

THE POWER OF STORY

FREE EXCERPT FROM

**HOW TO
SHOOT VIDEO
THAT
DOESN'T SUCK**

STEVE STOCKMAN

Have you had this experience? You grudgingly agree to watch a friend's video. You click on the link. The first few shots are good. Cute kids. But about 10 seconds in you start to get a sinking feeling. This video isn't about anything. It's a bunch of shots that aren't leading anywhere. And you're stuck having to watch enough to lie to your friend about how much you loved it.

You are watching a video without a story. Your friend took out a camera or phone, pointed without thinking, and shot for a while, also without thinking. The result is a series of unrelated images that become more boring the longer they continue. Your brain is trying its best to make sense of the images cascading before your eyes, but failing. That failure induces boredom, distraction and tension.

A shot of two kids on a swingset followed by a guy pouring a beer followed by a wide shot of a field where people you may or may not know are playing softball kind of suggests a story about a company picnic without actually being a story of a company picnic.

While we can't help a friend who shoots video this way (other than

sending her this free booklet) we can vow never to be that friend.

Fortunately, that's easy. Find the story in your videos every time, and they will be infinitely more watchable, every time. Read on, try the exercises, and your video will no longer suck. You're welcome.

Do you want more video lessons?

How to Shoot Video that Doesn't Suck has 248 pages of simple concepts and easy exercises you can use to get better still. Buy it.

You can get still more free tips, tricks sample videos and lessons at **SteveStockman.com**.

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Know Your Story

When someone wants to tell you about their favorite movie, they start with the words “It’s about a . . .” We pay attention because we instinctively recognize a story about to start. “It’s about a girl who learns she’s really a princess and has to grow into the responsibilities of royalty.” “It’s about a guy who dances with strangers all over the world.” “It’s about a girl in love with a vampire.”

If you ask about a movie and your friend starts her description with “It has good special effects,” she’s given you the equivalent of dating’s “He has a great personality.” You already know you’re not going to love it. “Once upon a time” is what draws us in and makes us want to put our butts in a seat for 90 minutes or more.

We love story. We crave story. We remember story. Every video, no matter how long or short, will be better if it tells a story.

Stripped to its essentials, a story has four elements: A hero, a beginning, a middle, and an end. The beginning of any story introduces us to the hero and what situation he’s in. The middle tells what happens to the hero next. The end is how it all turns out.

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The Hero: For our purposes, this is the “who” that the video is about. It can be your son the day he gets his first haircut, your best employee, or the singer in your band. But make your video about someone. (“Someone” could be “something,” of course—a dog, an oil-soaked pelican, or even a cardboard box that ends up in a landfill. But it has to be the main character.)

The Beginning doesn’t have to be complicated. In the beginning of any story, we introduce the hero, tell where we are right now, and give some sense of where we’re headed and why we are watching.

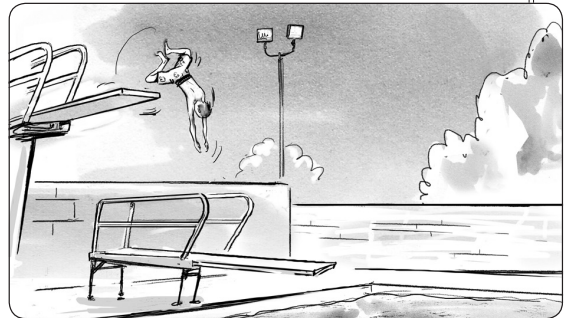
The haircut story might begin with shots of your husband trying to convince a two-year-old how much fun a haircut can be. The video about the employee might open on a customer-service phone call she’s making. And when the drummer bangs his sticks together on the opening beats, we know we’re in a music video. All simple, all beginnings.

The Middle: Something happens. Baby meets barber. Service rep calms an irate customer. The band sings the chorus of the song that you shot out on the street. It doesn’t have to be complicated, it just has to progress. If you can challenge your hero, so much the better. Show the scary scissors coming toward us or the wheel falling off a customer’s new car.

The Four Elements of Story



Beginning: The hero climbs the diving board.



Middle: The hero dives.



End: The hero enjoys victory.

TRY THIS

Story Strips

Before you shoot your next video, no matter what it is, write out some notes on the four story building blocks. Who is your hero? What happens at the beginning, middle, and end of your story?

The daily comics are masters of three-panel storytelling. Take a look at your daily paper (or a site like <http://comics.com>) and break any three-panel strip into

story components. No need to write—just notice: Each one features a hero and a setup (beginning), complication (middle), and joke (end). Simple and elegant storytelling.

Practicing looking at story this way will help you internalize story structure. And all by itself, that will change for the better the way you shoot video.

The End: What do you want to leave your audience with? Endings should have some kind of resolution or closure. Maybe your son finally stops crying when the barber gives him a lollipop. The employee takes another call while explaining in voice-over that customers—even crazy ones—are why she loves her job. The song ends, and the band members smash their instruments.

Story structure makes video easier to understand. You don't have to work it all out in detail, and the result doesn't have to be a feature-film script. Without any extra work, practicing with the rhythm of story will help you shoot better video.

Think about something as simple as your son's first dive off the high board. In story terms, he's the hero. Beginning: He approaches the board. Middle: He climbs up nervously. End: He dives—and comes up smiling. Just thinking about this sequence before you shoot gives you ideas about where to stand and when to press "record." You're more likely to be in the right place at the right time, shooting the right video.

THE HERO'S JOURNEY

In most well-constructed stories, the hero wants something. How he tries to get it is the story we tell about him. So it is with many videos:

Beginning: The hero expresses a desire or need. Middle: He struggles to fulfill it. End: He overcomes the trouble and gets it.

Not all heroes are Luke Skywalker. Sometimes the hero is your son, learning to ride a bike. He wants to ride without training wheels. He falls a lot. And finally he makes it down the street without crashing. A complete hero's journey in a two-minute video.

There is also a *tragic* hero's journey—in the end, the hero doesn't get what he wants. Think *Hamlet*, where everyone dies at the end. That's also the structure of the *comic* hero's journey. *America's Funniest Home Videos* has been on the air damn near 20 years with its version: Boy wants candy. Boy is blindfolded and swings at piñata. Boy hits father in the groin. A tragedy, to be sure, but one that apparently is *never* not funny.

Here's a real example of what *isn't* a Hero's Journey (anonymously adapted from the website of a nonprofit organization that should know better): Beginning: A scientist heading a major environmental group more or less reads her résumé on camera, ostensibly as a way for us to get to know her. Middle: One unrelated and unfocused anecdote after another about how much she cares about the environment. End: She finishes the résumé. Fade out.

Had there been a story about how she went into environmental science after her neighbors came down with a mysterious cancer, we would have seen some struggle. Had she come from a poor background and worked nights at a landfill to get her doctorate, we would have cheered her. But no. Just one job after another until—BANG—she's heading this organization. Yawn.

We all struggle through life. We tend not to be interested in people who don't.

EXERCISE 1

Channel Charles Schultz or Gary Trudeau

- 1.** The daily comics are masters of three-panel storytelling. Take a look at your daily paper (or a site like www.comics.com) and break any three-panel strip into story components. No need to write—just notice: Each one features a hero and a setup (beginning), complication (middle), and joke (end). Simple and elegant storytelling.
- 2.** Practicing looking at story this way will help you internalize story structure. And all by itself, that will change the way you shoot video for the better.
- 3.** Before you shoot your next video, write out some notes on the four story building blocks. Who is your hero? What happens at the beginning, middle, and end of your story?

Make Every Picture Tell the Story

Every part of a well-made video, no matter how small, tells a complete story. Even the smallest part of a film has a hero, a beginning, a middle, and an end. The small parts add up to larger parts, which also tell a complete story. Those larger parts combine to make the whole video, which also tells a complete story. Let's take a film example:

The film is about *a boy* (the hero) whose family is tragically killed, forcing him to join forces with a strange guru/warrior and flee his home planet to avenge them. After being captured by a corrupt and powerful enemy, he escapes, returning with a band of rebels to destroy the enemy's army.

A sequence is a section of a film that covers a big part of the story. In this film, one sequence tells the story of *the boy* and the guru entering a lawless town to find transport on a mercenary spaceship. They meet a corrupt ship's captain and barely manage to leave the planet one step ahead of enemy forces.

TRY THIS

Subject + Action = Shot

Start thinking of your shots in a complete sentence—noun, verb—just like your English teacher taught you in fourth grade. The noun is the hero of the shot, the action verb is story.

Ask yourself: What's this shot about? If you can answer in a complete sentence, you've got a good shot. If you can't, you don't. "A dog walks past the house" is a complete story in one shot. "A dog" all by itself is not.

A **scene** is a smaller part of the sequence that happens in a single place and time. One scene in this sequence shows *the boy* meeting the rogue ship's captain in a bar and taking an instant dislike to him.

A **shot** is a single piece of film or video without cuts. One shot in our bar scene shows us the action of a *mercenary bounty hunter* (the hero of this shot) catching sight of the ship's captain, who has a price on his head. Note that the boy isn't in this shot, but the action affects him. He's still the hero of the movie, but since he's not in it, he can't be the hero of this shot.

Star Wars is much bigger and more complex than your video, but the principles remain the same. If any part of your video is missing its story, the video feels stagnant. Story-less shots add up to a bad scene. Bad scenes make bad sequences. One bad sequence can kill a film. Every single piece of your video needs a hero, beginning, middle, and end.

In a birthday video, a shot might be "Daughter's hand reaches cake." It starts with a piece of cake (the hero!) on a pretty dish on a high-chair tray (beginning). A chubby one-year-old hand reaches out (middle action) and lands—*plop*—in the middle of the cake. Cut. End of shot.

For most home videos, if you worry about the shots, the story will take care of itself.

Three Frames from One Shot



Beginning: The hero of the shot (a piece of cake) sits on highchair tray.



Middle: A hand threatens our hero.



End: Our hero is destroyed by the marauder.

EXERCISE 2

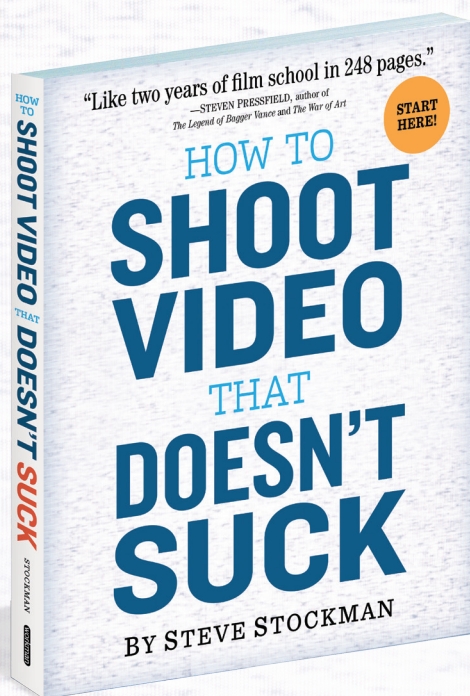
Subject Plus Action = Shot

1. Start thinking of your shots in a complete sentence—noun, verb—just like your English teacher taught you in fourth grade. The noun is the hero of the shot, the action verb is story.
2. Ask yourself: What's this shot about? If you can answer in a complete sentence, you've got a good shot. If you can't, you don't. "A dog walks past the house" is a complete story in one shot. "A dog" all by itself is not.
3. Turn on your favorite TV show or movie. Watch the individual shots with your finger on the remote. After each shot, pause. Decide who or what is the hero (noun) and what is happening to them in that shot (action). Repeat until you can see it without pausing.
4. Extra credit: Notice how the shots end when the action is complete and we know what just happened.
5. For more on story, go to: **stevestockman.com/?s=story**

Stockman skips past all the technical crap and cuts right to the chase:

How do you shoot a video somebody else will want to watch?"

—**DAVID A. GOODMAN**, executive producer/head writer of *Family Guy*



How to Shoot Video That Doesn't Suck is all about the language of video. It's about how to think like a director, regardless of equipment. It's about the rules developed over a century of movie-making-which work just as well when shooting a two-year-old's birthday party. Author and director Steve Stockman explains in 74 short, pithy, insightful chapters how to tell a story and entertain your audience.

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STEVE STOCKMAN

is a working Hollywood writer/director/producer.

He's created and executive produced shows like

Dogs of War on A&E and

Brew Dogs on Esquire Network, over 200 commercials, and the MGM film *Two Weeks* starring Sally Field and Ben Chaplin.

STEVE TWEETS WITTILY ABOUT VIDEO

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