



Level: Grades 9-12

About the Author

With permission, this lesson is based on a series of activities by Wayne McNanney in *Mediacy*, Vol. 20, No. 3, Fall 1998, and from TVOntario's *Behind The Scenes, Resource Guide For Television Literacy*. 1990.

Lesson Plan

Camera Shots

Overview

In this lesson, students examine the visual codes used on television and in movies through an exploration of various camera techniques. Students begin with a discussion about camera-subject distance, and review various film techniques that are used to create visual meaning. Using photos from magazines and newspapers, students select examples for the camera techniques they have discussed and present their findings to class. Optional activities include deconstructing the way "long shots, medium shots, and close-ups" are used in comics, television shows, movies and music videos. When their activities are completed, students will answer short vocabulary quiz.

Outcomes

Students will:

- identify important visual codes (such as long-shot, close-up, camera angle) that are used on television and in movies and begin to recognize that these codes affect meaning.

Preparation and Materials

- Have students collect and bring to class a wide selection of magazines and newspapers that contain a variety of photos.
- Photocopy the *Camera Shot Quiz* (educational handout) and *Quiz Answer Sheet* (educational handout)

Procedure

Introduction

Why is it important for students to be aware of camera-subject distance, perhaps before addressing any other aspect of movies and television?

Television is made up of hundreds and thousands of pictures, called shots, each of which must be carefully planned. The long shot, medium shot, and close-up (and many other camera-subject distances such as the medium long shot and extreme close-up) are the basis of editing in movies and on television.

Without these shots, the person who edits the movie, TV show, or commercial would have nothing to work with. Editing, in nearly all cases, is the combining of long shots, medium shots, and close-ups to create an effective visual presentation. Camera-subject distance is the basis for visual editing.

It is essential for students to have a clear understanding of camera-subject distance before they begin to analyze television programs and movies and before they begin to create their own productions on video.

Explain to students that they should be recording the terms and definitions that are discussed in class, as there will be a vocabulary quiz at the end of the lesson. During the course of this lesson, you may want to confirm that students are recording correct definitions for the terms that are included on the quiz.

Ask students:

- What terms are used to identify the three main types of shots that describe how near or far the camera is from the subject? (*Close-up, medium shot, long shot.*)
- What are some examples for each of these shots? (*A close-up shows only one part of the subject, usually in great detail. Close-ups would include shots of a person's face, or the paws of a dog walking down a path, of a hand on a doorbell, or of a tree branch. A picture showing half of the subject, such as a character from the waist up or the back end of a car, is a medium shot, while a long shot shows the whole subject: a person from head to foot or the entire car. Any of these shots can show one subject or more at the same time.*)
- How might these shots be used in a movie or television show? (*These three shots are used for specific reasons. An establishing shot at the beginning of a scene tells viewers where they are; for example, a long shot of a car driving up to a hotel, or a close-up of a restaurant sign. To show the effect of one person's words or actions on the other people in the scene, a reaction shot is used.*)
- What types of camera shots are you most likely to see in movies? In television? In music videos? In commercials? (*In general, television is a close-up medium: things look better in close-up because the screen is small. However, mixing the shots provides variety and gives information needed to keep the story moving.*)

In addition to camera shots, camera angle is also important. The angle from which a shot is taken is another way to give variety as well as information. (Think *Blair Witch Project!*)

- What is a high-angle shot? Can you think of an example from a film you've seen? (*A high angle shot positions the camera above eye-level, looking down on the subject, which consequently appears insignificant, weak, helpless, or small according to how extreme the angle is.*)
- What about a shot at eye-level? (*At eye-level, the impression is neutral.*)
- A low-angle shot has the camera looking up at the subject, who then appears important, powerful, or domineering, again depending on how exaggerated the angle is.
- What is a reverse-angle shot? (*Usually the camera looks at the subject, but occasionally the camera shows what the subject is seeing. This is a reverse-angle shot.*)

Another way to give television programs variety is for the camera to move. When the camera changes its position by moving left or right, this is called tracking or trucking. Changing the camera's position by moving it forward or backward is known as dollying. When the camera stays in the same position but turns left or right, this is

panning, and when it turns up or down, this is known as tilting. Even when the camera is stationary and not turning it can appear to move closer to or further from its subject; by using a special ring or lever on the lens, the camera person can zoom in or out.

Although these moves are useful, they should not be overused or they will lose their effect. In fact, any camera movement must be planned and rehearsed so that it will be smooth and in tune with the action.

- The *Camera Shot Quiz* may be administered before, or after, the activities.

Activities

Group Work Activity

It may be useful, before the group activity, to do a short lesson on determining the subject of photograph through using photographs shown to the class on an overhead projector. For each of the three photographs, the camera should be at a different distance from the subject. For one photograph, the camera should be far away from the subject; for another, the camera should be close to the subject; and for the other, the camera should not be too far from or too close to the subject. Ask the groups to talk about the effect of these three different camera-subject distances and to try to determine why they might have been used.

- Ask each group to select three photographs from the magazines and newspapers they have collected.
- For each of the photographs, have the group identify the subject (that is, the main focus of the photograph).
- Give the groups a fair amount of time to select the photographs and to talk about their effects. After the group work the students should share their findings with the rest of the class.

Possible Responses

Using an example of a rider on a horse, here is how students might interpret various shots.

- A long shot shows the subject in relation to its overall surroundings. The photograph may include a rider on a horse in the distance with mountains in the background. Students may say that it is difficult to determine what the subject is because all the details are at a distance; however, the subject appears to be the rider. Details of the rider are not evident (Is the rider a man or woman? What kind of expression is on the rider's face? What is the rider wearing?)
- A medium shot shows the subject in relation to its immediate surroundings. The rider and horse appear to take up most of the photograph. It is now evident that the rider is the subject of the photograph. We now see some details in the subject's immediate surroundings (small bushes, boulders on the ground, desolation). The overall surroundings are not as evident (a few mountains, slightly out of focus, in the background). We also see the subject more clearly (a palomino horse, blue jeans and red shirt on a male rider with blond hair). However, we still are unable to determine the expression on the rider's face.
- A close-up shows detail but little or no surroundings. We see only the rider's face (except for a blur behind his face). It is now clear that the subject is the rider and not the horse. We see physical details (unshaven, scar on cheek,

blue eyes, young, handsome, looking down at his watch) and we begin to understand how he feels (perspiration and fatigue, worried expression). The close-up helps the viewer to get "into the head" of a character. Also, close-ups of "things" may help to clarify action (close-up of the rider's watch indicating that the rider has to be somewhere shortly).

Other Activities

- Use comic strips to look at the way "long shots, medium shots, and close-ups" are used in a variety of ways. Many comic strips are similar to storyboard illustrations prepared for movies. Because of a wide variety of shots, Spiderman is a particularly effective comic strip. You may wish to conduct a short whole-class lesson on "camera-subject distance" in comic strips after the previous group work activity has been completed.
- Show a short excerpt from a movie or television show and conduct a whole-class lesson on camera-subject distance.
- View a music video and examine how camera techniques and music are combined for total effect.

Evaluation

- Group assignment
- Camera Shot Quiz

Student Handout #1

Camera Shots Quiz

Connect each of the following terms to the visual description that best describes it:

Close-up

The condemned man looks squarely at the camera and declares his innocence.

Medium Shot

An interior of a car where a couple are having an argument.

Long Shot

A teacher and principal are having a discussion. The camera doesn't move, but the shot moves from the principal, on the left to the teacher, on the right, each time they speak.

High Angle Shot

The camera moves from an interior shot of a couple arguing in their car, to an exterior shot of their car stuck in a traffic jam.

Low Angle Shot

With the camera remaining in one place, the shot follows Spiderman as he climbs up the side of a building, and then down again.

Eye-level Shot

You have a bird-eye view of a group of children playing in a schoolyard.

Reverse Angle Shot

All you see on the screen is a well-manicured hand, nervously tapping a countertop.

Tracking

As the heroes escape, it's as if we are in their shoes, looking ahead at the dark alley as we try to get away.

Panning

A villain laughs cruelly – it's as if he is standing on top of you as he does this. A car is driving on a deserted road. The outline of a city can be seen in the distance.

Dollying

The camera moves from left to right, following the hero as she runs on top of a moving train.

Tilting

Camera Shots Quiz: Answer Sheet

Close-up

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Medium Shot

An interior of a car where a couple are having an argument.

Long Shot

A car is driving on a deserted road. The outline of a city can be seen in the distance.

High Angle Shot

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A villain laughs cruelly – it's as if he is standing on top of you as he does this.

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The condemned man looks squarely at the camera and declares his innocence.

Reverse Angle Shot

As the heroes escape, it's as if we are in their shoes, looking ahead at the dark alley as we try to get away.

Tracking

The camera moves from left to right, following the hero as she runs on top of a moving train.

Panning

A teacher and principal are having a discussion. The camera doesn't move, but the shot moves from the principal, on the left to the teacher, on the right, each time they speak.

Dollying

The camera moves backwards from an interior shot of a couple arguing in their car, to an exterior shot of their car stuck in a traffic jam.

Tilting

With the camera remaining in one place, the shot follows Spiderman as he climbs up the side of a building, and then down again.