How to create TV news-style J- and L-cuts

J-cuts and L-cuts, so named because the clip layout in a sequence look like the letters J and L, are effective editing techniques used frequently in TV news and feature films. They ease the transition from one clip to another.

A J-cut starts by having the audio portion of a video clip (Clip B) play under another video clip (Clip A). After a few moments, the video portion of Clip A transitions to the video portion of Clip B and the audio of Clip B comes up full while the audio portion of Clip A fades away. This is a great way to let your audience know someone is about to say something or a transition is coming. Conversely, an L-cut has the audio of one clip tail off under the next video clip. This is an effective way to ease viewers out of a sound bite or narration track and into the cutaway.

To do either of these edits requires unlinking the audio and video portions of clips that contain both audio and video so you can edit them separately. After you unlink them, you can move the audio segment to another audio track and then extend or shorten the audio portions of both adjacent clips to make the J- or L-cut.

To complete the tasks in this guide, you should first work through the “How to adjust audio and apply crossfades” guide. That guide shows how to work with keyframes and adjust volume settings on audio clips in the Timeline panel, a prerequisite for creating J- and L-cuts.

For these tasks, you need a video clip with sound, such as a narration video, sound bite, or similar clip and two cutaways (with natural sound). All the clips need enough head and tail frames to allow for some overlap and to make smooth transitions.

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How to set up a J-cut edit

1. Start Adobe Premiere Pro, start a new project, and import three clips that include both video and audio. Trim each clip at the heads and tails.

   Note: This example uses one narration video and two short cutaways.

2. From the Project panel, drag (in this order) a cutaway (with natural sound), the narration video clip, and another cutaway (or reuse the first one) to a sequence in the Timeline panel.

   Your sequence should look like **Figure 1**. Your goal is to have the first cutaway video play over the first few words of the sound-bite audio and then have the video dissolve to the sound-bite clip while the cutaway audio fades out—a J-cut.

3. Click the narration clip (or the middle clip) and select Clip > Unlink.

4. Complete the unlink process by clicking outside the sound-bite clip in the Timeline panel to deselect it.

   Note: Now when you click on either the audio or video portion of the unlinked clip, only the clicked portion is selected.

5. Drag the unlinked audio portion of the sound-bite clip straight down to the Audio 2 track (**Figure 2**).

   If there is no available audio track, simply drag the clip below the audio tracks and Adobe Premiere Pro will add an audio track that matches the format of your clip (mono, stereo, or 5.1 surround).

   Note: Take care as you move the audio portions of clips that you don't slide them left or right when you drag them. If you do, the audio and video will get out of synch. The timecode display should read +00;00;00;00 to indicate the clip has not slipped. (**Figure 2**).

6. In the Tools panel, select the Rolling Edit tool, click the video portion of the first clip (the cutaway) to select it, and drag the edit between the first and second video clips to the right about 1 second (**Figure 3**).

   Use the timecode display to help make the edit.

   Note: If you use the Rolling Edit tool with the narration clip selected, only the video portions of the narration and the cutaway clips move.

7. Using the selection tool, drag the left edge (the in point) of the audio portion of the narration to the left to give it some extra room to fade it up. Be sure to move the in point and do not drag the clip out of sync.

   The first two clips of your sequence should look like **Figure 4**.

Figure 1 Three-clip sequence

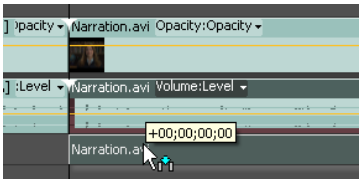

Figure 2 Dragging audio clip

Figure 3 Rolling Edit and tool tip

Figure 4 J-cut

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How to add and adjust keyframes in a J-cut

To make J- and L-cuts work effectively, you need to use keyframes in the audio clips to create something like an audio crossfade.

You learned how to apply keyframes to a clip in the Timeline panel in the “How to adjust audio and apply crossfades” guide. Here’s a basic review:

- Click the clip to select it.
- Move the CTI to the point where you want to add the keyframe.
- Click the Add/Remove Keyframe button in the audio track header.

To adjust the value of the keyframe (in this case, the decibel level), drag the keyframe up or down and note the dB level in the tool tip.

1. Continue where you left off in the previous task.
2. Expand the two audio tracks:
   - Click their Collapse/Expand Track triangles.
   - Drag the bottoms of their headers down.
3. Use the Zoom In button in the lower-left corner of the Timeline panel to expand the width of the two clips.
4. Apply five keyframes in the following locations in the audio clips (use **Figure 5** as a reference):
   - First clip (the first cutaway)
     - At the point where the narration audio clip (the audio in track 2) begins.
     - Where the actual narration audio begins (use the beginning of the waveform in the narration clip to help find that spot).
     - At the end of the first cutaway clip.
   - Narration clip (the audio you moved to track 2)
     - At the beginning of the clip.
     - Just as the narration starts (use the beginning of the waveform to help find that spot).
5. Adjust the keyframe values as follows:
   - First cutaway clip: Adjust the second keyframe to about –9 dB and the third keyframe down to negative infinity (silence) as shown in **Figure 5**.
   - Narration clip (in Audio 2 track): Adjust the first keyframe down to negative infinity (silence) as shown in **Figure 5**.
6. Play the J-cut.

   The cutaway's natural sound should fade as the narration begins.
7. In the Effects panel, open the Video Transitions > Dissolve bin and drag a Cross Dissolve video transition to the cut point between the two video clips to make this J-cut work even more smoothly.

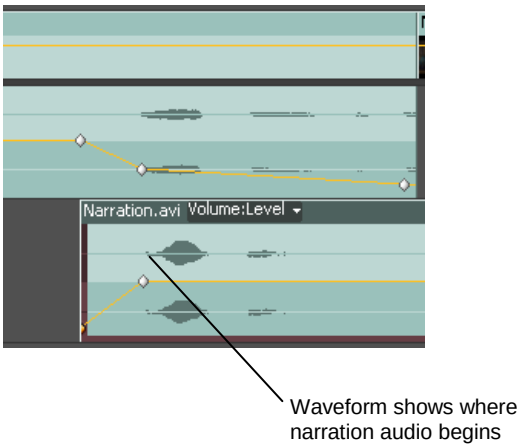

Figure 5 J-cut audio keyframes

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How to create an L-cut

1. Continue where you left off in the previous task.
2. Click the second cutaway and select Clip > Unlink.
3. Click somewhere off the clip to complete the unlinking.
4. Using the Selection tool, drag the in point of the audio portion of the second cutaway audio to the left, under the narration video (middle clip), about 2 seconds.
5. Drag the out point of the audio portion of the narration clip to the right about 1 second.

   As shown in **Figure 6**, the two audio clips should now overlap.
6. Add six keyframes to the audio portions of the narration and second cutaway as follows (use **Figure 7** as a guide):
   - Second cutaway (in Audio 1 track)
     - At the beginning of the clip.
     - A half-second into the clip.
     - A half-second or so before the end of the narration clip below it.
     - Directly after the narration audio ends (use the waveform).
   - Narration clip (in Audio 2 track)
     - Directly after the audio ends (use the waveform)
     - At the end of the clip.
7. In the narration clip, drag the keyframe at the end of the clip all the way down to fade that narration audio under the cutaway.
8. In the second cutaway, adjust the following keyframe values:
   - Drag the first keyframe all the way down.
   - Move the second and third keyframes to about -9 dB (to play the cutaway audio quietly under the narration).
9. Add a video Cross Dissolve between the video portions of these two clips.
10. Play the L-cut.

    The second cutaway's natural sound should fade up quietly beneath the narration's closing comment and then climb to full volume as the video transitions from the narration to the second cutaway.

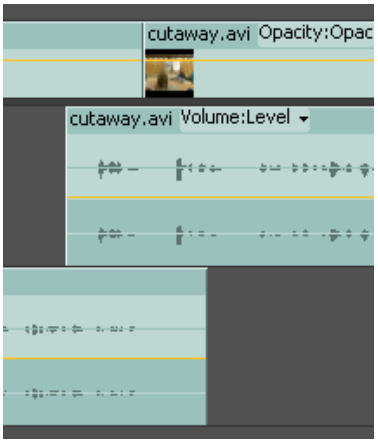

Figure 6 L-cut audio set-up

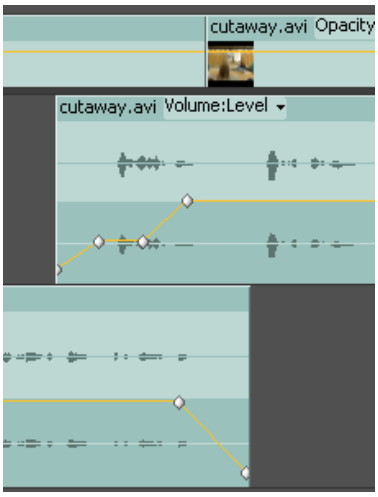

Figure 7 L-cut audio keyframes