

The Ten Tools of Film and Screen



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What are the Ten Tools?

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The main elements that work together to make a screen text effective.

Character

Colour

Composition

Camera

Cutting

Story

Sequence

Setting

Symbol

Sound

Character

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

Character Questions

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- Are there main characters?
- Is the story about this character or is it really about someone else?
- Who is telling the story? From whose perspective do we experience the action?
- What do the characters look like?
- How do they speak and what do they say?
- How do they behave alone and/or towards other characters?
- How can you tell what the characters are thinking or how they are feeling?
- 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 a character added or taken away?

Colour

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- 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 dull, 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.

Colour Questions

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

Composition

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- In cinematography, composition refers to the frame of the image and how elements such as **costume, set/location, props, lighting** or **actor position** are arranged within it to help tell the story.
- It is also known as **mise-en-scène**.
- Composition is all about understanding that everything in the frame was deliberately placed there for a specific reason – like a piece of music, it has been deliberately **composed**.

Composition Questions

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Costume

- What do you notice about the costume of characters within the frame?
- Is there anything that stands out about clothing, hair, accessories, make-up, defining marks or colours?
- Do the costumes match or clash with other characters and/or the setting?

Set/Location

- What is the set/location? Does anything stand out about it?
- What does the set/location reveal about the time and place setting of the story?
- How is a particular mood or atmosphere created by the set/location?

Composition Questions

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Lighting

- What do you notice about the lighting? Is it bright or dull? Does it have a colour to it?
- Are there shadows and are they hiding anything for a particular reason?
- How is a particular mood or atmosphere created by the lighting?

Actor Position

- How are the actors standing / sitting / holding themselves?
- What gestures are they making? What do these suggest?
- Where are they looking? Do we know what they're looking at and why?
- Where are actors placed in the frame? Who seems the most important?
- Does anyone have their back to the camera? Why?

Camera

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- 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 camerawork (framing, angles and movement) is used. It can:
 - Reveal a **character's viewpoint** and expressions.
 - Direct the **audience's attention** to what is important.
 - Describe **scenes and settings**.
 - Convey **mood and atmosphere**.
 - Dictate the **pace** of the action.

Camera Questions

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- What shots can you identify?
- What are the different shots used for?
- What do shots tell us about the story, the setting, a character etc?
- 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?
- Why do certain shots follow each other (e.g. a long shot followed by a close-up)?

Cutting

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- A cut is the point where one clip/shot ends and another begins.
- There are many kinds of cuts and transitions. Go to [Edits and Transitions | Screening Shorts](#) for a full list.
- Each cut affects the way that the action flows, and as a result affects the way that the story is experienced by the audience.
- Cuts often convey their meaning best when considered along with camerawork.

Cutting Questions

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- What different camera shots are connected by a cut? Do these help to tell the story in some way?
- Does the cut draw attention to important elements of a character, prop, costume etc?
- Does the cut establish place or time?
- Do the cuts create tension, excitement, shock, surprise, intrigue, etc?
- Do the cuts speed up or slow down the pace of the action?
- Do the cuts create or imitate a mood or rhythm?
- How have any special transitions been used?

Story

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- A story is a complete narrative which provides a screen text's basic structure and shape.
- It contains the plot (the series of events that unfold from start to finish), character development, setting, genre and themes.
- A story structure could be:
 - **Linear** with a clear beginning, middle and end – usually chronological – developed through linked scenes made up of a sequence of shots.
 - **Abstract** with a more artistic combination of sounds and images and no clear narrative.
 - **A combination of both**, where an artistic interpretation links with an identifiable structure.

Story Questions

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- 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?
- How would you like the story to end or continue?
- Does this story remind you of other stories? In what ways?

Sequence

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- Sequence refers to how:
 - Several **shots** are assembled within a **scene**;
 - Several **scenes** are grouped and arranged within a **story**.
- A sequence of shots makes us ask what is happening in one shot, then gives us the answer in another shot.
- A sequence of scenes might start with an incident, then a complication, followed by a crisis, a climax and a resolution.
- Sequences help us break down developments in the whole story, usually by following a main character's response to events.
- These guide the audience through the scene and/or story, creating gradual and believable changes that lead to a satisfying ending.

Sequence Questions

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- What different shots make up the scene?
- What different sequences make up the story?
- Does the story stay with one character or group, or does it move between sequences featuring different characters?
- What incident gets the story going?
- What are the main stages of the conflict?
- What revelations are there in the scene/story?
- What is the climactic moment of the scene/story? How does this satisfy the big questions the audience has been asking?
- Is the conflict resolved in a surprising or interesting way? Are any questions left unanswered?

Setting

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- A setting provides the backdrop against which a film, or a scene in a film, takes place. It can:
 - Tell us the **time and place** in which a story is happening.
 - Identify a **mood or situation** quickly.
 - Help the audience to understand the actions and emotional lives of **characters**.
- There will usually be a main setting and secondary/minor settings.
- These can be interior (inside) or exterior (outside).
- They can be filmed on location or in specially built sets.

Setting Questions

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- 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?
- Where did you think we were when the story began?
- 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?

Symbol

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- A symbol is something – an object, a colour, a sound, a piece of music, an effect, a name, a word etc. – which has a meaning and **represents something else** by association or resemblance.
- The ‘thing’ might **symbolise** an idea, emotion or theme that is important to the story (e.g. a clock might represent time).
 - A symbol that is repeated becomes a **motif**.
- Once you know **what** a symbol represents, you can consider **why** that symbol has been chosen.

Symbol Questions

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- Is your attention drawn to any objects, colours, sounds, music, effects, names, words etc?
- How is your attention drawn to the symbol (e.g. through an extreme close-up)?
- At what times in the story does the symbol appear?
- Is there a character or setting connected to the symbol?
- Is there any cultural significance to the symbol? Does it have deeper meaning to a certain country, religion, historical period etc?
- What themes are in the story? Do any symbols connect with these?
- Can you identify any repeated symbols (motifs)?

Sound

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- The **soundtrack** may contain several kinds of sound, each of which contributes to telling a story and have various purposes and effects.
- Some sounds exist in the 'real world' of the story – characters' dialogue or actions, and atmospheric effects like traffic noise or wind.
- Other sounds are added more for the audience's benefit – music or a voiceover.
- There is also **silence**, which can have a huge impact on the mood or atmosphere created. It can let the audience 'pause for thought' and add emotional tension or emphasis.

Sound Questions

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- 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 during these changes?
- 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?
- Would a voiceover add to the film? Who would speak? What would they say?

Credits

Resource developed by Gail Robertson from materials on Screening Shortson behalf of Screen Scotland.

For more information on Screen Education resources and opportunities, go to [Home | Screen Scotland](#).

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