Film-Making Toolkit For Teachers

This toolkit has been designed to help support your students through the process of making a film (including short films and animations). The toolkit is laid out in several sections. Feel free to pick and choose the topics that are most relevant to your students, or provide them with access to the information and resources directly so they can select what works best for them, and fills in their knowledge gaps.

You might like to engage student interest in the film-making process by playing the following video:

- Film Making Basics! (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JQnYwsehvs8)

Section 1: Following The Rules

The information in this section informs the decisions that will need to be made throughout the film-making process. As students come up with ideas and create engaging content, they need to be aware of the boundaries of film. Audiences and actors need to feel safe and laws need to be adhered to.

a. Copyright

This article, Legal Information For Film And Video Makers, contains useful information regarding copyright.

The following key points are great options to begin discussions around copyright with your students:

- When you make a film, only you have the right to (and all team members need to agree):
  - make a copy of it
  - allow the film to be seen and heard in public
  - communicate the film to the public, such as on TV or the internet.
- You can also grant permission to others, and even charge a fee, to allow them to show your film.
- Because this right also applies to other film-makers and content creators, you can’t use their stuff without permission (or sometimes, paying a fee). This applies to:
  - music
  - film clips
  - images
  - voices and sound effects
  - quotes and information (although in many instances, quotes and information can be used so long as they are attributed, meaning the author has been acknowledged or referenced).
Encourage students to check in with their teacher or librarian if they need help working out whether they can use other people's stuff in their work.

Some content is available via ‘Creative Commons’. This means the author has granted blanket permission for people to use their creations. Sometimes, all they ask is that you reference them as the creator – make sure you check if this applies.

**b. Releases and Permissions**

It’s important that students understand that they can't record live footage of anyone without their permission. In an age where everyone has access to film recording devices, it is essential that students develop a respect for people's privacy and understand the laws regarding film-making and distribution so that they keep themselves out of legal hot water. This text is from the same article listed above.

“Before filming, you must also get permission from the performers who appear in your production. Using a consent form is the best way to do this. A consent form should explain:

- what the project is
- what you are filming
- what you expect of them
- how they will be seen or heard in the finished edit

You will also need to get permission to film on private property and sometimes on some public land.”

(Source)

If you choose to explore this topic with your class we recommend that you allow students an opportunity to think about these issues and collect any questions they may have regarding copyright or permission. If you’re unsure how to answer their questions, librarians can be a great resource as they often deal with copyright issues and are usually trained in how to handle copyrighted materials.

**Section 2: Quality Content**

This section will explore how to engage audiences through story, using a hook, clear storyline, tension and a call to action. You might like to provide this information for students to read or read it out to them.

**a. The Hook**

All films need a clever opening to ‘hook’ the audience in or get them interested. In a feature-length film, the hook will occur in the first 5-10 minutes.

There are several strategies to effectively engage an audience quickly. Here are just a few:

- Humour - make your audience smile or laugh, and they'll want to watch more.
- Shock - do something that surprises them or pushes them out of their comfort zone. Some ideas might be: images of the effects of waste or rubbish, amazing or frightening statistics, extreme close-ups of people's faces, or someone showing a strong emotion (evil laugh, joyful laugh, crying, singing, etc).
• Start in the middle of a scene or story (or maybe even at the end!) - Your first scene or images can set up the audience to want to find out more, making them think: “How did that happen?”, “What event led up to that?” or “What's going to happen next?”. An example of this would be: an accident taking place, a person demonstrating a powerful emotion, a crime scene, or an embarrassing moment.

Stress to students that the most important thing to do at the start of their film is to make people care about the film. They need to make the audience want more and become invested in finding out what happens next. This will engage them in any topic, even if they might normally find it a boring one.

b. Basics of Storytelling

Even if a film is not a ‘narrative’ style film, it needs to tell some kind of story. Stories weave a journey for the viewer and help them structure their thinking around the topic or consider the ideas being proposed in the film.

Every story needs a beginning, middle, and end. An effective story will also have a point of climax or heightened conflict that will be resolved in either a positive or negative fashion. The following definitions can be shared with the class:

- **Beginning** - set up the scene and characters (if relevant), introduce key ideas, get the audience to care.
- **Middle** - the ideas are explored, characters strengthened, plot developed.
- **Climax** - a point of conflict that has been building throughout the Middle section. In a story with characters, the climax is usually a point in the film where one character's objective finally clashes openly with another character's objective, forcing them into some kind of battle – emotional, mental, spiritual or physical. Sometimes the climax will be the realisation of a previously hidden truth or a moment where the power balance shifts between opposing forces.
- **End** - this is where any conflict is resolved, either through one side winning the battle, or working it out through compromise or new understanding. Hanging endings are also quite common, and these occur where one problem may be solved, but another problem is revealed, without opportunity for any development. The ending then becomes the new beginning for an anticipated sequel.

c. Tension and Release

As explored in the sequence of storytelling, every effective story needs some kind of conflict or tension. This is the same with most forms of art. Tension and release is used as a strategy in music, dance, theatre, visual art, architecture and comedy.

Some effective strategies for tension and release that you may want to share with your students are:

- **Humour** - The best comedians will create humour by using tension as a tool. They deliberately make their audience feel just a little uncomfortable, while keeping them in a zone of safety. By telling jokes that challenge taboos, social norms or point out uncomfortable truths, comedians can make people laugh as a method for releasing their tension. Humour can be a great way of releasing tension, but also a strategy for building it. Slapstick is a good example of this. Comedians like Rowan Atkinson (the actor behind the famous Mr. Bean) create awkward situations (building the tension) where you expect things
to go wrong, then end up getting caught, hurt or injuring themselves or others, in an amusing or unexpected way (releasing the tension).

- Build trust with your audience (then stretch them) - David Attenborough is well loved and famous for his high quality and engaging nature documentaries. He lulls the audience with his calming voice and beautiful cinematography, then challenges them to consider disturbing environmental issues later in his films. By the time he is challenging the audience, he has built up a strong relationship of trust with them. He generally ends his films on a hopeful or positive note to release the tension, and continue his relationship of trust with the audience.
- Jump scare - Horror films are famous for their ability to build and release tension. These films will lead the audience to believe (through music and visual effects) that something bad is going to happen, but then nothing happens. Then they frighten them with a sudden scare out of nowhere, for example, the bad guy jumps out in the middle of a happy scene.

**d. Make an Impact**

Films are a very effective and engaging way to influence an audience. They provide an opportunity to share important messages or ideas in a non-threatening way and can even request that the audience take action.

The message or theme of students' films will be the idea that they want to get across to the audience. Some films might want you to think about ethical issues, such as treating other people kindly or being honest. Other films might have messages about how technology could be used in the future, or how people handled situations in the past and how we can learn from them.

An effective ‘call to action’ at the end of a film, will be short, direct and give the audience something practical they can do in response to the theme or message of the film.

Examples of a call to action are:

- Buy now!
- Put your rubbish in the bin.
- Remember the three steps to success.
- View my other great video.

**Section 3: Creating Quality Visuals**

**a. Lighting**

Lighting can make or break a film or photograph. In order to make a film look professional, often the most effective thing you can do is change the lighting.

Shooting outdoors is the easiest and cheapest way to ensure plentiful light. Remember to consider the following when shooting outdoors:

- Are there any awkward shadows blocking the light, causing strange shapes or falling across faces?
- Are there shadows of the film crew or equipment visible in the shot?
- Are my actors facing into the light or do I want to silhouette them by having the sun behind them?
- Is the sun too harsh or creating glare?
Hot tip: It’s best to avoid shooting on a sunny day, or at midday, when the sun is at the highest point in the sky. This can create ‘flat’ lighting and is unappealing to look at.

Are there any strange or distracting reflections coming off windows, mirrors, or water? Sometimes this can add to the look of the film, if used carefully to your advantage. However, it can also be quite off-putting.

If you choose to film indoors, then you can shoot close to a window, with the actors facing TOWARDS the window.

Otherwise, you will require some lighting. The general rules of lighting indoors are:

- The more light the better, but overhead lights can create nasty shadows.
- Try to place your lights just above the subject – for people, this would be just above eye level.
- There should be at least two lights placed at a 45-degree angle from the front of the subject.
- If you can, use another light behind the subject, lighting the background or the back of the subject (for a halo effect). The backlight should be placed as low as possible to the ground.
- Where possible, soften your lights using soft boxes or baking paper.

b. Cinematography Basics

Creating a good shot takes careful planning. It’s much more than pointing a camera at the subject and hitting record.

Things to consider when designing quality shots that you might like to share with your students include:

- Shot size - How much do you want to include within the frame of the shot? How close will you be to the subject?
- Composition - How will objects, people or scenery be included in the shot? Where will they be located?
- Camera position and angle - Where will the camera be located? Which direction will it be facing?
- Focus - What will be in focus? What will be out of focus?
- Light - What kinds of light will you use? Soft/hard/coloured?
- Movement - Will the subject move? How? Will the camera move? How?

You might like to encourage students to include these elements in their storyboard, if they choose to use one.

c. Filming People

When students film people, they are creating a ‘character’. Even if someone is playing themselves, a range of strategies can be used to influence the way an audience responds to a person on film including:

- A person’s ‘status’ or importance can be indicated by the use of camera angle. If you shoot someone with the camera below their chest, looking up at them, it can make them seem large and important. If you shoot someone from far away with no-one else around them, they can appear small and lonely. Refer to this article for examples: Filmmaking: Camera Position And Angle
• Depth of field allows you to contrast people against each other or their environment. You can put important characters or objects in the foreground (closer to the camera) to make them stronger or more influential, and less important characters or objects in the background. You can even make the foreground or background out of focus, if you have a camera that allows you to adjust for depth of field.

• What a person wears is important. It tells us who they are, where they are and how they are feeling. If a person is in a suit, then we know they are at work, probably in an office, and are feeling perhaps influential, or busy. If a person is wearing a dirty t-shirt and ripped jeans, it tells a different story. Try to encourage your students to experiment with costume and only wear school uniform in their films where it adds to the story.

Hot tip: Consider using a green screen to put your people into new environments. Green screens can be tricky to get the hang of but are relatively easy to set up once you know how. The secret is in getting the lighting right. Watch this to learn more: How To Light A Green Screen.

d. Stop-motion Animation

In a professional animated film, there are usually around 24 frames per second – for a one-minute film, that would be 1,440 frames in total. It’s common for each image to take up two frames, so that’s a total of 720 separate images or stills. That’s a lot!

Let’s say you produced an animation at a quarter the speed of a professional production. You would need 180 images that use up the equivalent of eight frames each – that’s only three images per second. While this is much more manageable, the animation will probably look pretty jumpy. It’s important when doing animation, to plan for an achievable goal. Animation can take a lot of time, so if your students choose this option let them know they will be doing a LOT of work collecting their still images and editing them together! Alternatively, they could swap between stop-motion scenes and live action or still scenes to make the task less daunting.

Some great tools for creating effective stop-motion animation are:

• Clay (see here)
• LEGO (How To Make A LEGO Animation – Brickfilm)
• Pegs or small objects (Stop Motion Pegs, How To Animate Found Objects)

e. Picture Stories

Creating picture stories are a bit easier. Using a program like PowerPoint, Keynote, iMovie or Movie Maker, you can easily create a visual presentation that combines a series of still images, text and animation effects. Students could use this technique on its own, or in combination with live action or stop-motion animation.

Here are some effects your students might like to use to create their film:

• Zoom and pan images
• Edit images to change with the beat of music
• Show images with a voice over or emotive music
• Make a grid of your images
• Combine or layer images
• Use text for impact – this can also be animated (or made to move/transition)
• Use a 2.5D effect (makes them look like they are moving or almost 3D) – this requires special software. This video demonstrates this effect: How To Transform Still Images Into Engaging Video

Note: Make sure all images are your students’ own work and/or do not break copyright. Remind them that if they take their own images, they are also likely to be better quality than pulling images off the internet.

Section 4: Creating Quality Audio

a. Sound Equipment

Sound equipment can be a daunting issue for some schools. It can be expensive and easy to damage, and there are so many different microphones for different purposes, making it feel like a ‘too hard basket’ kind of issue. But it doesn't have to be.

This section will provide you with everything you need to know as well as some tips for finding cheaper and more robust audio equipment to enhance the quality of your films.

First, let’s explore the different kind of microphones that are available. These are some good articles to begin with:

- Different Types Of Microphones
- Sound Equipment For Low Budget Filmmaking

The microphones you are most likely to find useful in a school are:

- A small, portable condenser microphone with a desk stand and tripod mount - this is good for recording still moments like sound effects, music performances, vodcasts and podcasts. Before you buy one, check out if it can plug directly into a video recording device so you can avoid having to sync the audio later.
- A lavaliere (lapel) microphone - this is useful for capturing speeches and studio-style videos. Some of these come with changeable inputs cables so you can use them with a range of devices, such as a DSLR camera, wireless set, video camera, smart phone, and hand-held recording device.
- A condensor microphone that sits directly on, and plugs straight into, a hand-held video camera - this is useful for capturing live action. A boom microphone is also ideal for this.

b. Sound Effects

Sound effects can play an important role in films, especially in action, horror and romance genres. Your students might want to consider using sound effects to enhance the impact and quality of their films. Show them this video so they can learn how the professionals do it, and get some ideas for how to create their own incredible sound effects:

- The Magic Of Making Sound
c. Vocal Technique

Even though your students may be using microphones to enhance the quality of their recordings, it’s important to remind them that microphones can only pick up sounds that they can get a signal of. If a voice is too quiet or muffled, it will be difficult for the microphone to pick up. Students need to speak clearly and loudly, just like on stage, to ensure they can be heard.

If students want to create a special vocal effect, such as a whisper, ensure they have the microphone nice and close to their mouths and pointed in the right direction for the pickup pattern of the microphone (e.g. uni-directional microphones will need to be pointed directly towards the mouth).

You might like to show your students this video so they get a feel for how to make the most of their microphones:

• 60 Seconds On Your Sound - Microphone Technique

Section 5: Project Planning

Creating a film takes time. Allow your students the opportunity to plan their films, but also encourage them to get started filming or creating as soon as they are able. Often students underestimate the length of time it takes to create and edit their films.

Encourage students to develop a brief plan for their film-making process. They should include the following elements in their plan:

• Equipment and resources they will need
• Type of film technique they will use (e.g. live action, studio, stop-motion animation, picture story)
• Technical elements they want to include (e.g. sound effects, studio lighting)
• How many people they need for filming and acting
• Any questions they still have that will need answering
• Estimated timeline for the project. How long will they dedicate to planning, making, editing?