

## THE LANGUAGE OF FILM

Jane Austen’s *Sense and Sensibility* begins with a description of the complexities of an inheritance. The opening paragraphs are key to understanding the characters’ roles in the novel, but they’re also likely to mystify (and turn away) contemporary readers.

*...By a former marriage, Mr. Henry Dashwood had one son: by his present lady three daughters. The son, a steady respectable young man, was amply provided for by the fortune of his mother, which had been large, and half of which devolved on him on his coming of age. By his own marriage, likewise, which happened soon afterwards, he added to his wealth. To him, therefore, the succession to the Norland estate was not so really important as to his sisters....*



Courtesy Andrew Davies.

SCREENWRITER  
ANDREW DAVIES

Screenwriter Andrew Davies has addressed this problem in two ways for his 2009 film adaptation. First, he has written an opening love scene that brings forward a dark subplot that is only alluded to in the novel. Shot in extreme close-up, in a flickering light so that we cannot clearly identify the characters, the new scene both informs the rest of the film thematically and adds an element of mystery to it since viewers won’t know who the two lovers are until nearly the end.

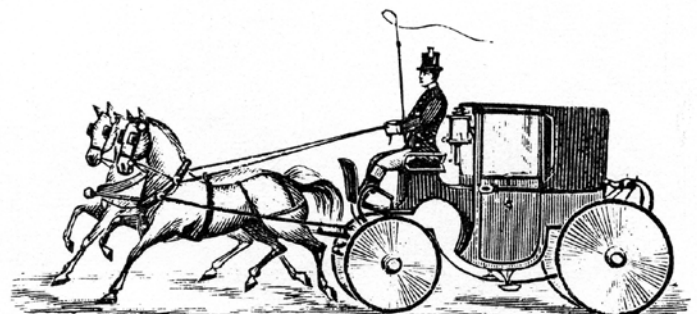
Davies then follows this by compacting the inheritance plotline into just a few short, stylish scenes that explain the intricacies of Regency-era inheritance law—and show vividly how they affect the characters in the novel—in a way that contemporary viewers will understand:

The camera briefly shows a horse-drawn carriage racing somewhere and following this, a bird’s-eye view of footmen walking through the grand interior of an estate. We hear a voice-over that says, “You should prepare yourselves,” and one that answers, “I have done all I can.”

A close-up shot of the worried face of a middle-aged woman then moves to the face of an old man in bed. The camera pans over the three girls who are with the woman at the old man’s bedside. Over a close-up of the woman, we hear footsteps. Then, her voice: “John. I’m so glad you’ve come.”

“Is it John?” asks the old man.

“Here I am, Father,” he answers.



As the camera moves between close-ups of the dying man and close-ups of John's face (these shot with a wavering, hand-held camera as if from the point of view of the dying old man), the father struggles to gasp out his words: "The law prevents me from dividing up my estate. You are to have everything. Without your help, your stepmother and the girls will have almost nothing. You must do something. You must give me your solemn promise."

"Yes, of course I promise," John says, as a close-up shows his face.

We cut to a high angle shot of the somber, gray exterior of the house as the camera tilts down to a horse-drawn hearse, then to the women and girls we saw at the bedside, now in black and crying. The camera follows them as they walk down the grand staircase and ready themselves to follow the hearse.

As the camera pulls away for an extreme long shot of the vast estate, we hear a self-satisfied female voice saying with delight, "Norland Park. Ours at last."

Students may settle in for one kind of film based on the fire-lit sensuality of the opening love scene, but in the next scene viewers are quickly in familiar Austen territory: grand houses, footmen, an old man's dying instructions about his will. Yet the crisp editing choices move us, in just four minutes and fifteen seconds, from a love scene to a death scene to the startling, comic moment when the somber shot of a funeral hearse on the vast estate is juxtaposed with the voice-over ("Norland Park. Ours at last.") that makes it clear that this grand property has just passed into someone else's hands. The combination will give students a great deal of information about the themes, characters, and plot of the book, even if they don't initially realize it. This is a perfect spot to stop and have students make predictions about what they expect the rest of the film to be about and why.

## Film Basics

*How do I feel during a certain sequence, and how does the filmmaker make me feel, react, or think that way?* This is the essential question for students to ask themselves as they view a film. Like the words of a novel, everything we see and hear on screen is put there intentionally, and everything contributes to the overall meaning. If students only talk about the story in a film, they miss the opportunity to analyze and interpret the film and the filmmaker's craft.

In film, story elements (plot, dialogue, character, theme, etc.) plus production elements (camera angles, lighting, costumes, acting, etc.) make the narrative. How does lighting set a mood? How does a director create a sense of intimacy in a scene? How is a character's loneliness emphasized visually? How is a character—even a villain—made understandable or sympathetic? How can the camera replace dialogue? How is point of view manipulated? How can sound intensify emotion or heighten suspense? Like looking closely at the writer's craft to see how he or she "showed" rather than merely "told," looking at film with a little knowledge of visual composition, camera movement, editing, and sound can make students active rather than passive viewers.



*How do I feel during a certain sequence, and how does the filmmaker make me feel, react, or think that way?*





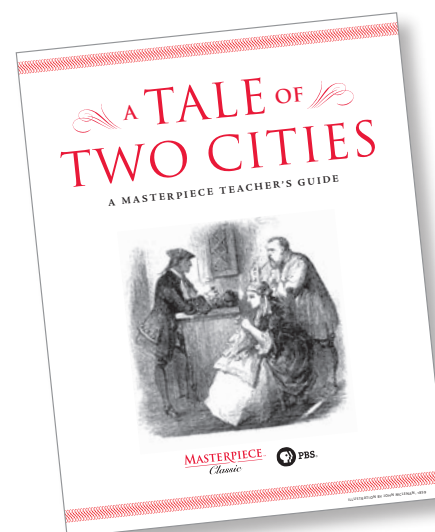
THE SEA RISES BY PHIZ (ORIGINAL ILLUSTRATION OF PARISIAN MOB FROM A TALE OF TWO CITIES, 1859)

The basic unit of meaning in written texts is the word. The basic unit of meaning in film is the shot (the frames produced by one continuous take of the camera, without cuts). Editing—how the shots are organized into a sequence—is what tells the story. The order in which shots follow each other is as important as the shots themselves. For example, imagine a sequence that begins with a shot of a woman and a man embracing. We understand from seeing this that the two people are attracted to each other, maybe even in love. But if this shot then cuts to a shot of someone secretly watching, and if that person is the woman’s husband, we have a whole new layer of information. If the camera then cuts to a close-up of his face and he is smiling rather than looking upset, the film goes in yet another direction.

As an example, we can look at the series of crosscuts that director Philippe Monnier uses in the 1989 adaptation of Dickens’s *A Tale of Two Cities* to contrast the world of the gentle heroine, Lucie Manette, in London, with the violent world of her revolutionary opposite, Madame Defarge, in the streets of Paris. As the tension rises to the storming of the Bastille, the filmmaker cuts between quiet scenes in London drawing rooms and chaotic street scenes in Paris, where hungry mobs fight for a sip of wine spilled on the ground and children are trampled by horses. The scenes with Lucie Manette—whom

Dickens called the “golden thread” of the novel—are brightly lit to reflect her role in the novel, while those with Madame Defarge are dark, a visual contrast that uses the language of film to translate the “shadow” images Dickens used repeatedly to describe her in the novel.

For a more in-depth discussion of the concept of *mise en scène*, a term which refers to everything that is seen on screen, you may want to read Warren Buckland’s *Teach Yourself Film Studies*. See Resources. For more about the film adaptation of *A Tale of Two Cities*, see [A Tale of Two Cities: A Masterpiece Teacher’s Guide](#).



A TALE OF TWO CITIES: A MASTERPIECE TEACHER’S GUIDE (AVAILABLE ONLINE AT [PBS.ORG/MASTERPIECE/LEARN](http://PBS.ORG/MASTERPIECE/LEARN))

## Learning the Language

Use the Glossary below to help familiarize students with the language of film. The related activities will enable students to practice learning this language and help them understand that a film is not just a story with pictures, but a different medium with

its own language. You may want to use several clips or a clip reel to illustrate camera angles, types of shots, etc. If you spend a day or so early on learning the terms and their meanings, the subsequent classroom discussion will be deeper and more insightful.

### GLOSSARY

#### Types of Shots

##### *Long shot*

A shot taken from a sufficient distance to show a landscape, a building, or a large crowd.

##### *Medium shot*

A shot between a long shot and a close-up that might show two people in full figure or several people from the waist up.

##### *Close-up*

A shot of one face or object that fills the screen completely.

##### *Extreme close-up*

A shot of a small object or part of a face that fills the screen.

#### Camera Angles

##### *High angle*

The camera looks down at what is being photographed.

##### *Eye level*

A shot that approximates human vision; a camera presents an object so that the line between camera and object is parallel to the ground.

##### *Low angle*

The camera looks up at what is being photographed.

#### Camera Movement

##### *Pan*

The camera moves horizontally on a fixed base.

##### *Tilt*

The camera points up or down from a fixed base.

##### *Boom*

The camera moves up or down through space.

##### *Tracking (dolly shot)*

The camera moves through space on a wheeled truck (or dolly), but stays on the same plane.

##### *Zoom*

Not a camera movement, but a shift in the focal length of the camera lens to give the impression that the camera is getting closer to or farther from an object.

##### *Hand-held*

A shot taken with a hand-held camera or deliberately made to appear unstable, shaky or wobbly; often used to suggest either documentary footage, realism, news reporting, or amateur cinematography.

#### Editing

##### *Cut*

The most common type of transition, in which one scene ends and a new one immediately begins.

##### *Fade-out / Fade-in*

One scene gradually goes dark and the new one gradually emerges from the darkness.

##### *Dissolve*

A gradual transition, in which the end of one scene is superimposed over the beginning of a new one.

##### *Wipe*

An optical effect in which one shot appears to “wipe” the preceding one from the screen.

Adaptation from *Reel Conversations: Reading Films with Young Adults* by Alan B. Teasley and Ann Wilder. Copyright ©1997 by Alan B. Teasley and Ann Wilder. Published by Boynton Cook, Portsmouth, NH. Used by permission of the publishers.

## ACTIVITIES

These activities will help students understand the language of film.

### Images

1. Practice becoming more aware of images by doing an “image skimming” exercise. Watch a short segment of a film, TV show, or commercial and concentrate on each frame. Then turn it off and list as many specific images as you can remember. Practice describing the shots, building up from two or three until you can get several in a row. You might even have a contest with your classmates to see who can list the most.
2. Cut compelling pictures from magazines, then explain what techniques give them that quality. See if you can find examples that illustrate each kind of camera shot listed in the Glossary. Then take still shots yourself that illustrate each, and upload them to a photo-sharing site or to a class blog, wiki, or website in order to compare them. For example, how might long, medium, close-up, and extreme close-up shots of a school athletic event contrast? What information does each give? What emotions does each evoke?
3. In *Reading in the Dark* (see Resources), John Golden suggests rolling up a piece of paper into a tube and using it to visualize various shots and camera angles. As you look through the rolled-up paper, you are a director looking through the lens of a camera. For instance, look at someone across the room, framed so that you can see their entire body in a long shot. Then roll up your “camera” more tightly so that you can see only their face in a close-up. You can look at someone from a low angle, with that person standing on a chair and you looking up; a high angle could be demonstrated by standing on a chair and looking down at someone below. You can also use your paper “camera” to pan across the classroom or to tilt from a high to a low angle. After practicing this the “low-tech” way, try doing the same exercise with a video camera or cell phones and posting the results online to create a “video glossary” of the film terms found here.

4. Try the filmmaker’s exercise of sequencing, or storyboarding, ten shots to show a simple activity or event. (See Storyboard.) Your ten shots can illustrate something simple and everyday (for example, someone making dinner or leaving in the morning to go to school), or they can illustrate a more complicated event, such as an interaction between two people. Next, try filming the sequence and see if viewers can break down the scene into the same storyboarded shots you originally planned.

### Sound

1. Listen to a section of film without viewing the images. As you listen, draw a line graph tracking the intensity of the music, dialogue, and sound effects. Look at your graph. Can you guess what was on the screen? Now turn off the sound and view only the images in this same sequence of film. Make another line graph, this time showing the intensity of the action based on visual cues (what you see on the screen). Compare your two graphs. How similar are they? Finally, watch the sequence with the sound on. How well do the images and the sound work together? What happens when sound is missing? What effects can a filmmaker create by using sound and music?
2. In *Seeing and Believing* (see Resources), Ellen Krueger and Mary Christel recommend learning to appreciate the role of sound in film by creating a “soundscape.” To do this, they suggest making a one-minute audiotape that tells a story through music, sound effects, background sound, and the use of only five words (the words are optional). You might do this in groups, either using a scene from literature or writing an original short paragraph that describes the actions and mood you want to create. To collect the sounds, you might go around your house, school, or community, or borrow them from sound effects recordings. Let your classmates listen to the audiotape. What images do they bring to mind? Write a story to accompany the sounds.

## All Together Now

- Nothing in a film sequence or in the text of a novel is accidental, but there is much that might escape your notice the first time you view a film or read a story. Build up your observation skills by watching the same segment of a film—perhaps the opening—several times. Make a list of the new things you notice with each viewing. If you are reading the literary version of the same story, try making this same list as you reread the scene several times.
- How do people’s perceptions and opinions of films vary based on their age, race, gender, and other circumstances? Choose a recent film about which there has been some controversy, and ask as many people as you can about their opinions of the film. (Be sure you reach a diverse group.) What conclusions can you draw? Can you imagine some circumstances in which you might change your own opinion of this film? Describe them.
- Watch the trailer for a film, keeping detailed notes about what information it gives, what questions it raises, and how it attempts to convince viewers to see the entire film. At the [MASTERPIECE](#) site you can watch trailers for some of the films used in this guide. After watching several, try to script or film a trailer for the film version of a book you’re reading.
- What are your favorite YouTube videos? Why? Analyzing them might seem silly—especially if they involve pets on skateboards—compared to analyzing films of classics, but thinking critically about media is a skill to practice no matter what you’re watching. Get in the habit of asking yourself “How do I feel watching this, and how did the filmmaker make me feel that way?”—whether you’re applying the question to a television commercial or to *Wuthering Heights*.
- Explore the differences between a film review, such as you might read in a newspaper or on a website, and a film analysis. What are the different purposes of each? In an analysis, the central question is, as noted above, *How do I feel watching this, and how did the filmmaker make me feel that way?* Read some classic examples of film analysis alongside an original review of a film you’re familiar with so you can find the differences, in preparation for writing your own review and/or analysis. (See Resources)
- A dramatic example of the power of film that students might analyze even if they haven’t read the accompanying text is the final scene in the 2010 film adaptation of *The Diary of Anne Frank*.  
Because the story is familiar to most students, they may need only a bit of background before they view the scene, which imagines the events of August 4, 1944, when the German SS and the Dutch security police find the secret annex and arrest Anne and the others. (Anne’s diary ends on August 1, 1944, so we don’t get to read the scene via her diary.) In the film, it’s an ordinary day in the attic. As the camera picks out each inhabitant, Anne is writing in her diary, and we hear a voice-over of what she’s writing. Suddenly there is a sound from downstairs, and we see first one character look up in alarm and then, in turn, the camera shows all the other characters as they begin to realize that this is the moment they have feared for over two years. So absorbed is she in her writing, Anne realizes the danger last, and the camera plays over her diary as we hear a voice-over deliver her famous line: “In spite of everything, I still believe people are good at heart.” The music begins to pound as Miep Gies bursts in with the police and says, “I couldn’t warn you, Mr. Frank. I’m so sorry.”



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