

I WRITE PICTURES!

BY WILLIAM C. MARTELL

Here are 10 visual storytelling techniques to help you turn your thoughts and emotions into actions—if we can't see it on the screen, it doesn't exist.

Alfred Hitchcock said, “Rely on action to tell your story and resort to dialogue only when it's impossible to do otherwise.” Screenplays are stories told in pictures. Modern motion pictures consist of two parts—the picture and the sound. As writers, we are responsible for both. The WGA ran a series of ads created by Scott Roeben that called attention to those great moments in cinema that were the picture part: “Remember that scene where Indy climbs out of the pit and starts to leave and THWACK that spoke is right through that coward dude's face, and then there's that RUMBLING and that friggin' huge boulder comes rolling right toward him and he has to haul his ass out of there? Somebody wrote that.” Just as actors don't make up their own dialogue (unless they're stars), the director and cameraman don't make up the pictures. That's half the movie! Half the *story*! And half of our job. We write pictures.

But, how do we make sure the pictures are telling the story? How do we write the character actions and situations and visuals that impact the audience? I went deep into my DVD collection to look at some of Hitchcock's early films to see how his writers did it ... and found 10 techniques to improve your visual storytelling.

Active Lifestyle

The first thing we need to do is find a story that isn't just talking heads. Something where characters don't just stand there, they do something. Back in 1927, before movies had sound, Hitchcock wrote and directed *The Ring*. The story of a carnival boxer, “One-Round” Jack Sander (Carl Brisson), who will fight anyone for a price ... and if they win, they win a large amount of money. The pretty girl selling tickets to the fights, Mabel (Lillian Hall-Davis), is Jack's fiancée. One by one, contestants go into the ring ... and come out holding their jaws or their stomachs. Jack never gets hit. One great moment has a contender hand his coat to a friend ringside before leaving frame to win his money ... only to

slam back against the ropes a moment later ... and his friend hands his coat back.

A Big Guy (Ian Hunter) begins flirting with Mabel, and this makes Jack jealous. While the

Carnival Barker tries to get more people from the crowd to put up the money for a fight, Jack focuses only on the Big Guy, goading him to take a fight ... and we have our conflict and



our story. By “casting the story” in the world of boxing, we can take the concept of two men fighting for the love of a woman and show them *actually* fighting. We want to set our stories against a background where people *do things*. They could run marathons or fight fires or try to win the world record for the tallest house of cards—as long as they are *doing* something. We need to place our stories in a background where conflict can be externalized. Where emotions and thoughts can be shown through actions.

Contrast

One of the greatest tools we can use is contrast—showing the difference between two things. When the Big Guy enters the ring with Jack, the “Round 1” card is dirty and torn up. But the Big Guy puts up a fight! After the first round, they put up the “Round 2” card and it’s brand-new—never been used before! The contrast between the old, torn-up “Round 1” card and the brand-new, unused “Round 2” card tells us something.

You can use contrast between two objects, contrast between character and environment, or contrast between two characters. The Big Guy is a sharp-dressed man who seems out of place at the carnival while Jack looks like he belongs there—one of the most important things you can do with any two characters who share the screen is find several ways to show how they are different. The great part about this technique is that by contrasting two characters, we learn about *both* of them and also learn about their relationship. I have a script where I needed to show a character’s loneliness, so I put him at the airport surrounded by people meeting their loved ones and hugging.

Visual Device

After they put up the “Round 2” card, we see the fiancée at the ticket window with a big roll of tickets ... which *rapidly* spins into a very small roll as they are sold. This is a visual device to show us how important this boxing match has become. The key to creating a visual device

is to focus on what information you want to give to the audience, then find a symbol that shows that. If you want to show the passage of time, you might start with a new candle and have it burn down to nothing.

Another early Hitchcock film, *Sabotage* (screenplay by Charles Bennett based on the novel by Joseph Conrad), opens with the sparkling lights of London at night—signs and buildings and streetlights. Then, the lights begin dimming ... and finally, all go out, thrusting the city into darkness. People pour from a cinema onto the dark streets, confused. At the power plant, authorities find sand in the machinery of a generator ... sabotage! Amidst the confusion, one man is calm—Karl Verloc (Oskar Homolka) strolls into the apartment next door to the cinema and washes his hands in the bathroom ... leaving traces of sand in the sink. The sand is a device to show us who the saboteur is. Our job is to find that visual device that shows us connections among events, thoughts, emotions and information.



Back to *The Ring*: When the Big Guy knocks Jack down and wins the fight, the Carnival Barker doesn't have the promised winner's money. He has to go around collecting money from other carnies. Through this device we learn *visually* that One-Round Jack has never lost a fight—they have no plan in place for losing.

Reaction

The Big Guy uses his winnings to buy a gold bracelet for Mabel—another kind of ring. He flirts with her and gives her his card ... he's top-rated-boxer Bob Corby! Rich, famous, important ... and about to make his run at World Champion. Jack sees the way Mabel looks at Corby, and the bracelet on her arm—he's left his mark on her. Jack could frown or look angry, but we want to use actions rather than expressions. What if you decide to show that your hero is happy by having him smile ... and they cast Clint Eastwood? Clint isn't really a smiling

kind of guy. You may lose that information. But if you can create an *action* that shows happiness, it doesn't matter who gets the role.

Jack feels he's losing Mabel, so he buys a wedding ring and proposes. Another ring! Good screenplays are precise—everything ties together. From the *cause*—seeing Corby flirt with his fiancée—to the *effect*—the marriage proposal—we learn what Jack is thinking and feeling. He's afraid of losing his fiancée to Corby ... feeling insecure.

Sight Gags

Now we come to Jack and Mabel's wedding ... a *carnival* wedding—so we get a dozen sight gags when the guests are being seated, ending with the topper: Siamese twins, one wants to sit on the groom side, one wants to sit on the bride side. The wedding situation allows for many different sight gags—we don't need dialogue because we all know what happens at a wedding. The

“set-up” for the gag is in place, we only need the visual punchlines.

Gags don't have to be funny, they are visual details or actions. In the forgotten Hitchcock thriller *Young & Innocent* (screenplay by Charles Bennett, Edwin Greenwood, and Anthony Armstrong based on a novel by Josephine Tey), an out-of-work screenwriter is wrongly accused of murdering a famous actress. When he gets the public defender from hell—completely incompetent and blind without his inch-thick glasses—he escapes ... wearing the lawyer's glasses as a disguise. But now *he* can't see and almost gets captured!

Think of all the things that happen to Indiana Jones in *Raiders of the Lost Ark* when he tries to get that gold idol at the beginning of the film. There must be three-dozen gags in that scene! The best way to create gags is to brainstorm all of the possibilities for your carnival wedding or blind escape from the law or various booby traps for your treasure-cave scene. Come up with 50 gags and select the best ones.

Decisions

You can also show what characters are thinking or feeling by giving them a physical decision to make. In *Young & Innocent*, that screenwriter on the run hijacks a car outside the courtroom, taking the pretty girl driving hostage. Of course, she's the police chief's daughter who was waiting outside the courthouse for her dad. This bit of irony raises the stakes for the story. The screenwriter tries to convince her that he is innocent, but she's her father's daughter—anyone accused of a crime is probably guilty.

It gets worse when she realizes he doesn't have a gun. They stop at a gas station, and he uses the last of his money to fill the gas tank. Will she run? Will she tell the gas station owner that he's a fugitive from the law? She *almost* does. Our screenwriter asks the gas station owner for directions to the town—where there may be the evidence that exonerates him. “At the Y in the road, turn left ... if you turn right, it just takes you back into town.” She drives to the Y in the road, and she must make a decision—believe that he is innocent and turn left, or turn right and take him back to the waiting police.

She makes a left turn, and we know that she believes him and is going to help him.

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Metaphor (Character)

By now, some of you are wondering what happened with One-Round Jack and Mabel and Bob Corby in *The Ring*. After the wedding, Mabel continues to wear Corby's gold bracelet, and Jack just isn't his old self in the boxing ring. You can figure out the symbolism of that on your own.

That gold bracelet Corby gave Mabel keeps sliding down her arm and covering the wedding ring, making it invisible. There are at least a half-dozen different scenes with that bracelet and ring *showing* us the fight between Jack and Corby for Mabel's heart—two pieces of jewelry fighting it out. Both are symbols; there is no dialogue that explains her heart being pulled two ways, we can see the jewelry battling it out on her arm. The jewelry is another device so that we can see thoughts and feelings.

Failed fighter Jack quits the carnival ... and ends up becoming the sparring partner for Corby as he makes his run at World Champion. Jack's job is now to get beaten up on a regular basis by the guy who made passes at his wife.

Well, "kind of wife"—because Mabel is now less interested in Jack the Loser and much more interested in Corby the Winner ... and starts an affair with Corby! Jack is beaten up by Corby every day and goes home to an empty bed. You can see why they didn't need many "dialogue cards"—this story is told through the actions and situations.

I'll bet you can tell where this story is going ... Jack is going to have to get into the ring again and work his way up to fighting Corby, who is now World Champion, to win back his wife. But he can't take on the Champ alone, so he asks his coach, trainer, and sparring partner from the carnival to help him. The old gang is together again!

Visual Goal

There's a great visual for Jack's rise from nothing to contender: Outside the big boxing arena, there's a huge, wall-sized sign listing the week's bouts. Jack begins at the very bottom of the sign in letters so small you can barely see them ... then with every fight we see, his name moves up on the sign and the lettering becomes larger until he is on the line just below Bob Corby in lettering almost as big. The goal is to take on the Champ, and we need a way to turn that goal into something

we can see. No matter what your character's goal, no matter what the obstacle—both must be things that we can see. If we can't see it in a film, it does not exist. The "bout board" is a way to *show* Jack's progress and *show* what these minor fights mean. No one has to say, "Hey, if you win one more fight, you'll be a contender for Champion"—we can see it on the sign outside the boxing arena.

Situations

There's a big emotional scene in the film that still has the power to choke me up over 90 years after the film was made. Jack wins the fight that bumps him up to the same line as Bob Corby and celebrates with his entourage. By now, these guys are *our friends* as well as Jack's—we've gotten to know them as Jack has made his climb from nobody to contender. Jack invites them back to his apartment to celebrate, but he can't find his wife. She's not in the kitchen when he gets the champagne and glasses. He pours everyone a glass, but before they have their victory toast, he knocks on the bedroom door so that Mabel can be part of the celebration. No answer. Jack searches the bedroom ... she's not there.

Well, she's not in *his* bedroom. There's a big, embarrassing scene where Jack looks at his watch waiting for his wife to return before they drink the champagne ... and his friends wait ... and they *know* his wife is somewhere with Corby ... and the champagne in the glasses goes flat. We *see* it go flat. That's a device to show the passage of time. It's late and the friends all have to leave ... flat champagne untouched in the glasses. It's a heartbreaker. But it also primes you for the Championship bout with Bob Corby. You want Jack to win.

Metaphor (Story)

Our carnival boxer has now been transformed into a contender for World Champion, and it's time for the big fight. Not just a World Championship boxing match, it is also a fight for the love of a woman. At the end of the fight, Corby's trainer finds the gold bracelet discarded ringside—just thrown away—and gives it to Corby. Okay, what has that shown us?

Film is a visual medium and, as screenwriters, we need to think in pictures. Tell our story through the actions of the characters, the use of symbols like the ring and bracelet, and by using contrast and other tools. 🚀

