

# MONSTERS! INK!

## LESSON FIVE

# LIKE LIGHTING, INSPIRATION STRIKES!

**‘IT JUST POPPED INTO MY HEAD!’**



What does the word innovation mean to you? Too often we think of it as some sort of magical thing that strikes randomly and simply “delivers” us a brilliant idea.

It isn't.

One might sigh with a bit of envy if you hear of a student or a teacher or great companies like Apple or Pixar referred to as simply “innovative.” While they certainly are, this label only tells a fraction of the story. The genius of Pixar (and Apple and that teacher or student) doesn't lie in their “innovative thinking.” Rather, it comes from their commitment to *the actual process of creativity*. Did you know you can make a habit of being innovative?

## HOW INSPIRATION WORKS

When you look at something great, like the iPhone or the first Toy Story movie, you can't help but feel like it was the result of some sort of divine inspiration, some kind of magic, but it wasn't. Is creativity magical?

Nope. Creativity isn't about an idea or a sudden burst of information. It is a process, and often a messy one. There are three big keys that we can use to unlock creativity and inspiration in our own content creation process.



## #1: CREATIVITY IS A LEARNED SKILL [PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE!]

Innovation and creativity really are about learning how to see things differently rather than how to create things differently.

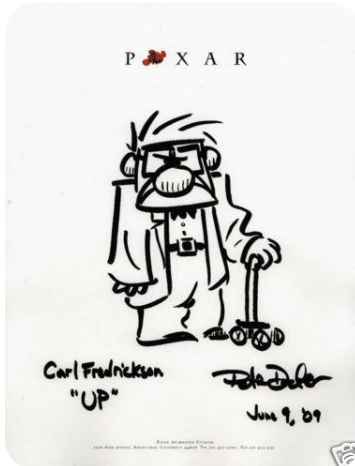
One example of a way that this idea manifests itself is in color theory.

Usually when we look at an object that is blue, we see the blue, and therefore draw the entire object as blue. In reality, though, that object is not solid blue. Look closer. Use your eyes a bit more. Pay attention to details. While a majority of the object may be blue, there are parts of it that may be darker than others because of

shadowing and highlights. Even further, the object may actually be comprised of many purple, pink, and yellow flecks that simply make it appear blue. Or, rather, blue-ish.

## #2: CREATIVITY IS A PROCESS

Early in their life, Pixar films aren't all that magical. In fact, some of them are downright terrible. In his book, *Creative, Inc.* Catmull outlines the early ideas behind the 2009 film *Up*, and paints a very bleak picture about the quality of the early story.



This view is usually the exact opposite of what we expect. When we watch a Pixar

movie, we see a great film with a great story. It is easy to label it as "innovative" and "creative" without realizing the painstaking process that went into making something that started out not-so-great into something truly great.



We see the end, but we never see the beginning, or the three years that it took to make a film. According to Catmull, it isn't unusual for Pixar films to start terrible, and remain terrible, for years before they finally find their true identity.

Often, however, we don't allow for this process in our own creative process. We expect things to be great right from the get-go, but that isn't how innovation works.

Innovation is a process, not something that wakes us up at night in a moment of inspiration. Removing this misconception from our mind can really go a long way in understanding true creativity.

This means that in order for us to make our content and our work more creative, we need to continually "create our most recent worst version." What we mean by this is that with every iteration/version, our content should slowly be getting better. The truth is that it will never be our best. It will simply be "our own most recent worst version."

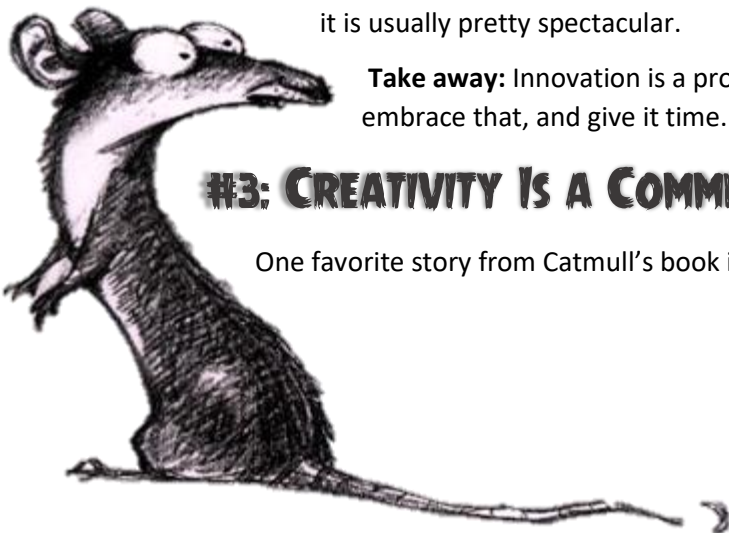
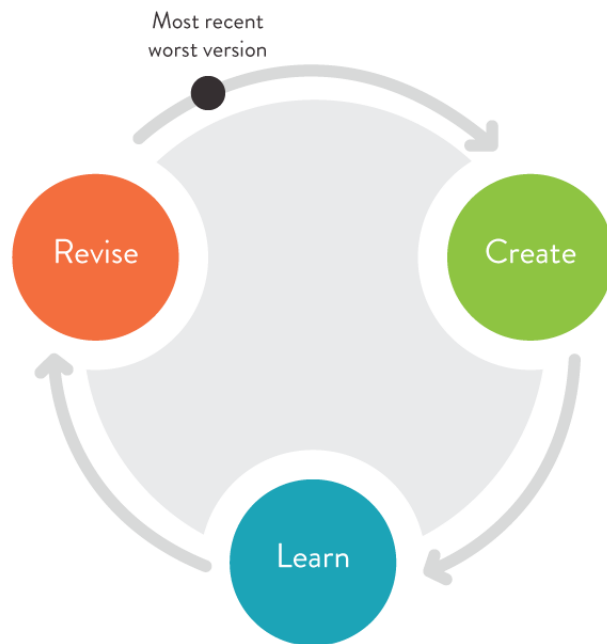
In the case of Pixar, that is what we see at the box office, but it may have only come after thousands and thousands of prior worse versions. The one we see is simply the most recent. It just so happens that it is usually pretty spectacular.

**Take away:** Innovation is a process that is developed over time. We have to embrace that, and give it time.

### #3: CREATIVITY IS A COMMITMENT

One favorite story from Catmull's book is about the film *Ratatouille*.

#### How to Create Your Most Recent *Worst* Version

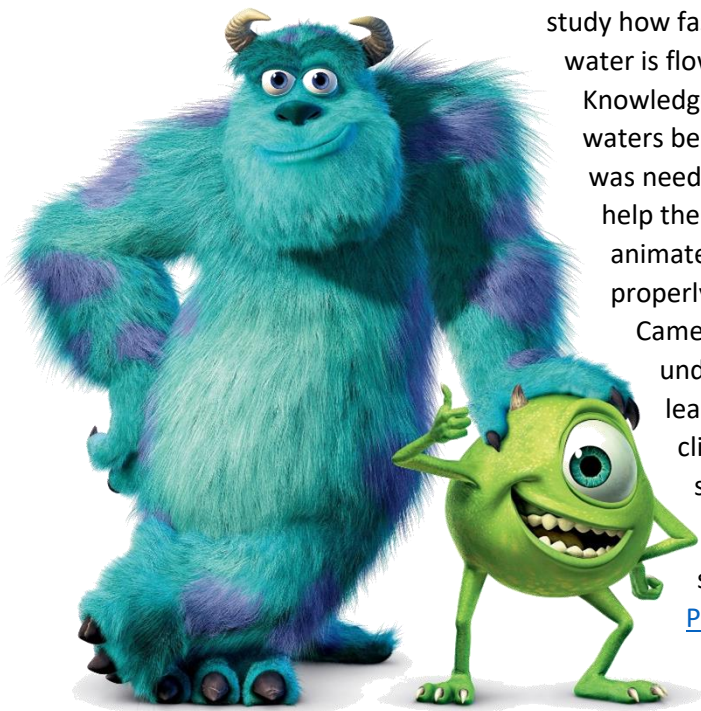


This film required the animation team to understand several things that they weren't necessarily familiar with, like French dining, fine food preparation, and of course, French sewers. As Catmull tells it, the company's creative lead John Lasseter put a bunch of people from the animation team on an airplane, and sent them to France to experience all of it. Even the sewers. Yes, the sewers!

Now that's a commitment!

For *Finding Nemo*, In order to get the look and the feel of *Finding Nemo's* characters and atmosphere just right, Pixar's in-house art team was [required to take courses and audit lectures](#) in marine biology, oceanography, and ichthyology and enroll in scuba diving classes. Pixar invited a scientist to present lectures on waves, swells and other motions. One of the trickiest problems for Pixar's staff was learning to communicate to each other about actions, textures and other details that are not easy to describe in the English language. A new vocabulary had to be developed in order to communicate. Animators

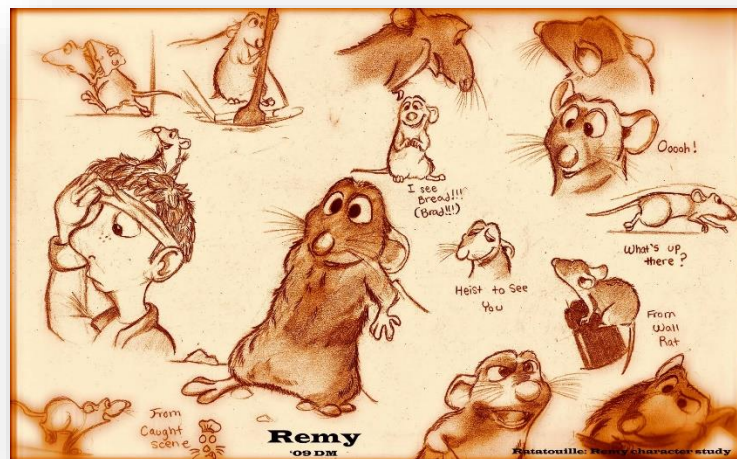
also had to learn to read the surge and swell, and study how fast the water is flowing. Knowledge of waters behavior was needed to help them animate properly.



Camera people needed to understand the effects of water on underwater photography. The lighting experts needed to learn how far away one can see underwater. (Option: Select clips and scenes from the documentary [Making Nemo](#) for students to watch about this process .)

And watch how a single detail brought the 'Scare Floor' scene together for Monster's, Inc. [The Making of Disney Pixar's Monsters Inc: Favorite Scene Roundtable](#)

There is a common attention to details like this with those who are 'innovative.' Details matter! This phenomenon is what Pixar producers call "the beautifully shaded penny." This



### DID YOU KNOW?

While the Pixar team's extensive research on the denizens of the deep yielded a wide variety of spectacular shapes and colors perfectly suited to an animated feature, the underwater populace proved consistently lacking when it came to one anatomical component. The dull eyes of the average finned critter weren't especially conducive to building expressive characters, so Pixar had to look elsewhere for its optical models. The crew chose one of the most openly expressive members of the animal kingdom on which to model the eyes of its fish characters: dogs.

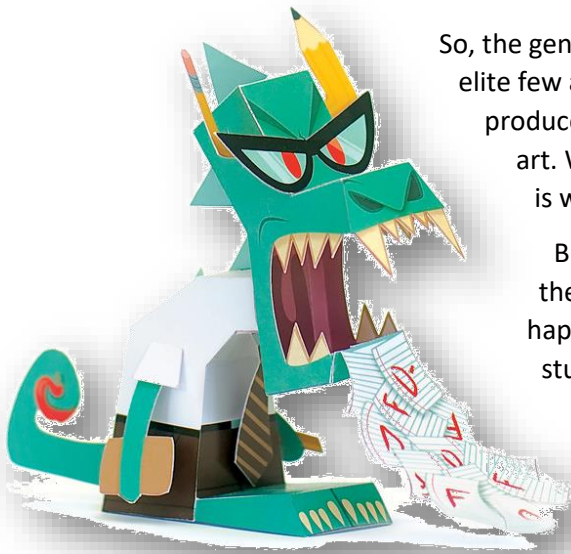


simply refers to the fact that artists working on Pixar films will frequently care so much about every tiny detail that they will sometimes spend days or weeks crafting what one producer calls “the equivalent of a penny on a nightstand that you’ll [the audience will] never see.”

You may never see it, but this attention to detail matters.

**Take away:** You must look deeper and demand more to truly uncover creativity.

# ROLLING OVER WRITER'S BLOCK!



So, the general consensus is that creativity is a gift bestowed on an elite few and that some of us were simply not designed to produce literary masterpieces or breath-taking works of art. Well, as we've discussed, the general consensus is wrong.

But sometimes an author isn't sure where their characters are heading or what should happen next. Story dice can help give you (and your student co-authors/story partners) inspiration when you need it. If nothing else the story told by the cubes or the suggestion they give can give a fresh perspective to those suffering from horror of the dreaded monster, Writers Block.



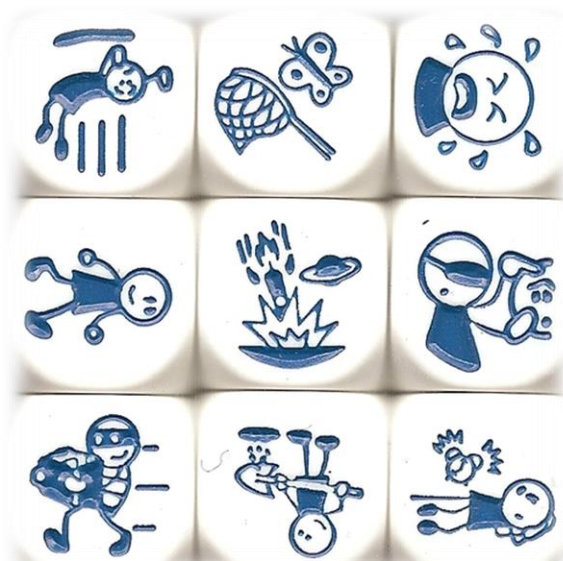
**Note: Story dice are recommended to be available for students/co-author groups to use throughout the writing and editing process of this unit series. When students/co-authors practice with the dice, always have them relate it back to their characters, their setting, and their stories. We are working on building their stories and every activity and discussion should relate back to that for them.**

**Tip: To modify for a group, and for some fun and creative practice before having co-authors use the story dice to start developing ideas for their stories, have each child in the class roll a dice and add to the group's story. It becomes a Team Activity and everyone has to work together to create a crazy group story!**



There are tons of variations. And the following are a few to try.

**Story Cubes (with all their variations):** Made up of 9 six-sided cubes, this creative tool



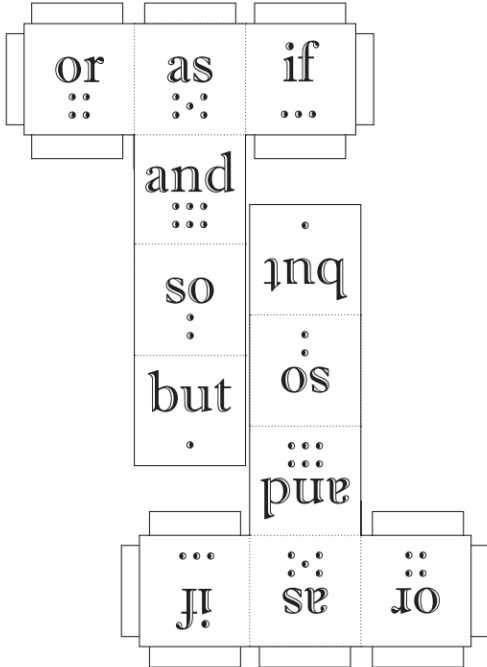
attempts to produce an unconscious expression of what is going on in the mind. Each of the six sides has an image and with a single roll of the nine cubes, the imagination is invoked and a story is created.

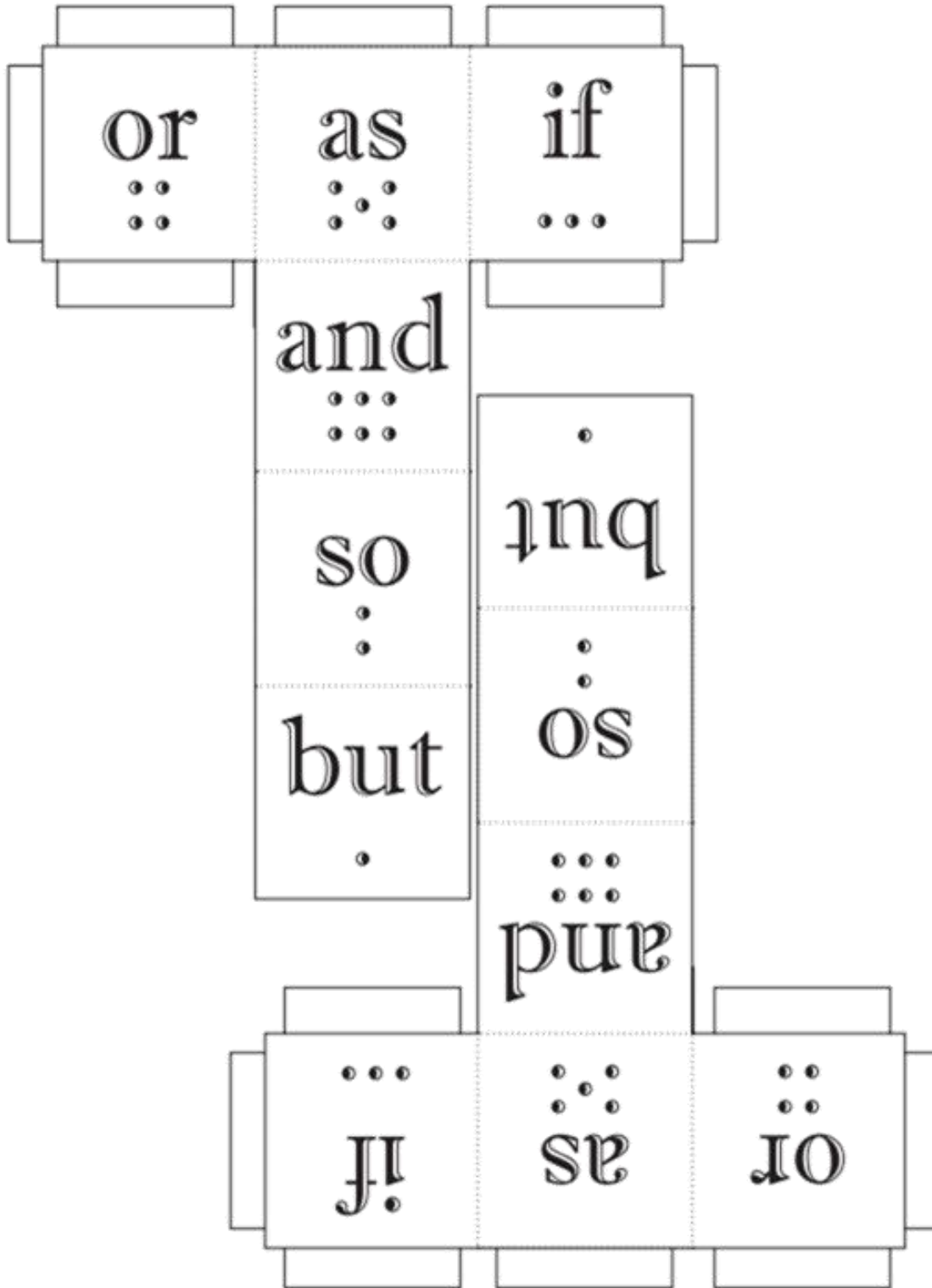
**Writers Dice & [the Writers Dice Guide](#):** Writer's Dice have six meaningful words: BUT, SO, AND, AS, OR, IF. These words help you create a story with a group of people in the moment or inspire a new direction

in your own tale. “No” is a non-starter. It stifles contributions and contributes nothing of its own. Even “Yes” alone isn’t enough to keep a story moving, since it just affirms the last contribution, but again contributes nothing of its own. “Yes, and...” is where the magic happens. When you bravely agree to see where the story goes next, armed with the license to build on past events. In writing, saying “Yes, and” to yourself is essentially the same as “then.” This happens, then this happens, then this happens. That’s just a series of events without context to each other.

Writers need more options than just “and” or “then,” as they outline their plots. Writers need more potent words that imply real causation and relationships between the beats. “But” for obstacles. “So”

for consequences. “If” for negotiations. “Or” for alternatives. “As” for parallels. And, of course, there is still need for “and,” for escalation. There are many more words that could be used, but those six seem particularly useful. It just so happens there are six sides to dice, so it just seemed natural to make Writer’s Dice.—Daniel Solis







**DIY = Make Your Own Story Cubes or Disks!** Using wooden or paper cubes, come up with your own (and have students help come up with their own) story inspiring dice. (Sample [tutorial](#), printable [box template](#),



**Paper [Story Dice](#)** like those from Dave Graffam Models (\$1.99 for pdfs):

At the heart of this set is the Event Die, and the idea is very simple. Any time a character takes an action and you need an idea, just roll this die. The Event Die provides a simple term that may be applied to nearly any activity, and you can use this to help your description of the outcome. For example, if a character is trying to sneak past the gate guards and fails, the Event Die might indicate that the outcome was influenced by "Time." The storyteller can

interpret this in lots of different ways, one of which might be that the guards are in the middle of a shift change. Instead of the usual two guards watching the gate, there are four of them!

Story dice won't change the way you write, except to sometimes make it faster and easier to come up with interesting descriptions on the fly. They won't overload you with information or draw attention away from the story. They're designed to give you just enough information to nudge your creativity and keep things varied and lively as you build your plot.



**Tips:** When folding and using templates...the best choice of paper and glue will depend a lot on the printing method that you choose. Desktop ink prints will be more likely to smear when you apply wet glue to them, so you should look for a low-moisture, tacky glue.

A little bit of glue is usually all that's required. A thin and even coat is much better than a heavy glob of glue. I keep a supply of small squares of excess cardstock, and use the edges of those squares to spread glue evenly. It's a good idea to keep some slightly-damp tissue if you need to wipe up extra glue, but be careful about this is if you're using ink-based prints.

## Roll-a-Story!

Creativity does not have to be difficult! Working together as a class and/or/then (compete) in small groups and work to craft (and write down their) crazy stories (and flash



fiction) all based on the roll of the dice. Make it a party game where players make and vote on stories, or use it as a way to challenge kids to integrate different things into the stories they tell. There are as many different ways to play with Story Cubes as there are possible combinations of images.

## Getting Started

Simply take all your cubes and give them a shake.

Roll them.

Then, starting with 'Once upon a time...' select the icon that catches your eye first. The objective is to tell a story that link together all nine images.

And remember - there is no wrong answer! Have fun!

Option: Start with a roll for character(s), then setting, or then decide them as you go, and let the plot begin!

You'll notice that introducing the new icons changes the whole thematic flavor of the story, and will help you take your storytelling to a whole new dimension.

## Variation: The Trilogy

Using multiple sets, ex. Three sets of Rory's Story Cubes, roll all of your cubes, ex. twenty seven cubes.

Each person takes 1/3, ex. nine cubes.

Then decide a genre and a theme together.

A genre might be fantasy, science fiction, romance or a western. A theme might be 'Friendship never dies'.

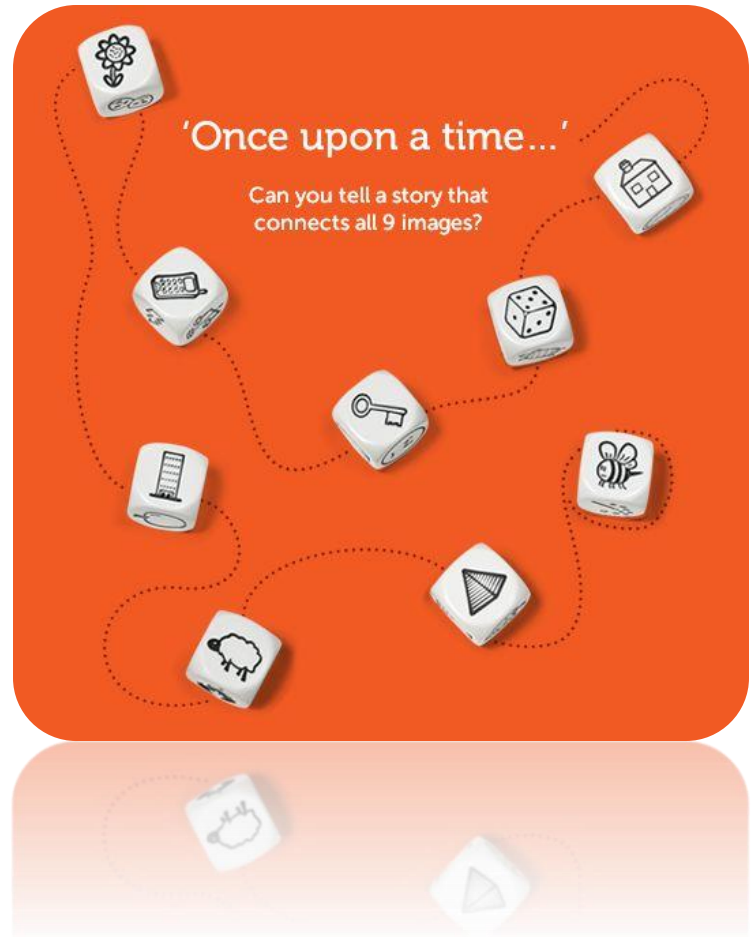
Let the icons suggest your genre and theme to you.

Next, decide who's going first, second and third.

The third person has to end the tale, tie up any loose ends and bring it to a climax.

**There are loads of ways to play with Story Cubes. We're just getting started.**

**Let your imagination ROLL!**



## Playing techniques

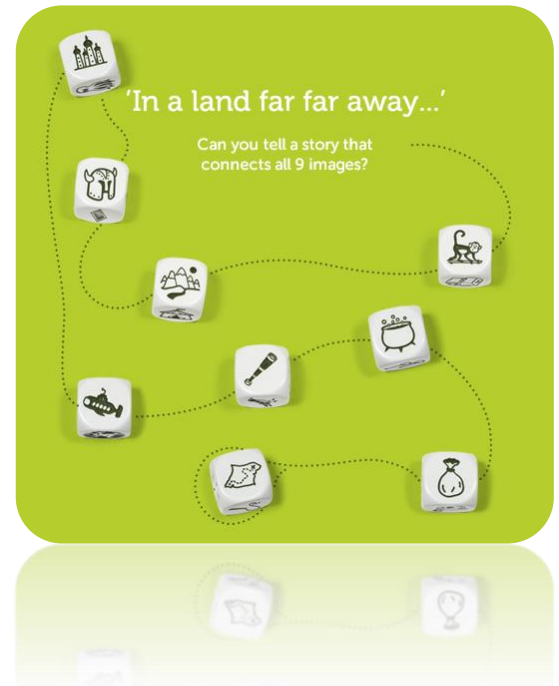
Do you remember when you were a child, and you were running down a hill and picking up speed, and going so fast that you either had to keep running or fall over? This is a good way to approach your/students' story telling with Story Cubes. If they do it as quickly as possible without thinking too hard, they'll be surprised by their own storytelling ability.

The first time you/they play with Story Cubes they might find it a challenge. But it's like trying to run 5km, the more you try, the easier it gets.

## What do the icons mean?

Their meanings are intentionally open, in order to trigger multiple associations. For example, the castle can be a castle, or it can refer to a princess, or to someone who's behaving in a guarded way.

Your brain is constantly trying to make meanings and it thinks in pictures. When you look at an icon, you can't help but find meaning. Your brain is doing it all the time, constantly filling in the gaps. Your brain searches through all of your memories and experiences to try and find a meaningful association.



# **MONSTERS! INK! LESSON FIVE SUPPLY LIST**

## **MATERIALS**

- Access to videos
- Story Cube Templates
- A variety of story cubes
- Paper
- Pencils
- Imagination
- Completed settings for each co-authorship
- Completed characters for each co-authorship

## **PACING GUIDE:**

**THIS LESSON HAS BEEN DESIGNED TO TAKE ONE 75-MINUTE SESSION TO COMPLETE. IT MAY TAKE MORE OR LESS DEPENDING ON THE NEEDS OF YOUR CLASSROOM AND THE ABILITIES OF YOUR STUDENTS.**