writing for the web

creating compelling web content using words, pictures and sound

LYNDA FELDER

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New Riders

VOICES THAT MATTER™

Also, the simulation needs to be paced just right. If it's too slow, readers will get distracted. If it's too fast, readers will get frustrated.

■ **Games** provide entertainment and can be educational. Make sure your audience thinks the game is as fun as you do. As with all Web content, your audience is key. Games for the corporate environment are nothing like games you play at home.

■ **Photo slide shows** show people best. Still pictures can provide a more emotional experience than video, especially when combined with Burns effects (panning across the image and zooming in or out).

■ **Digital storytelling** works well for personal stories and educational purposes. You can find wonderful examples and more information at www.storycenter.org.

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700 BILLION YOUTUBE VIDEOS

It's only recent advances in technologies that have given you the capability to easily add animation and video to your Web content. And readers are wild about it! YouTube.com was registered in 2005. Just five years later, YouTube (youtube-global.blogspot.com) announced, "During 2010, you all watched more than 700 billion YouTube videos and uploaded more than 13 million hours of video."

But before you can narrow down the type of media you'll use, you'll need to come up with an idea to set in motion. Brainstorming is an excellent way to unearth ideas, and writing down your ideas can help you flesh them out.

Capturing an Idea for Video or Animation

Where do you get your ideas? That's a question all authors are asked and asked often. It can be a difficult question to answer, because ideas can come from anywhere and anything. The more you think and talk about an idea, the more it morphs into something else. You're driving in your car, listening to a favorite radio station and boom! A fantastic idea hits you. Or you're talking with a friend and suddenly you stop listening, because something wonderful is percolating in your head. You don't want to be rude, so you share that idea with your friend. The friend catches on and takes the idea a step in another direction.

Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try Again. Fail again. Fail better.

—Samuel Beckett

In a heartbeat, you're collaborating. It's a fascinating process when you're just letting the thoughts gallop around in your head. However, trying to tie down ideas for a creative project can be exasperating.

Just for fun, try capturing your ideas for a story on napkins, the backs of envelopes, the palm of your hand if you don't mind a temporary tattoo, paper bags, the backs of receipts, the blank side of a greeting card, or any scrap of paper you have handy. It's good to be flexible.

You are the only one who knows what works best to capture an idea and begin the design process. But here are some ideas for brainstorming that have worked well for others:

- **Sticky notes.** Jot down anything and everything that comes to mind on sticky notes (**FIGURE 4.1**). Place the notes on a large surface, such as a wall or tabletop. Move the notes around as you continue to add notes.

- **3 x 5 cards.** Index cards work the same as sticky notes but give you the added flexibility of designing on the go. Keep them in your back pocket while you're out taking a walk.

- **Lists.** Make lists of whatever you think of that relates to one or more ideas.

- **An outline.** If you like working with outlines, this is probably the best way for you to begin.

- **Napkins.** Seriously, napkins work as well as sticky notes and can be fun for collaborations.

When you finally have an idea that's nearly hatched, you can begin developing it along a timeline. That's where a storyboard helps.

FIGURE 4.1
Use sticky notes to collect and sort ideas.
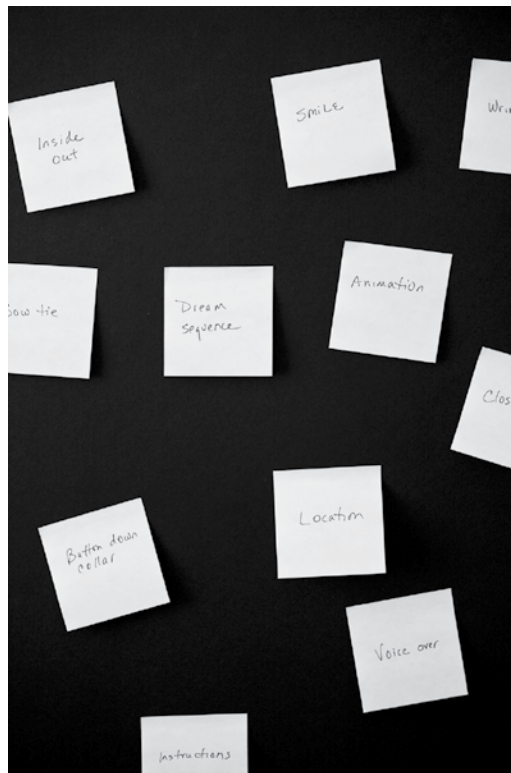
Developing the Story

Whether your work is fiction or nonfiction, it has to tell a good story. For video and animation, it's especially important to plan the story. You need to understand the concept, the structure, the setting, the action, any spoken narration, and so forth. You need to determine how all the multimedia elements will work together. The time spent planning is time well spent. If you've ever worked on a complex project that used seat-of-the-pants planning, you understand the trouble and frustration you can encounter that can easily be prevented by thinking through the design, developing a storyboard, and discussing with any team members or stakeholders what the final production will look like.

If we are to change our world view, images have to change.

—Vaclav Havel

The first important step in your planning is to develop a storyboard.

Designing a Storyboard

Storyboards are design tools that show the main action on the screen over time. A storyboard also lists all the media for each scene, such as sound effects, voice-over, music, and text, and describes how they all work together. Not only does the storyboard gather all the ideas on paper with a timeline, but it is also conducive for generating and building additional ideas. Designing a storyboard provides a few more benefits as well, because it:

- **Records the plan.** It documents the creative process by placing a stake in the ground for the initial starting point. From there you can use it to track changes.

- **Persuades stakeholders.** If you need to persuade someone else to pay for the production, a storyboard helps whoever holds the purse strings to make a good decision. It helps you convince someone that the production will be worth the cost.

- **Informs team members.** If you're working with a team of artists, writers, and programmers, the storyboard keeps everyone in line. You can use the storyboard as a reference for developing schedules and assigning responsibilities.

- **Establishes a blueprint.** A storyboard keeps you from making costly mistakes during production, because it provides you with a clear plan. The tailor's maxim is to measure twice, cut once. Completing a storyboard is like measuring twice.

- **Creates a working agreement.** If you're working with a client or a boss, the storyboard educates that person, documents agreements, and keeps the process moving. It's completely frustrating to be halfway through a project and hear the client say, for the first time, "Oh, we need to…" With a storyboard in place, you can gently remind the boss or client that you are following the original direction and any changes at this stage will cost more and take more time.

The format for the storyboard depends on the people you are working with and their expectations. Every storyboard needs a brief introduction to describe the work's main idea or message. In addition, every storyboard needs to state the targeted audience and the objectives or goals for the work.

For the corporate environment, it's likely that you'll need to set the expectations. If you're working on a training demonstration for instance, you might use a simple, three-column format (**FIGURE 4.2**).

FIGURE 4.2
A three-column storyboard format.

Storyboard		
Title		
Producer (Your Name)		
Artists (Photos)		
Composers (Music)		
Speakers		
Visuals	**Audio**	**Production Notes**
Add video, animation, still images, and text here.	Add narration, music, and sound effects here.	Add production notes here.

If you're collaborating with a team in the corporate environment, PowerPoint works fine as a storyboard tool. Place the visuals in the slide view, and then add all the information about other media in the speaker's notes.

For animation, storyboards are typically a series of framed, hand-drawn scenes. If you're not a fine artist or you don't like to draw, don't be alarmed. Stick figures work fine. If you feel self-conscious about your stick figures, draw balloons around their legs and arms to fill them out. Make sure, in the storyboard, that you change the perspective for scenes, showing them as wide or long shots (from a distance), mid-range, and close up (**FIGURE 4.3**).

FIGURE 4.3
A storyboard for animation.

Rapid Prototyping

Another way to design a digital production is to use a method called *rapid prototyping*. With rapid prototyping, you need to work with design tools to rapidly create a prototype of the final production. This works especially well with productions that can take weeks to develop, such as computer-based training.

Using rapid prototyping, you need to set expectations and let those who will be reviewing the prototype know that it is only the beginning of development and design. You can call the prototype a "quick-and-dirty" version of the final production. You want it to have imperfections at this point for a number of reasons:

- **Preliminary design feedback.** You want the prototype to be a design tool rather than the finished product. If it's too perfect, the reviewer or client might have a look and say, "Great! Let me have it. Send me the bill." Although pleasing the reviewer is satisfying, at this stage you're better off getting reviewers to offer suggestions and describe likes and dislikes.

- **Big picture critique.** You don't want to focus on minute details, such as the choice of fonts or color at this stage. Set expectations and tell reviewers and collaborators that the prototype is in its infancy, and it's not the time to spend hours crossing Ts and dotting Is. You definitely don't want to spend days searching for just the right shade of mango that your boss has in mind.

- **Team/client participation.** You want others to feel that they have taken an active part in the production, not just accepted your final product. Consider all suggestions carefully. But also remember that *you* are the author, and the final production will represent *your* work. Don't simply roll over and say yes to all suggestions that come your way.

For more information about storytelling methods, read Chapter 9, "Telling a Good Story."

Whichever storytelling approach you use, a good and simple way to structure your Web story is with three major parts.

Adding an Introduction, Body, and Close

According to Aristotle, a story needs a beginning, middle, and end, and your story with moving images is no exception.

For video blogs (also called vlogs), the introduction can be the title page and the ending can be the credits. If you're planning a series of videos, you'll want to give all the introductions and endings a similar look and feel, so your readers will recognize the series.

The middle of the video should tell the story. If you're not sure how to construct the middle, try following this simple organization:

1. Show the overview. Show a long camera shot as the audio narration speaks the introduction (**FIGURE 4.4**).

2. Show a mid-range shot as audio narration gives more specifics about the story (**FIGURE 4.5**).

3 Show a close-up shot and describe details with the audio narration (**FIGURE 4.6**).

try this

Imagine that you are showing a production to someone important, like the VP of marketing where you work. You've worked night and day on the production and feel certain it's going to wow the VP. Sadly, you don't get the response you're expecting. The VP does the equivalent of crumpling up a piece of paper, sneers, and says the entire thing is sophomoric and distasteful. Take a deep breath. How will you respond? Make a list of your thoughts.

FIGURE 4.4
Provide a long shot to start the story.

FIGURE 4.5
Provide a mid-range shot to continue the story.

FIGURE 4.6
A close-up of details to go deeper into the story.

The Animation or Video Setting

The setting is a combination of the location and the time. For example, the story might occur in the 1950s in Paris. Setting is important. For theater scripts, AT RISE appears at the beginning, and it tells what the audience sees when the curtain rises for the first scene. What does your audience see AT RISE for your first scene?

Make sure the setting meets the audience's expectations. For instance, if your story is about skydiving, the audience expects to see the sky, an airport, or the inside of an airplane. See Chapter 1 for more information on understanding your audience.

For video, remember that the camera can see more than you typically do. For example, if you're producing a video that shows how to make an exotic dish, make sure your kitchen is spotless and there aren't any crumbs on the counter.

Writing Scripts for Video and Animation

A written script provides a road map for your production and example dialogue for any spoken words in your story. It can also briefly explain the setting, action, lighting, and transitions. If you are the author, the director, the editor, and the producer, you don't need as many details. But if you are handing off the script to someone else to direct and produce, you'll want to add more detail.

You might think you can't write a script without screenwriting software. Shakespeare did not have a software application to help him write *The Tempest*, and it turned out pretty well. You don't need a screenwriting program to write a good script.