

NACAE

National Association of Comics Art Educators

Basic Storytelling... Lights, Camera, Action!

Teacher's note: This project sets out to make students think about two major variables in visual storytelling. 1: the identification of what I call "key moments." Moments that are essential for the telling of any given narrative without which the story wouldn't make sense. 2: the importance of shot selection once a key moment has been identified. Shot selection includes all the functions of framing, (e.g. distance, height, angle and level). By actually comparing the SAME story in two versions, students learn the benefits of simple, as well as more ambitious camera work. "Twenty-two points, plus triple-word-score, plus fifty points for using all my letters. Game's over. I'm outta here."

This exercise further explores basic storytelling, and the analysis and breakdown of a time-based event into a series of "moments". In class we discussed what it is that makes a successful story. We talked about the process of idea to plot to script to thumbnails to storyboard (and ultimately to film). We also talked about the importance of understanding framing and particularly the concept of the camera, and how this must be used even at the PRE-PRODUCTION stage.

For this project, you are required to write a story about how you got to school today. It should be grounded in reality (you must be the "star"), but may include some imaginary elements. You need to determine where and when the story will start and where and when it will end. It must logically conclude somewhere in or near our classroom. You will produce a basic plot and script for the story, and then make this visual in a series of panels. You will then produce two versions of the SAME story.

Version 1: In 9 panels (3" x 4" each) tell the story purely visually, with no text or sound effects. In this version it might help to imagine that a companion who travels with you (or near you) for the entire journey holds the "camera." Imagine this person is using a still camera, with limited ability to zoom or get too close to you; the camera work should be very limited. The camera has just 9 shots left.

Version 2: In 9 panels (3" x 4" each) tell the story purely visually, again with no text or sound effects. Taking EXACTLY THE SAME MOMENTS from version 1, tell the story this time with much more ambitious camera work. Your budget is limitless -- you can use helicopters, cranes, etc. With this camera work you must ENHANCE the storytelling. Be sure to use shots that promote storytelling. You might wish to use this camera work to convey an overall idea, or create a certain ambience. But remember, you can't change the actual events, only the way we view this action. So if in panel 1 version 1 you're just getting out of bed, then you must chose the exact same moment (with a different view) for version 2.

Compare the two versions and see how the same story can be radically changed by the use of thoughtful and adventurous camera work.

Specifics:

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- * Index cards. Medium: Pencil.
- * 9 panels of even size for each version. Each panel should be 3" x 4" landscape.
- * Arrange the panels symmetrically in 3 rows of 3. Leave about 1 inch between panels.
- * Produce an elementary written plot and script first, then move to thumbnails.
- * Especially with version 2, explore multiple camera positions at the thumbnail stage.
- * Complete version 1 before you attempt version 2.
- * Don't worry about too much detail at this stage - just enough to tell the story.

Further Exercise: Once you've completed both versions, compare and contrast the effectiveness of the stories. Now, take version 2 and ADD 3 more moments. These could be between existing panels, or at the beginning or end, consecutive or not. Essentially you're "filling the gaps". Now you have a chance to tell the story injecting a different mood and/or atmosphere.

Next combine both versions into one big story. Use all the panels from version 1 and version 2. See how the "simple" and more ambitious shots work surprisingly well next to each other. Maybe a mixture of shot types is a good style of storytelling?

Finally, chose any number of panels to form your ideal version of the story, as few as you wish or all of them.

-- Contributed by Patrick Welch