

Getting the Picture: Directing

A Movie to Watch

Jaws, directed by Steven Spielberg.

After you watch this movie, how do you think the director builds suspense and keeps the viewer feeling scared?



How do you take a story that only exists on paper, and turn it into an interesting and powerful movie? A good screenplay is a good foundation but even the best ones need to have a director that can translate it well to the movie screen.

This chapter is mainly about directing, however, much of it applies to other movie-making roles as well.

A good director understands the work of all the crew members. For example, to be a good director, you need to have a vision of how a scene should be shot. Can a director be effective if he or she does not know how things actually look on *camera*? Directors need to understand the importance of set design, and the difference lighting makes in setting a mood.

What is directing?

The director, in a sense, is like a teacher. He/she instructs the **cast** and **crew**. The **cast** are people *in* the movie, the actors. The crew helps make the movie and are involved in the *production* — all the activity associated with preparing and shooting the movie. Just like a

teacher helps students learn about physics, or algebra, the director helps the cast and crew learn about the story that will be told on film.

To be effective, the director takes the time, using his or her imagination, to think about the story:

- How should the story be told?
- How should the film look?

The director sees the film in that **imagination exercise**. That “**mental movie**” is called the director’s vision.

Students are not the only ones who have to do homework. The director of a movie has a lot of homework, too. To direct a film, part of your homework will be to create that “mental movie,” and run it through your imagination.

If you are a director who can explain your vision, the actors will understand how you want the story to be told. They will also respect your decisions as the director. You have probably had a few really talented teachers that you respected because they knew more than just science or math — they knew how to help you learn.

3

“ I spoke to a friend of mine recently who was about to make his debut as a film director. He was in a state of abject terror about the task ahead. His mind was reeling with information about lenses, and stock ratios, and CGI shots, and how to talk to the crew and the actors — you name it, he was panicking about it.

So I asked him why he wanted to make this particular story. He thought for a moment about it and then he launched into an impassioned speech about the characters and the themes, and vivid descriptions of the atmosphere.

In short, he had a vision for the film. When he'd finished I told him what I believed. Which is that his inspiring personal vision was the greatest possible tool he could have for dealing with all the other challenges. The entire crew will want to share that vision. To help execute it. To challenge it so that you can helpfully refine what you need to say. To answer all those questions. To collaborate. So for what it's worth, hold onto that vision. At all costs. The rest will to a large extent, take care of itself.”

*—Kenneth Branagh
Actor and Director, Hamlet*

What makes a good director?

Here are a few ideas:

- Having a clear, creative idea of how the movie should look
- Knowing how to tell a story visually
- Explaining this vision to your crew members
- Working well with people and getting the most out of their talents
- Being organized and prepared for everything that might go wrong on a shoot
- Making good, quick decisions
- Sticking to the schedule
- Inspiring the crew with positive phrases: “Great job!” “Well done!” “Beautiful work!”

These are some of the important traits of a good director. Be patient. Most of them come with practice, effort, and experience

What does a director actually do?

In Hollywood, the director is in charge of most of the moviemaking process. Everyone has a vital role, but the director has to oversee everything and everyone. The director usually has a boss or two, such as the executive producer, and/or the studio.

It is the director who:

- helps shape the script (often with the producer and writer)
- lays out the entire movie in a storyboard
- picks the rest of the crew (sometimes with the producer)
- chooses and works with the actors
- decides the shots for every scene and tries to stick to the schedule
- selects the locations and music
- oversees the editing
- basically, oversees *everything*.

The director's job Understand and work with the script

The director is responsible for how the story looks on film. The director first reads and analyzes the script if he/she has not already been involved in the creation of the script. Next, using his/her vision as a guide, the director creates storyboards, to show how the story should be told visually. These storyboards look something like a comic book, but without words. Sometimes they are really basic sketches, but they show the sequence of the shots, and the basic distance and angle of the camera. Using the storyboards as a guide, the director will work with the writer to make the script ready to shoot on film.

The director does this by getting as familiar as possible with the story, asking:

- What is the story really about?
- What is its theme?
- What mood will help tell the story?
- Who is the target audience?
- What are some interesting things you can do to tell this story *visually*?
- What changes need to be made to the script in order to make it better?

Stick to the schedule

Directors set the schedule and need to stick to it!

If you have a nine-page screenplay to shoot and only three days to shoot it, then you will probably need to shoot three pages a day to get it all done. If, on day two, you are still shooting the opening scene, then you are in trouble. Can you get an extra day of shooting? Can you change the script so that you do not need the last few scenes?

It sounds obvious, but a *lot* of Hollywood movies go over budget. Usually, it is because they did not stick to the schedule. Manage your time wisely. Think and plan ahead.

Head cheerleader

The director sets the mood for the entire production. If everyone has fun and feels good

about their contribution, you end up with a much better movie. So, remember to keep people feeling that they are important. Make sure your criticism is the helpful kind.

Above all, listen.

Check the day's shooting

At the end of a day of shooting, the director looks at the day's work to review what ended up on film. These shots are called the "dailies" or "rushes."

The director should ask:

- Am I happy with the work that was done today?
- Does other shooting need to be done?
- Do we have enough time to re-shoot a scene that just doesn't look right?
- Is there a way to learn from today, to help the shoot tomorrow?

Keep in mind that movies are not always shot in *sequence* (in first, middle, last order). The director has storyboards in sequence, but you can shoot each scene in any order. You will change around the order during *post production* (after the film is shot), during the editing phase. You do not have to begin shooting the opening scenes, and end with the last scene. You can mix it up. As the director,

you have to continually communicate with your cast and crew and use your storyboards to give them a sense of where the story is going.

Work with the editor

When the film *shooting* part ends, film *editing* begins. This is the process when the director and editor take all the shots, and put them in the order that the director thinks will tell the best story. It is time consuming, technical, and can really impact and shape the director's vision of the film.



Talented directors have a vision of how to tell the story, and communicate this vision so that the cast and crew can help capture the vision on film.

Communicating a vision involves making a lot of decisions.

The director is constantly making major decisions, like:

- Who should play each character?
- What kind of setting would be best for the fight?
- What kind of costumes should the actors wear?
- What kind of music should be playing?
- Where should the camera point?

The director has to know what he/she wants the actors to do before the shooting begins in order to get the best performance.

CREATING A STORYBOARD

Imagine and sketch the images

A director takes the screenplay, visually maps it out in his or her mind, and then, on *paper*, in the form of a **storyboard**.

What is a storyboard?

It is a shot-by-shot layout, drawn on paper or on a computer, showing what the film will look like before you bring an actual camera into the production.

Some directors plan every single shot with a storyboard. They really picture *exactly* how they want each shot to look and to flow together. (Some storyboards are so extensive they could fill every wall in a room.) Then the actual shooting of the film becomes as simple (or as difficult) as following these examples: many of the artistic decisions have been made already — the movie just has to be shot and edited together.

THE STORYBOARD: two examples

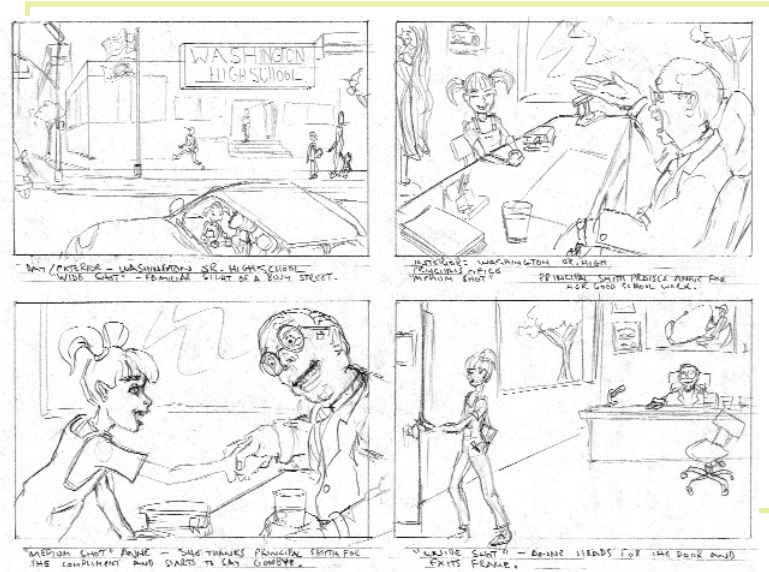
On the next two pages you will see two storyboards. Each storyboard tells this story:

A student, Anne, has a meeting with her principal at school. Anne does not want to tell her parents about the meeting. She goes home and, eventually, goes to sleep.

Nothing much happens here but still there are many, many different ways to get from point A (Anne at school) to point B (Anne asleep). These two storyboards give you two different choices. In the first storyboard, the story is told in a series of 15 short scenes. In the second storyboard, only 5 short scenes are used. Notice the different choices that are made.

Long Storyboard

Scenes 1-4

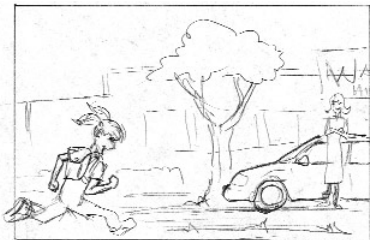


Long Storyboard

Scenes 5-8



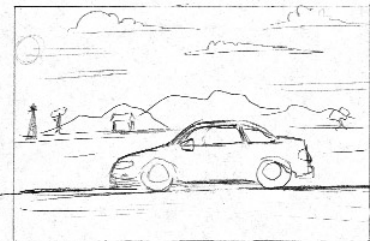
DAY/INT - OFFICE OF PRINCIPALS OFFICE LOW ANGLE WIDE SHOT - ANNE ENTERS FRAME AND WALKS TOWARD CAMERA.



DAY/EXTERIOR WASHINGTON ST HIGH WIDE SHOT - ANNE RUNS TO MEET HER. MYRA.



MEDIUM/TWO SHOT ACROSS BRIDGE MOM ANNE HELPS INTO CAR.



DAY/EXTERIOR SUBURBAN RD. WIDE SHOT - ANNE AND BOB MORE DRIVE ALONG ON THEIR WAY HOME.

Long Storyboard

Scenes 9-12



DAY/EXTERIOR - ANNE'S KITCHEN MEDIUM WIDE SHOT - ANNE RUNS AWAY WHILE ANNE RECAPS FOR COOKING.



DAY/INT - KITCHEN ANNE AS SHE STRETCHES FOR COOKING.



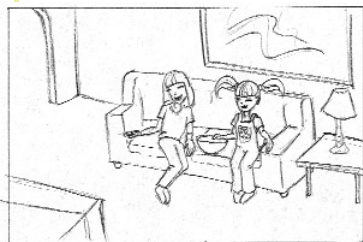
MEDIUM SHOT ANNE EATS HER SNACK AT THE TABLE WHILE BOB MORE WASHES THE VEGETABLES.



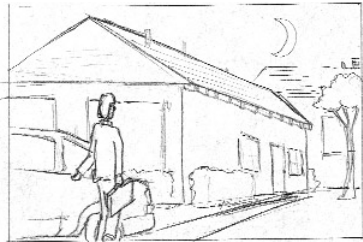
DAY/EXTERIOR ANNE'S HOUSE (WIDE SHOT) - ANNE GETS SOME EXERCISE BY PLAYING WITH HER DOG.

Long Storyboard

Scenes 13-15



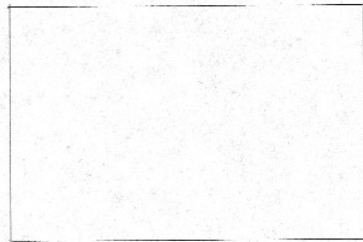
NIGHT / INTERIOR. ANNE'S BEDROOM
 ANNE'S BROTHER AND
 ANNE'S BROTHER IS WITH HER FAVORITE RECORD.



NIGHT / EXTERIOR. ANNE'S BEDROOM
 ANNE'S BROTHER IS WITH HER FAVORITE RECORD.



NIGHT / INTERIOR. ANNE'S BEDROOM
 ANNE'S BROTHER IS WITH HER FAVORITE RECORD.



NIGHT / INTERIOR. ANNE'S BEDROOM
 ANNE'S BROTHER IS WITH HER FAVORITE RECORD.



MEDIUM / FULL SHOT ACROSS BRIDGE FROM
 ANNE'S HOUSE INTO CAR



MEDIUM SHOT
 ANNE'S BROTHER IS WITH HER FAVORITE RECORD.



DAY / EXTERIOR
 ANNE'S BROTHER IS WITH HER FAVORITE RECORD.

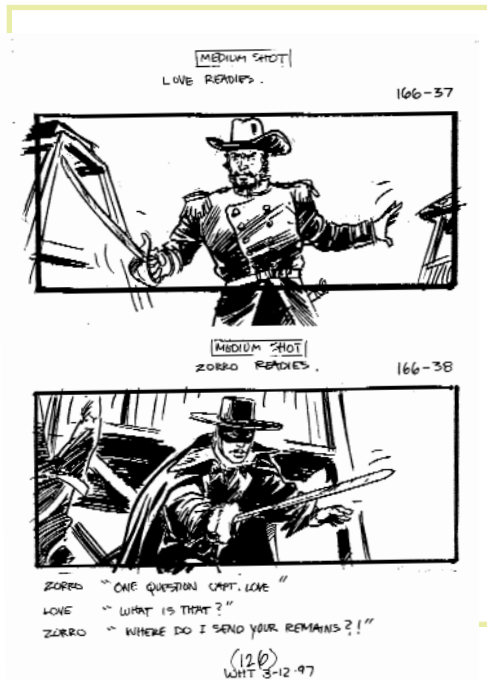


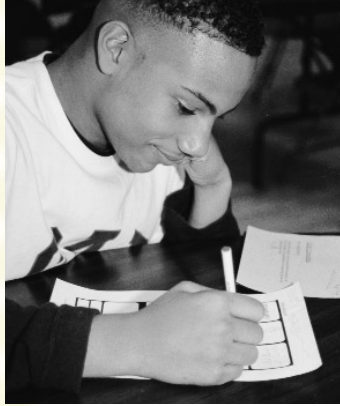
NIGHT / INTERIOR. ANNE'S BEDROOM
 ANNE'S BROTHER IS WITH HER FAVORITE RECORD.

The Mask of Zorro

Directed by Martin Campbell

Sample storyboard from The Mask of Zorro





Decide what you *think* you want the shots to look like before you arrive on the day of the shoot. Do your homework like a professional, and you will have a clear vision of the story you want to tell. Also, be open to making changes once you are on the set, and ask for other peoples' ideas — especially those of the cinematographer.

When thinking about the shots, make decisions about:

Composition

Composition is the positioning of people and things in the shot.

Should the main character be in the middle of the frame, or off to the side?

Lighting

Should it be bright or soft? Should it come from above, below, or from the side?

(POV) Point of view

POV refers to the position of the camera. Should it be up close and personal? Should it be angled downward or upward at the actor?



Explore: creating a storyboard

Storyboards help the director think visually about storytelling. Storyboards are not about making the drawings realistic; in fact, you do not need to make the drawing realistic. You can use stick figures for the people, squares for desks, a circle for the sun, and lines for a fence. The important thing is to get an idea of how each shot will look.

Here is a basic story

Two friends are sitting together in math class. J.D. is sitting behind Keisha as the teacher passes out a test. Both friends start to work on the test. J.D. tries to cheat by looking over Keisha's shoulder, and copying her test answers. Keisha notices and tries to cover up her paper. J.D. gives up and starts to work on his test.

Try to storyboard this short story. As you do, ask yourself the following questions:

- Do you want the shots to be really close (so that a face fills the entire screen), medium, or far away?

- What should the angle of the shot look like? Straight on or tilted? From above the character, or down low?
- From whose point of view will the camera be looking, from the point of view of one of the characters, or from the point of view of an invisible storyteller? There is no RIGHT way or WRONG way to do this exercise. You are the director — you make it look the way you want.

Long Storyboard

Short Storyboard

See how these shots show three different points of view? One is shot from a “third person’s” point of view. One is shot from the girl’s point of view. And one is shot from the fish’s point of view.



Can you identify each?

CHECKING YOUR SHOTS... BEFOREHAND



It is an excellent tool to have your shots on paper, but things look different through a camera. Directors and cinematographers usually want to see what their shots look like when framed by the camera, in order to really figure out which shots work. They look at a

scene through a **viewfinder** — the viewing piece of a camera — or they look through the camera itself. Keep in mind, this is not shooting the film, it is just looking through the viewfinder to see how things appear.



EXPLORE: a camera exercise

Have a friend pose in a chair, on a bed, or somewhere comfortable. Ask him/her to express an intense emotion, like anger or despair. Experiment with your camera, shooting your friend from different distances and angles. Notice which shots make your friend's emotion appear more extreme.

EXPLORE: shooting your storyboard

Take the storyboard you created and check out your shots with a camera — a video camera, a film camera, or a still camera. As best you can, try to shoot your storyboard. Try to create each scene. Notice what you like, or don't like. Notice how the camera's position changes the way the shots look. Each shot will tell a different story.



WORKING WITH ACTORS

The director works with the actors to determine how their characters should be played, and how a certain scene should appear. The actors give

their input, but the director is the person most responsible for what ends up on film, and makes the final acting decisions.



Explore: actors and directors working together

You will need three people for this experiment: two actors and one director.

The scene is between a girl who is sad and a guy making jokes.



Choices to make:

- Is the guy trying to show off for the girl?
- Is the guy trying to cheer her up?
- Why is the girl sad?
- Does she like the guy's attention?
- Does she want him to go away?

The director's choices will determine what the scene is really about.

The director should discuss with the actors how to play the scene. Is the guy being mean, or is the guy being nice? Is there something he wants from her, and is that why he is being nice? The director also has to decide the girl's motivation. Why is she sad? What does she want the guy to do? Is she angry that the guy is making jokes, or does she like it? Does she cheer up, or does she get upset?

Talk over these decisions, and then the actors can act out a short scene.

Write your ideas afterwards:

It was an interesting exercise because

The actors did a good job of

but they could have

better.

I learned that

The actors felt that

“ Plan the work, work the plan.”

—Tom Irvine
Assistant Director,
From the Earth to the Moon



Directing Tips from the Experts

Be prepared for everything to go wrong.

Filmmaking depends on many variables:

- The camera has to work.
- The lights have to work.
- The actors have to arrive on time and have their lines memorized.
- The costume person has to remember to bring all the clothes.
- For outdoor shooting, the weather has to be just right.

The list could go on and on.

Most directors say that *being prepared* is one of the most important keys to success. You should try to *anticipate*, figure out ahead of time, all of the things that could go wrong on any individual shoot, *and* you have to figure out a backup plan.

For example, if you were planning to shoot a scene with two actors, one camera, and one lamp, in an empty classroom after school, what are some of the things you might do to prepare?

Here are some answers to that question:

- Bring another camera, just in case something happens. And don't forget an extra battery pack.
- Check the lights in the room to make sure they work.

- Bring an extra light bulb just in case one of them goes out.
- Go over the lines and rehearse the scene with the actors. Are they ready? Did you remind them what time they need to arrive in order to get made up and dressed?
- Is someone going to be mowing the lawn right outside the window? Are you sure there is not a lot of traffic noise?
- Who is bringing the costumes for the shoot? Are there going to be costume changes?

No matter what happens, stay calm.

As the person in charge on the set, the director sets the mood, and if she or he is not calm, people helping with the shoot will not be as good at their jobs.

