Reading film

International Baccalaureate · IB Diploma · Film · HL

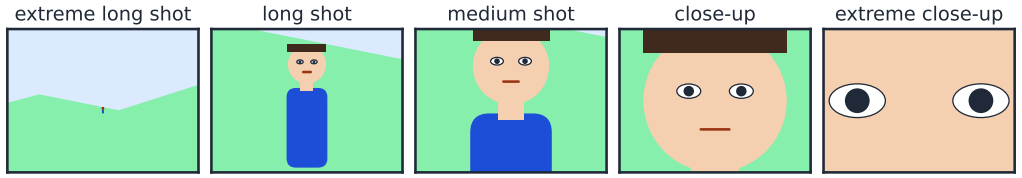
IB Diploma Programme Film HL (first assessment 2019; 2017 guide). This topic equips the TEXTUAL ANALYSIS – the externally assessed task (30% SL, 20% HL): a written analysis of a prescribed film text based on a chosen extract of at most 5 minutes, with a list of all sources, maximum 1 750 words. The craft this topic teaches is READING FILM: the systematic use of FILM LANGUAGE to explain how an extract's elements create meaning and effect in context. The worked examples analyse imagined extracts, with all findings original.

Must-know for the textual analysis:

Family	Content
film language	mise-en-scène, cinematography techniques, editing, sound
meaning	denotation to connotation: how elements construct theme and character
context	the film's world: production, historical, cultural, generic
extract	the chosen 5 minutes: justified, focal, analysable
document	1 750 words: context, element-by-element analysis, significance

Film language: the four systems

Film analysis names what the screen does. **Mise-en-scène** is everything in the frame: setting and props (location as statement), costume and make-up (character before speech), lighting (key high or low, direction, colour) and staging (blocking and movement within the shot). **Cinematography** is the frame itself: shot size (extreme close-up to extreme long shot), angle (low empowers, high diminishes), lens and depth of field, camera MOVEMENT (the pan that surveys, the dolly that travels, the handheld that panics) and composition (symmetry, rule of thirds, foreground weighting). **Editing** is the join: shot duration (the long take that holds against the montage that compresses), transitions (the cut against the dissolve that passes time), CONTINUITY (match-on-action, the 180-degree line) and MONTAGE (collision cutting that creates a third meaning). **Sound** is the unseen layer: diegetic (inside the story world) against non-diegetic (the score that tells the audience how to feel), dialogue, silence and the sound bridge that stitches scenes.



Shot sizes: the same figure framed from extreme long shot to extreme close-up

The analytical move is always DENOTATION to CONNOTATION to SIGNIFICANCE: describe the element precisely (a low-angle medium shot), read its connotation (the subject towers), then connect to meaning in THIS extract and film (power that the narrative will strip away). An analysis that names techniques without this chain is a catalogue, not an argument.

Context and the extract

The extract (at most 5 minutes of a PRESCRIBED film, listed in the guide's prescribed list) must be justified and FOCAL: an extract where film language visibly carries the film's central concerns. The analysis sits the extract in CONTEXT: the film's production context (technology, industry, movement), its HISTORICAL moment (what it answers), its CULTURAL world (whose stories, what nation or community) and its GENRE (the conventions it uses, delays or subverts). The prescribed list spans world cinema, so the context work is intercultural: an extract's meaning may rest on the audience a film assumes.

> **Worked example.** An extract from a prescribed neo-realist film: a long take, location light, non-professional faces and direct sound; the connotation chain reads documentary truth (denotation: real street, available light) toward the movement's claim (ordinary lives deserve the screen); the context is post-war reconstruction and a national cinema answering studio escapism; the significance: the film language IS the argument. The essay argues, it does not inventory.

Writing the analysis

The **document** (1 750 words maximum, plus sources) is structured: the extract identified and justified (minutes, what precedes and follows, why these minutes); the context compactly (a paragraph, not a history essay); the ANALYSIS proper, organised by the four systems or by the extract's sequence (each paragraph one element, the denotation–connotation–significance chain completed, always returning to the extract's place in the whole film); and the conclusion (the extract's contribution to the film's meaning). Sources: the film itself (cited properly), the prescribed-list context, any scholarship; a list of all sources, separated primary from secondary. The classic failures: the catalogue (technique names without the chain), the plot summary (what happens instead of how it means), and the review (evaluation instead of analysis).

Worked opening (original). Five sentences that sign the contract: "The extract runs 00:00–01:30 of [film, director, year]. In it, a fixed long take watches the mother cross the empty square: no edit, no score, natural light. The denotation is plain – a woman crosses a street; the connotation is that the city does not see her. By significance, the film's argument about invisibility is made before a word is spoken. Every system is doing this work at once, which is why these minutes earn analysis." Extract named, chain completed, destination stated – the rest of the essay must keep this contract.

Checklist

- The four systems and their vocabularies (film language).
- The denotation–connotation–significance chain in every paragraph (film language).
- The four contexts applied compactly (context).
- The extract focal, justified, at most 5 minutes, prescribed (extract).
- The four-part document; 1 750 words; sources separated; failures avoided (document).
- The worked neo-realist chain as the model; the examiner sees HOW meaning is made (worked, document).
- The worked opening's contract kept: extract named, chain completed, destination stated – from sentence one (document).
- Timestamps in the 00:00 form and quotations punctuated cleanly – the marker's first impression is craft (document).