Creature from the The shed loomed eerily adipiscing in the moonlight under a canopy Aenean bare, twisted branches. As the door creaked open, the hunched old man pulled the light switch. A dusty bulb glowed from the ceiling, casting shadows that made the stacks of tables and chairs look like enormous robots. Hearing a rustling, his work-hardened hand tightened its grip on the cable and he peered short-sightedly through the cobwebs.

Using film techniques to inspire brilliant creative writing

Calling the Shots!

Mr. Banks was hurrying towards his house in Birkbeck Avenue. It was a very cold night and his breath rose in steamy clouds under the street lights. The front gate clanged open and his shoes crunched up the path. As he stood in the porch, fumbling for his keys, he was surprised to see that the house was in darkness.

He pushed open the door and peered into the hallway. “I’m home!” he called, switching the light switch. But the bulb must have blown and he muttered crossly as the door swung shut, blocking out the sound of traffic and plunging the hallway into darkness.

“Anyone in?” he called again, feeling his way into the kitchen where the moonlight shone dimly through the window.

Darkest Hour

Mr. Banks

Birkbeck Avenue

Nick Handel
Calling the Shots!

by

Nick Handel

Using film techniques to inspire brilliant creative writing
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INTRODUCTION

Over a 35-year career with the BBC, I made programmes on a wide range of subjects from missing people to movie stars, from celebrity challenges to Children in Need, from international terrorism to talking dogs. Now freelance, I have been teaching production skills to young people starting out in the TV industry, both at the BBC’s own Academy and for many leading independent production companies. So how can a TV producer/director help children to develop creative writing skills? To answer that, I must briefly take you back to my own childhood. From the age of 10, I dreamed of working in film or TV. School holidays were spent making short movies with friends using my dad’s 8mm camera – and editing the shots together with evil-smelling glue. I quickly learned how to use a camera to amaze, amuse or terrify an audience; it was my first step towards becoming a professional storyteller. My passion for moving images proved invaluable in creative writing at school because thinking filmically helped me bring stories to life on the page. It also enhanced my enjoyment of reading, because I was able to picture myself at the heart of the action.

Film makers are storytellers – whether they’re producing fictional drama (Dr. Who), reconstructions of real-life events (Crimewatch) or documentaries (factual stories told in a visually compelling way). A director must be observant, imaginative and, most importantly, love using pictures and sound to inform and entertain an audience. A writer needs those qualities too, but paints pictures on the page instead of on the screen.

I recently wrote a children’s novel, Newskids on the Net (Matador), about a group of teenagers who start their own TV news station. While I was working on it, planning each scene as a movie in my head, it struck me that a knowledge of film techniques could help young writers at school. Children are growing up in a media age, but have relatively little understanding of the creative film making process and its tricks of the trade. Calling The Shots! encourages them to think of stories as connected, well-crafted ‘sequences’ (rather than paragraphs). Each sequence is made up of ‘shots’ (the equivalent of sentences). Each type of shot has a part to play in telling the story and is designed to have a certain effect on the audience. Children quickly learn to ‘see’ shots in their imagination; this enables them to visualise situations more vividly and the process of describing them becomes more relevant to their world. Storytellers must be able to ‘see’ before they write.

This book is the result of many school visits in which I have encouraged children (aged mainly from 8 – 12) to use film techniques to stimulate ideas for storytelling and composition. Young people are intrigued by the world of TV. It is a major source of information and entertainment – and most of them see it as cool and glamorous; but all its techniques are transferable to the written word. By tapping into that connection, we can add zest to their approach to literacy work.

Calling The Shots! and its accompanying DVD are full of exciting concepts and practical exercises that deal with different on-screen storytelling techniques and explain how they can be applied to the written word. There is advice for teachers on how to implement the ideas and ensure that children fully connect with them. It’s fun being a film director – and better still if you’re gaining writing skills at the same time. The book allows children one major freedom denied to most TV and film producers: there are no budgets to worry about! The only constraint on a writer is his or her own imagination – unless someone buys the film rights, of course.

How can Calling The Shots! help you?

Calling the Shots! is designed to motivate and develop children’s ability in creative writing, while increasing their appetite for reading. It helps them visualise scenes, character, atmosphere and emotion – then find the word power to transfer those images to the page. By the end of the book, they should be producing longer, more descriptive, better-structured stories that keep readers hooked.

This resource contains a host of fun, creative exercises. The Teacher’s Guide explains how each concept works and how you can help children apply it to their writing. The DVD contains lots of original mini-dramas for children to translate from screen to page. It is important to work ‘in concert’ with the DVD. For this reason, my ‘pieces to camera’ (and all the film scripts) are printed in the text to provide an ‘at a glance’ route map through the entire project. I’ve also provided a bank of worksheets (photocopyable from this book and available online PDFs at www.pogolearning.com/cts-resources) and stills from the films (also available online) that you can use on your interactive whiteboard, or as print-outs, to help scaffold the writing process.

For schools with camcorders, I have added a section on video-making using ordinary camera and editing equipment. The process of making simple films is an excellent way for children to build storytelling skills and develop an eye for detail to enrich their creative writing.

This resource helps your pupils to:

- sequence their ideas and stories
- choose words and images that bring writing alive for the reader
- use descriptive language to establish setting and mood
- build sentences
- create ‘worlds’ in which to set stories
- add atmosphere to a narrative
- plan their writing using storyboards
- use ‘connecting’ words to make stories flow on the page
- develop characters: description, behaviour, thoughts and emotions
- convey pace, movement and action.

Icons

Here is a key to the icons you’ll see throughout this book.

- Play the DVD. I’ve included transcripts from the films in italics for your reference.
- This appears when there are curriculum-matched grammar activities that link to the content of the unit.
- These are resources or worksheets for you to duplicate for your pupils. They are also available online as PDFs.
- Sample material for your interactive whiteboard for whole-class work. Digital version available online.
Calling the Shots! and the National Curriculum

Calling the Shots! covers the following National Curriculum objectives.

**SPoken LANGUAGE**

Pupils should be taught to:

- listen and respond appropriately to adults and their peers
- ask relevant questions to extend their understanding and knowledge
- use relevant strategies to build their vocabulary
- articulate and justify answers, arguments and opinions
- give well-structured descriptions, explanations and narratives for different purposes, including for expressing feelings
- maintain attention and participate actively in collaborative conversations, staying on topic and initiating and responding to comments
- use spoken language to develop understanding through speculating, hypothesising, imagining and exploring ideas
- speak audibly and fluently with an increasing command of Standard English
- participate in discussions, presentations, performances, role play, improvisations and debates
- gain, maintain and monitor the interest of the listener(s)
- consider and evaluate different viewpoints, attending to and building on the contributions of others
- select and use appropriate registers for effective communication.

**WritIng – CoMposition**

Pupils should be taught to:

- plan their writing by
  - discussing writing similar to that which they are planning to write in order to understand and learn from its structure, vocabulary and grammar
  - discussing and recording ideas
  - identifying the audience for and purpose of the writing, selecting the appropriate form and using other similar writing as models for their own
  - noting and developing initial ideas
  - in writing narratives, considering how authors have developed characters and settings in what pupils have read, listened to or seen performed.
- draft and write by
  - composing and rehearsing sentences orally (including dialogue), progressively building a varied and rich vocabulary and an increasing range of sentence structures
  - organising paragraphs around a theme
  - selecting appropriate grammar and vocabulary, understanding how such choices can change and enhance meaning
  - in narratives, describing settings, characters and atmosphere and integrating dialogue to convey character and advance the action
  - using a wide range of devices to build cohesion within and across paragraphs.
- evaluate and edit by
  - assessing the effectiveness of their own and others’ writing and suggesting improvements
  - proposing changes to vocabulary, grammar and punctuation to enhance effects and clarify meaning
  - ensuring the consistent and correct use of tense throughout a piece of writing
  - proof-read for spelling and punctuation errors
  - perform their own compositions, using appropriate intonation, volume, and movement so that meaning is clear.

**VOCABULARY, GRAMMAR AND PUNCTUATION**

Pupils should be taught:

**Word**

- regular plural noun suffixes –s or –es (for example, dog, dogs; wish, wishes), including the effects of these suffixes on their understanding of the noun
- how the prefix un– changes the meaning of verbs and adjectives (negation, for example, unkind, undoing, as in untie the boat)
- formation of adjectives using suffixes such as –ful, –less
- to use the suffixes –er, –est in adjectives and to use –ly in standard English to turn adjectives into adverbs
- to use the forms a or an according to whether the next word begins with a consonant or a vowel (for example, a rock, an open box)
- word families based on common words, showing how words are related in form and meaning (for example, solve, solution, solver, dissolve, insoluble)
- the grammatical difference between plural and possessive –s
- to convert nouns or adjectives into verbs using suffixes (for example, –ate, –ise, –fy)
- verb prefixes (for example, dis-, de-, mis-, over- and re–)
- the difference between vocabulary typical of informal speech and vocabulary appropriate for formal speech and writing (for example, find out – discover; ask for – request; go in – enter)
- how words are related by meaning as synonyms and antonyms (for example, big, large, little).

**Sentence**

Pupils should be taught:

- how words can combine to make sentences
- how to join words and clauses using and
- subordination (using when, if, that, because) and co-ordination (using or and but)
- to use expanded noun phrases for description and specification (for example, the blue butterfly, plain flour, the man in the moon)
- to express time, place and cause using conjunctions (for example, when, before, after, while, so, because), adverbs (for example, then, next, soon, therefore), or prepositions (for example, before, after, during, in, because of)
- to expand noun phrases by the addition of modifying adjectives, nouns and preposition phrases (e.g. the teacher expanded to: the strict maths teacher with curly hair)
- how to use fronted adverbials (for example, Later that day, I heard the bad news).

**Text**

Pupils should be taught:

- to sequence sentences to form short narratives
- the correct choice and consistent use of present tense and past tense throughout writing
- to use the progressive form of verbs in the present and past tense to mark actions in progress (for example, she is drumming, he was shouting)
- to use the present perfect form of verbs instead of the simple past (for example, He has gone out to play contrasted with He went out to play).
**UNIT 1: SHOTS AS THE BUILDING BLOCKS OF FILM**

This unit explores the concept of scenes as ‘sequences’ made up of different ‘shots’. You could explain to the children that a ‘sequence’ is to a film what a ‘paragraph’ is to a book and that a ‘shot’ is the equivalent of a ‘sentence’.

Shots are the building blocks a director uses to construct his/her scenes. Each one is carefully framed to contain information that tells the story and involves the audience at an emotional level. Once captured on film, the ‘shots’ are assembled by an editor – just like pieces of a jigsaw. A ‘sequence’ is a series of shots that, when joined together, give the impression of continuous action.

Children see sequences on TV and film all the time. Watching film drama with a more informed and critical eye helps them look at picture content and composition more closely. Suddenly, it becomes easier to visualise scenes in the imagination – and this is a very effective way of unlocking vocabulary. Once children learn to see before they write, they produce livelier and more descriptive work – and have a lot more fun doing so.

**Going back in time**

In 1895, the Lumière brothers, Auguste and Louis, gave the very first film show to a paying audience. They had made a series of short movies. Each one was 50 seconds long and, because there was no editing in the late 19th century, had been filmed from a single camera position – and in one ‘take’. One of them was called *Arroseur Arrosé* (which translates as *The Waterer Watered* – or *The Sprinkler Sprinkled*), but I prefer to call it *Teasing the Gardener*.

**ARROSEUR ARROSÉ:**

An old gardener is watering his plants on a hot summer afternoon. Suddenly, a little boy sneaks out from behind the bushes, creeps across the lawn and deliberately stands on the hose. The flow of water stops and the puzzled old man peers down the nozzle of the pipe. As he does so, the boy raises his foot – and sends a jet of water spurting into the gardener’s face. Alright, it’s an old joke – but it had them rolling in the aisles back in 1895!

Show children the original film (Film 1).

**FILM 1: ARROSEUR ARROSÉ**
Brothers, Auguste and Louis, and first shown in Paris in 1895. It’s called Arroseur Arrosé – and I expect you all know what that means... well maybe you don’t. If you really want to impress your mates though, it means ‘The Waterer Watered’ – or ‘The Sprinkler Sprinkled’. You’ll see why in a minute. First of all, see what you think of the movie and then discuss it with your teacher.

Discuss the film with the class. Was the story well told? Could they identify with the characters? Did it have tension and pace? How was the comedy built up? Most important of all – why would it be better if somebody filmed it today?

The answers you are looking for, of course, are that nowadays a director can use many different shots to tell a story. By cutting from one to another, he or she can draw our attention to important details within each scene, e.g. facial expression. This creates drama and we feel more involved in the action.

Now play Film 2 from the DVD. It’s a 21st century version of Arroseur Arrosé which I call Teasing the Gardener. While they watch it, children should be thinking about how it differs from the original.

"A really good way to develop creative writing skill is to practise "directing" scenes as "movies in your head""

Telling the story in pictures

Once children learn to picture the shots they’d use if they were filming a story, they’ll get ideas for details that turn basic information into pieces of writing that keep an audience ‘hooked’. Readers can’t see or hear what’s going on. The writer’s job is to carry setting, characters, action and mood into the imagination. You might suggest that:

Shots make for clearer, more effective storytelling.

They can make a reader laugh, cry – or hide behind the sofa!

Thinking in shots increases vocabulary and ideas rush into your head for words that bring the action to life in 3D and in colour.

WHOLE-CLASS ACTIVITY

I’ve included a storyboard of Teasing the Gardener. The pictures are frame enlargements from the film – and there are some prompts you might use as you help the children to create the story in words, writing ‘captions’ for each frame. Caption writing involves capturing what is going to be in a shot and is a good way of producing imaginative, well-structured sentences. These sentences can later be joined together to create a complete story. This will be a valuable skill as the children move on to longer, more ambitious written work.

Working as a class, tell the story by writing a caption for each frame, using the blank Teasing the Gardener worksheet (www.pogolearning.com/cts/unit1) on your interactive whiteboard. The shots are also available, with prompts, on the following pages to guide you through the exercise. Encourage children to use words that make descriptions more vivid and contrast these to the easier, more obvious choices, e.g. The water hissed and the flowers bobbed their heads under its cool spray (onomatopoeia and personification) is far more effective than He zapped them with the hosepipe. Explain that a good writer always thinks about how to make sentences more interesting.

Emphasise the importance of describing characters. A good starting point is giving them names. In this case, the old man is hardly a Romeo, Tiger or Zack, but he could be a Ted, Albert or Percy. There are many ways of adding detail to characters, e.g. through behaviour (if the scene is set on a hot day, old Ted could be irritably brushing pesky mosquitoes away from his nose) or facial expression (Ted’s changes from ‘happy’ through ‘puzzled’ to ‘furious’ as the story unfolds). These ideas come easily once we learn to see characters and situations in our mind’s eye.

INDEPENDENT ACTIVITY

Once you’ve created a class version, you could ask children to work independently, writing their own captions. Encourage them to change key aspects of the story, e.g. the setting – perhaps the story takes place in a zoo; the characters – maybe the old man is a baddie that the boy is trying to teach a lesson; or the ending – maybe the trick backfires and the boy ends up getting wet. Use the blank Teasing the Gardener worksheet (p.17 or www.pogolearning.com/cts/unit1) for children who want to use the original frames and use the blank storyboard (p.149 or www.pogolearning.com/cts/general) for children who want to create their own version.