



# The Writing Center

UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO  
DENVER | ANSCHUTZ MEDICAL CAMPUS

## Formal Elements of Film

<b>Time &amp; Space</b>	Shot	What is recorded by a single operation of the camera; can be defined in terms of distance and area (see “Framing” below) or subject
	Scene	Unit of action taking place in the same location; comprised of one or many shots
	Sequence	Group of shots forming a self-contained segment of the film that is intelligible in itself
	Mise-en-scène	Staging or arrangement of the visual elements within a shot or sequence; includes the placement of characters in relation to each other, the set design, the lighting, etc.

<b>Framing</b>	Long	Main objects are seen in the distance and appear small on screen; used to establish setting (often called an establishing shot) and show characters in relation to objects; similar to the third-person, omniscient point-of-view in literature
	Med	Shows a character from the waist up; often a natural or neutral shot
	Close-up	Object or character takes up most of the frame; highlights emotion played out on a face or the detail of an object; encourages viewers to identify with characters or to focus their attention on a thematic element

<b>Lighting</b>	Low-Key	Small source of lighting used to create ample shadows and an atmosphere of mystery/danger; can suggest characters are evil, conflicted or morally ambiguous
	High-Key	Even, sometimes flattering, light source with few shadows; can convey normalcy or lack of a threat; typical of most mainstream classical Hollywood films

<b>Angle</b>	Low	Camera is positioned lower than the subject and tilted upward; makes the character appear “larger than life”
	Eye-Level	Camera is level with the eye-line of the characters; a neutral shot emulating the natural way the viewer perceives the world

	High	Camera is positioned higher than the subject and tilted downward; makes the character appear smaller than normal
<b>Movement</b>	Pan	Camera <i>pivots</i> along a horizontal axis without moving its position; enlivens the shot, makes the frame dynamic, and emulates how people move their heads from side to side to view action (such as how a spectator watches cars zoom by on a race track)
	Tilt	Camera moves along a vertical axis without moving its position; can emphasize the grandeur of an object (like craning your head up to make look at a basketball player) or diminish it (like the huge class bully looking down at the class runt)
	Zoom	Camera's focal point is magnified/minimized to bring objects in the foreground or background into focus; emulates how our own focus shifts from person to person or object to object; can reconfigure the composition of the shot <i>without</i> any editing
	Track	Any shot taken when the camera is on some sort of moving vehicle or mechanism (such as a dolly, crane, or truck) or held by/strapped onto a person (Steadicam)

<b>Editing</b>	Fade	Image slowly fades to black; can signal the passage of time or a significant emotional ending to a sequence
	Dissolve	First shot slowly fades out while the second shot fades in, blending the two together; often used to create irony or visual juxtapositions
	Cross-cut	One shot placed immediately after another unmatched shot; creates visual dissonance and quickens the tempo and pace of the film
	Eyeline Match	Often used to depict conversations between characters; the camera first films the character looking in one direction, then follows with a shot of what is being looked at

#### Further Reading

Corrigan, Timothy. *A Short Guide to Writing About Film*. New York: Longman, 2010. Print.

Dick, Bernard F. *Anatomy of Film*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin, 2010. Print.

Golden, John. *Reading in the Reel World: Teaching Documentaries and Other Non-Fiction Texts*. Urbana: National Council of Teachers of English, 2006. Print.

#### Major Film Journal Databases

JSTOR

Academic Search Premier

Project Muse

Film and Television Literature Index

For further information on related concepts, please see the following handout:

- How to Write About Film