PROMPT CRAFT

Cinematic language

The vocabulary a cinematographer already uses, and what each term does to a generated image.

shotcraft.video/prompts/cinematic-language/

READ THIS FIRST

Convention, not measurement

This is craft convention, not measurement. A lens's 'character' describes how practitioners agree it renders, not a specification you can verify from a datasheet, and naming one in a prompt biases a model toward images associated with it rather than simulating that glass. Nothing on this page carries a corpus count or a source URL, and it must never be presented as though it did.

METHOD

How to use it

- Pick the mood first, then take the angle, shot size, movement, light, optic and grade from its row. The recipe is a starting point that already agrees with itself, which is most of the work.
- Name the optic and the stock rather than an adjective. 'Canon K35, 35mm f/2.0' carries more of a look than 'vintage', because the model has seen the former attached to images and the latter attached to everything.
- One light idea per shot. Two named lighting styles in one prompt fight, and the model resolves the fight by averaging them into neither.
- Say what the light does, not only where it comes from. 'Rim light separating the subject from the background' survives translation into an image better than 'backlight'.
- Keep the negatives short and specific. A long negative list spends attention on words you do not want in the frame.

MOOD RECIPE

Calm

Cues: quiet, peaceful, meditative

Angle	Eye level
Shot size	Wide, Medium
Movement	Static, Slow pan
Light	Golden hour, Natural, soft
Optics	Cooke S4/i, 50mm f/2.0
Grade	Warm vintage, pastel tones

MOOD RECIPE

Intimacy

Cues: tender, close, warm, love

Angle	Eye level, Over the shoulder
Shot size	Close-up, Medium close-up
Movement	Slow dolly in, Static
Light	Soft, Candles, Practicals
Optics	ARRI Signature, 85mm f/1.4
Grade	Warm, lifted shadows

MOOD RECIPE

Tension

Cues: tense, uneasy, dangerous

Angle	Dutch angle, Low angle
Shot size	Close-up, Extreme close-up
Movement	Handheld, Slow dolly in
Light	Low key, contrasty, single source
Optics	Zeiss Super Speed, 35mm f/1.4
Grade	Cool, desaturated, high contrast

MOOD RECIPE

Fear

Cues: frightening, horror, panic

Angle	Dutch angle, Worm's eye
Shot size	Extreme close-up, Close-up
Movement	Crash zoom, Handheld
Light	Low key, flickering, single source
Optics	Helios 44-2, 58mm f/2.0
Grade	Desaturated, cold, teal shadows

MOOD RECIPE

Power

Cues: powerful, heroic, strength, victory

Angle	Low angle, Worm's eye
Shot size	Full shot, Medium wide
Movement	Crane up, Slow orbit
Light	Backlight, Rim light, Golden hour
Optics	Panavision Anamorphic, 40mm
Grade	Teal and orange, saturated

MOOD RECIPE

Vulnerability

Cues: alone, sad, abandoned

Angle	High angle, Overhead
Shot size	Wide, Medium
Movement	Static, Slow crane down
Light	Overcast, soft, cool
Optics	Canon K35, 35mm f/2.0
Grade	Cool Nordic, desaturated

MOOD RECIPE

Epic

Cues: epic, vast, grand

Angle	Bird's eye, Low angle
Shot size	Extreme wide, Wide
Movement	Aerial pullback, 360 orbit, Crane up
Light	Golden hour, Volumetric rays
Optics	Panavision Primo 70, Ultra Vista
Grade	Teal and orange, dramatic

MOOD RECIPE

Energy

Cues: dynamic, fast, action

Angle	Low angle, Ground level
Shot size	Medium wide, Full
Movement	Tracking, FPV, Whip pan
Light	Contrasty, neon, practicals
Optics	Angénieux Optimo zoom
Grade	High contrast, saturated

MOOD RECIPE

Nostalgia

Cues: retro, remembering, youth

Angle	Eye level
Shot size	Medium, Close-up
Movement	Slow dolly out, Static
Light	Golden hour, soft, warm
Optics	Canon K35, Helios 44-2
Grade	Warm vintage, Kodachrome, grain

MOOD RECIPE

Mystery

Cues: mysterious, secret, hidden

Angle	Dutch angle, Low angle
Shot size	Silhouette, Close-up
Movement	Slow tracking, Static
Light	Low key, Rim light, silhouette
Optics	Zeiss Super Speed, 50mm
Grade	Film noir, high contrast black and white

MOOD RECIPE

Joy

Cues: fun, joy, celebration, happy

Angle	Eye level
Shot size	Medium, Two-shot, Group
Movement	Light handheld, Orbit, Pan
Light	High key, bright, natural
Optics	Cooke S4/i, 35mm f/2.8
Grade	Warm, slightly saturated

MOOD RECIPE

Romance

Cues: romantic, together, in love

Angle	Eye level, Over the shoulder
Shot size	Two-shot, Close-up, Medium close-up
Movement	Slow orbit, Slow dolly in
Light	Golden hour, Practicals, candles
Optics	ARRI Signature, 85mm f/1.4
Grade	Warm, soft halation

MOOD RECIPE

Corporate

Cues: office, presentation, professional

Angle	Eye level, Over the shoulder
Shot size	Medium, Medium close-up
Movement	Static, Slow dolly in
Light	Studio, natural, clean
Optics	Zeiss Master Prime, 50mm f/4
Grade	Cool neutral, clean

MOOD RECIPE

Luxury

Cues: premium, expensive, elite

Angle	Eye level, Slightly low
Shot size	Close-up, Macro
Movement	Slow orbit, Turntable, Dolly in
Light	Studio with rim accents
Optics	Zeiss Master Prime, 100mm f/2.8
Grade	Rich, deep blacks, gold accents

LENSES

What each optic is for

ARRI Signature Primes	Portraits, skin tones, premium
Cooke S4/i	Portraits, dialogue, drama
Leica Summilux-C	Portraits, intimate scenes
Panavision Anamorphic	Epic, blockbuster, wide screen
Panavision C-Series	Retro epic, seventies and eighties
Panavision E-Series	Action

LENSES

Lenses, continued

Panavision T-Series	Contemporary blockbuster
Zeiss Master Anamorphics	Clean anamorphic, science fiction
Hawk Class-X	Visual character, drama
JDC Xtal Xpress	Auteur cinema
Zeiss Master Primes	Product, deliberately sterile
Sigma Cine	Product, technology, sterile

LENSES

Lenses, continued

Zeiss Ultra Prime	Documentary, plainness
Master / MO Primes	General purpose, the cinema default
Canon K35	Vintage, seventies, nostalgia
Helios 44-2	Vintage, art, dreamlike
Zeiss Super Speed	Night city, noir, classic
Angénieux Optimo zoom	Energy, action, tracking work

FILM STOCKS AND SENSORS

The look before the grade

Kodak Vision3 500T	Night, neon, the cinema default
Kodak Vision3 250D	Natural daylight realism
Kodak Vision3 50D	Very clean, bright, detailed
Fujifilm Eterna 500T	Pastel, soft, art house
Kodak Tri-X 400	Black and white drama
Kodachrome 64	Retro, nostalgia, reportage

FILM STOCKS AND SENSORS

Stocks, continued

ARRI Alexa 35	Digital with gentle highlights
RED V-Raptor	Hyperrealism, hard, technical
Sony VENICE 2	Low light, night scenes
VHS / MiniDV	Nineties nostalgia, lo-fi

LIGHTING

Named setups and the words for them

Cinematic	cinematic lighting, soft shadows, controlled contrast
Golden hour	golden hour sunlight, warm amber tones, long soft shadows
Neon	neon sign reflections, cyan and magenta light, wet pavement glow
Studio	studio lighting, key light from above, soft fill, clean backdrop
Natural	natural available light, window light, overcast diffusion
High key	high-key lighting, bright even illumination, minimal shadows

LIGHTING

Lighting, continued

Low key and noir	low-key lighting, deep shadows, single hard light source, noir feel
Practicals	practical lights visible in frame: lamps, candles, screens, neon
Backlight	strong backlight, rim light separating subject from background
Volumetric	volumetric light rays, dust particles in light beam, god rays

SHOT STRUCTURE

The beat-blocked scene

A model holds a shot for a fixed span. Writing the scene as beats with times attached stops it compressing a three-beat idea into one, or padding one beat with drift.

- Title and act, then the location: environment, time of day, weather, atmosphere, background detail.
- Reference assignment: which reference is the character and which is the style, said explicitly, with identity preservation spelled out for the character reference.
- Style: one block of look words, plus what to avoid.
- Story: what actually happens, in two to five sentences.
- Characters: appearance, clothing, emotional state, body language, objective.
- Emotional realism: eyes, face, breathing, body. This is the section most prompts skip and it is the one that stops a performance reading as a mannequin.

SHOT STRUCTURE

The storyboard grid

It gets a whole shot list out of one generation, which is the cheapest way to see whether a sequence holds together before spending on video. It also exposes identity drift immediately, because nine versions of the same face sit side by side.

- Global consistency first: one reference image, and an explicit list of what must not change between frames.
- Layout: three rows, three columns, nine frames, each a different shot from one continuous sequence, each labelled.
- Environment and visual style, stated once and applying to all nine.
- Character: subject, wardrobe, hair, makeup, expression, movement, recurring props.
- Story: one paragraph connecting all nine frames.
- Per-frame shot plan: shot type, angle, lens, composition, action, expression, lighting.
- Camera variety, named as a list to draw from, with an instruction not to repeat framing.
- Continuity rules, then quality, then negatives.

SHOT STRUCTURE

The five-beat fusion arc

It is a shape rather than a subject, so it survives being reused: fix the arc and vary one thing. The version documented on this site holds the beats, the texture language and the negatives byte-identical across eleven films and changes only what the drawing emerges from. Five beats of roughly three seconds is also the practical ceiling - twelve transformations in fifteen seconds and the model silently dropped one.

- The spark, 0-3s: a real physical action releases the drawn element onto a real surface.
- The spread, 3-6s: it moves to a second surface, unravels, changes colour, reforms.
- The big one, 6-10s: it dives into an object and bursts out dragging that object's own colours.
- The character, 10-13s: it collapses onto a real fixture, which grows a face and limbs.
- The world, 13-15s: it unravels across a large surface and reorganises into a whole scene.
- Then three blocks appended to every beat: handmade texture in specifics, continuity verbs with replacement forbidden, and a diegetic-only soundscape with music explicitly set to none.

Read the rest online

Lenses, stocks, lighting, grades and mood recipes in full.

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