The very first films in the late 1800s, made by the Lumière Bros. and Thomas Edison among others, were single-shot actualities, for example, a train pulling into a station and people leaving a factory. The camera was locked in place; it recorded, in its entirety, the “event” taking place. It was the magic of capturing movement that captivated audiences. Editing was originally called “cutting,” as it actually was the cutting together of two pieces of film. “Cutters” held the strips of film up to the light and cut them with scissors, cementing the two pieces together at the desired point. The jump cut, a deliberate mismatching of two scenes, evolved into the first “special effect” of movies. Within the same scene, an actor could be made to “disappear” by stopping the camera, removing the actor, and resuming the scene without moving the camera. Famed French filmmaker, George Méliès, produced dozens of elaborate “trick” films using this effect as one of his primary marvels.

Movies that looked like plays filmed without moving the camera soon gave way to bold close-ups, medium shots, and tracking shots under the direction of film pioneers Alice Guy Blache of France (she was the first female director) and Edwin S. Porter and D.W. Griffith of the U.S., among others. Their methods helped create a language of film. Cutting from a long shot of an actor standing by a tree to a similar shot of just his face near the tree created a sense of continuous action, even though the shots may have been filmed on different days. Cutting evolved into “editing,” the manipulation of time and space. The ability to manipulate time and space also allows the filmmaker to change our emotional and intellectual responses to what we see on the screen.

Editing is one of the most creative aspects of filmmaking. The film editor collaborates with the director and establishes the pace and structure of a film by connecting various shots to create scenes and sequences that form the final movie. The shots the editor chooses and the ways they are combined set the mood, develop the action, create the rhythm, establish the film’s time and space, and guide the viewers’ attention. Images are edited in the order and length most appropriate to telling the story.

One approach to editing is continuity. Continuity editing generally presents the action in a logical, chronological sequence. Even though the time and space of a sequence may be manipulated, it has the appearance of “real” time to the viewer. A long shot of a person sitting down is “matched” to a close-up of the person sitting down into the frame. In essence, the editor is focusing in on the scene in much the same manner as the human eye—jumping from place to place, farther or closer.

Film editing can have its own unique logic as well, functioning in much the same manner as the brain with seemingly jumbled thoughts and images creating their own individual meaning. The groundwork for many of these techniques, later used by Alfred Hitchcock and others, was laid by a group of Soviet filmmakers—most notably Lev Kuleshov, Sergei Eisenstein and Vsevolod Pudovkin—who, in the early 1920s, began to experiment with film style and technique and especially with montage. Montage, or collision editing, is done by editing together a rapid
sequence of carefully selected shots to evoke a specific emotional or intellectual response. For example, Eisenstein once combined shots of a poor woman and her undernourished child seated at an empty table with shots of an affluent, overweight man seated at a table filled with food. His intent in combining those shots was to evoke images of the oppression of the poor by the wealthy. Montage, in the modern sense of the word, often refers to sequences where several shots have been edited together to compress a series of events that happen over time.

Most films produced before 1902 were only a few minutes in length. In those films, editing was nothing more than splicing the loose ends of the film together to put the shots in order. With the introduction of George Méliès’ *A Trip to the Moon* (1902) and Edwin S. Porter’s *The Great Train Robbery* (1903), films began to be longer and more complex. Filmmaking continued to mature over the next several decades as represented by such films as D.W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and Eisenstein’s *The Battleship Potemkin* (1925). Films such as these helped establish the concept of film as an art form rather than as a novelty or recorded reality. Porter and Griffith, both American filmmakers, used editing to enhance the emotional impact of a film on its audience. Griffith developed the use of the close-up and experimented with cutting together scenes that were widely separated in physical space to show what was taking place in different locations at the same time. For these and other innovations, Griffith is known as the “father of film.”

For much of Hollywood history, there were virtually no filmmaking opportunities available to women other than screenwriting and acting—with one major exception. Women have always been welcomed—and in many quarters preferred by male directors—as film editors. In the early days, the job was regarded as menial labor, and it largely was. Cutters worked by hand, running film on reels with hand cranks and manually cutting and gluing together strips of it. (Moreover, they almost never received screen credit.) After the advent of the Moviola editing machine in 1924, the process became faster and easier, but was still tedious and low paying, which is why most cutters remained young, working-class women. This attitude has change considerably for modern filmmakers who consistently rely on female editors. As for why so many male directors have chosen to work with female film editors, Thelma Schoonmaker, who has won three Oscars for editing Martin Scorsese’s films, says, “Filmmaking is a collaboration. People have to learn how to deal with their own egos and work as partners. And I think women are probably better at that than men.” When asked how it was that such a nice lady could edit Scorsese’s violent gangster pictures, Thelma replied with a smile, “Ah, but they aren’t violent until I’ve edited them.”

The film editor is responsible for transforming massive amounts of film into the story seen on the screen; the usual shooting ratio for a feature length of film is 6:1 – 12 hours of footage is edited to a two-hour movie; the shooting ratio for a documentary feature is 10:1. To make things even more complicated, the director may film each scene several times from four or five different camera positions. The scenes are also not shot in the same sequence as the film’s story. All the scenes in one location or using a particular actor will be shot together to minimize the cost of the production. The editor sorts through this rough footage and gradually assembles the film, scene by scene. Working closely with the director, the editor must choose the best acting performances and the most effective camera angles and lighting for each scene to achieve the desired impact. The editor must then decide just how to join together all those segments of film to create the final, finished story.