

# Composition Basics



In visual arts, composition is the placement or arrangement of visual elements in a work. It can also be the organization of the elements to enhance understanding of your message. How you frame a shot is an important tool in conveying your point of view.

## Framing

How you frame your shot brings emotional and aesthetic focus to a subject. The process of framing your shot defines what you want to show and emphasize in your story.

Framing an action shows our intention about the subject. As the director your task is to choose what to include in the frame and what to leave out.

It is important to maintain proper head room, chin room, and look room in order to make sure the frame does not overpower subjects or objects in the frame.

- **Head room:** It is the space between the top of the subject's head and the top of the frame.
- **Chin room:** It is the space from the subject's chin to the bottom of the frame.
- **Look room:** It is the space left in the frame for the subject to talk or look in a particular direction.

## Camera Shots

The craft of filmmaking is well over 100 years old. As a consequence, directors, camera operators and producers have developed a nomenclature describing actions and creative choices. Shorthand that eases understanding, if you will. A camera shot is the amount of information, the number of people and objects included in the framing. They are used to demonstrate different aspects of setting, themes and characters.

What follows is a glossary of terms used to describe the framing and purpose of different camera shots.

- **Establishing Shot:** This is a long shot to set up a location and the action. It gives the viewer a specific idea of setting.
- **Extreme Long (Wide) Shot:** It shows an exterior, situates action and contains a large amount of landscape. Very little detail is visible in this type of shot. It is intended to give a general impression rather than specific information. Often, with online video, long shots are ineffective since details are lost on a small screen or media player.
- **Crane Shot:** As the name implies, this is a shot taken by a camera on a crane. Mostly used to view the actors from above or to move up and away from them. The elevation of the camera defines the relationships of characters in a story.
- **Long (Wide) Shot:** This shot shows the entire scene area where the action is to take place.
- **Full Shot:** It shows the entire object or human figure.
- **Medium Long Shot:** this shot frames one or two people standing up, that is, their entire body.
- **Medium Shot:** It refers the characters or a character from the waist up. Medium shots work well to show body language.
- **Aerial shot:** This type of shot is often done with a crane or with a camera attached to a special helicopter to view large landscapes. This shot type situates the action in the broadest context.
- **Medium Close-Up:** This shot includes a space equivalent to a person's head and their shoulders.
- **Close-Up:** This is a shot taken from a close distance in which the scale of the object appears relatively large and fills the entire frame to focus attention and emphasize its importance. This enables viewers to understand the actor's emotions.
- **Extreme Close-Up:** This shot contains one part of a character's face or other object. Think lips in "Rocky Horror Picture Show".
- **Point-of-View (POV) Shot:** This is a shot that shows what a subject is looking at (represented through the camera). The camera is positioned where the character stands. It puts the reader in the place of the character.

- **Over the Shoulder Shot:** This shot is very common when two characters are having a discussion and will usually follow an establishing shot which helps the audience place the characters in their setting. It retains the identification with the subject but adds context to the relationships of characters or subjects being interviewed.
- **Head On:** This is a shot in which the action comes directly toward or at the camera. This is most often seen with web camera presentations and on-camera demonstrations. The effect is the subject in the frame is talking directly to the viewer.
- **Tails Away:** This is a shot in which the action moves directly away from the camera.
- **Walk, run, or drive-by:** This is a shot where the camera is fixed as the subject walks across the field of view.
- **Dynamic Shot:** The camera is used to reveal information, mimic the point of view of a character, infuse energy to an otherwise static scene, create anxiety or disorientation in the viewer.
- **Static Shot:** This shot has no camera movement.

The next three are very self-evident.

- **One shot / Single:** This is a shot of a single person.
- **Two shot:** This is a composition of two people in a frame.
- **Three shot:** It refers to a medium shot that contains three people.

## Camera Angles

A scene may be shot from several camera angles. Camera angles describe the specific location at which a camera is placed for framing a shot. Camera angle shows the relation to the subject and affects the viewer perception of that subject. Camera angles can amplify the dramatic impact of the scene. They also contribute significantly to how your audience will perceive your presenter or interview subject. Shooting down on your subject, even slightly, will have a profound impact on credibility, integrity and importance. These angles are often used to demonstrate the power relationship to the audience.

- **High Angle:** Looking down upon a subject. The camera points down on the action, to make the subject appear smaller. This angle will diminish a character. The character/s will look vulnerable or small.
- **Eye-Level Angle:** Most interviews and presentations are shot at eye-level. Placing your camera at the same height as your subject's eyes puts the viewer on an equal footing with the character/s. This is the most common angle as it allows the viewers to feel neutral about the presentation.
- **Low Angle:** Looking up at a subject. The camera points up at the action, making the subject appear larger. This is the opposite of a high angle. It elevates the stature of a character in the story and makes them look more powerful.
- **Bird Eye View:** Looking directly down upon a scene or subject and mostly used to give an overall establishing shot of a scene.

## Visual Aesthetics

As filmmakers it is best to follow basic principles in visual arts in order to maintain the visual aesthetics. The two important visual principles are 'The Rule of Thirds' and 'The 180 Degree Rule':

- **The Rule of Thirds:** The design principle works on the theory that an unbalanced composition will be more interesting and dynamic. When composing a shot the director will divide the frame into nine equal parts, using two horizontal and two vertical imaginary equidistant lines. A starting point for composition involves placing the subject on an intersection of one of these points.
- **The 180 Degree Rule/Crossing the Axis:** This rule is about the camera placement during a scene to ensure a consistent screen direction. It is best understood in the context of an interview. When you cross the axis of 180 degree in camera placement, it will appear that the characters are facing the same direction, not facing each other. The camera is the audience, and if you imagine your location as a stage you can choose a direction that is always the background and a direction where you will place the camera.

## Shooting for Sequences

A sequence is a series of related shots designed to tell a story or idea. A sequence contains a variety of camera shots and angles that advance the action and narrative of your scene. This is true for all filmmaking, not just features and shorts.

Documentaries and demos rely heavily on sequencing shots to clearly present an idea or information. These scenes are broken into individual shots that advance the story.

Think of each shot as a sentence in a paragraph. Just like writing, where there is syntax and grammar, shooting a sequence has visual syntax. And just like writing where the order of sentences will have a significant impact on the coherency of your story, the order and structure of your shots will have a significant impact on the coherency of your story.

Shooting a sequence leverages all of the shot varieties listed above. The close-up, the wide shot, the establishing shot, the reaction shot, and the POV (Point of View) shot are all staples of a sequence.

## Camera Movement

Camera movement plays a considerable role in the emotional language of a story. It can be used to follow or reveal an action.

A well choreographed shot leveraging thoughtful camera movement can eliminate the need to edit your story. This choreography can be difficult to achieve as there are often competing variables contributing to sabotage the effort. But when a well conceived shot is successful the fluidity of the camera can draw the viewer into the story or information.

In addition to practical concerns like tripping over cables, unplugging lights, forgotten lines or bumping into objects, one of the biggest pitfalls to using a continuous shot is the dead spot. Often when moving from character to character, or moving a large distance, there is a moment in the video when nothing happens. The camera may have nothing in the frame, the presenters may be waiting for a cue, or people may forget a line. The consequence of this inaction drains the energy from your video.

If you choose to create a scene with a continuous shot it is recommended that you allot the time to rehearse it thoroughly.

- **Pan:** Horizontal shift in viewpoint from a fixed position; like turning your head side-to-side. Horizontal movement can suggest travel or momentum. Movement from left-to-right across the screen is more common for western cultures.
- **Tilting:** Vertical shift in viewpoint from a fixed position; like tipping your head back to look at the sky or down to look at the ground. Vertical camera movement can suggest growth and freedom from traditional bounds. Tilting down can suggest danger or overwhelming power.
- **Zoom:** It is a single shot taken with a lens that has a variable focal length, moving from a wide-angle shot to a telephoto shot in one continuous movement.
- **Dolly:** Placing the camera on a moving platform to move it closer or farther from the subject.
- **Tracking/Trucking:** Placing the camera on a moving platform to move it to the left or right.
- **Crane:** Moving the camera in a vertical position; being able to lift it off the ground as well as swing it side-to-side from a fixed base position.