

## WRITING VISUALLY (OR, “SHOW IT, DON’T SAY IT”)

Most beginning screenwriters make a very simple mistake: they forget that movies are made up of pictures. Yes there’s dialog and talking and music, and all that other stuff, but first and foremost: movies are a visual form of storytelling.

Let’s go back to *Raiders of the Lost Ark* for a moment. Consider the beginning of the movie. In *Raiders*, a little over two minutes of the movie passes before the first line of dialog, “the Hovitos are near.” In other words, the first 2 minutes are told completely in pictures. Sure there’s music and sound effects, but you can turn the sound down and the scene still makes sense.

### JOHNNY THE PAPERBOY

Here’s another example. Let’s say we’re going to make a movie about Johnny, a 15-year-old guy who has a paper route. A paper route is a pretty easy thing to show, so let’s make things more complicated. Let’s say that Johnny’s father died a few years ago and that his mother has recently remarried. Let’s also say that Johnny isn’t too happy about his mother’s new marriage (now our story has a problem to solve). Here’s a first pass at this story. Try to imagine each scene as it is would look in a movie.

Johnny, a friendly-looking 15-year-old, is walking down the sidewalk of a tree-lined street. Around his shoulders is a bag full of folded newspapers. He walks with heavy feet and his head held low. Occasionally, he pulls out a paper and half-heartedly throws it toward a house.

In front of one house, a kind-looking old man sees Johnny. The old man shakes his head in sympathy and walks over to Johnny. Placing his hand on the boy’s shoulder he says:

“Hi Johnny, you don’t look too happy.”

“Hi Mr. Johnson. No, I guess I’m not.”

“Are you still upset that your mother just remarried?”

“Yes, I guess I am.”

“Ah. I suppose you still miss your father. It’s only been three years since he died, hasn’t it? And the fact that your new step-father is vice-principal of your school can’t be easy, either.”

Alright, that’s enough of that.



## Digital Filmmaking Handbook

Do you see the problem? Sure, there's some visual storytelling going on – Johnny walks around looking sad, and we know that he has a paper route. But the dialog isn't believable. Mr. Johnson plainly knows that Johnny is upset, and he knows why. The only reason he's asking is because the screenwriter needed someone to explain things to us, not to Johnny.

Let's try the scene again.

A car pulls into the driveway of a nice-looking house on a tree-lined street. An attractive woman in her 40s gets out of the car and goes in the front door of the house. Inside, she sets down her purse, takes off her sunglasses, and glances at the mail.

"Hello? Anyone home?" she yells absent-mindedly.

Cut to a hallway. We see her walking towards us, still looking at the mail.

"Johnny, are you home?"

She walks up to Johnny's room and looks through the open doorway. Inside is a typical teenage boy's room. Heaped on the bed are a pile of folded newspapers and a newspaper bag. The woman suddenly looks concerned and hurries down the hall.

In the kitchen, she sets down the mail and is reaching for the phone as a man, sweaty in his running clothes, walks in the back door.

"Hi honey," he says, slightly out of breath.

"Hi dear. Have you seen Johnny?"

"No, but I've been out for the last hour."

The woman now looks more upset.

"I'm afraid he's skipped his paper route again," she says. "I don't get it, this just isn't like him!"

The man looks concerned. He takes the woman's hand.

"It's hard having a new father. It's going to take time for all of us to adjust. That's all."

The woman looks at him and nods.

On a basketball court, a nice-looking kid stands on the free-throw line. He takes a shot and makes it.

"Alright Johnny!" yells another kid.

There are, obviously, a lot of things that are different about this telling. First, we actually get to see all of the characters involved – Johnny, his mother and step-father. What's most important, though, is that when they speak, they aren't speaking to tell us things, they're speaking to tell things to each other. In other



words, their dialog is more realistic than in the first scene.

Two other things are important. First, the emotions that the characters are expressing are more complex. The woman exhibits contentment when she walks in the house, then confusion, then distress. Johnny, is revealed to be upset, but then we see him confidently make a basketball shot. In other words, the emotions aren't the stilted "Gee Johnny, you're sad" emotions of the first telling.

Also important is that, in the second telling, the filmmaker has the opportunity to present a lot more information to the audience. We get to see the inside of Johnny's house. We get to see his mother and step-father. We see that his step-father is active and fit and that his step-father and mother seem to get along very well. Yes, we haven't learned yet that he's the vice-principal of the school, but we can be shown that later.

Telling a story visually is hard because you have to come up with situations where you can let your characters realistically and believably act out what they are feeling and doing. Sometimes, it can be very difficult to think up such situations. The pay-off, though, is a movie with much more believable, natural, interesting scenes.

This document is a companion to the Digital Filmmaking Handbook, 2nd edition, by Ben Long and Sonja Schenk, published by Charles River Media ([www.charlesriver.com](http://www.charlesriver.com)).

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