

## Word Movies: a teaching unit

**Get students used to the idea of “movie” as a writing tool.** Once you establish it, it becomes a useful, fundamental teaching tool. Most students like the idea that, when they write, they can create movies on their readers’ minds.

- **Introduce the idea of close-up and wide shot.** When movie directors get ready to shoot a scene, they decide whether they want a close-up or a wide shot. They choose. Good writers can do the same thing when they write. They choose. Explore this idea. *Teachers: This exercise helps students develop a habit of asking if their writing is creating the mental images for their readers that they hope to create.*
  - **Activity 1:** Read each sentence in the box below. Watch the images this sentence creates in your mind as you read. For each sentence, answer these four questions.
    1. Was the image clear or blurry?
    2. Was the image close up or far away (wide shot)?
    3. Did the movie move from close-up to wide shot? From wide shot to close-up? Or did it stay the same?
    4. If only part of this sentence created a strong image in your mind, what part?
    5. How can you rewrite the last sentence with movie verbs?  
Example: I cried as I ran home. > Write two other endings with movie verbs.

### **Sentences in a box**

- A furry yellow worm with lots of legs crawled off a leaf and onto my little finger.
- I was counting the worm’s legs when my mother called me from the house. “Storm’s coming!” she said
- As big, black clouds rolled above me, the little worm slipped through my fingers.
- I was sad on the way home.

- **Activity 2:** Here’s a great way to illustrate the concept of close-up and wide shot: (1) Show the beginning of the movie, *Forrest Gump*: A feather floats down over the whole city of Savannah, a very wide shot.
- Here are some word movies for the students, as the feather falls:
  1. *A feather floats high over a town, trees, and hills.*

2. *The feather floats down over dozens of roofs and trees.*
  3. *The feather floats down through big trees, passing a few roofs and windows.*
  4. *The feather floats past a man sitting on a bench. It lands at his tennis shoe.*
  5. *The man picks up the feather and puts it in his briefcase.*
- **Activity 3:** Ask students to write three sentences that start with a close-up, then pull out to a wider shot. Here's an example. "*A bumblebee landed on my dog's nose, then buzzed into a big field of sunflowers.*" Write three other examples.
  - Then reverse it and write a sentence that starts with a wide shot, then pulls in to a close-up. Example: "*A bumblebee buzzed out of a big field of sunflowers, landed on my dog's nose and stung him.*" Write two more!
- **Movie words and glue words.** This is easy. "Movie" words create images in your mind. Sometimes the images move, and sometimes they're a still image. But they create an image.

Glue words are words like "the," "and," and "is." A glue word doesn't create images, but they help hold the sentence together. They are important, but too many of them can get boring. Aim for a good mix of movie words and glue words.

- Rule of thumb: Choose words that create the kind of image you want.
  - **Activity 1:** Copy the sentences from the box above. Look at each word as you copy. Draw a circle around the movie words and a line under the glue words.
  - **Activity 2:** Are there words in those sentences you can change to create a closer, more specific imager? What are they? How would you change them.
- **Verbs: Use them to help your reader see image and movement:** Lots of times, we choose a "glue" verb when we could be choosing a verb that gives the reader a clearer picture. This is important, so we have five activities.
  - **Activity 1: Learn to recognize glue verbs.** Here are examples of glue verbs: "is," "was," "remain," "consist," etc. None of them bring

up any image by themselves. Look at the four sentences in the box. Draw lines under glue verbs.

- **Activity 2: Learn to choose the verb that gives your reader the image you want.**

If I say, “I came in the room,” the reader doesn’t know how I came in. The verb “came” produces a fuzzy movie. I can choose a verb that gives the reader a sharper movie. For instance: I ran into the room. Strutted into the room. Crawled into the room. Skipped. Dragged into the room. Climbed in through the window. What do you choose?

**Activity 3: List at least five sharper alternatives** to ‘got’ in this sentence: “I got to my friend’s house.” Example: I biked, rushed, ran, poked. You may decide, for your story, to stick with a wimpier verb.

- Rule of thumb: Choose the verb that gives you the level of motion you want. Sometimes you want less motion, but always consider before you decide.

- **Activity 4: Look at the verbs** in Irene McKinney’s poem, “Possum.” Would you change any of them? Which give you a sharp image? Rate each verb 1 – 5, with 5 as “very sharp.”

*My brother*

*walking home at noon, his face clenched like  
a trap with a stuck spring, a possum hanging  
on his thumb, bitten through to the bone.*

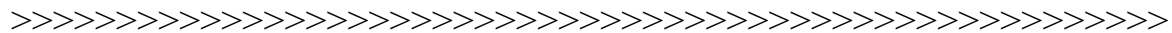
*It sits on a shelf in the storage room now,  
a dusty albino with red glass eyes.*

*The mice have eaten its feet and the thin bones  
small as a mouse’s leg shine through, caught  
in the swirling sunlight from a haze of windows.?*

- **Activity 5: Learn how to do a verb check.** Get copies of stories you have written. List your verbs. How many are glue verbs, producing no image? Are they the verbs you want, or did you write them without thinking about it? Would you like to convert some of them to movie verbs?

*Teacher note: Help students develop the habit of doing a verb check after they write. Ask them to go back through and check their verbs. Question every wimpy verb.*

- **Activity 6: Moving through time with words.** Good writing can carry a reader forth between past, present and future. It’s part of the magic. Learn how to do it.
  - **Activity 1:** Look at the sentences in the box. Which of them moves you through time, even a little?
  - **Activity 2:** If you want to jump in time, use a time phrase such as “Two weeks later” or “Fifty years before.” Put the time phrase at the beginning of the sentence so your readers will know you’re jumping.
  - **Activity 2:** Write three sentences that move people through time. Example: One hundred years ago, my grandmother fed her sheep every morning with pails of corn. OR> Last week, a car jumped the curb and hit my brother. OR > Five minutes later, I ate a hamburger.
  
- **Moving through space with words.** More magic: Your words can take your reader anywhere in the universe, as you create a word-movie in their mind.
  - Example: The sentences in the box above show small movements through space and bigger movements. The worm crawling onto the hand is a bigger movement than the child running back to the house.
  - Activity: Write four sentences that include small movements and much bigger movements.
  
- **Cast of characters/ Point of view:** Draw a point-of-view diagram on the board, a circle with legs sticking out from it (like spider legs) with a character’s name or description at the end of each leg. Talk about the fact that each character would tell the same story differently. Discuss a few examples.
  - **Activity:** Ask students to choose a well-known fairy tale and tell it from the point of view of one of the other characters. Tell them you will be looking at their verbs and looking to see how they move through time and space.
  
- **More activities: The passages on the following pages by West Virginia writers can be used practice any of these skills.**



## Here are four practice passages that create movie in readers' minds

### Denise Giardina: Descriptive details / Verbs in description / Close-up and wide shot

- *Denise Giardina demonstrates strong use of movie details to describe a place. She is writing here in the language people used in the early 1900s, so some words may be unfamiliar.*

A path wandered behind the cabin, down to the riverbank. Grapevine was broad and green, slow-running, never more than waist-deep on a grown man, save during the spring thaw. I waded into the water, my skirt hiked to my thighs. Silver explosions of trout churned the water, and minners started fuelishly about my legs.

I came abreast a stand of cattails and halted. The sweep of Grapevine curved away north, its path to Shelby and the Leviasy hidden by the far mountains, one after another, the mist dancing up their flanks.

Every way I turned, the lush green peaks towered over me. Had it been winter or spring, they would have been iron-grey or dappled with pink and white dogwood, sarvis and redbud. But always they would be there, the mountains, their heights rounded by the elements, like relics worn smooth by the hands of reverent pilgrims.

I swept my hand up and flung water like beads of glass.

~ Denise Giardina, from *Storming Heaven*

*How can you tell readers what a place is like/ feels like?*

- *What words in this passage create an image in your mind? Which words make the image move? List them.*
- *Where are the close-ups and wide shots? Make two lists*
- *Notice the underlined verbs. How many create an image? Are there any you would change or make more specific? Notice where she uses glue verbs.*

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### Richard Currey: Moving through space and time in close-up detail, to build suspense

*Here, Richard Currey demonstrates the way a writer can build suspense by piling up small details, one after the other. This passage comes from Currey's short story collection, The Wars*

of Heaven, set during the West Virginia Mine Wars. A coal miner is speaking. He has helped beat up two Baldwin Felts mine guards. He knows they'll come after him to get revenge, so he sends his wife and kids out of town to their relatives. Then he comes home and waits:

"I came back into Red Jacket three days later, thinking our house would be gone, burned out or vandalized. It was our own home, land that had been in my mother's family, outside town limits, and it was there, still standing pretty as you please, that old coat of ivory paint peeling black under years of coal soot.

They had been there, somebody had: the front door stood open. It had rained in: dead leaves blew straight into the parlor. I went through every room, every closet, cupboard, shelf. I looked under beds and up the chimney until I was satisfied nobody was waiting for me.

By then, it was dark. I turned on all the lights downstairs, drew the curtains to give the place a warm and homey look from the road. I locked the front and back doors and all the windows and took the shotgun from the hall closet corner.

Upstairs, I pulled off my boots and I had the time, sitting there, to think about my situation, to consider the plight of the man who dispatches his family to innocent country and sits afraid for his own life in his own home, simply because he wants to trade his labor for a decent wage, and the Baldwin men stepped up on the porch. Knocked politely at the front door. I kept my seat.

- Richard Currey, from *The Wars of Heaven*

- Dissect the way Currey piles up details. List them. He takes you through the house with details.
- In every sentence till the last paragraph, Currey does not tell what the man is thinking. Instead, he shows what he does. Is this effective? Why?
- Look at his sentence length. What is the shortest sentence in this passage? What impact do the two short sentence have?

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## **Breece Pancake: Choice of detail and verbs to create movie**

*A trucker has stopped to see some people he knows. Once again, notice how Breece Pancake chose verbs that create an image in your mind.*

At a wide berm near the farmhouse, he edges his tractor truck over and the ignition bell rings out until the engine sputters, dies. He picks up his grip, swings out on the ladder, and steps down. Heat burns through his T-shirt under a sky of white sun, and a flattened green snake turns light blue against the blacktop.

~ Breece Pancake, from "The Stories of Breece d'J Pancake"

- Pancake is known for his polished, rhythmic language. He scrubs his sentences of unnecessary words. Look at the passage above. Are there any words that could be removed without changing the image?
- *Pancake is also known for his authentic, unpretentious dialogue. Read the sentences out loud. Do they come out of your mouth easily? Reading aloud is a good test of your writing. If it does not read aloud easily, it won't read easily silently. Read the other passages on this page aloud. It's also a good way to study a writer's style.*

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### Davis Grubb: Using detail and contrast to build tension and suspense

*Two children are running down a steep, weedy hill in the dark night, trying to escape a murderer who is pretending to be a preacher. The older child, John, knows how much danger they are in, but the little girl, Pearl, does not understand. John has to make her hurry. A "skiff" is a little rowboat.*

John's feet slipped and sucked in the mud, and the weeds tore at his legs as he led her stumbling on toward the boat, but Preacher had heard them, and now his sweet tenor voice called after them.

John said, "Hurry, Pearl! Oh Godamighty, please hurry, Pearl!"

"You said a cuss word, John. That's a sin."

He thought desperately, staring into a great patch of mists: Maybe the skiff is gone. Maybe one of them shantyboat trash borrowed it tonight.

"John, where -"

"Hush! Hush! Hurry, Pearl!"

Then he spied it, the bow jutting sharply in the blanketing white, and Pearl, yawning now in a perfect picture of a child bored with a stupid game, hugged the doll, Jenny and fought her way wearily through the ooze to the skiff.

"Children! Children!"

They could hear him above them, thrashing down through the high brush filth, fighting his way toward them. "Get in the skiff, Pearl! Oh Godamighty, hurry!"

~ Davis Grubb, from *Night of the Hunter*

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