Lesson 1: Planning your digital story

Seven elements of digital storytelling

Our workshop-based approach to digital storytelling is based on the *StoryCentre*'s approach. *StoryCentre* are digital storytelling pioneers and outlined what they called the *Seven Elements of digital storytelling*. These are seven characteristics that are common in digital stories.

> Check out the StoryCentre's work: https://www.storycenter.org/

These elements do not necessarily need to be part of your story but paying attention to them will help highlight what makes your story meaningful.
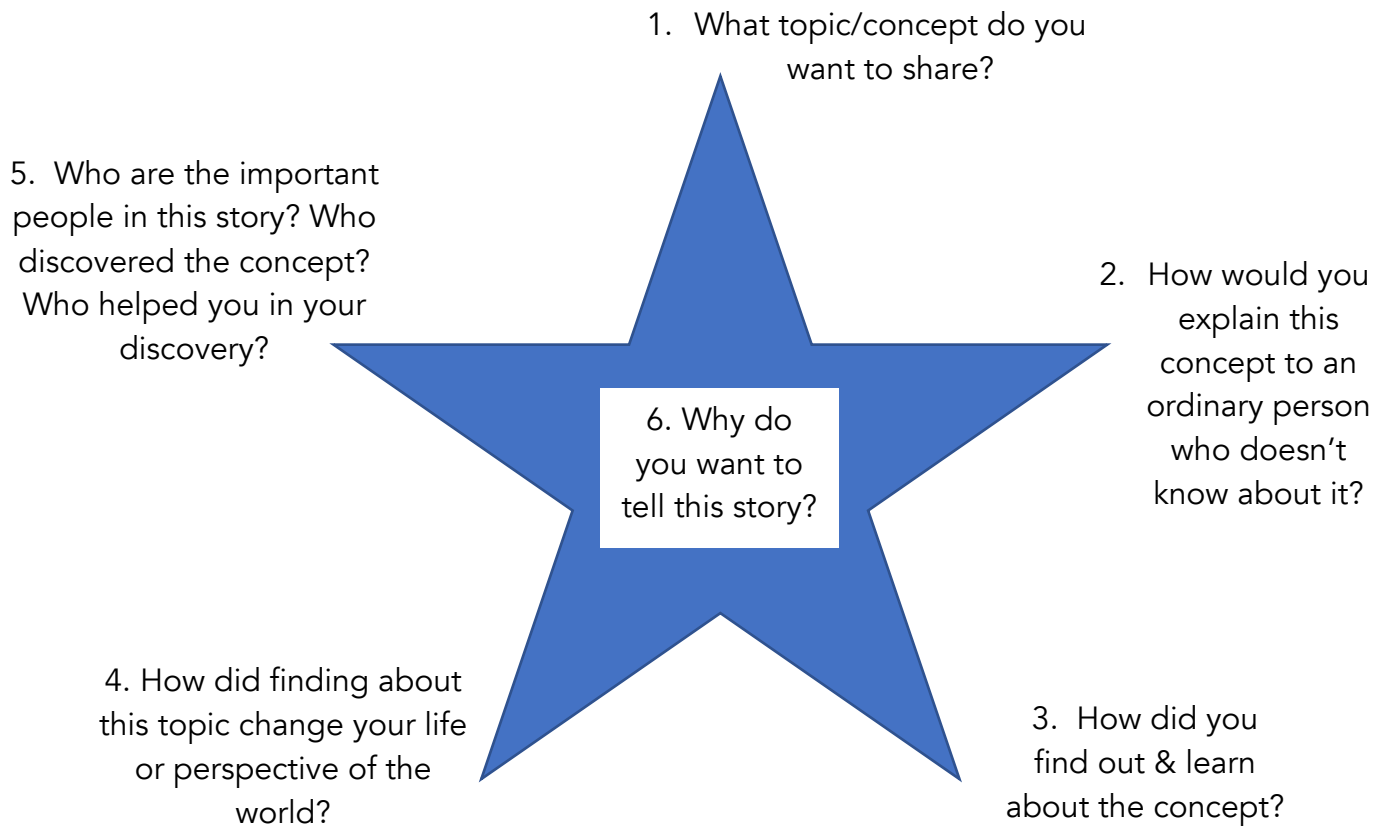
POINT OF VIEW	*What is it that you want to communicate?* In your digital story, the main character is likely to be you, talking from your point of view. You will be the narrator, and you will need to take your audience into your confidence.
DRAMATIC QUESTION	*How is the main conflict resolved*? A dramatic question can be used to create tension and capture the attention of your viewers. It draws the viewer into the story, so it needs to be bold, intriguing and a bit dramatic! The opening sentence can be a question or even a bold statement, like : "*I was seven years old when I first saw a man hit a woman,*" or questions like, "*What would you do if you hadn't eaten in four days?*"
EMOTIONAL CONTENT	Establish what emotional issues will come alive in your story and how you will use these emotions to connect with your audience. Be brave and speak honestly!
THE GIFT OF YOUR VOICE	Your voice and words are telling the story, making it personal and intimate. Make each word count. Even make the silence count! Remember your idiosyncrasies, accent and personality make the story worthwhile.
THE POWER OF SOUND	The music and sound effects set the mood for your story.
ECONOMY	Keep your story succinct with just enough detail to keep the viewer engaged. Use your visuals to say things that words can't say.
PACING	Pacing refers to the rhythm of your story. How slowly or quickly you want your story to progress? You may want to speak faster during suspenseful moments, for example, or slower during heavy moments.

✨ YOU! THE STAR OF YOUR *OWN* SHOW ✨

You will be telling your story and even if it is about someone else – it is your personal story about someone else. It will give your point of view, and show your emotions. It will use your voice to narrate the story, and it will feature your visuals and your ideas for a sound track. A personal story does not necessarily have to be about something deep and emotional or a dark secret about your life. It does, however, help if your story is heartfelt and genuine. The more believable the story, the more it will attract the attention of viewers and engage their thoughts, emotions and even actions, so it's important to be clear about the messages that you want to send through your story.

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Activity 1: Finding your story

Answer the following questions. Your answers will form the basis of your story script in Activity 2.

1. What topic/concept do you want to share?

5. Who are the important people in this story? Who discovered the concept? Who helped you in your discovery?

2. How would you explain this concept to an ordinary person who doesn't know about it?

6. Why do you want to tell this story?

4. How did finding about this topic change your life or perspective of the world?

3. How did you find out & learn about the concept?

Activity 2: Writing a script

Think about the outline of a story you developed in the previous activities. Turn those ideas into a script that will become the audio narration of your story. The five-point star exercise will be helpful in organising your thoughts. When writing your script, keep the **seven elements** of digital storytelling in mind. Also remember that you will be bringing this script to life with visuals and audio. The secret to a good script is to test it out by reading it to members of your class, and then to rewrite it several times until it works. Consider the feedback of your class members and ask for their suggestions to make your script meaningful.

Getting ready for your next lesson...

Think about the images and videos you'd like to use for your video. To help get started, you can take your script and underline keywords and phrases that would make good visuals so you have an idea of what visuals you will need to source.

Lesson 2: Making your digital story

Everything that you hear in the video is the *audio*. There are a lot of decisions to make regarding audio. The most important aspect of sound in a digital story, is the **narration** (script) as this is where the storyteller's voice comes through. You will also have to record the narration yourself but can always download music and sound effects from the internet.

The key to good audio is that it should be **clear, easy to understand, and have little unintended background noise.** You can use background music to compliment your narration. *For example, soft violins can help create a feeling of sadness.* Sound effects can be used to add texture to the story. *For example, playing a heartbeat when something scary happens.*

Remember that your narration will be the main focus of the video and complimentary sound should not overwhelm the script.

Activity 3: Recording your soundtrack

Poor sound recording is easy to notice and difficult to fix, even using editing software. Your smartphone should have a built in voice recorder and you can improve the quality of this recorder by using free apps. Many editing software also allow you to record directly into the program. This may be useful if you have already laid your visuals out and just want to read your script according to the visuals.

Recording tips:

- always record in a quiet space
  - you could park your car in a quiet space and keep the windows closed
  - wrap yourself in a heavy curtain or bedding or sit in a shut wardrobe full of clothes
- position the recording device a fair distance from your mouth (see image)
- keep the recording device still, preferably not in your hand or rubbing against another object Don't place it flat on a surface but rather face it upwards
- don't wear jewelry or clothing that will make a noise when you move
- record atmosphere for a few minutes to test for sporadic sounds
- record a few seconds of room noise for ambiance
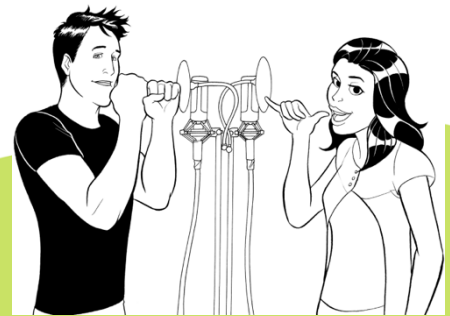
An image from *VoiceOverVoiceActor.com* illustrates ways of ensuring an adequate distance between your mouth and the mic.

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A **LOW** angle shot of a man

Activity 4: Finding footage for stories

The next step is piecing together all the different aspects described in our storyboards using a video editor to create a digital story in a video format (mp4). Before you start editing, you need to collect footage. This section will provide some tips for taking or choosing good photos and videos and how to record your narration so that it is audible and clear.

You can use basic equipment to create a quality video. You can take videos and photos with entry-level smartphones and you can also record audio through a free app on your smartphone.

Compiling your digital story will broadly involve three overlapping stages:

*A **HIGH** angle shot of a child.*

1. **Visuals:** gathering all the visual elements of your story. This could involve taking photos, recording videos, downloading clips from the internet or searching social media.

2. **Audio:** gathering all the sound that will be used. This involves recording your script as narration, finding suitable background music and recording or downloading sound effects for more detail.

3. **Editing:** putting all the visuals and audio together using computer software, adding effects, transitions and text, and exporting your project as a final digital story.

There are two kinds of visuals that you can use.

- **Stills:** images that don't move or stay 'still' (photographs)
- **Video:** images that have movement

Taking a photo or video of something from different angles or distances can imply different meanings. Recording images or video from different distances and including more or less detail can invoke specific emotions. Using a variety of camera angles and sizes in your video helps make it dynamic and capture audience's attention. Think about these when choosing or taking visuals.
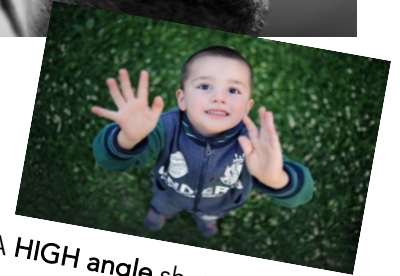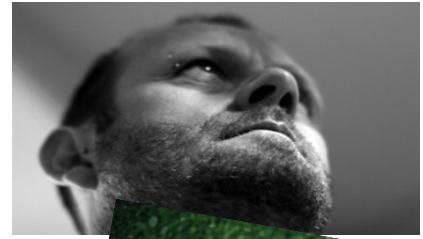
VISUALS

Wait a second before pressing the capture button. Use this time to really *look* at what you see in your screen – *does everything fit comfortably in the frame? Are any important details cut out? Could I stand somewhere else to get a better view*?
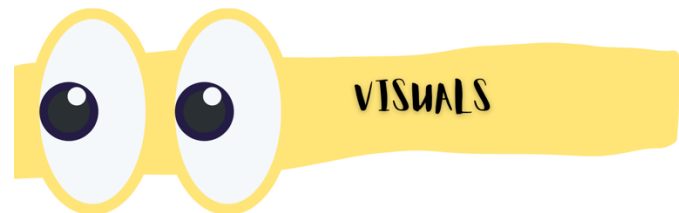
Angles

Low-angle: Taking a photo from beneath the object while looking up at it (*see image*) can create the sense that the object is powerful or ominous. This is often used in filmmaking when portraying villains, warriors, or powerful figure.

High-angle: Taking a photo while looking down on the object can invoke a sense of subordination or vulnerability. In films, children, victims of murders and vulnerable women are often captured from this angle.

Diagonal/obscure: Awkward angles can invoke a sense of confusion, displacement or instability.

Sizes

Wide: Wide angles are big – they include the object, as well as a great deal of surrounding context. Filmmakers often use wide angles to set the scene. A wide angle of a human would include their forehead and feet in the frame.

Medium: Medium shots include less context and focus more on the object. If your object is a human, a medium shot would include the person's head and waist.
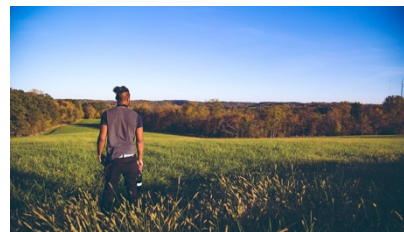
Close: Close shots focus in on a small area of the object in great detail. Close-ups are great in conveying emotion of a human object, as you can clearly see their facial expression.

Close-up   Medium   Wide

Tips for good visuals

Here are some tips to capture effective video and images. If you are going to use content you found on the internet (and have permission) or content that you already have you can use these tips to assess which photos would be the best to use.

Framing

Pay attention to what is included in the photo. The **rule of thirds** suggests that the main subject should be positioned at particular points in the frame (see image) as our eyes naturally move to these lines when looking at an image or video.

Rule of thirds grid shows the lines that the human eye is typically drawn to.
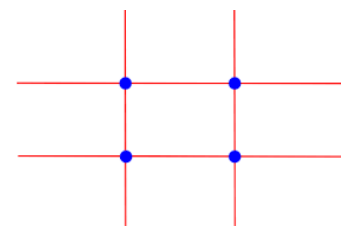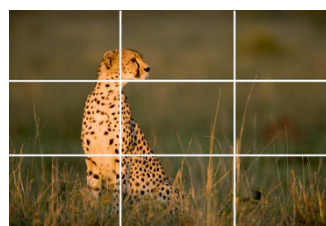
- Don't cut off the object at awkward points (*below the knee, mid forehead, for example*)
- Decide when to use landscape or portrait orientation (*What size screen will your viewers to be using?*)

Quality

- **Avoid blurriness** - holding the camera steady when taking videos and taking autofocus off will help avoid blurriness. Wait a split second before moving the device after taking a photo.
- **Avoid digitally zooming in** – rather move closer to your subject if possible.
- **Focus** – don't use auto-focus or check if there are other moving elements in the frame.
- **Sufficient lighting** – not enough lighting will obscure the subject while too much lighting will also have a poor quality.
  - If *outside* on a bright day, keep the sun behind to avoid silhouettes
  - Check that the subject is not unintentionally covered in shadows or patterns
  - If *inside*, use light from windows

Tips for good video

- Record complete actions
- If you don't have a tripod, place your device on a stable surface or hold it steady
- You are not making a professional movie, so a bit of camera shake is acceptable and adds to the feeling of the narrator being immersed in the story, but bouncing shots will make your viewers dizzy!
- If you want to pan (the shot that begins at one point, moves horizontally and ends on another point), hold your shot still for about three seconds at the start and end of the camera movement so that when you edit your clip.

What makes a good video

Is it steady (little shake)?   **Is it bright enough?**   **Is the sound clear?**   **Are the series of clips varied (sizes/angles)**

Activity 5: Make your video

Rhodes University uses WeVideo, an online video editor. The tutorials will thus describe WeVideo but editors typically have the same layout and features and you can adapt these skills to any program you choose to use after this.

Open WeVideo while going through this tutorial section and practice as you read through it.

Layout of video editor

Most basic video editors have a similar layout. The screen is divided into three sections. On the top left corner, is the **media bin** where all your uploaded footage is organised. On the top right side of the screen is the **preview window** where you can view individual clips before deciding to use them in your video. You can also playback your entire video to see what it will look like as a final product (so far). Finally, across the bottom of the screen is the **timeline** – this is where all the actual editing takes place. Here, you will crop images, remove sections and arrange clips. The timeline is made up of two sections divided horizontally. These sections are called *tracks*. Visuals are placed only on the top track and audio only at the bottom. You can add multiple tracks – for example you can use one audio track for narration and create a second one for background music. These tracks create layers – what you put on the top visual track will be visible ON TOP OF what you put on a visual track below it, unless you reduce the opacity of the TOP track. *Transitions* are used to improve the flow between clips. Effects are added to enhance the content. *Text* is added to provide more information.

USEFUL TERMINOLOGY

Project	the work being done using the editor. Like *Microsoft Word* has documents, video editors have projects
Clip	a single media file being edited
Import	bringing media into the video editing software

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Media	all the footage inserted into the project
Edit	assembling the video; modifying images/audio
Timeline	the linear space where you edit the video
Track	a row on the timeline that shows you a type of media - audio or visuals
Cut	rearranging clips. F*or example, dividing one audio recording into two, or removing chunks from a clip*
Transition	movement from one clip to another
Export	saving the project in a video format, such as mp4
Opacity	the level of transparency of a clip
Dashboard	the home screen. Click on a listed project to continue working on it.
Media	all the media you have uploaded into an editor. You can delete media you don't want to use.
Finish	to finalise your video, you can click on the 'finish' tab. You can then choose a thumbnail (small preview icon) for the video and **export** it. It will take a few minutes to be ready.

WEVIDEO Step-by-step

- Once you have logged in and created a **new project**, you will see the editor screen.
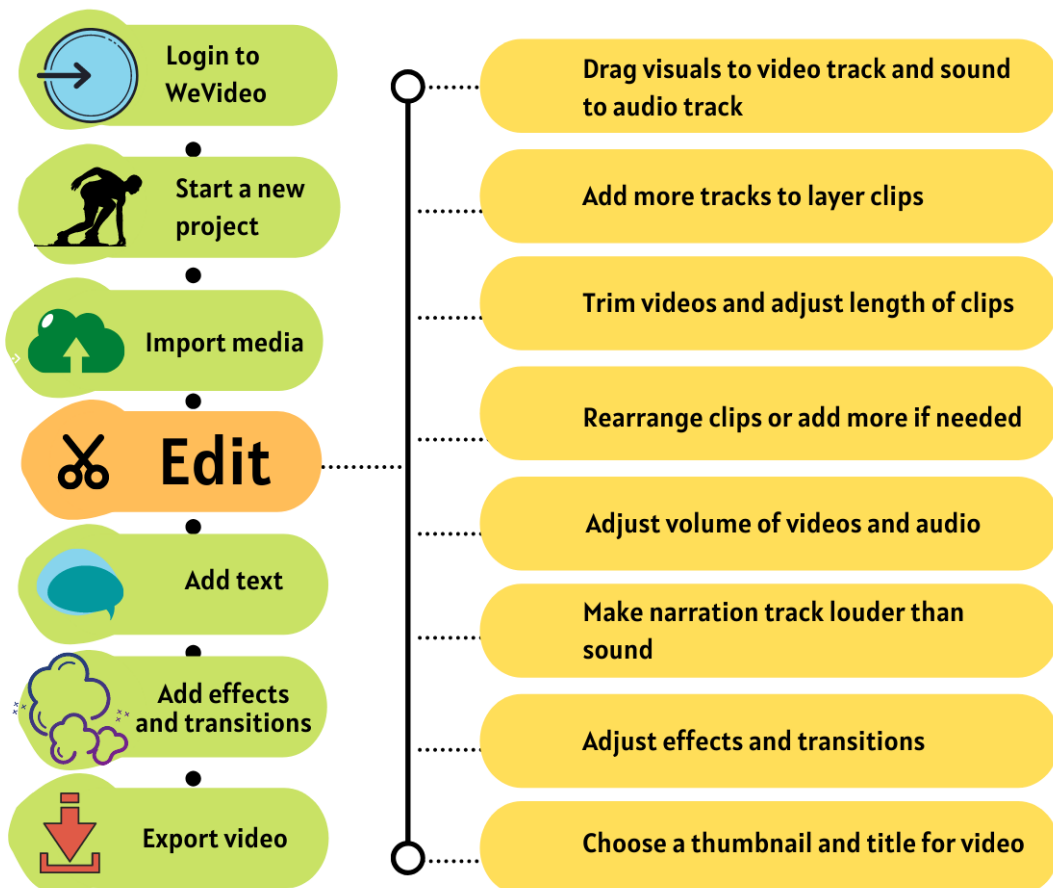
- Add images and video by clicking on the **green cloud icon**. They will all appear in the box on the top left of the screen.
- **Drag your media onto the timeline**. Remember that visuals (photos, videos, text) go on the top track while audio (narration, soundtrack, effects) go on the bottom track. If you need to use an extra track, click on the plus sign on the left of the timeline.
- Control what you see in the preview window and where you are on the timeline by **adjusting the blue cursor.**
- You can **cut** the length of videos using the scissor icon on the blue cursor.
- You can **rearrange** images and videos on the timeline by dragging them where you want them to go. Click 'Insert and Push' if you want to move a picture between two other images instead of overwriting any of them.
- You can adjust images by **double clicking on the image in timeline**. This will open a settings window.
- To layer images, add an extra image timeline and place the images directly above each other. Reduce the opacity of an image by opening its settings. The top layer will be visible ONLY, unless you reduce its opacity.
- You can change the size of the image by **adjusting its scale**. You can edit pre-set text by double clicking on it and moving it around in the preview window. Add an extra track to use background music. Lower the volume of the music track.

Tips for editing a digital story:

- Fade your visuals in at the beginning and fade it out and the end
- Ensure the narration is louder than the music and not overwhelmed
- Have a reasonable combination of moving and still images
- Consider the seven elements of digital storytelling

PREMIUM CONTENT   **IMPORT CLIPS**   **ADD TEXT**   **ADD SOUND**   **TRANSITIONS**   **ADD EFFECTS**

CUT/TRIM TOOL

00:00.00

PLAYHEAD /CURSOR

Use these tools to add clips, text, effects and transitions [top left side of the screen]

Use these tools to arrange your footage on the timeline. [across botttom half of the screen]

ADD ANOTHER TRACK

+

Video 2

Video 1

Audio 1

Place photos and videos on this row

Place narration and music on this row

Change aspect ratio for your viewer's screen - desktop, portrait smartphone, Instagram square

16:9

16:9

9:16

1:1

Add more tracks to layer your clips and sound. [top left side of the screen]

SAVE VIDEO AS MP4

PREVIEW WINDOW

Preview controls

Add text and other effects here

Add your clips here

PHOTO/VIDEO TRACK

AUDIO TRACK

CURSOR

Zoom in/out of timeline

TIMELINE

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