

# A Glossary of Film Terms

Note: The following definitions are given to assist you in discussing aspects of a film. You will probably not use all of them, but using a term correctly will allow you to make yourself clearly understood. Note that there are often several terms for the same technique; since the film industry is constantly developing new techniques for making films, new terms will always be needed to describe such advances.

**Abrupt cut:** see **cut**

**Abstract:** (adj) the quality of a picture or scene that is in some significant way removed from everyday reality.

**Abstract** (v/transitive): to select and highlight details, at the same time de-emphasizing or even omitting other details.

**Action** (1.) activity or movement recorded on film; (2.) word called out to begin a **take**.

**Audio:** the sound track usually consisting of at least one or more of the following: dialogue, background sounds, sound effects, music (background or natural).

**Audio cut:** (see **sound edit** or **split edit**).

**Available light:** natural light at a location.

**Back-story:** relevant events that happened prior to the time setting of the film

**Boom:** a long pole, usually counterbalanced, on which a microphone, camera, or light is attached allowing the instrument to be placed appropriately. Often, a boom “travels,” or is moved as needed during shooting.

**Boom shot** (also “crane” or “helicopter” shot): equipment used to create an extremely *high angle shot*; said to be a *booming shot* (or *craning shot* or *helicoptering*) when the angle changes to higher or lower position during the shot (“booming up to a higher vantage point, looking down on...”)

**Camera angle:** the angle of the camera as it records a scene to *suggest* a particular emotion or attitude.

Ex. an *extremely low angle*, looking up, suggests the strength and dominance (sometimes evil) of the subject; a *slight low-angle*, looking up, suggests the strength and nobility of the subject; an *extreme high-angle*, looking down on the subject, suggests the weakness, perhaps pitifully so, of the subject; a *moderate high-angle*, looking down, suggests disdain for the subject. An **eye-level shot** is used when the camera is on the same level as the subject, usually seated standing; the suggestion is non-judgmental.

**Camera movement:** when the camera changes location or angle during filming. **Pans** or **panning shot:** rotates horizontally on a stationary base (from “panoramic”); **dollies** or a **dolly shot:** camera moves in (forward) or out (backward) on a subject, usually by means of mounting on a dolly (a wheeled cart); **tracks** or a **tracking shot:** the camera moves sideways such as with a walking person, often with the camera mounted on a long track for smooth movement.

**Cartoon** (modern): a short animated film, usually humorous. Originally, artistic use: a preparatory full-size line drawing for a painting, fresco, or tapestry with colors suggested, if at all, only in broad strokes and without significant detail.

**Cel:** a term used in animation with multiple meanings. At its simplest, a cel is a drawing on celluloid or other transparent medium such as acetate. The drawing covers only a portion of the cel and is used in conjunction with additional cels, in layers, to form a complete picture, also called a cel. At its simplest the picture may have a background cel, which doesn’t have to be redrawn for subsequent frames, and a subject cel, which is redrawn for each frame if the subject is in motion. There can be additional cels for layers of scenery and for stationary characters. In the larger sense, a cel is the same as a frame and these words are used interchangeably.

**Close-up:** a shot of one person, usually of just head



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and shoulders. *Extreme close-up*: close enough so that only a portion of the person or object is shown on the screen.

**Credits**: listing of the names of those involved in the making of the film. **Front credits**: production and distribution company logos shown prior to the beginning of the film; **opening credits**: listing of the names of members of the production staff (and in fiction films, names of the leading actors) often **intercut** with the opening shots; **end/final credits**: credits shown at the end of the film, sometimes including added bits of information about the characters and listing all persons (and businesses) who had some role in making the film.

**Crew**: all of the people needed to get the motion picture and sound recorded and edited other than those being filmed

**Cut**: (1) any change from one shot to the next, usually *smooth*, *unobtrusive*: the new shot is somewhat similar to the former scene in tone, light intensity, and/or sound; or the cut may be *abrupt*: the new shot strongly contrasts with the former in tone, lighting, and/or sound, often used for changes in scene and/or sequence.; (2) word called, usually by the director, to end the filming of a particular **take**.

**Discovery shot**: when the camera moves, usually by **panning or booming**, during a shot and unexpectedly shows (“discovers”) a person or significant prop that was present from the beginning of the scene but not in the camera’s view or focus.

**Editing**: the process of assembling the **footage** from the many and various **takes** into an effective narrative form (note: in fiction film and docudramas, the film editor is usually not the same person as the director; in documentary film, the director often serves as his/her own editor).

**End credits**: see **credits**

**Fast motion**: recording the scene with the camera running slower than 24 frames-per-second (fps) so the projected motion is faster than normal (e.g., if shot at 6 fps, then 4 seconds of action is shown in each second.)

**Filmmaker**: spoken of as if it were just one person, the director, who has the authority to make all artistic decisions, yet often this authority is divided between

several persons, all of whom usually serve the director. This term is understood to mean whoever had the authority for a decision.

**Focus**: the sharpness of the image. In normal filming, the subject is in “clear focus”; part or all of a shot may be deliberately out of focus for a special effect.

**Footage**: refers to what has been recorded on film (e.g., the footage of one particular press conference is shown several different times in the film); *staged footage*: the director sets up an interview or a re-enactment; *unstaged footage*: the film crew records an event that is taking place the best way they are able.

**Frame**: (1) a single image, in sequence with many other single images on a single strip (formerly of celluloid film, now on digital recording). Shown at the rate of 24 frames per second (fps). Similar to a photo but meant to be shown with numerous similar frames recoded in sequence to create a “motion picture.” If reproduced as a single photograph, it is known as a “still.” (2) the same as when we discuss what is in the picture’s frame, that is, what is included within the picture’s borders. (For animation, see **cel**.)

**Front credits**: see **credits**

**Ground level shot**: the camera is close to the ground, usually looking straight ahead at something close to the ground (If looking up, it would be an *extreme low angle* shot)

**Handheld shot**: a shot taken with a handheld camera rather than on a tripod; it often appears shaky rather than stable and may be used for a documentary or news-reporting effect.

**Intercut**: a brief interruption in the ongoing scene when an image of an object or person, not in the scene, appears suddenly for a short time.

**Intercutting**: repeatedly alternating back and forth between two or three scenes, breaking the action each time.



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**Key lighting:** the main, or primary light on a subject in a frame; *high-key*: brightly lit; *mid-key* (medium key): medium light; *low-key*: little or no light; frame is dark. (A scene is said to be in *high contrast* if different areas are lit in high- or low-key lighting; *mild contrast* if the frame is only high-to-mid or mid-to-low; *little contrast* if the entire frame is all in one key.)

**Long shot:** camera is far enough away from the subject to show him/her entirely. *Extreme long shot:* the subject is very far from the camera, appears quite small on the screen.

**Low-angle shot:** see **camera angle**

**Metaphor:** a term borrowed from literature to describe the use of an object, character, or action that is meant to suggest, through association, another object, character, or action with which it has an implied relationship.

**Mise-en-scène (m.o.s.)** (from French for “placing on stage”) A shot for which sound recording is unnecessary. It is filmed without sound. (There are many possible explanations for the derivation of the abbreviation “m.o.s.”)

**Montage:** (from French for “editing”) usually used to mean a series of rather short shots put together to create a coherent sequence

**Motif:** a recurring image or symbol in the film that helps to advance the plot, develop the theme, or delineate the character.

**180-degree rule:** There is an imaginary axis between two actors in a scene, and the camera should always stay on one side of that axis to avoid disorienting the viewer.

**Opening credits:** see **credits**.

**Off-screen:** refers to dialogue or sound coming from a source not seen but understood to be nearby, as an unseen character talking to the subject.

**Point of view (p.o.v.)** (1) a shot taken to suggest the perspective (including relative height and direction of view) from a character’s position; seeing things as if through the character’s eyes. Usually a **p.o.v. shot** follows a shot showing a character look-

ing in a particular direction. (2) Beliefs or mental attitude of a person on a given subject

**Re-enactment:** the portrayal of an event after the fact, generally using actors; e.g., if no **stock footage** is available, the moment is then duplicated by re-enactment.

**Reverse angle:** Direction of the camera view in the second shot is 180° away from the direction in the first shot.

**Scene:** consists of a series of shots taken in a single location, relating some portion of the story.

**Sequence:** a series of **shots** or **scenes** united by the same idea. If we liken a sequence to a chapter we can see that a sequence may involve one continuous action, one scene, or several shifts in the action, involving different characters in different locations, different scenes. A sequence has one or more scenes; a scene has many shots, all in the same setting, showing more or less continuous action. (A **scene** could have just one continuous shot but this has rarely been attempted.)

**Shot:** constant sequence of **frames**, uninterrupted by **cuts** or **editing**

**Split edit** (or **sound edit**): when the audio and visual portions of a shot do not end simultaneously. Usually, the sound from an upcoming shot is heard before the shot appears on the screen. Normally used when transitioning to a new scene.

**Still:** a single, unmoving image; one frame, usually enlarged, often as a photograph, from the film; sometimes a staged photograph, not necessarily found in the actual film, used for publicity.

**Stock footage:** film shot previously, not for use in any specific film, kept in a film library and available for use whenever appropriate.

**Take:** a single, continuously filmed bit of action that



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produces a **shot**. The same action filmed again because the first “take” was unsatisfactory in some way, is referred to as “take 2,” “take 3,” etc., of the same shot so the film editor has a choice of which works best. Documentary film makers prefer to avoid “re-takes” since the opportunity doesn’t exist when life’s ordinary events are being filmed; doing re-takes during interviews is generally regarded as violating the documentary code. (One infamous WW II general lost a much of his troops’ respect as they watched him insist on re-taking his wading ashore from a landing craft several times to make sure the cameras got good shots of the event.)

**Title:** gives the title of the film, sometimes over scenery from the film’s location or other part of the film

**Title card:** a method of giving information in print about the film’s location, date, etc., with printed words appearing on the screen, which may be either blank or showing a shot “behind” the words. Often used at the end of the film, just before the end credits, especially in docudramas, to relate additional information (perhaps updating the characters or events) beyond the scope of the story.

**Transition shot:** a shot which seems connected to the ongoing scene/sequence but gradually transforms into a new scene/sequence.

**Voice-over (v.o.):** an off-screen narrator, not actively present in the scene, speaking or commenting on the action; can be the same person/character as in the scene, but the comments are recorded separately from the filming.



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