14

Media Grammar for Teachers

Assessing Media Expression

Listening to Dr. Jean-Pierre Isbouts

This book comes with a special feature: videos created to illustrate some of the points addressed in this chapter. Most of the videos are in the form of conversations about the nature of media grammar that I have with award-winning documentarian and screenwriter Dr. Jean-Pierre Isbouts. I talk with Dr. Isbouts about how media grammar plays out in the world of filmmaking and then how it can be translated into media we ask students to make at school, where they don't have the budgets and facilities that professional mediasts have. The videos were shot largely in his home—no fancy studio was used. As always, I am trying to model producing quality media without the expensive accoutrements of professional production.

Becoming a Media Persuader

Earlier I defined media literacy as being able to recognize, evaluate, and apply the techniques of media persuasion. The reality is that the

only way for students to become truly media literate is to become media persuaders themselves. Doing so forces them to lift the hood, so to speak, and see media's intricate workings that conspire to do one thing above all others: make the final media product appear smooth, effortless, and natural. Digital storytelling (DST) offers a very effective way to lift the hood.

Becoming a media persuader bothers many people. I understand why. Persuaders deliberately manipulate the audience—some for the sake of art, others for the sake of sales, but all because they want the audience to see something in a particular way, that is, their way.

However, we need to remember that media persuasion didn't begin with new media. For many years, in language arts classes throughout the world, children have been taught how to persuade with words. In fact, one of the hallmarks of the literate person is being able to write a persuasive essay that convinces readers of a particular point of view using the techniques of effective writing. I suppose this is how lawyers get their early training. But while writing persuasive text is respectable, creating persuasive new media is suspect, largely, I think, because when students use new media to support a particular point of view, it looks too much like advertising.

I'll leave you to make your peace with this conundrum of new media authorship that often pits the desire to be honest against the desire to be effective. But rest assured that unless you actually create your own media, and do so paying particular attention to how to most effectively engage and convince your audience, then any appreciation you have of media's persuasive abilities will be shallow and theoretical at best.

The media maturity line. The heart of being persuasive with media is relating to your audience. I have found that this does not necessarily come naturally to students. In fact, I tell teachers that often I feel that what I am trying to do is bring students across "the media maturity line." (Sometimes it feels more like dragging or pulling.) On one side of the line, students want to do what they want to do with their media pieces, without much thought about whether audience members understand what they are trying to say. This causes immature media makers to use images, photos, or music that make sense to them but don't necessarily make sense to anyone else. Once they cross the media maturity line, students can see their work as audience members would see it. They ask themselves, "If I didn't know anything about this topic, or the images I am looking it, would this make sense to me?" It is a leap in maturity and emotional development, going from an "I only care about me" perspective to one that cares about

others. It is a move toward empathy. In fact, making media can be one of those teachable moments that helps your students evolve, grow and mature.

Are there times to simply give students space to get in touch with the artiste within, whether or not it seems to make sense to others? Sure. But they need a basic command of the media before they do so. And whatever they create needs to connect with others in some way. Follow the rules, break the rules, make the rules—that is the path toward creating art. But stories or art that doesn't resonate in some way loses their place in our lives.

The Grammar of Media—Avoiding the Bumps

Play Media Grammar Overview, 0:00 to 3:00

In this chapter, I address media technique and what I call "media grammar." Consider this Version 1.0 of this topic for the average content-area teacher who probably will never become a dedicated media developer and is simply looking for help in evaluating the new media his or her students will produce. My approach assumes that media production will happen in a classroom within a content-area context, rather than in a professional media studio as part of a media production course. Thus, I don't spend any time on the details of fancy media-editing techniques or the latest, greatest editing gear. Instead, I address the "run-ons," "fragments," and other basic considerations of creating clear, effective new media. My goal is to help teachers begin to understand the grammar of effective media so that they can do two things: (1) develop the basic vocabulary and perspectives needed to discuss new media production with their students and (2) create assessment rubrics for new media production that are simple and useful.

What is grammar? Basically it's a set of guidelines for the use of any language or medium that facilitates effective communication. When I assess student-written work, I'm hoping not to find "bumps"—those places in the writing that force me to stop, squint, reread, and puzzle over what the writer is trying to say. Besides being annoying, the bumps distract me from enjoying the writer's ideas. Typically, when I find bumps, it's because the writing has grammatical problems. That is, students didn't have a command of the language commensurate with what they were trying to say.

According to McLuhan, every medium has its grammar.

Looking for bumps. Thus, from a technical point of view, what teachers should be looking for in new media projects is where they "go

bump" as well as where they don't. We want teachers to be able to articulate the nature of media bumps so that they can teach students how to avoid them and so they can assess student work in ways that are helpful to students, parents, and others who want to understand DST's value in education.

Many of the media grammar traits I address in this chapter were derived from my own experience as well as the discussions I've had with teachers about digital stories, an experience I covered in some detail in Part I. When assessing media grammar traits, feel free to use whatever scoring method works for you: A scale from 1 to 10? Narrative critique? "In progress/ satisfactory/exceeds expectations?" Up to you. But it is tremendously helpful to provide specific comments tied to time codes and specific events in a production. For example, it is extremely helpful to provide feedback like "at 1:02 you are talking about a dog, but we are looking at an image of a rainbow," or, "at 1:47 the music is so loud I can't hear your narration."

A number of the media grammar rules that I present will seem obvious to you after they're pointed out. But on the basis of viewing numerous digital stories over the years, I can assure you that these rules are abrogated as often as subject and verb agreement in student writing. After a while, bad media grammar are going to stick out so bad it's going to feel like you am slapped in the face—the way you feel slapped in the face by this sentence because of its poor grammar.

I want to reiterate what I feel is the most effective way to see the grammar and technical aspects of new media production: Watch it twice. Watch it once for the story and then watch it immediately afterward. The second time, you won't be interested in the story because you already know what is going to happen and will be able to watch from a technical point of view. Feel free to pause, take notes, rewind, and replay—whatever helps you "see" the new media grammar employed by your students.

Always keep in mind that there can be reasons that digital storytellers break grammatical rules. Poets do it all the time with words. Recall the discussion in Chapter 2 about digital stories being essays versus poems. When you're in doubt, it's up to you to decide whether you're looking at multimedia poetry or a documentary that needs more work.

Most important, make sure that what you're watching aligns with assignment expectations. If you were expecting an essay, then insist on essay-like clarity. If students are creating poetry, then feel free to ask them to defend their choices. It's what artists are often asked to do in art school.

A Few Notes About Cameras and Tripods

Watch Cameras, 13:30–16:52

Before we begin discussing media grammar, let's take a quick look at the one of the most important tools in your tool box: your camera. You have many options open to you, from high end to consumer level to your smartphone. The video discusses the differences among them and emphasizes the importance of one particular, inexpensive tool: a tripod. Nothing screams "amateurish" more than a jiggly video shot. A tripod to the rescue. No tripod? Then try to find a flat, stable surface to set your camera on. Having said that, you will see more handheld camera shooting in professional media these days. It is intended to give more of an authentic feel, as though you are looking at something from the perspective of a human being who is moving. However, pulling this off takes a lot of work. When in doubt, go for the stable shot.

Grammar of Using Images in Digital Stories

If a picture is worth a thousand words, imagine the amount of grammar that implies. That's why we should help students use images as effectively as possible. The traits I describe in this section are those that most often make me go bump.

Bear in mind that there are entire university degrees offered in image creation. For those interested in more advanced image techniques, there are many resources on the web about topics such as "the rule of thirds" of photo composition and "leading the talent" in video recording. As always, consider having professionals work with you to take your students to the next level of professionalism if the project warrants it.

But the purpose here is to address basic image grammar for content-area teachers who are not technology specialists. For them, the goal is very straightforward: Students should use pictures in their digital stories that support the story and are in focus, well lit, well composed, and well selected.

A Clear, Focused Picture

Although pointing out that pictures need to be clear and in focus sounds like something Captain Obvious would say, I still bump on photos with focus problems now and again, even in this age of self-focusing cameras. Still images should be in focus; if you're squinting when you look at student work, then there's often a focus problem. Video recordings should be nonjiggly; if you're feeling slightly

nauseated, then the jiggles are usually present. While students can always claim artistic license, the reality is that there are very few cases in which a blurry or jiggly picture is desirable. Don't be afraid to ask students to defend their decisions in these situations.

This doesn't mean students should never move the camera when shooting either still pictures or video footage. In fact, a number of camera techniques these days require movement. Instead, it means that in the absence of trying to produce a motion effect, pictures should be steady and clear. Above all, when movement effects are used, they need to support the story. Impact without a good reason typically doesn't work. Many cameras have autofocus, which can help with some of the issues identified here. Also, using tripods when movement is not required will greatly reduce blur and jiggle.

By the way, there is actually software now that will deblur pictures. One day in the not-too-distant future, you'll have to decide whether your students should use it—just the way you might expect them to use spell checking today to clean up their writing—or should be prohibited from using it because it denies them an important skill-building experience.

Students face similar issues when using images found on the web. The average image search yields thumbnail representations of images, which then point to larger original images. If you use the thumbnail rather than the original in your digital story, it pixelates as it spreads to fill the screen, giving it a fuzzy, grainy, and often indecipherable appearance. Bottom line: Make sure you get the original image. Also, make sure that the images you download are big enough to be used in your production. Generally, the bigger the better. If you are trying to fill the screen with an image, then your image probably shouldn't be any smaller than 800-by-600 pixels. Experiment. See what works for you. It can be helpful to show what you are trying to do to colleagues to see if they bump.

Bottom line: Are you squinting? Dizzy? Either is analogous to going bump when you read poor writing. In both cases, you have to work harder than you should at understanding what the student is trying to convey. You want to get to their ideas, not bump on the interface. Have students reshoot, select a better image, or do their best with photo-editing software to clarify the picture.

A Well-Lit Picture

Watch Lighting, 6:00–8:35

Poorly lit subjects in still pictures and video is a common occurence and harder to rectify with software after the fact than one might suspect. Observing the following basic rules helps: (1) make

sure windows are behind the photographer rather than behind what they're shooting; (2) adjust the lights in the room where you're shooting (typically, you want as many lights on as possible without producing shadows); (3) use as much of the light coming through the window as possible; and (4) use a light reflector to bounce light on to the subject. A light reflector is actually a good, inexpensive tool to have in your tool kit. But if you don't have one, you can use a large white sheet of paper or a portable whiteboard—whatever will bounce the light. A good way to think of lighting in a nonprofessional setting is there are two basic kinds of lighting: main lighting (which illuminates the subject) and fill lighting (which tries to get rid of shadows, and perhaps accent certain parts of the subject). In a school, try to use your window light as the main lighting, and overhead lighting, or any supplemental lights you have, including light from a reflector, to fill in and eliminate the shadows.

I recommend students look for bright areas within their classroom or building to shoot pictures; there are always some places that are brighter than others. I also recommend that districts consider buying a good set of lights that can be shared between schools for serious media production.

Bottom line: Are you squinting? If you are, is it because of poor lighting? Have students reshoot, select a better image, or do their best to lighten the image with photo-editing software.

An Appropriately Composed Picture—Beware Visual Noise

Play Visual Noise, 16:54–20:23

The subject of the photo or video footage should at least be evident if not obvious. If the story is about a dog and the dog is hard to see because it's sitting behind a tree, then the picture isn't well composed. (If the story happens to be about a dog that is hard to see, well then, maybe the picture works.) Even though the dog should be central to the picture, this doesn't mean it needs to be in the center of the picture. It simply means that the dog figures prominently. You want people to look at the image, not squint, and think to themselves, either consciously or unconsciously, "That's a dog." Sound obvious? I bump on stuff like this more than I would like.

What detracts from the composition of any picture, still or moving? One thing is unwanted visual information, what I call *visual noise*. It's not uncommon for students to use pictures in which the subject of a digital story—like a dog—is mixed in with what amounts to visual clutter. Perhaps a student uses a family photo in which the dog is one of many competing subjects or is crowded by all the stuff

on the boat dock. Or perhaps a student uses an image in which the subject is too small in relation to the rest of the visual information in the picture, perhaps surrounded by too much space above it or on the sides; that is, perhaps the dog is so small in comparison to the lawn the dog is sleeping on that it might be mistaken for a cat. All of this makes the viewer's mind squint. Consider having students crop or reshoot the material or make the subject clearer by highlighting it or pointing to it graphically.

What's at issue here is trying *to get students to cross the media maturity line*, which I talked about earlier. The owner of the photo knows that the small figure on the huge lawn is a dog, which unconsciously helps him see that figure as a dog. But no one else knows this. It's your job to get students to ask themselves, "If I didn't know that was a dog, what would I see?"

Background is another element of composition to consider. If the digital story is about living on a boat and students take pictures of each other standing in front of a bookcase, then they haven't thought through the composition well enough. I'm not suggesting they find a boat; I always assume that production needs to happen within a school day on school grounds. Instead, I'm suggesting that storytellers use their imagination to approximate a boat, given the materials on hand. Perhaps they could stand in front of a chalkboard or sheets of construction paper on which they've drawn simple waves. Even standing in front of a blank wall that allows viewers to fill in the background with their own imagination might work. But not a bookcase. And as pointed out in the visual noise video, background sheets are inexpensive and easy to set up and take down.

A brief anecdote might be helpful here. Once I was working with some Alaskan students who were going to interview Native Elders in their community. To rehearse, they had set a chair in front of a bookcase; one of them sat as "the talent" so the videographers could practice shooting. What they didn't see was the visual noise in the background of the frame. Papers and books were literally spilling off a bookshelf behind the talent, producing an extremely unprofessional background. I asked them to look through the lens until they could tell me what was wrong. It took a few moments, but finally they saw all of the visual noise when they looked beyond the interviewee. They then found a beautiful Alaskan Native Chilkat blanket and hung it so that it filled the entire background. From bookcase to beautiful set with one blanket, in a normal classroom at no cost. All it took was for the students to see everything that was in the frame, especially the visual noise, and then use their imaginations to address the issue. Sometimes it is that easy.

Play Camera Framing, 8:38–11:25

Special care needs to be taken when framing people, especially for the purpose of interviewing. In this case the picture frames best if you observe three guidelines, (1) use a ¾ view, (2) have the interviewee look slightly left, and (3) frame the subject a bit off center. This is demonstrated in the video.

Bottom line: Are you squinting, wondering what the subject of the picture or video footage is? Are you confused or disoriented, bumping on extraneous visual information? You shouldn't be. The picture should be clear enough that its relationship to the narrative is not in doubt. Have students reshoot, find a better image, or use cropping and other techniques to make the subject clear.

Appropriate Use of Image

This applies particularly to the images that students import from the web. Students can't be assessed on the quality of the images they download because they had nothing to do with their creation. But students can be assessed on their selection and use of images.

We're back to the story of the dog. If it's about a sad little white dog, and the storyteller uses a picture of a happy big gray dog, then the picture selection needs work. The picture may be of a dog, but it's the wrong dog. Sound obvious? Yet I see this kind of thing far too often. Given the number of pictures of dogs on the web, my guess is that the storyteller got lazy, ran out of time, or perhaps didn't have the search skills needed and gave up. When students look for pictures, they should spend time reflecting on what they use the same way they should wrestle with words in order to find the best way to say something.

Bottom line: Does the picture or video footage make you go bump because it seems at odds with the story? If so, then the student needs to find a more accurate image to use.

Supportive Image Changes

Every time the picture changes in a digital story, viewers implicitly look for a connection between the new image and the story. If they don't find it, then bumping and mind-squinting occurs. A common infraction is displaying images before the narrative occurs that they're intended to support. That is, the picture of the dog appears while the narrative is still talking about the cat. Another infraction is the "slide show" effect. That is, images appear in a way that would make sense as part of an independent slide show but not within the context of the story as it's been shaped. Ideally, image changes should

happen without viewers noticing them—without going bump on them. How images change and interact with the story impacts story flow and is addressed later in this chapter.

Bottom line: Are you squinting because the images or video arrives too soon or too late and therefore conflicts with rather than supports the narrative? Then the piece needs to be reedited and/or remixed.

Appropriate Shooting Angle

Camera angles are typically the domain of the professional photographer and may be beyond your concern. However, this aspect of image capture is worth pointing out because it's highly manipulative and is often used by professionals specifically for its manipulative qualities. Whether a picture is shot straight on, from above, or from beneath can impact viewer perception greatly. If the clarity, lighting, and composition are the complete, clear sentences of camera work, then camera angles are the adjectives and adverbs. If nothing else, this topic should be discussed as a media literacy topic. Resource E addresses specific angles and their meaning in some detail.

Watch Camera Angles, 11:26–13:30

Final Note

Visual literacy and Art the 4th R. Basic image editing is part of Art the 4th *R* (www.jasonohler.com/nextr). Through thoughtful image selection and placement and by using highlighting, cropping, and other simple techniques, students can clarify a picture's role in a story and ensure that story listeners don't bump on what they're watching. As with all media components, the visuals need to support, not detract from, the experience of the story.

If you're interested in taking some next steps in the area of visual literacy, I recommend anything by Robyn Williams (2003). I've consulted her *Non-Designer's Design Book* for years. I also like *Visual Literacy* by Lynell Burmark (2011). She does a great job of explaining the vast world of visual literacy in practical terms. And there is a tremendous amount of information on the web. A simple search of YouTube for "visual composition" will yield a cornucopia of resources.

The Grammar of Using Audio in Digital Stories

A true story. Long before flat screens and cable TV, I used to have an ancient TV—the kind that had knobs the size of saucers and huge

glowing tubes inside that could heat an entire house. It was one of those TVs that you had to whack every so often to get going, even though doing so ran the risk of hurting the flimsy rabbit ears draped in tin foil that were perched precariously on top of the TV's dark walnut cabinet. Readers who aren't old enough to belong to AARP will have to watch old movies or talk to their grandparents to verify that such TVs existed.

For the most part, the TV worked, except for one serious flaw: Every now and then the screen would go blank. I could still hear the audio, but otherwise it looked as if the TV set had been turned off. Usually, I would just wait about 10 seconds and the picture would return. Aliens? Government espionage gone awry? Who knows?

As annoying as this was, it helped me realize the importance of the audio component of media. Losing the picture for short periods didn't ruin what I was watching because so much of TV programming is carried by the music and dialogue. On the other hand, if the audio had been dying on me instead of the picture, I would have been disoriented and confused. Prove this to yourself. Put on a movie, a TV program, or a digital story. Kill just the visual. Now kill just the audio. It's amazing. Without the visual, you're annoyed. But without the audio, you're lost.

Well-produced audio is essential to successful digital stories. DST gives students a voice, and the voice needs to be clear.

If your ears are squinting, then you're going bump. The result is that you can't understand, enjoy, or learn from the story as well as if you weren't squinting. The audio needs to be clear and well mixed, and the voicing needs to be well paced. If these basic grammatical rules are observed, the story has a good chance of being successful, even if the visuals aren't great. In this section I consider some specific grammatical issues involved in producing the audio portion of new media narrative.

Clear Audio

Watch Audio, 3:00–5:58

Captain Obvious here, making the point that not being able to hear or understand the audio is like trying to read an essay printed on a printer that has a dying toner cartridge. I wouldn't make this point except that I've heard way too much weak and unclear audio in my day.

As a basic rule: Use an external mike vs. a built-in mike, whether you are recording with your computer or a camera. If students are recording directly into their computers, using a headset is preferable to using the built-in mike because it cuts down on ambient noise and

computer hum. If you are recording a performer or an interviewer and interviewee, then use a lavalier rather than the microphone built into the camera for similar reasons. The video does a good job of demonstrating the difference between the two. Audio using the lavalier is crisp and clear, while audio using the built-in microphone tends to grab a lot of ambient noise, resulting in muddled sound.

By the way, students can avoid poor sound by conducting the all-important sound check before producing final audio. Record a little bit, listen to it, and adjust the audio settings as needed. Resources B and C contain information about mikes and miking techniques that can help students produce better audio.

Bottom line: Does the digital story make your ears squint because the voice is weak or unclear? If so, then the narration needs to be rerecorded or remixed.

Well-Mixed Audio

Poorly mixed audio is a specific kind of unclear audio that warrants its own category because it's such a common grammatical infraction in digital stories. It takes a few forms, typically music drowning out the spoken narrative or music lyrics interfering with the spoken words of the story. The voice narrative is supremely important and should always be clear and accessible. The audio should be mixed so there is no conflict. When in doubt, storytellers should turn everything else off so that the narrative is clear. See Table 14.1 for some specific guidelines.

Table 14.1 Guidelines for Mixing Audio in Digital Stories

Audio Rule No. 1:	Use music without lyrics when narrative is present.
Audio Rule No. 2:	Only one audio source at a time should dominate. During narrative, turn the music off or way down.
Audio Rule No. 3:	Field-test your audio to determine whether the narrative is clear and prominent.

Bottom line: Are your ears squinting because you're trying to hear the narration among the audio clutter? If so, this usually means that better music accompaniment needs to be considered and/or the story needs to be remixed.

Voice Pacing and Inflection

Students have a tendency to hurry through their narrative, whether speaking into a mike or performing, often because they lack

confidence as speakers. The result is that their narration can lack the inflection and nuance that gives a story texture.

Practice helps students gain confidence. As they gain confidence, they tend to slow down and inflect their voices. This is why renarration and retelling are important parts of the story development process. When students are reading their narrative in a voice-over narration, I often recommend that they tackle a paragraph at a time, reading it aloud, hearing where any bumps are, practicing, and then doing a final recording.

Bottom line: If you find yourself wanting to say "Slow down" or are mentally trying to catch your breath as you listen to a digital story, then the narrative is too fast. If you find that you're bumping on the speaker's sense of timing or that you're bored or confused because of a lack or misuse of voice inflection, then the delivery needs work. This can be extended easily to performance by including considerations of body movement and facial expression.

Final Note

Helping students hear themselves. It's hard for any of us to develop an accurate sense of what we sound or look like when we're speaking or performing. Having students listen and/or watch recordings of themselves can help immensely in this regard. Doing so gives them a chance to identify and address their own challenges in the areas of pacing, inflection, and expression. This is the same strategy that dancers, athletes, and speakers use to improve their performances.

The *Jaws* theme can make Bambi appear evil . . . that's the power of music . . . use it wisely.

The Grammar of Using Music in Digital Stories

Narrative is often developed as a result of editing and reflection, resulting in a professional relationship between creator and product. This relationship usually doesn't develop between students and the music they use because they rarely create their own music. Instead, they usually rely on familiar music that has personal emotional appeal.

In the media business, we say that the images convey the information and music tells us how to feel about it. Emotional appeal can be a double-edged sword. In my media literacy classes, we talk about strategies advertisers use "to pierce the neocortex," that is, to grab listeners (or consumers) beneath their judgmental minds where they are often helpless to use critical thinking to evaluate what they're experiencing.

Music is one of the most powerful tools in their toolbox for achieving this. Like it or not, sappy music tends to make us feel sentimental (even if we don't want to), while the *Rocky* theme makes us feel powerful and conquering, even if we aren't. What's more, the effects of music are usually very predictable over a wide range of audience members. That is, play the *Rocky* theme for a diverse crowd, and many people will have similar reactions to it every time. That's power.

Our goal in using music in digital stories is simply this: Music must support the story and not overwhelm the narrative. In the next section we consider assessment traits that can help keep the use of music in perspective.

Appropriate Music Choices

Feel free to ask students, "How does the music relate to the story?" I do. Sometimes what I find out is that the connecting factor is the student, not the story. That is, the music and story are both very important to the storyteller; therefore they go together. I question this approach, because this means that the story has then been created for the storyteller rather than an audience. We're back to crossing the media maturity line, which I addressed earlier. For the most part, I think stories should be created for audiences. This doesn't mean they shouldn't be personally expressive or even challenging to an audience. But in the end, if you lose your audience, then your story fails. The degree to which you want to have students cross the media maturity line is your call.

Bottom line: Does the music fit the story and support the narrative? Does it have a compelling and authentic reason for being included in its current form? If not, then rethink the music or at least remix the audio so the music is less prominent.

Appropriate Role of Music

In Part I, I talked about how the inherent emotional impact of music can overwhelm a story. When I'm conscious of being manipulated by music, especially during a bad movie, I consider it a cheap shot and an indication that the story isn't very good. I've watched digital stories that would seem shallow or disconnected if the music weren't there. If the assignment is a music video, then this might be fine. If not, then perhaps music has been given an inappropriately dominant role.

As I mentioned above, there is also the problem of the music conflicting with the spoken narrative. Again, the rule here is simple: the music should not compete with the narrative. The easiest way to do

this is to use music that does not have singing and is turned down to background levels while the narrator is speaking. Recall my earlier comments about FreePlayMusic.com and GarageBand. Both are great sources of supportive music.

Bottom line: Does the music drive the story, or is it the other way around? An interesting litmus test to consider: If the music were removed, how would the story fare? If not well, then the role of music may be inappropriate. As always, if the music conflicts with the narrative, then remix the audio so that it doesn't.

Final Note

Teaching the power of music. Have your students shoot 30 seconds of video of a simple activity, like walking into class and sitting down or getting out of a car and walking into a building. Then have them use different music behind the video to change the story. You might even tell your students that you want them to create, for example, a romantic comedy, a thriller and an action flick, simply by changing the music. The results are amazing and make the persuasive power of music very apparent. I have an example of this kind of project on my website (www.jasonohler.com/storytelling).

Grammar of Editing, Transitions, and Titling in Digital Stories

A part of every digital story is the use of editing features like transitions, effects, and titling that come standard with iMovie, Movie Maker, PowerPoint, Keynote, and a number of other programs. As explained earlier, transitions help the flow between two images. A common example is fading in and out between scenes. Effects are like transitions but are different in that they happen only to a specific image rather than between images. A wide variety of effects and transitions are available these days, from the subtle (like soft focus) to the purposely obtrusive (pictures flipping end over end). Titles are the words that appear on the screen, usually at the beginning and the end. It's a rather unique trait of digital stories that titles often appear during the story as well.

For many first-time users, transitions and effects are a wonderland of distraction. They can't help themselves as they make pictures and titles spin, ripple, overlap, and do all sorts of things. Personally, these kinds of effects make me dizzy. I quickly lose my focus on—and interest in—the story. That is, they make me go bump in a big way. In a sentence, the goal in using transitions and effects is to make sure

they're supportive and unobtrusive. In this section I address traits that I consider when assessing this aspect of digital stories.

Seamless Transitions, Unobtrusive Effects

Basically, viewers shouldn't notice editing unless there's an overwhelming artistic reason to do so. In professional movies and TV programming, transitions happen seamlessly, the same way flowing from one paragraph to another happens seamlessly in good writing.

When is an unsubtle effect OK? When it supports the story so well that you don't notice it. Here's an example. A workshop participant created a story about a very personal trauma. In his story he displayed a twirling expletive for about 10 seconds at just the right moment. It worked, especially because it was the only time he used such an effect. Even though I noticed it at first, it supported the story so well that the bump quickly disappeared, while the impact remained.

Watching TV to learn from the professionals. When I am working with students who have effectitus (the tendency to use glitzy effects and transitions, or to overuse or misuse effects and transitions of any kind), I give them television-watching assignments. Horrors! A teacher assigning TV watching? The reality is that most of what you see on television, whether movies, programming, documentaries, or whatever, is created by professional mediasts who are highly skilled at what they do. In much the same way that we have students read great writers as models of how to write, we should be asking them to watch great moviemakers and documentarians as models of how to create media. We don't do this very often in K–12 at present. But someday we most certainly will.

Back to the TV-watching assignment. I ask students to sit with pen and paper (or iPad, or whatever they want to use), and make notes about how the professionals transition from one scene to another, as well as how they use effects. Inevitably, they tell me that transitions were subtle, usually unnoticeable. They also tend to comment that effects "made sense." That is, an exploding car effect or a shaking room effect *made sense to the story.* In a phrase, that is all I ask: Whatever you do, make sure that it makes sense to the story. Every now and again you see transitions that pop out at you, like those used in *That '70s Show.* Given the show, they work. It's all part of the shtick. That is, they make sense as part of the narrative. As does that sound that *Law & Order* uses. What is that? I don't know, but it works.

Bottom line: Do you notice the effects in a sustained way? Do they seem unsupportive of the story? If so, then you've bumped on them, and they need to be changed or eliminated.

Clear Titles

I've seen many titles that I couldn't read because they were zooming in from outer space or flipping end over end. Professional video programming rarely does this with titles. Titles need to be clear and stable long enough to read. This doesn't mean you can't take a creative approach to titling. I see it more and more in professional media. But my suggestion is that students start by harnessing basic titling, which often comprises centered, white words on black backgrounds. Then feel free to move out of the box. As I said earlier: Follow the rules, then break the rules, and maybe even make the rules. It's what art is all about.

Bottom line: Do you squint and find yourself running out of time as you try to read the titles? Do you find yourself wishing they would stop moving so you could see what they say? Then the titles need to be modified.

Clear Citations

Every digital story needs a clear citation page that cites the sources for all the images, sounds, music, and other media used in the story that are not original. It's up to each teacher to decide what citation format to use. But to me, new media projects that don't have citations are incomplete.

Bottom line: Is everything that is not original accounted for? Are citations explicit and complete? More about this in the chapter about copyright and fair use.

Final Note

Of all the places I go bump when I watch digital stories, the misuse and overuse of transitions and effects are some of the bumpiest. It's up to us, the executive producers on the project, to ask the media makers to explain their choices and make sure those choices support the narrative. Be prepared for pushback.

The Grammar of Organization in Digital Stories

Most teachers know the joy of receiving student writing that is well organized and flows smoothly from one thought to the next. The joy comes in being able to relax and enjoy the writing, rather than bumping on the interface, in this case the words. There are

similar considerations with digital stories. If a media piece flows unobtrusively and doesn't leave viewers feeling lost or assaulted, then the audience gets to relax and enjoy the story.

I recommend that teachers focus on two basic elements that contribute to this experience: structure and pacing. As we shall see, they are closely related. In a sentence, a digital story that observes sound organizational grammar is well paced, employs effective rhythm, and is unobtrusive in the way it's structured. In this section I discuss traits that should help teachers assess this aspect of digital stories.

Structure

The hallmark of a disorganized digital story is that it causes viewers to ask, "How did I get *here?*" This often happens because of poor editing choices. Nonsupportive image or scene changes, extraneous information and subplots, and poorly edited narrative can also easily destabilize structure.

But the most serious infraction of structure is simply a weak or poorly constructed story. If the story development process I described in Part II is followed in any sense and at least some of the story-planning instruments I described are used (story maps, story tables, scripts, etc.), then students' digital stories can't help but be somewhat structured. While that doesn't ensure that they'll be well structured, it improves their chances in this regard. Briefly, in terms of the story core, all problems and questions should be clearly connected and addressed by the end of the piece, and the role of transformation should be clear and play a significant role in the story. In the absence of a compelling artistic reason to lose viewers—such as inspiring them to discover where they are—the audience shouldn't notice the structure. For the most part, cause and effect should move the story along without forcing it along.

Bottom line: By the end of the story, are you still wondering how you ended up at certain places? Did you feel lost, or bump on the flow of events? If so, then the story needs to be restructured and/or reedited. Students should revisit their story maps or story tables for the project to see if there are ways to strengthen the story structure.

Effective Pacing

Good organization doesn't ensure flow. Instead, flow is primarily dependent on good pacing, which, as Lambert (2003) explains, is often one of the most transparent but most important elements of a successful story. A story's pacing and rhythm often determine the

audience's interest and direct viewers' sense of expectation. When a digital story doesn't flow, it's the new media equivalent of writing in which paragraphs follow logically but awkwardly, causing the viewer to stumble along the way.

Good pacing doesn't mean consistent pacing; after all, changing pace is often an effective way to support the action of the story. Like so many things in media, when it's good, it's unnoticeable, even when it changes, because it supports the narrative so well.

Infractions come in a number of varieties. For example, a digital story can spend too much time on one part of the narrative, leaving little time for other parts. The result is that students hurry to the finish, causing viewers to feel lost as they unconsciously struggle to find the story line. As always, a story can move disconnectedly to achieve effect, and it will be up to you to determine whether obtrusive pacing is an effective execution of poetic license or simply a project that needs more work.

Bottom line: Does the story hurry or linger inappropriately in places? Is there more description than necessary? Do the images change in ways that are at odds with the narrative? Does your mind squint as you try to figure out how you got where you are in the story? Ideally, you should not notice the pacing or rhythm unless there are overwhelming artistic reasons to do so. Instead, you should ride the story's rhythm unconsciously. So, do you bump on the rhythm?

Final Note

Model what you want, be open to what's new. It's important for teachers to keep in mind that they will need to model the media grammar they want students to use. An easy, effective modeling approach is building a short digital story on the spot with students as a group activity, purposely using "bad grammar." This doesn't take a lot of time or technical expertise. And it's fun and enlightening.

Teachers also need to keep in mind that unlike traditional grammar, media grammar is evolving at a perceptible rate. This puts them in the exciting but uncomfortable position of actually being in the midst of a language whose rules are changing. However, one thing doesn't change: The goal is always effective communication. My advice? Stay open to the changes while always valuing clear communication that supports the story. Generally speaking, if you notice a technical event, then you've bumped on the media. If you've bumped, then you've encountered a problem—or a potential growing experience for you.