

Camera Move Jargon

by Bill Davis, Videomaker, May 2001

<http://www.videomaker.com/article/8205/>

In any field of business, it's hard to "come across" as a professional until you know the language. In medicine, "stat" means as quickly as possible. To a short order cook, the cryptic phrase "BT wheat works" tells the cook that the customer ordered a bacon, lettuce and tomato sandwich on whole wheat bread with fries. When it comes to industry-specific jargon, the video production business is no exception.

In video, words like "pan," "tilt," "dolly" and "zoom" have specific meanings every bit as precise as an emergency room doctor's call for a "32 French, a particular kind of needle. Using a variety of camera moves is a great way to create compelling shots for your productions. Learning the terms that describe them facilitates communication between the director and camera operator. This extensive glossary should give you the start you need to understanding camera move terminology. But first, a little context.

A Touch of Etymology

Camera move terminology originated in the film and television industries. In order for directors to instruct remote camera operators how to frame and move during a shot, they needed concise and descriptive terms. One factor that influenced this early language was that original studio cameras were very heavy. There was no such thing as a "shoulder mounted" camera back then, so many of the terms described movements of a camera mounted on a fixed stand. Today, we mount large studio cameras on a pillar-like system called a pedestal, which itself sits on a wheeled base originally referred to as a truck. As camera weight decreased, tripod use became more common, but a lot of the language of the pedestal-mounted camera systems still prevails.

Common Camera-move Terms

Pan - A pan is a horizontal camera pivot, right to left or left to right, from a stationary position. With a simple pan on a tripod, the camera operator makes sure the pan lock is not locked down, then the camera handle is slowly and steadily moved either to the right or left. The best pans are slow, smooth and end by coming to rest on a pre-selected scene. The director's written or spoken cue to initiate this move is either "pan right" or "pan left."

Tilt - The tilt is the vertical version of a pan: an up or down pivot of the camera. As with all camera moves, tilts should come to rest on a shot that's well composed. The director's cue is "tilt up" or "tilt down."

Zoom - The term "zoom" came into existence after the original fixed turret lens system of the early TV cameras was replaced by variable focal length lenses common today. Through the use of tiny motors, today's camcorders can change focal length at the push of a button. The director calling for "zoom out" wants the focal length changed so that the new shot encompasses a wider angle of view. This allows the audience to see more of the shot and lightens the emotional tension of a scene. "Zoom in" calls for the opposite effect, moving the frame towards a specific part of the scene and making target objects appear larger in the frame.

The best zooms often start and stop so smoothly that the audience's attention stays focused on the action in the scene and not the camera move. At the other end of the zoom spectrum is the "explosion zoom" or "snap zoom," where manipulation of the zoom control is rapid. This is a special effect. Often, a director will use the terms "**push**" and "**pull**" instead of zoom in and zoom out.

Truck - "Truck" is one of the terms that originated with pedestal-mounted cameras. A truck is a rolling move to the right or left, parallel to a moving subject. The key to a smooth truck is to get your wheels properly aligned before you start your move. The director's cues are "truck left" and "truck right."

Dolly - A dolly is a companion move to the truck but instead of

moving parallel with a moving subject, the camera moves physically closer to, or farther away from, a stationary object. Beginning videographers often mistakenly believe that zooming-in and dollying-in achieve the same result. They do not. While both moves make the object appear larger and closer, there's a substantial difference in the two techniques and the results they have on the look of the scene.

Dollying changes the focal point of your shot as the distance between the camera and the object changes. This also changes the apparent relationship of the object to its background. Zooming maintains a consistent focal length, doesn't change the relationship of object to background, but changes the depth of field (see Figure 1).

Arc - The arc is another wheeled shot that can be very effective. Imagine that you tie a string from your subject to the camera and move the camera left or right in an arc keeping the string taut as you move. The arc shot virtually circles the subject, revealing new background as the camera moves while keeping the audience's attention on the subject. It's hard to execute an arc without an extremely smooth surface or a curved-wheel and track system, but it's a stunning shot when done with finesse. Be sure to visit **Videomaker's** online Video Clip Archive at our Web site www.videomaker.com/scripts/video_clips.cfm to see several examples of these camera moves.

Like a Pro

A well-planned and well-executed camera move can add interest and sophistication to your work. Overused, they are distracting. Knowing the basic camera moves and the jargon that describes them helps the communication between director and camera operator go smoothly and efficiently. Using these terms and the techniques they describe, it won't take long for you to shoot and sound like a pro.