Animation: The Story

Character and Narrative Structure
Ideas for Writing
Basics of the Script
Elements of a good story.

• Goal: To evoke a strong emotional response from the audience.

• Necessary basics: Setting, character, conflict, and satisfying resolution.

• Interesting characters: The viewer should care for or be challenged by the characters.

• Conflict: The audience should relate in some fashion to the conflict.
Narrative structure.

• The most applied and well-known story structure dates back to *Poetics* by Aristotle; it is still one of the best written works about story.

• Consider the three-act structure:

  **ACT I:** Setup the story; introduce setting, characters, status quo, and then the catalyst.

  **ACT II:** The conflict rises, and the crisis or turning-point occurs.

  **ACT III:** Climax and resolution (*denouement*).
Characters and conflict.

• Good character development creates and reveals motivation.

• The catalyst and other obstacles to a character’s motivation create the conflict.

• Conflict in turn changes the character. (epiphany -- point of realization)

• The audience should relate emotionally to the conflict and change in the characters. (catharsis -- emotional release)
Tips for interesting conflict.

• Build the characters as much as possible and lock the conflict early in the story. Each scene should also advance the plot and increase the conflict.

• Types of conflict: man versus man (society or others), man versus himself, man versus nature. (“Man” can be male, female, or even other creature or object, particularly in animation.)

• Conflict may be physical, mental, spiritual, or emotional, or a combination of these.
The resolution.

• Some type of resolution needs to occur to satisfy the audience.

• Happy endings are most popular, of course, but a sad or tragic ending will still satisfy the need for resolution and may better fit the goal of the story.

• Denouement -- falling action, “wrapping up” any subplots or loose strings.
Writing for animation.

- Animation is mainly a **visual** medium, so “show don’t tell.”

- Shoot for storytelling through **action**.

- Dialogue and sound are still important but should be considered carefully with the visual aspect in mind.
Writing process.

• Pre-writing: free exposition of ideas to brainstorm about the following:
  • Character background, setting, conflict, resolution.

• Outline for structure.
  • Form three act structure and devise plot points.

• Actual writing.
  • Treatment, scene breakdown, then script.

• Revision.
Developing ideas.

• **Research:** Consider personal experiences; novels, magazines, comics, short stories; movies, plays, television; history, dreams, myths.

• **Brainstorming:** Create a list for several ideas including characters, setting, motivation, and a couple obstacles for each.

• **Story premise (concept sentence):**
  
  • Literal: It is a story about a little girl on a subway late at night who murders a frustrated, solitary man who ignores her.

  • Deeper, figurative: Adults should pay more attention to needy children.

  • Typical Hollywood premise: You may be beautiful and popular if you only take off your glasses.
Checklist and pitfalls.

• Does the story seem to work? Does it have good structure? (Beginning/middle/end?)

• Is it a good visual story? (Good for 3-D animation?)

• Is it clever or original?

• Is the motivation of the characters clear to the audience?

• Does the audience relate emotionally?
Other things to be careful:

• Obvious linear progression.

• Stereotypical, contrived, or 2-D characters.

• Non-human characters in a human world.

• Characters and conflict appropriate for 3-D animation.

• Dream sequences and flashbacks.

• Dialogue.

• Cramming too much.

• Superficial action (murders, weapons, etc.)
“Careful, honey, it’s loaded,” he said, re-entering the bedroom.
“This for your wife?”
“No. Too chancy. I’m hiring a professional.”
“How about me?”
He smirked. “Cute. But who would be dumb enough to hire a lady hit man.”
She wet her lips, sighting along the barrel.
“Your wife.”

- Jeffrey Whitmore
Grandma Meets the Ax Murderer

The crazed ax-murderer approached the house. Having ravaged the entire neighborhood, his sack of booty was almost full.

Alone inside, the old woman sat knitting. The murderer raised his blood-stained ax and rang the porch doorbell. Slowly, she opened the door and peered into his face.

“Trick or treat!” the little boy shouted.

- Diane Elliot
Basic scripting.

• Format: plain-type (courier) on 8 1/2 x 11 paper.

• Composed of scenes, master scene described (specific shots not usually included).

• Slug line: INT/EXT, LOCATION, TIME

• Brief but vivid descriptions of scene to the full width of the margins.

• Dialogue blocked with each character’s name above. (CAPS when introduced.)

• Focus on presenting the story through character development, action, careful dialogue, and avoid “directing” the film in the script.
Sources and additional material.

- Aristotle, *Poetics*, 350 B.C.


