



WEEK 01

Framing I

Visual Storytelling for the Screen

Lesson 1: Framing I

Composition · Shot Size · Show Not Tell

Lesson Objectives

1. By the end of this lesson, the learner will Recognise composition choices in canonical silent-cinema frames
2. By the end of this lesson, the learner will Read shot size as a meaning-bearing decision
3. By the end of this lesson, the learner will Adopt a show-not-tell stance toward story material

Lesson Learning Outcomes

- The learner can Names composition choices visible in a still frame
- The learner can Distinguishes shot sizes by their effect on attention
- The learner can Articulates how a beat can be carried without dialogue

INTRODUCTION — 10 MINUTES

Before Eisenstein had sound, he had geometry. In the Odessa Steps sequence of *_Battleship Potemkin_*, a diagonal line of soldiers faces a dispersed mass of civilians, and without a word spoken, the frame has already told you who holds power. The composition itself makes the argument. That a hundred-year-old silent film can still produce this effect is not nostalgia; it is evidence that the visual decisions practitioners make about framing, scale, and staging carry meaning regardless of era, genre, or budget.

Those decisions are the subject of this course. Composition, shot size, and show-not-tell are not stylistic flourishes added after the real work is done; they are the real work. Every frame is a selection: what is included, where it sits within the bounded rectangle, how much of the subject the scale funds. Griffith understood this when he cut from a full-body situation shot to an extreme close-up of Lillian Gish's face, not to show more of the scene, but to move all the viewer's attention to one thing. Chaplin understood it when he staged the pantry scene in *_The Kid_* so completely that a viewer who has never heard the premise can reconstruct the entire emotional beat from gesture and position alone. These practitioners were not working intuitively; they were making deliberate choices about what the frame argues.

By the end of this first lesson, you will have looked at specific frames from these films and named what each one is doing: what visual weight is where, what the shot size is funding, what beat is readable from composition and staging alone. That practice of reading frames before you build them is where this course begins.

1 Composition

Recognise composition choices in canonical silent-cinema frames

In the Odessa Steps sequence of Sergei Eisenstein's *_Battleship Potemkin_* (1925), bodies are distributed across the frame with geometric exactness — a diagonal of soldiers against a mass of fleeing civilians, weighted and counter-weighted so the composition itself argues the power relation before anyone fires a shot. Eisenstein's frames do not illustrate the action; they make the structural argument the action depends on. Practitioners name this sequence when teaching how compositional choice produces meaning before movement starts.

Core: Frame as Selection

A photograph is not a window. A window gives you whatever is in front of it; a frame is a selection. The person making the frame decided what to include, what to cut, and where within the bounded rectangle each element sits. That set of decisions is composition — and because every decision involves position, weight, and edge relationship, composition is already an argument about what matters before a character moves or speaks.

Two compositional forces practitioners use most often:

Rule of thirds. Divide the frame into a 3×3 grid. Subjects placed on the grid lines or at intersections read as positioned, not centred and inert. A horizon line at the lower third weights the sky; at the upper third it weights the ground. The rule is not a prescription but a description of where the eye expects emphasis.

Visual weight. Large areas, high contrast, warm colour, and isolated placement all pull attention. A small figure placed in a large empty field carries weight because isolation draws the eye; a large face in a crowded frame may dissolve because similarity reduces contrast. Eisenstein's soldiers are not larger than the civilians, but they are geometrically isolated — and that isolation gives them visual weight the composition uses to argue power.

Look at a still from the *Odessa Steps*. Identify the heaviest visual element. Now identify what is being argued: that this element dominates, controls, or overwhelms whatever it shares the frame with. Composition that is only decoration does not produce an argument. Composition that carries weight produces one.

Compositional force

What it does

Eisenstein example

Thirds placement

Positions subjects as weighted, not centred

Soldiers on diagonal axis, civilians distributed in lower thirds

Visual weight via isolation

Signals power or emphasis through contrast

Soldiers' geometric block against dispersed crowd mass

Edge relationship

Implies containment or escape

Frame edges trap the crowd; the soldiers' line has no edge pressure

Checkpoint

Look at two stills from any silent-era film. For each, name the heaviest visual element and state what compositional force is producing that weight. Then name what the composition is arguing.

REFLECTION ACTIVITY — 10 MINUTES

Select one of the *Odessa Steps* stills provided in the course folder. Write two sentences: the first names which compositional force is doing the most work; the second states what the frame is arguing about power or attention. Do not describe what is happening in the scene — name what the frame is doing to your eye and what argument it makes.

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DISCUSSION — 10 MINUTES

In small groups, discuss "Composition". Share one example from your own experience or from work you have seen. Listen for differences in how peers interpreted the same material.

2 Shot Size

Read shot size as a meaning-bearing decision

In *_Broken Blossoms_* (1919), D.W. Griffith cut between wide shots that established situation — a room, a street, a spatial relationship between bodies — and extreme close-ups that isolated Lillian Gish's face so completely that nothing survived in the frame but emotion. Practitioners point to these cuts as the founding demonstration that shot scale is not a description of where the camera sits; it is a decision about what the filmmaker is funding the viewer to notice.

Core: Scale as Attentional Directive

Shot size names a position on a decision spectrum, not a camera location. The canonical taxonomy practitioners use:

Shot size

Abbreviation

What the frame funds

Extreme long shot

ELS

Environment, scale, geography

Long shot

LS

Full body in environment; situation established

Medium

MS

Waist up; action and expression both available

Medium close

MCU

Chest up; expression begins to dominate

Close-up

CU

Face; emotion is the funded content

Extreme close-up

ECU

Detail — eye, hand, object; everything else cut away

Each step inward withdraws attention from the environment and funds it toward the subject. A Griffith long shot tells the viewer where characters are and what they face; a Griffith close-up spends all the frame's attention on one face. The medium shots between are not compromise positions — they are the scale where action and expression coexist, which is why practitioners default to the medium for dialogue and action sequences that need both readable bodies and readable faces.

Core: Shot Size as a Meaning-Bearing Decision

Choosing a shot size is not choosing how much of the subject to show. It is deciding what the viewer is funded to care about in this moment. Griffith's *_Broken Blossoms_* cuts from the full-body situation (where is she, what is around her) to the extreme close-up (what is she feeling) because the story needs both — and the cut between them is the argument that the feeling is more important than the situation at that instant.

A single change in shot size across two otherwise identical frames produces a different claim about what matters. A medium shot of a character handing over an object reads as an action; a close-up on the hand and the object reads as a significant transfer — the shot size funds the significance.

Checkpoint

Look at two Griffith frames from *Broken Blossoms*: one wide establishing shot, one close-up of Gish. For each, name what the shot size is funding the viewer to notice. Then name what changes in your experience of Gish as a subject between the two scales.

REFLECTION ACTIVITY — 10 MINUTES

Choose any two frames from this week's screening folder — one wide, one close — shot of the same subject. Write one sentence per frame naming what the shot size is funding the viewer to notice. Do not describe what is in the frame; name the attentional directive the scale produces.

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DISCUSSION — 10 MINUTES

In small groups, discuss "Shot Size". Share one example from your own experience or from work you have seen. Listen for differences in how peers interpreted the same material.

3 Show Not Tell

Adopt a show-not-tell stance toward story material

In the pantry scene from *The Kid* (1921), Charlie Chaplin encodes a complete story beat without a single intertitle. Chaplin's character is hungry; he spots food; the child who lives with him also wants food; Chaplin solves the problem with a sequence of small physical decisions — the handling of an object, the positioning of bodies relative to each other, the staging of a small act of tenderness. Practitioners cite this scene as the cleanest available instance of a full emotional arc delivered through visible, frameable action: what show-not-tell actually means in practice.

Core: Show Not Tell as Practitioner Stance

Show-not-tell is not the absence of words. It is the decision to carry narrative content — character intention, relationship, emotional state, story beat — through visible, frameable action and composition rather than through explanation. The practitioner question is not "is there dialogue?" but "could the viewer reconstruct the beat from the frame alone?"

Chaplin's pantry scene is reconstructable. A viewer who has not been told the premise can answer: What does the adult want? What does the child want? What does the exchange between them mean? The reconstruction is possible because Chaplin made the body position, the object handling, and the staging legible — every physical choice is a showing decision.

The move practitioners use to check whether a scene is showing: remove all dialogue and all intertitles and ask what remains. If nothing readable remains, the scene was telling. If a beat is recoverable from gesture, staging, and composition, the scene was showing.

Core: Composition and Shot Size as Show-Not-Tell Tools

Every choice from Topics 1 and 2 is a show-not-tell decision. Composition places visual weight on the elements that carry the argument; shot size funds the viewer's attention toward the element that matters most at that instant. A filmmaker who knows what to show and chooses the composition and scale that makes it visible has already told the viewer what the beat means.

The synthesis for Week 1 asks learners to photograph the same subject across three composition variants and write a short read of how each variant changes what the frame says. That is a show-not-tell exercise: the variant is the showing; the read is the practitioner's account of what the frame is telling. Before learners

can write the read, they need to practise the reconstruction move — seeing what a frame is saying before they hear an explanation.

Chaplin's pantry scene is practice for that move. Watch it once without context. Then answer: What is the adult trying to do? What does the child want? What does the exchange mean emotionally? The answers are in the frame. If you can reconstruct the beat, you have done what the W1 challenge will ask your cohort to do with your composition variants.

Checkpoint

Watch the Chaplin pantry scene without context. Name three physical or compositional choices Chaplin makes that let you reconstruct the beat without explanation. For each, state what the choice is showing.

REFLECTION ACTIVITY — 10 MINUTES

Choose one of your Week 1 composition variants (from your phone camera work or the course folder). Write two sentences: the first names what the frame is showing — what beat, state, or relationship is readable from composition and scale alone; the second names one specific compositional choice (from Topic 1 or Topic 2) that is doing the showing work. Do not name the subject or explain the scene; let the frame carry the argument.

DISCUSSION — 10 MINUTES

In small groups, discuss "Show Not Tell". Share one example from your own experience or from work you have seen. Listen for differences in how peers interpreted the same material.

HOMEWORK

1. Choose a single staged subject in your immediate environment: a person, an object, a corner of a room. Do not move to a different location between shots.
1. Photograph the subject across at least three distinct composition variants on your phone camera. Hold the subject, the light, and the location constant. Change only the compositional decision: shift the framing, reposition relative to the thirds grid, alter the visual weight by changing what is in or out of the frame. Each variant must produce a different compositional argument from the same raw material.
1. For each variant, write a short read of two to three sentences. Name what compositional force is doing the most work in that frame (rule of thirds placement, visual weight, edge relationship, or shot size), and state what the frame is arguing. Name what the composition is telling a viewer about attention or power before any action occurs.
1. Review your reads against your frames. Where the written read and the composed frame do not agree, revise the frame, the read, or both until they match.
1. Compile your images and reads into a single document. Label each image with its variant number. Place the written read directly beneath each image.

Submission

Submit the compiled document as a zip containing your three or more images and a single PDF of your reads.

Feedback questions

- What compositional force did you find easiest to make legible, and what about your environment or subject made it accessible?
- When your cohort views your variants the following week without your reads, what do you expect them to recover from the frames and what do you expect to get lost?

References

Readings

Rules of Shot Composition in Film — Practitioner reference naming the operative composition principles (rule of thirds, visual weight, leading lines) in industry-standard terminology before class.

<https://www.studiobinder.com/blog/rules-of-shot-composition-in-film/>

Watching Silent Films — Practitioner-authored piece on reading mise-en-scene and staging when there is no dialogue; prepares the show-not-tell stance the challenge requires.

<https://nofilmschool.com/silent-films>

Watch

Roger Corman on the Odessa Steps Scene — A practitioner reads Eisenstein's composition choices aloud in real time, grounding composition-as-argument in the canonical silent-cinema instance the lesson opens with.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hESDxUnZ1fo>

Battleship Potemkin Odessa Steps Sequence — Primary viewing object for the week; watch before class to encounter framing and shot-size decisions in motion without instructor framing and arrive with your own initial read.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=giVMhYTXIXU>

Resources

Guide to Camera Shot Sizes — Practitioner reference card for the canonical shot-size taxonomy; reach for it during the challenge when naming the scale of each composition variant.

<https://www.studiobinder.com/blog/types-of-camera-shots-sizes-in-film/>

Recall Test

Based on the content of this lesson

Your instructor will conduct a retrieval practice recall test based on the content of this lesson.

The test is low-stakes · it is not formally graded. Its purpose is to strengthen your long-term memory of the material by requiring you to actively retrieve what you have learned, rather than simply re-reading it. Research shows this is one of the most effective study strategies available.

What to expect:

- 15 minutes, closed notes
- Questions will draw directly from this lesson's concepts, vocabulary, and processes
- You will receive immediate feedback · the goal is to identify gaps, not to catch you out

Why retrieval practice works

The Testing Effect

Roediger & Karpicke (2006) demonstrated that students who practise recalling material retain significantly more over time than those who spend the same time re-studying.

Desirable Difficulties

Bjork (1994) showed that learning strategies that feel harder in the short term · such as recall · produce stronger, more durable long-term memory.

Principles of Instruction

Rosenshine (2012) identifies daily review and retrieval as one of the most evidence-backed habits of effective instruction.

Roediger, H. L. & Karpicke, J. D. (2006). Psychological Science, 17(3), 249-255.

Bjork, R. A. (1994). In Metcalfe & Shimamura (Eds.), Metacognition. MIT Press.

Rosenshine, B. (2012). Principles of Instruction. American Educator, 36(1), 12-19.