

# MY PLACE | MY STORY

## DIGITAL STORYTELLING WORKSHOP

Name: \_\_\_\_\_



Student Activity Guide

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Overview ..... 1

Identity Map ..... 2

Story Idea Development..... 3

Drafting Your Story ..... 4

Symbolism & The Essay Film..... 5

Production Planning: Shot List ..... 8

Narration Revision ..... 10

The Essay Film ..... 12

Video Production: The Shot ..... 15

Video Production: Camera Movement..... 18

Video Production: Image Composition..... 20

Brainstorming Pages ..... 24

Autographs ..... 26

# OVERVIEW

## WHAT TO EXPECT FROM MY PLACE | MY STORY

- Meet new friends and artistic mentors
- Discover and write a personal story
- Learn filmmaking techniques and software
- Create a 3-minute film
- Screen your film for friends and family at a premiere screening and reception at the Smith Rafael Film Center after the workshop
- Have fun!

## WHAT WE EXPECT FROM YOU

- A desire to write and produce a visual story
- Attendance at all 5 days of the workshop
- Attendance at the world premiere screening
- Respect for, and cooperation with, all of your instructors and fellow students

## FIVE DAYS AT MY PLACE | MY STORY

**DAY 1: RESPECT**  
There are two types of Respect: Self-respect is to honor yourself and your ideas. Respect for others is to support your classmates on their path while they support you. We are all on the same team!

**DAY 2: EXPLORE**  
Share, trust, venture outward and inward, discover, uncover, and “flesh out” your story.

**DAY 3: EXPRESS**  
Process, create, transform a single life experience, a dream, a hope, a fear into a unique, dramatic visual story. Make it funny or serious, but make it yours!

**DAY 4: REFINE**  
Polish up, fine-tune and add the finishing touches to “package” your film.

**DAY 5: DELIVER**  
Finish your film, and bring your story out into the world!

# IDENTITY MAP

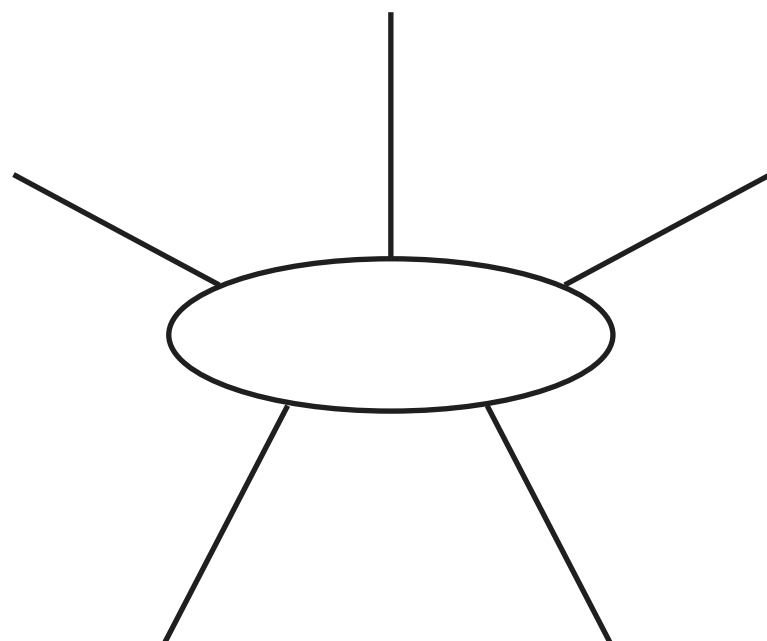
## FINDING YOUR LENS

In this activity you will...

- create an identity map as a brainstorming tool.

### DIRECTIONS:

1. Write your name in the center circle.
2. At the end of each spoke, write a word or phrase that captures some aspect of your identity. Examples might include family relationships, ethnic/racial identity, sports/activity groups you are a part of, religious affiliation, personal values that you hold, etc.
3. Continue adding spokes and words until the page is full of words that capture the variety of your personality and identity.
4. After completing your map, consider how the various facets of your identity make you unique, and brainstorm stories that express one or more aspects of your identity.



# STORY IDEA DEVELOPMENT

In this activity you will...

- brainstorm ideas relevant to your film's story.

1. Write your STORY IDEA here:

---

---

---

2. CENTRAL THEME:

The theme is the main idea of your story. [e.g., Childhood, Good vs. Evil, Love Conquers All, Human vs. Nature, Individual vs. Society, Triumph over Adversity, Coming of Age]

---

---

---

3. OBJECTS

Any items your characters use (e.g., tables, cars, radios—even buildings and houses are objects)

---

---

---

4. PEOPLE

Who appears in your story idea?

---

---

---

5. EMOTIONS/MOODS

How do you feel about the idea/memory? Your goal is to make audiences feel that too.

---

---

---

6. COLORS/SHAPES

Colors and shapes affect us and are linked to emotions and moods. Try to envision specific colors and shapes throughout your story.

---

---

---

7. MESSAGE

What is the message you'd like to impart to your audience with this story?

---

---

---

# DRAFTING YOUR STORY

In this activity you will...

- use a Story Spine to draft a short version of your essay film narration.

## DIRECTIONS:

1. Pick an aspect of your identity that you want to develop into a personal essay film.
2. Think of an experience you had that relates to that topic.
3. Tell a story of that experience by completing each sentence prompt in the Story Spine.

## SUGGESTIONS:

- Don't worry about adding a lot of detail yet; right now, the objective is creating the basic structure.
- Sentences 1 and 2 should introduce the **setting** and **main character(s)**.
- Sentence 3 will introduce a **conflict**, which should escalate in sentences 4 and 5.
- Sentences 6 and 7 contain the **resolution** and might also hint at a **moral** or **theme** of the story.

Once upon a time, _____ _____.
And every day, _____ _____.
Until one day, _____ _____.
Because of that, _____ _____.
Because of that, _____ _____.
Until finally, _____ _____.
And ever since that day, _____ _____.

# SYMBOLISM & THE ESSAY FILM

In this activity you will...

- practice thinking about the symbolic meaning behind images of physical objects.

## WHAT IS SYMBOLISM?

Symbolism is a term used widely in literature to refer to when something in a text has a deeper meaning that goes beyond its literal meaning. A toy in a literary text, for example, may literally be a toy, but it could also represent childhood, innocence, optimism, or some other theme/concept entirely. Symbolism can be used to create layers of meaning, and it is just as prevalent in film language as it is in literature as a means for the artist to convey thematic ideas and emotional effects in subtle and sometimes subconscious ways.


## USING SYMBOLISM IN AN ESSAY FILM

A basic structure of an essay film is to tell a story with an audio narration told over images that might not relate literally to the narration. For instance, it would be unusual in an essay film to stage a reenactment of an event. Instead, the filmmaker will try to find images that are abstract or might seem unrelated at the literal level, but carry a symbolic meaning to reinforce or offer a counterpoint to the narration. As you make an essay film, finding compelling images requires that you think about how you can show something that carries an additional layer of meaning beyond the literal.


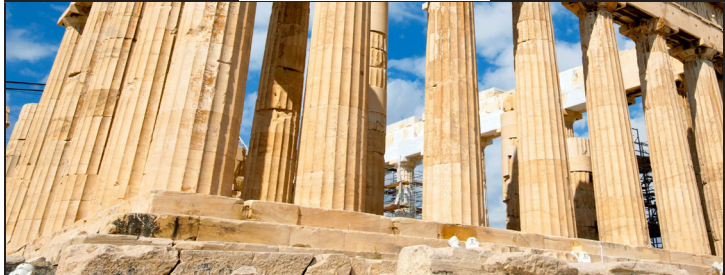

## SYMBOLISM EXERCISES

Complete the following exercises to practice thinking about how images can have subtextual symbolic meanings.

**Part 1:** For each image in the left column, write down two or three possible symbolic meanings for that image. These can be any concepts or ideas you associate with that image, but are not a literal description of the image.

Image	Symbolic Meaning
	

# SYMBOLISM & THE ESSAY FILM

Image	Symbolic Meaning
	
	
	

**Part 2:** For each symbolic meaning in the right column, draw an image, or find a photograph/image, of an object or situation that might suggest that symbolic association. Again, avoid literal interpretation.

Image	Symbolic Meaning
	Happiness
	Family

# SYMBOLISM & THE ESSAY FILM

Image	Symbolic Meaning
	Justice

**Part 3:** Think about what concepts and ideas you want to explore in your essay film. Then, brainstorm a series of images (you can describe them, rather than draw each one) and intended symbolic meanings that you can use to communicate those ideas.

Image	Symbolic Meaning





# THE ESSAY FILM

## A GENRE FOR PERSONAL EXPRESSION

In this lesson you will learn...

- *how to define an essay film.*
- *the elements that go into an essay-style film*

### INTRODUCTION

Today's world is saturated with video. Whether you are watching a narrative story in a movie theater or on Netflix, following current events on a television news broadcast, tapping "like" on a social media clip, or watching a YouTuber or Twitch streamer broadcast from their home, throughout the day you encounter countless videos in an ever-expanding variety of styles. While most video formats share many characteristics, different video styles have different purposes and use different techniques. In this course, you'll be learning a basic production approach for creating an **essay film**, a specific video genre that you have probably encountered but might not have had a name for. By the end of this course, you will not only be able to make your own essay film, you will also have a set of foundational skills useful for producing other film genres.

### MOTION PICTURE GENRES

The essay film is a broad **genre** of film. A genre is essentially a category of shared characteristics. For example, science fiction, comedy, and drama, are all examples of movie genres. Science fiction films typically deal with "what-if" scenarios involving futuristic or fantastic visions of human achievement. Comedy films are made with the purpose of evoking laughter from the audience. And dramatic films tend to be realistic stories focused on the authentic, emotional side of human experiences. These are **story genres**, because they are classified in groups based on story elements.

There are, however other ways of thinking about genre. The three genres already mentioned, for example, could all be considered sub-genres within the larger genre of **narrative film**; that is, films designed to tell a story, often using techniques like a written screenplay, actors performing as characters, and the use of staged sets and props. Another large genre that you are probably familiar with is the genre of **documentary film**: films based on actual events using techniques like interviews, voice-overs, and archival footage to tell a story that claims to be factual and authoritative. These two genres—narrative and documentary—have dominated as the two main genres of motion picture storytelling, with all other genres (comedy, drama, superhero, etc.) falling somewhere within one of these categories.

# THE ESSAY FILM

## A GENRE FOR PERSONAL EXPRESSION

### THE STYLE OF THE ESSAY FILM

Over the years, another filmmaking genre has emerged, distinct from both narrative and documentary, known as the essay film. Essay films are not like the movies you would see in a movie theater or on Netflix. Nor are they like the documentaries you might see in school or on PBS. "Essay film" describes films which tend to be highly personal and frequently experimental works, typically produced by a single artist working independently to tell an autobiographical or observational story. Essay films might draw upon a variety of techniques used in both narrative and documentary, while never being quite like either of those genres.

Essay films often include **voiceover narration** (frequently the words and/or voice of the filmmaker). Footage may be original and created specifically for the film. Unlike a narrative film, essay films don't typically use actors and staged plots, though the footage might be more scripted than the spontaneous events recorded in a documentary. In an essay film, a director might include footage of symbolically significant places, objects, images, or even abstract imagery of color, light, and shadows. Sometimes essay films contain no original video and are instead composed of **found footage**: film clips created in the past for unrelated works (such as old news broadcasts, films, commercials, etc.) that have been repurposed into the essay film. The film essayist sees the video frame the way a painter sees a canvas: as a blank slate upon which to use light, shape, and imagery to evoke emotional responses and ideas from their audience.

Most importantly, essay films tend to emphasize personal storytelling. Even when an essay film may focus on a historical event or analyze a piece of art, an essayistic approach tends to emphasize the filmmaker's interpretations or observations, embracing the subjective nature of the piece, rather than claiming to be authoritative, as a documentary might.



*Essay films tend to favor strong images that emphasize symbolic meaning or emotional response over narrative.*

# THE ESSAY FILM

## A GENRE FOR PERSONAL EXPRESSION

### WHY MAKE AN ESSAY FILM?

Essay films are a great entry point to filmmaking because of the low barriers to entry. You don't need a big crew. You don't need sets, props or actors. Really, all you need is a basic camera, simple editing software, and the courage to share your own story. And actually, even the camera is not necessary if opting for a found-footage approach. With these few ingredients, the essay film becomes a powerful tool for communicating your unique perspective to the world.

### WHERE CAN YOU SEE OR SHARE ESSAY FILMS?

At one time, this style of film didn't have a lot of outlets. You couldn't go see works like this in a movie theater. So for a long time, essay-style films were seen at film festivals, film societies, museum galleries, and home video releases. Many of these venues are still places where essay films are screened, and there are many film festivals for students that will include essay films. Now, however, streaming via the internet has made it possible for filmmakers to share their work immediately. YouTube and Vimeo are both places that foster and host a wide range of films, and many creators share essay films on these platforms.



Film festivals continue to screen essay films by new artists.

### IS A "STREAM" AN ESSAY FILM?

For our purposes, we are excluding streamers like you would see on Twitch or YouTube from the definition of essay films. Even though they include some of the characteristics described above, the term "essay" assumes a certain amount of intent and formal composition, whereas a stream is often more improvised and informal. Their conversational nature is part of the magic of streaming and why it is a new and exciting frontier in video production—but one that we won't be covering in this course.

# VIDEO PRODUCTION

## THE SHOT: THE BUILDING BLOCK OF FILM

In this lesson you will learn...

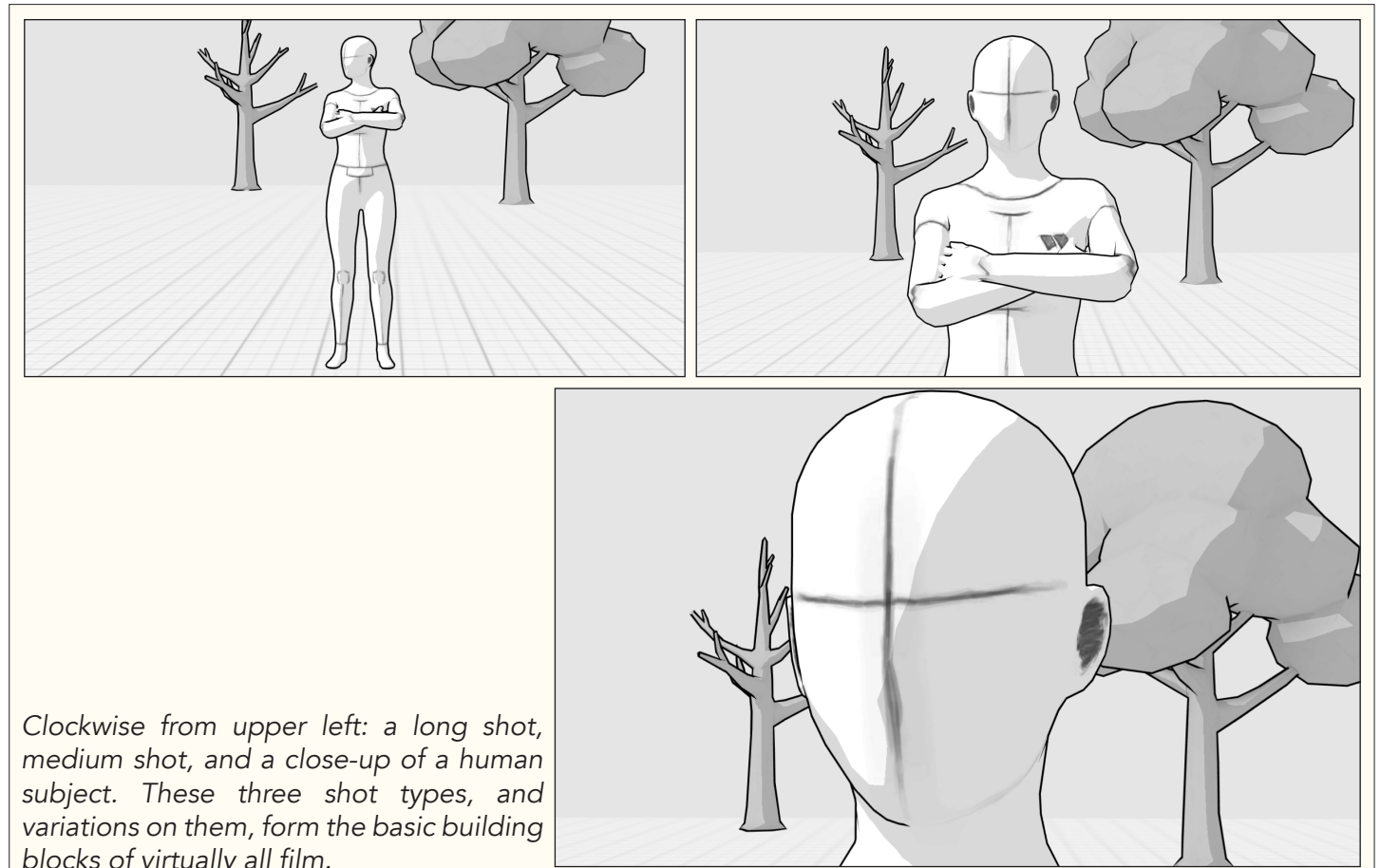
- the basic shot framing types.
- the difference between shots and takes.

### INTRODUCTION

A shot refers to a single continuous recording of film or video. A film is made up of multiple shots edited together. One of the tricky things about first making films is learning how to talk about films and describe the visual idea for a shot. In general, a shot is described by how much of the frame the subject occupies.

### BASIC SHOT TYPES

Take, for example, a human subject. A **long shot** will show the person from head to foot. Sometimes long shots are also called **full shots** because they show the full subject. A medium shot will show roughly from waist to the top of the head, and a close-up will show just the head.



Clockwise from upper left: a long shot, medium shot, and a close-up of a human subject. These three shot types, and variations on them, form the basic building blocks of virtually all film.

# VIDEO PRODUCTION

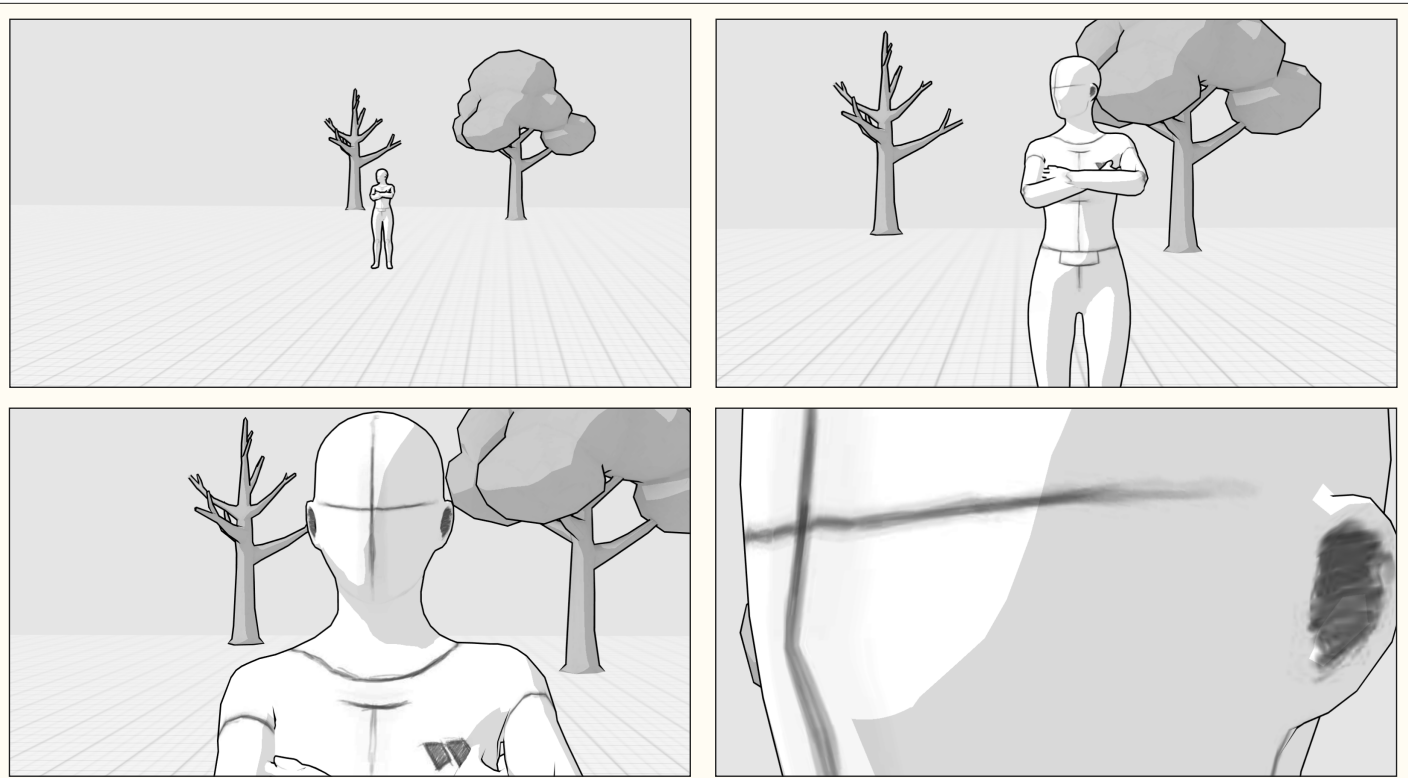
## THE SHOT: THE BUILDING BLOCK OF FILM

### ADDITIONAL SHOT TYPES

Additional terms are used to describe shots in between these basic types. An **extreme long shot** will include even more of the landscape. Extreme long shots are often used as an **establishing shot** at the start of a scene because the audience can see a lot of the space, which establishes a spatial understanding of the objects in the scene. An **extreme close-up**, on the other hand, will be so close that it crops out parts of the surrounding subject, such as an extreme close-up on the subject's eyes. A **medium-long shot** will cut somewhere around the knees, and a **medium-close-up** will crop the subject somewhere around the chest.

Keep in mind that these terms are not always used to describe the frame in relation to the subject's face. For example, you can have a close-up on a hand, or foot. The shot type is really based more on how much of the frame the subject takes up, and that subject can be a person, a part of a person, or an even inanimate object.

When filming an empty café, for example, you might open with a long shot that shows multiple tables, a medium shot on just one table with a coffee mug on it, and lastly a close-up on just the coffee mug. Thinking about these basic shot types will help ensure you get variety when filming, which will give you more options when editing.



Clockwise from upper left: An extreme-long shot, medium-long shot, extreme close-up, and medium close-up of a human subject. The cut-off point between shot types can vary based on the subject.

# VIDEO PRODUCTION

## THE SHOT: THE BUILDING BLOCK OF FILM

### SHOTS VS. TAKES

Another important term related to shots is the word **take**, which has two important applications. First, a take refers to a single filmed version of a shot; often when filming a project, each shot will require filming multiple takes to ensure the shot comes out how the director intended. A take is also used to describe the time duration of a shot. When a filmmaker describes a shot as a "long shot," they are referring to the framing of the subject: Remember, in the previous example of a human figure, long shot means it's framed so you can see the entire subject. But if that filmmaker describes a "long take," it means that the shot will run for a lengthy amount of time.

With these ideas of shots and takes in mind, you may start to notice how different shot types achieve different emotional effects. The detail and intimacy of a close-up, especially when focused on a human subject's face, tend to get the viewer more emotionally involved in the subject's inner life. Long shots, on the other hand, allow the viewer to contemplate a subject in relation to its surroundings. By varying the shot types in a film, a filmmaker literally provides different perspectives on a subject, creating a dynamic and emotionally engaging array of images. At all times, the selection of a particular shot type must be motivated by the story and be appropriate to the details, emotions, or story beats in that moment.

Life is a tragedy when seen in close-up, but a comedy in long-shot.  
-Charlie Chaplin

# VIDEO PRODUCTION

## CAMERA MOVEMENT

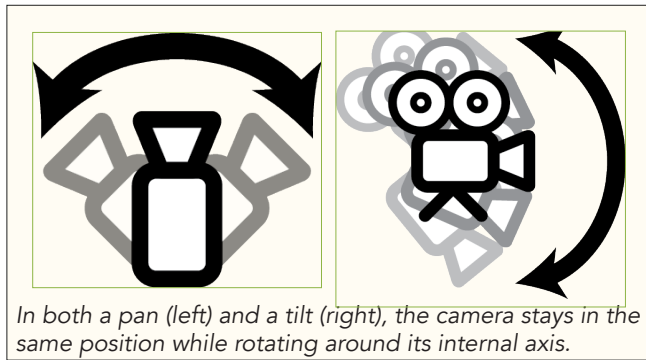
In this lesson you will learn...

- the terms for specific types of camera movement.
- tips for utilizing camera movements when shooting a film.

### BASIC CAMERA MOVEMENT

A simple but important difference between a film/video image and a photographed image is that the video image can move during the course of a shot. There are different terms for the basic types of camera movement, and knowing them will help you spot these movements in films and utilize them when making your own.

The most basic types of movement are the pan and the tilt. A **pan** is a horizontal pivoting of the camera—often used for surveying a landscape or tracking a subject with lateral movement, such as a person walking or a car driving. A **tilt** is a vertical pivot and is useful for tracking a subject moving up and down, or for capturing the full height of a subject too tall to fit into a single shot. Both the pan and the tilt can be effectively achieved when filming with a tripod, or even just standing still, holding the camera in one position and rotating it carefully.



### SPECIALIZED MOVEMENTS

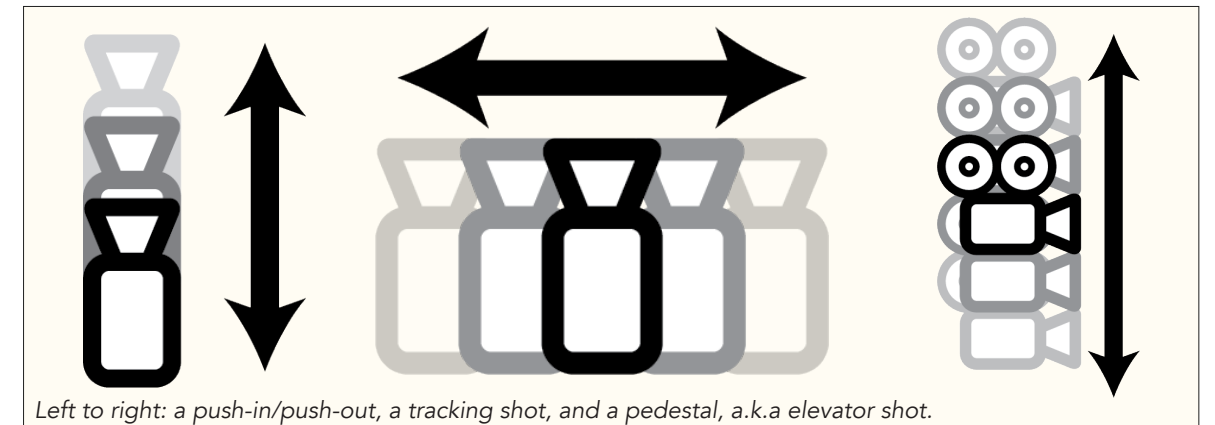
More advanced camera moves require specialized equipment but are worth mentioning here so you can identify them in films that you watch. A **dolly** shot refers to movement in which the camera actually moves forward/backward (a push in/push out) or side-to-side (a **tracking** shot). Usually these require a specialized piece of equipment called a dolly, which is a wheeled device that runs on tracks. You can try mimicking a dolly shot by having someone push you in a rolling chair or other wheeled device while filming. A **pedestal**, also known as an **elevator shot**, is a shot in which the camera moves up and down without tilting on its internal axis. This is another one you can mimic by holding a camera steady and either dropping into or standing up from a crouch.

More and more we see extended tracking shots covering lots of distance, which are achieved using either a **Steadicam** (a camera holder that uses a weighted vest

# VIDEO PRODUCTION

## CAMERA MOVEMENT

so the operator can move around while keeping the movement fluid), or a **gimbal** (a handheld stabilizer which uses an internal computerized motor to automatically adjust the tilt and pan based on the calculated weight of the camera). Drones are also used for more advanced camera shots. You can create a longer handheld tracking shot simply by holding your camera and moving around, but you won't be able to achieve the same fluidity as with more expensive equipment. If you are trying this, minimize shakiness by keeping your legs bent and in a crouch while walking/running and holding the camera as still as possible.



### ZOOMS

While not technically involving movement of the camera, a related concept is a **zoom**. Technically speaking, a zoom involves the changing of the distances between the glass components in a lens (the focal length) to change the field of view and relative size of the subject in the frame. More simply, a zoom either increases or decreases the size of the subject in the frame without moving the camera. Zooming is very useful for adjusting framing, but zooming during a shot can be quite distracting, so it is not typically used in professional cinematography.

Combining these basic moves leads to complex camera choreography. Remember, however, that camera movement should never be an end unto itself: Using camera movement merely to show off or dazzle is never as important as the thoughtful use of a camera movement to enhance a story by guiding the viewer's attention or affecting their emotions. A film can be told with lots of movement, or with entirely static camera shots. Complex movements are not always better and, as a filmmaker, always ask whether a particular camera movement is in service of your story.

# VIDEO PRODUCTION

## IMAGE COMPOSITION: THE RULE OF THIRDS

In this lesson you will learn...

- the definition of the “rule of thirds” as a composition strategy.
- when and how to use the rule of thirds when composing.

### INTRODUCTION

What makes a photograph or image look pleasing to the eye? There are many factors, and sometimes it is subjective, but virtually all aesthetically satisfying photographs will at least have an effective **composition**, which arranges the various visual elements within the frame so that the image feels balanced or interesting to the viewer.

When learning camera composition for photography and videography, one of the most important basic concepts is something called **the rule of thirds**. This name is actually misleading though, because it’s not really a rule in the usual sense. The rule of thirds is simply a guideline which suggests that when looking at a square or rectangular image, the human eye tends to focus on the elements arranged along the lines and points that divide the frame into thirds. Therefore, images which frame the subject so important points of focus appear along these dividing lines tend to feel balanced and pleasing to the eye.

It’s a little counterintuitive—often when we think of balance, we think of something balanced in the middle and thus might want to position an important subject in the center of the frame. But in practice, it’s very difficult to achieve a visually pleasing symmetrical balance, which is why it is advisable to compose your images using the rule of thirds.

### USING THE RULE OF THIRDS

The rule of thirds is helpful when filming landscapes and environments. If you are filming a tree or tall building, try aligning the main subject on the left or right third line. Try aligning horizontal elements, like the horizon, or a street/sidewalk, along the bottom third line.

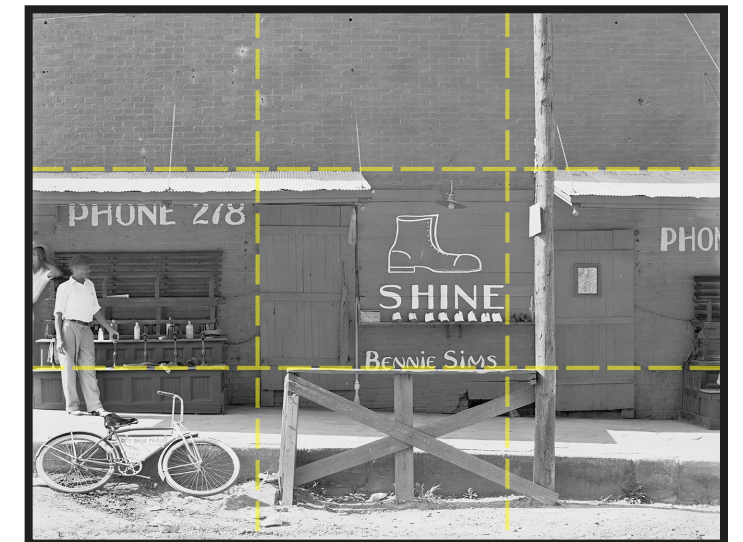
If you are filming a person, especially in an interview, line up your shot so their eye line is on the top third line—that is, the top horizontal third line should pass through both their eyes. This often works whether the shot is a close-up or medium shot. If it is a long shot where you can see their entire torso or body, then line up their spine along one of the vertical third lines, and try to position their head at the intersection of the top horizontal and either the left or right vertical third line.

# VIDEO PRODUCTION

## IMAGE COMPOSITION: THE RULE OF THIRDS

### EXAMPLE USAGE OF THE RULE OF THIRDS

In the following sets of images, notice how the photographer has aligned specific parts of the composition to align with the third lines and/or intersection points.





**BRAINSTORMING**  
A PLACE TO FREEWRITE

**BRAINSTORMING**  
A PLACE TO FREEWRITE

**AUTOGRAPHS**

**AUTOGRAPHS**

# DOWNTOWN SAN RAFAEL

