

**A Short List of Film Terms
for Beginning Film Students**

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Below is a very brief introduction to some of the most common terms. It is by no means comprehensive; nonetheless, it will give you some basic terms to use when speaking and writing about film. A few of these terms come from literary analysis and from theater, but most are specific to film.

**documentary** - Used to describe a nonfiction film.

**lighting** - This term refers to the way in which lights are used for a given film.  Lighting, in conjunction with the camera, sets the visual look for a film.  The **key light** is the main light used for a scene; **back light** refers to a secondary source, usually placed behind the actors; and **fill** refers to a light placed to the side of the actors.  This system is called **three-point lighting** and was very common in classical Hollywood films.

**plot** – the sequencing of events selected to tell a story

**story** – what the main character(s) experience

**setting** - like the literary term, this word refers to the time and place of the film.  The setting for *The Usual Suspects*, for instance, is New York and Los Angeles at a time contemporary with the film’s year of release (in this case, 1995).

**shot** (and **close-up** v. **long shot**) - generally, the smallest unit of unbroken film.  The camera can move within a shot, but the second that the film makes a transition (see below) to another shot, the previous shot has ended.  Alternatively, when used with certain adjectives, **shot** also refers to the distance from the camera to the subject, almost always the actor.  In a **long shot**(or a **wide shot**), one can see the entire body of the actor; in a **medium shot**, one can see the actor from the waist up; in a **close-up**, one can see only the actor’s face (there is no such term as the “short shot”).  You might also see an **extreme close-up** in a film, where you can only see part of the actor’s face (just the eyes, for example).

**POV shot** - stands for “Point of View” shot.  This type of shot does not refer to the technology used so much as the way we interpret it.  In this kind of shot, we are looking through the eyes of a character; you have probably seen a POV shot when a character who has been rendered unconscious is waking (the other characters look directly into the camera, in a low-angle shot (see below), and say “Are you okay?” as the edges of the frame are blurred and the speech has an echo effect).

**high-angle shot**, **low-angle shot** - These terms refer to camera placement.  If a camera is looking down on an actor from a high vantage, it is a high-angle shot; if a camera is placed very low to the ground and looks “up” at actors, it is a low-angle shot.  High-angle shots might emphasize that characters are being overwhelmed by their circumstances, while low-angle shots might emphasize that characters are somehow larger than life.  Be very careful, however, when attaching a certain cinema technique to a recurring plot device or tone.  There are always exceptions, and you need to evaluate every scene individually.

**editing**- refers to the way that individual shots are connected to one another to make the film. This process happens AFTER a film’s footage has been captured.

**montage**- this word has two meanings.  First, **montage** can simply be another word for editing, which is often the way you will see it in film theory or when we study the Soviet filmmakers of the early twentieth century.  Second, and more commonly in contemporary

usage, **montage** refers to a series of shots edited together to show a longer activity evolving in a shorter amount of time or to show a series of related activities.  A sports film, for instance, might have a training montage, where the character becomes much better at the sport (the film might condense three months of training, for instance, into a two-minute montage of jogging, lifting weights, etc.).

**transition**- refers to the way a shot moves from one to the next.  Films use several different kinds of transitions, including:

* **cut**- simply splicing one shot to the next.  The most common kind of transitions, cuts are used extensively in editing.
* **dissolve**- when one shot “bleeds” into another.  In other words, the end of the first shot is still visible as the second shot becomes visible.  Dissolves are often (but not always) used to show a smaller amount of time passing than a fade in or fade out.
* **fade in**, **fade out** - Going from black (nothing on the screen) to a shot (fade in), or going from a shot to black (fade out).  These transitions usually (but not always) connote a larger amount of time passing or might also be used to signal a break in the narrative (the end of an act, for instance).
* **wipe**- one shot “wipes” across the screen and replaces another.  You do not see wipes used overly often in contemporary films, although some directors use them often (the *Star Wars* films use wipes consistently).

**diegetic sound** - sound that other characters would be able to hear.  A song on a radio, for instance, as a character drives down the highway, would be a diegetic sound, as would someone coughing audibly during a scene.  The sound of a radio playing in an apartment, for instance, is a diegetic sound, even if no character is present in the apartment during the scene.

**non-diegetic sound** - sound that characters cannot hear.  The two most common types of non-diegetic sound are voiceovers, which is a character’s narration that plays over any given scene, and non-diegetic music, which is music used to inflect the mood of a given scene.  Creepy horror-movie music, for instance, that plays when a character is walking into an old house, is non-diegetic music, since that character cannot hear the music.

**ambient sound** - This term generally refers to any sounds that are used to establish location.  The ambient sound of a scene in a park, for instance, might include birds chirping, children laughing, or a dog barking.  The ambient sound of a train station would include the whine of train brakes, the tinny sounds of arrival and departure announcements, and the general noise of people walking and talking.