

Cinematography Basics: A Beginner's Guide

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What is Cinematography?

Cinematography is the art and technique of capturing moving images on film or digital media. It combines visual storytelling, technical knowledge, and creative choices to bring a script to life.

The Role of a Cinematographer (DP)

A **Director of Photography (DP)** or cinematographer is responsible for how the film looks visually. They work closely with the director to choose camera angles, lighting setups, lenses, and shot composition.

Camera Shots & Angles

Basic Shots:

- **Wide Shot (WS):** Shows the subject and environment.
- **Medium Shot (MS):** Waist up, focuses on character and some background.
- **Close-Up (CU):** Focuses on a detail or emotion, e.g., a face.

Camera Angles:

- **Eye Level:** Neutral, realistic.
- **High Angle:** Camera looks down — makes subject appear smaller.

- **Low Angle:** Camera looks up — makes subject appear bigger or powerful.
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4 Camera Movement

- **Pan:** Left/right rotation on a fixed base.
 - **Tilt:** Up/down rotation.
 - **Dolly:** Camera moves toward/away from subject.
 - **Tracking/Trucking:** Follows subject sideways.
 - **Handheld:** Creates natural or shaky feel.
 - **Steadicam/Gimbal:** Smooth movement while walking/running.
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5 Composition & Framing

✓ Key Rules:

- **Rule of Thirds:** Divide frame into 3x3 grid; place subjects on intersections.
 - **Leading Lines:** Use lines to draw viewer's eyes.
 - **Headroom & Lead Room:** Space above head or in direction subject is facing.
 - **Depth:** Use foreground, midground, and background for a 3D feel.
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6 Lighting in Cinematography

Light sets the mood, tone, and dimension.

✓ Basic setups:

- **Three-Point Lighting:** Key Light (main), Fill Light (reduces shadows), Back Light (separates subject from background).
 - **Natural Light:** Using sunlight effectively.
 - **Practical Lights:** Visible light sources in the scene (lamps, candles).
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7 Color & Mood

Color grading and color palettes evoke emotion:

- Warm tones = cozy, romantic.
- Cool tones = cold, distant.
- High contrast = dramatic.
- Low contrast = soft, dreamy.

Lenses & Focal Lengths

- **Wide-Angle Lens:** Expands field of view; great for landscapes or tight spaces.
- **Standard Lens (35mm–50mm):** Natural perspective.
- **Telephoto Lens:** Compresses space, good for close-ups from distance.
- **Prime Lens:** Fixed focal length, sharper image.
- **Zoom Lens:** Variable focal lengths.

Tools & Equipment

- Camera (DSLR, Cinema, Mirrorless)
- Tripod, Gimbal, Steadicam
- External Monitors
- Filters (ND filters for exposure)
- Lighting kits (softboxes, LEDs)
- Reflectors & diffusers

Tips & Best Practices

- ✓ Plan your shots — make a shot list or storyboard.
- ✓ Master exposure triangle: ISO, Shutter Speed, Aperture.
- ✓ Practice good focus pulling and depth of field.
- ✓ Experiment with lighting — quality, direction, and color temperature.
- ✓ Watch films critically — observe how scenes are lit and framed.
- ✓ Collaborate well — communicate with your director and crew.

Helpful Resources

Books:

- “Cinematography: Theory and Practice” by Blain Brown
- “Film Lighting” by Kris Malkiewicz

Online:

- **No Film School** (www.nofilmschool.com)
- **Filmmaker IQ** (www.filmmakeriq.com)
- **YouTube Channels:** Film Riot, DSLR Video Shooter

Final Tip: Keep Shooting!

Cinematography is learned best by **practice**. Experiment with different styles, lighting setups, and storytelling techniques. Your visual style will grow with every project.
