# DRAWING & COMPOSITION for VISUAL STORYTELLING

Click here to see this webiste in inversed colors (black on white).

What is the key to success in visual storytelling? A willingness to collaborate, the flexibility to evolve, and an understanding of the basic rules of cinematography.
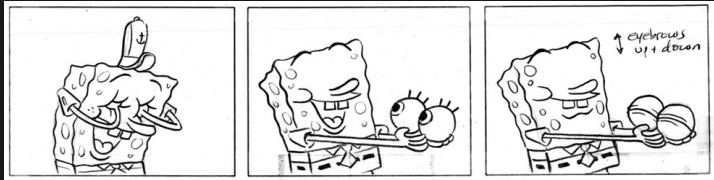
Why Learn How to Storyboard?

> A story artist is like a mini-director
  - In control of creative content
  - Visualizing (and improving) the idea or script
  - Lots of responsibility, but lots of freedom

> A good story artist is always in demand
  - Story is the one discipline that is still not being outsourced
  - Job security & career path for growth with many diverse projects
  - Whether it's freelance or contract work, storyboards are
    ALWAYS needed to bring the concept or screenplay to the next phase.

> Storyboard artists are some of the highest paid artists in the industry
  - Why? Because you are near the top of the creative food chain
  - Commercials, advertising, interactive media, motion graphics,
    pre-viz for special FX, 2D or 3D animated feature films,
    televisions series, music videos, and video games;
    all require storyboards of some sort to visualize a
    script or idea, to help uncover any potential problems
    and to help the client / producer / director visualize the end product.
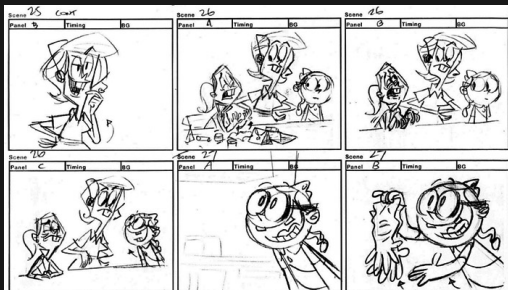

The Function of Storyboards

Staging: The positioning of characters in each scene for maximum emotional content and clear readability of actions. In Animation it refers to the purpose of directing the audience's attention, and make it clear what is of greatest importance in a scene; what is happening, and what is about to happen. This can be done by various means, such as the placement of a character in the frame, the use of light and shadow, and the angle & position of the camera. In live-action this is refered to as 'Blocking'.

Storytelling: Each panel's sketch clearly communicates to an audience the important ideas expressed through the action of each scene. This is all compromised of different types of shots, framing / editing principles, and scene transitions, and how they are used by filmmakers to help tell a story. These depict many elements like the poses and expressions of the characters, as well as how the scenes will cut and how close (or far) the camera is to the subject.

Tips on how to use of the basic tools of **Line, Shape, Space, and Motion** to express clear visual language in your storyboards:

Share

Storytelling: Space

Share
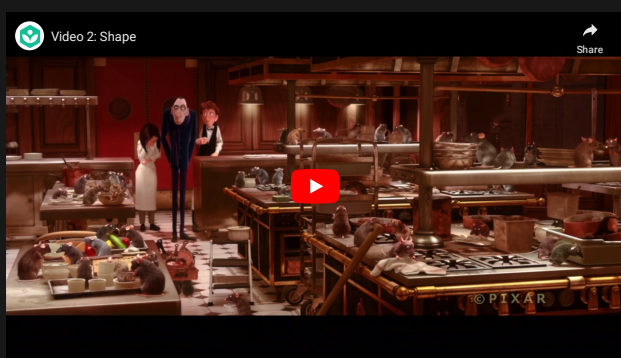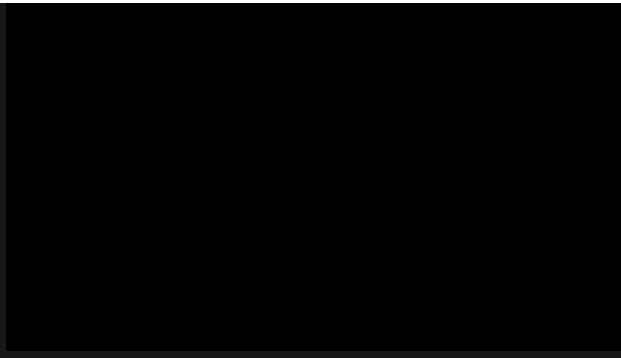
Storyboarding Usage

1. Film / Television / Video Games The storyboard is essentially a large comic strip of the film or some section of the film produced beforehand to help directors, cinematographers, video game cinematic director and advertising clients to visualize the scenes and find potential problems before they occur.
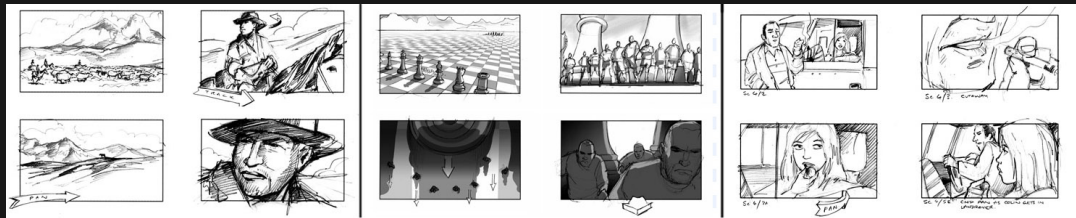
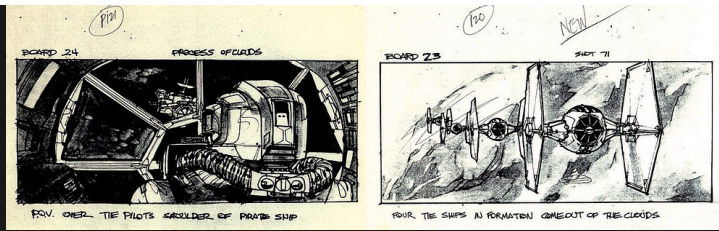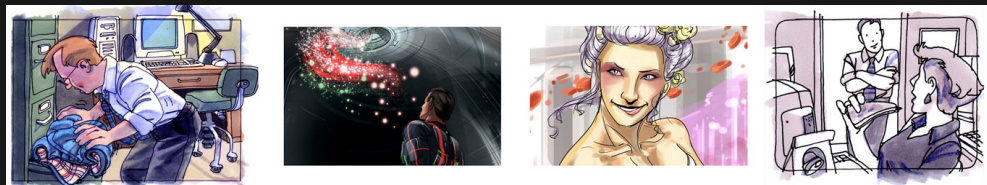**2. Animatics:** In animation and special effects work, the storyboarding stage is followed by a mock-up called "animatics" (also known as leica reels or story reels) to give a better idea of how the scene will look and feel with motion and timing. All the panels get strung together in a slideshow with the voice actors saying their lines in conjunction to the scenes. This is how you plan out the length of ever shot and sequence and ultimately time out the length of the entire episode or film.
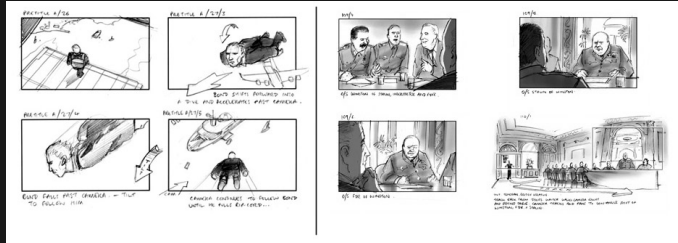
3. Interactive Media / Advertising / Business: Storyboards were adapted from the film industry to business for planning ad campaigns, commercials, workflow proposals or other projects intended to convince or compel an audience to action, and to pitch a concept to the client. Storyboarding is even used in the fields of web development, software development and instructional design to present and describe interactive events as well the display of flowcharts, audio elements and motion graphics.

Advertising - Storyboard:
Cheerios Keyframes.

pspart.com
the art of paul phillips

Artwork © 2012 Paul Phillips

But the most important reason is for yourself. Whatever animated thing you are about to create or develop, storyboarding it first will always help you to PLAN YOUR WORK, which is vital to figuring out the staging and acting for all your characters and layouts and how the camera will frame these elements.

Introduction to visual storytelling:
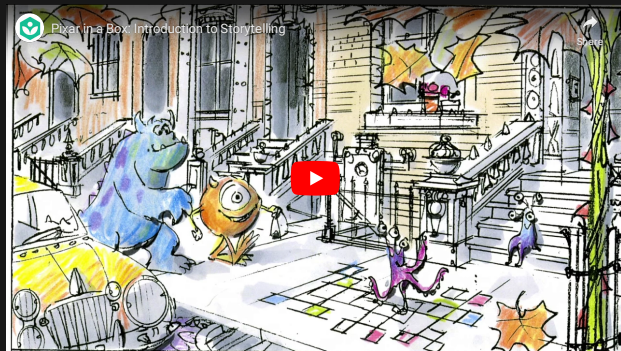
Planning is probably the step most often missed by students, and at the same time, it is probably the most essential tool in your entire animation toolbox, especially in the first few years of y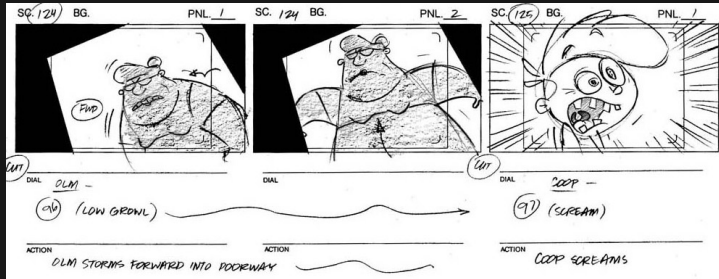our animation life. You should never sit down in front of your computer, animation disc, puppet, or camera setup, until you know exactly what poses you are planning to use, when you are planning to use them, and why. Before you begin any shot, it's so important to study references, work out your thumbnails, and make your timing and acting decisions on paper. This may seem like an "extra" step to some of you, but believe me, it will save you time in the long run and your work will look so much stronger than it would have otherwise.

All the shots I've ever worked on that turned out great, are also the ones I spent the most time planning out. The shots where I got cocky and thought "Aw, I know how to animate that, I'll just sit down and do it" are all without exception, the shots that ended up being just "okay," but never as good as they could have been. I'll always regret missing the opportunity I had to make those shots special, but at least they taught me an invaluable lesson: Planning Comes First, ALWAYS!

Terminology

TYPES OF SHOTS

| EXTREME WIDE or ESTABLISHING SHOT | LONG / FAR WS | FULL FS | MEDIUM MS | CLOSE CU | EXTREME CLOSE ECU |

ANGLES - BASIC

| STRAIGHT ON | UP SHOT | DOWN SHOT | WORM'S EYE VIEW | BIRD'S EYE VIEW | OVER CAMERA |

ANGLES - VARIOUS

| OTS (over the shoulder) | UP SHOT / 2 SHOT short character in FG | UP SHOT / 2 SHOT same character size | DOWN SHOT / 2 SHOT large person in FG | VIEW THROUGH OL | VIEW THROUGH (BINOCULAR MASK) |

| OTS - 2 SHOT | OTS - 3 SHOT | LOW ANGLE / 2 SHOT | POV SHOT (POINT OF VIEW) | GROUP SHOT | FRAMING WITH OLs (OVERLAYS) |

Upshots place the viewer beneath the focus and downshots place the viewer above, physically and psychologcally. These shots add variety and drama to the sequence. Shot 1 - medium long shot, cut to Shot 2 - downshot (POV), which sets up the upshot (POV).

TILT / DUTCH ANGLE
Used when weird, unstable, impressionistic, spooky, or other novel views are needed.

DUTCH ROLL
Twist in to a tilt to over-dramatize a reaction.

CAMERA MOVES

CAMERA ADJUST: THE CAMERA MOVES LESS THAN ONE FULL FRAME IN ANY DIRECTION

PAN: CLEARLY DRAW IN ARROWS OF DIRECTION

PUSH IN / TRUCK IN
SLOW IN / SMASH IN

PUSH OUT / TRUCK OUT
SLOW OUT / SMASH OUT

DRIFT IN:
IF THE CUT TO THE NEXT SHOT COMES BEFORE THE CAMERA STOPS

PUSH IN / CAM. ADJ. LEFT

SLIGHT ADJ. RIGHT

FRAMING THE SUBJECT

CLOSE UP
EXTREME CLOSE UP
MEDIUM CLOSE SHOT
MEDIUM SHOT
MEDIUM LONG SHOT
FULL SHOT / LONG SHOT

S/A = SAME AS   OL = OVERLAY   ¢ = CENTRE
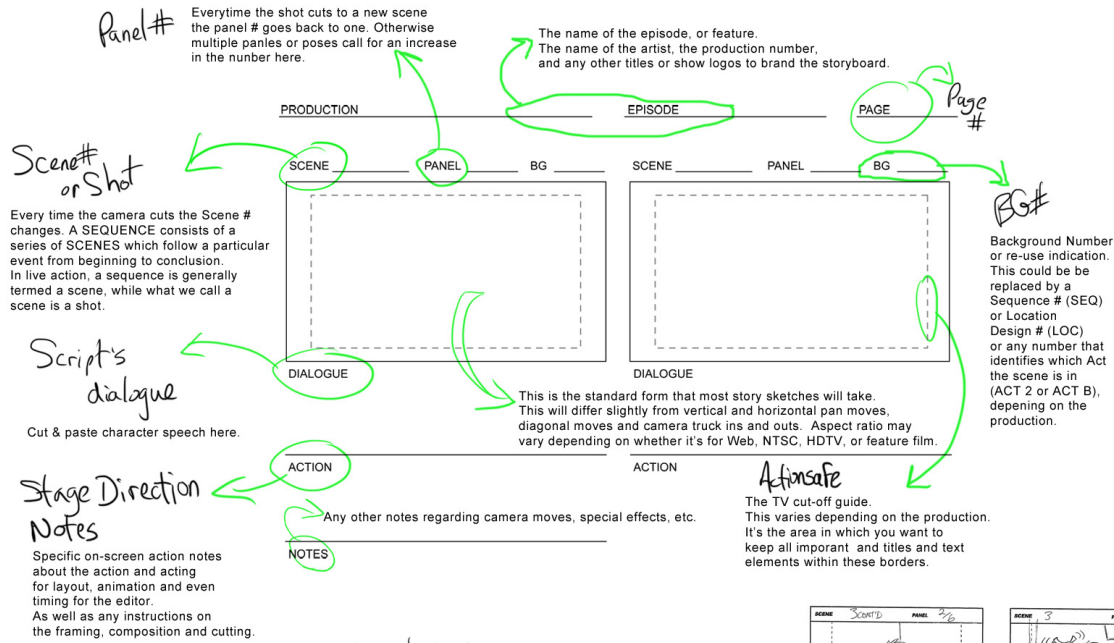BG = BACKGROUND   MG = MIDGROUND
FG = FOREGROUND   O/S = OFF SCREEN

USING MOVES IN COMBINATION

SHOW THE DIRECTION AND START & STOP POINTS OF THE PAN.
IF ACTING CHANGES THROUGH THE PAN, SHOW A FEW POSES.

MULTIPLANE EFFECT

| PAN IN (A)   PAN IN (B) TRUCK OUT | TRUCK IN WHILE PULLING OFF OVERLAYS |

CAMERA MOVES & TRANSITIONS

| TRUCK IN | TRUCK OUT | CAMERA SHAKE | CCW ROTATION TRUCK IN | CW ROTAION TRUCK OUT |

HORIZONTAL PAN - BG TO FG OR FG TO BG

| ANIMATED ROAD BG | ANIMATED GROUND BG |

DIAGONAL PAN WITH TRUCK OUT

DIAGONAL PAN

PAN WITH OVERLAYS
UNDERLAYS PAN FASTER IN FG
UNDERLAYS PAN SLOWER IN BG

VERTICAL PAN
W/ CAMERA AT ¢

HORIZONTAL PAN WITH ACTION

ZIP PAN (SWISH PAN / WHIP PAN)

RACK FOCUS FROM (A) TO (B)

| RIPPLE DISSOLVE | FADE IN | FADE OUT | IRIS OUT | CROSS DISSOLVE | WIPE |

THINGS TO AVOID: • DEAD CENTER COMPOSITIONS • TILTED/OBLIQUE ANGLES • SPLTTING THE SCREEN IN HALF WITH HORIZONTAL LINES

THE ANATOMY OF A STORYBOARD

Panel #

Everytime the shot cuts to a new scene the panel # goes back to one. Otherwise multiple panels or poses call for an increase in the number here.

The name of the episode, or feature.
The name of the artist, the production number, and any other titles or show logos to brand the storyboard.

PRODUCTION _____   EPISODE _____   PAGE _____

Page #

Scene # or Shot

Every time the camera cuts the Scene # changes. A SEQUENCE consists of a series of SCENES which follow a particular event from beginning to conclusion.
In live action, a sequence is generally termed a scene, while what we call a scene is a shot.

SCENE _____   PANEL _____   BG _____   SCENE _____   PANEL _____   BG _____

BG #

Background Number or re-use indication. This could be be replaced by a Sequence # (SEQ) or Location Design # (LOC) or any number that identifies which Act the scene is in (ACT 2 or ACT B), depening on the production.

Script's dialogue

Cut & paste character speech here.

DIALOGUE   DIALOGUE

This is the standard form that most story sketches will take. This will differ slightly from vertical and horizontal pan moves, diagonal moves and camera truck ins and outs. Aspect ratio may vary depending on whether it's for Web, NTSC, HDTV, or feature film.

Stage Direction Notes

Specific on-screen action notes about the action and acting for layout, animation and even timing for the editor.
As well as any instructions on the framing, composition and cutting.

ACTION   ACTION

Any other notes regarding camera moves, special effects, etc.

NOTES

Actionsafe

The TV cut-off guide.
This varies depending on the production. It's the area in which you want to keep all imporant and titles and text elements within these borders.

Scene Labelling

1. Scene 1, Panel 1 of 1
   (first shot of the episode first and only panel)
2. Establishing Shot
3. Fade in & Truck in
4. Action Notes
5. Dialogue speech both off screen and on.

Scene #2 (2nd shot)

Panel 1 of 2

Arrows to indicate movement Walk-in.

Camera Trucks out. to 2nd panel to reveal the last position of the camera.

CUT indicating this is a new shot/angle.

Scene #3 first of 6 panels (poses)

Camera Pan, tracking character as he walks over.

Notice that the Background is drawn in for the first panel, then (unless indicated otherwise) remains the same in all the other poses and panels in the same shot.
Lots of arrows to indicate the arcs of motion and direction of gestures and body movements.
The scene numbers stay the same as long as the camera does not cut. The Panel numbers accumulate until we cut to a new shot (thus resetting the Panel number back to 1).

Storyoboard Tests and Exercises
"The Incredibles" Practice Retro-boarding

DOWNLOAD: Movie Clip
DOWNLOAD: Thumbnail Template

Play and pause on each shot from the provided clip, and draw what you see, indicate any camera moves, changes in poses and expressions, recreate the poses, framing and subject placement for every shot. **50-60 panels**.

Keep it rough and simple, imagine you are reverse-engineering the sequence as you break down these shots to storyboard them. Think about the pacing and editing, why the shots are framed the way they are, where the negative space is, when and why does it go to close-ups, and where is the main focal point in each shot.

As you go, illustrate the compositional elements used to direct and lead the storytelling.
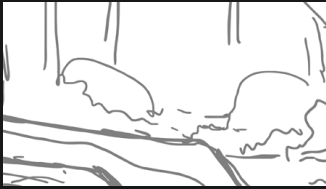
Think about how the camera was used to draw out your initial emotional response and visual language to the scene.
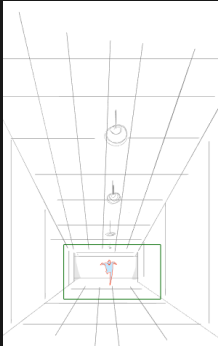
SOFTWARE:
Storyboard Pro

Photoshop

Sketchbook
PaintTool SAI
Krita
Gimp
Storyboarder
Pencil2D
Artweaver

What software you use, doesn't matter, the standard in the industry is both Storyboard Pro and Photoshop. Whether you're working in-house at a studio or freelancing from home, ask the client/supervisor/director which they prefer. If they have no preference, you can use which ever tools you would like.

Storyboard Pro and Photoshop are quick and easy to learn with lots of tutorials on YouTube showing you how to use them.

Usually Storyboard Artists only have a short amount of time to capture their subject, they operte under fast deadlines, and so should you. At first, your drawings should be really loose because you're trying to capture the gesture and energy of your supposed model/actor/character.

So with that being said, your first pass should first focus on the overall performance other than how detailed the drawings look. This means, create a short hand of your character!

With simpler shapes and more gestural lines, you can focus on things like squash and stretch, its easier to exaggerate your drawings; making your drawings bolder. You'll notice that you feel more confident in animating something like a stick man over something with a lot of design beauty. So the thing to be loose and simple in your first approach.

Once you feel that your performance is solid, then you can add another pass on top of those roughs where you can finally tie down your drawings with a bit more detailed

I know these aren't the best examples since they don't really showcase an acting/performance choice, but this shows the first 'thumbnail' pass, rough shapes and forms, then the second pass, which adds in all the missing poses and refines the character's volumes and proportions better. Remember, the faster the action and the more stuff going on, the more poses you need to choregraph and plot out the action.

Don't forget, you're creating reference for layout and animation, you're goal isn't to do pretty pictures, it's to make solid camera-placement choices, strong acting and staging choices, plan out the shots that communicates the story and caoptures the scripts intentions in the best way.

Animators will take your work, use it for reference and take it to the next stage. You need to provide as much clear information as possible.

Since TV animation tends to have smaller budgets than feature animation, we are often times limited in the kind of animation we can do in terms of backgrounds. Here are a couple workarounds I have to show movement in a background.

The first is a tracking shot into cam where our Character is running without gaining away or from cam (but they could if they wanted) The foreground is the ground plane which is just a simple looping set of lines. The BG is actually a static image that would slowly drift down towards the horizon line imitating movement away from the background.

The second is also a tracking shot where the character is more in profile. This one requires some soft focus and low detail background drawings (usually not a lot, maybe 3 looping images. I only used 2 here but the theory holds.

The last one only requires a single background layout, but we use the camera to imitate action as it pulls out over a static image.

Using a static background you can also imitate a camera tilt to change perspectives. This is a background using somewhat simple perspective to take an eye level shot and turn it into an upshot.

Using this background, character A can run towards eye level cam, leap and come down closer to cam and kick character B, then stand up in an upshot.
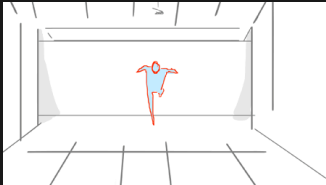
This is really basic cinematography and the basics can help make a board really work and saves the background designers from having to do too many bgs in a short amount of time.

REFERENCE: Photoshop Storyboarding Techniques - Part 1
REFERENCE: Photoshop Storyboarding Techniques - Part 2

Watch this video

DOWNLOAD: Storyboard Template
DOWNLOAD: Character Design Tips by Robert Cory
DOWNLOAD: Tips on Posing/Staging from Sherm Cohen
WATCH: Story School at Pixar
REFERENCE: Types of Shots
REFERENCE: Tips on Staging

Storyboard Pro Trick: Tips on Storboarding 1
Photoshop Trick: Tips on Storboarding 2
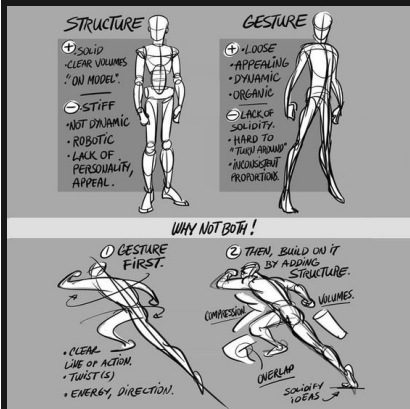
Clarity in your posing comes from strong lines of action and negative space:
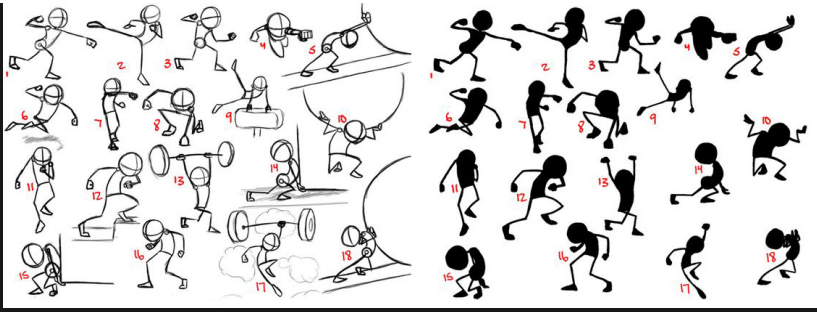
Tips on shot composition:
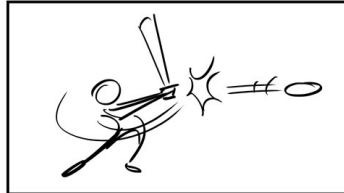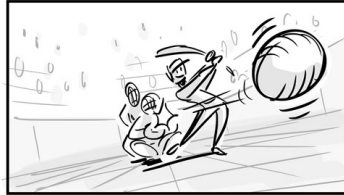
DOWNLOAD: How to use the Axis Line
DOWNLOAD: Shot Progression Method
SAVE & USE: Ron's Storyboard Cheatsheet
DOWNLOAD these Storyboard Brushes.

Install them in Photoshop like this:
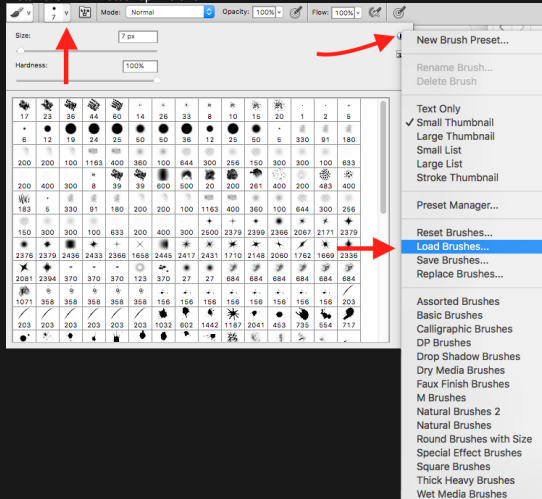
Tips for shortcut keys for photoshop:

1 **B** Automatically select your BRUSH tool.

2 **alt** Hold this down in between brush strokes to temporarily call up your EYEDROPPER and select color from your image.

3 **F** Change viewing modes for Photoshop– I prefer working without seeing my scrollbars, desktop, etc.

4 **[** **]** Quickly size your brush down ([ ) or up ( ]).

5 **Space** Hold the SPACE BAR to temporarily call up your HAND TOOL to move around your image easily.

6 **ctrl (⌘)** Hold this key to temporarily call up your MOVE TOOL to move your active layer quickly.

7 **ctrl (⌘)** + **Space** Hold these both down and tap with your stylus to quickly zoom IN.

or **alt** + **Space** Hold these both down and tap with your stylus to quickly zoom OUT.

Here's the intro to an old class that Master Story Artist Kris Pearn had made, it breaks down the essence of what the purpose of storyboards are:

Storyboarding with Kris Pearn on Schoolism.com

Observe these tips on Staging:

Sorry
This video does not exist.

Framing Techniques:

Fargo - Framing Relationships | The Cinema Cartography

The Art of the Reverse Shot:

Share

The Quadrant System:

Share

The Geometry of a Scene:

Share

DOWNLOAD: Tips on Framing and Cutting
DOWNLOAD: Tips on Composition
DOWNLOAD: Tips on Screen Side / Screen Direction & Motivating the Cut

STUDY: Choosing the Best Poses for Your Acting Shot

STUDY: Reference for Illustrating Expressions for Characters

STUDY: How to Construct Feeling Into a Pose

3D SPACE
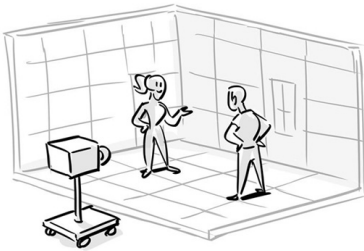
IT'S IMPORTANT TO CONSIDER THE 3-DIMENSIONAL SPACE THAT A SCENE TAKES PLACE IN.

MASTER SHOTS

IN MANY SITUATIONS, IT IS HELPFUL TO CONCEPTUALIZE THE SCENE IN TERMS OF A MASTER SHOT AND ADDITIONAL CAMERAS. THIS WILL GIVE THE SCENE A SENSE OF VISUAL/SPATIAL COHESIVENESS.

MASTER SHOT

ADDITIONAL CAMERA #1

ADDITIONAL CAMERA #2

ENGAGEMENT / DISENGAGEMENT

ENGAGMENT ———————→ DISENGAGEMENT

HEAD-ON	3/4	PROFILE
- TOO "DIRECT" FOR MOST SITUATIONS - GOOD CHOICE IF YOU WANT TO MAKE AUDIENCE UNCOMFORTABLE	- BEST CHOICE FOR VAST MAJORITY OF SHOTS - CLEARLY SHOWS ACTING AND EXPRESSIONS WITHOUT BEING TOO "DIRECT"	- TOO "DETACHED" FOR MOST SITUATIONS - GOOD CHOICE FOR SHOWING A CHARACTER ACTING ALOOF OR EMOTIONALLY DISTANT

HEAD FRAMING IN STORYBOARDING

1 MAXIMUM CLARITY THROUGH:
- OPEN BG FOR CHARACTER
- COMFORTABLE POSITION. NOT TOO CLOSE TO EDGES.

2 KEEP GENERAL POSITION OF CHARACTER (HEAD) FROM SHOT TO SHOT.

3 SAME RULES APPLY WITH PUSHED PERSPECTIVE.

4 BREAK THE RULES IF THE STORY NEEDS IT.
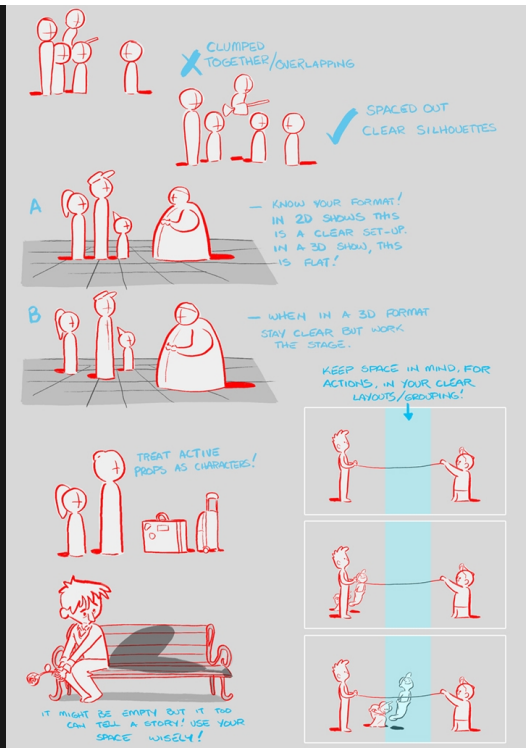
Tips from the 'Adventure Time' Storyboard Director:

Don't break the 180 Rule!

Keep characters on a consistent side of the screen throughout a sequence. Don't flop them back and forth. Imagine a straight line between two characters. pick one side of that line and only show them from that side of the line.
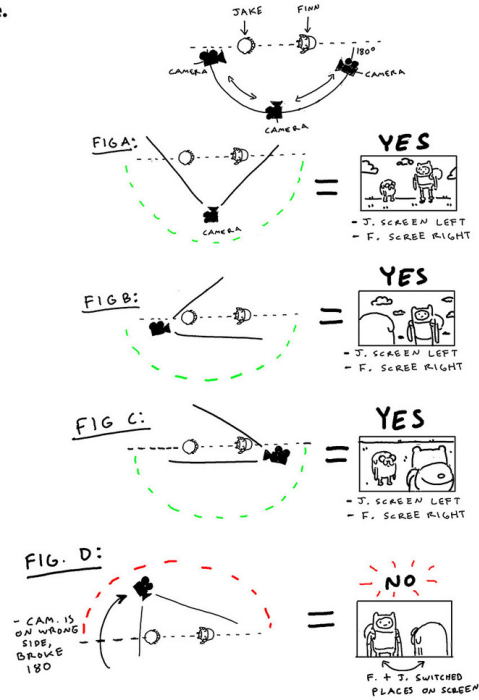
Screen Direction
Maintain the direction a character or object is moving from shot to shot.
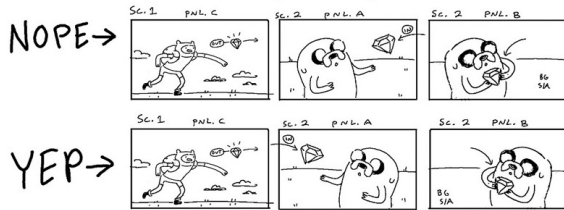
Maintain screen direction through the whole episode. For example: Finn and Jake leave the tree house on a journey heading left to right. Keep them heading left to right untill they reach their destination. Have them head the opposite direction, right to left on their way home. This is not a must, and can be deviated from along the way, but it's good to keep it in mind.

- Maintain characters proportions, volumes, scale and placement throughout a scene. Don't let them grow and shrink or drift around uncontrollably. Don't let arms, legs, bodies get thicker and thinner from pose to pose.

- Keep hands and gestures clear. Draw all the fingers.

- Make sure facial expressions read clearly.

- Posing out acting and dialogue can be done to a lesser extent in the thumbnail stage. Additional poses can be added in the Clean up stage.

- Re use setups. When cutting around in a sequence, look for opportunities to re use previous shots. It'll save you from having to draw new backgrounds. Cutting to familiar shots is less chaotic for the audience too. It helps to establish a comfortable rhythm.

Watch some helpful viewing material on film theory and visual language:

Extreme shots
Share

Video 4 (UPDATED)
Share

storyboarding (UPDATED)
Share

Genndy Tartakovsky | Reading the Action
Share

David Lean's Scene Transitions
Share

Akira Kurosawa - Composing Movement
Share

12 Angry Men- A Lesson in Staging
Share

Mindhunter's Brilliant Editing - A Breakdown
Share
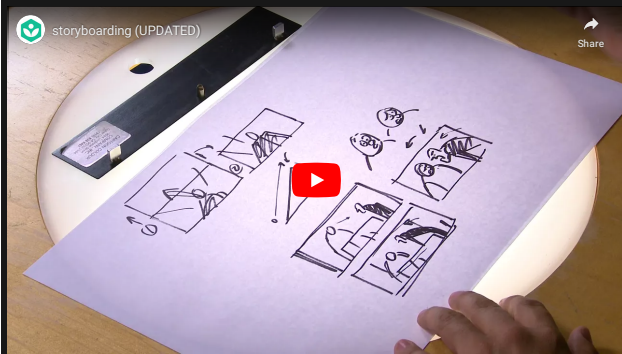
The Importance of Thumbnailing
Professional/experienced storyboard artists can do about 30 clean panels per day. This is because they do a lot of play-outs and run-throughs; where they do quick and dirty roughs like this to see how the sequence works. It's actually quite normal to be able to rough out 200 panels in an 8 hour shift.
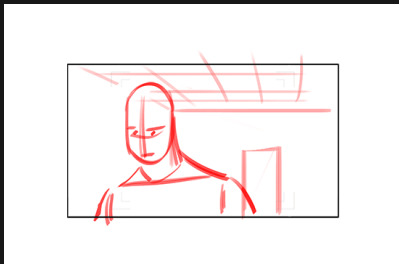
STUDY: Understanding Composition

This little rough thumbnail is 27 panels, and it's not actually staged very well, but it was done in 15 minutes.

Something like this is what any storyboard artist would turn in for their thumbnail/rough pass to be reviewed by a the director or storyboard supervisor. Then they will receive notes on how to make it better. They'll redo whatever he/she asks for, and then comes the clean up pass... which is a different animal, and can take a bit longer, in the clean-up pass you refine the posing and acting, placing the characters on-style and on-model, add in more BG details, add in some secondary poses and camera information.

But still, just to get to the clean stage, it's important to be fast, to be an efficient storyboard artist you need to burn through the really rough passes... so you CAN get all your thumbnails done, get feedback and approvals, and do the revisions asked, and still have plenty of time to spend doing clean up.Â

The most crucial thing to keep in mind: It's more important to tell the story, than to draw a pretty picture.

Clarity in your staging and posing is key.

Composition in your shots can be improved with simple methods like this:

A useful trick to help you avoid flat staging between characters is to create a dynamic visual triangle. Place your characters in the foreground near the camera, in the middleground, and in the background to introduce a sense of depth to your composition.

- Create depth in your compositions: Place characters or other elements in the foreground and middleground to help create a sense of scale and perspective and to strengthen your overall frame composition.
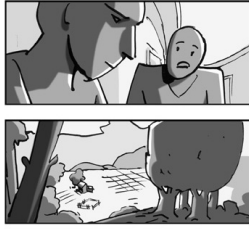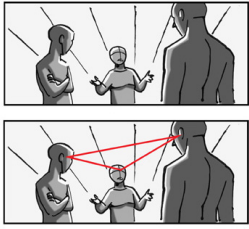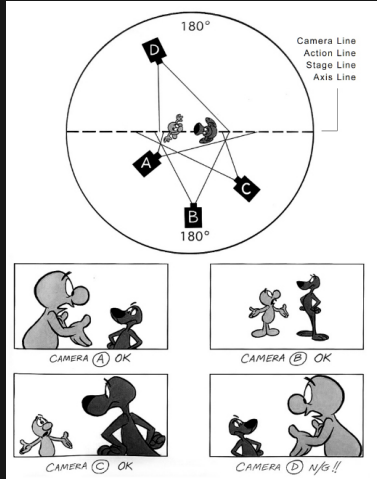

Thumbnail Tips:
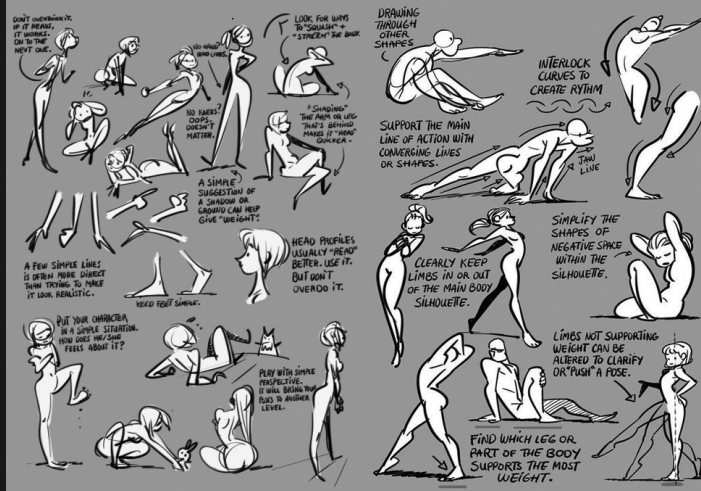
Pay attention to the axis line to maintain screen continuity from shot to shot.
You may have characters actively cross over the axis line in order to have them change which side of the screen they are on.

Carefully plan when to make insert shots - those close-ups that will allow the viewer to see what the characters sees, often happens in this story when they look down to read the book title. Type out the dialogue under the panels.

Storyboarding Advice:

Visual Storytelling 101:

Visual Subtext:

Cinematic Motion - Screen Position/Direction:

Action Directing with Genndy Tartakovsky:

Using Scale & Framing as a Visual Storytelling Tool:
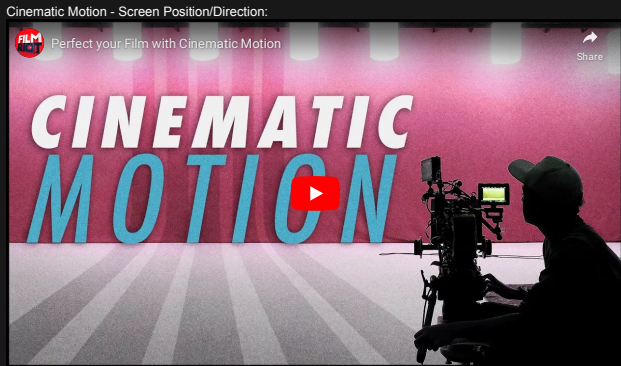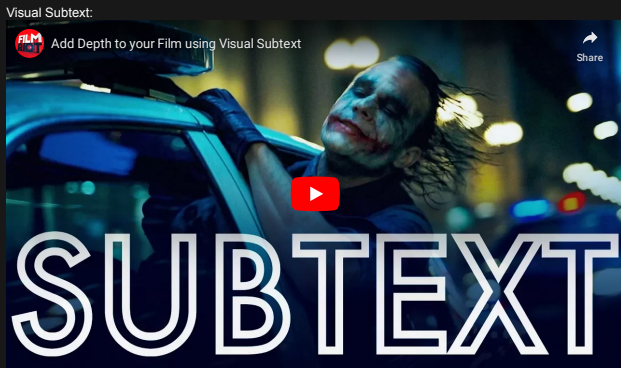
What storyboard artists can learn from comics:
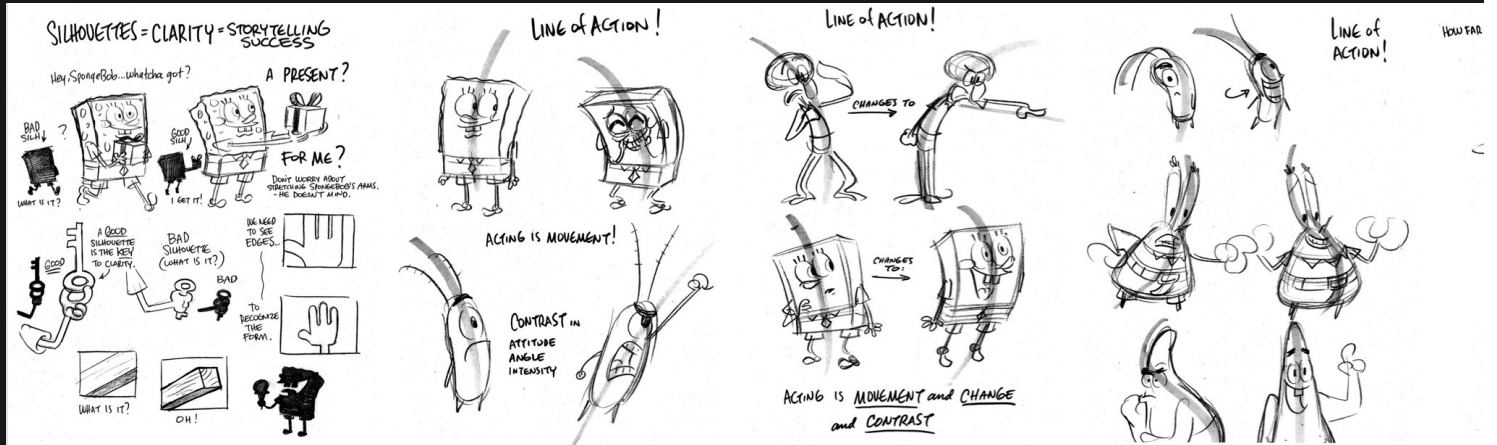
A storyboard artist is a sprinkle of fine artist, a dash of filmmaker, and a smidgen of writer all kneaded into one crispy bread loaf. A key ingredient in the mix is the filmmaker part, and for that we need to understand the visual language of film. The film language makes direct reference to a camera when discussing shots and visual storytelling. The concept of a camera is what determines the point of view of the story.

Think of yourself as being part of the story and being able to view the events through your personal camera lens. As a storyboard artist, we look through the camera lens of our minds and capture what we see in a drawn image. In the beginning, these camera and cinema concepts may seem overly technical, but once you understand the principles behind film language, it unlocks all of the excitement and challenges of a storytelling project.

Being a storyboard artist in animation is particularly challenging; you become all of the following >> cinematographer, illustrator, character designer, prop designer, backgrounds designer, actor, and editor... all rolled into one.

Storyboard a Chase scene, where there is a simple beginning, middle and end, and a clear goal for the characters. Try to keep the action short, tight, and to the point **(50-100 panels)**. Pay attention to stageline and camera mechanics. Keep it very loose and rough, *thumbnails only*, but all the action is must be **clear**.

DOWNLOAD: Thumbnail Template
DOWNLOAD: Chase Scene Sample
STUDY: Storyboard Refresher Course
STUDY: How the Shots Tell The Story (Wall-E)

BEFORE YOU BOARD:
Think of your action and how the characters drive the story.
Identify your characters and their role in the scene.
PROTAGONIST - who is our sympathetic lead... who are we rooting for to win?
What is that character's goal?
Will the chaser win or lose?
ANTAGONIST - who is working against our sympathetic lead?
What is this character's goal and how is this want in conflict with your protagonist's want.
- For simplicity, please try to keep the primary action of the scene between two characters (or two character groups, as seen in *Bullet*).
- It can be a chase on horseback, skiing, cars, bikes, airplanes, or a *foot chase*. - Work rough... try to make your staging clear and readable, always focus on compositional design and big shapes rather than detail, imagine what the animatic would look like, fast cutting + fast moving.
- Remember to number your drawings and if possible write out the premise of the scenes (under the panels) so I can quickly troubleshoot spots where I may get lost in the action. Very rough, simple shapes and forms, strong lines of action, lots of movement, no dialogue.

Have fun... This is the type of work Board Artist's kill for. See this classic Gumball episode's chase scene.

Here's another epic chase scene storyboarded.

Indiana Jones | the Fundamentals of Action
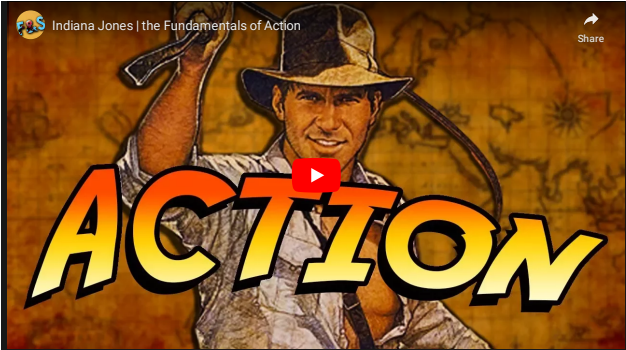
Applying these theories to your storyboarding; there are two things that stand out to me as being extremely crucial in that video -- CLARITY and FOCAL POINT. In every Indy clip used in that video, all the shots are easy to **read**, and have only one primary element the audience need to focus on.

Think like a camera person:

Become very, very, very familiar with the basics, and how to use them: