



The Writing Center

UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO
DENVER | ANSCHUTZ MEDICAL CAMPUS

Formal Elements of Film

Time & Space	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.

Framing	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

Lighting	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

Angle	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
Movement	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)

Editing	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