



lingoda

# The transition from silent to talking pictures

SPEAKING

LEVEL  
Advanced

NUMBER  
C1\_1044S\_EN

LANGUAGE  
English

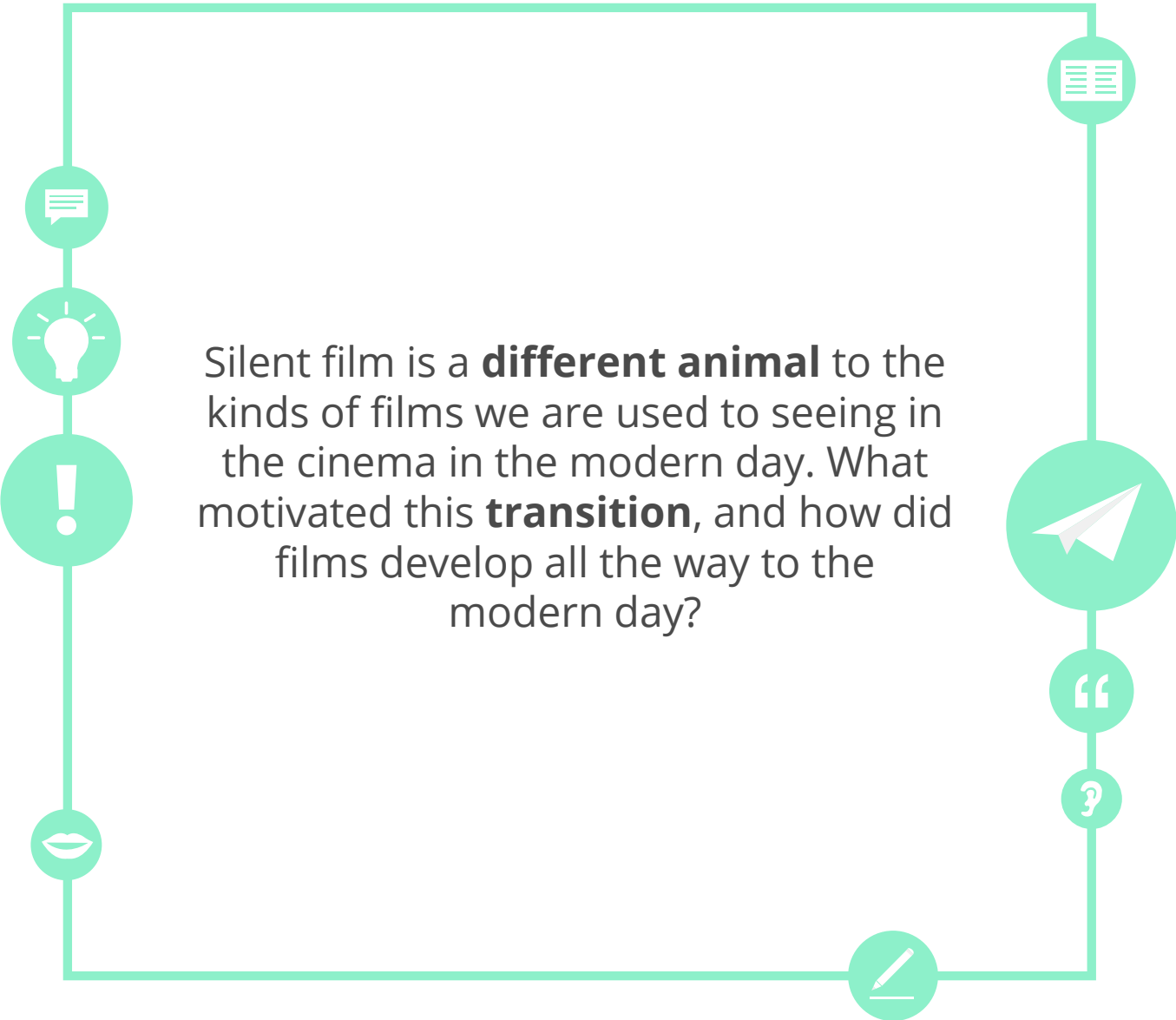




## Goals

- Can read and understand a complex text about the history of film.
- Can compare silent and talking film conventions and present my own critical analysis of film.





Silent film is a **different animal** to the kinds of films we are used to seeing in the cinema in the modern day. What motivated this **transition**, and how did films develop all the way to the modern day?



## Going to the cinema

Do you go to the cinema much?  
If so, what do you like about it?  
If not, why is this the case?





## Film review



Are you a film buff? Do you watch many films? Why (not)? Give a brief outline of the last film you enjoyed, and explain what it was you liked about it in particular.



## Discussion about film

**Think about the following questions in relation to films you've seen recently, and/or your own personal values. Remember to explain your answer.**



1

Do you think genre really exists? What do you think of prejudice against certain genres, like RomComs?

2

Is there any content you consider unsuitable for the big screen? Why?

3

Is censorship necessary? Do you agree with age ratings on films?



## Sound and picture in the 1890s

Have you heard of Thomas Edison? He might be best known for having invented the light bulb, but it was also Edison who invented the **phonograph**, a device for both recording and playing sound, as well as the **motion picture** camera. The two different technological ingredients for talking pictures, or 'talkies' as they were known, had been discovered in the late nineteenth century, but it wasn't until the late 1920s that this **end** was realised in the way it had been originally intended by Edison. Although Edison had made **Herculean efforts** to bring talkies to the public, he had found no satisfactory way of synchronising the soundtrack with the picture. It was around 1925 when recorded soundtracks of any kind began to be added to motion picture.







## Silent film

Silent film (known more **colloquially** as silent pictures), was a very different form of entertainment than what we expect to see at the cinema today.

For one, there was no **set-in-stone** soundtrack. Instead, a live orchestra - or in some cases a solo **pianist** if it was all the theatre could afford - would sit in a pit below the cinema screen and play music to accompany the onscreen action. The musicians would play **swelling**, uplifting music for happier scenes, tense music for scenes of conflict...you get the picture!



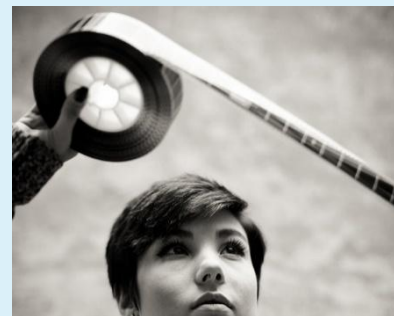




## Silent film

The acting in silent pictures was also very different; the actors **conveyed** their emotions and thoughts exclusively through their body language and facial expressions. Occasionally, the characters would speak, in which case the words would appear onscreen as 'titles' so that the audience could understand.

Charlie Chaplin was one actor **esteemed** for his silent acting; although he never spoke, audiences were able to perceive his feelings without effort from the way he moved his body. One of the main advantages of silent film was that deaf people could happily sit in the audience and feel perfectly included, able to follow all of the action without missing anything.





**New vocabulary: have you seen any of these words in different contexts? How was it used? How does context change meaning?**

motion picture

end

Herculean effort

colloquially

set in stone

pianist

swelling

to convey

esteemed



## Questions on the text

**Read back over the text and answer the following questions.**



1

How were silent films screened? What was done about the soundtrack?

2

See if you can find a pun (a play on words) somewhere in the text.

3

What happened in silent films when somebody spoke? How did the audience know what was being said?



## Big question

**Would you ever  
go to see a silent  
film in the  
cinema?**

**Do you think you  
would enjoy it in  
the same way as  
a talking film?**



happy audience?



...or feeling trapped?



## Inclusive activities

Silent film was just as inclusive and immersive an activity for deaf people and people hard of hearing.

What kind of group or community activities can you think of that we have nowadays which are just as easy for a deaf person to follow?





## Describing music



The text used adjectives such as **swelling**, **uplifting** and **tense** to describe music.

What emotions do these adjectives convey? What other words can you think of that could be used to describe music?



## Contrasting differences

**The text outlined some key differences between the styles of silent and talking film. Think about them again, expand on them, and add as many new ones as you can to the list.**

Silent film

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Talking film

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## Silent vs. talking

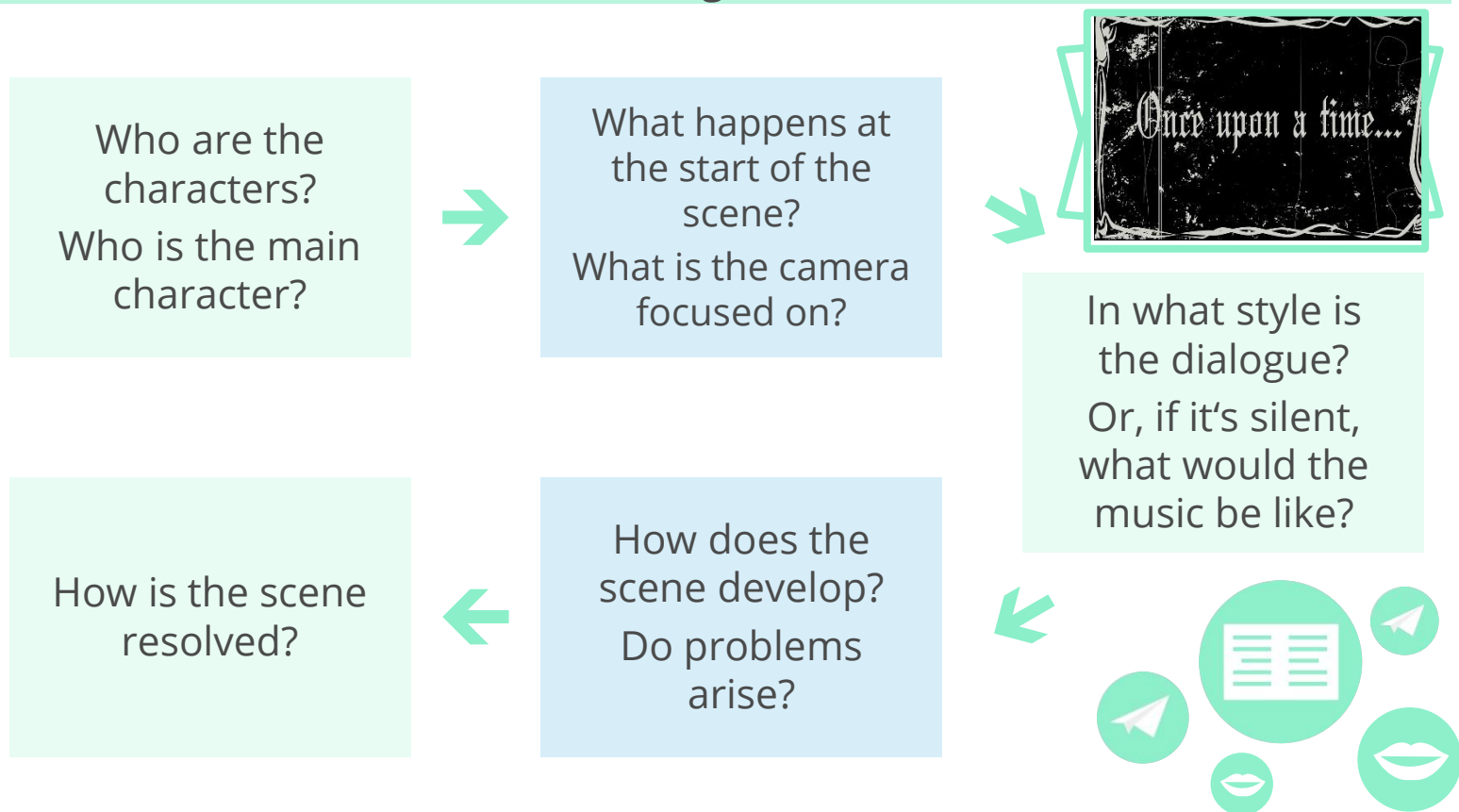
**How would each situation below be shown in a talking versus a silent film? Use the lists you compiled in the previous activity to help you explain your answers!**





## Aaaaaand action!

Choose your favourite situation from the pictures on the previous slide and develop it into a short scene with a beginning, middle and end. Figure out where the picture you're drawing inspiration from will fit in. Choose whether you would put it in a silent or talking film and adapt your story to the genre.





## Get ready to listen



The next few slides will focus on  
training your listening comprehension



## Listening activity

**As you listen to your teacher reading, fill in the gaps with the help of the options on the right hand side.**

By this time, it was widely \_\_\_\_\_ that nobody would want to hear the actors talk, and that there was simply no \_\_\_\_\_ for talking film. The Warner Brothers' way of \_\_\_\_\_ this belief while still \_\_\_\_\_ their films was by introducing a pre-recorded musical soundtrack to their films. This \_\_\_\_\_ away with live musicians and \_\_\_\_\_ financial \_\_\_\_\_ on individual film theatres which wouldn't have had the \_\_\_\_\_ for a full orchestra. These new films with a uniform \_\_\_\_\_ were called '\_\_\_\_\_ ' movies, meaning 'sound of life.'

did

negotiating

lifted

budget

market

soundtrack

limitations

believed

Vitaphone

innovating



## Talkies

**The text says that initially “there was simply no market for talking film.” From what you know of 1920s U.S. society, do you find this easy or difficult to believe?**

**Were you surprised by anything in the text?**



## New vocabulary: discuss the meanings with your teacher

transition

in earnest

to dabble

cumbersome

to do away with

uniform



## Imagine this

**Imagine you are a deaf person in the 1920s. You previously enjoyed going to the cinema once or twice a week. It was nice to feel included in the fun of a community, as well as loving to watch the films themselves. Now talkies have become the norm and you feel a lot more excluded from what's happening. Explain to your friend how you feel about this change.**

- Compare and contrast your feelings before to how you feel now
- Try to explain the experience of not fully understanding what is going on in talking films



isolating  
confusing  
disorienting  
excluded  
included  
disrupted  
new technology

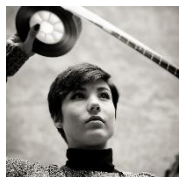






## Critical analysis

Choose a film (or TV series) which you know particularly well and think about it in relation to the following three points. Answer in detail.



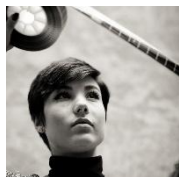
1

**Character development:** what are the characters like? Do they progress in a positive way or do they go downhill during the course of the film?



## Critical analysis

Choose a film (or TV series) which you know particularly well and think about it in relation to the following three points. Answer in detail.



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**Character development:** what are the characters like? Do they progress in a positive way or do they go downhill during the course of the film?



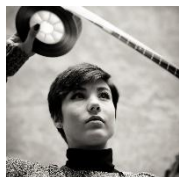
2

**Themes:** what type of ideas does the film dwell on? What kind of message does the film relate?



## Critical analysis

Choose a film (or TV series) which you know particularly well and think about it in relation to the following three points. Answer in detail.



1

**Character development:** what are the characters like? Do they progress in a positive way or do they go downhill during the course of the film?



2

**Themes:** what type of ideas does the film or show dwell on? What kind of message does the film relate?



3

**Overall tone:** does the film end on a happy note, sad note, or bittersweet?



## Heading for obsolescence

Many actors from silent film didn't make it into the talkies. Put yourself in the shoes of the actors.

What do you think they would have thought of this big transition which had such a big effect on their career?





## Reflect on the lesson

Take a moment to review any new **vocabulary, phrases, language structures** or **grammar points** you have come across for the first time in this lesson.

Review them with your teacher one more time to make sure you don't forget!





## Transcription

### Exercise p. 19

In 1925, the **transition** from silent film to talkies began **in earnest**. The Warner Brothers, a company who had opened a string of film theatres across the United States, had also **dabbled** in producing their own films and were looking for a way to make their movies more successful. Enter a small group of researchers who worked in a telephone company; instead of the **cumbersome** phonograph, they had developed small microphones and amplifiers in order to better pick up and record sound.

By this time, it was widely believed that nobody would want to hear the actors talk, and that there was simply no market for talking film. The Warner Brothers' way of negotiating this belief while still innovating their films was by introducing a pre-recorded musical soundtrack to their films. This **did away with** live musicians and lifted financial limitations on individual film theatres which wouldn't have had the budget for a full orchestra. These new films with a **uniform** soundtrack were called 'Vitaphone' movies, meaning 'sound of life.'

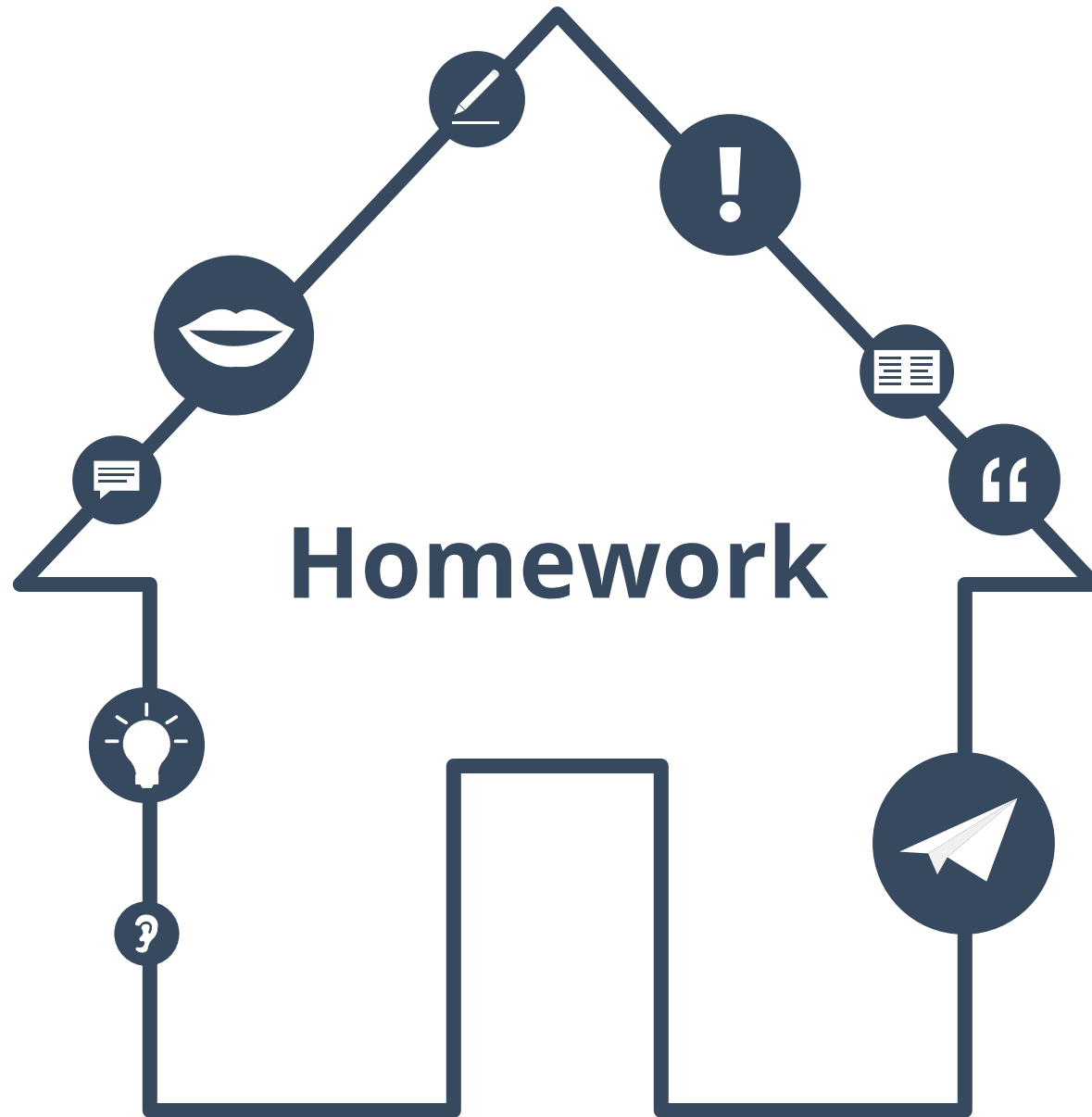
As Vitaphone movies grew in popularity, the entire nature of the film industry transformed. Actors who had previously been highly successful suddenly found themselves out of a job due to the so-called unsuitability of their voices. Similarly, projectionists had to learn how to do their job all over again! The films themselves transitioned from energetic, action-focused pieces to movies including long scenes of actors simply talking - this is how they gained their nickname 'talkies'.



## Answer key

**Exercise p. 19**  
believed, market, negotiating, innovating, did, lifted, limitations, budget, soundtrack,  
Vitaphone







## Pronunciation watchlist

**Did you come across any words in this lesson that were difficult to pronounce? Go back through the lesson and make a note of each one.**



Pronunciation

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## Letter of lament

**You are a film star in the 1920s who has been told their voice is unsuitable for talking film. Write your friend or family member a letter explaining how you are feeling.**

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○	Dear Lucy...
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