

The Cs and Ss

As with all art and forms of communication, film has its own rules and language used to describe and discuss its form, content and concepts. These concepts are not hard to grasp and can enhance your and your pupils' understanding and enjoyment of moving image media. The language and grammar of film can be summarised by focusing on the main elements that work together to make a film work. These are known as the Cs and Ss:

Story**Setting****Sound****Colour****Character****Camera**

Character, Story and Setting can be applied to any text or media. Camera, Colour and Sound are unique to film.

You can use these six elements to explore and 'interrogate' a film text in detail. You will find that talking about any film by focusing on these elements yields plenty of information and ideas for discussion and further language-based work around the film. Many teachers use questions suggested by Aidan Chambers in his book *Tell Me* (1993) to encourage children to talk about their reading of written texts. These questions provide a range of possibilities for eliciting rich, varied and imaginative talk with children in response to moving image texts.

Outlined below is a brief definition of each element of the Cs and Ss, followed by questions that can focus children's attention and lead to further talk and writing activity.

Cs and Ss can be approached as a class or group activity before engaging in other activities based on the film. The film should be viewed a number of times, focusing children's attention on a different aspect of the film each time. Children enjoy searching for clues in a film. You will find that:

- Using the feedback from focusing on all of these elements can provide a detailed reading of any text
- Concentrating on just one element of a film gives a clear focus and frames children's viewing
- Watching a film in such a way introduces the skills necessary for close viewing at any level, and prepares children for more critical viewing later on
- As children become more skilled at identifying the way each element works in the construction of the film, they will respond more quickly and independently

Story

This is the narrative of a film, which provides its basic structure and shape. It is generally told from a particular point of view, and this may or may not be obvious. Children are likely to be familiar with different narrative structures and patterns of storytelling, including:

Linear with beginning, middle and end – usually chronological – developed through linked scenes made up of a sequence of camera shots. *Baboon on the Moon*, *Otherwise*, *Dangle*, *Nits* and *The Lucky Dip* (and many others in the collection) are all examples of texts with clear, strongly defined linear structures.

Abstract with perhaps a more artistic combination of sounds and images and without a clear narrative. *Ferment*, *Love on the Wing*, *Growing* and *Train of Thought* are all examples of abstract film.

A combination of abstract and linear, where an artistic interpretation links with an identifiable structure or narrative. *Laughing Moon* could be considered abstract in its use of shapes but does have an identifiable, if episodic, narrative.

Questions to ask:

- What happens in the story, at the beginning, middle and end?
- What are the most important things that happen (events) in the story?
- How would the story change if events happened in a different order?
- How do we know where the story takes place?
- Who or what is the story about? How can we tell?
- How long does the story take — in 'narrative' not 'real' time?
- What do you think happened before the story began?
- What might happen next, after the end of the story?
- Does this story remind you of other stories? How?
- How would you like the story to end or continue?

Setting

A setting provides the backdrop against which a film, or a scene in a film, takes place. It can be both historical and geographical. It can identify a mood or situation quickly and can help the audience to understand the actions and emotional lives of characters. Most films consist of both a main setting and secondary/minor settings, which can be interior (in a house) or exterior; and they can be filmed on location or in specially built sets. In some more abstract films the setting, or background, may also be abstract and not refer to any particular time or place, but just help to convey a mood. Talking about the setting of a film can lead to imaginative thinking about both what is shown and not shown, and what the story would be like in another setting.

Questions to ask:

- Where does the action take place?
- Why is the story set in this particular place?
- When and how does the setting change?
- How does the setting affect the characters and the way they might behave?
- When the story began, where did you think we were?
- How could you tell where the story was taking place?
- Could the same story have happened in a different place?
- How do you think the story would have changed if it happened in a different place or setting?

Sound

The soundtrack may contain several elements, each of which contributes to telling a story. These can operate in parallel layers, for various purposes and effects. There are sounds within the frame of the film itself, such as the characters' dialogue or actions, or the atmospheric effects such as traffic noise or wind. There are other sounds that are layered into the film, such as music or a voiceover. There is also silence, which can make a huge impact on the feeling or atmosphere created in a film; it can be a space between sounds and creates a 'pause for thought' often adding emotional tension or emphasis.

Questions to ask:

- How many different sounds do you hear? What are they?
- Is there music in the film?
- How did the music make you feel?
- When do the music or sounds change? What is happening on screen when the sound or music change?
- If you listen to the sounds without the pictures, can you tell what is happening?
- Are there any moments of silence in the film? When do they happen?
- What music would you add to the film?
- Do any of the characters speak?
- Can you add your own voiceover to the film? Who would speak? What would they say?

Colour

Colour contributes to how a film looks, and helps to tell the story in several ways; it can convey mood and atmosphere, depending on whether the colours are bright or sombre, or in a particular range of shades. Visual contrast can be used to make a character, building or place stand out, such as the colour of a character's clothing against a contrasting background. Colour can also help show the passage of time, for example the tones of colour may change as the action moves from day to night.

Questions to ask:

- What colours do you see?
- When do the colours change and why?
- What do the colours tell you about the time of day the story took place?
- What are the main colours used in the film? Are some more important than others?
- Why do you think certain colours are used?
- What colours would you have chosen?
- Do the colours change when the story is in a different setting?
- Are any colours associated with particular characters?
- How important do you think the colours are in the film?
- What would the film have been like in black and white, or in just one colour?

Character

Characters are revealed to us in different ways and for different purposes. We also need to think about who are the main characters in a film and how we know. How different characters behave and relate to each other can tell us a lot about them.

Questions to ask:

- Is there a main character? Are there main characters?
- Is the story really about this character or about someone else?
- Who is telling the story?
- What do the main characters look like?
- How do they dress? What do they wear?
- How do they speak and what do they say?
- How can you tell what the characters are thinking or how they are feeling?
- How do they behave? How do they behave towards other characters?
- Do any of the characters have particular music or sounds?
- Which character interests you the most?
- Is there anyone else you would like to see in the story?
- How would the story be different with another character added or a character taken away?

Camera

The camera effectively acts as the narrator, with sequences of camera shots leading the viewer through the story. It is important to think about when and why certain shots are used. Close-up shots can be used to convey detail, while medium or long shots are used for scene setting and establishing the broader context. The angles and movements of the camera can be used to convey moods, atmosphere and pace of action.

Here there are parallels to written stories in that a camera can reveal a character's viewpoint and expressions, describe scenes and settings, create tension and convey the pace of the action.

Questions to ask:

- What shots can you identify?
- When do you see a long shot or a close-up shot?
- What are the different shots used for?
- Through whose eyes did we see the story?
- When do we see different characters' points of view?
- When does the camera move and when does it stay still?
- How does the camera help to tell the story?
- What do the first shots tell us about the story, the setting, etc?
- Why do certain shots follow each other, eg a long shot followed by a close-up?