Film Terms and Topics

If you are writing an essay about a film, consider incorporating some of this specialized vocabulary into your argument.

**Theme:** the ideas that drive and structure a film, what a film is about

**Narrative:** the flow of a film’s parts over time to form a coherent, connected whole
- story: all the events in a narrative
- plot: specific arrangement of events

Most Hollywood films are “classical narratives,” meaning that there is a logical connection between their plotted events, there is “closure” at the end of the film, the film’s focus is upon characters, and the film’s style is presented “objectively” to give us the illusion that what we are seeing is “real,” even though everything in a film is a product of many people’s artifice.

**Characters**
- explore types, focus on choices made by actors, directors, and crew to create “people.”
- Characters are not real; they are made.

**Point of View**
- objective pov: the illusion that the camera is showing us everything
- subjective pov: the sense that we are seeing things through one character’s eyes

**Mise en scène:** what is ‘put in the scene,’ everything independent of camera position, movement, and editing. The most common kind of mise en scène is ‘the illusion of realism’
- setting: where a scene is set in ‘the real world’
- sets: a space designed to look like a place in the world
- acting styles: define characters
- costumes: define characters
- lighting: creates feeling and meaning
- use of space: puts characters in relation to one another and the world

**Composition of Image**
- The Shot: the basic unit of film, the image you see before a cut to another image. Shots have several photographic properties
  - tone (range and texture of colors)
  - film speed (slow, normal, fast)
  - perspective: what you are allowed to see clearly (and not clearly)
    - deep focus: everything looks clear
    - shallow focus: only one thing is clear
    - rack focus: clarity shifts suddenly
  - frame: the border that contains the shot.
  - properties of still frames:
    - widescreen
    - standard screen
high-angle
low-angle
canted/unbalanced
close-ups (eg, of faces)
medium-shots (eg, of people’s full bodies)
long shots (eg, of large groups of people)
off-screen space (what isn’t in the frame)

properties of moving frames:
still shots (camera is on a tripod and does not move)
crane shots (camera is on a crane, swooping image around)
tilting shots (shot is not true to the horizontal of the frame)
panning shots (camera stays still, follows action)
tracking shots (camera moves to follow action, usually on a track or with a body-mounted ‘stillcam’)
hand-held shots (camera held by hand, moves with body of cameraman)

**Editing:** the linking of shots between cuts

Editing establishes a film's **pace** (speed of a film’s action), **rhythm** (pattern to film’s pace), **scenes** (action confined to one place and time), and **sequence** (interwoven action, times, locations) through a number of techniques:
- long takes: drawn-out scenes with no cuts
- rapid-cuts: quick editing, lots of cuts
- continuity or ‘invisible’ editing: illusion of continuous action, viewer does not notice the editing
- jump-cuts: cuts that break up a scene
- establishing shots: locate a scene clearly in space and time
- shot-countershot editing: usually featured in dialog, cuts between faces in conversation, creates illusion of intimacy, featured in dialog

Other editing techniques:
- fade in and out (image darkens and lightens on new scene)
- iris in and out (circle closes in and opens out on new scene)
- wipe (a line ‘wipes’ one scene off the screen, replacing it with another)
- dissolve (one image becomes more translucent as image of new scene replaces it)
- match-on-action (two separate events in time and/or space are edited so as to appear synchronous

**Sound:** everything that you hear while watching a scene, human and nonhuman
- pitch, loudness, timbre
- effects (offscreen voiceover, distortion)
- music