

Storyboarding

A storyboard is a place to plan out a visual story in two dimensions. The first dimension is time: what happens first, next, and last. The second is interaction: how the audio – the voiceover narrative of your story and the music – interacts with the images or video. In addition, a storyboard is also a notation of where and how visual effects such as transitions, animations, or compositional organization of the screen will be used.

Storyboarding in the film world is a high art, bringing to life a vision of a scene. This composition includes imagining the many choices available to a director regarding camera placement, focal point, shot duration, possible edits, and camera-based effects such as panning and zooming. Storyboard artists combine illustration skills and a sense of stage business (where actors, props, and sets are placed before the window of the camera), with cinematography and cinematic theory to write the roadmap for the director and film crew to organize every part of a film production.

The art of film storyboarding has taught anyone working on a story (from megamovies to digital stories) one important lesson: planning on paper will save the enormous expense of time, energy, and money when it comes time to produce your work. Taking the time to organize your script in the context of a storyboard tells you what visual materials you require. If this exists, from the selection of images you have in your archive, then it just tells you the order of things and makes your edit go quickly. But, much more importantly, especially for novice storytellers, storyboards clarify what you do not need, and saves you from scanning, photographing, shooting, designing, or recording things that don't fit into a particular story.

Recipe for Disaster

Our cautionary tale concerns Rick, just an average guy, getting ready to make his first digital story:

"What a great morning," thought Rick, stepping out his back door and going to the little studio he had cleared out of a corner in his garage. "Today, I become a filmmaker. I am going to make my first digital story this weekend. Today, I'll assemble all the material I need. Tomorrow, I'll edit it all together."

Rick's story was a tribute to his parents. Their fortieth wedding anniversary was in a week, and he had a great idea about a retrospective on their lives. He had taken two large boxes of photos and a few old 8mm films from his parents' home earlier in the week. He was confident that if he could just sort through the stuff, the story would write itself. "I know that's how Ken Burns does it; just gather all the sources and piece it together like a puzzle."

He had his computer fired up. He had a scanner and digital camera handy, and the video camera set up on a tripod next to the old 8mm projector. He was going to project the film against a sheet he had hung on the wall and then record it. "Ingenious," he thought to himself.

The day began smoothly. Rick organized the photos into piles representing five decades of his parents' life together. "These are great," he thought. "I'll scan these eight from the 1950s, and these twelve from the 1960s, but the ones from the 1970s, when I was born, there are at least thirty of these I have got to use." And on it went. The piles grew, but no scanning yet. He broke for lunch.

Then came the film. "Old 8mm film is really beautiful, isn't it?" he thought. "My parents are going to love this part when I had my first little swimming pool. Wow. I'll just transfer it all, and then make my selections tomorrow during the edit." Despite a few glitches in the camera, he eventually got it right, and by 4:00 p.m., the video was recorded. He thought about taking notes about which sections were on his two-hour tape, but since he was having so much fun reminiscing he never got around to it.

"I have to find the right music – old show tunes and stuff. And I need a few archival images, and I bet I can find that stuff on the internet." After dinner he got online, and around 11:00 p.m. his eyes grew tired and his hand had gone numb. But he had everything he needed – just all in one big folder on the computer.

Rick woke up in the middle of the night and opened his eyes. "... The part where they are looking out over the Grand Canyon ... I can cut to a shot of me digging myself into the sandbox when I was three. That will be so cool. I can't wait to start."

The next day, he scanned his images, played with Photoshop, and he captured so much video on his computer that he ran out of hard drive space. He played with his morphing software. He did everything but start on the story. Sunday evening came and it was still a big mess. The workweek was a nightmare, so he only had a few hours to actually edit.

When the event approached on Saturday, the best thing he came up with was an extended music video, fourteen minutes long, with whole sections of images, film, and titles bumping, flipping, and gyrating for reasons unknown. Several of his parents' friends fell asleep during the showing, and at the end there was a spattering of applause. Rick attributed the reaction to the heaviness of the gravy on the chicken stroganoff that was served at the dinner.

His mother, of course, cried through the whole thing.

His father, always supportive, thanked him, and said, "Rick, that was, well, really ... interesting."

Digital stories have an advantage over film production – you are often using available material at the core of your project as opposed to creating all-new footage. As our story shows, the material itself can be profoundly compelling for the storyteller, particularly if it is a first visit in a long time. But without a script, and an idea of how the story is told, composing a digital story can overwhelm the best of us.

Rick's tale is the worst-case scenario for the digital storyteller: so much wonderful content and so many cool tools to play with, but so few ideas for how things will actually come together. We have met many people with symptoms of these obsessions, and in our workshops we try to gently bring them back down to earth. We affirm that the material might seem irresistible, but we encourage students to write a first draft and complete a bit of storyboard work prior to diving into their family's photo archive.

Professional filmmakers use the storyboard as a critical production management tool, saving countless hours of experimentation by avoiding non-essential material. We want to encourage our participants to reach for their highest level of organization to maximize the precious time they have to create their stories. For many of our workshop participants, life may give them only a few such opportunities to really mine the archive for the critical stories of their lives. But we want to honor all different kinds of creative processes. For some, time is not so extravagant a luxury. If you can afford to excavate your archive completely, to fully examine the creative palette of multimedia tools, and to work through a series of drafts of your project to make a highly polished piece, the rewards are worth the effort.

Making a Storyboard

Our reference here is from a tutorial developed by StoryCenter in 1999 called MomnotMom, and is based on a reflection by staff member Thenmozhi Soundararajan.

The specific section that we refer to below consists of a title, six photographs, and a short video clip. The soundtrack is a nice piece of guitar music. We've laid out the storyboard on the next page.

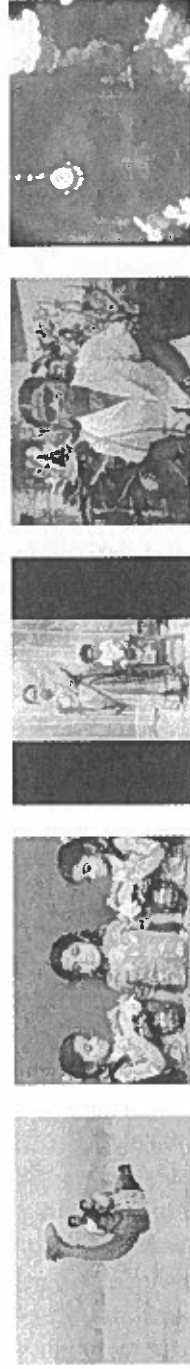
Notice how few words of the voiceover are under each picture. Each line takes about six to ten seconds to speak. In general, three to four seconds is about the ideal length for any still image to appear on the screen. If it's too short, then it's hard for the viewer to recognize what's being shown; too long, and boredom sets in. If you're laying out your storyboard and find lines and lines of text under any one picture, rethink your script or your images.

Can the script be cut down, and can the image be left to fill in for the missing words? If the text remains long, can more than one image illustrate the essential words? You may also want to use some effects to extend the viewer's interest in a single still image. But, for now, try to use the best effect of all: letting images speak for themselves, and using words to say the rest.



Images

Effects	Fade In	Image Pan	Image Pan	Image Pan
Transitions		Cross Dissolve		
Voiceover	There is a picture of my mother that I always keep with me.	It is a curious photo, because in most photos I always imagine that people pose for the future, but in this time, in this moment, this photograph, I feel like she is searching for her past.		
Soundtrack	Fade in guitar chord progression			



Images

Effects	Alpha Channel Motion			
Transitions	Cross Dissolve	Cross Dissolve	Cross Dissolve	
Voiceover	Across oceans and between cultures, a young woman, a doctor, a wife, I think back to who she was as a girl.			
Soundtrack	guitar chord progression			

Some Ways to Make Your Storyboard

- 1 Get a piece of posterboard, preferably large (22" × 17"), and a packet of Post-it notes. Sort out the image material you plan to use and label each of the Post-it notes with the name and, if needed, a phrase describing the image.
- 2 Create five or six horizontal rows across your posterboard, leaving room for writing text below each Post-it. Fill in the text of your script in pencil, and place the appropriate images above the appropriate words. The Post-its will allow you to move things around or take them out as need be, and you can erase the text if you want to move it around.
- 3 Instead of labeling Post-its with the name of each image, you could go to a copy place and photocopy your photos. Tape or glue your copied images to the Post-its, and lay out your storyboard. The advantage here is that, just as on the computer, you can easily move things around.
- 4 If you'd like to work on a smaller page, photocopy the blank storyboard template on the next page or visit www.storycenter.org/storyboard.pdf and download the .pdf file.
- 5 If you can scan images and are familiar with desktop publishing software like Quark XPress or Adobe's InDesign, or if you know how to lay out tables in Microsoft Word, you can make your storyboard right on the computer.
- 6 Any of these methods will work. Do whatever is convenient and easy for you. A storyboard will speed up your work in many ways. It can show you where your voiceover should be cut before you record, and it may help you to determine if you have too many or too few images chosen before you begin scanning. Storyboarding is a valuable tool, and it can also be fun. Get others to join you in your storyboarding process and make it a collaborative project.