# Unit 5: The Grammar of Film

## Overview

We go back to theory in this unit and then have a chance to practice and apply it.

When we watch a film or TV show most people have no idea how much work and detail it took to make the production. Nor do they know the rules, guidelines, principles, and practices that were followed to create it. This unit and the ones following will help you explore what these best practices are and understand how to apply them to your work.

This will be a fun chapter as you get to explore and experiment with the fundamental building blocks that create meaning in cinema. It is a unit that will challenge both your thinking and your intuition skills as you learn the basic components of filmmaking and how to use them in creative ways.

## Topics

This unit is divided into the following topics:

* Basic Grammar of Film
* Basic Shots and Their Descriptions
* Camera Angles and Heights
* Camera Subject Angles

## Learning Outcomes

When you have completed this unit, you should be able to:

* Define the basic elements of the grammar of film
* Describe basic shots and their descriptions
* Contrast camera angles and heights
* Determine when and how to use subject angles
* Create shots that reveal what you discovered in this unit

## Activity Checklist

Here is a checklist of learning activities you will benefit from in completing this unit. You may find it useful for planning your work.

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| --- | --- | --- |
| 🗹 | **Activities** | **Time** |
|  | Activity 2.1: |  |
|  | Activity 2.2: |  |
|  | Activity 2.3: |  |
|  | Activity 2.4: |  |
|  | **Assignment 2:** |  |

## Resources

Here are the resources you will need to complete this unit.

* Chapter Five of course text
* “21 Eye-Opening Ways To Develop Your Intuition,” https://liveboldandbloom.com/04/self-improvement/develop-your-intuition
* Studying film shots is an essential part of mastering the craft of filmmaking. Study this helpful overview: “15 Essential Camera Shots, Angles and Movements in Filmmaking,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7y0ouVBcogU>
* For an overview of the types of film shots and angles see: “The Ultimate Guide to Camera Shots (over 50+ Types of Shots and Angles in Film), “ <https://www.studiobinder.com/blog/ultimate-guide-to-camera-shots/>
* **Brooklyn College Film Glossary**, <http://userhome.brooklyn.cuny.edu/anthro/jbeatty/COURSES/glossary.htm>
* **17 Lessons Henri Cartier-Bresson Has Taught Me About Street Photography**, <https://erickimphotography.com/blog/2014/12/09/17-lessons-henri-cartier-bresson-taught-street-photography/>
* Other online resources will be provided in the unit and text chapter.
* Guidelines for Film Grammar exercise

## Topic 1: Basic Grammar of Film

In the previous units we look at the basic building blocks of visual composition and cinematic motion. In this unit we are going to learn how to put them together with a variety of other shots to make cinematic context and meaning. This is the grammar of film used to make cinematic “sentences” which convey meaning and context to an audience as we create scenes, sequences, and short films.

However, as we focus on the components of filmmaking, we must not let the emphasis only be on film logic. We also want to cultivate the role that intuition and feeling play as we develop shots and put them together. This reminder is important because filmmaking is as much art as technical craft. We need to know the craft—the technical aspects—but also the art—the aesthetic and emotional dimensions. We need to keep this before us as we venture into the many elements and guidelines of effective filmmaking.

In this first topic you will learn about:

* **Frames**
* **Shots**
* **Scenes**
* **Sequences**
* **Acts**

These components give you the big picture of how the many smaller elements add up to create mood and meaning in a film project.

### Learning Activities

#### Activity 5.1: Title (e.g. Read, Reflect and View)

Find and consult a film glossary such as “Brooklyn College Film Glossary,” <http://userhome.brooklyn.cuny.edu/anthro/jbeatty/COURSES/glossary.htm>

Continue to read and study the one you like throughout this course and it will help you grow your film vocabulary and your understanding of the many components and processes involved in filmmaking. Set a goal to learn 5 new terms or concepts each day. Bring 5 of the new terms to class and share one of them with your classmates. Listen closely to their terms and how your peers define them. This will enhance and re-enforce the concepts for everyone.

Read the first section of Chapter 5, …

In your Film Journal, explain how frames and shots become scenes and sequences and how they add up to a complete film story.

Study a web essay on how to build your intuition such “21 Eye-Opening Ways To Develop Your Intuition,” <https://liveboldandbloom.com/04/self-improvement/develop-your-intuition>

Commit to doing one technique several times a day. Share the technique you will focus on with your facilitator and peers. What did you learn from this experience?

*Note that this learning activity is ungraded, but is designed to help you succeed in your assessments in this course.*

## Topic 2: Basic Shots and Their Descriptions

This is a vital section. You need to know the following shots and how to describe them because you will have to use this language to communicated to your crew. Few things are more frustrating for a film crew than the director or cinematographer not knowing what they want or how to name and describe a shot.

* **Extreme Long Shot (ELS)**
* **Long Shot (LS) also called Wide Shot (WS)**
* **Establishing Shot (ES)**
* **Full Shot (FS)**
* **Medium Long Shot (MLS) also known as Medium Wide Shot (MWS)**
* **Cowboy Shot**
* **Medium Shot (MS)**
* **Medium Close Up (MCU)**
* **Close Up (CU)**
* **Extreme Close Up (ECU)**

In addition to shot size we also designate film shots by who or what is in the frame and how they are positioned:

* **Single Shot**
* **Two Shot**
* **Three Shot**
* **Group Shot**s
* **Over-The-Shoulder** **Shot**
* **Reverse Shot**
* **Point of View Shot (POV)**
* **Reaction** Shot
* **Cutaway**
* **Cut-in and Insert**
* **Combo Shot**

### Learning Activities

#### Activity 5.2: Read and Watch

Read the next section of Chapter 5

Be sure to view the video resources for this unit and in the course text such as “Introduction to shot types and camera movement,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lRo2IqYbEaE> and

“15 Essential Camera Shots, Angles and Movements in Filmmaking,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7y0ouVBcogU>

As they say, a picture is worth a thousand words, and when you see the shots in action in these resources they become more clear.

## Topic 3: Camera Angles and Heights

Camera heights and angles reveal both text and subtext. That is, they show us what is being filmed (the object or subject) and often convey something about the meaning of the subject or object (the subtext).

In essence, there are no “neutral” camera angles. Our camera height placement will convey something and it is important for the filmmaker to know what that something is.

The different camera heights include:

* **Eye-Level**
* **Low Angle**
* **High Angle**
* **Shoulder Level**
* **Hip Level**
* **Knee Level Shot**
* **Ground Level**
* **Worm’s Eye View**:
* **Bird’s Eye View**
* **God’s Eye View**
* **Dutch Tilt or Dutch Canted Angle**

### Learning Activities

***Activity 5.3:***

Read the next section of Chapter 5, …

To help re-enforce how camera height affects what we see and how we interpret it study this essay and its visual representations: “Camera work 101: Camera Height,” <http://timurcivan.com/2015/02/camera-work-101-camera-height/>

Summarize in your journal the best thing you learned about camera heights in this section.

## Topic 4: Camera Subject Angles

Subject angle refers to the perspective the audience has of the person being filmed. Subject angles are important because they affect the way the audience interprets the character or scene.

The following are key subject angles:

* **Profile**
* **Full-Face**
* **Three-quarter**
* **Quarter angle**
* **Full-Back**
* **Combo**
* **Silhouettes**

Having completed this topic, you now have a firm grasp of the grammar of film and its components.

***Activity 5.4:***

Read the final section of Chapter 5

Now that you know the overall basics of camera shots and angles study the following detailed resource to enhance your understanding of the psychological and narrative impact they have on an audience: “John Suler's Photographic Psychology: Image and Psyche, Camera Angles,” <http://truecenterpublishing.com/photopsy/camera_angles.htm>

What new or deeper insights did you learn? Log these observations in your journal and share them with your facilitator and peers.

***Activity 5.5:*** Exercise for Applying Grammar of Film

Now that you have done the theory, it is time to practice and apply what you have learned. Be sure to use both sides of your brain—the conscious, intentional shot logic part and the intuitive, feeling, follow your gut and take a risk part. Learning to combine both will help you grow immensely in your creativity.

For this exercise you will engage in street photography, that is, go out into your local world and explore it through your cell phone camera lens and capture photos that use at least ten different shot sizes, subject framing, subject angles, and camera angles and heights.

For inspiration about street photography see:

* **17 Lessons Henri Cartier-Bresson Has Taught Me About Street Photography**, <https://erickimphotography.com/blog/2014/12/09/17-lessons-henri-cartier-bresson-taught-street-photography/>

Share your four best shots with your classmates and log in your journal what learned from your street photography and exploring of camera angles.

## Unit 5 Summary

In this unit, you learned about the importance of film grammar and the multitude of shot sizes, framings, angles, etc. In doing so, you now a good foundational grasp of the basic components needed to make excellent film projects.

## Assessment

The exercises for this unit are for practice purposes and are not graded. But hopefully you are beginning to grasp that professionals must be diligent and self-motivated as they focus on project excellence.

#### Grading Criteria:

…

## Checking your Learning

Before you move on to the next unit, you may want to check to make sure that you are able to:

* Define the basic elements of the grammar of film
* Describe basic shots and their descriptions
* Contrast camera angles and heights
* Determine when and how to use subject angles
* Create shots that reveal what you discovered in this unit