



# Calling the shots!

*How film and TV techniques can inspire brilliant creative writing*

First featured in Autumn 2016, here's a chance to revisit **Nick Handel's** ideas for using film and TV techniques to inspire children's writing.

I am a former award-winning BBC Television producer, now committed to using my knowledge of TV and film techniques to inspire creative writing in children mainly, though not exclusively, at Primary level. A few years ago, I published my concepts in a resource called 'Calling the Shots!' (Education Resources Awards finalist). It's an easy to use, fully illustrated guide for teachers that needs little or no preparation and comes with a DVD of professionally shot films for children to translate from screen to page. It is linked to the National Curriculum and comes with a wealth of support material (worksheets and illustrations) that can be downloaded for whiteboard use. The package initially sold at £60 and the eventual plan is to move it online. I am still holding quite a bit of stock and have decided to give this away **free of charge**—only the cost of postage. Children love these concepts—and reaction from teachers and home educators who have used the book demonstrates that they are hugely beneficial: 'Writing is something that is easy to teach to children who can grasp the structure required to write a good story or description. However, the exercises in *Calling the Shots!* inspire not only imaginative children, but those who might struggle

to think of their own ideas or find them difficult to organise.' Full details for ordering copies are given at the end of this feature! But first—let me tell you my story...

A dark, blustery November evening shaped my life. The wind was howling down our chimney and a log fire spat and crackled in the grate. Leaves crashed against the rain-lashed windows as if some evil giant was trying to get in. I was eleven years old and home alone while my parents visited some friends. It was 1960. Homework done, I had turned to the telly. Not much choice—only two channels—and black and white at that. The little screen flickered as the set warmed up. 'And now the first episode of our classic serial,' intoned the BBC announcer. '*Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens.' A bored eleven year old, tired of long division, would have preferred *Batman* or *Popeye*, but I decided to give it a try. The opening shots of young Pip scurrying across the Essex marshes at dusk had me instantly hooked. There was menace in those clouds and I can still see the image of gallows silhouetted against a glowering sky and hear a curlew crying out in the distance. A huge shower of fallen leaves skittered behind Pip as he clambered over the churchyard wall—then the

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stinger punch. ‘Keep still you little devil or I’ll cut your throat.’ The shock ‘reveal’ of Magwitch (played by bald-headed character actor Jerold Wells) had me diving behind the sofa. I had nightmares for weeks and swore then that one day I would be the one **making** television programmes that could frighten everyone half to death!



I am now freelance after 35 years with the BBC where I produced and directed series on countless subjects ranging from international terrorism to the work of a world-famous animal impersonator (although I shall probably go to my grave being remembered as the *That’s Life!* director who discovered a Yorkshire terrier called Prince who made the word ‘Sausages!’ a national catch phrase). Since leaving the staff, I have been training television directors (in drama and documentary techniques) both at the BBC’s own Academy and for many leading independent production companies. I also write children’s fiction. So let me tell you how all this ties in with my early encounter with Pip and Magwitch on the bleak, misty marshes...

Once I’d emerged from behind the sofa, I began experimenting with my dad’s 8mm film camera. I started making short movies with friends, editing the shots together with evil-smelling glue. I suppose, in a way, I was ‘confronting my fears’. I quickly learned how to use a camera to amaze, amuse or terrify an audience. It was my first step towards becoming a professional story-teller and my passion for moving images proved invaluable in creative writing at school because thinking filmically helped me to bring stories to life on the page. It also enhanced my enjoyment of reading because I was able to picture myself at the heart of the action. Children in Dickens’ day didn’t have DVDs, Xboxes, Playstations—or even the good old BBC drama department. They used imagination to bring an author’s words to life in their mind’s eye—creating personal images of the characters, settings, atmosphere, drama and suspense. I worry that constant access to digital media turns young readers into passive consumers to an extent that part of the creative side of the brain ‘switches off’. That said, it is a fact that kids are growing up in a media age and that isn’t going to change any time soon. However, I believe there are ways of using film and TV as forces for good—and that by applying their techniques to the written word, it is possible to ‘kick start’ visual imagination and stimulate story structure, description and vocabulary.



Look out! He’s behind you! Young writers are luckier than most movie directors because they can let their imaginations run riot without worrying about budgets (unless someone buys the film rights to their stories, of course!)

As a former TV producer, you could say I’m poacher turned gamekeeper but when I write fiction, I don’t think in sentences—I think in shots. It’s my way of generating ideas for the page and I know from the scores of workshops I’ve run in primary schools that children respond enthusiastically to that concept. Shots are the building blocks directors use to construct scenes (or ‘sequences’). You might say that a ‘sequence’ is to a film what a ‘paragraph’ is to a book and that a ‘shot’ is the equivalent of a ‘sentence’. Each shot is carefully framed to contain information that tells the story, creates a mood and involves the audience at an emotional level. They are the ‘building blocks’ of a story. Once captured on film, the shots are assembled by an editor, just like pieces of a jigsaw. Children see other people’s shots on TV and film all the time—and watching drama with a more informed and critical eye helps them consider picture content more closely. They quickly get the idea of coming up with images of their own and enjoy finding words that describe them on the page. That sleepy part of the brain begins to stir...

Let me demonstrate by describing a dramatic situation that uses only six shot types. The action is simple: an old man visits his workshop late at night and gets a nasty shock. Most directors (and writers) start a new scene with an



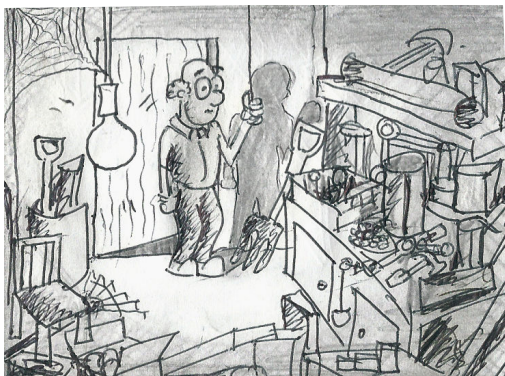
**ESTABLISHING SHOT** whose purpose is to set the scene and create a mood. I always start by thinking how these are lit. The excitement of a football cup tie is enhanced by ‘banks of dazzling floodlights’ while a ‘rich golden glow’ from shop windows at Christmas creates a ‘warm, festive’ feel. Shots of the sun blazing mercilessly on desert sands sent ice lolly sales rocketing in cinemas when David Lean’s *Lawrence of Arabia* hit the screens—and you can achieve the same effect on the page. Lighting is a powerful creative tool and is often enhanced by professional camera operators who place cut-out shapes (known as ‘gobos’) in front of powerful spot lamps to create shadows on scenery. These give all kinds of effects: sunlight streaming through windows, sinister prison bars or suits of armour cast against castle walls. Ask children to imagine an old man shuffling down his garden on a freezing winter night and they’ll have lots of ideas on the effect moonlight might have on the scene. Before lockdown, I visited a school where our word list included ‘dim’, ‘shadowy’, ‘milky’, ‘eerie’, ‘spooky’, ‘ghostly’, ‘other-worldly’, ‘misty’ and ‘pale’. Properly focused, kids are great at recalling details of creepy places they’ve actually visited or seen on TV—and there’s no disgrace in ‘borrowing’ other people’s ideas if they can be used to create atmosphere on

your page. In film and television, directors and designers plan each ‘frame’ in detail so that every shot plays a full part in telling the story and avoids irrelevance. ‘The old man’s garden would be overhung with bare, twisted branches,’ one nine year old suggested to me. ‘Like a scratchy canopy over a rain forest’ said another. ‘They’d be threatening him like dragon’s claws’ added a third. Suddenly, the scene was coming alive in words. We agreed on: **‘The shed loomed eerily in the misty moonlight under a canopy of bare, twisted branches that reached towards the old man like the claws of a wicked dragon.’**

Don’t forget sound. All too often children’s work takes place in complete silence—but a sound track is as important in the written word as it is on the screen. **‘An owl was hooting from a nearby tree as his feet crunched over the frosty grass and his frozen fingers rattled the key in the lock.’**

When a TV drama is shot in a studio, the background is kept very quiet so that the actors’ dialogue is crystal clear. But a silent background is devoid of atmosphere (or ‘sterile’) so effects are added afterwards in a Dubbing Theatre. These are called F/X (an abbreviation of ‘sound effects’). There are background sounds, usually termed ‘atmos’ tracks, and more impactful ‘foreground’ sounds. The TV drama ‘Holby City’ is filmed mainly in a converted office block at the BBC’s Elstree Centre. No matter how good the acting, an accident victim being trolleyed into A & E will lack drama and urgency until corridor hubbub, banging doors, rushing footsteps and beeping electronic equipment are added. These are blended together in ‘post production’ by a Dubbing Mixer. I find that children enjoy creating their own ‘dubbing charts’ for written work—and the book shows them how to do that.

Cutting to a **LONG SHOT** gives us a closer, more detailed view of our character’s arrival in the shed, starting with sound.



**‘The wind whistled through a broken pane as the door creaked open, setting a tangle of cobwebs dancing on the ceiling. He tugged a light switch and a dusty bulb glowed from the ceiling casting shadows that made the stacks of garden tools and furniture look like enormous robots.’**

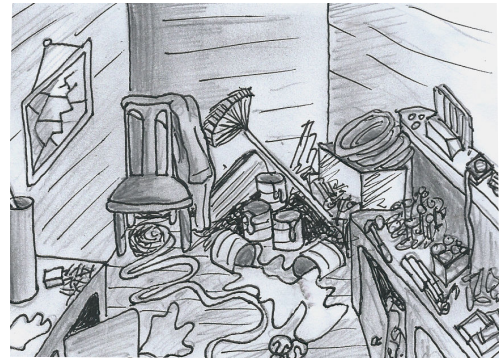
A **MID SHOT** gives a ‘waist upwards’ view and we can see greater detail of a character’s appearance and facial expression. When an actor appears in mid-shot, a director will suggest action (or ‘business’) for them to perform. This contributes to the characterisation and tells the story.

Children should also think how they’d ‘direct’ their characters. They’re not planks of wood—they



should be living, breathing personalities drawn in 3D and in colour. In this case, the old man’s teeth could be chattering, he might blow into cupped, frozen hands, a sudden sound might startle him or perhaps he simply peers into the gloom. Get your characters to act for you: **‘He could hear a mouse scurrying under a pile of deckchairs—but suddenly, a much louder sound made him tighten his grip on the light cable. ‘Who’s there?’ he whispered, peering anxiously through the cobwebs.’**

But what does he see? That’s where the **POINT OF VIEW** shot comes in (where the viewer/reader sees a situation through the character’s eyes): **‘But all he could see were the tools, tins and wood shavings that littered the floor of the untidy little room.’**

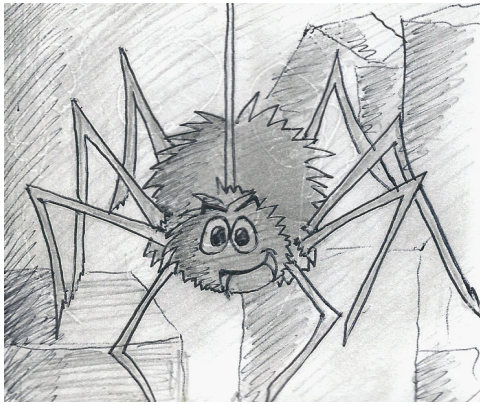


Getting towards the punch line now and time for the all-important **CLOSE-UP**. This tells viewers or readers how a character is feeling or thinking.



I have found that children find it hard to describe thoughts and emotions in their writing—yet they are the things that make characters interesting. Even in dialogue scenes, a brief description of the person who *isn’t* speaking can add more to the story than uninterrupted speech. ‘Jimmy could feel the sweat breaking out on his upper lip as the policeman questioned him.’ In film parlance, this would be called a ‘reaction shot’ or ‘cutaway’ from the main action. Sir Michael Caine once said to me: ‘Movie acting isn’t about acting, it’s about reacting. Listening to another character is as important as delivering your own lines.’ Thus, in our ‘garden shed’ scenario: **‘But suddenly his eyes widened in terror...’**

Finally, the **REVEAL**. This is your ‘punch line’ or ‘resolution’. In this case, it explains *why* the old man has reacted so strongly. Children always have fun with this one—this was the collective effort of my young group:



‘...As a hideous creature crashed through a pile of paint cans. A giant, monstrous, black, hairy spider with huge, swivelling blood-shot eyes and long, dribbling fangs.’ We could have gone on and on with that one, but a writer must also be good at editing his work!

Another useful tip is that, if a child is ever stuck for an ending to a story, the solution is often to cut back to your hero or heroine with a short description of how the experience has left them feeling. *‘The old man sat bolt upright in his bed. ‘What a horrible nightmare!’ he murmured, wiping sweat from his brow. ‘That’ll teach me to eat cheese sandwiches before I go to sleep!’*

So, we’ve now turned our shots into words. A good way of judging their effectiveness is to ask a friend or classmate to close their eyes while you read them aloud. Could they picture the images in their minds eye (just like our Victorian forebears turning the pages of a Dickens novel by candlelight)? Let’s see:

*The shed loomed eerily in the moonlight under a canopy of bare, twisted branches that reached towards the old man like the claws of a wicked dragon. An owl was hooting from a nearby tree as his feet crunched over the frosty grass and his frozen fingers rattled the key in the lock. The wind whistled through a broken pane as the door creaked open, setting a tangle of cobwebs dancing on the ceiling. He tugged a light switch and a dusty bulb glowed from the ceiling casting shadows that made the stacks of garden tools and furniture look like enormous robots. He could hear a mouse scurrying under a pile of deckchairs – but suddenly, a much louder sound made him tighten his grip on the light cable. ‘Who’s there?’ he whispered, peering anxiously through the cobwebs. But all he could see were the tools, tins and wood shavings that littered the floor of the untidy little room. But suddenly his eyes widened in terror as a hideous creature crashed through a pile of paint cans. A giant, monstrous, black, hairy spider with huge, swivelling blood-shot eyes and long, dribbling fangs.*

*The old man sat bolt upright in his bed. ‘What a horrible nightmare!’ he murmured, wiping sweat from his brow. ‘That’ll teach me to eat cheese sandwiches before I go to sleep!’*

Nick Handel is a children’s author, former BBC TV producer and a highly respected documentary-maker. He has been responsible for many prestigious events on BBC 1 and BBC 2, including the annual Children in Need appeal. He is passionate about the use of film to inspire children’s imaginative writing and runs regular workshops in primary schools using film techniques to stimulate language, storytelling and description.



There are countless more film techniques that can be applied just as effectively to the written word, but there isn’t space to explain them here. Suffice to say that kids love being directors—and gain valuable writing skill at the same time. ‘Calling The Shots!’ includes: structuring a story, scene-setting, creating characters, handling dialogue, describing feelings and emotions, telling simple stories in six shots (or longer-form), describing movement and action, storyboarding. There are notes for teachers on how to work with each idea and a ‘grammar/vocabulary focus’ section after each unit. The final section shows children how to make their own videos (which, of course, is how I came in to all this as an eleven year old!). I always tell children: ‘Creative writing gives you one huge advantage over most TV and film producers: there are no budgets to worry about! The only constraint on a writer is his or her own imagination—unless someone buys the film rights, of course!’

If you think ‘Calling the Shots!’ could be a useful addition to your ‘literacy tool kit’, please order a copy **free of charge** from [www.pogolearning.com](http://www.pogolearning.com). The site enables you to leave a delivery address and cover cost of package and posting. It goes without saying that this can only be offered while stocks remain.

