

# Chapter 6

## Storytelling Mini Lessons

In cooking, there is the concept of *mise en place*. Literally translated from French, it means “set in place,” and refers to portioning ingredients into small bowls before one begins to cook. Having the ingredients measured and organized ahead of time streamlines the cooking process and ensures that all of the components needed for the creation of a delicious dish are present. Similarly, teachers must determine how best to mete out movie-making skill development in order to help their students tell effective stories. Audiovisual skills that are taught and reinforced over time become transferable between content areas as students learn to communicate clearly in a digital medium. Rather than asking students to become expert moviemakers all at once, essential skills can be taught via mini lessons alongside core content throughout the course of a unit.

This chapter outlines five key mini lessons teachers can use with their students. Some of the lessons build screen grammar, while others deal with more technical aspects of moviemaking. Screen grammar, also called film grammar, refers to the terms that are specific to filmmaking, such as the difference between a frame and a scene. Some of the most important components of screen grammar are the various film angles. Knowing the proper terms for these angles facilitates collaborative conversations between students, as well as dialogue

and feedback between teachers and students. Essential technical aspects of movie-making include learning how to appropriately match audio and visual components, as well as how to record compelling voiceovers. It is also important that students understand how to effectively leverage the Ken Burns effect, a push-and-pull animation sometimes applied to still photos. Finally, having and using a common lexicon to discuss cinematic elements necessitates the use of the SCALE acronym, which will also be covered in this chapter.

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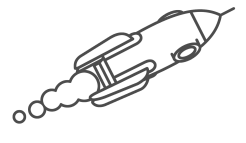
## *Film Angle Mini Lesson and Extension Activities*

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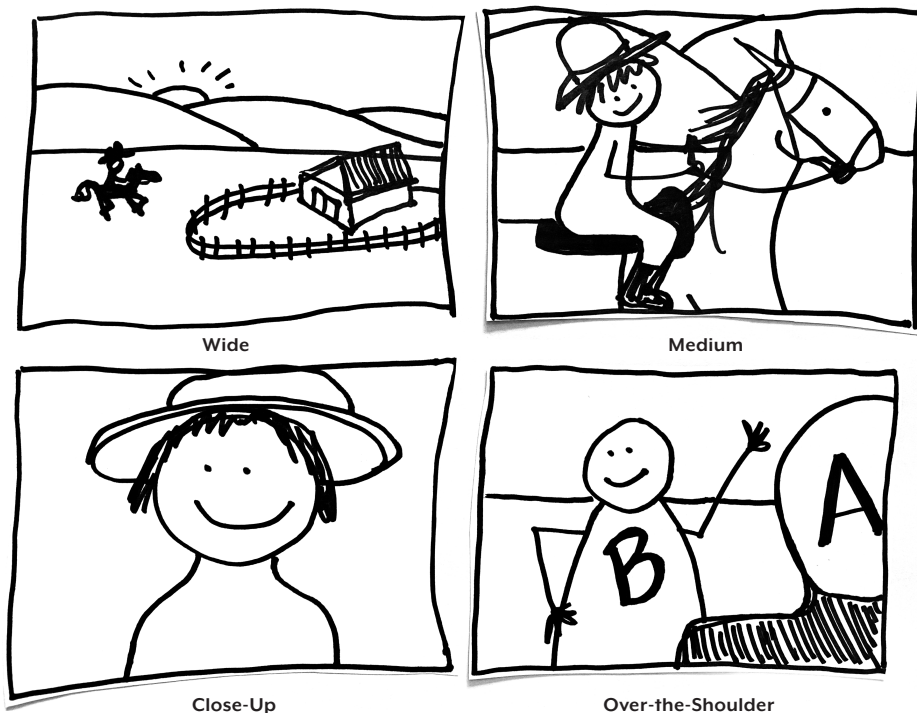
The first mini lesson explains the four basic film angles: wide, medium, close-up, and over-the-shoulder. Wide shots are used to communicate the setting, where characters may appear in the shot, but are depicted with plenty of scenery context to help viewers place the action. This type of shot is essential at the beginning of a scene to establish the setting. Establishing shots are one of the most frequently forgotten when students collect assets, whether filming or locating existing resources. Medium shots show much less of the setting than wide clips. The point is to shift the viewer's focus away from the setting to focus more on the character(s). Shots build understanding, so the overall objective is to reveal more information with each shot that appears. Close-up shots are used to showcase important objects or character reactions—another shot that often students seem to forget to include. Finally, the over-the-shoulder shot is used to depict conversations between characters. This type of shot also allows the viewer to observe what a character is seeing, so if the story hinges on some important information the character sees, the viewer will see it along with them. The goal of the film angle mini lesson is to help students identify these angles and begin to consider how they might be used together to unveil settings, characters, and conflict.

First, find a movie trailer that students will be interested in watching. Listen to their conversations to find out what is currently popular or pay attention to social media. You can even ask students for suggestions—just make sure you preview each trailer before

## FILM ANGLE MINI LESSON AND EXTENSION ACTIVITIES



using it in order to make sure the content is appropriate for your grade level. Show students the trailer, which usually lasts 1–2 minutes. Ask them to pay attention to how the camera moves. Then, ask students to divide a piece of paper into quadrants using a pencil or pen. You could also allow them to use a drawing app on a tablet, or a whiteboard with a marker. Generally, I ask students to use their interactive notebooks, so storytelling notes are stored alongside content area notes. Spend 5–6 minutes drawing simple sketches to illustrate each of the four basic film angles. Talk to students about how and why each angle is used. When students volunteer ideas, offer validation and treat the sketching time as a conversation. After each of the four angles have been covered, replay the movie trailer and pause it randomly. Each time the video pauses, ask students to shout out the film angle that appears. By the end of the trailer, student accuracy will be extremely high. This entire mini lesson should take approximately 10 minutes—certainly no more than 15. The point is to give a bite-size skill lesson that can be further developed throughout the rest of the week.



**FIGURE 6.1** Sample drawings of the four film angles taught during the Film Angle Mini Lesson.

For the next several days, ask students to practice their film angle literacy using a film angle sorting task as a warm-up (see Figure 6.2). Students work together in pairs to sort of variety of images into categories labeled with the four basic film angles. You can utilize screenshots from popular movies, pictures you have taken yourself, or photos students submit. For each sorting task, include 8–10 images for students to identify; each task takes approximately 2–3 minutes total, including partner discussion.



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ACTIVITY

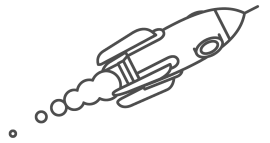
### Film Angle Sorting Activity

Directions: Examine each of the screen captures and sort them into categories based on the film angle that is shown.

Wide Angle	Medium
Over-the-Shoulder	Close-Up

**FIGURE 6.2** The Google Draw sorting activity for the Film Angle Mini Lesson.

Another engaging follow-up to this mini lesson is tasking students with a film angle scavenger hunt. Form teams of two or three and give students a list of shots to collect. Have someone on each team take pictures using a phone, a classroom tablet, a Chromebook, or the like. Offering a prize can give a powerful incentive, but often just the sight of seconds ticking by on a timer on the board provides ample motivation. The timer creates impetus to finish quickly, so this follow-up exercise generally takes 5 minutes or less.



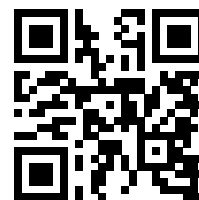
Anyone who has studied film or performed a quick internet search likely knows that there are more than four film angles. Typically, I do not instruct these angles and prefer to let students discover them on their own instead. Students will absolutely begin to move their cameras in new ways and organically discover how to communicate visual information even more effectively. The four basic angles simply form a baseline understanding.

## Agreement Mini Lesson

Agreement refers to when audio and visual components match. This is a difficult skill for students to acquire, because they often take a word association approach to editing when a more literal approach is required. For several years, I took my classes to visit the local news station, and the director shared that the concept of agreement is explained as “see dog, say dog” in the news industry. Since it is easy to remember, I often teach this phrase to my students. From a storytelling standpoint, agreement is much more than just matching the topic of a voiceover with an appropriate image. Over time, agreement also becomes about matching the mood or tone and conveying the most information possible. Some images are more powerful than others—finding the exact right image to communicate both on-the-surface and under-the-surface meaning is an essential storytelling skill.

For this 10-minute mini lesson, I begin by telling students to find a picture of the “best dog ever.” I set a one-minute timer and students begin wildly searching through Google Images, each trying to find the cutest dog, or the dog most like their own, or just a dog that looks like one they would want to adopt. I ask students to open their image in a new tab and tell their partners why the dog they found is the best. A few students share out to the whole class, after which I ask them to consider two pictures of a yellow dog. In one picture, the dog is standing on grass looking off camera. In the other picture, the dog is captured mid-run, jaws gaping, as he lunges toward a tennis ball that is just out of reach. Next comes the all-important question: Which image tells a better story? Student hands shoot into the air, and everyone

inevitably agrees that the dog chasing the ball is in the middle of a story. Responses vary and tend to get more entertaining as the conversation progresses. Maybe the dog's owner threw the ball. Maybe the ball was knocked over a fence and the dog is retrieving it. Maybe the ball is the dog's favorite and it is about to roll over a cliff into the sea! Maybe the ball is rolling toward a mouse village and the dog is the superhero who will save them!



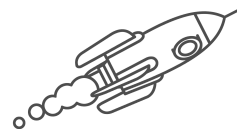
DOG VIDEO FOR  
AGREEMENT LESSON

From there, I ask students to reprise their initial task. Find a picture of the best dog ever *and* make sure the picture tells a story. The timer is set for two minutes, and usually you can hear a pin drop because students are so focused on finding the best possible dog with the best possible story to share. After the timer, students turn to their partners to show their pictures and tell their stories. Be prepared—your classroom will get loud as excited student voices share the images they found.

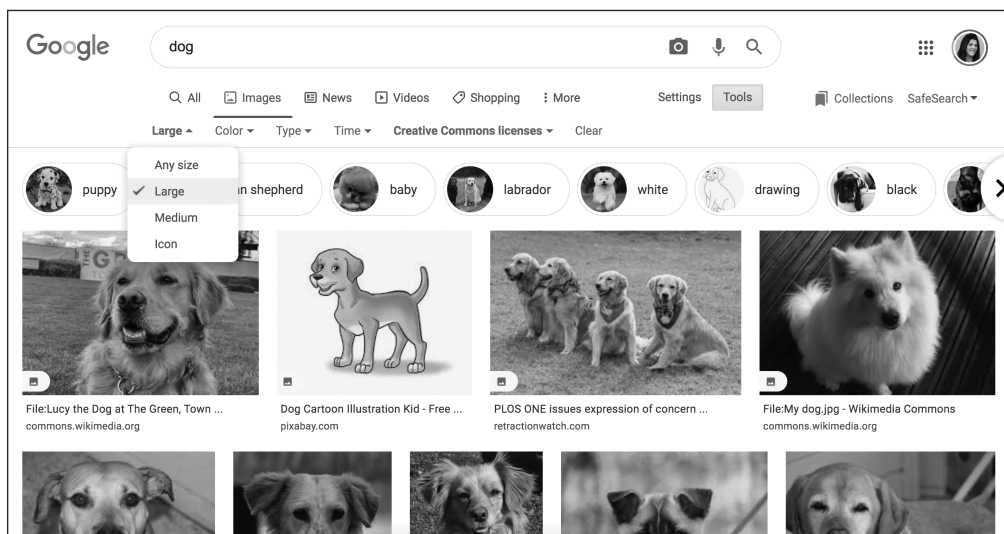
The final step is to show students how video can sometimes add a little something extra, a sensory layer that makes a subject even more compelling. Students view a YouTube video I found on social media a few years ago (see the QR code on this page). Someone strapped a GoPro camera onto a dog's back and then unleashed him at the top of a rocky hill leading down to a beach. The entire clip is filmed from the dog's perspective, as he runs joyously down the embankment and rushes head-first into the waves. There is a moment where the dog is suspended in a midair leap before dipping below the surface of the water, and that is usually about the time the whole class sighs longingly and someone inevitably says, "I wish we had an ocean here in our desert."

This entire instructional sequence should take approximately 10 minutes, definitely no more than 15. The goal was to teach students to think about the story that an individual image can tell. With this foundational understanding, students will be able to select better, more powerful images for their digital stories.

This is also a good time to teach students how to use the advanced search tools to filter for images that are high-resolution and copyright-free (see figure 6.3). If you are unfamiliar with how to conduct an advanced image search, navigate to Google



Images and search for your topic. Click on the Tools button, then select the desired size. Large images are always best because they are the highest resolution. Images are measured in pixels, so the higher the pixel count, the higher the resolution. When images appear blurry, it is because they have a low pixel count. Google displays the pixel measurements for each image, which is extremely helpful for students. Another advanced search tool allows users to filter images according to their Creative Commons license. Whenever students use images from the web, it is important to ensure they are following copyright and giving credit through proper citation. Digital citizenship skills are especially important if work is to be shared beyond classroom walls. Thus, explicitly teaching students to search for images that are free to use and share is essential.



**FIGURE 6.3** How to search for high-resolution images is an essential skill. Teach students to toggle the search settings and select search criteria for large images only.

## Audio Fluency Mini Lessons

Many of the movie projects my students undertake rely on a voiceover. In fact, most of the quick-start lesson frames contained in part 3 of this book include voiceovers

as their primary audio component. Most students are not immediately aware of the impact a voiceover can have on their digital story. There are many aspects of voice recording to be aware of, including but not limited to background noise, ambient noise, pacing, intonation, pronunciation, and expression. Other layers of sound also play a part in digital stories, such as music and sound effects.

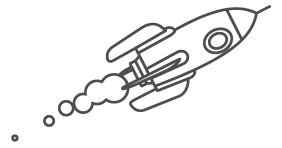
One of the challenges of recording audio is the presence of background noise. Whether in the classroom or at home, there are generally lots of other voices that can be accidentally captured in the recording process. There are also many sources of ambient noise, such as air conditioners, fans, cooking food, footsteps, or even wildlife. In the desert where my students and I live, cicadas are particularly loud during certain times of the year. Students are hard-pressed to find anywhere outside the classroom that does not offer refuge to these loud bugs, making cicada-free spots golden.

Voice recording also requires rehearsal, because lines must be delivered with expression at an appropriate pace. In talking with some of my students over the years, simply pressing the Record button causes enough anxiety that they tend to rush through all of their words using little inflection. So, giving students opportunities to practice is key. Even if a voiceover is recorded perfectly, its storytelling potential can still be destroyed by the heavy-handed use of sound effects or musical choices that simply do not “agree” (that is, do not match up) with the mood, tone, or subject matter.

Since there are so many audio pitfalls to avoid, I decided to ask students to create the worst possible audio track for a 20-second digital story. This idea was inspired by Marlena Hebern and Jon Corippo, authors of *The EduProtocol Field Guide* (2018). They published a lesson frame in their first field guide that required students to create the worst possible presentation using software of their choice. In a similar fashion, I ask my students to create truly awful audio in order to help them understand what absolutely does *not* work when it comes to storytelling. Students are provided with a short script and given 10 minutes to record an audio track with as much background and ambient noise as possible. Students read as fast or as slow as they can using intonation that absolutely does not match the content. Students then add



## KEN BURNS EFFECT MINI LESSON



ill-suited music and whatever sound effects they can find, taking an “everything and the kitchen sink” approach. One of my favorite student projects of all time featured a student who decided to read as slowly as possible. The script was a paragraph featuring what was meant to be an exciting action sequence. Instead, the student carried his Chromebook over to record next to the oscillating fan in one corner of our classroom. He borrowed the pacing and intonation of the teacher played by Ben Stein in *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off* and added a bunch of nature sound effects. The end result was a mixture of the other students reading in the background, the whirl of the fan, the dead tones of his own voice, sappy music, and rainforest sounds. It was absolutely hysterical to listen to! Students share their recordings with a partner and the giggles make this mini lesson worth it. They also totally grasp what *not* to do by the end of their awful recordings.

The second 10-minute mini lesson that follows is an opportunity for redemption. Now that students know what to avoid, they must recreate their recording using best practices. This time, students record using earbuds with a microphone to focus their voices. They avoid background noise by spreading out and stay away from air conditioners and fans. They read using an appropriate pace and tone, adding expression where needed. At this point, paying attention to music and the mood it creates becomes almost second nature, and sound effects are relevant. My favorite feature about these two connected audio mini lessons is that students are able to discover on their own what makes or breaks an audio recording—no boring teacher lecture needed!

## — Ken Burns Effect Mini Lesson —

The Ken Burns effect refers to the movement of the camera as it pans or zooms across a still photo. This type of push-and-pull animation adds life to an otherwise static image. The technique was honed by Ken Burns, an American filmmaker widely known for his use of historical images in documentary films, and has become so ubiquitous that it is sometimes automatically applied by movie-editing software. It is important to teach students to retain control over the use of animation, because

purposeful choices of when exactly to apply the Ken Burns effect can greatly improve the overall quality of a movie.

To teach this 10-minute mini lesson, I simply show students how to access the push-and-pull animation tools. On iMovie, the tool is called Ken Burns, while on WeVideo's browser-based software, it is called Animation. The iOS version of iMovie has a plus and minus feature in the corner of the preview box that allows users to set a start and stop point for zoom animation. Adobe Spark, Animoto, and other online editing software contain static zoom features. Once students know where to locate the animation tools, it's just a matter of letting them play. To wrap up this hands-on exploration, I typically show students an anchor movie that uses the Ken Burns effect to enhance the overall message of the story. You can always use a video clip from an actual Ken Burns documentary, but I find it is more impactful to use student-created work, which is part of the reason I archive so many movie projects on our classroom YouTube channel. Targeted viewing can be an incredible tool. When we give students something specific to focus on, such as paying attention to how the storyteller used the Ken Burns effect, students are able to form a better understanding from the viewing experience.

These guiding questions can help facilitate classroom discussion:

1. How did zooming in on an image help the storyteller communicate their message?
2. What effect did panning across an image create?
3. How do you think this movie would have been different without the use of animation?

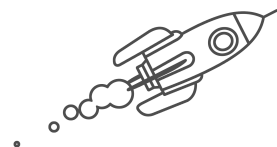
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## *SCALE Mini Lessons*

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As previously discussed, developing a common lexicon of moviemaking and storytelling terms can prove enormously helpful in the classroom. During my tenure as a teacher consultant at DIGICOM Learning in Palm Springs, the curriculum team worked out an acronym to help students and teachers understand the various

## SCALE MINI LESSONS



elements that comprise movies: SCALE. The letters of SCALE stand for Story, Camera, Audio, Look, and Editing. High-quality digital stories exhibit best practices in most (if not all) of these categories. Though this acronym was originally developed to help teachers and students improve their movies by “scaling them up” to the next level, I found it most useful to use SCALE as a pre-teaching and critical viewing tool.

If we want students to create better movies, we need to orchestrate as many opportunities as possible for them to watch and appreciate the work of other young people. Even though students consume an unprecedented amount of media through streaming services and social media platforms, they are not necessarily used to seeing their peers create cinematic content. Watching and discussing that content using common language can be enlightening.

As this book has discussed extensively, the essence of moviemaking is the development of an emotionally impactful story that resonates. When evaluating the element of **Story**, I ask students to determine whether the action unfolds in three parts. Remember, though some might refer to this as beginning, middle, and end, it is really more about emotional beats. Students must also be able to analyze whether a story is compelling, with evidence to support why it is or is not. Finally, students need to assess whether economy of detail was applied by the person who created the movie. Generally, storytellers show instead of telling. The art is to show just enough for viewers to grasp what is occurring, rather than belaboring the point. Every teacher who has ever made a movie with students knows what it is like to watch an extended cut of a character walking down the hallway during a 15-second take. The scripting equivalent might be including too much detail when less would suffice.

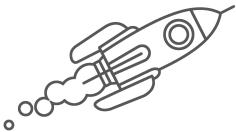
When evaluating **Camera**, students should pay attention to the number and types of film angles used. Whether images are clear or pixelated is a consideration when using photos as opposed to video footage. As previously mentioned, students are prone to leaving two particular types of shots out of their work: close-ups to show character reactions and establishing shots. Reaction shots are important because they visually inform the viewer about how certain events or pieces of information are received by the characters. They also trigger emotion in the audience, so leaving

out a reaction shot can significantly lessen the emotional resonance of a scene. Establishing shots show the setting of a scene and help viewers understand the larger context in which the action occurs. Usually, students like to cut straight to the action, as opposed to taking a few seconds to set the stage for the audience. I teach my students to pay particular attention to how and when others integrate these two types of shots. If students know to look for them, they are more likely to include them in their own work.

Students need to be able to assess **Audio** in terms of balance. Audio fluency is important and, once achieved, should not be undermined by inappropriately balanced supporting tracks. New storytellers have a tendency to drop music and sound effects into the audio, but then forget to turn them down during voiceovers or dialogue. Some editing software balances automatically (this tool is sometimes referred to as “ducking”), but most require manual manipulation. Choosing music purposefully so that it evokes emotion is key; this is a skill that must be explicitly taught, so it helps to have recurring conversations about the effect of music on mood and tone.

When evaluating the **Look** of a movie, students should consider the physical setting. Understanding basic lighting concepts, such as whether faces are properly illuminated or if there is backlighting, can greatly improve the footage students are able to capture. Additionally, students should pay attention to their surroundings. Though actual set design is definitely beyond the scope of what we do in the core content classroom, we *can* teach our students to film in locations that are as distraction-free as possible. Nothing ruins a scene more than seeing other students filming in the background!

Look is closely connected to **Editing** because the two elements work hand in hand. The use of transitions can either add to or distract from the story, and the amount of precision used when editing can affect a story's pace. For example, live-action clips should be trimmed so that angles flow seamlessly from one shot to the next. The editing stage is when economy of detail comes into play on a second-by-second basis. Every frame of a movie should contribute to the story; if it does not contribute, it should be cut. Students become excellent editors when they have



multiple opportunities to see what good editing looks like from work their peers have produced.

**TABLE 6.1** SCALE Guiding Questions

Story	Does the story have three parts (emotional beats)?
	Is the story compelling?
	Is there economy of detail?
Camera	Are a variety of angles used?
	Are images clear or pixelated?
	Did you include establishing shots?
Audio	Are voiceovers and music balanced?
	Does the voiceover have expression?
	Does the music evoke emotion?
Look	Is there backlighting?
	Are faces properly illuminated?
	Did you choose a distraction-free location?
Editing	Did you use precision when editing?
	Do transitions add or distract?
	Does every frame help tell a story?

An effective 10- to 15-minute mini lesson that can be repeated often is a SCALE Viewing Party. Organize students into groups of five and give each person in the group a SCALE card. Each card consists of a letter from the SCALE acronym and a series of guiding questions (see table 6.1) pertaining to that particular aspect of moviemaking. If students are working in groups of four, then combine both the Look and Editing categories by giving both of these cards to one person. Select a student-created movie to watch and then discuss as a whole class using the prompts on the SCALE cards. This gives teachers the opportunity to both model (by thinking aloud) and facilitate (by engaging the point of view of several outspoken students).

It is important that students understand what a critical viewing discussion sounds like before they try it on their own.

When the class is ready, watch a second student-created movie and have students discuss in their small groups. Ask each group to document their discussion using a piece of poster paper and a maker. Hang the papers on the wall or have one person from each group hold them up. Ask students to draw general conclusions based on common observations they see recorded on the group posters. A variation of this activity is to establish groups to evaluate each element of SCALE, one group assessing story, another group assessing audio, etc. Groups can record their observations on a Padlet wall, poster paper, or via backchannel chat.



DOWNLOAD  
SCALE CARDS

The SCALE mini lesson can be repeated throughout the year. It can also be applied during small group feedback sessions as a way to evaluate first drafts. Once students have internalized the SCALE acronym, they are better able to view and discuss their own work as well as the work of their peers.



*Julie Barda*, **SEVENTH-GRADE TEACHER**

"Every movie project I ask my students to create has a metacognitive component. We go through the process in stages, with multiple stopping points, so that students have opportunities to reflect and improve their work. Even all the way up to the end of the storytelling process, after they have turned in their final draft, I always ask them: *If I gave you another day, what would you change? What would you make better?* In this way, they realize that their stories are never really done, per se. There is a constant back-and-forth of ideas resulting from reflection. Dissecting their work and the work of others makes students better writers and editors."