

# Course sample

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Open College of the Arts

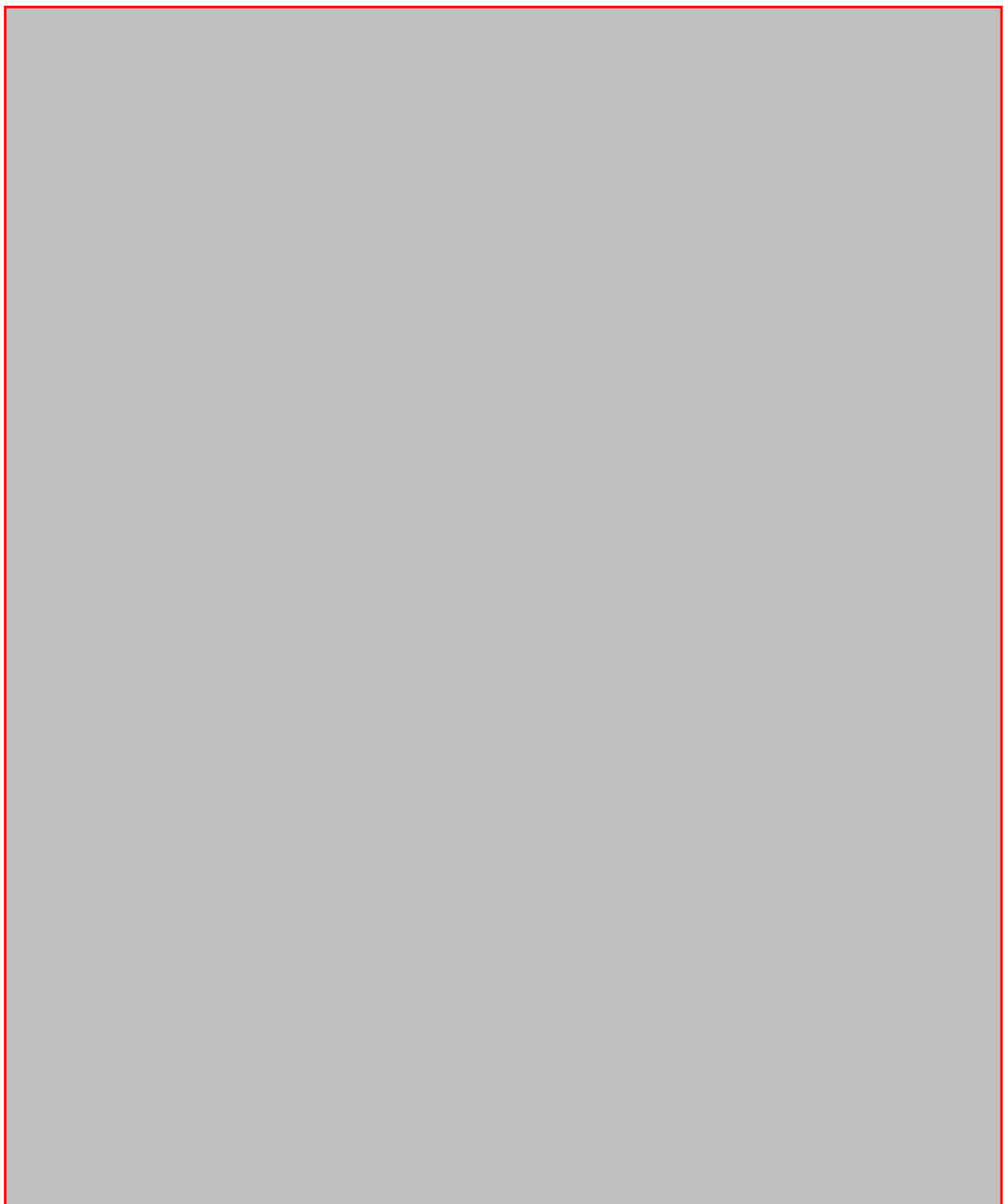
0800 731 2116

[enquiries@oca-uk.com](mailto:enquiries@oca-uk.com)



# Digital Film Production

## Creative Concepts



## Level HE4 – 40 CATS

This course has been written by Reuben Irving  
storyboards by Gill Gathercole  
Film stills from 'How To Be' and 'New World' courtesy Oliver Irving  
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Open College of the Arts  
Redbrook Business Park  
Wilthorpe Road  
Barnsley S75 1JN

Telephone: 01226 730 495  
Fax: 01226 730 838  
Email: [enquiries@oca-uk.com](mailto:enquiries@oca-uk.com)  
[www.oca-uk.com](http://www.oca-uk.com)

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# Project and assignment plan

The following timings assume that you are spending at least 20% of your time on each section doing research, and keeping your learning log up to date.

		<b>Total time 400 hours</b>	
		Approximate time in hours	Page
<b>Part one: Framing</b>		<b>95</b>	
<b>Projects</b>	Frames in the film	5	15
	Function of a frame	20	18
	The feel of a frame	25	23
	Camera angles	20	26
	How to learn	5	30
<b>Assignment 1: Framing</b>		20	32
<b>Part two: Composition</b>		<b>120</b>	
<b>Projects</b>	Mise-en-scène	20	35
	Depth	15	38
	Balance	10	43
	Light and colour	25	48
	Sound	20	55
<b>Assignment 2: Creating mood and atmosphere</b>		30	59
<b>Part three: Beyond the frame</b>		<b>90</b>	
<b>Projects</b>	Screen space	10	63
	Connecting shots	10	67
	Non-diegetic sound	20	71
	Camera movement	10	73
<b>Assignment 3: Creating meaning</b>		40	77
<b>Part four: Narrative</b>		<b>95</b>	
<b>Projects</b>	Traditional narrative	10	81
	Other narratives	15	85
	Time	5	88
	Motivation	5	92
<b>Assignment 4: Constructing a narrative</b>		60	95



# Creative concepts

This course is a **practical introduction** to the **creative** ideas and techniques that can be employed in **digital film production**. It will provide insight into the creative processes involved in visualising and realising a wide range of moving image sequences.

By the end of the course you should feel confident in your ability to create sequences that convey layers of meaning, atmosphere and story. You will have practiced a wide range of techniques and produced several short sequences and a short film.

You will also develop an approach that will help you to continue learning independently using films and film-makers as your primary source and guidance.

## Practical

This is a practical course. The assessment is based on production and most of your learning will be achieved through practical exercises. You will watch and analyse films for ideas and techniques. You will be asked to write some analysis and reflection on your own work and to keep an ongoing research blog. This analysis is for practical knowledge rather than theoretical understanding. You will not be looking at how films can be 'read' but how they can be 'written'. You may also choose to do some wider reading and of course there will be plenty of thinking. All of this will ultimately inform and develop your practical work. There will be no lengthy academic essays to write.

## Creative

This course explores creative concepts and techniques rather technical skills. For instance when we talk about camera techniques we will consider how an image feels, what meaning it conveys, how it is composed, rather than what f-stop, focal length and camera settings will be required to achieve a specific effect.

The course contains written information providing you with basic theories, ideas and approaches and suggestions of how to explore these ideas further in your own practice. While these well established ideas are explained it is worth remembering that there are no rules. The most important process you will undertake during this course is the creative experimentation you do on your own.

To undertake this practice you will need some technical skills before you start. The requirements are given below.

# Introduction

This is a big, wide-ranging course. Film making involves a huge array of skills and specialities, most of which require years to finesse. You should not expect to be an expert by the end of this course. It is a starting point.

As the course covers such a wide range you may need to exercise some self-discipline in completing each project and moving on. If you continue to study or practice film production, you will return to all these ideas again and again. This is a whistle-stop tour.

While there is a tendency to want to make everything you produce into a masterpiece it is more important here that you take advantage of the opportunity to practice for the sake of practice. In each project you will be experimenting with a specific technique. By concentrating on this you should be able to complete the course in a reasonable time.

By the end of the course you should have a new understanding of the whole process of making a film and some sense of the wide range of ideas to be considered. This will be an excellent starting point for defining your own interests and planning a path to for your own future practice and production.

## Digital film production

Digital technology is what makes this course possible. It means that for the price of a sofa you can have camera and editing equipment that easily competes with, or even exceeds, the quality of technology used by many of the great figures of cinema. It certainly means that you can produce material that can be distributed and watched all over the world; something that has never been possible before.

It also means that you can work alone or with minimal support, honing your skills and techniques without the demands and responsibilities of huge crews and budgets.

It means that a distance-learning course like this (the first of its kind?) can exist. You can complete your work at home and simply upload it for distribution, exchange, discussion and feedback.

All this is very convenient but it has also changed the way media is used and understood by audiences. The range of distribution channels and media through which moving image sequences are now viewed has opened up whole new industries of moving image production. For some people producing digital 'films' may not even involve a camera.

For the purposes of this course though, we will refer to film-making as anything that involves using a camera to capture moving images. The principles involved in planning, recording and editing these sequences are similar, regardless of the genre or format of the finished product.

The aesthetic of domestic video – and even mobile phone footage – has a quality of its own. While it has a presence in mainstream media it carries a range of associations and preconceptions with it. Many of these associations are about quality. Audiences will often relate to material that has high production values differently from that which is seen as 'amateur'. Of course this is very superficial and changes quickly over time. There have been numerous box office successes made with cheap equipment. As mentioned earlier the pioneers of cinema worked with equipment that didn't even come close to the capabilities of your humble handycam. The real quality of a film is in its conception and construction.

The aim of this course is to give you a basis in the fundamental principles of film-making that will allow you to produce top quality work that best exploits whatever technology is available to you.

## Technical requirements

For the purposes of this course it is assumed that you have a basic understanding of the equipment you will need to use to complete the projects and assignments.

Specifically you will need:

- A digital video camera and the ability to upload material to your computer
- The ability to capture video, edit and export sequences
- The ability to upload video to the web
- The ability to scan or photograph documents and upload these to the web
- The ability to take stills and/or extract them from video clips and upload these to the web
- A reasonable level of computer literacy so that you can do the above and make use of the course blog and relevant online applications associated with it.

More details of these processes, tips and technical specifications can be found at:  
[www.oca-uk.com](http://www.oca-uk.com).

**There will be some practical help and advice available with these areas but this is not a technical skills course.**

## How you will work

### Working alone

Film-making is a collaborative process. This course touches on a range of techniques and ideas employed across the range of specialised roles in film production. It is designed to allow you to work alone to gain your own understanding of film-making principles.

Whether your ultimate ambition is to become a specialist working professionally in a defined role or to be an independent digital auteur, it is essential that you have this fundamental understanding of the whole production process. It will help at times if you have friends or family who you can rope in to act or assist, but the course is designed so that you can still complete it even if you are living in isolation in a lighthouse.

### Working together

An important aspect of the course is the interaction with other students. This can all be conducted online allowing you to compare results, discuss ideas and explore problems together. Your tutor will also be available to answer specific questions and take part in online discussions.

The material you produce and the information you add to your research blog will help other students, and their work will help you.

## Projects

The course is divided up into a series of projects. These projects are of varying length and will take different times to complete. This does not reflect their importance. Some activities just take longer than others.

You should try and work through the projects in order as many of them build on the projects that came before.

Each project involves reading, viewing, practice and reflection – though not necessarily in that order.

## Reading

This is largely up to you. There is a reading list that accompanies the course but there is very little direct reference to it. The main points are outlined in the text of each chapter and this should be enough for you to complete each project. Of course any wider reading you do will be a very good thing.

## Viewing

You should be on the lookout the whole time. You won't be able to complete the course without watching a lot of films, but exactly what and when you choose to watch them is your choice.

There are some specific references to films in the text but these are kept to a minimum – as you may not have seen them recently or have them to hand. The concepts discussed should also be apparent in a cross section of other material that you will probably watch anyway.

The viewing lists give some suggestions of where you can find examples and films you should try and get hold of. You will also find clips and examples on the website.

Throughout the course you should view critically, developing an appreciation of what is achieved in the films you watch.

## Practice

Most of the projects involve some kind of practical exercise. These exercises are a chance for you to play with ideas and techniques. Sometimes you may wish to try them in a couple of different ways. Some you will spend a long time on others you will complete quite quickly.

The important thing is not to obsess too much. These are experiments you are conducting alone. Focus on what you hope to achieve in each case and what you want to learn, not the

objective quality of the end result.

You should look for glimpses of what can be achieved rather than success itself.

You will upload most of these experiments to the site to discuss with other students. Remember you are all in the same boat. This is a collaborative experiment not an exhibition of your masterwork.

## Reflection

The reflection (which is a formal way of saying thinking) can happen at any time. Some of your best insights and ideas may come weeks after you have finished a project.

The important thing is to give yourself some time around each project for this thinking to take place. Don't try and cram a whole project into a day and then move on. Do all the practical work in a day by all means, but watch a few films and think about it a bit before and after.

It is worth going back to some of your older work from time to time. Look at it with fresh eyes; notice how your understanding has changed.

## Research

Throughout the course you will keep a research blog. This is where you will share your experiments with other students, exchange observations and share ideas.

You will use the research blog like an exercise book, scrapbook or portfolio; to store the results and notes related to the project work you do. As well as the practical exercises many of the projects contain suggestions for wider research. This may involve finding examples of specific ideas or techniques, or answering specific questions. You will also note down your own thoughts and ideas that occur as you work through the course.

On the group site you will have the opportunity to set up and take part in group discussions and forums, this may also form part of your research.

If you are doing the course for credit the research blog will provide evidence of your practice and wider research for assessment.

## Assignments

The skills you develop by completing the projects will underpin the assignments at the end of each section. You may wish to look ahead to the assignments and bear them in mind as you work through the projects, or you may prefer to work on the projects wholeheartedly and look back at them when you begin to consider each assignment.

Each assignment requires you to produce a more complete sequence. You will pull together the concepts from the previous projects and use them to produce a sequence which achieves a specific aim.

But remember: your assignments are not your great film – they are still only exercises. The time allowed for them reflects this. You will inevitably pay more attention to the quality and end result here than you did for the project exercises but don't get too obsessive. The assignments are just another tool for your learning process.

One day you may produce a masterpiece but for now you are working on yourself. Each assignment is only as useful as what you learn from it. To reflect this you will be asked to write an evaluation of each assignment that critically assesses your production and then considers what you have learned from it and how you can progress.

## Getting through it

At times the scale of this course may seem daunting. The beginning of the course is actually the hardest part. The skills you develop here will make the later projects and assignments easier.

Try to work steadily. Give yourself a regular time to work. Allow yourself time and space where you can just mull things over and contemplate ideas. Don't feel that because you haven't produced anything for a while you are wasting your time. When ideas are surfacing in your mind as you watch TV or do the washing up you are developing them.

That said, don't prevaricate too long. Those projects won't do themselves.

As you progress through the course you will find that you fluctuate between thinking it is overwhelming, complicated and endless and thinking it is simplistic, laborious and maybe a bit pointless. Somewhere in between you will hopefully have moments of insight and clarity where the many things you have looked at seem to come together and make sense in a whole new way. These rare moments are really what it's all about.

## Health and safety

There are no specific Health and Safety issues to identify on this course though it is worth considering some general areas that can cause concern:

### Equipment

You will be using your own equipment but be sure you are familiar with it and any hazards it may pose. Ensure that it is in a good safe condition.

### People

When you rope other people in to help you with projects you should consider their wellbeing. If you are directing people they may do things without thinking as carefully as they would normally. Be careful not to instruct people to do anything potentially dangerous. Always make people aware of any potential risks. Where you are filming in public you must also ensure you do not pose a risk or obstacle to members of the public.

### Locations

If you are filming on locations you should take extra care always survey an area for potential risks before starting any work. Pay particular attention to traffic, members of the public and fire risks in enclosed spaces.

### Computers

You are likely to spend long periods of time working at a computer. This can seriously damage your health. Take the following sensible precautions. Ensure your desk, screen, keyboard and chair are at appropriate heights and adjusted properly. Look away from your screen regularly. Take regular breaks to stand up and move around (at least once an hour).

# Project 4: Camera angles

The camera angle refers to the position from which the camera, and therefore the audience, views the subject of the shot. (When I refer to the subject of the shot I mean 'the thing which we are primarily looking at' it may be a person, plant or inanimate object.)

There are some technical rules that guide the positioning of the camera and therefore the choice of camera angles, but for now we will concentrate on the effect and meaning of different angles and how this may affect the feel of a shot.

There are some suggestions of how you can explore this project further but you will complete a practical exercise in Project 4.

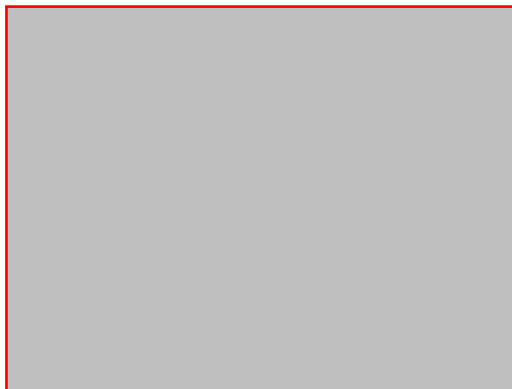
## Definitions

While talking about camera angles it will be useful to understand the following terms.:



### **L/A, Low Angle**

A shot taken from below the eyeline of the subject, or where there is no obvious eyeline from a position that is 'looking up.'



### **H/A, High Angle**

A shot taken from above the eyeline of the subject, or where there is no obvious eyeline from a position that is 'looking down.'



### **Canted Frame** also known as a Dutch angle

The camera is angled horizontally, so that the 'normal' perspective is tilted, e.g. the horizon may run diagonally across the frame.



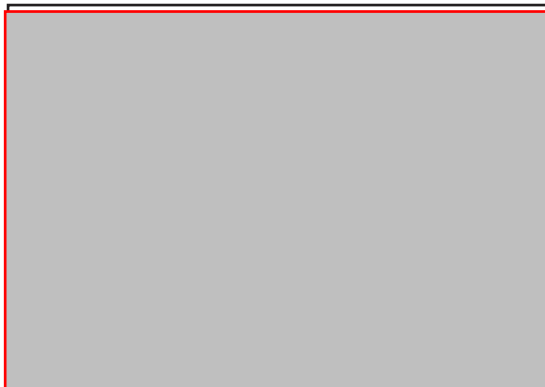
### **POV Point of View**

A shot that represents a subjective viewpoint. It is understood by the audience to represent a character's vision.

In the subjective sequence you produced for project 3, the camera angle was dictated by the position of 'your' eyes, that is, the eyes of the unseen character whose point of view (POV) the audience was sharing.

The camera angle provided information about where the character was, whether he was standing or sitting, and where he was looking. In each of these shots you were able to add nuance and suggest intensity or emotion through the size of the frame but your decision about where to place the camera was limited.

In this subjective sequence another camera angle, which didn't match the POV of the unseen character, may have suggested another character in the room. The camera angle of these shots would provide information about them.



For instance a low angle shot – with the camera near the floor looking up at the character – may represent a drunken friend sprawled on the floor, a high angle – looking down on the character from behind – may represent someone standing in the doorway.

## Objective angles

In a sequence that includes objective shots the choice of where to place the camera is greater. The motivation for the camera angle is not directly dictated by the action (as it was when the character defined their own POV). The angle is motivated by an objective vision of how the scene should be viewed.

The angle no longer indicates what a character is seeing but how the audience should see the scene. The camera angle influences how everything within the shot and scene is perceived.

The same sequence can feel very different when viewed from different angles.

At eye level the scene seems quite 'normal'. The action is fairly flat and the angle itself gives little away.

The high angle makes the same scene appear more dynamic and exciting. The character seems less powerful and significant; there may be some threat from a bigger force.

The low angle shot is also more dynamic and exciting than the eye level. Here the character seems more powerful, the sense of threat is more likely to come from within the scene, possibly from the character herself.



Try to find good examples of camera angles used to create atmosphere or alter the meaning of a scene or shot. As you watch consider whether the angle affects:

**Viewpoint** – does it indicate a specific POV?

**Relationship** – does it change your relationship with the characters on screen?

**Status** – does it indicate the status of the character on screen?

**Suspense** – does it create suspense, tension or expectation? How?

**Mood** – does it create a particular feeling or mood?

Make notes of specific sequences you have found and if possible upload clips or stills to your blog to illustrate this.

## Exercise

Look back at the sequence you produced in Project 3.

You will now record the same scenario but from an objective point of view. (Alternatively you can choose to record one of the other scenarios you imagined).

Again you will need to think very carefully about what you wish to frame, you will then also need to consider where this is seen from and what camera angle would best suit your purpose. Also consider what other meanings and feelings will be implied by your choice of frame and angle.

It will help you if you have an actor, but if not you can either set up the shots carefully and then perform yourself, or find a substitute model or doll to stand in...

### What to do:

- Sketch out some basic storyboards. Ensure that each new angle is justified
- Record the shots
- Edit them into a short sequence (or you can record them in order on your camera)
- Upload your sequence to your blog
- Look back at your finished sequence and reflect on its success. You can also compare it with other examples on the course discussion site. What works, what doesn't work and why this is the case? Can you think how you could improve the piece? Make notes in your journal.