

Curriculum for Creating a 90-Second Newbery Film

With a bunch of kids

In a fairly short amount of time

Teachers, here's a fun project that will get your students reading Newbery winners. Students, here's an excuse to mess around with video equipment. Librarians, here's an activity to do with your teen advisory boards. Anyone can enter. Everyone wins!



What is the 90-Second Newbery Film Festival?

The 90-Second Newbery Film Festival is a contest open to anyone, but especially to kids: **Create a video that compresses the story of a Newbery award-winning book into 90 seconds or less, using (at least mostly) kid actors.** Books that have won the Newbery Medal or Newbery Honor are fair game. The best videos received are shown at annual 90-Second Newbery Film Festival screenings in New York City, Chicago, and Portland, Oregon (for details about the live film festival screenings and links to featured videos, go to <http://www.90secondnewbery.com>).

Thanks to modern technology, creating videos is no longer rocket science or prohibitively expensive. But following a few rules of video production—AND of kid wrangling—can improve one's final work by a factor of 42.

It's a Partnership

The adult or older teen managing this project must first answer the following question: **How much of this will be child-directed and how much adult directed?**

There's no getting away from it: the best 90-Second Newbery films will be directed by the adult (or video-savvy teen), written by kids with adult oversight, acted by kids with the adults either behind the camera or behind the student with the camera, and edited by the adult, possibly with a savvy middle-schooler or two providing opinions. There is no doubt that the kids will feel that they are immersed in the experience, even if you're the one with fingers on the keyboard.

However, if the goal of your program is more to have kids create something (almost) all by themselves, that's A-OK too! A 90-Second Newbery film can be accomplished with kids doing the bulk of the work and adults mostly doing the herding. But unless your kids are already intimately acquainted with video production, acting, directing, and editing, this project is definitely an adult-kid partnership.

Getting Started

What the producers of the 90-Second Newbery Film Festival are looking for is a unique twist on a famous book, a twist that often involves humor. While a straight rendering of a book may be possible in 90 seconds, this is not what you are aiming for. *A Bridge to Terabithia* makes me cry every time, but doing it in 90 seconds as the characters from Hello Kitty might be hilarious. Perplexed by the ambiguous ending of *The Giver*? Make Nancy Drew the narrator, push it to a minute and a half, and see what happens. Or try mixing genres: *Charlotte's Web* as a horror movie, for instance. This is where brainstorming sessions with the kids in your group can be particularly valuable. Those crazy random associations your kids' minds make are *exactly* what are needed for a 90-Second Newbery film!

Before you make your decisions about how to manage this project, we encourage you to read through this manual to see our recommendations for making your 90-Second Newbery video production as smooth as possible. We hope that reading our recommendations and using some of our worksheets will cut down on your prep time as well as help you see your path more clearly from beginning to end. It should go without saying (but we are saying it anyway) that you should tailor both the recommendations for meetings and the worksheets to the particular needs of your group.

How to Structure a 90-Second Newbery Production

Creating a 90-Second Newbery film from start to finish can be compressed into a one-week full-time camp if you're going to be finishing up the editing after the end of camp, a one-week morning or afternoon session if you choose the book and mark the scenes ahead of time, and edit the film outside of the camp afterward. Or it can be a semester-long once-per-week meeting of 2 hours, in the middle also meeting separately with characters to shoot scenes individually, and the remainder of the semester devoted to editing.

We all know your kids are characters...

Creating a winning 90-Second Newbery Film is difficult to do effectively in a large group, unless the majority of the group is okay with being in "the crowd" and/or having crew roles rather than starring roles. Choose your main character actors carefully (you want 5-6 stars at maximum) and if possible, choose the book according to the kids who will be acting and what they like to do. Remember, using many characters is a sure way to confuse an audience even for a long movie... in 90 seconds you need to be able to introduce characters *and* have a plot that doesn't keep the audience wondering "Wait, who's that again?" If all of your main character actors look alike (e.g., you've got a bunch of blonde 9-year-old actors), do your best to distinguish them from each other with wigs or costumes.

Further reading before you plunge in

You might want to pick up *Cinematic Storytelling: The 100 Most Powerful Film Conventions Every Filmmaker Must Know* by Jennifer van Sijll. There are many tips and tricks in this book that you can easily deploy that will dramatically improve your movie at no extra cost. Here's some sample advice:

"As Westerners we read left-to-right. If you rented fifty studio-made movies, there's a good chance that the 'good guy' will enter screen left every time. When the 'good guy' moves left-to-right, our eyes move comfortably. Subconsciously, we begin to make positive inferences. Conversely, the antagonist usually enters from the right. Since our eyes aren't used to moving from right to left, the antagonist's entrance makes us uncomfortable. The screenwriter exploits this by transferring our learned discomfort to the characters."

Would you ever have guessed this? You can really feel the difference between someone entering from the left or entering from the right. There are many easy-to-learn, easy-to-apply conventions like this. Use them!

90-Second Newbery Film Jobs

- Producer/Director
- Script writer
- Camera(s)
- Editing Dictator (Note: We sort of mean Dictator literally. In video editing, too many opinions spoil the broth and make life hell. So it's easiest if this is a one-person job, at most a three-person responsibility.)
- Main Set Designer
- Costume Design/Props
- Actors (who can also have the other roles, above, depending on the size of your group)

The Curriculum

This curriculum breaks the process for creating a 90-Second Newbery film into ten 2-hour meetings. Please adapt to your own needs!

In advance of meeting 1: Select the book, decide who should act in the film (if possible), assign parts, and ask the kids to read the book. This can alternatively be done by designating one or two kids as producers and having them prepare in advance. If possible, watch several 90-second Newbery films to type out the scripts to see the length. (Scripts for *A Single Shard* and *A Wrinkle in Time* are appended to this guide as samples.) Note: The script will be very short. Shorter than you expect. A full single page is pushing it.

Meeting 1: Watch several 90-second Newbery films to analyze pacing, length of production, length of script (very important), number of scenes costumes, lighting, special effects, set, and camera shots/angles. Before viewing, give kids Worksheet: Analysis of existing 90-Second Newbery films for them to write notes on each film. Discuss analyses as a way of making decisions for their own film; during the discussion (or afterward) they can fill in their own ideas under Worksheet: Creating the plan. If the actors and characters haven't been pre-assigned, now is the time to do it. Send the kids home with the "Important Scenes in the Book" worksheet to be completed before next meeting. (Alternatively, to save time or to have extra control, the Director could do this him/herself in advance of Meeting 1.)

Meeting 2: Everyone discusses their Important Scenes in the Book worksheet. The idea is to come to a decision of which scenes are absolutely critical. This is a fairly long discussion, but by the end the goal is to come up with a common short list of scenes to shoot. Don't be afraid to cut and combine scenes, even if it makes the script "unfaithful" to the text. Real movie adaptations do this all the time. It's better to be entertaining than accurate, as long as you don't totally destroy the original story. If characters get dropped, then you also need to find another function for the actors that are going to play the characters. Actors are assigned scenes. Actors get busy (& silent?) reading scenes, possibly paired up with a non-acting crew member. They can use the "My Scenes Notes" worksheet. Discuss props with the person in charge of props. Ask kids to bring in props to the next meeting if possible.

Meeting 3: We recommend a quick run-through of ALL of the scenes in a neutral setting (meaning, not necessarily where you're going to be doing the final shoot), with the camera running, if possible. Then sit down and watch, discussing where it might be tightened by picking up the pace. Should any dialogue be rewritten? Calculate how much you have run over. Do not worry, do not despair, when you find yourself with at least twice the length of the final piece. Can any scenes be cut? All will be well by tightening, creative editing. Costume discussion should go here, if it hasn't already been discussed. Discuss what other things need to happen before you can actually shoot, and make a list. Do you need to create a Green Screen? Do you need to buy props or costumes? Do you need to convince the farmer on Ayrault Road to let you borrow a few sheep? Assign cast

& crew to accomplish these details before the next meeting. Have them bring in as many costumes as possible.

In advance of Meeting 4: Assemble any craft items needed for costumes, props, and setting.

Meeting 4: Compile costumes, props, and setting. Paint, sculpt, nail, sew, glue, whatever. Additional set design discussions should be no later than today. Make a schedule for where what scenes should be shot.

Meeting 5: Start shooting scenes. Obviously, focus on those for which costumes, props, and setting are all complete! If you are working with a class or a small organized group for which the meetings are part of a pre-scheduled program, then of course you need to accommodate the fact that all of the kids will be there, at least in the background, for all of the scenes. If this is just a loose group, we recommend scheduling the shots with just the actors in the shot and the crew members necessary. We recommend shooting each scene twice, looking at the video to see what can be improved, and doing it once more.

Meeting 6: More shooting.

Meeting 7: More shooting. If possible, the group should view the roughly spliced-together work and see what can use improvement. Keep the humor factor in mind.

Meeting 8: More shooting.

Before Meeting 9, the video editor compiles the best of each shot into sequence, NOT doing any fancy editing unless so inclined. This can alternatively be incorporated into a meeting with a few of the kids... NOT the entire group unless the entire group is no more than four people. Too many cooks spoil the broth on this! You should not get bogged down with minutiae of editing or special effects; the goal is to string the scenes together economically.

Meeting 9: The group views the roughly-edited video and discusses what can be improved, what is missing. Music discussion goes here. Assignments to find the music as necessary. If possible, re-shoot any scenes that need re-shooting in the place where you are meeting. Often, new ideas for ways to make things funnier or put a different spin on a scene crop up here. Make sure these are heard; ideas for hysterical touches often come at this point, and they can make all the difference to the final product. If music assignments are made, make sure the person finding it emails the relevant files to the editor.

Before Meeting 10: The editor inserts new scenes, and does the majority of the artful editing work. This can take hours, so be prepared for that. If the editor is a student, then it is really important to have an adult on hand here.

Meeting 10: Re-shoot any scenes required, insert music, finish editing together, upload to YouTube, paper plate awards, set breakdown, self-congratulatory high-fives.

Equipment

Cameras: Effective video cameras are no longer super-expensive, but there is no question that the versions in the several-hundred-dollar range are quite superior to iPhones, flipcams, and regular cameras that have a video function. If you do have access to the better equipment, you will have greater success and will find it much easier to create a professional-looking product. Don't be fooled by the size of the camera... Panasonic and other companies pack a lot of power into equipment that is only the size of a can of soda.

Video Editing Software: Although many Macs come with the perfectly serviceable iMovie as a part of their standard iLife package, Final Cut Pro (which retails for around \$249) is considered the industry standard for the Mac. This price is MUCH less than it used to be, and if you are going to make multiple movies, it is a worthwhile investment. Windows often comes with Movie Maker or its equivalent for free, but you can purchase packages that give you much more control for about \$80, such as Power Director.

Green screen (not required, but really cool): Have you ever wondered how video images get laid over one another so you can give a new background to the image? The answer is to film in front of a "green screen." A green screen is lime-green colored; filming a scene in front of it will allow you to overlay your video image on a very different background. You can construct your own green screen (provided you have fabric of the proper color; find construction instructions on the Internet); green chromakey backgrounds with stand are available for about \$100.

Lights: Film outside or make sure you have excellent quality lights. Really, make sure of this because not being able to see faces properly can kill even the most hilarious production. Purchase a couple of video lights on eBay (about \$100) if you think you may make further use of them after this project.

Sound: DO consider sound quality when planning your production. Using a flipcam in a space that echoes will ruin your video. Sometimes this can be solved by using lots of close-up shots when a character is speaking, if you don't have access to a strategically-placed microphone. Some video cameras are sophisticated enough to filter out background noise if the focus is on a human face that is speaking, but if you're not lucky enough to have a camera like this, make sure to choose interior filming areas that have minimal echo, and outdoor filming areas that have little to no traffic noise. LISTEN before clicking the "record" button! When you are viewing the rough video shots, ask yourself: Can I easily understand the person speaking? If not, re-record, possibly in a different place or with the microphone much closer to the speaker.

Also: you might want to institute a "death penalty for mumblers" rule. It may save you much time and angst.

Notes on Videography

- Close-ups with funky angles work well for this medium.

- The actors should be more-or-less facing the camera for the shot to make sense. Remember, you're not documenting a continuous live performance; you're splicing together many short discontinuous clips to tell a story. Of course, you should vary the shots to also include some long-ish shots along with the many close-ups.
- The classic mistake is a mid-shot of two people talking to each other for several lines at a time. This not only kills visual interest, it makes it impossible to tightly edit the scene by trimming out excessive silence between lines. By filming conversations by cutting back and forth between close-ups, you free yourself up for more effective editing later.

Notes on Video Editing

Video editing is not rocket science. Here's how it works:

- You open the program you intend to use.
- You import the various snippets of video that you have downloaded from your camera into your package. One by one, click-and-drag these snippets to a storyboard.
- From that storyboard, you can "trim" your videos, which means trim off unwanted parts, leaving on the storyboard only the portion you want to use.
- String these video snippets together visually so that they flow with good pace.

Professional videographers use transitions between scenes, such as fade-ins, but we advocate not fussing with these, because they take up time. Besides, videos tend to be funnier when scenes are juxtaposed roughly against each other.

In addition to stringing videos next to each other, you can overlay audio files in with your work, and we recommend doing so, primarily in the form of music. Import music files just as you import video files, click and drag to slide the audio underneath your video (usually it is literally placed underneath it on the storyboard), and click and drag the sides to trim it to exactly the right length. Use the audio controls on the sound to raise or lower the volume of the music to blend with your video.

Humor

Making a 90-Second Newbery Film work for your audience requires some kind of gimmick. And remember, it should end up being funny if possible. One thing that works well for humor in general is to juxtapose two seemingly unrelated things and present them together. One way to do this is to decide on a book's style, but render it in a style that is seemingly opposite. For example, recreating *Good Masters! Sweet Ladies! Voices From a Medieval Village* in the style of a reality

TV show. Or you could film books about contemporary times in a completely different time and place: *The Westing Game* as cavemen would do it, for example. Or *Ramona Quimby, Age 8* set in an old age home.

Slapstick humor: Physical activity is great; it makes the point dramatically and quickly. Fight scenes are also effective; speed them up if possible.

Filming with a bunch of kids

When working with kids, especially elementary-age or middle-schoolers, it can be hard to keep them on track if they are just left to their own devices. They also argue a lot and may shout down ideas before they can be fully discussed. So having the ideas all written down so everyone can look at them objectively is extremely useful and a real time-saver. It also lets the kids edit themselves... if they write it down, they can think about it more easily than just blurting it out.

As we emphasize in the curriculum outline above, it makes it so much easier if you can decide in advance which book you'll be filming. Just a few people need to be involved in that decision; it is extremely difficult to do this with a committee of several middle-schoolers. Consider yourself forewarned.

Official Rules of the 90-Second Newbery Film Festival

1. Your video should be 90 seconds or less. (Okay, okay: If it's two minutes long but absolute genius, they'll bend the rules for you. But *try* to keep them short.)
2. Your video has to be about a Newbery award-winning (or Newbery honor-winning) book. You can find a list of all the winners at the American Library Association website.
3. Just to be clear: *They're not looking for book trailers*. They're looking for full-on dramatizations, with mostly child actors, that manage to tell the *entire* story of a book in a ridiculously short amount of time.
4. Your video must condense the plot of the book in 90 seconds or less. Exceptions will be made for something really ingeniously bonkers, but it *has* to be related to a Newbery winning book.
5. Upload your videos to YouTube or Vimeo or whatever and send the link to kennedyjames [at] gmail [dot] com. Make the subject line be "90 SECOND NEWBERY" and in your message

please include your name, age, where you're from, and whatever other comments you'd like to include, including whether you'd like me to link to your personal site. You can give an alias if you want.

6. Sending the link grants James Kennedy and other representatives of the 90-Second Newbery the right to post your video online and link to it from other social media websites (like Facebook, Twitter, etc.) and to share your movies at public readings, school visits—and, if your film is one of the winners, the “90-Second Newbery” Film Festival screenings!

7. The deadline for the second annual 90-Second Newbery Film Festival is October 29, 2012.

To learn about upcoming 90-Second Newbery Film Festival screenings, or watch entries made by others, visit <http://www.90secondnewbery.com>.

Worksheet: Analysis of existing 90-Second Newbery films

	Film #1	Film #2	Film #3
Length of production	_____	_____	_____
Number of scenes	_____	_____	_____
Costumes	_____	_____	_____
Number of speaking parts	_____	_____	_____
Lighting (inside/outside? etc)	_____	_____	_____
Special effects	_____	_____	_____
Set	_____	_____	_____
Camera shots/angles: mixed?	_____	_____	_____
Music	_____	_____	_____
Intro/Credits	_____	_____	_____
How well did it tell a story?	_____	_____	_____
How funny was it?	_____	_____	_____
What didn't you understand?	_____	_____	_____
Was the acting good?	_____	_____	_____
Were the costumes effective?	_____	_____	_____
How was the sound quality?	_____	_____	_____
Enough close-up shots?	_____	_____	_____
Gimmick: What was it?	_____	_____	_____
Overall evaluation	_____	_____	_____

Worksheet: Creating the plan

Our Book: _____

Everyone has opinions. Write them here so we can all look at them objectively instead of having a verbal discussion that disintegrates into chaos.

Length of production *The right answer: 90 seconds or shorter*

Our Gimmick: What should it be?

About how many scenes should this film have for this book?

Speaking parts (name characters)

What actors should play what characters?

Costumes

Lighting (inside/outside? etc)

Special effects _____

Set _____

Costumes: _____

Music ideas: _____

Ideas for humor in the film: _____

Important Scenes in the Book

Remember, we want the highlights here. You have 90 seconds to tell the whole story, so start thinking that initially you want to end up with 10 scenes of about 9 seconds apiece. Of course, what will probably happen is that you end up with more scenes, some of which are only a second or two long. We give you a worksheet here for listing the scenes in order. Then cross off what is not absolutely essential.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____
11. _____
12. _____
13. _____
14. _____
15. _____
16. _____
17. _____
18. _____
19. _____
20. _____

A Single Shard, in Sijo Poetry

Created by Madison Ross and Olivia Summerville Farrar
for the 2011 90-Second Newbery Film Festival

Tree-ear: Crane-man! I'm glad we live here. Ten years I've lived under the bridge.

Crane-man: Yes, Tree-ear, you've been a great help because I've got this bad leg. It's too bad you're an orphan. After all, orphans bring bad luck.

Tree-ear (to Potter Min): Honorable sir: Your box, I broke it. Can I repay you?

(Potter Min): Yes. Tomorrow at daybreak, you will begin nine days of slave labor.

(Potter Min): You have completed your work. **(Tree-ear):** It was awful! Can I keep the job?

(Min's wife): As Min's wife, I will help this boy, for he spares my husband work.

(Tree-ear): Wow! The bowl has been refilled. I can give some to Crane-man.

(Crane-man): Great! We have some real food now! Too bad we're still broke and homeless.

(Tree-ear, to Min): Potter Kang has a new technique, but it's really ugly work.

The emperor will give you a job if you use Kang's method.

(Potter Min): Bummer. I can't travel. **(Tree-ear, to Min's wife):** I'll do it as my thanks to you.

(Silent scene with robbers.)

(Tree-ear): The vases, they are destroyed! I see only a Single Shard.

Sir! Royal emissary, I bring only a Single Shard.

(Royal emissary): Ah. Min's work! Radiance of jade and clarity of water.

(Tree-ear): I bring word of your commission! Sir, why do you not look glad?

(Potter Min): Tree-ear, your friend Crane-man has died. Now you're an orphan again.

(Min's wife): But we would like you to be our son! We will give you the name "Hyung-pil."

A Wrinkle in Time

Created by James Kennedy

for the 2011 90-Second Newbery Film Festival

MEG (12 lines)

IT (3 lines)

MRS. WHO (1 line)

CAMAZOTZ BOY (1 line)

CHARLES WALLACE (5
lines)

MRS. WHATSIT (2 lines)

MRS. MURRY (1 line)

CALVIN (4 lines)

MRS. WHICH (2 lines)

MR. MURRY (1 line)

Props: basketball, sandwich, glass of milk, string, bug, varsity jacket, 3 witch costumes, brain in a jar.

INT. – MEG MURRY’S BEDROOM – DAY

(MEG MURRY is in bed.)

MEG. I’m Meg. It’s raining. I hate my life, and I can’t sleep.

INT. – KITCHEN – DAY

(CHARLES WALLACE and Meg talk at counter.)

CHARLES WALLACE. Here’s hot milk and a sandwich.

MEG. How did you know, Charles Wallace?

CHARLES WALLACE. I’m a four year old genius. But spooky!

MEG. Mom, where’s Dad?

MRS. MURRY. *(pops head in)* He’s on another planet.

CHARLES WALLACE. I heard something outside!

(Meg and Charles Wallace rush outside)

EXT. – MURRY’S BACKYARD – DAY

(Three witches appear: MRS. WHATSIT, MRS. WHICH, and MRS. WHO.)

MRS. WHATSIT. He is on another planet!

MRS. WHO. *Brevity is the soul of wit.* Shakespeare.

MRS. WHICH. Itttt’ sssss ttimmme ttto ttessserrr.

MEG. But what is tessering?

MRS. WHATSIT. You see this string? And this insect?

MEG. OK, I get it.

(Calvin O'Keefe enters.)

CHARLES. *(to Calvin)* Who's this guy?

CALVIN. I'm Calvin O'Keefe. I'm popular but sensitive. And only I understand how special you are, Meg!
(Meg and Calvin look romantically at each other)

(SFX Rrrrrrrrip!)

MEG. What's that!

MRS. WHICH. Tttthe Univvverssse jjjustt rripped!

CHARLES. That's bad. *(Special effects of flying through hyperspace.)*

EXT. – CAMAZOTZ -- DAY

CALVIN. Now we're on another planet.

(Enter Camazotz Boy, playing basketball)

MEG. Look at that boy! It's scary.

CAMAZOTZ BOY. I'm just playing basketball.

CALVIN. Whatever, robot.

(They brush past the CAMAZOTZ BOY.)

INT – THE LAIR OF IT -- DAY

IT. Hello, I'm a giant brain.

MEG. Hi, Dad!

MR. MURRY. *(Entering)* I'm not going to solve any of your problems.

IT. You'll never get your brother back.

MEG. But what about the power of love?

IT. I never thought of that!

(IT explodes. Brains fly everywhere. Everyone cheers and dances.)

THE END