



# POWER UP YOUR SCENARIO-BASED eLEARNING

With Storytelling and Dialogue Writing

*White Paper*

**GoAnimate**

## Introduction

"Stories live in your blood and bones, follow the seasons and light candles in the darkest night. Every storyteller knows that she or he is also a teacher."—Patti Davis

Everyone who's delivered training knows the challenge of engaging an audience, especially if they're trying to teach that audience something. Learners put up defenses from the get-go. They arrive at a class, keynote or training session knowing they need to learn something, but they're prepared for the worst. They have a fear—sometimes a rational one—that the experience will be painful.

As your audience waits for you to begin speaking, their subconscious mind is saying something like this: "I know you're going to deliver information. I don't know how. I don't know if it will be any good. You may hurt my brain. You may make my brain tired. You may force me to interact publicly in ways in which I'm not comfortable. I'm here under protest."

How do you scale that wall?

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## The Promise of Story

Most learners would prefer a quick fix to sitting in a conference room. They'd love it if they could just get the information they need transferred into their heads like something from "The Matrix." But they'll settle for engagement, and whether that engagement happens correlates strongly with how the information is delivered. Worst case: They'll be shown a series of bullets. Better: A presentation that includes some kind of interactivity.

Or they might get the best case: A story.

Just the promise of story gains the best learner buy-in before the speaker even begins. A story, if done well, delivers immersive magic. A story lets the audience escape the room and return later a bit smarter than before. They participate while listening because they're constructing the story along with the storyteller.

## Telling Your Story with Video

If you're planning to tell your story with video, hats off to you. Video is more effective than other forms of media—viewers will remember nearly 60% more—because content that combines audio and visuals is better matched to the way we learn, according to the dual-coding theory formulated by Allan Paivio of the University of Western Ontario<sup>1</sup>.

But video is a tool, not a panacea. Like all tools or methods, it performs best when used for the right purpose, such as to convey and enforce easily visualized behaviors or skills that learners need to practice.

Scenarios help lessen a learners' feeling that he or she will have to go into a new situation, such as a sales call, "without a net." As learners watch the characters in a video act out the right or wrong way to do something, they have an opportunity to "laugh at mistakes" in advance, without having made them in real life.

Some sample topics that are well suited for video include:

- ▶ Customer service
- ▶ Sales
- ▶ Negotiation
- ▶ Soft skills (ethics, harassment)
- ▶ Leadership
- ▶ Management
- ▶ Mentoring

But this white paper isn't about "selling you" on scenario-based videos or proving our points with stats. Execution is key, and that's why the focus of this white paper is how to build solid scenario foundations with three building blocks: character, concept and dialogue.

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<sup>1</sup> Paivio, Allan, *Imagery and verbal processes*, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971.

## Building Block #1: Character

Most people start with a content outline and then graft a plot onto that. I'd encourage you to start with character. Story is built through characters. If your characters are drawn correctly, their character design will lead them to certain actions as though it's their destiny.

There are many different ways to construct story through character. Let's start by looking at the prototypical characters in every story.

### Who is your protagonist?

The protagonist is the main character in your story. Please note: "protagonist" does not equal "good guy," although in many cases, he or she is. Think instead of your protagonist as your "change agent"—the person who challenges the status quo.

### Who is your antagonist?

The antagonist is NOT your "bad guy." He or she is the person (or thing) who opposes your main character. Think of your antagonist as your change resister. If the change agent is the bad guy (ex: terrorist hell-bent on blowing up the city), then the antagonist is actually the good guy (ex: Bruce Willis in Die Hard, to continue that example).

### Who is your point-of-view character?

Stories often have a point of view (POV) character. This person witnesses the conflict between the protagonist and the antagonist. He or she is changed by the events of the story.

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**"Sometimes reality is too complex.  
Stories give it form."**

—Jean Luc Godard

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For example, in the 1989 movie "Dead Poets Society," the protagonist is Professor John Keating (Robin Williams), who challenges the orthodox teaching methods at the Welton Academy. He goes up against Headmaster Nolan (Norman Lloyd) who wants to protect the four pillars of the school: "Tradition, Honor, Discipline and Excellence." Watching and narrating the unfolding events is Todd Anderson (Ethan Hawke) a painfully shy student.

## Building Block #2: The Concept

Now that you've developed your characters, you might already have your concept—the main idea behind your story.

### Think beyond the cubicle. Think big.

If you're creating a corporate training video, you might be tempted to set it in the most literal representation of your subject matter: which in most cases, is an office. I'm not making a value judgment here. Chances are that an office will be relevant to your audience, and you should consider it.

But sometimes a degree of separation from the real world is helpful. Think about how old Star Trek episodes take place in fantastical places but discuss current social issues. In many ways, this is a relief to the audience. The issues show up more clearly because they're abstracted away from familiar, day-to-day life. We learn through metaphor.

And aim for big, high-concept ideas. Think "Avatar" or any of the "Mission Impossible" movies. The more fun and exciting your story is, the more learners will be engaged. A big story promises more immersion, more buy-in, and, if you can deliver and fulfill the promise, more actual engagement and retention.

Along these lines, make sure that something important is at stake. There's a reason that police procedurals and medical dramas are so popular: their plots are literally a matter of life or death. You might think that your average office environment doesn't provide much excitement for your training video, but when it comes to someone losing his or her career through ignorance or error, the workplace is high stakes indeed.

### Come up with a pitch.

Your pitch is a very short verbal description of the idea behind your story. You might use a pitch to describe your idea to the people who are going to approve your budget for the training video, for example.

The stereotypical pitch, satirized in Robert Altman's 1992 movie "The Player," combines the titles of two wildly dissimilar movies as shorthand: "It's 'Out of Africa' meets 'Pretty Woman.'" Or "It's 'Ghost' meets 'Manchurian Candidate.'"

If people get your pitch—if they laugh or otherwise show interest—it's a good indicator that the conceit might be strong enough to survive the process of development and review.

## Develop a treatment.

Once you've settled on your pitch, develop a short summary or description of your project, also known as a "treatment." For a corporate video, the treatment should be no longer than one page; busy executives are unlikely to read anything longer. It should summarize:

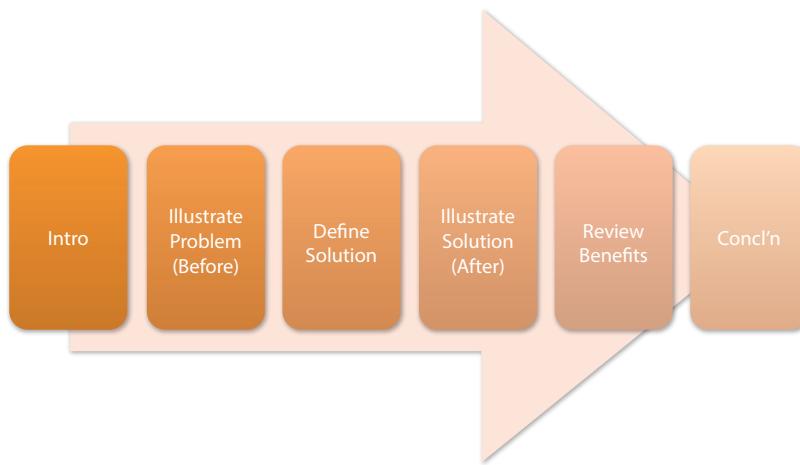
- ▶ Your audience
- ▶ Your objectives in creating the video
- ▶ The genre, angle or tone you want to take
- ▶ Your story: the protagonist, antagonist and POV character (if there is one).

The treatment helps you build buy-in for the project before you invest resources in it and "sell" the project internally.

## Expand your treatment into an outline.

Once you've gotten your one-page treatment approved, it's time to get to work. Start fleshing out your treatment into a detailed outline listing the basic "beats" of the video. Beats, which make up a scene, are the events, decisions or discoveries that change how the protagonist pursues his or her goal. Beats are the moments that move the story forward.<sup>2</sup>

Once you've finished your outline, you'll find that you're more than ready to start writing the actual script. But here's where a lot of would-be video producers stumble. Take this example of the typical outline for a corporate video.

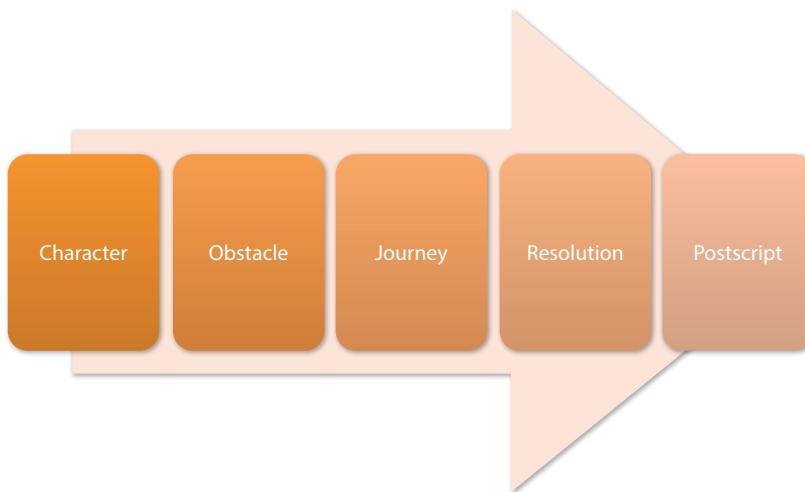


<sup>2</sup> Wikipedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Beat\\_\(filmmaking\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Beat_(filmmaking)).

Although this is a great way to organize information, it's what "defensive" learners fear most. They'll start to tune out during the intro, which will feel like a lot of exposition they need to memorize in order to complete the module. So while this type of outline may be a good way to organize the subject matter you need to communicate, it doesn't take advantage of the power of story.

## Story Outline

Let's look at a different type of outline.



This outline is about overcoming real obstacles—boulders in the road that your change agent needs to clear. It's beginning to look a little more like a story and less like an outline. But here's the problem: it has a lot of the right elements, but they're in the wrong order.

Movies make this mistake a lot. We spend a lot of time with the character in "ordinary situations" to get to know him or her, before we see the character tested by events. We're somewhat comfortable with that as audiences, but it's not compelling. In fact, it's just another form of "introduction."

Many times in corporate videos and training, we give the "obstacle" lip service. We create cardboard-cut-out bad guys or poorly drawn problems that our protagonist can solve much too easily. And when problems can be solved too easily, they're boring. Audiences disengage and learning suffers.

Imagine an ethics video about bribery. Someone offers an employee a bribe. He immediately shakes his head and says, "I can't. It's against policy." It's weak. Why invest in a video just to make that point?

What if, instead, he's really tempted, because the bribe is conveyed more with more subtlety? We inhabit his temptation for a while, highlighting how valuable that cash might be—and how it's not really clear whether it's a bribe. You've got a better, more engaging story that maps better to reality. You also get better learning.

Unfortunately, this type of story ordinarily gets killed on review. Why? Organizations are afraid to have real conflict or obstacles in a business or training video. Managers may fear they're signing off on something that might be perceived as promoting the acceptance of bribes. That's why you should meet in person with the managers approving your video, preferably at the treatment, script and storyboard stages. Unless you're there to walk them through these deliverables, your story may get redlined to death. Make it clear to your reviewers that yes, conflict is scary "politics." But content elaborated through conflict has a far better chance of being retained.

But we digress. Here's what a script based on this outline looks like, addressing a different problem: lateness.

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EXT CITY STREETS – MONTAGE
Morning rush hour is in full effect. Cars, buses, trains.
People rushing everywhere.

Narrator (V.O.)
It's a crazy world out there.
We're all super busy and
getting busier by the minute.

INT. KITCHEN – DAY
JANE, a youngish-looking middle-aged woman, is preparing
breakfast. Her two children, aged two and four, sit at the
table. The older one bangs her spoon.

DAUGHTER
MOMMY! I'm HUNGRY.

Narrator (V.O.)
Just like Jane. Jane is
always on the go, and always
a step behind.

Jane steals a glance at her watch, rushes, then spills OJ.

Narrator (V.O.)
Part of the problem is her
alarm clock. Jane REALLY
likes to sleep in, and her
alarm clock lets her hit
snooze as many times as she
wants. Her boss is not
pleased with her constant
lateness.

INT OFFICE – DAY
"
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Establishing Jane's typical morning isn't a bad choice. We're conditioned to expect an introduction. But most introductions fail the "speed-of-engagement" litmus test: Will it get the majority of learners to stop playing with their phones or checking email? The script above is fine. But the learners will hear the narrator saying generic things—crazy world, painting a proxy character that's supposed to be them—and take that as a cue to continue multitasking while barely engaged.

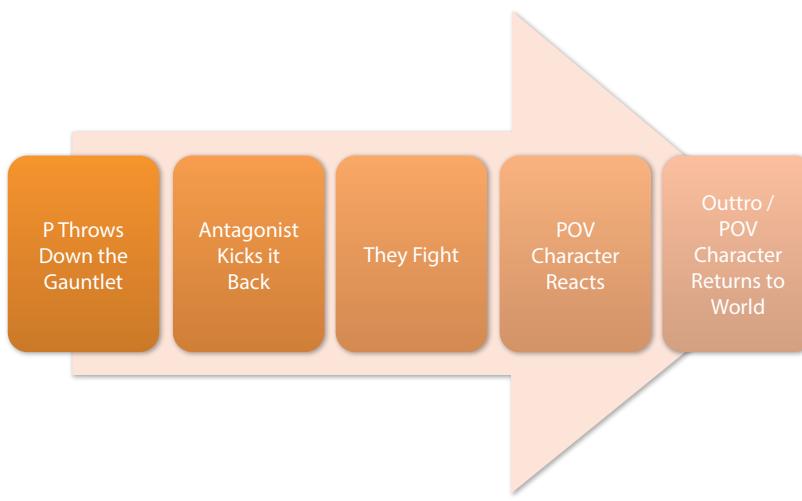
## Here's what you should do instead: Cut to the chase.

If the obstacle is a mountain that needs to be climbed, don't start the video with the climber making breakfast. Don't start the video with him talking with his colleagues about the mountain, why he intends to climb it, or what the challenges will be.

Start the video with the ice pick going into the mountain, the character pulling himself up a bit...and the ice pick slips out and the character plummets. Ten seconds in, the story is well under way, and the audience is engaged. We'll learn about the character on the way down.

### Cut-to-the-Chase Story Outline

Here's a "cut-to-the-chase" story outline involving both our protagonist (the change agent) and our antagonist (the change resister).



First, the protagonist throws down the gauntlet. This means that you don't describe the problem: you attack it right away, without a lengthy introduction. Maybe you start with an employee refusing a vendor's bribe or gift. Show the employee walking to his car...in a parking garage, looking vulnerable...See how that's much more engaging?

Next, the antagonist "kicks it back": The vendor gets angry and makes a threat.

Think about the reaction of the POV character, who could be an intern or spouse. How will this conflict change them? Charlie Sheen's character in the movie "Platoon" says, "...Those of us who did make it have an obligation to build again. To teach to others what we know, and to try with what's left of our lives to find a goodness and a meaning to this life."

Think about first scenes for an ethics or sexual harassment video, or a scenario in which a customer service representative has to pacify an angry customer.

Here's the lateness issue addressed in script form (and from a different treatment) that follows this outline.

INT. HOUSE – NIGHT

CLOSEUP on the side of A GIANT ROOSTER'S VIOLENT HEAD. This is CHOPPY.

His GIANT TOES tiptoe... through the living room... down the stairs... into the bedroom...

He draws close to the bed, on which lies...

JANE, a youngish-looking middle-aged woman, snoring.

CHOPPY'S AXE rises.

It glints in the moonlight, as CHOPPY holds it high above his head, and ever so slowly begins its descent.

JANE'S PILLOW EXPLODES IN A CLOUD OF FEATHERS.

JANE'S EYES pop open wide.

CHOPPY leans over her menacingly.

CHOPPY  
Wakey wakey eggs and bakey

CHOPPY winks.

JANE groans, reaches over and slams the snooze button on her alarm clock.

Isn't a giant, potentially murderous rooster holding an axe over Jane's head more engaging than watching her spill orange juice while a narrator drones on? We know nothing about Jane (or Choppy), yet we're still engaged. We want to know what's happening: Why is a giant, axe-wielding rooster breaking into someone's house? And we're willing to put our phones down and pay attention so we can find out. Cutting to the chase increases speed of engagement.

Sure, we're cheating. Beyond cutting to the chase, the two script samples are very different. It's not an apples-to-apples or orange-juice-to-orange-juice comparison. And that's the point.

The second script is much more high concept. On the surface—and often in treatment reviews—this seems bad. We're highly unlikely to encounter a giant, violent rooster in our lifetimes, so reviewers tend to say, "How is this relevant?" The answer is that literal relevance isn't a prerequisite for learning. Speed of engagement is. High-concept stories, if executed well, turbo-boost the speed of engagement.

There's another important difference between the two script samples. The second one is more cinematic. It takes better advantage of video as a visual medium. You can feel movement and dramatic lighting (for instance, the glint of moonlight on the axe) right off the page. These factors emphasize story moments and build engagement.

On a related note, you'll also notice that there isn't much dialogue. While dialogue is very important, it's also overused in most videos. Words are easy to review. Talking heads are easy to shoot. These things give video creators and their managers a sense of comfort and control over a process they find a little daunting. Unfortunately, this comfort and control come at the expense of quality and effectiveness. Many times, for expedience, people simply copy and paste the content outline into dialogue format. This is a sure-fire way to develop bad dialogue, which we'll talk about in the next section.

The bottom line: You have a maximum of eight to 10 seconds to engage your audience. Make it count. You never get a second chance to make a first impression.

## Building Block #3: Dialogue

So you've mined all this material and constructed a great story outline, but your scenarios still turn out badly. Chances are, it's because of the dialogue. It's really hard to write good dialogue. Can you guess why?

If you answered that the hardest thing about dialogue is making it "real," that's a good answer. But it's wrong. Making dialogue 100% real will actually render it 100% incomprehensible. How people "really" talk does not make for good dialogue on-screen. Think about it. In your everyday life:

- ▶ Do you speak in full sentences?
- ▶ Do you speak with perfect grammar?
- ▶ Do you finish most of your thoughts?
- ▶ Do you ever cut off your friends?
- ▶ Do you use "inside" language, specific to your job, industry, interests, group of friends?
- ▶ Do you use slang? Catch phrases that change over time?

All of these habits would make a transcription of your conversations unintelligible to an outside listener. To prove my point, go to a restaurant or café and listen to the conversations of people near you. For extra points, listen to a group of four or more people. Transcribe the conversation, word for word. Can you tell what they were talking about? Probably not.

Your goal is to make your dialogue seem realistic—without being too realistic.

### Think about Dialogue Drivers

To write good dialogue, start with one character at a time. Everyone has a different way of speaking that has evolved over his or her life.

## Individual Drivers

Here are some of the individual drivers you need to consider when arriving at a “baseline” of how your character speaks:

- ▶ Geographical: Where are your characters from? Where are their parents from?
- ▶ Age: When were they born? What generation are they part of (Baby Boomer, Gen X, Millennial)?
- ▶ Socioeconomic background: What did their parents do for a living? What were their attitudes toward school, homework, religion, sports, college, work or money?
- ▶ Education: Did they graduate from high school? College? Which one? Did they attend graduate school?
- ▶ Profession: What do they do? What have they done in the past?
- ▶ Personality: Is your character nervous? Aggressive, depressed? Patient? A big flirt? Shy? Scatterbrained? Disorganized?

You don't have to write a detailed biography of each of your characters. But thinking about these drivers will help you write their dialogue.

## Group Drivers

In addition to individual drivers, we have different manners of speaking when we're in different groups, because we have different roles within each group of which we're a member. These groups may include:

- ▶ Family or home (parent, child, sibling)
- ▶ Work (boss, manager, newbie)
- ▶ Group of friends (ringleader, wacky one, tough guy)
- ▶ Sports team or hobby group (good player, bad player, team captain, rookie)

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**“The human species thinks in metaphors...  
and learns through stories.”**

—Mary Catherine Bateson

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Think about the interpersonal dynamics within the group:

- ▶ Are there defined roles in the group? Idea generator? Boss? Mediator?
- ▶ What defines your character's relationship to others in the group?
- ▶ What are the internal drivers that define how your characters act within the group? Are they motivated by respect, desire, love, or insecurity?
- ▶ How does the group culture influence your characters?
- ▶ What happens when individual personalities come up against the group culture? Is an open person blunt?
- ▶ Are members of the group direct with each other? Polite? Overly polite? Flowery?
- ▶ If someone disagrees with your characters, how do they react?

There's a lot to think about, but doing so will add a level of realism to your scenes and make your characters easier for your audience to relate to.

### The Train Must Reach the Station

Real-life conversations often go nowhere. If you put too-realistic dialogue in a video, you would bore your audience, and the video would be much too long. And if you simply turn your content outline into dialogue, it would feel stiff, awkward, and pedantic. Your audience would tune out.

Striking the right balance is key. Dialogue has a role: Not just to advance the plot—although that's usually a big part of it—but to advance the story of change agency, resistance and someone being changed in the balance. Your story has to advance, and in a video, there's only a short timeframe in which to do it.

## 3 Sure Paths to Failure in Storytelling

So there you have it: The three main building blocks of storytelling in successful videos. But in closing, we'll highlight three common errors.

### #1: Exposition.

Remember how I talked earlier about cutting to the chase in your story—to start right in the middle of the action? Lengthy exposition will bring your story to a crashing halt. Don't stuff background information into narration or the dialogue.

However, sometimes you simply can't avoid exposition. Sometimes you have to define terms and environments—the “rules of the universe,” as some have called it—to the learners. This may be due to the nature of the material, which might be new, complicated, or highly technical. That's why your audience is in training, after all. We can't always cut directly to the chase—but we can do it cleverly.

Think about “The Matrix.” The writers faced a huge challenge in explaining the rules of this universe to you. They succeeded by combining it with story and a challenge. Morpheus says to Neo: “This is your last chance. After this, there is no turning back. You take the blue pill—the story ends, you wake up in your bed and believe whatever you want to believe. You take the red pill—you stay in Wonderland and I show you how deep the rabbit hole goes.” We know what Neo chose, and after that, the story was off and running.

## #2: Over-verbalization.

Watch out for the dreaded “tennis match” dialogue, which happens when you start pasting your content outline into dialogue boxes. One character—who isn’t really a character at this point—spews a bunch of information at the other character. Since there’s no structure or point to the story, the other character simply replies with “yeah,” “uh huh” or “tell me more.” And they keep bouncing the ball back, back and forth.

Have you ever watched a movie or TV show and thought that the actors were horrible? It’s more likely that they’re doing the best they can with some seriously over-verbalized lines.

On a related note, it’s true that in real life, people often have trouble getting to the point. Experienced writers can simulate this to comedic or dramatic effect. But novice writers risk creating dialogue that goes on too long, which bores the audience and causes them to disengage. Trim the fat. If you’ve created engaging characters and understand what drives how they speak, you should be able to break up the content in a way that seems realistic.

## #3: Making everybody sound like you.

Unless you differentiate your characters, you’ll end up with a bad story where no one’s pushing for change. A clone of you will barely oppose the other clone of you in whatever is the opposite of a battle of wills. It will be the limp handshake version of a movie, with duplicate personalities, and banal, non-differentiated dialogue. When writers do this, it’s usually unintentional. They usually just haven’t had enough training—or they’re lazy.

## Conclusion: Keep Your Audience Front and Center.

Don't forget that a video script is meant to be seen and heard, and the style of narration, demonstration, or conversation that you choose, as a storyteller, will determine whether your target audience will be engaged and absorb the message—or tune you out. Be sure you know your audience, and use language and terms they readily understand as well as a style that will feel comfortable to them.

As you develop your characters, story and dialogue, make decisions in relation to the target audience and learning objectives. And in the end, that's what storytelling is: A series of judgment calls about how best to deliver your message in a way that's clear, effective, and leaves your audience changed for the better.

Get immediate feedback on your dialogue in the comfort of your own headphones! Sign up for a GoAnimate Free Trial. With GoAnimate, you'll have characters moving around and speaking your lines in a matter of minutes!

## About the Author

Gary Lipkowitz is the Chief Operating Officer of GoAnimate. He joined GoAnimate in 2011, because he sincerely believed that making a video shouldn't be a drag—it should be drag & drop.

Previously, he was the COO of Wego.com in Singapore, a price comparison travel search engine referred to as "the Kayak of Asia." During this time, he also served as an advisor to Idol Films, a Hong Kong-based film development company. Prior to Wego, he was with Mediacorp Raintree Pictures, Singapore's feature film studio, concentrating on film financing and international sales. Prior to Raintree, he served as a strategy consultant with Yahoo! Southeast Asia, advising senior management on a variety of strategic, operational and financial issues.

Before moving to Asia, Gary wrote, produced and directed the English-language adaptations of over 20 anime franchises for ADV Films, including both "fan titles" such as City Hunter, Legend of Crystania and Queen Emeraldas, and "crossover titles" such as Tekken and Sonic the Hedgehog.

Gary holds a B.A. degree in economics and psychology (magna cum laude) from New York University, an M.F.A. in Film/TV from Northwestern University, and an MBA degree (with distinction) from INSEAD. He enjoys playing ice hockey and collecting Balinese art.

## About GoAnimate

GoAnimate is the world's #1 animation video creation platform. We were the first to enable businesses on six continents to produce videos quickly and easily, and we've never stopped innovating. Our platform is the most powerful of its kind, with many unique features—yet everything is controlled through the same simple drag-and-drop interface. We offer tens of thousands of pre-animated characters, backgrounds, props and actions representing hundreds of industries and occupations, and we're adding more all the time.

GoAnimate's templates let you successfully complete an animated video in a matter of minutes. You can customize further until your video is truly one of a kind. Adding voice over narration or lip-synced dialogue is a snap, too! Music and sound effects from premium libraries are included at no extra cost. When you're finished with your video, simply download it as an .MP4 file, or publish it directly to YouTube or any of our video-hosting partners.

## Resources

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McKee, Robert, *Story: Substance, Structure, Style and the Principles of Screenwriting*, 1997.



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