

2 Film and Reading Strategies

As I suggested in the introduction, film and literature are not enemies; in fact, they should be used closely together because they share so many common elements and strategies to gain and keep the audience's attention. We know that for many of our students, film is much more readily accessible than print because of the visual nature and immediacy of the medium, but the very things that films do for us, good and active readers of literature have to do for themselves. With that similarity in mind, this chapter deals primarily with isolating particular skills that we want active readers to possess and demonstrating how they can be introduced and practiced with film *and then* transferred to the written text. This philosophy, I think, reflects most classroom teachers' approach to reader-response theory in that students should try to put themselves into a text before beginning the formal analysis and synthesis. All film does is make this leap easier.

Predicting

When active readers are engaged with a written text, they tend to ask themselves, "What is going to happen next?" We make guesses and, without skipping to the end of the murder mystery—unless you're one of *those*—we revise our predictions as needed. One of the most successful activities for pairing film and literature is to show the opening shots or sequences from a film and ask students to make predictions about what will happen next. I then give students the first page or so of a written text and ask them to make predictions about it. Not only should you have your students predict what they think might happen, but also you must ask them to give several reasons for their guesses. The reasons should be grounded specifically in what they saw or heard. Sure, they might think that *Citizen Kane* or *The Great Gatsby* will be about a wisecracking ski instructor from Venus, but do they have any support for this guess? The point is not that students need to be right about their predictions, but that they make predictions grounded in the film or written text. The sequences described below all work well for predicting because each clip seems to ask more questions than it answers. It is best if you can do at least one film clip and one written text within a

given class period, so that students can really see how the process for predicting texts in one medium works equally well for the other.

Citizen Kane (Orson Welles, 1941)

0:00:00–0:02:49

After the sequence opens with a close-up of a “No Trespassing” sign, the camera moves up and over a series of intricately patterned fences and then continues with a long shot of a gloomy-looking dark castle with one lighted window. (See Figure 12 for a very effective shot from this sequence.) The shot dissolves into other long shots of the decrepit grounds, but always with the castle and its one light in the distance. We get a series of long shots connected by very slow dissolves, though we appear to be moving closer and closer to that window. The music is slow and mournful and it seems to be building to a climax just as the light goes out. And as it does, we have moved, subtly, inside that room; we have now officially trespassed. Next, we see a close-up of a hand holding a snow globe that depicts a scene of a small cabin. The snow seems to fill not just the globe but the whole frame as well. The only spoken word in the whole sequence is when a man—shot in an extreme close-up of just his mouth—whispers “Rosebud” and dies. The glass ball drops from his hand and shatters, without a diegetic crashing sound, on the floor. A nurse calmly enters the room and covers him with a sheet. We see one more shot of his body lengthwise and deep in shadows before the scene and the music fade out.

Questions to Consider

1. What is Rosebud? (No fast forwarding if you don’t know.) How do you know it’s important?
2. Who is this man, and why is his death important to this film? What will it be about?
3. What visual clues did Welles give us to create the mood or theme of this film?
4. What is the significance of beginning with the “No Trespassing” sign?

Rear Window (Alfred Hitchcock, 1954)

0:00:00–0:04:34

As the titles run (and, by the way, your kids will need to be reminded that the opening credits are part of the film; they’re so used to getting popcorn or talking during them), we see the large windows of an apartment

Figure 12. The lighting and music that accompany the opening shots of *Citizen Kane* create the somber mood, and the presence of the gates and the lighted window of the looming castle create a sense of spying and trespassing.



building and the blinds are slowly being raised by some unseen hand. There is a lively (non-diegetic?) jazz soundtrack playing. After the credits, the camera slowly tracks forward, toward and nearly out of one of those windows, which, we see now, looks out onto a middle-class apartment courtyard. (See Figure 13 for a publicity still from the film.) The camera pans across the apartment windows directly across from where we started and shows the neighbors getting ready in the morning to the tune of that jazz we heard from the credits. Slowly we come back inside the first apartment again to see a close-up of a man sleeping and sweating. Cutting to a thermometer, we see it's over 90 degrees. Closer than the first time it did so, the camera again pans across the courtyard and now we can make out some detail. First we see a man shaving, and that song we had been hearing turns out to have been coming from his radio (so it was actually diegetic), which now plays a commercial. He switches stations and the new tune fills the courtyard. We see a couple sleeping on the fire escape and a young woman who dresses in front of her open window and makes coffee while stretching her legs. Returning another time to the first apartment, we now see that the man is in a wheelchair with a cast on his leg that reads, "Here lie the broken bones of L. B. Jefferies." In a series of close-ups, the camera dollies and pans across the man's possessions: a broken camera, action photographs on the wall, a framed picture of a woman seen in negative, and a stack of fashion magazines. Is it the same woman? It looks a little like the woman across the courtyard. No answers yet because the scene ends at that point with a slow fade to black.

Questions to Consider

1. Why so many long shots? Why the use of only diegetic sound?
2. Who will be the main character, and how do you know this?
3. Who will the minor characters be, and what role do you think they will play?
4. What role will the setting play in this film?

Ghost (Jerry Zucker, 1990)

0:00:00–0:03:45

This is kind of an interesting film to show even if students have already seen it, because it really asks them to pay attention to the visual and sound elements in order to make good predictions. This clip was recommended to me by Ann Foster, a teacher in Brevard County, Florida. When you use this sequence be sure to begin right at the very beginning

Figure 13. The setting for the action in *Rear Window*: the normal and the everyday go bad.



because the word “GHOST” appears suddenly, flashes twice (punctuated by the nondiegetic music), and quickly disappears. The camera then moves through what appears to be an attic filled with dusty, forgotten items. The lighting is classic low-key with shafts of light coming through the walls, ceiling, and floor. It is rather disorienting, and the objects that the camera shows us are all somewhat indistinct: bundles of miscellaneous items, as well as wires and pipes, but nothing is clear. The camera then moves to an area of total darkness, which is suddenly punctured by a hole being smashed in what we now realize is the floor of the attic room we have been looking at. Three figures, all in white, look into the space. Next, we see those same figures swinging sledgehammers at a wall, which goes down inside that room where we had been. When they move into the space, one of the men finds a jar with an “Indian-head” penny inside, which he proclaims as “a good omen.” A woman responds, “You’re the good omen,” and gives him a big hug. “It’s so great,” the woman says just at the end of the scene. Using the title, the atmosphere, and what preconceptions they have, your students should be able to make some interesting, though perhaps incorrect, predictions.

Questions to Consider

1. Listen again, and closely, to the music at the very beginning. Is it standard ghost-story music, or are there other elements? Describe its effect.
2. What specific elements seem to be foreshadowing? What do you think they foreshadow?
3. Why do you think the director started with us inside the attic? What is the effect of that choice?

Shifting to Print Texts

Now you should take the opening paragraph or two of any novel or story (e.g., “Call me Ishmael” or “It was the best of times . . .”) and have students take exactly the same approach. It is best if you use a novel that they are actually going to be reading for class, so that they can reassess their predictions from time to time. (The sample chart in Figure 14 is from a class prediction based on the first chapter of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. As you can see, students’ guesses may be right or wrong, but they do have textual support for their predictions.) Also note one more thing: there is almost nothing in common that I can think of between *Kane* and *Their Eyes*, but that is the point. We are isolating skills that our students can apply to any text they encounter.

Film/Novel	Predictions about Character, Theme, Setting	Reasons for Predictions
<i>Citizen Kane</i> , directed by Orson Welles	<p>This is going to be a murder mystery. We are going to find out who poisoned the old man.</p> <p>The old man is very rich and lonely. I bet that he has a lot of children who don't come to visit him too much.</p>	<p>I think it's going to be a mystery because of the dark lighting and the creepy music.</p> <p>I think that he's lonely because he's in a big old house and when he died, the nurse didn't cry or anything.</p>
<i>Their Eyes Were Watching God</i> by Zora Neale Hurston	<p>I think that this is going to be a girl's book.</p> <p>I think the story is going to be about that woman who is coming into the town and what will happen to her when the town hears about what she did.</p>	<p>It talks about love and dreams and horizons and things like a girl would talk about.</p> <p>She's going to be the main character because we hear a lot of descriptions about her good body and how the town is jealous of her.</p>

Figure 14. Prediction chart.

Responding to the Text

We know that, in addition to making predictions about a text, active readers make a text their own. But how do they do this, and how can we assist those students who may not be inclined to do so? One of the best methods I have found is to have students keep a type of viewing/reading log (see Figure 15 for an example) as they read short passages and watch film clips. As with the prediction activity, this one is best used when mixed in with short prose passages or even poems. In fact, this exercise is almost best viewed as a sort of drill-and-practice because we want these kinds of responses to become almost second nature to students. I try to sandwich two reading passages between two short film clips, alternating between the reading and the viewing. I start with a high-interest film clip, move to a high-interest reading clip, then look at a more challenging viewing text, and follow with a difficult reading selection. (If you look at the sample chart shown in Figure 15, you'll see that when I ask students to respond, I want them to think about their

Film/Story/Poem	I liked . . .	It reminded me of . . .	I felt confused when . . .
<i>A Christmas Story</i> , directed by Bob (Benjamin) Clark	when the kid said the bad word, but we didn't really hear it. I liked it when the mother called his friend's mom.	a time when I got grounded for pushing my little brother and I got sent to my room. I hated my dad then.	I didn't get why the kid was wearing glasses and carrying a cane, but I figured it out.
"Those Winter Sundays" by Robert Hayden	the phrases: "no one ever thanked him" and the "angers of the house."	My father used to wake up early during the summer and mow the lawn at like 7:00 a.m. The neighbors hated us.	What does "love's austere and lonely offices" mean? Is the father a nice guy or an angry guy?
<i>Henry V</i> , directed by Kenneth Branagh	I didn't like much except for when she tried to speak English words and got them wrong.	It reminded me of why I dropped Spanish last year; I hate trying to speak other languages.	Just about everything. It took me about five minutes just to realize what was going on and by that time the clip was over. Are we going to see it again?
"Chicago" by Carl Sandburg	many of the really visual lines: "Flinging magnetic curses" and "fierce as a dog."	the inner city. I thought about the homeless people I see downtown.	I couldn't figure out who the guy talking is. He loves Chicago, but why does he say all the bad things about it?

Figure 15. Sample viewing/reading log.

connection—or their lack of connection, which is just as important to identify—to the selected text.) The questions are simple: What did you like or not like about it? What does this text remind you of? When did you feel confused or uninterested? Just as with the prediction exercises, this activity should focus mainly on the skills that it takes to be an involved viewer/reader. The questions that follow each clip are not necessarily analytical in nature, but rather they are intended to encourage personal response to the text.

**High-Interest Film #1: *A Christmas Story*
(Bob [Benjamin] Clark, 1983)**

0:39:02–0:45:00

A wonderful clip from my favorite Christmas movie (sorry, Jimmy Stewart), this sequence begins as Ralphie, an eight-year-old boy, and his family are driving back from buying a Christmas tree when the car gets a flat tire. While helping his father change the tire, Ralphie accidentally drops the lug nuts and, worse, yells “Fudge!” in front of his father. The voice-over narration, however, points out that he didn’t actually say “fudge,” but a curse word that begins with the same letter. (Don’t worry—he doesn’t actually say it.) At home his mother puts a bar of soap in his mouth until he tells her who taught him the bad word. Since he cannot, of course, tell her that he heard it from his own father, he blames a friend of his. Angry at his punishment, Ralphie imagines a scene later in life when he returns home as a blind man, blinded by the very soap his parents forced him to swallow. His fantasy ends with his parents begging his forgiveness, and the scene ends with Ralphie back in bed feeling better at the thought.

Questions to Consider

1. What was the funniest moment of the scene? What made it funny?
2. When have you been in a situation similar to Ralphie’s, whether getting in trouble, receiving punishment, or fantasizing about retribution through guilt?
3. How did the voice-over narration help you follow the story?
4. What was the most interesting framing choice in the sequence? Why?

High-Interest Film #2: *Groundhog Day* (Harold Ramis, 1993)

0:45:56–0:56:20

In this sequence, a television weatherman, Phil, played by Bill Murray, has become trapped in some sort of twilight zone where he is forced to repeat the same day (February 2) over and over, though no one else is aware that it has been Groundhog Day again and again. Perhaps out of genuine interest or perhaps because he simply is bored, Phil tries to begin a romance with his producer, Rita, played by Andie McDowell. He is not at all successful at first, but, remember, he has day after day to improve his pickup lines. And she has no recollection of the previous

night's date. Each little sequence within this scene moves Phil closer and closer to having Rita fall in love with him, but he always messes up something. At one point, while they are dancing, the nondiegetic song "You Don't Know Me" by Ray Charles seems to signal that Phil's attempts are shallow and ultimately unsuccessful. Toward the end of the scene, Rita turns him down in his hotel room, and the remainder of the scene recounts several repeated days of Phil's attempting just to get their date back to the hotel room. His attempts to plan and reinvent the spontaneity of the first night are quite pitiful, and, after a series of rapidly edited face slaps that happen earlier and earlier in the date, Phil finally gives up.

Questions to Consider

1. When did you laugh the most? When did you feel sorry for either character?
2. If you could live one day over and over, what would you do with your time? Did Phil accomplish anything worthwhile during his repeated days in this sequence?
3. Would you get bored with life if you had to live it like this? When did Phil appear to be bored?
4. How did the editing contribute to the humor in this scene?

Challenging Film #1: *Henry V* (Kenneth Branagh, 1989)

0:51:15–0:55:09

First of all, this scene is almost entirely in French. Emma Thompson plays Katherine, the daughter of the French king, who wants to learn English and asks Alice, her maid, to teach her the English words for various body parts. There are no subtitles whatsoever, so unless you speak French, you have to figure out what you can from the context, the actions, and the heavily accented English words they do say. As Katherine and Alice practice the words, Katherine giggles and dances around like a schoolgirl. The scene ends as Katherine opens the door to her chamber, laughing at her new vocabulary, as her father, the dour king, walks by, obviously heavy with thoughts of the coming war with England.

Questions to Consider

1. Have you ever seen a foreign film with subtitles? Did you expect this one to have subtitles? How did you feel when you realized that there were not going to be any?
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2. What were the words that Katherine learned? Were these similar to or different from the first words that you learned in a foreign language?
3. When did you feel the most confused during this scene? When did you really feel like you understood what they were talking about? Do you think that you would understand even more if you were to see the clip again?

Challenging Film #2: *The Conversation* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1974)

0:33:05–0:39:36

This is a difficult sequence for a number of reasons. It can be difficult to follow the plot itself, which occurs in a present time and a series of flashbacks, and it also takes quite a bit of time to understand what the characters in the flashbacks are saying—which actually is the point of the entire scene. Harry, played by Gene Hackman, is a surveillance expert who has been hired, apparently by a jealous husband, to audiotape a conversation between a man and woman as they discuss their affair. Before this scene begins, Harry has already turned in a transcript of the tape to his employer, but something still nags at him, and in this sequence he tries to work on the audio quality in order to hear their entire conversation more clearly. So, as he works on the tape, we *see* visual flashbacks of the man and the woman talking even though Harry himself can only *hear* them talk. Gradually, the sound becomes clearer and Harry becomes increasingly interested in getting every word. All the while, we have been seeing different angles and framings of the conversation as Harry works on the dialogue. Finally, the key phrase in the entire conversation has been made out: the man says to the woman, “He’d kill us if he got the chance.” Everything that was said earlier now takes on a different meaning. It may be a case not only of adultery but also of murder. If you let the scene play just another second or two, you will see that Harry immediately goes to a church for confession and guidance.

Questions to Consider

1. When were you most confused or bored with this scene? When were you most interested? Why?
 2. How would this scene have been different if we did not see the conversation, but, like Harry, only heard it?
 3. When have you overheard a conversation and been interested in what the participants were saying?
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4. What do you think Harry will do about what he heard?

This activity values a type of viewer (or reader) reaction that is often looked down on: the simple response. Too often I hear myself saying to my students, “Don’t tell me your feelings about it; give me an analysis of it!” I forget sometimes that in order to analyze a text, students must first interact with it at the most basic level, and, when I ignore that step, the result is that the students are cut off from the text, unable to do much with it at all. These exercises, then, remind us that when a student says, “I didn’t like it,” they are beginning the process of making meaning out of that text—an important first step.

Questioning the Text

Once students have begun responding to the text, we can now move them toward a greater interaction with it. An effective way to get started is to have students write questions about the text you are studying. The act of *asking* questions, rather than simply *answering* questions all the time, is essential to achieving a real connection with a text. Think about a typical student’s day, in which all he or she does is answer questions posed by adults in authority. But when students begin to question the text, they gain ownership of it, and become, in fact, an authority. In order to help make their questions as focused and relevant as possible, I recommend introducing students to the idea of the levels of questions. This approach was presented to me by two California English teachers, Jo Ellen Victoreen and Betsy James, who synthesized the ideas of various Great Books programs and the College Board’s Building Success strategies. The main idea is that there are three levels of questions that can be asked about any text, and all three types of questions are essential to being able to construct meaning from the text. Students should be taught about these levels and encouraged to write questions at each of them.

Level One: Questions of Fact

These questions can be answered with a word, phrase, or detail from the text. Imagine reading the story of Cinderella. A level one question might be, “What time must Cinderella be home?” or “What was turned into her carriage?” Sometimes these are basic recall questions to check on comprehension, but they are not always simple questions; in fact, at times they are essential to gathering support for an argument.

Level Two: Questions of Interpretation

These questions can be answered only by interpreting the facts given in or suggested by the text. Again from Cinderella: “What motivated Cinderella to want to go the ball?” or “How would you characterize her stepsisters?” These are the kinds of questions that we often ask in our classrooms, addressing such concerns as character, setting, and tone. They can also involve authorial/directorial intent in using a particular phrase, angle, lighting choice, or other technique or element: “Why did the director use [particular device or technique]?”

Level Three: Questions Beyond the Text

These are questions that relate some aspect of the text to the real world. Answers to these questions are to be found not by looking within this single text but by examining society and the world at large. With Cinderella, a level three question might be, “Why are women often portrayed as waiting for Prince Charming to save them?” or “Is there such a thing as ‘happily ever after’?”

Notice that each of these three levels is essential to interacting with a text, and none of them is any more significant than the others, even though the numbering implies a hierarchy of sorts. Also remember that since this exercise asks the students themselves to come up with the questions, they should take the lead in the discussions that follow. Or, you may not even want to have their questions answered; sometimes the questions alone are enough. Just as with the two previous activities, the idea is to use the film clips to practice writing good questions at each level and then move on to the written text. Below are outlines for several film clips, along with sample questions I have created for each level. The chart shown in Figure 16 includes sample questions that I received from students when we did this activity at the beginning of our study of *Romeo and Juliet*, using *Titanic* as a lead-in.

***Titanic* (James Cameron, 1987)**

0:55:39–1:03:00

This sequence in the first third of the doomed-boat film deals with third-class passenger Jack Dawson, played by Leonardo DiCaprio, when he is invited by first-class passenger Rose, played by Kate Winslet, to dinner in the main dining room. The scene begins as Jack is being dressed in appropriate attire by the kindly Molly Brown. When he enters the first-class section, Jack is initially awed and a little intimidated by the surroundings of the main foyer and the dining room, as well as by the

Titles	Questions
<i>Titanic</i>	Level One: Where does Jack get his nice suit of clothes? Why is he eating dinner with the rich people?
	Level Two: Why does Rose like Jack? How is he different from her boyfriend?
	Level Three: Why do rich people look down on poor people? Does money make you happier?
<i>Romeo and Juliet</i> (Act 1)	Level One: Who is Romeo in love with at first? Who are the two feuding families?
	Level Two: What makes Romeo fall in love so quickly? What will be the most difficult thing for Romeo to overcome in order to get Juliet?
	Level Three: Is love supposed to be difficult? Why do people meddle in other people's lives?

Figure 16. Levels of questioning.

gestures expected of a gentleman, which, as it is pointed out to him by Rose's fiancé, he is only pretending to be. Soon enough, however, Jack begins to gain confidence and, in fact, dominates the conversation at the dinner table with his rough eloquence. Notice the cutaways to Rose and Molly, showing their admiration. The scene ends as the guests at the table all raise their glasses to echo a statement Jack has made about "Making it count!"

Level One

1. How does Jack say that he got his ticket for the *Titanic*?
2. What items at the dinner table does Jack have the most difficulty with?

Level Two

1. Why does the mother appear to be threatened by Jack? Why does Cal appear *not* to be threatened by him?
2. What does Jack seem to value most?

3. What does the director do to make us sympathize with Jack?

Level Three

1. Do you think that there is as much difference between the social classes today as there was in the time of the film?
2. What does it mean to “make it count”? Do you or people you know seem to live their lives like Jack does?

Smoke Signals (Chris Eyre, 1998)

0:33:50–0:38:10

I absolutely love this short scene from this small independent film, which was, by the way, one of the first major releases to have a predominantly American Indian cast and crew. Victor and Thomas are teenagers taking their first major trip away from their reservation in Coeur d’Alene, on their way to collect some items left by Victor’s father, who recently died and who had disappeared from the family years ago. On the bus, Victor tries to teach Thomas, a geeky boy with braids who smiles all the time, what it means to be “a real Indian.” He tells him to be stoic and to imagine that he has just come back from killing a buffalo. In addition, his hair needs to be long and free, to show his power. This is the only way, Victor says, that the Whites will leave them alone. A few moments later we see the bus driver and Victor waiting alongside the bus as Thomas comes out of the restroom in slow motion, hair flowing wild and a look of stone on his face. It lasts only so long, as he breaks out into one of his smiles again. The smile doesn’t last long either, however, because when they get back on the bus, two White men have taken their seats and refuse to move for them. Victor tries to be tough and use the stoic face, but the men only respond with racial insults. Thomas and Victor take new seats, and, though Thomas tries to tease him gently about the “Indian power,” both boys are clearly hurt. They do, however, get some revenge by singing about John Wayne’s teeth. (If you like this clip, be sure to consider teaching the complete film; see Chapter 4.)

Level One

1. What does “stoic” mean? What is a stoic face like?
2. When Thomas tells Victor that their tribe never hunted buffalo, what does he say they did hunt?

Level Two

1. How does Victor feel about his American Indian heritage? How is this different from how Thomas feels?
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2. What is the effect of the long, slow-motion shot of Thomas coming out of the rest room? Describe how the nondiegetic music helped create this effect.
3. Why do Thomas and Victor not do more to get the men out of their seats?

Level Three

1. What does the popular representation of American Indians tend to be like in the media today, and what has it been like throughout history?
2. What do you think is the most common misunderstanding between Whites and American Indians?
3. What causes racism between various ethnic and racial groups?

The Color Purple (Steven Spielberg, 1985)

0:19:41–0:22:48

Very early on in this adaptation of Alice Walker's novel, Celie is young but already married to a brutal man called Mister. Her sister Nettie has come to live with them, and the sisters become inseparable (as seen in the shot shown in Figure 17), though they know that Nettie will have to leave soon because Celie's husband, played by Danny Glover, is looking at her in a way unbecoming of a brother-in-law. This clip begins when Nettie and Celie are talking about staying in touch somehow. When Celie says that they can write to each other, Nettie decides to teach her older sister to read by placing the names of things all around the house. Together they spell things like jar and kettle, but when Celie gets to "sky," she spells "M-i-s-t-e-r" instead because her husband is suddenly there towering over them, glaring down at her. The scene continues as they run around like school children playing games and hugging each other, but it ends when Mister, not quite reading the paper he's holding, eyes Nettie even more closely.

Level One

1. Why does Nettie teach Celie to read?
2. What do they carve into the tree alongside the house?

Level Two

1. Why do you think Mister does not want Celie to learn to read?
 2. What do you think the sunflowers the girls play with represent?
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Figure 17. From *The Color Purple*: the young Celie and Nettie in happy times, as represented by the high-key light and the lush fields.



3. What does the director do to make us feel the closeness of the sisters in this scene? Why is it important for us to feel that?
4. How does the director show us Mister's growing interest in Nettie?

Level Three

1. At its most basic level, as in this scene, why is education so important?
2. Are there differences between the ways that men and women are educated?
3. What roles do siblings play in our lives?

The most important part of this activity is the fact that it is up to the students to generate questions on the three levels for each of the film clips. When they write the questions in this manner, they have to be engaged with the clip on a variety of levels, and, in fact, they become the experts on the text. After you have practiced this approach a few times with these or other film clips, you will see how well students are able to question a written text. When I am in the middle of a novel with my classes, I often have them generate questions for quizzes and use their level three questions for journal topics. I also put students in charge of a chapter to present and discuss their questions with the rest of the class. It has almost always been successful, I promise.

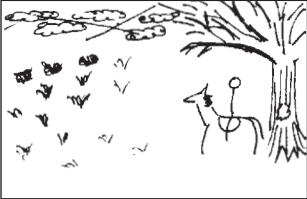

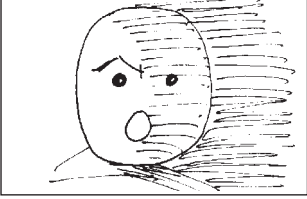
Storyboarding

One of the greatest successes I have had in using film study as a reading strategy is to ask students to "storyboard" a portion of the story or novel we are reading. These storyboards are graphic representations of exactly what would appear in each shot in a film adaptation of the text we're reading. It's sort of like a comic strip, though there are no dialogue balloons or "?#@&*&?!!!" type of symbols anywhere on the picture since it is supposed to look exactly like the finished film image on the movie screen would look. The storyboard is essential in determining framing, angles, and many other choices, and just about all directors will storyboard most of their shots ahead of time in order to be sure that their ideas turn out the way they had intended. (Many digital video disks [DVDs] available for rental or purchase now include the storyboards used while filming the movie.) It is legend that Hitchcock rarely looked through the lens of the camera for any of his films because he had storyboarded every shot so extensively that there simply was no need: he could see it all in pictures in front of him. Even though real

storyboards are drawn by professional artists, our storyboards will not require any artistic talent whatsoever. The idea is to ask the students to imagine how a story might be filmed and to represent their ideas visually, and stick figures work just as well as more polished pieces. There are two similar types of storyboard assignments that I like to do with my students. The first is a close reading of particular lines that I have in mind from a text we are reading, and the students complete a chart like the one shown in Figure 18, which is based on a text selection I have had good success with—the opening of “The Fall of the House of Usher,” which reads as follows:

During the whole of a dull, dark, and soundless day in the autumn of the year, when the clouds hung oppressively low in the heavens, I had been passing alone, on horseback, through a singularly dreary tract of country; and at length found myself, as the shades of the evening drew on, within view of the melancholy House of Usher. I know not how it was—but, with the first glimpse of the building, a sense of insufferable gloom pervaded my spirit. I say insufferable; for the feeling was unrelieved by any of that half-pleasurable, because poetic, sentiment, with which the mind usually receives even the sternest natural images of the desolate or terrible. I looked upon the scene before me—upon the mere house, and the simple landscape features of the domain—upon the bleak walls—upon the vacant eye-like windows—upon a few rank sedges—and upon a few white trunks of decayed trees—with an utter depression of soul which I can compare to no earthly sensation more properly than to the after-dream of the reveler upon opium—the bitter lapse into common life—the hideous dropping off of the veil. There was an iciness, a sinking, a sickening of the heart—an unredeemed dreariness of thought which no goading of the imagination could torture into aught of the sublime. What was it—I paused to think—what was it that so unnerved me in the contemplation of the House of Usher? It was a mystery all insoluble; nor could I grapple with the shadowy fancies that crowded upon me as I pondered. I was forced to fall back upon the unsatisfactory conclusion, that while, beyond a doubt, there *are* combinations of very simple natural objects which have the power of thus affecting us, still the reason, and the analysis of this power lies among considerations beyond our depth. It was possible, I reflected, that a mere different arrangement of the particulars of the scene, of the details of the picture, would be sufficient to modify, or perhaps to annihilate its capacity for sorrowful impression; and, acting upon this idea, I reined my horse to the precipitous brink of a black and lurid tarn that lay in unruffled luster by the dwelling, and gazed down—but with a shudder even more thrilling than before—upon the remodeled and inverted images of the gray sedge, and the ghastly tree-stems, and the vacant and eye-like windows.

**FILM & READING STRATEGIES:
STORYBOARDING ACTIVITY # 1**

	What did you want to demonstrate?	What lines helped you see this?
<p>SHOT #1</p> 	<p>I wanted to show the gloominess of the setting, which is like a cemetery or something.</p>	<p>"autumn of the year" "clouds hung oppressively low" "dreary tract of country"</p>
<p>SHOT #2</p> 	<p>I wanted to show that the narrator has come upon a very sad and broken-down old house.</p>	<p>"bleak walls" "vacant eye-like windows" "rank sedges"</p>
<p>SHOT #3</p> 	<p>The narrator is immediately repulsed by the house and I wanted to show his horrified reaction to it.</p>	<p>"a sense of insufferable gloom invaded my spirit."</p>

What music or sound effects would you imagine in this scene? Why?

If this really were a movie, I would want a slow-moving classical song with lots of violins playing. We would hear only the sounds of the horse moving along the path. But when he first sees the house, there is no sound at all.

Figure 18. Chart for first storyboarding activity.

Nevertheless, in this mansion of gloom I now proposed to myself a sojourn of some weeks. Its proprietor, Roderick Usher, had been one of my boon companions in boyhood; but many years had elapsed since our last meeting. A letter, however, had lately reached me in a distant part of the country—a letter from

him—which, in its wildly importunate nature, had admitted of no other than a personal reply. The MS. gave evidence of nervous agitation. The writer spoke of acute bodily illness—of a pitiable mental idiosyncrasy which oppressed him—and of an earnest desire to see me, as his best, and indeed his only personal friend, with a view of attempting, by the cheerfulness of my society, some alleviation of his malady. It was the manner in which all this, and much more, was said—it was the apparent *heart* that went with his request—which allowed me no room for hesitation; and I accordingly obeyed what I still considered a very singular summons, forthwith.

Based on selected lines from this excerpt (or from whatever other text we may be using), students draw what they imagine would be on-screen during this part of the story, and they must be able to explain what in the story itself led them to make this particular choice. In other words, if they used a close-up or a low-angle shot of the house, what language that Poe used made them imagine the house that way? Not only do they need to visualize the language of the story, but they also must begin interpreting the reasons why Poe might have used a particular word or phrase. This activity, I have found, is best done while you are at the very beginning of your study of the text because it becomes such an engaging entrance into the story.

The second storyboarding activity is a little more creative and wide-ranging. After we have read a short story or a novel, I select a chapter or a portion of a chapter and assign one student, or a group of students working together, the task of completing a chart such as Storyboard Activity #2 (see Figure 19). You can see the differences between these two activities. The first depends on a close reading of the text itself, whereas the second allows for greater individual interpretation. This second activity also requires students to have a full knowledge of cinematic technique, since it asks them about camera movement, editing, lighting, and so on. Obviously it still requires a close reading of the text, but it also gives the students much more flexibility in deciding which lines from the story are the most relevant or have the best visual connection. The two shots sampled here are taken, again, from “The Fall of the House of Usher,” though I normally ask for anywhere between five and ten shots to be storyboarded. When you break the text into sections and assign them to groups to present, the whole story gets retold visually. Whichever activity you use, it is important that students, acting as directors, are aware of the effects their choices have and know that those choices should have at least some basis in the original text.


It is very important to reemphasize that artistic skill is not required to create a good storyboard. What your students are trying to demon-

**FILM & READING STRATEGIES:
STORYBOARDING ACTIVITY # 2**

Title: "House of Usher" **Pages:** 1-2

Summary of Scene:
This starts just as the narrator reins his horse and begins to walk down to the house.

SHOT # 1



Intended Effect of Shot:
To show that the house appears forgotten and overgrown.

Diegetic Sound:
wind blowing, horse stomping, an owl screeching

Non-diegetic Sound:
scary, horror-movie, very dramatic and fast paced.


Shot Type: long shot

Angle: low angle **Lighting:**
very low key, especially dark around the house.

Movement: pan to house

Edit: dissolve to #2

SHOT # 2



Intended Effect of Shot:
To show that the narrator is deeply affected just by the sight of the house.

Diegetic Sound:
The narrator shivers, the horse stomps even louder, and the wind is now howling.

Non-diegetic Sound:
Same as shot #1, but now it is building to a crescendo that will continue until he enters the house.

Shot Type: medium

Angle: high angle

Movement: none **Lighting:**
low key with side lighting on the narrator to emphasize his fear.

Edit: cut to #3

Figure 19. Chart for second storyboarding activity.

strate are their interpretations, represented in visual images, of a written text. It is amazing to see how each student will visualize and adapt the same story differently. As a culminating activity, you may want to show students a filmed version of the story they have read so that they can see the similarities and differences between their interpretations and

those of professional filmmakers. Many suitable videos of stories are probably available in your school's library; for example, I know that McDougal Littell has a series, and the American Short Story collection from PBS is widely available. Whenever I have shown a filmed version of a text that we have storyboarded, invariably some students will loudly protest that the professional filmmakers got it all wrong and that theirs were better. That's definitely taking some ownership of a text!

Soundtrack

Another great way to engage students with a text is to ask them to imagine being the producer of a film being made of whatever story you are reading in class. One of the tasks of the producer is to find songs and musical accompaniment that will go along with the story.

If you were reading "The Cask of Amontillado," for example, you might make a tape of three or four short songs, or portions of songs, that you think might be appropriate. The songs I have used for this particular story are "Welcome to the Jungle" by Guns N' Roses, "The Adversary" by Crime and the City Solution, and any classical piece that sounds a little mournful (see Figure 20 for sample student responses about how the songs might be used). As you play each song, ask your students the following questions:

1. Where would this song fit best in a movie of this story? What *action* would be happening on screen while this song was playing? Why at this place?
2. What would the scene look like while this song was playing? Shot type? Angle? Lighting? Why these?
3. If you could select only one of these songs, which one would you choose? Why?

This type of exercise, again, asks your students to visualize the written text, but it also requires that they know enough about the characters, setting, and plot of the story to be able to justify their choices. After you have gone through the music selections you brought to class, ask students what songs they know of that might fit the story. Believe me, they will be able to think of great ones; maybe, too, you can convince them to bring in music to share, and maybe even to copy it for you so you can use it next year. This activity does take a little time, in order to find appropriate songs for a written text, but it pays off wonderfully. (In fact, I've expanded this activity while writing this book. Recently I asked students to put together an entire soundtrack—four or five songs—for a novel we were reading, along with a brief explana-

Song Title	Where would it go in the story? Why?	What specific images do you imagine?
"The Adversary" by Crime and the City Solution	This would happen just when Montessor chains him up because Fortunado now knows he is the enemy and the song tells him that.	A close-up of the bricks being put in place and the smile of Montessor.
"Love's Illusion" by Anonymous 4	I bet this would go at the beginning when he is telling his plans because it seems like it would be from that time period. It's old and classical, but also kind of haunting.	Maybe we would see establishing shots of the whole city as the camera pans across the buildings. It stops on Montessor's window and we go inside.
"Welcome to the Jungle" by Guns N' Roses	I don't know, it sounds kind of out of place, but it's very loud and the guy singing it seems crazy so it should probably go just when Montessor and Fortunado first go into the catacombs since he says "Welcome."	It should be very dark, and the camera should be sort of jumping all over the place. Fortunado's cap, Montessor's evil smile, etc.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Now, as the film's producer, you just found out that your budget allows for only <i>one</i> of the above songs. Which one would you choose, and why? • What other songs that you know of would fit in well with this story? Where would they fit? 		

Figure 20. Soundtrack possibilities for "The Cask of Amontillado."

tion of why they chose the songs they did. We shared the soundtracks in class and debated which were more effective.)

The ideas behind each of these activities derive, really, from garden-variety reading strategies; there's no rocket science or critical theory here. Anytime we can get our students fully involved in a text, we know we have done our job. The particular skills—predicting, responding, questioning, and visualizing—are ones that students at any level need either to develop or to practice. I have found that students are more willing to practice with film at first, and then they may follow you by swallowing that bitter pill of reading the written text as well. We just won't tell them that reading the text was the whole point anyway.

Reference

Poe, Edgar Allan. 1983. "The Fall of the House of Usher." *The Unabridged Edgar Allan Poe*. Philadelphia: Running Press.
