

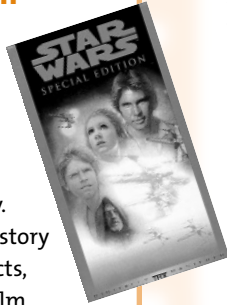
STORYTELLING

Making movies is about telling a story...visually

A Movie to Watch

Star Wars: A New Hope,
directed by
George Lucas.

This, the first of the
Star Wars movies, really
follows a hero's journey.
By combining a simple story
with special visual effects,
Lucas created an epic film.
Watch it to see how well it follows
the story formula.



Almost every movie tells a story and the better you are at storytelling, the better you will be at moviemaking.

One of the classic ways to tell a story is to follow this simple story formula:

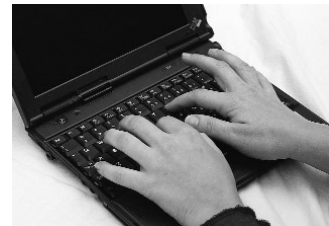
- There is a hero.
- Hero faces a scary or difficult adventure or problem. He/she is trying to accomplish something.
- Hero eventually overcomes his/her fear and goes on the adventure.
- Hero faces serious obstacles.
- Hero solves his/her problems, and overcomes the obstacles.
- Hero reaches his/her goal and learns a lot along the way.

This formula may sound basic, but huge numbers of excellent movies have used it. The power of a film comes more from how the story is told.

You can read more about this formula in *The Writer's Journey* by Christopher Vogler.

Telling a story *in a movie* differs from using words to *write* a story. This chapter will tell you about those differences and give you exercises to help you become a better storyteller... and moviemaker.

1



WORDS OR NO WORDS

Sometimes, movies don't use words to tell the story.

Watching a movie is a visual experience. Much of the story is shown to the viewer without using any words. Think about a movie that opens with a car chase, or a dog's view of the sidewalk as it is being walked. No words are used (in movies, the words are called **dialogue**), only visual images and sounds: cars crashing, the jingle of a dog leash, or sometimes, just music.

Imagine a scene in a horror film where a monster sneaks up on his victim, ready to pounce, and, at the last minute, the victim turns around and screams. Again, there is no dialogue; the director wants the audience to *see* the action, to feel more captivated and scared.

Now, imagine the opposite:

Monster "I am now approaching my victim, ready to pounce."

Victim "And here I am, completely unaware of what's about to happen."

Monster "Here I go, about to jump!"

Victim "I think I sense something coming towards me...uh-oh!"

This dialogue would be silly, and funny instead of scary.

In filmmaking, the storytellers decide if the *feeling* expressed to the audience would be communicated better *without* using words. In our daily lives, we experience non-verbal (no words) communication all the time. Think about when your mother, or father, or best friend gets mad at you. Sometimes the way they look at you, or the things they do like ignoring you or turning their back on you can be more hurtful than anything they might say.

How can you tell people how you are feeling without using words?

List three ways you can communicate your feelings non-verbally:

1

2

3

Have you ever been around someone who is speaking a foreign language? Could you tell something about what they were saying just from their tone of voice, gestures, and emotions? People can communicate without saying, or understanding words. Many times, you see the true character "underneath" the words. Actors work hard to show the audience the true nature of their characters, using more than just words.

Can you tell by someone's body language if they are surprised? How can you tell? Describe what someone might do with their face, or other body parts, to convince an audience they are really:
grossed out by a cockroach.

disappointed by a bad grade on a test.

shocked to hear an old lady swear.



EXPLORE: acting without words

You need at least one other person for this exploration. It's a little like charades. Write down as many emotions as you can think of, like sadness, pleasure, anger, fear, surprise, embarrassment, and shyness on individual slips of paper. Fold up the pieces of paper and put them in a hat or a bowl. One person picks a piece of paper and acts out the emotion without saying a word. The other person(s) guesses the emotion. However, some emotions are pretty hard to act out.

After you do this exercise, record some of your thoughts:

It was easy to act

because

It was hard to guess that my friend was trying to act

because

I had an easy time guessing that my friend had picked

because



EXPLORE:

How do directors convey the feelings of the characters without using dialogue?

Compare two movies. Look for techniques like the angle and distance of the camera, the actor's body language, the sound effects, and lighting techniques.

Pick one movie where the emotion of a character was communicated *very effectively* without dialogue:

Movie:

Name of character:

Give an example of how the director and actor revealed the character's emotion in a particularly powerful scene:

How did the music or other sound communicate the way the character was feeling?

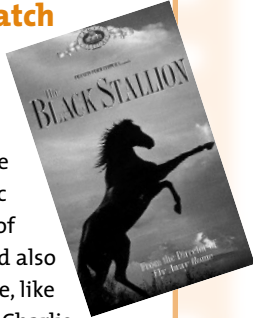
Did you think about whether the director decided to use a particular angle of the camera, or if the lighting helped communicate emotions?

Ideas:

A Movie to Watch

Black Stallion,
directed by
Carroll Ballard.

This is a great movie that tells a dramatic story without a lot of dialogue. You should also watch a silent movie, like *The Kid*, directed by Charlie Chaplin. Made in 1921, it is a wonderful example of how moviemakers were able to tell stories even before they knew how to make sound in movies.



Now choose the opposite — a scene in a movie that did a poor job of expressing feeling.

Movie:

Name of character:

How was this character's emotion shown?

Obviously, it often makes sense for characters to talk. But it is important to realize that in film, dialogue is just one technique used to convey the movie's story. Filmmakers-in-training should experiment with all the techniques introduced in this guide.

WORDS, WORDS, WORDS

Movies usually include dialogue to help tell the story.

In order to make a movie, you will probably tell your story using action without dialogue, as well as with dialogue. It is important to understand how to express parts of the story using only action and images, and to practice

writing dialogue. There are no rules, but the films that many people respond to use dialogue that seems real — how a real person would talk.



EXPLORE: how real people talk

How do people talk to each other?

How do people look as they are listening to someone?

How do people combine words, expressions, and other types of body language during conversation?



Take a field trip for this exploration.

Go to a public place, like a restaurant or a mall, and observe the different ways people communicate. Pay attention to the conversations around you. Notice the types of words, accents, phrases, and topics discussed, and how the people interact when communicating back and forth. Do they pause a lot? Do they talk really fast? Does the person they are talking to seem to understand them better than you?

Public place:

“Characters”:

Amusing phrases or words:

Strange phrases or words:

Other observations:

You may want to keep notes about other interesting people you observe, to give you ideas later for developing the characters in your film.



EXPLORE:

Write a conversation

The characters are Demaune and Christina, and they are your age. Here is the scene: Demaune and Christina barely made it on the school bus, and had to sit together. Both are embarrassed. They like each other, but neither one wants the other to know. Christina is wondering if Demaune knows about Renee’s party this weekend, but she does not know how to ask him. In the first line, Demaune says: “Good thing we caught the bus.”

DEMAUNE: Good thing we caught the bus.

CHRISTINA:



Tips from the Experts

- When writing dialogue, think about how people really speak.
- You do not want the characters to sound like they are giving a speech.
- Have them talk the way you know people talk. If they speak in slang, use it.
- Be sure to read the dialogue out loud.
- Listen to how it sounds. If it sounds natural, keep it.
- If it sounds strange, or forced, rewrite it.

MAKING IT BETTER: WITH PROBLEMS

Some stories are great. As you are reading or watching them, you cannot wait to find out what happens next. Other stories are boring, and put you to sleep. How do you tell a story to make it exciting?

Storytellers often make their stories more interesting by adding *conflict*. The conflict can be a battle or a contest of some kind.

Sometimes, conflict is created when one person wants to do something, and someone else is trying to stop him or her from doing it. Conflict can also come from within the character. For example, a woman wants a raise in salary. She totally deserves the raise, but she is insecure and afraid to ask her boss. The conflict here comes from within the woman — from her own fear.

Question: How can you make a story more interesting, more dramatic?

Answer: Create an obstacle — create conflict, create a problem.

Obstacles are more dramatic if they are alive. Climbing a mountain can be an obstacle, but it might be more dramatic if someone tries to prevent you from climbing to the top.



EXPLORE: the use of obstacles

Do obstacles really make stories more exciting? Think about and answer these questions:

What is one of your favorite movies?

Who was the hero of that movie?

Did the hero face an obstacle? What was it?

How did the hero overcome the obstacle?



EXPLORE: creating obstacles

Below are four characters. You create the obstacles/conflict for each one. Try to give them human obstacles... someone who wants the opposite of what Barry, Shartelle, Quintin, and Juan want.

A Movie to Watch

Titanic, directed by James Cameron.

The main character, Rose, has several conflicts — her relationship with her ill-suited fiancée, the expectations of her mother and wealthy social group, not to mention, trying to survive the sinking of the *Titanic*. This movie is an excellent example of how conflicts and obstacles can intertwine.



Character **Barry, age 15**, has decided he has to quit hanging out with his friends, because they have started committing hate crimes against gays, African Americans, and Asians.

Obstacles:

Character **Shartelle, age 24**, wants to move from New York City to her aunt's farm in Northern Michigan. She is trying to break away from a life of using drugs and get her life back together.

Obstacles:

Character **Quintin, age 19**, wants to follow his passion to become a biologist and help save endangered species. But his mother, a single parent, thinks making money is the most important priority, and will not pay for his college unless he goes to Business School.

Obstacles:

Character **Juan, age 13**, has grown up in Kansas and he's never left the state. He wants more than anything to go mountain climbing. By helping his dad with his business, collecting old tires to be recycled, he has saved enough money for a plane ticket.

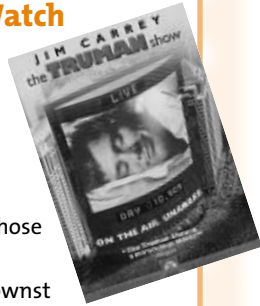
Obstacles:

A Movie to Watch

The Truman Show,
directed by
Peter Weir.

This is an *original* story of Truman Burbank, a man whose life is nationally televised, unbeknownst to him. Truman slowly uncovers that all the people in his life are “actors,” and his reality, as he knows it, doesn’t actually exist. It’s a wonderful film with heartwarming scenes, clever dialogue, and a fresh and innovative plot.

A must see!



Tips from the Experts

- Stories are most interesting when the characters have big decisions to make, and when the audience knows that making the wrong decision would be a real disaster.
- Stories are most dramatic when the conflicts are intense and require the hero to make hard decisions.
- The audience should understand the goals of both the hero and the person (or monster or animal) trying to block the hero. The audience might even like both of them.
- Stories can be exciting when both sides have a good argument and it is hard for the audience to decide who is right.
- There should be plenty of surprises.

Notes:
