Chapter TWO

How Do Writers Tell (Digital) Stories?

Question: Do you imagine the pictures or images in your head before you write, or do you have to draw them?

Answer: I imagine them very clearly and then attempt to describe what I can see. Sometimes I draw them for my own amusement!

—J. K. Rowling, Interview

How do the best writers tell stories that grab readers and hold their attention right to the end? That question is just as important when students are working on digital stories as it is when they are doing other writing assignments. It's true that the written text is only one element of several that make up a digital story. But the words students write, their digital storytelling scripts, are the foundations for these stories and provide the threads that connect the images. The images add to the text. That's why the writing matters and why you can approach the writing of digital stories in pretty much the same way you approach other writing assignments.

You may want to start by reminding students about what they have already learned about how writers tell great stories. Ask students questions to get them thinking about stories they like: What makes a story a good one? What makes you want to keep reading? What sorts of details do you remember best after you read a story? When writers tell stories about their own lives, what details do they choose to include and what kinds of things do they leave out? How do writers make factual information meaningful? How do writers connect the different parts of their stories? Where do they start their stories? Why do they end them the way they do?

Writers for any media, of fiction or nonfiction, choose specific details that matter for the stories they are trying to tell. They begin stories with interesting information and make you want to know more. They often have a central idea about the subject of their story that they want to get across. They present the story from a certain point of view and make clear transitions between different parts of their story. They write an ending that is satisfying, that feels like an ending. They explain why factual information matters, what it means to readers. Sometimes writers put us right in the middle of the action during part of the story.

Students should consider some or all of these possibilities when they put together digital stories, just as they would consider them when completing other writing assignments. With some students you might also talk about metaphors and similes or foreshadowing. One third grader I worked with told a story about his dog and began it by mentioning that things were crazier after the puppies came. I said, "Puppies? What puppies?" He said he was going to get to the puppies later in the story. He was foreshadowing what was to come.

Talking about books they've read will give students ideas about what they might write about and how, all the way through the writing process. We can all learn by imitating great writing, even though we eventually want to find our own writing style.

Elements of a Digital Story

In addition to discussing what goes into a good written story, you may want to discuss storytelling elements many digital stories have in common. The Center for Digital Storytelling (CDS) in California (http://www.storycenter.org), a nonprofit arts and education organization that offers digital storytelling workshops all over the world, has in the past listed these: point of view, dramatic question, emotional content, the gift of your voice, the power of the soundtrack, economy, and pacing. This list has been adopted by many; I followed it when I put my first digital story together during a CDS workshop.

(Note that the Center has since changed how it teaches workshops. Instead of talking about digital storytelling elements, it now cites Seven Steps of Digital Storytelling: owning your insights, owning your emotions, finding the moment, seeing your story, hearing your story, assembling your story, and sharing your story. You can find more information about these steps in the Center's Digital Storytelling Cookbook, http://www.storycenter.org/resources.html.)

I've adapted the Center's list somewhat for our youngest storytellers. Emotional content may not be appropriate for some assignments students are asked to do, though these assignments can work as digital stories. A "dramatic question" can be construed to mean something involving emotion at one extreme end of the emotional spectrum or the other. And I see pacing as something that comes from the way students read their stories, the music they choose for their sound tracks, and the transitions they use between the art they choose. So my list of elements includes the following:

- An interesting question to answer
- Impact
- A clear point of view
- Economy
- The power of a student's voice
- Art that helps tell the story
- The sound track

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The first four can be elements of many kinds of writing students do; the last three are particular to digital stories. Naturally you can tailor any discussion about any of these elements to your students.

Digital stories do not have to include every element. I've seen interesting stories with only art and voice, or without voice-over but with slides featuring text incorporated into the stories. What your students include may depend on their ability level and the time they have to complete their stories.

It may take seven or eight class periods, fifty minutes each, to finish digital stories, but the project will take more or less time depending on how quickly the writing gets done, how complicated the stories are, how often your students have access to computers, and whether you have help or must record each student's narration yourself. Get parents or other volunteers to come in and help if you can. The more adults working with students and computers, the better.

Of course, some students will be more proficient in working with these elements and creating digital stories than others. Some stories will be more complicated or deep or polished than others. That's fine. Students will get a lot out of creating the stories no matter what the final products look like.

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Showing Examples of Digital Stories

You probably discuss and model different types of writing for your students—personal narratives, fairy tales, fables, science reports—and so may want to show students some examples of digital stories before they begin their own. (See this book's accompanying CD for examples and Resource Box: Online Examples of Digital Storytelling for information on finding stories online.) You might get your students to create a list of what makes a great digital story by asking them to think about what makes the stories work, remembering that the list will include criteria they've discussed before about good writing: What do they like about a particular digital story? What do they not like? Is the story interesting? Are there any surprises in the story? Does the beginning grab their attention? Does the ending fit the story? Are there any questions the writer doesn't answer in the story but should? Does the writer include all seven elements?

Do they help tell the story? Is the story clear? Do the art and the text go together well? Does the story have a central idea or theme or message?

The Elements of Three Students' Stories

One story begins with a photograph of a massive tornado (see "Colby" on CD). The music we hear is fast, the notes tumbling along. The story's author, fourth-grader Colby, begins by telling us, "Tornadoes are very dangerous in this part of the world. One of the highest windspeeds for a tornado is more than 300 miles per hour." More dramatic tornado photos follow.

Another story begins with a photograph of the woodworking shop belonging to a young author's dad (see "Tyler Woodshop" on CD). We hear light rock music, and then the first photograph fades into a second, a close-up of some sort of machine. Slowly our view changes as the frame of the picture zooms out until we can see the whole machine, and we hear the author and narrator, third-grader Tyler say, "Swish,

smash, oh great! Now who's paying for that? A board just slingshotted off the table saw and made a hole in the wall. I don't think we're getting that fixed because it will just happen again. Be careful. The table saw *can* be dangerous."

A third story opens with a photograph of a hamster in some tall grass (see "Sam Lucy" on CD). It's a wide shot—we can see how small the hamster is—that steadily zooms in until we see only the hamster. Over soft, happy music the storyteller, third-grader Sam, says, "Squeak, squeak. Hi, my name is Lucy. I'm a real explorer. I love to explore. I want to show you a time I had an exploring experience. It was at a weird, cool, and pretty place. There were a lot of things that were bigger than me, and some things that were smaller than me."

These three stories immediately draw listeners in and go on to make good use of the elements of a digital story. Let's see how.

An Interesting Question to Answer

Stories that answer interesting questions will invite readers in and keep them engaged to the end. The questions don't have to be complicated, but they've got to be answered by more than yes or no, or there's no tension or sense of discovery that drives the story, no surprise in store.

Colby's story answers the question, Why should we fear tornadoes? She sets up tension at the very beginning of the story when she tells us of the power of tornadoes. We want to know more.

Tyler started out knowing he wanted to write about his dad's woodworking shop, and as he wrote and put together his story, he began to see it as sort of a tour of the shop, highlighting the most interesting and important machines in the place. His story answers the question, What do the machines in the woodworking shop do and how does a person handle them? or even, Why do people need all of the machines in the woodworking shop?

Sam wanted to tell a story of Lucy, his hamster, out in the world. His question is, What does the outside world look like to a little hamster who goes exploring?

I do not think these students necessarily had these questions in mind when they started writing their stories, and maybe they didn't even realize they answered these questions. But they did find ways to tell their stories that took them beyond mere recitation of facts and so made the stories intriguing.

Impact

The best digital stories have an impact on the audience, whether they make people laugh or cry or teach them something amazing or important. If students consider impact when working on their stories—along with an interesting question—their stories will always be more than mere reporting of facts.

Colby's story is meant to teach us about tornadoes, and it's clear from the pictures she chose and the tone of her voice narrating that she wants us to take them seriously.

Tyler's story is also meant to teach us, about the woodworking shop. But his story is moving as well as informative; as you watch his story you come to realize how proud he is of his dad. He actually turns his story into an advertisement for his dad's shop.

And Sam's story makes us laugh and imagine what life is like when you're only a few inches tall.

A Clear Point of View

Digital stories give students a chance to try out different points of view—which can be great fun—and consider which one might help tell the story best. Students might, for example, write the story as though they were the animal or object the story is about, as Sam did and as third-grader Sarah did when she wrote about a day in the life of an apple from the point of view of the apple (see "Sarah and Apple" on CD); they might do the story in first person themselves, telling what they've seen and/or what they've learned; they might use a third-person narrator to describe the habitat of the common tree shrew or a road race between aliens from Mars and aliens from the Moon. They might see everyday things as really big or really small—like Lucy the hamster—or try to tell a story from the viewpoint of a friend or sibling. Colby's research makes her knowledgeable about tornadoes, and she tells the story as the researcher she is, relating what she's learned calmly, clearly, and confidently. Tyler is the expert when it comes to talking about the woodshop, so he's the appropriate narrator for that story. Sam, though, wants his viewers to see what things are like through Lucy's eyes—that's a main purpose of his story. Students writing digital stories must think about audience to make sure what they're trying to get across will be clear to others. How does a different viewpoint change the way a story is told? Does it change

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the way things should be described? Does it affect the details an author decides to include in the story?

Consider a book such as *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs!* "as told" by Jon Scieszka and illustrated by Lane Smith (1989), where the story is narrated by the wolf instead of the pigs (I use this book in my newswriting classes to get my students to think about point of view and about doing research that gets below the surface of a story). The facts of the story are changed some, but what is most unlike the usual version of the tale is the way the wolf's actions are interpreted. Trying out different points of view may get students to think about how differently the same incident or issue can be seen by different people, and why. It may also help them to think about whether they're getting the whole story when they read or hear something online or on television.

Economy

Digital stories are generally short, three to five minutes long. They're short for a couple of practical reasons: The computer files with images and audio can take up a lot of space on a computer server, and keeping them short makes them manageable for you and your students. But it's also true that a story that is short and therefore tightly focused on an experience or theme can be more compelling than a sprawling story about the same subject. If students want to tell longer stories about trips or other experiences they've had, encourage them to pick only parts of those trips or experiences to write about and to be choosy about what they include in the story. A digital story should have one central meaning, one central theme.

Economy applies to the words and sentences used too. Stories are most often in prose form but can be poems, and scripts may be as short as a few paragraphs or lines of a poem. You might get students to think about what they're writing as similar to a poem in the way few words are used to convey meaning, with nothing extraneous left in. They should think about choosing only the most interesting and/or important details for their story and try to use only a few sentences to go with each image, so they're getting rid of words that don't do any work, that don't move the story along.

Looking at picture books can also help students think about economy, if they consider what specific details writers include (and maybe what they don't) to tell

their stories. The book *Song of the Water Boatman and other Pond Poems* (2005), by Joyce Sidman, includes short poems about pond life along with a paragraph per poem of true information about the subject of each poem (and beautiful illustrations by Beckie Prange). Students could consider what's included in both parts of the story about each living being—poem and paragraph—and talk about why the writer chose only those things to show or tell.

Colby simply shows us different views of tornadoes. The photos show us how menacing and destructive they are; she doesn't have to describe everything the photos show. She also economizes with her words, choosing telling details to include in her text such as how one tornado killed 695 people and damaged 15,000 homes. Her audience gets the message about how dangerous tornadoes are.

Tyler's story continues with photographs of the woodshop's machines and short explanations of what they do and, in a couple of cases, what trouble somebody can get into if he or she doesn't use the machines properly. He's chosen the information viewers most need to know and left out the rest. When a photograph of the edge bander comes up, he tells us, "The edge bander is a machine that heats up small balls of glue. It puts edges onto the boards. These boards are then used to make wood tables. One thing you should not do is pour the entire bag [of glue] because it would make a mess." That's definitely important to know!

Sam's story is told through five photographs. Each one shows Lucy in a different setting, and we're told about what she sees and feels and thinks as she explores. "Help, help, I'm being chased by a black snake," she tells us. "Oh, it's just a black pipe. Whoa! Look at that big hole right in front of me. I hope I don't fall in it. Wow, look at that bush right next to me and look at those purple flowers on the top of it." Sam's chosen the most vivid or surprising things in each picture to tell us about. In a brief but detailed story we're let in on what Lucy would most notice about the outdoors and what's most important to her. We also start to look at ordinary things around us in new ways.

The Power of a Student's Voice

A student's voice is one of the most compelling parts of a digital story. Reading their own stories empowers students. Hearing the stories in their own voices does the

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same. We listen eagerly to stories told out loud because *someone* is telling them. We love to hear (and read about) people talking. In my journalism classes, I tell students that sometimes the most compelling parts of a news story are direct quotes from sources, which allow those sources to speak directly to readers. Imagine the story of Little Red Riding Hood without the voices of the wolf and Red. The scene where she confronts the wolf might be written something like this: "Red Riding Hood looked at the figure in the bed and thought it had awfully big ears, eyes, and teeth. The wolf told her these were all so she could see, hear, and finally eat her." The story definitely loses something in this telling.

Instead, we usually have dialogue for this part of the story—two characters talking to each other: "Grandmother, what big eyes you have!" "The better to see you with, my dear." "What big ears you have!" "The better to hear you, my dear." "What big teeth you have!" "The better to eat you!" The drama is in the characters' own words.

You'll find when you do digital stories that some students have never heard their own voices recorded before. You might play other classmates' recordings before recording theirs, to put them at ease. This voice-over is a way for students to put their personal stamp on the story and present it to classmates and others without having to physically stand up in front of the class; it's a new way to present themselves and their work. The way students read their stories, emphasizing certain things and reading fast or slow—pacing—sets a tone or mood for the story too.

Students often say they don't like their voices when they hear them for the first time, but they still take pride in these self-narrated pieces. With Sam's, Tyler's, and Colby's projects, the voices of the narrators really make the stories come to life. The voices reach out to viewers, bringing them into the stories.

Many software programs, including the one I'm featuring in this book, Microsoft Photo Story 3 for Windows, allow you to use a microphone to record students' voices right into the program. (You'll find more on this in Chapter 4.)

Art That Helps Tell the Story

The main difference between digital stories and some of the other writing assignments your students do is that art is an important part of the telling of these stories. Your

students may download photos or clip art from the Web (see Resource Box: Finding Images, Music, and Sound Online for sources); take photos with a digital camera and download them into the computer system or from a CD made of the photos if you use disposable cameras; or draw or paint their own illustrations to go with their stories. If you can have students take their own photographs or draw or paint pictures, do it. This strengthens the sense of ownership students feel when creating these stories.

RESOURCE BOX: FINDING IMAGES, MUSIC, AND SOUND ONLINE

Online sources for free photographs, art, and music include the following, which you can find by Googling the names or checking the Web sites listed in the "References and Resources" section at the end of the book:

• Classroom Clipart. Free images.

• Pics4Learning. As explained on the Web site, Pics4Learning is "a copyright–friendly image library for teachers and students. The Pics4Learning collection consists of thousands of images that have been donated by students, teachers, and amateur photographers. Unlike many Internet sites, permission has been granted for teachers and students to use all of the images donated to the Pics4Learning collection."

• The New York Public Library Digital Gallery. Offers images that can be downloaded free for classroom use and student projects.

• Discovery Education's Clip Art Gallery. Geared toward educators and students, with free material that is intended to be used for school projects, though there may be limits on how much you can download.

- Kitzu. Offers free educational kits centered around subjects. The kits can include copyright-friendly photos, video, illustrations, music, and text.

You may also want to use Google's Image search, but keep in mind that the images it brings up may be copyrighted.

For music, try Soundzabound, which is a royalty-free music library (not free, though; schools must pay licensing fees to use the music) or Freeplay Music, which allows students to use music at no charge for educational projects (read the Terms of Use on the Web site carefully). Also check out FindSounds, a free site where you can search for sound effects.

Many digital storytelling sites offer links to art and music resources for teachers and students, such as the Digitales site created by Bernajean Porter. Keep in mind that any photo sites not specifically created for education may include images that are not appropriate for young children.

Downloading Images from the Web

If you're downloading images from the Web, you need to pay attention to the resolution of the image, measured in dpi, dots per inch. The more dots in every square inch of an image, the better the quality of the image when you import it into a computer program that enlarges it for showing on the computer screen. Bernajean Porter, on her Digitales Web site, recommends images with no less than 720x534 dpi for digital storytelling projects. Otherwise, your images will be blurry when shown as part of the story.

Also, before you download an image from the Web, click on the thumbnail version on the Web site to get the full-sized image. Then download that image onto your computer, not the small thumbnail version.

The number of images students use is up to you; effective stories can be told with only three or four images, and the most a three-minute digital story would include

is fifteen or so. Limiting the number of images students use makes them concentrate on the story, and the story becomes the deciding factor in what images to use, not the other way around. It also makes the stories easier to complete in less time, so at least the first time you have students create digital stories, limit the number of images they can use to four or five. The art should do work; it should help show what the narration talks about and may even convey information not included in the narration that helps move the story along.

The children's picture books I most love aren't just beautiful to look at; the pictures truly help tell the story, the visuals and the text complement and complete each other. Look at *Owl Moon* by Jane Yolen (1987), illustrated by John Schoenherr. It's a story about a young girl and her father who go out in the winter night to search for owls. The illustrations are beautiful, the text is spare, and they work wonderfully together. There's one place where the child and father, dressed for the cold, stop in the middle of a clearing in the woods, beneath the moon. The picture, with its muted colors and many trees, seems to say "cold" and "night" and "mystery," and, because the picture shows the people so small in the landscape, it captures the way it feels to be in the woods on such a night looking for a wonderful creature that is not at your beck and call. The words of the book alone would not be enough, and neither would the pictures, but they each enhance the effect of the other. That's the way the best digital stories work too.

We say, "A picture is worth a thousand words." Sometimes that's true. But in an increasingly complicated world, where TV and the Web bring to our students lots of aural and visual and textual information, it matters that we teach them to make sense of what text and visuals do together, and how to tell stories using both.

Begin by having students consider how the illustrations in a book work with the text. Do the pictures show exactly what the writing does, or do they include things that aren't written down? Do the pictures go well with the writing? Are there places where the pictures tell part of the story better than the writing, or the writing better than the pictures? A book such as *A Couple of Boys Have the Best Week Ever* (2008), by Marla Frazee, about two boys going to nature camp, shows this well, because there are places where the pictures tell a slightly more accurate (and funny) story than the text does, and vice versa. For example, in one part of the story the boys are

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supposedly resting in "quiet meditation" after camp, but the illustration shows them furiously playing video games.

One second grader created a whimsical digital story about a little bear, Fluffy, who—though he doesn't mean to—keeps getting into trouble (see "Chris and Fluffy" on CD). Chris has a sequence of his own drawings that show things the text does not describe. For example, in one picture the bear, wearing a cape, tries to leap across the room without knocking anything over. The narrator says, "'Phew, that was close,' said Mom." The next picture shows Fluffy on the floor where he has fallen after leaping. The narrator says, "Mom asked, 'Are you OK?' 'No,' said Fluffy sadly." The narrator tells us later that the bear got in trouble again the next day but doesn't tell us how. Instead, the picture shows us: He was playing basketball and the ball ended up someplace it was not supposed to be.

Tyler and Sam were in a third-grade class where the teacher gave students digital cameras to take home and told them to take pictures of things that were important to them. For stories about three wishes, some first and second graders drew their own pictures of the people wishing, the fairy granting the wish, and the things the wishers received. One first grader painted beautiful pictures of penguins in the Andes for a story called "Penguins in Action" (see this story on CD). For other stories, students used clip art or photographs they downloaded from the Web.

Colby downloaded compelling photographs from the Web for her story. Tyler took photographs of the most interesting machines in the woodshop. Sam placed Lucy in settings where she'd find a lot to explore. Without the words, the pictures themselves would only tell part of the story; without the pictures, the stories would be flat. In all three cases, both elements work together to make for interesting storytelling.

I'm a big fan of original student artwork for digital stories. If they're taking photographs of their own, or drawing or painting illustrations rather than pulling art from the Web, students feel more like the stories belong to them, like they're in control. They also have the chance to really make the art work with the text. If you have them downloading art from the Web, they'll still think through that connection, though they may have a hard time getting art that shows exactly what they want it to. This is one reason you may want to have them create at least some illustrations themselves. When students pull images from Web sites, they may choose the same sort of image over and over, or images that don't quite match the text. I'm

not saying your students can't do successful stories with images they get off the Web. I'm saying they may not get exactly what they're looking for—though that can mean they get quite creative in showing what happens in their story. For example, one third grader, another Sarah, tells a story her mom has recounted to her lots of times, about the day a little boy fell off of the school bus her mother was riding on when she was Sarah's age. Sarah uses clip art and photographs found online to illustrate her story, and when she gets to the part about the bus hitting a bump and the boy falling out, she shows a clip-art image of a bus tilted on its side, as if it's hit a big bump, then a photograph of a road, a long stretch of asphalt, to show us where the boy fell. It works.

If your students are working with artwork they find online, you'll want to talk with them about copyright issues. (See the information on copyright on page 28.)

The Sound Track

In digital stories, students can also set a certain mood and pace with the music, the sound track, they use. From movies, students know slow, somber music goes with a sad story and fast, energetic music with action. If you want to talk to students about the power of music, you might use movies as examples. Imagine the bicycle chase scene in *E.T.* when the boys' bikes suddenly lift into the air without the triumphant music playing in the background. The scene would lose so much of its intensity and joy without the music.

Photo Story 3 for Windows allows students to create original music, using options included in the program, to go with their stories as the last step in the process of creating those stories. They get to choose a genre, such as classical or country; a style, such as '80s rock; bands or instruments, such as orchestra or electric guitar; moods, including adventurous or sad; different tempos; and different intensities.

Colby used different music for each photograph in her story, and while that's a bit distracting, she chose music that's fast-paced and sometimes dissonant to hint at the tornadoes' speed and the chaos they cause. Tyler created music with fast beats for most of his pictures, giving the story some movement; Sam created music that sounded dramatic, also with a fast beat, adding a bit of tension to his story. Another student I worked with, whose story was about saying goodbye to his mentor, said he used sad music because the story was about a sad day.

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Students can also import music they've found on the World Wide Web, but remember that some of these works—certainly music from an artist's CD—are copyrighted. Not all music Web sites offer music files free, and some sites require you to set up an account. Photo Story 3 will accept files in the following formats, meaning the files will have one of these suffixes at the end of the file name: *wma* (Windows Media Audio), *mp3*, or *WAV*. Usually you can choose the format when you download music from the Web. (For more information, see Resource Box: Finding Images, Music, and Sound Online on page 23.)

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About Fair Use and Copyright

I'm not out to make you paranoid about copyright, but you should pay attention to fair-use guidelines, and your students should understand that they can't always simply download someone else's work and use it in their own projects. Too often these days students figure that because something is available on the Internet, they can use it and use it without crediting the source. The fair-use doctrine allows some use of copyrighted works for classroom instruction and other purposes. But there are guidelines as to how much material can be used, and credit must be given to those who created the copyrighted works.

Copyright and fair-use guidelines came into existence long before multimedia. But as explained in an article entitled "The Educator's Guide to Copyright and Fair Use," written by Linda Starr (2004) and posted on the *Education World* Web site, in 1996 the Consortium of College and University Media Centers (CCUMC) brought together publishers, educators, industry representatives, and legal experts "to draft a set of fair use guidelines for educators and students to use while creating multimedia projects that include copyrighted works. The guidelines they developed, although not legally binding, do represent an agreement among most institutions and organizations affected by educational multimedia. Following the guidelines should keep you and your students safe from charges of copyright infringement" (2004).

These guidelines, posted on the Web site of the Consortium of College and University Media Centers, state that "students may incorporate portions of lawfully

acquired copyrighted works when producing their own educational multimedia projects for a specific course." There are limits to how much material can be used, though the guidelines exempt K–6 students from closely following those limits. You should, however, know what the limits are and have students follow them as much as possible. The limits, as set out in the *Education World* article, include these:

- Up to three minutes or 10 percent, whichever is less, of a single copyrighted motion media work

- Up to 30 seconds or 10 percent, whichever is less, of music and lyrics from a single musical work

- Up to five photographs or illustrations by one person and no more than 15 images or 10 percent, whichever is less, of the photographs or illustrations from a single published work (Starr 2004)

Young students don't have to know all the detailed ins and outs of these guidelines. They can understand, though, what it would feel like to have someone take pictures they painted or stories they wrote and claim them for his or her own. They should be taught to keep track of where they get all photographs or other elements they download from the Web and write up a works cited page to be included in or with the project.

As I've discussed previously, there are Web sites offering copyright-friendly or copyright-free materials for educators and students (see Resource Box: Finding Images, Music, and Sound Online on page 23). Of course, if students take their own photographs or create their own images and music for digital stories, you'll be home free.

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