About this Guide

Good movies -- ones that have an emotional impact or communicate a desired message -- often seem like magic, but in reality they are a blend of ideas and technical elements that can be learned and mastered. With an understanding of the basic tools and techniques at your disposal, you, the filmmaker, can come closer to achieving your vision.

This is the first in a series of practical guides intended for anybody who is interested in making movies. In it you will find basic information about shots and composition. It has been designed as a starting point for beginning filmmakers, but can be used as a reference by individuals at any skill level. We hope that you find the information contained within useful and inspiring.

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There are many different types of movies, but all movies, regardless of whether they are documentary or fiction, live-action or animation, communicate using a language of images and sound. In spoken language, we use words to carry meaning. In film language, we use **shots**. Shots are an essential aspect of filmmaking, in which camera angles, movement, and cuts are used to express ideas and emotion.

**What is a Shot?**

The term “shot” comes from the early days of filmmaking, when cameras had to be cranked by hand to record an image. This action was similar to the act of cranking a machine-gun, so it was said that a cameraman would “shoot” with the camera the same way he would “shoot” bullets from a gun. Cameras have come a long way from those early days, but today the concepts of “shooting” and “shots” have remained the same.

**Definitions**

Below are a few basic filmmaking terms that will be used throughout this guide, and in future guides.

A **shot** is a moving image recorded over an uninterrupted period of time. The term shot can be applied to two different parts of the filmmaking process -- shooting and editing.

**Shooting** is the act of capturing moving images.

**Editing** is the creative act of selecting and combining shots to make a movie.
When you are **shooting**, a shot begins the moment you press record and ends the moment you press stop:

- Camera operator presses record.
- The camera records an action.
- Camera operator stops recording.

In this instance, the shot is the continuous image that is recorded from the time the camera starts to the time it stops.

When you are **editing**, a shot begins and ends with a **cut**. A cut is a visual break in a continuous image, created by placing one shot next to another. If we think of shots as words, then cuts are like spaces. They are transitions between one idea and the next.

In the example above, cuts are indicated by the spaces between the images, but when we are watching a film, cuts are instantaneous and often “invisible”. Shots and cuts are the building blocks of film language. To be an effective filmmaker you must understand how shots and cuts work, and pay close attention to them in the movies you watch.
Understanding Composition

The Frame

Every photographic image, whether still or in a movie, is bounded by the edges of what the camera can see. These edges constitute the frame. Although the concept of the frame may seem simple, it is something that is very important for a filmmaker to understand. The frame is what contains the information carried by a shot, and as a filmmaker, it is up to you to choose an appropriate frame for the images you capture.

What is happening in the image above?

Most people will agree that the image depicts a woman milking a dri (female yak). Notice how the woman and the dri are positioned nearest to the viewer. Because of this, we say that she is in the foreground of the image. If the woman and dri are in the foreground, then what is in the background, farthest away from the camera? What is in the middleground, between the foreground and the background?
Center of Interest and Screen Dominance

Take another look at the image on the previous page. What draws your eye and captures your attention? Again, it’s the woman in the foreground. In this case we can say that she is the center of interest, because she is the focus of our attention and the subject of the image.

A center of interest can be large... ...or small (notice the people at the bottom-left of the frame). Sometimes, there’s no easily identifiable center of interest at all.

In the first shot, notice how the center of interest/subject takes up most of the space on the screen. Here we can say that the center of interest is dominant -- the subject’s size in the frame demands that we pay attention to him.

In the second shot, the center of interest/subject is small in the frame. The snowy landscape takes up the most space on the screen, and therefore is dominant. Think about what this communicates. Although our eye is drawn to the people, we keep the landscape in our mind. How might the meaning of the shot change if the people walking were larger in the frame?

When you are shooting or editing a movie, it is important to consider what attracts the viewer’s attention in each shot. Understanding the concepts of center of interest and screen dominance will help you compose your images with greater purpose and intent.
As we have seen in the example above, a shot’s meaning can change depending on where you place the camera, or how your subjects are positioned in the frame. There are other things that can affect a shot too, for example movement, technical properties of the camera, or perspective. Below is a list of common shots and cinematographic elements. It is just a starting point, and as you become more experienced, you will discover many more new possibilities. As you study the list, consider how the visual elements potentially affect the meaning of each shot.

**Camera Placement**
The following shots relate to the camera’s distance from its subject:

- **Extreme Close Up**: Shows extreme detail.
- **Close Up**: The subject takes up most of the frame.
- **Medium Close Up**: Halfway between a Medium Shot and a Close Up.
- **Medium Shot**: Part of the subject is shown in detail, while giving an impression of the whole subject.
- **Wide Shot**: The entire subject is in the frame.
- **Long Shot**: The subject is visible, but the environment is dominant.
- **Establishing Shot**: The environment is the subject.
Camera Height
The two shots to the right pertain to the camera's height in relation to its subject:

Low Angle
The camera is placed below the subject, giving the perspective of looking up.

High Angle
The camera is placed above the subject, giving the perspective of looking down.

Movement
The shots below incorporate camera movement. In some cases, the camera is fixed on a tripod, in others the entire camera moves. These shots are presented as image sequences, which depict how the shot changes over time.

The arrow (➡️) denotes movement of the camera.

Pan
The camera is fixed in place on a tripod or in the cameraperson’s hands and swivels to the right or left. In this example, the shot pans to the right.

Tilt
The camera is fixed in place on a tripod or in the cameraperson’s hands and swivels up or down. In this example, the shot tilts up from the sitting monk to the monk with the tripod.

Zoom
The image changes perspective by means of the lens. A zoom can be toward a subject (from a wider shot to a closer shot) or away from a subject (from a closer shot to a wider shot). A zoom toward the subject is called a zoom in or push in, while a zoom away from the subject is called a zoom out or pull out. Although the camera seems to move, it actually stays in place and the lens does all the work. In this example, the shot zooms in on its subject.
The camera is fixed in place on a moving device. A tracking shot is usually performed with a camera dolly, a special wheeled platform for the camera, but almost anything with wheels can serve the purpose. The shot above was filmed from a motorcycle riding parallel to the motorcycle in the frame. In a tracking shot, the entire camera moves, whereas in a pan, the camera is fixed in place and swivels right or left.

A following shot moves with its subject from behind, as if it is in pursuit. In the example above, the camera is held by the camera operator, who is walking behind the subject. A following shot can also be taken from a dolly or other moving device.

Focus
Focus is another property of the camera that can affect an image. When something is in focus, it appears sharp and when it is out of focus it appears blurry.

In a shallow focus shot, only part of the frame appears in focus. In this example, the foreground is blurry and the background is sharp.

In a deep focus shot, everything in the frame appears in focus. In this example the foreground and background are both sharp.

In a rack focus shot, the focus changes from one part of the frame to another. In this example, the focus changes from the subject in the foreground to the yaks in the background.
Subjects and Placement
The shots below relate to the number of subjects in the frame:

One-Shot
A single subject is in the frame.

Two-Shot
Two subjects are in the frame.

Ensemble Shot
Three or more subjects are in the frame.

Perspective
These shots indicate the camera’s perspective, or viewpoint:

Over the Shoulder Shot
A shot taken from over a person’s shoulder, in which the back of their head and shoulder are used to frame the image. This shot is commonly used when two people are having a discussion.

Point of View Shot
The camera takes the perspective of the subject, as if we are seeing through his or her eyes. Often, a point of view shot is preceded or followed by a one-shot of a subject looking at something, indicating the camera’s perspective. In the example above, the two images are separated by a cut. The first shot depicts a man looking, and the second shot is his point of view.
Exercise: Scavenger Hunt

Objectives: To understand and practice basic shots and cinematographic elements.
Numbers: 4+ people
Equipment: Camera and sound equipment (one setup for each group is ideal); pens and paper; a watch or other timekeeping device. For larger groups it is helpful to have a TV monitor and speakers for showing the footage.
Time: Variable

Now that you are familiar with some of the types of shots, it is time to practice them.

Gather several friends and divide into small groups (2-4 people per group is ideal). Each group should generate a list of 25-30 shots. Try to include some of the shots listed in the guide, but also be creative and incorporate your own ideas. Be as detailed as you can -- for example, instead of writing “Medium Shot”, add a specific detail, such as “Medium Shot of a person standing near a stove”. To make the exercise more fun, make some of the shots humorous or absurd.

When your group’s list is finished, exchange it for another group’s list. Your task is to capture as many shots as you can from this new list. For added fun, set a time limit for capturing the shots so that the exercise becomes a race against the clock.

Once time is up, bring all of the groups back together. Each group should present its footage shot-by-shot to the other groups. After showing each shot, the group that is presenting should pause the recording and let the groups that are watching try to name the type of shot they have just seen. If there are disagreements over the type of shot being viewed, encourage the groups to defend their positions and work toward a resolution. If you’d like, you can keep score to determine which group collected the most accurate shots.