

SECOND EDITION

ANIMATED STORYTELLING

SIMPLE STEPS FOR CREATING
ANIMATION & MOTION GRAPHICS



LIZ BLAZER

FREE SAMPLE CHAPTER

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ANIMATION & MOTION GRAPHICS

LIZ BLAZER

Animated Storytelling, Second Edition

Simple Steps for Creating Animation & Motion Graphics

Liz Blazer

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This book is dedicated to:

My son Evan and my husband Jeff Oliver

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INTRODUCTION

We live in a magical era for animated storytelling. Film festivals flourish worldwide to celebrate new animation; animated content is being produced and streamed on new platforms for both kids and adults, and advertisers are hungrily seeking fresh talent to connect with audiences in a meaningful way. Skilled storytellers specializing in animation are in high demand, and the opportunities to thrive in the field are ever-expanding. And yet it has been difficult to find a resource aimed at providing the skills necessary to become a successful animated storyteller.

This book is a step-by-step guide on how to make great stories for both animation and motion graphics. It's based on the idea that whether you are creating a character-based narrative or experimental film for festivals, an advertisement for television or the Web, or a motion graphics title sequence, being intentional about storytelling is the key to success.

In ten simple steps beginning with pre-production and storyboarding through color and sound and finally to animation, this book will provide you with the tools you need to create an effective animated story. You'll find concise explanations, useful examples, and short assignments allowing you to set the theory you've learned into action. You'll also find hints on how to take full advantage of animation's limitless potential.

Big consideration went into the idea of exploring animation alongside motion graphics in the same book. The two forms are often treated as if they come from different worlds. Certainly, they grew up in different neighborhoods. Animation (for the most part) has been lumped into the filmmaking discipline, with its commitment to experimental and character-driven stories destined for television, movie theaters, and video game consoles. The study of motion graphics, meanwhile, has been part of the graphic design discipline, where its focus on branding and content promotion has made it essential to advertisements, broadcast graphics, and film titles, to name a few. Animation and motion graphics have been kept apart, and yet these two forms have much in common and so very much to learn from one another. They are presented together in this book because they exist hand-in-hand and because their lessons are mutually beneficial.

For you animated filmmakers eager to get your experimental short into the Ottawa International Animation Festival, Annecy, or GLAS, you'll find plenty in this book that speaks directly to your goal, but I also urge you to be influenced by the "commercial" culture of motion graphics which stresses discipline and strict deadlines. It will help you get that short completed and sent off in time. And for you motion graphics artists working on a new commercial spot, I address you directly and often, but pay close attention to the lessons of animation's experimentalism and nonlinear story structures. Your motion work will thrive under its influence.

So flip a page and start the fun. Get ready to learn scores of practical skills, but know you're also headed on a personal journey. This is about you gaining the confidence to tell the stories you've always wanted to tell and becoming the storyteller you were always meant to be. With that...*may the animated storytelling begin!*

4

STORYBOARDING

Build your visual script

“At our studio we don’t write our stories, we draw them.”

—Walt Disney

Walt Disney is known for many important innovations in the field of animation and motion graphics. But perhaps his most useful contribution came in the 1930s when he decided to pin up a series of his rough sketches in sequence to help explain a story idea to his team. Like many great innovations, the decision came out of necessity—animation is an expensive and time-consuming process in which a single misstep can be very costly.

Being able to solidify story before animating could potentially save a fledgling animation studio like Disney's more than a few bucks. Plus, the method suited Mr. Disney's natural showmanship. He used the visual aid of his sketches to bring the full scope of his ideas to life, including his thoughts on timing, staging, framing, continuity, and transitions. He would use these sketches to get people excited—from his team of artists to potential investors. The process became essential at Disney, and within ten years live-action studios caught on as well, making storyboarding as ubiquitous as scripts in Hollywood backlots.

Storyboarding is your opportunity to work out the visual elements that best suit your story. It can help you determine most aspects of your animated piece before moving a single pixel. Boarding saves time and money and can help get people excited about your project before it's made. Simply put, the better your storyboard, the more likely you are to achieve success with your project.

PLEASE NOTE

There are just as many approaches to storyboarding as there are for storytelling. Some artists begin with a finished written script and “transcribe” it to pictures. Others start with only a rough outline and do the “writing” in the storyboard process. I encourage you to experiment and find what method works best for you!

I'll cover the basics of storyboarding first and then continue on with some important concepts you'll need to make your storyboard complete and ready for animatics. The entire process is organic; let your storyboarding evolve gradually from simple to more complex.

BUILD THE STORYBOARD

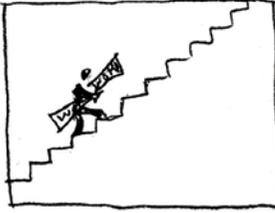
As you begin the process of storyboarding, you're creating individual frames of the action from your story beats. Start out rough and gradually add the needed details. This process ensures the story is first understandable and then allows you to add the nuances that make the story more complex and interesting.

Thumbnailing

Thumbnails are the first rough sketches of your storyboards. They help you work out the sequencing of your “shots” and provide an opportunity to establish important aspects of shot composition, framing, staging, and transitions. Your thumbnail drawings should be rough—stick figures are just fine. Use Post-it Notes as well—they're re-positionable and purposefully limit the amount of detail you can add to your drawing. Approach thumbnailing as the experimentation phase of storyboarding and keep a wastebasket nearby—you're going to be lobbing a lot of hook shots in that general direction.



Thumbnails don't need a lot of detail to be effective. Good thumbnail drawings show only the most essential information.



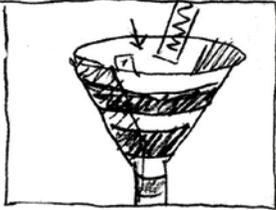
CLIMBING



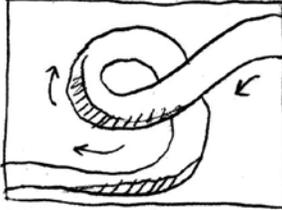
CLIMBING



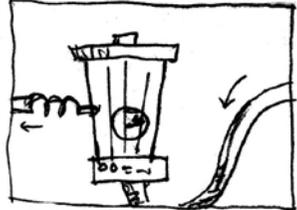
THROWING WORDS INTO FUNNEL



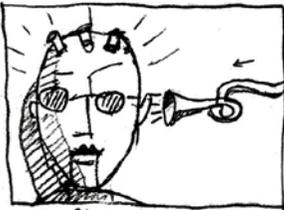
CAMERA FOLLOWS WORDS



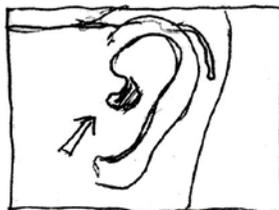
FOLLOW WORDS



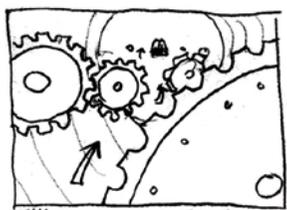
BLENDER RUMBLES



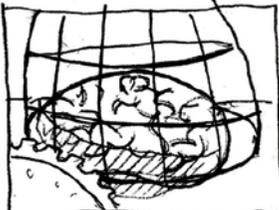
WORDS INTO EAR LIGHTS BEGIN TO GLOW



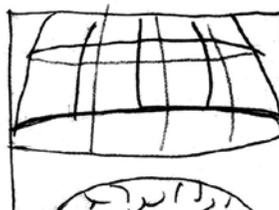
CAMERA FLIES IN EAR



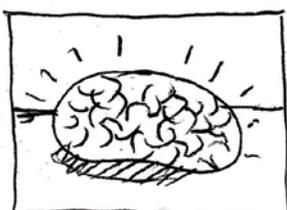
FLY DOWN EAR TUNNEL THROUGH GEARS + WORDS... PAH



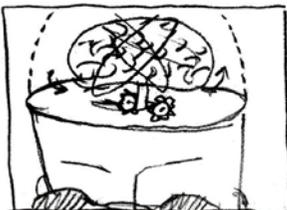
COME TO ROOM WITH BRAIN CAGED IN.



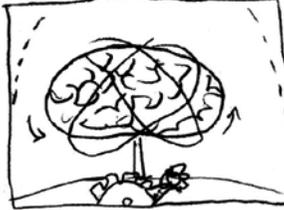
CAGE LIFTS, FREEING BRAIN



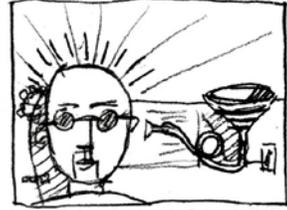
BRAIN COMES ALIVE



WE SEE BRAIN START SPINNING



SPINS INTO BLUR → GLOWING



PULL BACK TO REVEAL AD.

Says professor and story artist Greg Araya, “A storyboard’s first job is to read quickly and clearly, not to be polished art. You’ll discard or rework panels all the time, so don’t invest too much into them. Don’t keep a panel if it isn’t working for your story, even if it’s the best drawing in your board.”

THUMBNAIL REVISIONS

Once you’ve drawn up your thumbnail sketches, slap them up on the wall in sequence and get ready for some brutal revisions. Do the shots make sense? Are there leaps in time or logic? Lags in story? Clunky flow from scene to scene? Pitch your thumbnails to yourself frame-by-frame and voice out any dialogue you’ve written, or even sing the music you intend to play over the finished piece. If something isn’t working, be ruthless. Stick a Post-it Note over problem areas and redraw until it feels right. Any fixes you make here will save you time and heartache down the road.

Storyboarding

Some storyboard artists take the time to create beautifully polished renditions of each frame, but the goal here is not high art, it’s clarity. If you are able to capture the action and emotion of your story with little more than scribbles, then go for it, but just make sure you’re able to capture all the detail.

Reminder: This is now the place where you should be resolving your shot composition, framing, staging, and transitions. It is important to consider where all of your props and visual elements fit into the frame. So don’t come to me crying when you start animating and say, “Wait, I forgot his hat! My chef has no hat, but there’s no room in the frame to add it!”

Once you’ve completed your drawings, use the space beneath each frame to write either dialogue or brief explanatory notes (such as “hears bear” or “comes to life”). Once you’re done, a casual observer should be able to understand what’s going on in each frame and even follow the overall story.

STORYBOARD REVISIONS

Time to test out your storyboards by presenting them to a small audience or, at very least, in front of one person who isn’t afraid to ask you hard questions. Pitching your storyboard to an audience will force you to clarify your beats

and the decisions you've made about staging and flow. Plus, an authentic human reaction offers a great sounding board. Watch your audience's body language as you pitch—it's as important as (and often more honest than) their verbal feedback.

Once you've made changes based on feedback, revise your boards and clean them up for public consumption. Many clients will react better to clean, elegantly rendered storyboards. If a client needs to be sold on an idea from boards alone, they better sparkle! If a crew of animators and designers are using your boards to generate their shot list, then the boards should be detailed enough so that no element is left up to interpretation.

NOTE ON STYLE FRAMES

In Chapter 1, we discussed the importance of creating style frames to communicate the mood, color palette, and texture of your project. As you are working on your storyboards, it may be helpful (and is customary when working with a client) to insert a few style frames into your storyboarding sequence. The style frames act as a reminder of the “look and feel” of your film and will support the clarity of your storyboards.

STORYBOARDING HINTS

Okay, now that you know the steps to set up the basic structure of your storyboards, what are the best methods for creating effective storyboards? Or in other words, what do you need to consider throughout the storyboard process to help bring the full scope of *your* story to life visually? It has a lot to do with putting on your director's hat. You have to compose your “shots” as in a movie, not only for clarity (which is the most important thing) but also for



Job, Joris & Marieke, A Single Life storyboards

maximum emotional impact. That means learning a thing or two about shot composition, framing, staging, and transitions. These are the details that you add frame by frame making each a perfect unit as they allow the complete story to unfold.

Shot Composition

Want to give your audience the feel of a majestic location—say, a mountain peak at sunset? A slow, *panning extreme wide shot* will evoke the mountain's beauty and sheer size. What about the lone climber who finally reaches the summit of that mountain? How best to capture their joy? A *close-up* will best reveal the expression on their face (and tears in their eyes) with maximum intimacy. Your audience is hungry for information, and *shot composition* is all about revealing information to your audience. You can get as close to, or as far away from, a subject as you want (as director you have the power of X-ray vision, flight, and invisibility all at once), so take the initiative to bring your audience right up to the action.

But composing different sized shots isn't only about providing information for your audience. It can also be used to *withhold information* for maximum effect. Take our mountain climber who has reached the peak. Let's say we choose a *medium close-up* to give the impression that she has finally reached the peak. We show our climber weeping in triumph, jumping up and down in victory—she has defeated the great mountain. But then we pull back to a *wide shot* to reveal that in fact our climber has only hiked a tiny foothill at the base of the great mountain and is nowhere near the summit! With one quick change in shot size, our climber went from skilled and heroic climbing veteran to hopeless amateur. One size change to comedy gold.

Shot composition grants you the power to reveal information how you wish to your audience, so use your power with great care.

Framing

If sizing your shots is all about giving your audience the pertinent visual information they need, then *framing* is all about keeping that eye interested. Framing is the artistry of your shots, the “cinematography,” and, in a way, the poetry. Sure, you could just plop your subject in the middle of each frame, hell, you could plop a tornado in the middle of your storyboard frame and, yes, it will still be a tornado. But you want people to feel the wind, the chaos, and the movement of the tornado. Dynamic framing is one of the keys to enhancing the visual drama in your story.

The famed “rule of thirds” provides an easy-to-follow tool for keeping your framing dynamic. Simply break down your single frame into nine equally sized quadrants by dividing it both horizontally and vertically into thirds.

RULE OF THIRDS



TOO CENTERED



✓ MORE INTERESTING



TOO CENTERED



✓ MORE INTERESTING

Now, instead of placing your subject squat in the middle (which is considered a “static” location), place it in another box—the top, bottom, left, or right third of the frame. Try laying the focal point of your subject on one of the four “intersection points” where your quadrant lines meet.

Why do this, right? Seems random? Well, think of it as entertaining a child on Easter Sunday. If you want them to find an Easter egg, you wouldn’t just put it on the table in front of them. Since the child will naturally roam around for the Easter egg, they will likely be more excited by the egg once they find it under the park bench. It’s interactive. Same with the subject in your shot. The eye wants to roam and will feel more gratified if it goes searching to find your subject. Place your subject in the middle and there’s nowhere to go—it’s a boring game. Put your subject closer to the edges and there’s room to roam. Play the game by the rules (of thirds) and your shots will feel more pleasurable for the eye and will give your story a sense of excitement and suspense.

Staging

While thoughtful framing helps you compose shots around a subject in a way that keeps the viewer’s eye interested, *staging* is all about where you put that subject in space (and the other objects in the shot) in the scene in relation to the camera. Staging should create a visual and conceptual hierarchy for the objects and characters in your frame, placing them in a way that reinforces your overall story.

First thing to consider (as always) is clarity. You want your audience’s eye to clearly see what’s going on with your subject. So that means avoid crowding it with unnecessary visual information. Let’s say your project is about an animator who’s been up all night working on storyboards. Though their studio may have a big bookshelf or a stereo or heavily framed photos that are organic to the location, adding them to your shot means that your audience’s eye will roam to story *dead zones*—where visual information does not enhance your story. You want to stage only the visual elements that will enhance your story. In the case of our animator pulling an all-nighter, you may want to stage a waste bin filled to the brim with crumpled pages next to her desk, some empty cans, and/or an alarm clock that says 6:00 a.m. in big red letters

SHOT INTENTION: ALL NIGHTER/ON A DEADLINE



TOO MUCH INFO
AMBIGIOUS FOCAL POINT



✓ BETTER

SHOT INTENTION: HAND-OFF KEYS TO CAR



TOO MUCH INFO
AMBIGIOUS FOCAL POINT



✓ BETTER

to the side. Staging items around your subject should help to emphasize the idea that you're trying to convey, while not detracting from the importance of your primary subject.

But staging has advantages beyond enhancing your subject. It can also provide *depth* to your shots. In the tangible sense, staging your subject gives a sense of physical depth to the environment. Let's look at another example for this one. One character is handing car keys to another character. Placing the characters' hands and keys large in the foreground and the car small in the background will immediately create depth and interest. This staging allows the audience's eye to roam from the larger main subject to the background

where it can discover the car. As mentioned earlier with the rule of thirds, discovery is a lot more pleasurable for the eye than instant gratification. Giving the eye some physical depth to explore for new information makes for a more interesting visual composition.

But there is another way that staging adds depth to your shots: in the story sense. By staging your subject along with important visual information, you offer your audience a deeper read of what's happening in your story. In the case of the animator, the crumpled papers in the waste bin, of course, represent the animator's trial and error, but a deeper analysis could interpret that the overflowed waste bin represents her indomitable spirit. You must earn this leap through consistent storytelling, but once your audience gets to interpreting visual information, you may be surprised at some of the connections they make. This is generally why people call a good story "deep."

TRANSITIONS AND CONTINUITY

Bold statement alert: Animation's most powerful advantage over other forms of filmmaking is the animated transition. There, I said it, caution to the wind! Anything can happen in between two frames of animation. You can transform the black pupil of an eye into the black text on a girl's report card, a fire-breathing dragon into a baby's bath toy, or the door to your boss's office into the gates of hell. As with animation as a whole, the possibilities for animated transitions are endless, which is exactly why you must practice great discipline and make those transitions work with your story. The most dependable way to ace your transitions is to pay close attention to continuity.

Continuity is the natural flow of visual information from one shot to another employed to support your story. At its most basic you must ensure that the story is flowing from shot to shot. If a character is blasted with wind in one shot, make sure that their hair is messy in the next shot and that it stays messy until they comb it. If a character is on the second floor of a building, they can't run out of the front door and into the street without walking down

some stairs. You'd be surprised how many films let this stuff slip through the cracks. The simplest way to guard against continuity errors is to always follow the logic of the world you've created (spatial continuity), the story you're telling (temporal continuity), and the physical direction it's headed in (directional continuity).

Observe Spatial Continuity

Making sure that the rules you've established in your world are consistent from shot to shot is called *spatial continuity*. If you establish early on in your story that there is forest behind a boy's house, when he runs out of his house and into the backyard, you know where he's headed—into the woods. If you have established the size of his bedroom, when he lies on his bed throwing a ball against the wall, even if it's "off-screen," the audience should know roughly how far that ball should travel before it bounces back. Or not! Because using the wonders of animation, let's say you want to transport the boy from his bedroom directly into outer space. A great way to achieve that: A boy throws the ball against the wall and it never returns. Thanks to laws of spatial continuity, the audience will know that the ball should return within a second or so—when it doesn't, they can guess that either something intercepted it or (suddenly) the wall is gone! When you cut to the boy's bed surrounded by outer space, it will actually make sense as a transition since it follows the law of spatial continuity. You'd be surprised how many professional films mess this up as well, so take the time to do a dummy check to ensure that all of your shots follow the physical world that you've created.

Observe Temporal Continuity

The consistency of logic in your story is known as *temporal continuity*. Animation audiences will go along with dramatic visual change from shot to shot so long as it's loyal to the story they're being told. Temporal continuity can occur chronologically, or even with flashbacks or flashforwards, but it must make sense and be earned based on the work you've done to set up a solid story. If you've established a love-struck teenager searching at a party for the object of their affections, when they finally find the person, temporal

continuity will allow a variety of plausible options. You may see the teen's eyeballs transform into hearts; you may see a flashback as the teen's entire life flashes before their eyes; a flashforward fantasy may occur that takes you years into the future as the teen stands blushing at the alter finally marrying his crush. Transitions can take wild leaps and will be easy for your audience to stomach so long as they're consistent with the story you've been telling. If your transition doesn't make sense to the audience, then you haven't earned that leap—so head back to the storyboard.

Observe Directional Continuity

This final rule is pretty simple with *directional continuity*: Maintain the direction of any action for an object or character in a sequence from shot to shot. If a car is driving from the left side of a panel to the right, you must continue that same movement into your next shot. Switching directions of vehicles, characters, or any object that is headed in a particular direction is disorienting to the viewer and a big no-no in storyboarding. Do a second dummy check here, because directional continuity errors happen all of the time.

IS IT REALLY WORKING? TIMING AND ANIMATICS

The notion of *timing* may seem a bit abstract at this point. I mean, how can you nail timing on a bunch of static cards? Allow me to explain and emphasize that timing is one of the most important details you'll need to solidify in your storyboarding process. Imagine the horror of the following situation: You are pitching a final board to a client of a 30-second motion graphics advertisement to discover when you test out the dialogue it is timing out to two minutes long! There is no amount of charm that can ease you out of that pickle. To avoid such a conundrum, you must work to establish the timing of your project during your storyboarding process.

First step in doing this is to determine how long your whole piece must run, or the Total Running Time (TRT). Now, break your story into three to five

TIME



SOUND

chunks and establish how many seconds each one must be. Finally, time each scene using the dialogue and/or stage direction as a realistic guide. You may find that you have some trimming to do. You might even have to cut some beats that you love very much. Time to get brutal because you *must* hit those marks! Once you feel that the timing is worked out, pitch your storyboards again to an audience, this time with a stopwatch in hand.

The Magic Ingredients: Time and Sound

Still don't trust your timing? Then take a step into the realm of computer animation by creating an animatic. An *animatic* is a video version of your storyboards laid out in sequence on an animation timeline with a soundtrack aligned. It allows you to see your storyboards (these static shots) come to life and get a true sense of how your story will time out.

To create an animatic, you'll need to use a video-editing program. Many are affordable, some even free if you look around: iMovie, Adobe Premiere, Adobe After Effects, Final Cut Pro X, and Toon Boom all work well for creating an animatic. Plus, there's a wealth of YouTube videos that can teach you how to make animatics with any of these programs.

Once you've downloaded one of these programs, scan and import your storyboards into it and lay them out on a timeline. If you have recorded dialogue, music, voiceover, or sound effects, import those as well and add them to your sequence. It's going to take some tinkering to get this right, and it will always feel a bit awkward (after all, remember you are "animating" static shots), but do your best to create an honest timeline of your entire story.

Warning: You may be tempted to add new panels to your animatic, to give it more of an "animated feeling." But if you are posing out walks, blinks, or camera fly-throughs, you've drifted into animating. We're not ready for that yet, so pull back!

You'll need (again) to bring out your most brutal internal editor. If a beat is too long, shorten it. If a beat seems expendable and you need the time, get rid of it. You might even find that you have too much time and be forced to create a new visual beat. Get to work on that immediately and realign your animatic with the new beat. Timing is the truth, and the truth will become crystal clear when you sequence it out on your animatic. This is where surprises and excuses vanish, because the animatic is your last and final chance to get your story right before taking the big leap into animation.

If you feel ready—I mean really ready—then let's go forth!



Sterling Sheehy, *Wakefield* storyboards

STORYBOARDING RECAP

- 1. Vary Your Shots Responsibly:** Utilize different-sized shots to enhance narrative logic and drama.
- 2. Framing & The Rule of Thirds:** Keep shots interesting by placing subject off-center.
- 3. Staging:** Block elements to create visual and conceptual hierarchy.
- 4. Spatial Continuity:** Make sure frames are consistent with the physical world you've created.
- 5. Temporal Continuity:** Make sure frames are consistent with the story you've been telling.
- 6. Directional Continuity:** Make sure things are moving in a consistent direction from frame to frame.
- 7. Timing:** Break out a stopwatch and make sure that your story works in the time you've been allotted.
- 8. Animatics:** Develop the rhythm and flow of your shot sequences by laying out your storyboard panels on a timeline, along with temp dialogue and other sound.

ASSIGNMENT

Storyboard a simple premise

Using the method outlined above, create thumbnails, thumbnail revisions, storyboards, and storyboard revisions for the following simple premise: A character in a bind discovers a magic carpet. Where do they find it? Where do they go? That's all I'm telling you, except that it must be 30 seconds long, exactly. Once you've completed your storyboard, pitch it to a group or a person. Time it out as best you can, and if you can access an editing program, go ahead and lay it into an animatic for final timing.





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