Cinematography Cheat Sheet 2: Shot Framing & Camera Movement

The four dials

Every shot is a setting on four dials. Decide what the audience should *feel*, then set each one on purpose.

Dial	Controls	Rule of thumb
Shot size	Intimacy vs. context	Closer = emotion; wider = situation and geography
Angle	Power and stability	Looking up = power; looking down = vulnerability; tilted = something is wrong
Composition	Where the eye goes, who dominates	Balance = calm; imbalance, crowding or empty space = tension
Movement	Energy and point of view	Static = observation; slow push = significance; fast/ handheld = chaos; reveal = surprise

Golden rules: motivate every move (a character, a sound, a reveal); change one dial at a time to escalate a scene; save the extreme options (Dutch tilt, crash zoom, dolly zoom) for the moments that earn them — overuse kills the effect.

Shot sizes

Shot	Frames	Use it to	Classic example
Extreme wide / extreme long (EWS)	Landscape; person tiny or absent	Establish world, scale, isolation, insignificance	*Lawrence of Arabia* desert
Establishing shot	Building, city, location	Orient audience in time and place	Exterior before interior cut
Wide / long shot (WS)	Full body plus lots of environment	Geography, blocking, physical comedy, loneliness	Keaton, Wes Anderson
Full shot (FS)	Head to toe	Costume, body language, dance, fights	Musicals, standoffs
Medium long / cowboy (MLS)	Mid-thigh up	Gunfights (holster in frame), group confidence	Westerns
Medium shot (MS)	Waist up	Dialogue, gesture, neutral coverage	Most TV dialogue
Medium close-up (MCU)	Chest up	Conversations with emotion; interviews	Drama singles
Close-up (CU)	Face	Emotion, reaction, decisions	Any key reaction
Extreme close-up (ECU)	Eyes, mouth, detail	Intensity, obsession, hidden clues, standoff tension	Leone’s eyes in duels
Insert	Object detail (hands, phone, key)	Plot information, clues, product hero	Commercials, heist films
Cutaway	Something outside the main action	Pacing, comedy reaction, hiding edits	A bystander’s reaction
Two-shot / three-shot	Two or three characters together	Relationship, power balance, group dynamics	Romance, buddy films

Shot	Frames	Use it to	Classic example
Group / crowd shot	Many people	Scale, mob mentality, chaos	Battle scenes

Camera angles

High angles diminish, low angles empower, and the Dutch tilt signals psychological or moral instability. “Dutch” is a corruption of *Deutsch* — it came from German Expressionism.

Angle	Camera position	Feeling	Best for	Tip
Eye level	At subject’s eyeline	Neutral, equal, honest	Most dialogue	Default — deviate only with intent
Shoulder level	Slightly below eyes	Subtly confident, heroic	Leads in action films	Common in modern blockbusters
Hip level	Waist height	Tension, readiness	Westerns, gunfights, swagger walks	Pair with cowboy shot
Knee / ground level	Near the floor	Grounded, childlike, sneaky	Footsteps, pets, kids’ POV, approaching threat	Wide lens exaggerates foreground
Low angle	Below, looking up	Power, dominance, menace, heroism	Villains, heroes rising, monsters	Ceiling in frame = oppressive
Worm’s-eye	Directly below, pointing up	Overwhelming, godlike	Giants, skyscrapers, trunk shot	Tarantino’s trunk shot
High angle	Above, looking down	Vulnerable, small, observed	Defeat, children, victims, overwhelmed characters	Can also show control from above
Bird’s-eye / overhead / God’s-eye	Directly above (90°)	Detached, fate, pattern, omniscience	Crime scenes, choreography, dinner tables, death	Turns people into graphic shapes
Aerial / drone	High in the sky	Scale, freedom, isolation	Openings, travel, chases	Keep it motivated; avoid “real-estate video” drift
Dutch / canted tilt	Rolled on its axis	Unease, madness, wrongness, villainy	Breakdowns, drugs, villains’ lairs, *The Third Man*, *Inception*	8–12° reads uneasy; extreme tilts read comic-book
Dynamic Dutch	Tilt changes during shot	Mounting instability	Losing grip on reality	Roll gradually as tension rises
Over-the-hip / over-the-object	Shooting past a foreground element	Voyeur, tension	Thrillers	Foreground frame adds depth

Framing & composition

Technique	What it is	Effect / use
Rule of thirds	Subject on third lines/intersections	Natural, balanced, cinematic default
Centered / symmetrical	Subject dead center, mirrored frame	Order, control, formality; unease when “too perfect” (Kubrick, Wes Anderson)
Lead room / nose room	Space in the direction a character looks or moves	Comfort and flow; removing it makes characters feel trapped

Technique	What it is	Effect / use
Short-siding	Character looks toward the near frame edge	Claustrophobia, unease, something behind them
Headroom	Space above the head	Too much = small/lost; cropped forehead in CU = intensity
Negative space	Large empty areas	Isolation, loneliness, threat that might fill the void (horror)
Frame within a frame	Doorways, windows, mirrors framing the subject	Entrapment, voyeurism, depth, separation between characters
Foreground obstruction / dirty frame	Objects partly blocking the lens	Surveillance, voyeurism, realism, depth
Over-the-shoulder (OTS)	Past one character to another	Conversation geography; clean OTS = distance, dirty OTS = connection
Point of view (POV)	What a character sees	Empathy, subjectivity, the killer's view, discovery
Shot–reverse shot	Alternating angles in dialogue	Standard dialogue grammar
Clean single	One character alone in frame	Isolation from others in the conversation
Two-shot staging	Two people in one frame	Height, distance and focus show who holds power
Deep staging	Action on foreground, mid and background planes	Multiple stories at once; threat in background
Leading lines	Roads, rails, corridors pointing to subject	Guides the eye; corridors = inevitability
Diagonals	Strong diagonal lines	Energy, conflict, instability
Silhouette	Subject dark against bright background	Mystery, iconography, anonymity
180° rule	Keep camera on one side of the action axis	Spatial clarity; crossing it on purpose = disorientation or a power shift
Looking into lens	Character looks at or near the lens	Breaks the fourth wall; confrontation (*Silence of the Lambs*)
Aspect ratio	2.39:1, 1.85:1, 1.33:1, 9:16	Wide = epic; square-ish = intimate/claustrophobic; vertical = social-native

Core camera movement

Pans and tilts pivot a fixed camera; dollies, trucks and cranes physically move it; a zoom only changes focal length. Moving the camera changes parallax; zooming does not — that's why dollies feel immersive and zooms feel observational.

Move	What happens	Use it for	Best practice
Static / locked-off	No movement	Observation, tension through stillness, comedy timing, horror holds	Let action enter and exit frame
Pan	Camera pivots left/right	Follow action, reveal, survey a space	Pan slowly enough to avoid judder (~7+ seconds for an object to cross frame)
Tilt	Camera pivots up/down	Reveal height, scale, character head-to-toe	Tilt up = awe or threat; tilt down = defeat, discovery

Move	What happens	Use it for	Best practice
Dolly in / push in	Camera moves toward subject	Realisation, rising emotion, importance	Slow, almost imperceptible push = “pay attention”
Dolly out / pull back	Camera moves away	Isolation, reveal of context, ending	Pull back to reveal a character is not alone or is surrounded
Truck / crab	Camera moves sideways parallel to subject	Walk-and-talks, panoramic reveals, parallax	Foreground objects passing sell the speed
Pedestal / boom	Camera rises/lowers vertically, no tilt	Rise over obstacles, reveals	Rise with a character standing up
Tracking / follow	Camera moves with subject	Immersion, journey, chases	Leading (ahead, facing back) vs. following (behind)
Arc / orbit	Camera circles subject	Heroic moments, romance, confusion	Bay 360° hero orbit; slow arc for romance
Crane / jib	Large vertical + horizontal sweep	Openings, endings, grand reveals	Crane up and away = ending; crane down = arriving
Zoom in/out	Focal length change, no physical move	70s style, documentary, observational distance	Feels like a watcher, not a participant
Rack focus	Focus shifts between planes	Redirect attention, reveal a threat or clue	Time it to a line or a sound
Handheld	Operator holds camera	Realism, urgency, chaos, intimacy	Calibrate shake to emotion
Steadicam / gimbal	Stabilised floating move	Long follows, oners, dreamlike glide	*The Shining* hallways; floating = surreal
Drone	Aerial flying platform	Scale, travel, chases, reveals	Combine with a tilt-down for a God’s-eye reveal
Cable cam / Spidercam	Camera on suspended wires	Stadium flyovers, impossible straight-line moves	Sports, big set-pieces
Motion control	Robot repeats move precisely	VFX passes, clones, product hero, food	Needed for split-screen twins and miniatures
Car rig / Russian arm	Crane on a moving vehicle	Car chases and commercials	The car-commercial standard

Creative & specialty moves

The “spice” shots — use one per scene at most, and attach it to a story beat.

Move	How it works	Ideal for	Famous examples
Whip pan / swish pan	Pan so fast it motion-blurs	Energy, comedy beats, hidden-cut transitions, back-and-forth arguments	Edgar Wright, *La La Land*, *Whiplash*
Whip tilt	Very fast tilt	Vertical transitions, sudden look up at a threat	Action trailers
Crash zoom / snap zoom	Very fast zoom in	Shock, comedy punchline, 70s grindhouse, reality-TV gag	Tarantino, *The Office*, Shaw Bros

Move	How it works	Ideal for	Famous examples
Dolly zoom / Vertigo / zolly	Dolly one way while zooming the other; subject stays same size, background warps	Sudden realisation, dread, vertigo, panic	*Vertigo*, *Jaws* beach scene, *Goodfellas* diner
Snorricam / body mount	Camera rigged to actor's body facing them	Drunkenness, panic, drugs, losing control	*Requiem for a Dream*, *Mean Streets*, *Pi*
Earth zoom / cosmic zoom / "Google Earth"	One continuous rush from orbit down to a face (or reverse)	Placing a character on the planet, scale gags, openings/endings	*Powers of Ten*, *Contact* (reverse), *Men in Black* ending
Push-through / impossible shot	Camera passes through walls, windows, keyholes	Omniscience, connecting spaces, showy openings	*Fight Club*, *Panic Room*, *Contact* mirror shot
Oner / long take	Whole scene with no cuts	Immersion, real-time tension, virtuosity	*1917*, *Children of Men*, *Goodfellas* Copacabana, *Adolescence*
FPV drone dive	Racing drone flies through spaces at speed	Adrenaline, impossible flythroughs, chases	Bowling-alley FPV, *Ambulance*
Barrel roll / camera roll	Camera rotates 360° on lens axis	Disorientation, zero-g, dreams, transitions	*Inception* hallway, *2001*
Bullet time / frozen moment	Array of cameras around frozen action	Hyper-reality, power, show-off moments	*The Matrix*
Speed ramp	Shift between slow and fast motion in one shot	Action emphasis, impact	Zack Snyder, *300*
Grand pull-back reveal	Long pull back revealing the larger situation	Dramatic irony, fate, isolation	*Gone with the Wind* depot crane-out
Creep / slow drift	Slow, almost unnoticeable push or drift	Unease, "something is watching"	*The Shining*
360° pan	Full rotation from a fixed point	Surveillance, searching, paranoia	*It Follows*
Top-down track	Camera travels overhead parallel to ground	Graphic, map-like, fate	*Taxi Driver*, Wes Anderson
Trunk shot	From inside a car trunk looking up	Power over the victim, signature style	Tarantino
Mirror / reflection move	Camera hides in or passes a mirror	Duality, identity, impossible-shot gag	*Contact*, *Black Swan*
Match cut / match move	Movement continues across a cut to a new scene	Elegant transitions, time jumps	*2001* bone to satellite
Infinite / recursive zoom	Zoom keeps going into nested images	Dreams, loops, mind-bending openers	Music videos, tattoo-loop shorts
Crane-down to a detail	Crane descends from a vast view to one detail	Find the clue in the crowd	*Notorious* key shot
Parallax slide past foreground	Slide while foreground objects pass close to lens	Depth, voyeurism, premium commercial feel	Car and product ads
Shaky-cam burst	Short violent shake	Impact, explosion, monster footsteps	Disaster and creature films

Toolkits by goal

Pick the feeling, then pull from its row. Escalate by moving one step tighter, lower or faster as the scene builds.

Goal	Shot sizes	Angles & composition	Movement	Tricks
Build tension / suspense	Progressively tighter: MS → CU → ECU	Short-siding, negative space behind character, cropped headroom	Slow imperceptible push-in, locked-off holds, slow pans	Let shots run long; withhold the reverse shot
Disorient / throw off kilter	Mixed, unpredictable	Dutch tilt, crossing the 180° line, extreme high/low	Snorricam, handheld, barrel roll, dynamic Dutch	Dolly zoom, jump cuts, fisheye, mismatched eyelines
Dread / horror	Wides with empty space; CUs that hide frame edges	Negative space, deep focus, doorways and dark corners	Slow creep, 360° pans, static long holds	Threat in background, out of focus; audience notices before the character
Jump scare / shock	CU then sudden cut	Tight framing that blocks peripheral vision	Static, then whip pan or crash zoom	Silence before, sound spike on the reveal
Power / dominance	MCU, full shot for stature	Low angle on the powerful, high angle on the weak; centre frame	Slow push-in, crane up	Give the dominant character more frame space
Vulnerability / defeat	Wide or high-angle CU	High angle, bird’s-eye, small in frame	Crane up and away, pull back	Drop to their level when they regain strength
Intimacy / romance	MCU, CU, two-shot	Eye level, dirty OTS, shallow focus	Slow arc, gentle Steadicam	Long lens + shallow focus; both faces share the frame
Isolation / loneliness	Extreme wide, clean singles	Negative space, frame within frame	Static or slow pull-back	Separate characters with door frames or windows
Action / energy	Wide (geography) mixed with CU (impact)	Low angles, diagonals	Handheld, tracking, FPV drone, whip pans	Keep the 180° line for clarity; speed ramps for impacts
Comedy	Wide and full shots so gags read	Symmetrical, eye level, deadpan	Static, then crash zoom or whip pan for punchlines	Hold on the reaction; let the frame do the joke
Awe / wonder / scale	Extreme wide, establishing	Low angle on the wonder, tiny human for scale	Crane up, tilt up, slow drone reveal, earth zoom	Reveal gradually; time the music swell to the move
Realism / documentary	Medium shots, reactive framing	Eye level, imperfect composition	Handheld, snap zooms, searching pans	Let the operator “find” the action late
Paranoia / being watched	Wide through foreground clutter	High corner angle, frame within frame	Static long-lens, slow creep, 360° pan	Shoot through blinds, glass, foliage
Revelation / realisation	CU on face	Eye level	Dolly zoom, push-in, rack focus	Rack from character to the thing they’ve understood
Ending / closure	Pull to extreme wide	High angle, bird’s-eye	Crane up and away, drone rise, earth zoom out	Mirror the opening shot for a bookend

Translating this into AI video prompts

- **One move per shot.** Stacking moves (“orbit while pushing in while tilting”) usually produces mush. Chain moves across cuts instead.
- **Name start and end states.** “Starts wide on the farmhouse, slow push-in ending on a close-up of the window.” Start/end frames make this reliable.
- **Earth zoom prompts:** state direction (down or up), the start (orbit) and end (face/eyes), that it’s one continuous move, and no pans or orbits on the way.
- **Dutch tilt:** specify degree — “slight 10° Dutch angle” vs. “extreme 45° canted frame.”

- **Speed words matter:** “imperceptibly slow push”, “aggressive crash zoom”, “lazy drifting Steadicam.”
- **Rig words imply texture:** “handheld”, “Steadicam”, “FPV drone”, “snorricam body-mounted”, “locked-off tripod” each carry a distinct motion signature.
- **Pair framing + movement + emotion:** “low-angle medium shot, slow dolly in, menacing” beats a list of camera terms with no intent.

Sources

MasterClass (camera moves); NFB Blog (camera moves); Beverly Boy (camera movements); Envato Tuts+ (language of camera movement); Morphic (canted angle, earth zoom); FilmLifestyle (Dutch angle); TV Tropes (astronomic zoom); Melies (earth zoom); AWS Nova (video camera-control keywords).