

ista



FILM PRODUCTION ROLES

**PRACTICAL
GUIDE**

A COMPANION RESOURCE TO THE ISTA
FILM PRODUCTION ROLES CARDS

© 2026 ISTA Global Arts Learning Ltd.



ista
STORE



SHAPING MEANING ON SCREEN

Created by **Mike Bindon & Sharon Lacoste McDonagh**

The ISTA **Film Production Role Cards** help students understand how meaning is created on screen through the work of five key filmmaking roles: Director, Writer, Cinematographer, Sound Designer and Editor. The cards are organised into two companion decks. The **Practical Deck** gives students a hands-on creative task for one role, paired with a question linking that task to meaning on screen. The **Analysis Deck** guides students to notice a specific kind of choice within one role, with questions for interpreting its effect.

THINKING LIKE A FILMMAKER

Film students often know what they want a piece of work to feel like, but struggle to identify which specific choice will create that effect, or to see how a professional filmmaker achieved something similar. Attaching every choice to one of five roles, and to one question, how does this shape meaning on screen, gives students a precise, repeatable way to move from a general idea to a specific decision, and from a vague impression of a film to a specific observation.

This guide shares the method behind that process: how to use a card to make a choice or notice one, and how to build that into planning, production, post-production, analysis and assessment, using either deck on its own or both together.

Who This Guide Is For

The method in this guide, and the cards it is built around, are designed for any group making or studying film, from an introductory unit to assessed coursework.

- ✓ IB DP Film
- ✓ GCSE and A Level Film or Media Studies
- ✓ BTEC Creative Media or Performing Arts Production
- ✓ MYP Media Arts, as an introduction to filmmaking roles
- ✓ Film clubs, production teams and collaborative film projects
- ✓ Teacher training and staff CPD



Both decks are organised around the same five filmmaking roles, each responsible for a different part of how meaning is created on screen.



Director cards focus on creative decisions that shape story, performance, image and sound, helping students explore how directorial choices influence meaning on screen.



Cinematographer cards focus on visual choices such as framing, composition, lighting and camera movement, helping students examine how images convey meaning.



Editor cards focus on choices involving selection, sequencing, pacing and rhythm, helping students investigate how editing shapes audience understanding and response.



Sound Designer cards focus on choices involving dialogue, effects, ambience and music, helping students analyse how sound shapes mood, atmosphere and audience interpretation.



Screenwriter cards focus on choices relating to story, structure, character and dialogue, helping students explore how screenplays communicate ideas and meaning.

Exploring the **BIG FIVE** Key Production Roles

In the **Practical Deck**, each card gives a hands-on task for one role, linked to a stage of production, pre-production, production or post-production, alongside a question connecting that task to meaning on screen.







In the **Analysis Deck**, each card guides students to notice a specific kind of choice within one role, with questions for interpreting how that choice shapes an audience's understanding or response.

Each deck works as a standalone set of stimulus cards. This guide is written to work with either deck on its own, or with both together.



The Film Production Role Cards are designed to move students repeatedly through the same creative cycle. Repeated use of this cycle helps students develop the habits of both filmmakers and film analysts.

WATCH → NOTICE → NAME → ADAPT → MAKE → REFLECT

 <p>WATCH Observe professional film work closely.</p>	 <p>NOTICE Identify a specific creative choice through one production role.</p>	 <p>NAME Describe that choice precisely using film language.</p>
 <p>ADAPT Transfer the underlying idea into a new context.</p>	 <p>MAKE Apply the choice within practical filmmaking.</p>	 <p>REFLECT Evaluate how the choice shaped meaning on screen and decide what to refine next.</p>

SUPPORTING ASSESSMENT

The Film Production Role Cards support both practical filmmaking and analytical assessment by helping students make, notice, describe and evaluate creative choices.

Assessment or Task	How The Cards Support Learning
MYP Media Arts	Introduces filmmaking roles and encourages reflective creative practice.
IB Film	Film Portfolio: Develops role-specific intentions, evidence collection, practical exploration and reflection.
	Textual Analysis: Builds precise, role-based analytical language focused on specific film choices and their effects.
	Comparative Study: Supports comparison of stylistic and role-specific choices across films, filmmakers and contexts.
	Collaborative Film Project (HL): Encourages understanding of how production roles interact and contribute to collaborative meaning-making.
GCSE/A Level Film and Media Studies	Strengthens close analysis, filmmaking vocabulary and practical production skills.
BTEC Creative Media, Digital Media and Film Production	Supports practical production planning, role specialisation, reflective evaluation, and analysis of how creative choices shape audience response.



WAYS TO USE THE CARDS

The same cards can do very different jobs depending on how you frame them. Here are some of the ways film and media departments use Film Production Role Cards across a course or a production.

In the classroom

- **Starter:** Pick one role card and give groups one minute to explain what that role contributes to meaning on screen, then build a shared class list of all five roles.
- **Plenary:** After watching or making something, ask which role's choices shaped it most strongly, and why.
- **Production stimulus:** Use a card as the starting point for agreeing collaborative filmmaker intentions for a new task or scene, before assigning roles formally.
- **Production reset:** When a plan, shoot or edit feels stuck, pick a card and apply it directly to the problem.
- **Close viewing:** Assign each student a different role card and watch the same short extract through that lens only.
- **Comparative analysis:** Pick two cards, from the same or different decks, and ask students to compare what each reveals about a scene.
- **Assessment task:** Set a card, or a small hand of cards, as the basis for a practical or written task.
- **Cover lesson:** Hand a small set of cards to a cover teacher with simple instructions. The structure runs itself.

Beyond the classroom

- **Production meetings:** Use Practical Deck cards to structure a planning meeting for a student film.
- **Written reflection:** Use a card's focus and questions as the basis for a production journal entry.
- **Film club:** Run a regular "card of the session" to introduce a new way of watching films.
- **Festival or showcase preparation:** Use a card to solve a specific problem in an existing edit or cut.
- **Staff CPD:** Use the cards as a shared vocabulary for discussing student or staff film work.
- **Independent viewing:** Students apply an Analysis Deck card to a film they watch at home, then bring their notes to class.



THE CORE METHOD: PICK A CARD

Every activity in this guide, and every activity in the decks, runs on the same five-step method. Once a group knows it, you can use a Film Production Role Card in any spare five minutes.

1. **Pick a card.** Either deck, any role. Draw at random for breadth, or choose deliberately to focus on a specific role or stage of production.
2. **Set a time limit.** A minute to read, ten to twenty to respond. The limit keeps the focus on the choice, not on producing a perfect answer.
3. **Apply the card fully.** For a Practical Deck card, make the choice it asks for. For an Analysis Deck card, watch or rewatch with only that card's focus in mind.
4. **Share and name it.** Describe the choice that was made, or the choice that was noticed, and how it shapes meaning on screen.
5. **Decide what to keep.** For practical work, decide whether the choice stays in the plan. For analysis, decide what it has taught the group about their own filmmaking.

Scaling the method

- **A spare five minutes:** one card, one quick task or extract, one observation named afterwards.
- **A single lesson:** one Practical Deck card to plan or create, one Analysis Deck card to compare it against a professional example.
- **A workshop or production day:** cards drawn role by role, moving through pre-production, production and post-production tasks.
- **A term-long project:** a small hand of cards drawn at key milestones, used to plan, test and reflect across the whole production process.

PRACTICAL DECK

The following two frameworks work with any Practical Deck card, for any role and any stage of production, and can be repeated throughout a project.

1

The Production Choice

PLANNING (15–20 MIN) | PAIRS OR SMALL GROUPS

Pick a Practical Deck card that gives a hands-on creative task for one production role, with a question linking that task to meaning on screen.

1. Read the card together and identify the task it sets, and the question it asks about meaning.
2. Complete the task for a film idea the group is already working on, or a simple scenario you provide.
3. Answer the card's question in one plain sentence: what should the audience see, hear, feel or understand because of this choice?
4. Share the choice and the sentence with another group, and discuss whether the choice and the intention match.

Tip: If the choice and the intention do not match, that gap is often the most useful thing to discuss. It usually points to what needs testing next.

Practical Deck cards exist for every stage of production and every role, so this framework can be repeated many times across a project.

2

Role Swap, Same Plan

DEVISING (20–30 MIN) | PRODUCTION TEAMS

Pick a Practical Deck card that gives a hands-on creative task for a role other than the one a student is currently working in.

1. Each student in a production team identifies the role they are currently responsible for.
2. Each student then picks a Practical Deck card for a different role.
3. Working in that new role, each student suggests one change to the current plan that the card's task would lead them to make.
4. The team discusses which suggestions to adopt, and what that reveals about how the roles depend on each other.

Tip: This works well early in a project, before roles feel fixed, and again midway through, once there is a plan worth testing.

Because the deck covers all five roles across every stage of production, this framework can highlight a different dependency each time it is used.

ANALYSIS DECK

These two frameworks work with any Analysis Deck card, for any role, and can be repeated with a new extract or a new card each time.

1

Watch Through One Role

CLOSE VIEWING (10–20 MIN) | WHOLE CLASS, PAIRS OR INDIVIDUALS

Pick an Analysis Deck card that guides students to notice a specific kind of choice within one production role, with questions for interpretation.

1. Choose a short film extract, ideally under two minutes.
2. Give each student, pair or group an Analysis Deck card for one role.
3. Watch the extract once with no discussion, focusing only on what the card asks you to notice.
4. Share what was noticed, then discuss the card's interpretation questions as a group.

Tip: Replay the same extract with different cards across a lesson. Students will notice more each time, and start to see how roles overlap.

Analysis Deck cards exist for every role, so the same extract can generate a different lesson depending on which cards are in play.

2

From Noticing to Naming

ANALYSIS (20–30 MIN) | PAIRS OR SMALL GROUPS

Pick an Analysis Deck card that guides students to notice a specific kind of choice, with interpretation questions that connect it to audience response.

1. Watch a short extract and use the card to identify one specific choice within its focus area.
2. Describe the choice as precisely as possible: what exactly was done, not just what effect it had.
3. Answer the card's interpretation questions in writing, linking the choice to a specific effect on the audience.
4. Compare answers with a partner who used a different card on the same extract, and discuss how the two choices work together.

Tip: Push students to describe the choice itself before discussing its effect. Precise description is often the hardest part, and the most valuable.

This framework builds the kind of precise, role-specific language that written film analysis depends on.

The two decks are designed to work together. Analysis builds the vocabulary and judgement that practical work depends on, and practical work gives students a reason to look closely at professional choices.

1

Watch, Adapt, Transform

1. Watch a short extract from a professional film.
2. Use an Analysis Deck card to identify one effective choice within a specific role.
3. Discuss why that choice works, using the card's interpretation questions.
4. Pick a Practical Deck card for the same role and use it to plan a related, but different, choice for a student film or task.

Encourage students to adapt the underlying idea, not the specific scene. The aim is a new choice that solves a similar problem in a new context, not a copy of the original.

2

Five Roles, One Scene

Give a small group, or the whole class divided into five, the same starting point: a short scenario, a single image, or a short film extract. Each person or group works from a card for a different role, Director, Screenwriter, Cinematographer, Sound Designer or Editor, either from the Practical Deck to plan a response or from the Analysis Deck to read an existing scene. Bring the five perspectives back together and discuss what each role noticed or proposed, where they reinforce each other, and where they pull in different directions.

3

Same Focus, Two Decks

Choose a card from the Analysis Deck for one role, then look for a card in the Practical Deck for the same role that addresses a similar part of the process. Use the Analysis card first to find and discuss an example of that kind of choice in a professional film, then use the Practical card to plan a similar kind of choice for a student project. This pairing makes the link between seeing and making explicit for students who find one easier than the other.





The following example illustrates how a teacher might use the Film Production Role Cards to move students from close analysis of a professional film extract to purposeful practical filmmaking and reflection.

1 Example: From Analysis to Production	
FOCUS: Cinematography - Framing and Composition PAIRS OR SMALL GROUPS	
FILM EXTRACT: Children of Men (2006), dir. Alfonso Cuarón (or substitute any short extract familiar to your students)	
<p>Step 1 Pick a Card</p>	<p>Students receive the Cinematographer Analysis Card: Framing and Composition. Students are asked:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>What does the framing encourage the audience to notice?</i> • <i>How does composition suggest relationships, power, isolation or emotion?</i>
<p>Step 2 Watch Through One Role</p>	<p>Students watch a 60–90 second extract, focusing only on framing and composition. After viewing, students identify one specific choice. For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>“The protagonist is framed alone in the centre of the image, surrounded by empty space.”</i>
<p>Step 3 Name the Choice</p>	<p>Students avoid vague statements such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>“The shot looks interesting.”</i> <p>Instead they describe precisely what the cinematographer has done. For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>“The cinematographer places the character in a wide shot with significant negative space surrounding them.”</i>
<p>Step 4 Interpret the Effect</p>	<p>Students discuss:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>What does this framing encourage the audience to feel?</i> • <i>What does it reveal about the character or situation?</i> <p>Example response:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>“The empty space emphasises the character’s isolation and vulnerability, encouraging the audience to feel uncertainty and loneliness.”</i>
<p>Step 5 Adapt the Idea</p>	<p>Students now draw a Cinematographer Practical Deck card. Working in groups, they plan a short scene in which framing communicates a similar idea, but in a completely different context. The aim is not to recreate the original scene, but to adapt the underlying cinematic principle.</p>
<p>Reflection</p>	<p>Students complete the sentence:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>“The framing choice shaped meaning on screen by...”</i> <p>This process demonstrates how students can move from watching film, to identifying specific choices, to making purposeful creative decisions in their own work.</p>



The cards are written to follow the stages every film production moves through: pre-production, production and post-production. Pick cards for the stage a project is in, from either deck, to keep the work focused on what matters at that point.

Pre-Production

- Use cards to define the film's intention, clarify roles, plan visual and sound style, develop story and character, and test key techniques before filming begins.

Production

- Use cards to keep each role focused on meaning while filming, guide decisions on set, review whether footage supports the intention, and capture material that post-production will need.

Post-Production

- Use cards to shape pacing and rhythm, refine sound, colour and tone, evaluate structure and emotional impact, and reflect on how choices created meaning on screen.

1

The Production Reset

RESET (10-15 MIN) | WHICHEVER TEAM IS WORKING

1. Pause the work, whether it is a plan, a shoot or an edit.
2. Pick one card, from either deck, for the role most relevant to the current problem.
3. Apply the card directly: make the choice it describes, or look for the choice it asks you to notice in your own footage or plan.
4. Discuss what became clearer, and what changed.
5. Decide what to keep, and update the plan, shot list or edit accordingly.

Tip: The card does not need to dictate the final decision. Often, it simply gives the team a concrete way to talk about a problem that felt vague.

These prompts can be used after any activity in this guide, whether it lasted two minutes or covered a whole stage of production. Choose two or three rather than working through the whole list.

BEFORE

- What is my role responsible for in this choice?
- What do we want the audience to see, hear, feel or understand?
- What would we do differently without this card?

DURING

- How does this choice shape meaning on screen?
- How does this choice support or challenge what other roles are doing?
- What are we noticing that we would not have noticed otherwise?

AFTER

- The card helped me focus on...
- The creative choice I made, or noticed, was...
- This shaped meaning on screen by...
- The audience was intended to feel or understand...
- Next time, I would refine...



MAKING MEANING VISIBLE: WHY THE METHOD WORKS

Everything so far in this guide is ready to use immediately. This section explains the thinking behind it, for anyone who wants the fuller picture.

Film students often have a strong sense of what they want an audience to feel, but find it hard to identify which specific choice will create that effect, or to see how a professional filmmaker achieved something similar elsewhere. The Film Production Role Cards address both problems at once, by attaching every choice to one of five roles and one question: how does this shape meaning on screen?

How The Method Puts This Into Practice

Each card gives students a different lens for looking at the same piece of work:

- **Practical Deck** cards turn a vague intention into a specific, role-based choice, something a student can actually do, rather than a feeling they are hoping for.
- **Analysis Deck** cards turn a vague impression of a film into a specific, role-based observation, something a student can point to and discuss.
- **Working role by role**, rather than film by film, helps students see how the same kind of choice, a cut, a light, a line, a sound, recurs across very different films and genres.
- **Moving between the two decks** connects what students can make with what they can see, so each deck strengthens the other.

Used this way, the five roles become a shared language for the whole class: a way of asking precise questions about any piece of film, whether it is a professional extract or a student's own first draft.

Framing This With Students

It can help to introduce each role as a question rather than a job title, not "what does an editor do" but "what changes if someone controls when we cut". Students do not need to master every role before starting. Most groups develop a feel for all five by moving between them repeatedly, on both decks, across a project.



READY FOR THE FULL DECKS?

This guide gives you the method: how to use a card to make a choice or notice one, and how to build that into planning, production, post-production, analysis and assessment. Each deck gives you the material.

The **Practical Deck** gives you hands-on filmmaking tasks across all five roles and every stage of production. The **Analysis Deck** gives you role-based viewing tools for close, precise analysis of professional film.

store.istaglobal.org



Ignite your students' creativity with this vibrant collection of four high quality international film course posters, designed to inspire and elevate any classroom or film studio space.



About ISTA

ISTA is a global arts education charity that supports schools offering theatre worldwide by providing dynamic festivals, high-quality training, and practical resources for students, teachers, and artists. Rooted in collaboration and creativity, it celebrates ensemble-based, intercultural learning through inspiring and inclusive theatre experiences.