

Las Vegas Quill Keepers Lesson 17: Storyboarding and Time Lines

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If your writing a short story, novella, or even non-fiction, sometimes the time lines for your tale get confusing. Or, as a novelist, you may have mixed up character settings or even quirks, from one to the next. Maybe your biggest problem keeping track of events, characters, and even plot twists. You should consider using storyboarding techniques.

A storyboard is a visual display of a scene, an event, or even a character. Remember those Colorforms™ you played with as a child? There was preset background image, and you would place plastic cut-out items onto the image. The plastic used static charge to give the illusion of sticking to the board. You could put a cartoon character in different locations onto the displayed scene. If you wanted to have him wear red, you'd just pose him that way in a red shirt. Storyboards work and look very much like those Colorforms™ games.

Back in the days when I was working in the movie industry, one of my jobs was to create storyboards for special effects shoots. The storyboards gave the director an idea of what each shot looked like without the expense of using film. For every camera shot, I'd have a new 5" x 9" pane. Some storyboards were the size of the warehouses we shot in, while others took up a table space. Below these image panes were text boxes. Notes regarding the scenes resided there. Often a director would use one color pencil, while a producer used another, and the shot would be decided based on the visuals and the comments.

Directors rely on the images as a guide for the camera crew. Writers can use the storyboard for the variety of scenes in any tale. Not an artist? It

doesn't matter. If a stick figure gives you an idea of a layout of any scene, then it's doing the job just fine. If you're trying to decide how a character got a weapon, for example, from a drawer in a bureau, without the knowledge of another, use the drawing to show placement of the protagonist in relation to his antagonist.

Storyboards will allow visual understanding of impossible, or probable events. How many times have you watched a movie, and had no idea how the lead would escape a precarious position? Using a visual aid, like a storyboard, gives ideas of possibilities.

Another way to storyboard without drawing is by cutting out images and pasting of laying them onto a poster board. Much like paper dolls, you have the freedom of moving one or many images. Let's say you describe a face, but it really doesn't seem realistic. Draw a circle, use cut outs of pictures of noses you've found in a magazine. See if you can create someone's look to seem "rounded, but with a nose that seems almost too flat viewed from the side". Just playing with cut out features allows a clearer image of the character.

A time line is a visual representation of events occurring within a specific time frame. I wrote an autobiography, (available from ByShayne.com), called TimeLine consisting of a long line drawing, with paragraphs of information appearing during particular locations on the drawing. The events occur between May 1, 1964, and May 1, 1994, covering the first thirty years of my life. There are only representative points during key moments of my life, and the text is terse. The time line for any story should be developed in a similar manner.

Do you know key points in your story, but aren't sure what events come first? Use index cards to write down comments. Line the comment cards

left to right, and then mix the orders around until your story seems to clearly unfold the way you would like. The time line helps to not only organize events, but can assist you in bringing back key points during character conversations. Back stories are greatly improved by the use of time lines. If your story begins with a woman in prison, knowing the timeline of how she got there will strengthen the back story.

Even if you never make reference to the back story in your novella, knowing the events that occurred in your character's life will help create a better, realistic protagonist or antagonist. Does your lead character have a fear of telephones because her mother used to hit her with one? Every time your character passes a beagle, does he stop and scratch the dog's ears? Our special quirks come from our environment, as they would your characters'. Use a timeline to decide what events help develop your character into one that your readers can relate to.

Blend a time line and a storyboard. Doing so will not only allow you to learn about your character, but also the world in which she lives. Using a large poster board, draw the layout of the town where your story takes place. Include in the drawing all key locations that matter, and those which have importance for back story purposes. Unlike your grade school projects, no one is going to judge this layout but you.

A trick that I use is to create a sample town, and then place the index cards of key events on top of the locations where they would happen in my story. This helps me focus on which characters would have knowledge of story segments, and who would not. It also helps me determine the length of time needed for a character to get from one place to another. (Is there public transportation? Is there a freeway?)

Each index card text is color coded by year/event. If I have a red panned card, for example, the event occurred with in the first few chapters of the story. A blue card indicates events that are part of a back story. A green text indicates events that are yet to be written. I'm lazy though, so if I complete an event, I can just put a red dot onto the corner of the index card, indicating that part of the story is now written.

Time lines and storyboards are tools that allow you to explore story possibilities before you ever commit them to paper. Another form of timeline is a genealogy tract, also known as the family tree. This type of time line not only gives you dates of birth and death of characters, but can reveal relationships between one character and the next. You don't have to use this form of graph for blood relations. Instead, you can use them for personal relationship structures.

For example. My story is about Mary. Mary was married to John, now married to Elisa. Elisa and John have four children, the oldest is Brian. Brian is Mary's new gardener. Elisa used to be Mary's stepsister. Do you see how confusing it is by just reading sentences? However I could put this in a table:

Mary (Smith) Burton	
John Burton	Elisa (Smith) Burton
Brian-(gardener)	

I used red to connect John, Brian's job, and Mary. I used Blue to connect Mary to Elisa. I used the layout of the table to show a hierarchy, and a closeness of characters. It reads a little easier this way, and by playing with the font color and weight, I can easily see who is connected to whom.

There are simple programs used by businesses that give a chain of command, or departmental breakdowns. These same programs can show layouts of family connections, events, and even progressions from one event to the next. Many office programs already contain this software.

Here are some links to time line and story board information:

TimeLine Maker

<http://www.timelinemaker.com/>

Chart Software

<http://www.smartdraw.com/specials/timelines.asp?id=5811>

Journaling with a Timeline

[http://www.outliners.com/discuss/msgReader\\$2870?mode=day](http://www.outliners.com/discuss/msgReader$2870?mode=day)

Free storyboard software, (Registered version loses watermarks)

<http://6sys.com/Springboard/>

Mac Storyboard software

<http://www.macnn.com/print/14255>