### **ACTUAL SOUND**

Actual sounds are all the sounds that occur within the world of the film and can be heard by characters.

**Onscreen sound.** Any sound that has a source within the frame.

**Offscreen sound.** The source of the sound isn’t visible on screen but the audience understands that it’s part of the scene. Ambient sound is a good example of this. If a scene takes place inside an apartment, the audience understands that the off-screen sound of traffic is part of the scene. One of the best uses of off-screen sound is in [Steven Spielberg’s *Jurassic Park*](https://youtu.be/1koa2xAxCAw) when the audience hears the sound of the approaching Tyrannosaurus Rex before it appears on screen. Sometimes filmmakers will use off screen sound to imply something that is too horrible to show on screen. In [*The Dark Knight Rises*](https://youtu.be/pB0imvTpE2Y)*, (at 1.23)* Christopher Nolan cuts away to the reaction of another character and we hear terrible muted screams as Bane (Tom Hardy) kills Dagger (Ben Mendelsohn).

**Transitional sounds.** A sound bridge when the sound between two scenes overlaps. Dialogue from the one scene, for example, might be heard before the characters appear on screen. This helps to create a smooth transition between two scenes.

**Pre-lap.** In Unbreakable, M Night Shyamalan uses dialogue to bridge two scenes. Elijah Price (Samuel L Jackson) is heard before he appears on screen. “I followed the guy in the camouflage jacket,” he says. Shyamalan cuts to the next shot where he’s having a conversation with David Dunn (Bruce Willis). The audience understands that this is dialogue from the next scene. In Skyfall (Sam Mendes, 2012), there James Bond is sitting in a hotel bar when he receives a text message informing him that an assassin has arrived in Shanghai. Mendes cuts to a close up of Bond and the sound of a jet landing has been edited into the scene before he cuts to a shot of the airport. This sound helps to smooth the transition between the two shots. In The Matrix, a sound bridge is used to create a transition between a nightclub and the protagonist waking up the next morning. “The answer is out there, Neo,” says Trinity against the loud music of a nightclub. “It’s looking for you. And it will find you if you want it to.” The sound of an alarm clock gradually starts to fade in and there is a sudden cut to Neo’s alarm clock as it wakes him the next morning. In *I*[*ndiana Jones and the Last Crusade*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jf-HZz5Qv8E), director Steven Spielberg uses pre-lap sound to smooth transition from one scene to another as Indiana Jones (Harrison Ford) decides whether he should travel to Berlin to recover his father’s grail diary. The camera dollies in on a street sign that says ‘Berlin’. Music and the sound of chanting voices can be heard before Spielberg cuts to a Nazi rally.

**Post-lap.** In [*The Silence of the Lambs*](https://youtu.be/8fo8wjp80C8), Jonathan Demme uses a sound bridge to smooth the transition between two locations. Clarice Starling (Jodie Foster) is having a telephone conversation with her superior at the FBI. “I figured he’s from Baltimore and I looked in the phone book and there’s a Your Self Storage…” she says as Demme cuts to an establishing shot of the business, “…right outside of downtown Baltimore, sir.” Letting the dialogue trail into the next scene helps to smooth the transition between these two scenes.

**Audio match cut.** An audio match cut is when two similar sounds fade into each other. Director Alfred Hitchcock famously used an audio match cut in [*39 Steps*](https://youtu.be/LzAoCsvvFBY), cutting from a shot of a woman screaming to the shot of a train sounding its whistle. In the thriller *Dead Calm*, director Philip Noyce uses an audio match cut, transitioning from the sound of a heartbeat to the sound of wiper blades. In Season 2 of *Breaking Bad* in an episode called ‘Over’, an audio match cut is used to transition between a shot of Walter White using a power tool at home, to a shot of a janitor using a vacuum at Skylar’s office.

### **SUBJECTIVE SOUND**

Subjective sound is any sound occurs in the mind of a character. As David Sonnenschein notes in Sound Design – The Expressive Power of Music, Voice and Sound Effects in Cinema: “By getting inside a character’s head, hearing what he or she is hearing, the audience can have a strong bond with that experience.”

**Inner voice.** A character’s inner voice is when you hear what they’re thinking word for word.

**Remembered sound.** Although visual flashbacks are often used in films, a sonic flashback is when a character hears something – usually a line of dialogue from a previous scene – that reminds them of something. In [*Hot Fuzz*](https://youtu.be/rmwTaNhAKAY) (Edgar Wright, 2007), Nicholas Angel (Simon Pegg) is thinking about the murders that have rocked the small town of Sandford. The camera dollies in on Angel as he’s eating an ice cream, recalling the words a character said in the previous scene, “No luck catching them killers, then?” This sonic flashback helps to reveal that he’s made a significant breakthrough in the case.

**Imagined sound.** There are some films that allow the audience to hear characters’ thoughts. Alfred Hitchcock’s [*Psycho*](https://youtu.be/f-PnGRaJaSA) is a good example. Leaving Phoenix after she has stolen $40,000, Marion Crane hears the voices of her boyfriend and boss, imagining how they’re going to react. “Marion, what in the world –” the audience hears Sam say as she’s driving along the highway. “What are you doing here? …Of course I’m glad to see you. I always am. What is it, Marion?”

**Distorted sound.** Sometimes, when the audience hears sound subjectively from the perspective of a character, it can be distorted. In [*Unbreakable* (1:50)](https://youtu.be/YBRmNUxAVYs?t=100), when David Dunne (Bruce Willis) plunges beneath the surface of a pool and starts to drown, the audience hears what the character would hear while he’s struggling beneath the surface. In *The Hunger Games*, when Katniss (Jennifer Lawrence) is knocked off her feet by an explosion, all sounds are suddenly muted and the audience can hear the ringing in her ears.

**Spoken writing.** When a character is reading something – often a letter or note – the audience can hear the voice of the character who wrote it. This is used in [Napoleon Dynamite](https://youtu.be/BO9ddHEeJfE) when Trisha receives a note from Napoleon which reads, “There’s a lot more where this came from… if you go to the dance with me. Yours truly, Napoleon Dynamite.” At the beginning of *Valkyrie,* Bryan Singer uses spoken writing. Claus von Stauffenberg (Tom Cruise) is writing in his diary. Although the spoken writing begins in German, it slowly transitions to English. Steven Spielberg’s *Saving Private Ryan* uses this technique to highlight the lives lost at Normandy when he cuts to a room full of women at typewriters. The sound of military personnel reading the letters are layered on top of each other in the sound mix.

**Personal narration.** Personal narration is when a character, from some point in the future, narrates the story. In [*Mean Girls* (1:35)](https://youtu.be/VZpMlm4xYG4?t=90), the narrator is also the main character Cady Heron (Lindsay Lohan) explains in voice over that she grew up in Africa because her parents were research zoologists and is starting school for the first time at age sixteen.

### **NON-DIEGETIC SOUNDS**

**Impersonal narration.** While personal narration is relatively common, filmmakers seem to use impersonal narrators less frequently. An impersonal narrator is not a character in the film. 500 Days of Summer is a great example of how an impersonal narrator can be used: “There’s only two kinds of people in the world. There’s women, and there’s men. Summer Finn was a woman. Height : average. Weight : average. Shoe Size : slightly above average. For all intents and purposes, Summer Finn: just another girl. Except she wasn’t. To wit, in 1998, Summer quoted a song by the Scottish band Belle & Sebastian in her high school yearbook. “Color my life with the chaos of trouble.” The spike in Michigan sells of their album “The Boy with the Arab Strap” continues to puzzle industry analysts.” [*The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford* (0:20)](https://youtu.be/r2gY_e1ZKD8?t=20) is another film that uses an impersonal narrator: “He was growing into middle age, and was living then in a bungalow on Woodland Avenue. He installed himself in a rocking chair and smoked a cigar down in the evenings as his wife wiped her pink hands on an apron and reported happily on their two children. His children knew his legs, the sting of his mustache against their cheeks. They didn’t know how their father made his living, or why they so often moved. They didn’t even know their father’s name.” The film uses this very dry and impartial narration to make the audience question the way we celebrate folk heroes like Jesse James.

**Non-diegetic sound effects.** Non-diegetic sound is any sound that doesn’t occur in the created world of a film. These sounds cannot be heard by the characters. In *Snatch*, Guy Ritchie uses a stylised bullet sound to accompany a jet taking off. In [*Thank You For Smoking* (1:20)](https://youtu.be/FILhDuYWvO0?t=76), director Jason Reitman uses non-diegetic sounds to convey that Nick Naylor (Aaron Eckhart) is a charismatic public speaker. “I don’t have a MD or law degree,” he says. There is a shot of Naylor standing at a podium. His words are replaced by the sound of machine guns and grenades. “I have a bachelor’s in kickin’ ass and taking names.”

**Score.** In narratives, orchestral music performs a number of functions. It can establish setting. In the opening shot of [Braveheart](https://youtu.be/4n2Ao7FFB-g?t=60), the camera soars over the Scottish highlands and James Horner’s score, which makes extensive use of bagpipes commences. In conjunction with the visuals, the music helps to establish the setting of the film within seconds. Similarly, in the opening sequence of Equilibrium, Klaus Badelt’s score helps to create the impression of an oppressive, totalitarian government through its use of a Soviet-style choir. The score also conveys information about character. In The Dark Knight, composers Hans Zimmer and James Newton Howard collaborated on a theme for The Joker: a single note played on the violin which increases in intensity and pans rapidly from left to right, gradually joined by other discordant and distorted electronic instruments. As James Newton Howard notes: “What’s great about the Joker theme to me is that it feels totally untethered. It just kind of exists. It lives somewhere in the cracks.” The jarring, incessant wall of noise contributes significantly to his sinister characterisation. John William’s Imperial March is another great example of music being used to characterise a villain. Of course, film scores also help to characterise heroes as well. Take John William’s Raider’s March or The Theme from Superman. Film scores also contribute to audience engagement. They heighten suspense and pluck at the heartstrings. Midway through Ridley Scott’s Gladiator, Maximus is forced to fight for his life in a brutal and bloody battle in the Colosseum. Ridley Scott created a tense, furious and brutal scene which made all the more effective by Hans Zimmer and Lisa Gerrard’s orchestral track, The Barbarian Horde. This is a good example of music underscoring and accentuating the action in a narrative. In The Avengers (Joss Whedon, 2012), the heroic and heart-pounding score by Alan Silvestri is used in the climactic battle sequence to emphasise the heroism of the main characters.

**Songs.** Popular music can also make a significant contribution to narratives. When the T-800 travels back through time in James Cameron’s [Terminator 2](https://youtu.be/bzdWRZEu3hk), he arrives in the present day completely naked, finds the nearest seedy bar and demands the clothes, boots and motorcycle of one of its patrons. He emerges from the bar clad completely in black to George Thorogood’s ‘Bad to the Bone’.

**Contrapuntal sound.** Contrapuntal sound is when sound or music is used in an ironic or unexpected way. In John Woo’s [Face/Off](https://youtu.be/gn7hLkbrNq4?t=160), a child caught in a massive gun battle between criminals and police listens to the song ‘Somewhere Over the Rainbow’ through a pair of headphones. Windows explode, machine guns flash and spark as the room is showered with bullets. The scene plays out in slow motion to this unexpected music. A similar example occurs near the beginning of I am Legend, when Robert Neville (Will Smith) is bathing his dog and singing along to the Bob Marley song ‘Three Birds’. Contrary to what the lyrics suggest, everything is not going to be all right. How could it in a nightmarish, post-apocalypic world filled with bloodthirsty vampires? Rather than make the audience feel comforted, this song creates a deep sense of unease.