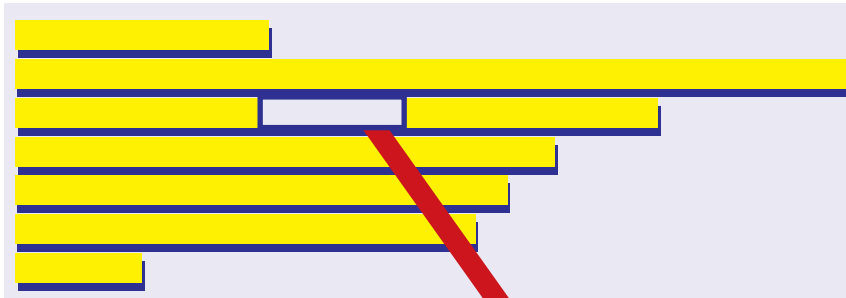
Trim clip 15C-1

I prefer the acting and the dialog in the over-the-shoulder shot of the daughter (15C-1) rather than the close-up shot 15D-1).

Start with frame 493 and end after frame 534

Scene 15C Take 1   493

15C-1

Scene 15C Take 1   534

Place this clip in the timeline

Once I have set the in and out points, I place this clip in the time line.

Picture

Audio

> I was sixteen when I met your daddy and I knew right away that was where I wanted to be. Still I sometimes wonder what it would be like. Go sailing off across the ocean. Hear a nightingale sing in Barkley Square. Sit at one of those little sidewalk cafes in Paris. You will settle down when it is right for you. In the meantime, you go on doing what makes you happy.

15A-1

Scene 15A Take 1   655

Scene 15A Take 1   1344

In
Frame 655

Out
1344

Trim clip 15A-1

I prefer the acting and the dialog in the over-the-shoulder shot of the mother (15A-1) rather than the close-up shot (15B-1).

This is a very long time to watch the mother. But this does not matter because now I am editing the audio and ignoring the picture as best I can.

Start with frame 655 and end after frame 1344

15A-1

Scene 15A Take 1   655

Scene 15A Take 1   1344

Place this clip in the timeline

Once I have set the in and out points, I place this clip in the time line.

Picture

Audio
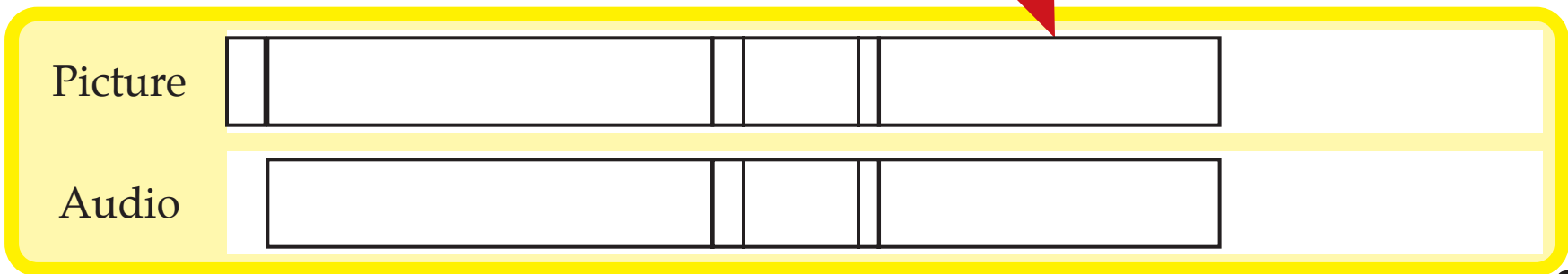
Thanks Mamma. I am going to go for a walk. I will be back for breakfast.

15C-1

Scene 15C Take 1   1309

Scene 15C Take 1   1436

In
Frame 1309

Out
Frame 1436

Trim clip 15C-1

I prefer the acting and the dialog in the over-the-shoulder shot of the daughter (15C-1) rather than the close-up shot (15D-1).

I made sure that the sound of the kiss is lined up in clips 15C-1 and 15A-1 but I use only the sound of the first clip (15C-1) because it sounds better.

Start with frame 1309 and end after frame 1436
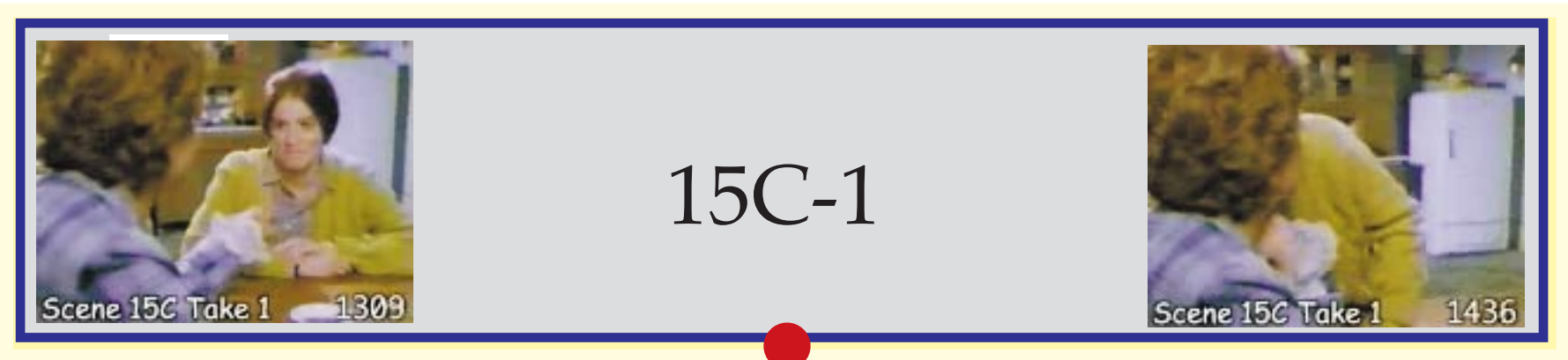
Scene 15C Take 1   1309

15C-1

Scene 15C Take 1   1436

Place this clip in the timeline

Once I have set the in and out points, I place this clip in the time line.

Picture

Audio

Switzerland?

15A-1

Scene 15A Take 1   1495

Scene 15A Take 1   1932
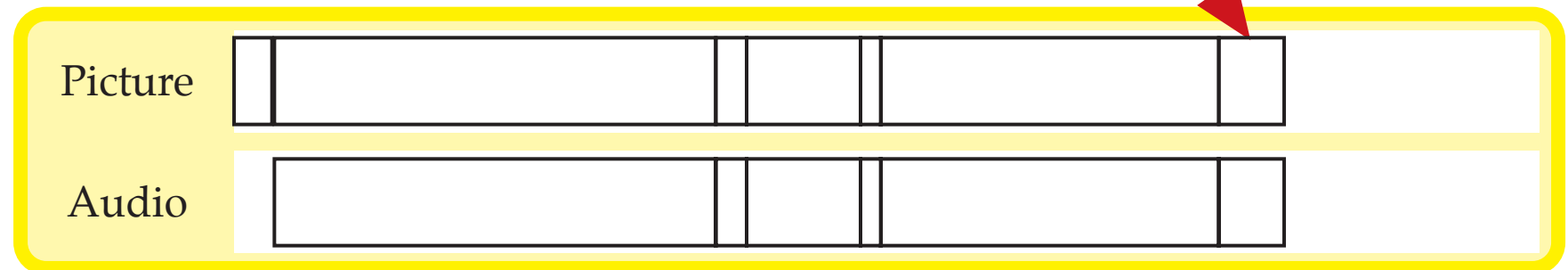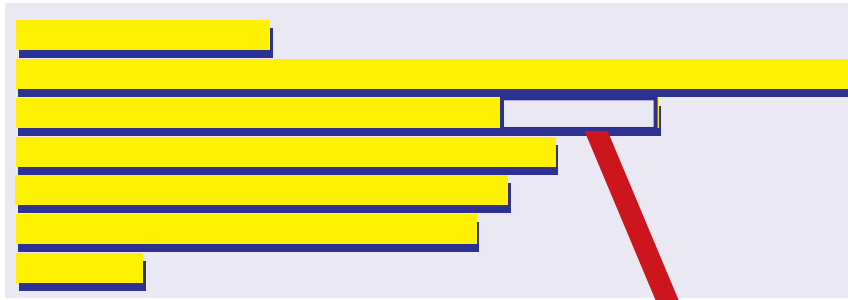
In
Frame 1495

Out
Frame 1932

Trim clip 15A-1

This is the only clip with all the necessary dialog for the end of the scene. Therefore, I am forced to use this clip.

Start with frame 1495 and end after frame 1932

15A-1

Scene 15A Take 1   1495

Scene 15A Take 1   1932

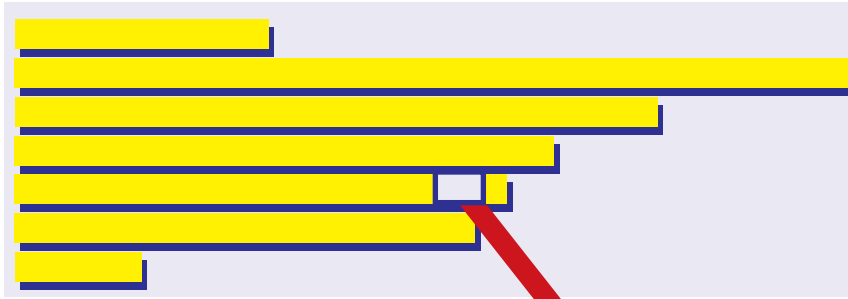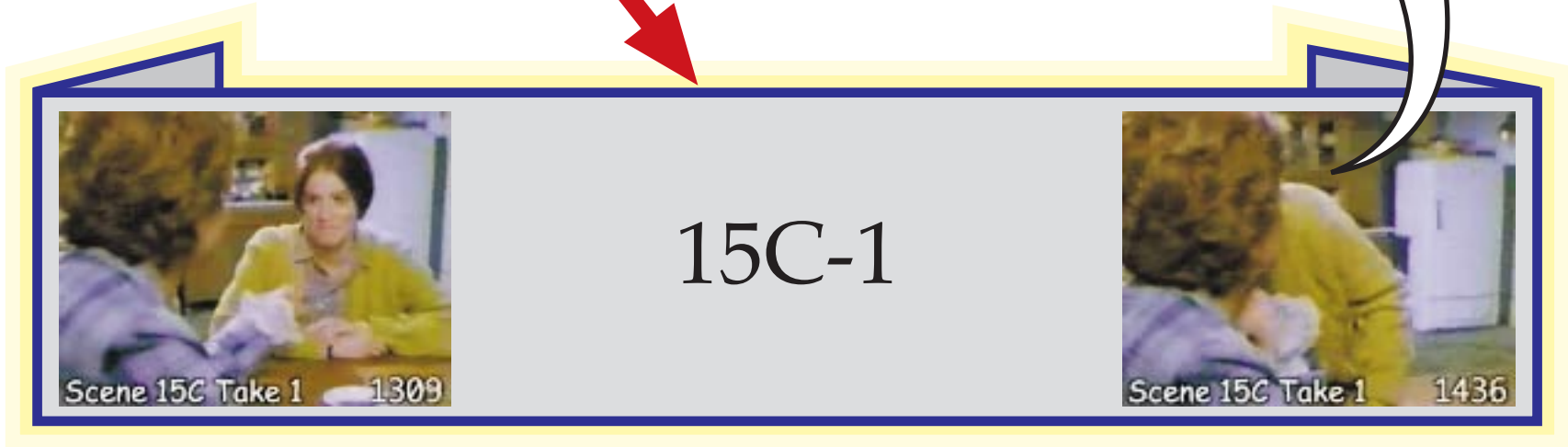## Place this clip in the timeline

Once I have set the in and out points, I place this clip in the time line.

I must get rid of the director's comments by lowering the volume of the audio for just those words. I use the rubberband tool to turn down the volume just for these words.

I add a fade-to-black transition for the last 6 frames.

Picture

Audio

06:42:43.24

W-15
SOUND REEL*17

WILD LINE FOR SCENE 15

Scene 15 Wildtrack   214

15-Wild

06:42:48.20

W-15
SOUND REEL*17

WILD LINE FOR SCENE 15

Scene 15 Wildtrack   331
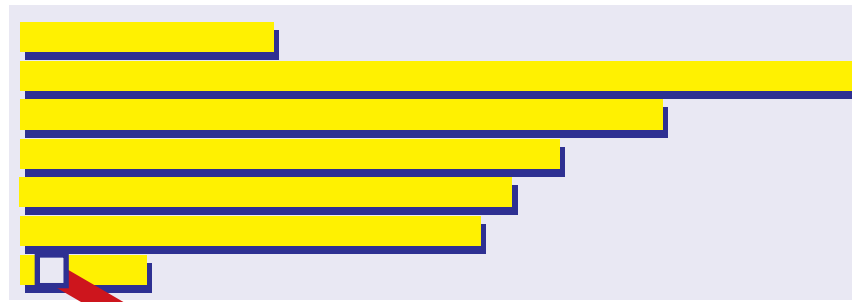
In
Frame 214

Out
Frame 331

Trim clip 15 Wildtrack

Now I need to remove the words of the daughter about the coffee in the establishing shot and replace these words with the wildtrack audio.

Start wildtrack audio with frame 214 and end after frame 331.

Timeline

Scene 15 Take 2   381

Scene 15 Take 2   498

15-Wild

06:42:43.24

W-15
SOUND REEL*17

WILD LINE FOR SCENE 15

Scene 15 Wildtrack   214

06:42:48.20

W-15
SOUND REEL*17

WILD LINE FOR SCENE 15

Scene 15 Wildtrack   331
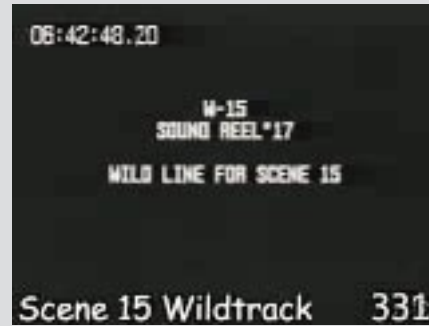
Place this clip in the timeline

Once I set the in and out points, I place just the audio portion of this clip in the timeline.

I turn the gain on the wildtrack sound clip down to about 50% since the daughter is far away from the camera.

I remove the old dialog simply by lowering the volume for only the words of the daughter while still leaving the sigh of the mother (which is in between the words of the daughter.)

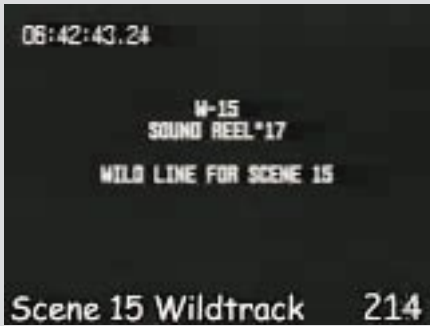The audio from the wildtrack must be in perfect sync with the first word of the old audio because the daughter's mouth is seen in the picture. Therefore, I make sure that the words of the two clips line up very accurately.

Picture

Line this clip up with frames 381 to 498 of clip 15-2.

Audio

31
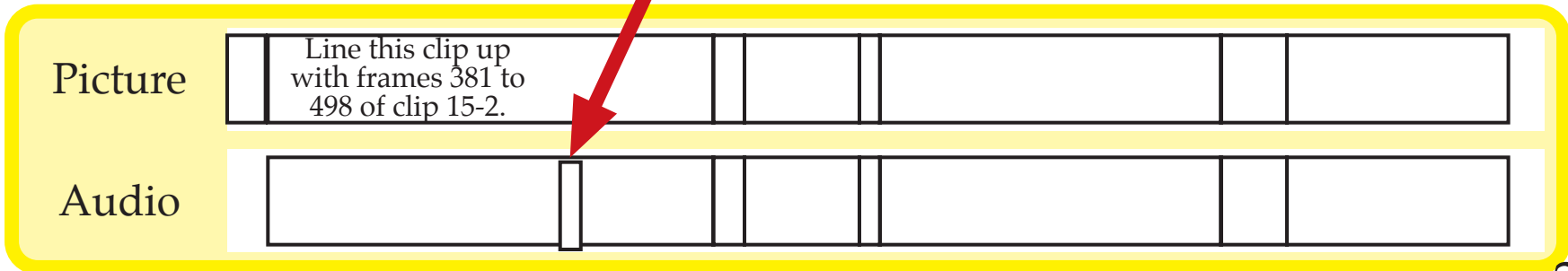
Finishing the Audio

I play all the clips and listen to the audio. The audio should sound perfect... even if the picture does not look perfect. The dialog should flow naturally with a realistic rhythm. If not, now is the time to adjust it.

At this time, I adjust the gain on any of the clips which seems too hot or too soft. Sometimes the microphone is further away from the actors and sometimes the actors speak softer, specially for their close-up shots. (When I adjust the volume, I usually adjust the gain for the entire clip.)

Also remove any noise in the audio. I use the rubberband tool to eliminate any bad noises, clicks or pops. Note that I carefully listen to the audio at its maximum resolution while I edit the scene.

Next, I save a backup copy of the editing project. If I have any problems, I want to come back to this edit where the audio is perfect.

Now, lock the audio!

From now on, the audio for the dialog does not change. The dialog is finished. It is never changes! Therefore, I lock the audio.

Locking audio is simple. Some editing programs can lock all the audio with just a single command. Other editing programs require you to go through and unlink the picture from the audio for every clip... but this usually takes less than a minute. Either way, it is not bad.

If you do this correctly (lock and unlink the audio from the picture), you are able to roll the edits of the picture back and forth without affecting the audio edits in any way. This is very important.

Picture

Audio

15-2   15D-1

Scene 15 Take 2   1017

Scene 15D Take 1   259
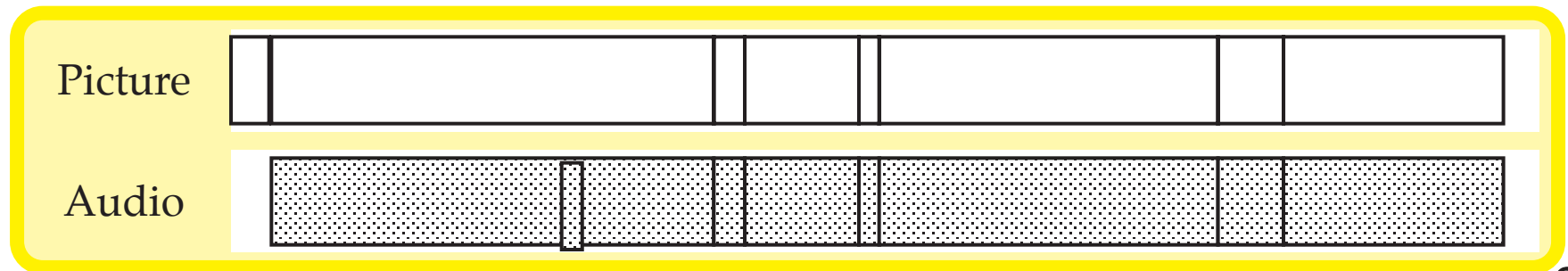
Adjusting the Picture

Now that I have finished editing the dialog, I need to adjust the picture. Unfortunately, there is only so much I can do. I can roll the picture edit forward or I can roll the picture edit backward, or I can insert a different picture such as a cut-away shot or a reaction shot. But that is all.

Above all, I must not do anything which changes the edit of the dialog which should already sound perfect.

To start, I play the entire scene. I look for edits where the picture looks awkward. Often, the best place to edit the audio is not the best place to edit the video.

When I find an edit which seems awkward, I use the roll-edit tool and roll the edit point for the picture (but never the audio) forward or backward until I find a spot that looks better for a visual transition.

Actually, this is easier than it sounds. To do this, I roll the picture edit until I find a natural gap in the dialog such as a pause to take a breath or even better, a pause between sentences, clauses or even phrases. Then I play the movie and see if my new transition point for the picture looks good. If not, I roll the picture edit to another place and play the movie again. This only take a few minutes.

How do I know if I have found the right edit point for the picture? Answer: If it looks good, it must be right! That is the only rule.

Picture

Audio

Scene 15 Take 2 1017

Scene 15D Take 1 259
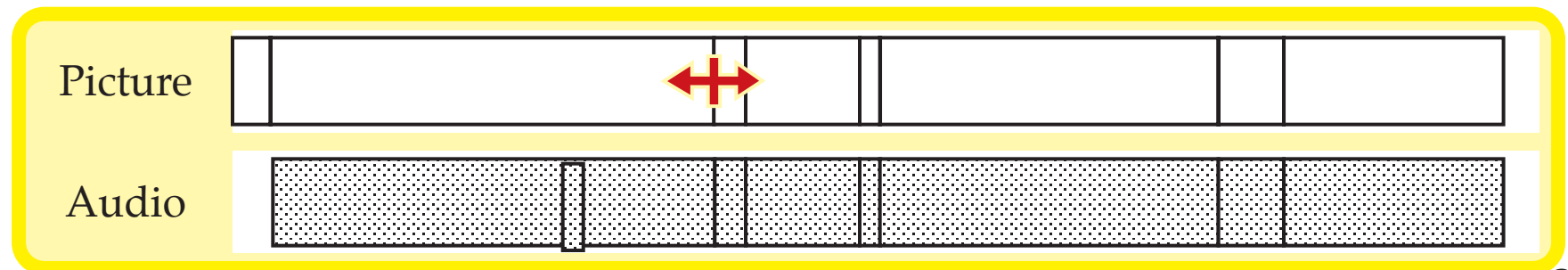
15D-1

Roll Picture Edit Forward

This first edit looks awkward. I think it will look better if the establishing shot is seen for the first part of the daughter's dialog rather than showing the close-up shot for all of the daughter's dialog. Therefore, I roll the picture (but never the audio) forward.

When I originally edited this clip, I was careful that the dialog for both of these clips (15-2 if it was extended further and 15D-1) line up perfectly. Now you see why I did this!

Roll the OUT frame from 1017 to 1033 and roll the IN frame from 259 to 275.

15-2

Scene 15 Take 2 1033

Scene 15D Take 1 275

Picture

Audio

34
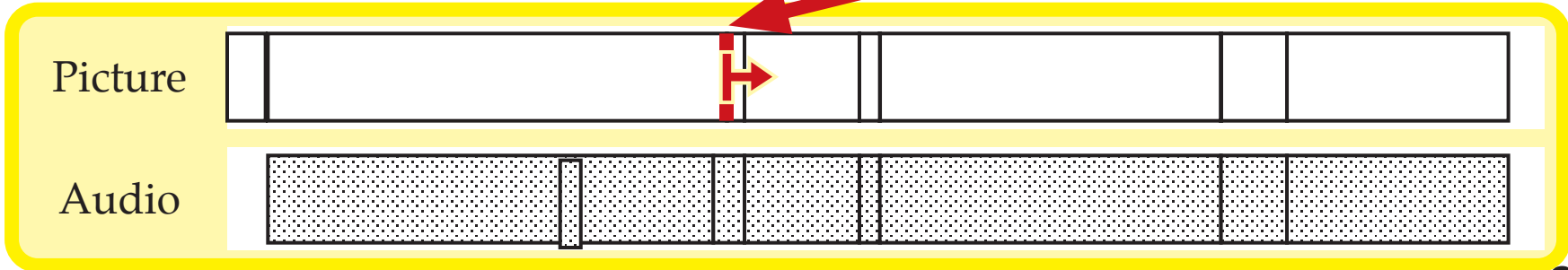
15A-1 15C-1

The Next Bad Spot

Again, I watch the movie of this scene. Again, I look for a transition point which does not look right.

Toward the end of the scene, I see that the mother's hand is in two different places at this edit. Not good!
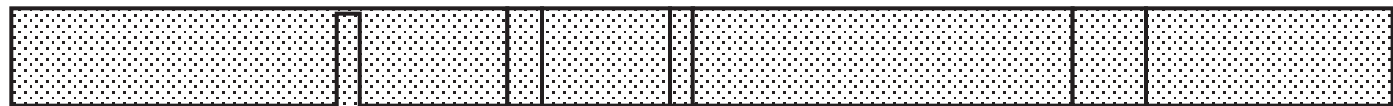
Also, I prefer to see more of the daughter's reaction.

Therefore, I use the roll edit tool and roll the picture edit until I find a good place for the visual transition... without making any change to the audio which is already perfect.

Picture

Audio

15A-1

Scene 15A Take 1   1344   Scene 15C Take 1   1309

Roll Picture Edit Backward

I roll the picture edit (but not the audio) backwards until there is a pause in the mother's dialog.

Since the mother's mouth cannot be seen, there is no need to worry about syncing the mother's lips to the audio.

Roll the OUT frame from 1344 to 1195 and roll the IN frame from 1309 to 1160.

Scene 15A Take 1   1195   Scene 15C Take 1   1160

15C-1

Picture

Audio

36

15C-1

Scene 15C Take 1   1436

15A-1

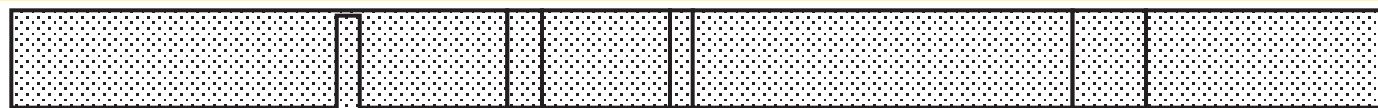Scene 15A Take 1   1495

Yet Another Bad Spot

Once more, I watch the movie for this scene.   Now I spot a an awkward moment in this scene.

The daughter's kiss appears awkward. Also the mother's head blocks the view for part of the shot.

Naturally, I use the roll-edit tool and try to find a better place for the visual transition... without making any change to the audio.

Picture

Audio

15C-1

Scene 15C Take 1   1436

Scene 15A Take 1   1495
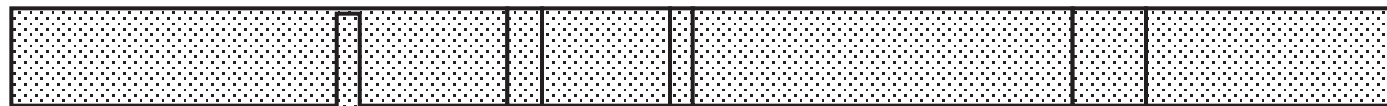
Roll Picture Edit Backward

I roll the picture edit backward so that the entire kiss is seen in the second clip. The mother has no dialog so I do not worry about lip sync for the mother.

Roll the OUT frame from 1436 to 1414 and roll the IN frame from 1495 to 1473.

Scene 15C Take 1   1414

Scene 15A Take 1   1473
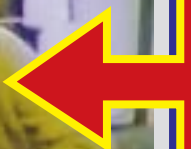
15A-1

Picture

Audio

Roll the other edits?

I look at the other picture edits and roll them forward or backward just to see if I can find a better transition point for the picture edit.

Some picture edits might look better with a tiny (one to two frames) adjustment... but I decide not to make any changes. Everything is good enough just the way it is.

Picture

Audio

Add Sound Effects
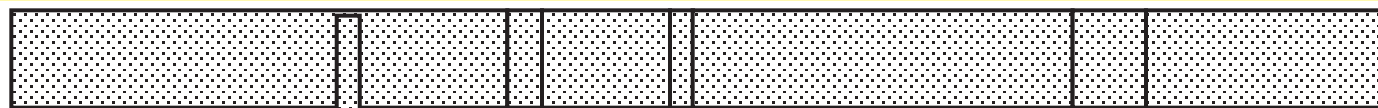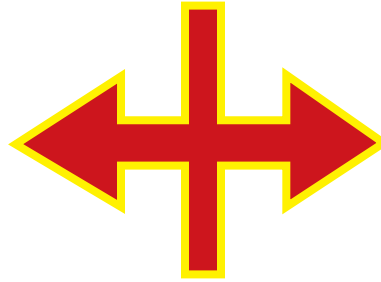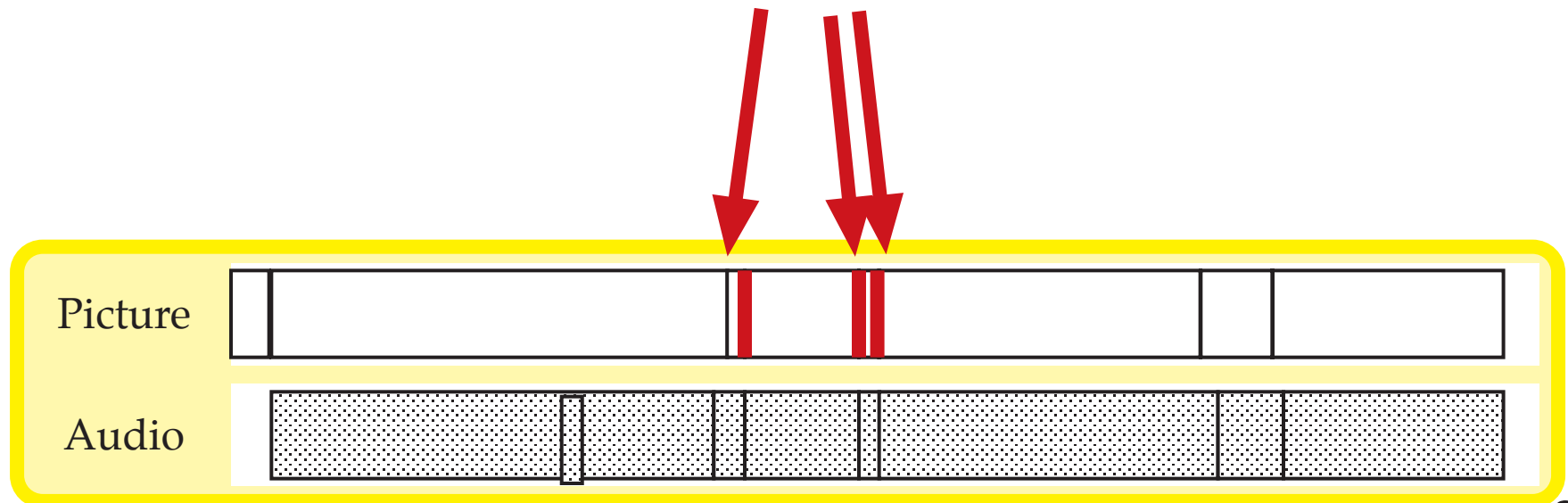
This scene needs only two sound effect.

The opening shot of the exterior of the house needs the sound of birds chirping in the wilderness. This kind of sound effect is easily found on inexpensive sound effects CD libraries.

Therefore, I add the sound effect to the beginning of the timeline and adjust the length to about 15 seconds long. I create a short fade in at the beginning to match the picture. I must adjust the volume so it is not too loud. After three seconds, I turn the volume down to barely audible for the interior of the house and slowly fade to nothing as the dialog starts.

Next I search my sound effects libraries for the sound of a Swiss yodel. I could not find anything I like so I connected a microphone to my computer and recorded my voice doing a really dreadful yodel and save it as an audio file.

I import my "yodel" audio file into a sound editing program. I add lots of echo to sound as if it was recorded in the mountains of Switzerland. Then I save this audio files

I import the audio file into my editing program and place it on the timeline. I start this sound effect just as the mother takes a sip of the coffee at the end of the scene.

Birds Chirping

Swiss Yodel

Picture

Audio

Create the Musical Score

After looking at the scene, I decide to add three pieces of mood music – an introduction, an ending and a simple musical effect for the daughter's kiss.

Next I decide that I do not need to watch the movie while I compose my music. For this scene, I will not need any "hit points" where the music changes tone or rhythm to match the action. I want to keep this simple.

Instead, I use a stop watch and time how long each piece of music must be.

Watching the scene, I see that the opening music must be about 12 seconds long, ending just as the mother starts to talk.

To make the music, I use a MIDI sequencing and sound generation program (such as Apple's GarageBand) to create my musical score.

I decide to use an old folk tune which goes "When the sun in the morning comes over the hill". This is such a simple tune, even I can play the melody with one finger on a MIDI keyboard connected to my computer. Since I know the tune by heart, I just need to practice about 5 minutes before I can play it without sounding like an idiot.

My next decision is how much of the song to play. I have three choices. I can play the first seven notes very, very slowly. I can play the first 12 notes. Or I can play the first 12 notes quickly twice (the first time normal and the second time changing the melody slightly so it pitches down at the end instead of up.)

I practice the music all three ways until they all sound good. Eventually, I decide on the second option.

Also, I need four seconds of music at the end of the scene. I decide to play the first three notes of the same melody quickly but hold the last note. That's all I need! Again, I practice over and over until I can play these three notes with one finger on my MIDI keyboard.

Then I go back and add other tracks to my musical score. On the other tracks, I add cords using other musical instruments in GarageBand. As an example, for the ending music (which is just three notes), I add the sound of a violin for the last note. I know how to play a major cord on a piano so I use the violin for two notes of the cord.

Next, I create the musical sound effect for the daughter's kiss. All I want is a single musical note played expressively.

For my musical scores, I use only the sounds of the musical instruments of the symphony orchestra. Only professional musicians are talented enough to use other sounds. If I use only the sounds of a symphony orchestra, people automatically assume that I know what I am doing. If I make any mistake, the audience think I am brilliantly creative... as long as I use the sounds of a orchestra!

I pan all the monaural musical instruments into stereo. I export the music as audio files and then I import the audio files into my editing program and place them on the timeline at the appropriate places.

Picture

Audio

L

C

Scene 15A Take 1   616

R
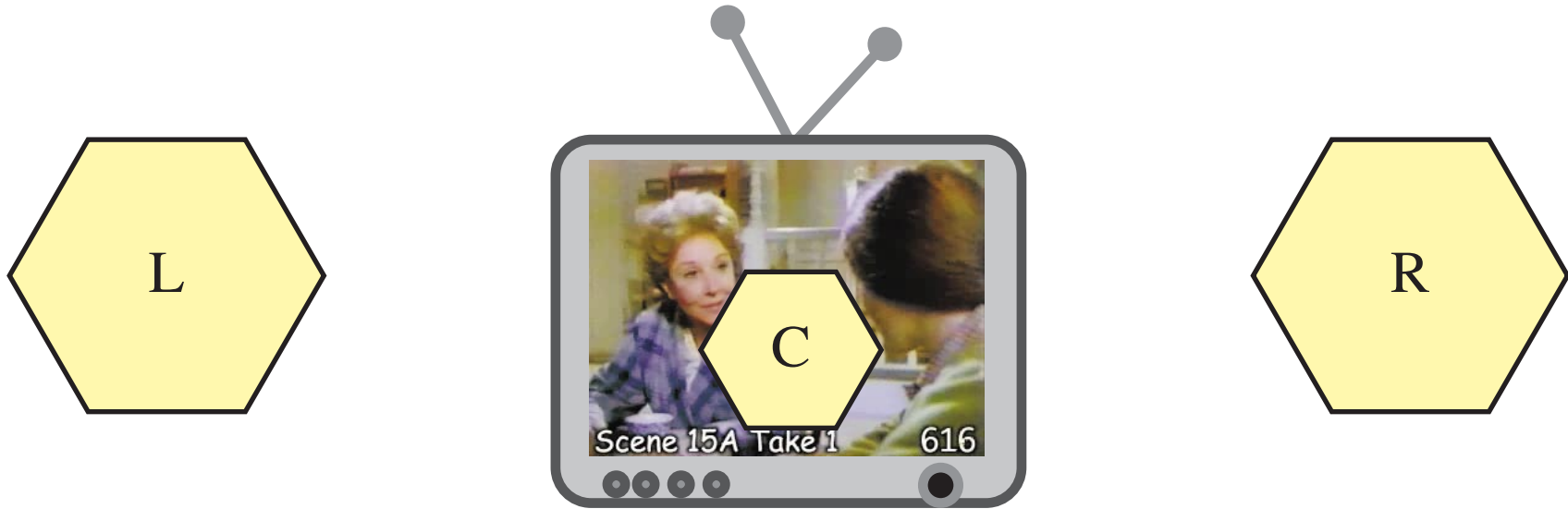
Pan The Music

Because this is a TV drama, I pan all the dialog to the center of the screen. With a motion picture, I have more options... but not with a TV drama which will be viewed on a tiny TV screen

If I use 5.1 surround sound, that means all the dialog goes to the center speaker. If I use stereo audio, I put the dialog on both the left and right speaker at equal volumes. This creates the same effect.

The panning of the music is just the opposite of dialog. I pan each musical instrument to either the left or to the right of the center of the screen. That is I pan each of the musical instruments to any direction **except** the center of the screen so that I keep the music complete separate from the dialog.

Similarly, I pan the sound effects in the direction of the source of the sound effect... but never directly center on the screen while the actors are talking.

Note: When I am finished, I must check to see if my stereo mix will sound good if played on a monaural TV set. If not, I redo it. I cannot afford to ignore the fact that most people still use monaural TV sets.

Film Editor's Demo Reel

"Morning Coffee"

Scene 15A Take 1   1495

Edited by
Your Name Goes Here

Add this scene to your demo reel

When I finish my edit of this scene, put it on a DVD-Video disk so I can show it to motion picture producers in Hollywood. Before I can get hired as a film editor, I must show them just how good I really am.

This is why I collect my best edits of these practice scenes and create a DVD-Video disk. Most DVD authoring programs allow me to letterbox half- size images such as this scene. By letterboxing this scene, I have a blank area around the picture where I can put the name of the scene as well as credits.

After the scene, I include my name as the editor, sound effects person, and the film composer. No one is going to hire me as a film composer or sound effects person but I want to show that I know enough about film scoring and sound effects to work well with a real film score composer and a real sound effects designer.