# Prepare to Board!

## Creating Story and Characters for Animated Features and Shorts

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## FOR ANIMATED FEATURES AND SHORTS

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# Introduction

This book describes visual storytelling and design methods developed during the "Golden Age of Animation" and still in use today, as Roy Disney pointed out to me. Some people say that story is the *only* thing that matters in animated film.  I agree. Good animation and good design never saved a bad story. Strong characters can make a weak story tolerable and a good story better, but characters develop within a story context. Each depends upon the other.

The first part of this book will concern itself with developing story *content*. *Technique* will be discussed in the second part, and the third part will deal with the *presentation* of the story and artwork before an audience.

Story works out of and depends on your experience and skill. There is no software that will draw good storyboards for you.

Memorable characters exist in every medium. The technology may vary but basic design principles remain constant. A well-drawn character will translate into a well-designed puppet or computer-generated imagery (CGI) character.  The principles described in the book's character design sections are intended for use in all media.

Eighty percent of an animated film's production time is spent in developing  the story, art direction, and designs for the characters. The other 20 percent is spent on the actual animation production and post-production.

Outlines, scripts, and storyboards for television, feature  length, and short animated films differ greatly from one another. Feature and short animated films are more popular than ever before. Yet their production differs from that of a television show. Most films and television shows start with a script. While scripts are important on longer animated films, they are not necessarily written at the start of the production. Animated short films may be created without any script at all.

This book will concentrate on visual scriptwriting.

There is a danger of concentrating solely on technique—the 'how'—of animation (squash and stretch, how to turn a head, how to do a walk, how to run a program) and considering story and context—the 'why'—almost an afterthought.

This is putting the cart before the horse.

Animation and story are not mutually exclusive. Good stories and appealing characters will transcend their technology. Professional animators and hardcore fans will notice minor inconsistencies in a film. If the story is good, and the characters appealing, the audience will overlook these same inconsistencies.

Animated characters are often able to defy the laws of gravity and physics, but animated stories cannot defy the laws of common sense. The animated film must create its own reality. We must immediately comprehend the power of the poisoned apple, or the character weakness of a lion cub or a "Beast." Boredom and frustration results if a character's properties change mid-picture solely to accommodate weak storytelling.

It is not enough to rely on the soundtrack to carry the story. Ideally, dialogue in an animated film complements the visuals and not vice versa. The very best character animation can still tell the story with the soundtrack turned off. It should illustrate a story that is worth telling.

Good writing leaves a lot to the reader's imagination. Each reader creates their individual pictures of the settings and the characters' appearances based on information that the author provides. Author and reader collaborate to create the story. An animated film distributes a few artists' fantasies to large masses of people. We should try to make them good ones.

Animated actors are harder to watch than human actors. The animator must convince the audience to suspend disbelief and accept imaginary characters as living beings with real problems. Most live actors don't have this problem since we accept them as 'real' from the start. Animation *brings the inanimate to life*—the life is not there to begin with.

A good character can be developed from a story. A good character can *inspire* the story. Story is the most important thing in animation, but creating appealing characters to tell it—*animated* characters—is the *other* most important thing. Which element should the animator develop first?
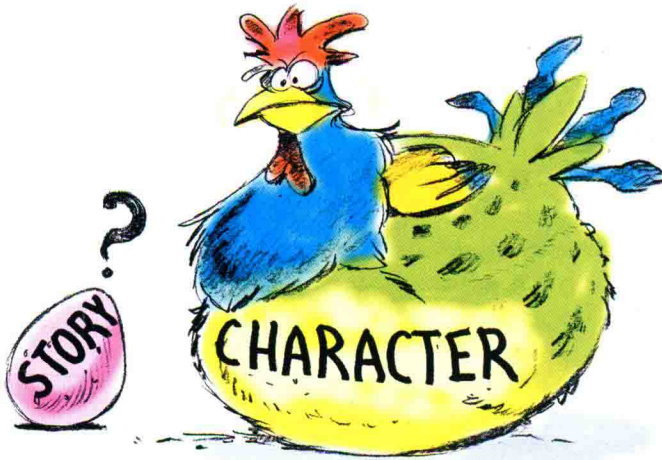
**Which comes first?**

Character and story reinforce one another and are created concurrently during preproduction. They will be discussed in all three parts of this book since developing one in the absence of the other is like making an omelet without eggs.



**Character and story develop simultaneously!**

Development is a marvelous creative process in which the journey is as important as the destination. It's what you do, *and* also how you do it!

I've always felt that animators are not merely "actors with pencils," as the cliché goes. That term does not begin to cover what an animator really does.

We bring the inanimate to life.

We create universes.

We are *magicians*.

Nancy Beiman
Rochester, New York
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# Dedication and Thanks

This book is dedicated to A. Kendall (Ken) O'Connor—a brilliant layout man, designer, draftsman, story man, art director, and teacher who was able to explain everything from how a caterpillar's muscles move to why a 1926 trash can silhouette differs from that of a modern one. In story, these things matter! So this is for you, Ken.

*Circumstances alter cases!*

Nancy Beiman

# Contents

# Getting Started

# First Catch Your Rabbit: Creating Concepts and Characters

There is a famous old cookbook recipe for stewed rabbit. The first sentence of the recipe gets right to the point. It reads: "First, catch your rabbit."

How do you "catch the rabbit" and create original characters and stories? Where do ideas for original stories and characters come from?

A story recipe depends on the freshness of the ingredients, the quality of the preparation, and the skills of the creator.

The first two ingredients— *Character* and *Conflict*—develop simultaneously. Both must be established at the beginning of your story and, like well-written newspaper headlines, they will immediately grab the reader's attention. A quick search through several online news sites yielded the following unusual "human interest" stories:
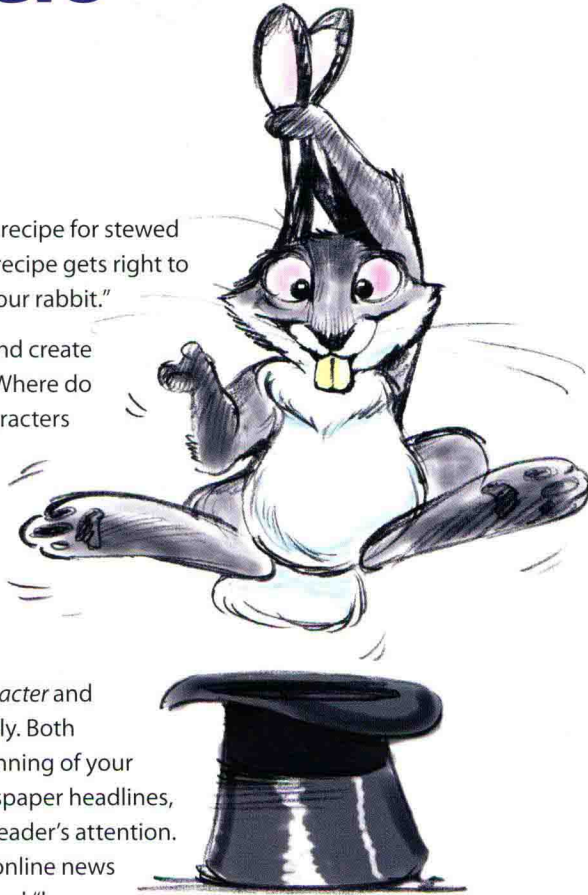
- Robot Runs On Flies and Sewage
- Berlin Bear Steals Bicycle, Attempts Breakout From Zoo
- Boozy Bear Plunders Camper's Beer
- Zombie Worms Found Off Sweden

These actual news items already sound like story lines for animated cartoons. All of the stories have one thing in common: they convey a visual image.



**[Fig. 1-2] Sketches based on online news reports from the BBC, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, and Reuters News Service.**

Some of these headlines leave the reader wanting to know what happened next—(Where was the bear going to *go* with the bicycle?)—or empathizing with a character's situation—(What kind of self-esteem does a fly-eating robot have?). An animated story line may grow from a grain of truth.

Animation pre-production is called *development* for a reason. One definition of development is "the act of improving by expanding or enlarging or refining." The story and characters grow and change during pre-production from simple ideas to the complex, structured, *visual* story.

The next ingredient in the story stew is imagination. Animation is not reality and it is at its best when it portrays things that could *possibly* happen. The seed of reality provides the viewer with a point of identification and then germinates into a fantastic story.

Feature animation often does not start with a written script. The germ of the story can be conveyed in a short *outline* or *treatment*. The characters and plot twists are then developed visually. Stories can change dramatically when they are boarded. Scripts are not finalized until the latter stages of preproduction so that they may incorporate new material created on the storyboard.

Old-time animation story men referred to a story as the "clothesline" on which they would "hang" gags and character development. The shorter film develops more quickly than a feature since it has less time to tell the story. You should be able to convey a story idea in a few short, direct sentences. If you are unable to do this, the idea needs work.