

- Shot sizes
- Camera angles
- Camera movements

Once you understand the basic principles of each type of shot, you can use them as building blocks to make more interesting combinations.

Shot Sizes

Shot size refers to how big or small the frame is in relation to the subject. Does your character fill the frame or are they so far away as to be nearly invisible? What else is visible in your shot? Multiple characters? Objects? Landscapes?

Let's look at the 5 most important shot sizes and see how they work:

Close-up (CU)

The **close-up** is one of the most common shot sizes in cinema. It's used when you want to highlight the facial features of your character without any other distractions in the shot. A typical close-up shows the character's face from their forehead to their chin.

However, there's room for some variation. An **extreme close-up** goes further, often showing nothing more than the character's eyes. Think of a classic Western in which two characters stare each other down before a duel. This shot draws the viewer's attention to facial features and expressions that would be lost in a wide shot.

Long shot (LS)

A **long shot** is in some ways the opposite of a close-up. It shows the character's entire body in frame, from their head to their toes. This gives the viewer a better sense of the subject's surroundings, and conveys information that would be lost in a close-up.

Long shots are often used in action scenes, when it's important to see

how the character is moving through his or her environment. You might cut from that extreme close-up of your two dueling characters to a long shot that shows just how far they're actually standing from each other, giving the viewer a better perspective on the scene.

One variation of this shot is an **extreme long shot**, in which the character is so far away they're nearly lost in the frame or obscured by their surroundings. Think of a character riding off into the sunset, getting smaller as they get further away from the camera.

Medium shot (MS)

The **medium shot** or **mid shot** is somewhere between a close-up and long shot. A typical medium shot shows the subject from their head to their waist. It's close enough that you can still see their face, while also including some of their body language.

You might use this shot when a character is carrying an object or pointing a gun. Or, if they're sitting at a desk, you can show them writing in a book, while avoiding wasting valuable screen space on their feet or their knees.

It's also useful for when a character is moving through the frame, since it contains enough background information that the viewer doesn't get disoriented.

Single, two shot, three shot

Another way to categorize a shot is by the number of people in the frame. We call this a **single shot**, a **two shot**, or a **three shot**, depending on how many people are in it.

Typically, you'll combine this with one of the other shot sizes we've already looked at. For example, you might use a two-shot close-up for a scene of two characters kissing. Three characters in an office might call for a medium three shot.

POV

Finally, there's the **POV** or **point-of-view** shot. This is used when you want the viewer to see what the character is seeing or feel what they're feeling. It can be a static shot or you can combine it with one of the camera motions that we'll look at later.

Camera Angles

The next category that we'll look at is **camera angle**. Once you've decided on a shot size, you can add a bit more perspective to your shot by choosing an angle. The camera angle can help you create a sense of fear, empathy, or disorientation in the viewer.

Eye level

The most neutral camera angle is the **eye level** shot. The camera points straight ahead at about the same level as the subject's face. This is how you would shoot an interview scene if you wanted to maintain a sense of objectivity.

The goal is to let the viewer follow the action without manipulating their emotions. While it's called "eye level," it doesn't have to be a shot of the character's face. You can get an eye level shot of an object by maintaining a neutral camera angle.

Low angle

A **low-angle shot** adds some subjectivity to the scene. Instead of facing straight ahead, the camera looks up at the subject from a low angle. This can make a character appear threatening, dominant, or in a position of power relative to another character.

As with some of the other shots we've looked at, you can vary the intensity of it. A slight low angle might be used to convey a sense of authority, such as a teacher looking down at a student. An extreme low angle shot might be used to show a monster like Godzilla or King Kong bearing down on other characters.

High angle

The reverse of the low angle shot is the **high angle shot**, which creates the opposite impression, and makes the subject of the camera seem small. For example, a shot from King Kong's POV might point down from a higher angle to show how powerless the characters are in relation to him.

You can also take this to the extreme with a **top angle** or **bird's eye view**. This shot looks down on the character from above and can be used indoors or outdoors. For example, you might look down on your subject entering a church or stadium.

Or, you could use this to show your character running away from a helicopter, in which case it would be an **aerial shot** or a **drone shot**.

Dutch angle

A **Dutch angle** is one of the most common ways to convey disorientation. For this shot, simply tilt the camera to one side so it isn't level with the horizon. You might use this shot to show the POV of a drunk character stumbling down the street, or in a horror movie to give the impression that the walls of a haunted house are closing in.

Over-the-Shoulder (OTS)

An **over-the-shoulder shot** is another angle that can shift a viewer's perception of the scene. A OTS shot is generally a close-up of another character's face from "over the shoulder" of another character and is used to convey conflict or confrontation.

You could also use an OTS wide shot to show a character looking out over a landscape or moving through an action sequence, when you don't want to use a POV.

Camera Movement

The third category that we'll look at is **camera motion** or **movement**. Most of the shot sizes and angles we've look at can be used as either static shots or moving shots. By adding motion to a scene, you can move between camera angles easily, sometimes even within the same shot. Let's look at 5 common camera movements here:

Pan or tilt

The simplest camera movement is a **pan** or **tilt**. A **pan** is when you keep the camera in one place and turn it to the side, and a **tilt** is when you turn it up or down.

If your camera is on a tripod, then you can simply turn the head of the tripod, just as you would turn your head to one side to get a new perspective on a scene. If a subject stands up, you can turn an eye-level shot into a low-angle by tilting the camera up as they rise.

A pan or tilt is also a good opportunity to experiment with speed. You could spend an entire minute slowly panning from left to right to show off a room or a landscape, or you can do a **whip pan**, in which the movement happens so fast that it becomes a blur.

Tracking shot, dolly shot, or crane shot

The key to a pan or tilt is that the camera itself doesn't move, so the viewer feels mostly like a spectator. If you want to move with a subject and make the viewer feel like a part of the action, you can use a **tracking shot, dolly shot, or crane shot**.

Typically, a tracking shot moves sideways, a dolly shot moves forwards or backwards, and a crane shot moves up or down. Depending on your equipment, you can use these movements separately, or combine them to move on multiple axes at once.

Zoom

A **zoom shot** moves into or out of the frame by using a zoom lens rather than moving the camera. You can turn a medium shot into a close up by slowly zooming in on a subject's face as they deliver an emotional monologue. Or you can zoom out to reveal a character or object that wasn't previously in frame.

A zoom can be slow and subtle so that the viewer barely notices it happening, or it can be more obvious to give the shot a *cinema verite* style.

Random motion

Random motion is used to create energy and intensity, particularly in an action scene. Think of *The Bourne Identity*, in which the camera bounces around so quickly that the subject of the scene isn't even always framed in the shot.

While random motion can be effective in creating a sense of disorientation, sometimes it can be *too* effective, leaving viewers dizzy and confused.

360-degree motion

The last type of motion that we'll look at is **360-degree motion**, in which the camera moves entirely around the subject of the shot. These shots can be challenging to do on large film sets, because they require hiding the crew and equipment from view, but they're more common in the days of Steadicams and CGI.

The Matrix used a special camera setup for its 360-degree fight scenes, but you can also use a handheld camera or a drone.

Compound motion

The great thing about camera motion is that you don't have to restrict it to one axis at a time. You can combine movements to move in multiple dimensions at once and create more complex shots. Let's look at two popular compound shots:

Dolly zoom

The **dolly zoom** is used to create a sense of vertigo or unease. It was famously used in Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* and Steven Spielberg's *Jaws*. In this shot, the camera moves forward or backwards while the lens zooms in the opposite direction.

Single Take

A **single take** combines multiple movements, shot sizes, and angles into one extended shot. Rather than cutting from a long shot to a close-up, for example, the camera might track, zoom, pan, and tilt between a variety of different shots.

This can be the hardest to get right, but it's an effective way to orient viewers to a new environment, such as with the opening shot in *Goodfellas*. It can also lend a theatrical feel to a movie, as in *Birdman*, which is made to appear like one very long shot.

Try it yourself

These are 15 of the most essential camera shots, angles, and movements in filmmaking, but remember, they can be combined in an infinite number of ways.

Here's a simple chart I've designed to help you come up with more creative shots. Start off by choosing a **camera angle** from the first column, a **shot size** from the second, and a **movement** from the third.

Try a few different combinations, and don't be afraid to experiment and see what works best for your scene. You can always get a few different shots on set and decide which one you like best in the editing room.

TL;DR

I've divided 15 essential camera shots into three groups of 5 each: Angles, Shot Sizes and Motion. Together, you can create an infinite combination of shots for your film projects.

Camera Angles

1. Eye level – camera points straight ahead. Intention is to be objective.
2. Low angle – camera points up from a lower angle. It makes the subject dominating.
3. High angle – camera points down from a higher angle. It makes the subject diminutive. A variation: Top angle or bird's eye view – special case when you want to show the topography of a location. Aerial shots fall under this.
4. Dutch – tilted angle. It draws attention to the fact it's not a balanced frame. Something is literally off kilter.
5. Over the shoulder (OTS) – not strictly an angle, but it's a specialized shot that deserves its own place. Confrontational by nature.

Shot Sizes

1. Close up – facial features and expression is more important than anything else. Variation: Extreme close up – you probably want to chop something off for an even closer look.
2. Long shot – When you want to add action and location along with the subject. Variation: Extreme long shot – when the location is more important than the character at that moment.
3. Medium shot or Mid shot – half of a person, roughly, where body language is important while eliminating distracting elements of the background.
4. Single, two shot, three shot. etc. – Number of people in frame decide this. You can combine this with a CU, MS or LS.
5. POV – as if the audience were the subject.

Camera Movement

1. 360 degree – showcase the subject by moving around it.
2. Zoom – when you want to get closer or further away without making an emotional statement.
3. Pan and tilt – when you want to observe the space from a single vantage point, follow the subject so you feel like you're a spectator observing. The movement happens on a pivot.
4. Tracking shot, crane, dolly – when you want to follow the subject and be more involved with the space and location. The audience is drawn into the world.
5. Random – camera shake or motion to provide energy.

Compound Motion

You can combine motion into more complex shots. The two most popular examples are:

1. Dolly Zoom or Vertigo Shot – where the camera dollies in/out and zooms in/out (the opposite direction to the dolly movement) at the same time.
2. Single take shot – where the action is a complex choreography of different camera angles, shot sizes and motion. The toughest and most time consuming to pull off.

That's it! By using a combination of angles, shot sizes and motion you can create an infinite variety of shots. Happy filmmaking!