Contents

QUICK START 1
What is stop motion? 1
Recording the audio first 2
Recording the pictures first 4
Power tips for making better stop motion movies 5

OVERVIEW 9
Methods of stop motion 10
What equipment do I need? 12
How many pictures do I need? 12
File names 15

SCRIPT 17
What makes a great movie? 18
Writing a script 19
Step 1: Writing a premise 19
Step 2: Questions which develop the premise 21
Step 3: Writing the story in three acts 22
Step 4: Writing the story into a script 22
Step 5: Labelling the scenes (optional) 22
Tips to develop a story 24
About genres 26
Writing a TV advertisement 29

AUDIO 31
Microphones 32
Equipment to record sound 33
GarageBand 35
The GarageBand window 36
Creating a soundtrack

Step 1: Recording the dialogue
Step 2: Reviewing the dialogue timing
Step 3: Recording/adding music
Step 4: Adding sound effects
Step 5: Adding atmosphere sounds
Step 6: Saving the soundtrack

Recording with a microphone

Software instruments

Adding loops

Adding other media

Sound effects

Editing the soundtrack

Editing Software Instruments
Exporting the soundtrack
Editing the soundtrack later

Sound versus noise

Tips for great sound

How to make a microphone ‘shock’ mount

PROPS AND SET UP

Modelling with Plasticine

Plasticine modelling tools
Making an armature Plasticine character

Building with Lego

Setting up a stop motion stage

Standard stage with painted background
Invisible horizon stage
Green screen stage

Creating a three dimensional world

Tips for great pictures

Picture composition
| The Rule of Thirds   | 78 |
| Title Safe         | 79 |
| Camera angle       | 79 |
| Camera focus       | 80 |
| Behind the scenes  | 83 |

**Camera, tripod and mount** 85

- Choosing a camera for stop motion 85
- Camera tripod 87
- How to make a camera mount 88
- How to make a camera cradle 88

**Lighting** 89

- Key light 89
- Fill light 89
- Back light 89
- Soft, even lighting 90

**How to make a portable stage** 92

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STOP MOTION</th>
<th>95</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>iStopMotion</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The iStopMotion window</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Making a stop motion movie** 98

- Step 1: Opening iStopMotion 98
- Step 2: Choosing an image source 99
- Step 3: Camera set up 100
- Step 4: Importing soundtrack 100
- Step 5: Recording your first picture 101
- Step 6: Bringing your characters to life 103
- Step 7: Playing your movie 104
- Step 8: Editing your movie 105
- Step 9: Saving your movie 105
| Title and credits | 106 |
| View options | 107 |
| Importing a reference video | 108 |
Making a Lego minifigure walk 110
Using replacement figures 112
Making a character talk 112

Creating visual effects 116
Dramatising an action sequence 119
Illustration artwork 122
Whiteboard artwork 123
Flat 2D art 124
Two level stop motion 125
Time Lapse – security system 126
Tilt Shift - miniatures 127

Common stop motion mistakes 128

Advanced iStopMotion 131
Compositing pane 131
Editing pictures 133
Stop motion movie with a digital still camera 135
Planning a complex stop motion movie 139

Principles of animation 140

EDIT AND PUBLISH 145

iMovie 146
The iMovie window 146
Editing a stop motion movie 148
Adding effects 149

Saving the movie 156

Showing your movie to the world 157
Saving your movie for the internet 157
Making a DVD 158

INDEX 161
Websites for more information 167

TEACHER LESSON PLANS 169
What is stop motion?

Stop motion movies are made from a series of individual pictures. When the pictures are viewed one after the other, our eyes are ‘tricked’ into thinking that the objects in the pictures are moving. This is the magic of stop motion.

In this book, we use iStopMotion software (www.boinx.com) and Apple’s GarageBand and iMovie software (www.apple.com) to make stop motion movies.

This Quick start chapter is written for those who just want to dive in and get started. If you want more detail, follow the page numbers to the appropriate sections.

This chapter outlines two processes to make stop motion movies:

• writing the script and recording the audio first, and
• recording the pictures first.

The last part of this chapter is a summary of the vital keys for a high quality movie. These are expanded more fully in the rest of this book.
Writing a script

Here is an overview of the process to write a script for a movie.

**Step 1: Writing a premise**

A story needs to be about something. That something is the premise. It’s the central idea, the reason people want to watch the movie. It’s often an open question: ‘**What might happen if...?**’

**Movie premises**

*Bee Movie (2007)* – what might happen if bees find out that humans are taking their honey?

*High School Musical (2006)* – what might happen if someone follows their own dreams instead of dreams other people have for them?

*Monsters Inc. (2001)* – what might happen if children stop being scared of monsters?

*Toy Story 1 (1995)* – what might happen if toys come to life when their owner is out of the room?

*Groundhog Day (1993)* – what might happen if you live the same day over and over again and have the chance to change your choices?

A good premise should be:

- brief – ideally one sentence (maximum 25 words)
- an idea that jumps out at you
- in the present tense.

Sometimes people waste a lot of time trying to improve a story that’s not worth telling because the premise is not interesting.

Write down the premise for your movie
– “**What might happen if...**”
Tips to develop a story

Watch and learn
You can learn how to write a good story by watching other people’s movies – both good and bad. Watch all sorts of movies, not just stop motion ones, and not just your favourite type either.

The story must have a point
The story has to be about something or it will be boring. A common plot is about someone whose life has been interrupted by an event or threat of an event. The story is about how they try to sort it out.

Movies are more successful because they have good stories rather than great special effects.

Choose a hero
Movies should have a hero/ine (also called a protagonist). The hero can be a group of people, an object or a place. They do not always have to be nice, but they should be intriguing.

Make your hero likeable and make their dilemmas something everyone can relate to. Many stories have a hero that the audience would like to be friends with.

Structure your story
Every story needs a beginning, a middle and an end.

When you have more confidence you can mix them up – start your story in the middle and follow it with the end. Then finish by telling the start of the story.

For example, if you start your story with the ending, eg the villain knocks at the door, then tell rest of the story from the beginning so that we can see how the events led up to the villain knocking at the door.

Longer movies often have small side stories to help lead towards the one big story.
Adding loops

Loops are very short pre-recorded beats, rhythms or tunes. GarageBand comes with thousands of loops and you can buy more to extend the range, e.g. Apple Jam Packs – Voices, Rhythm Section, World Music, Remix Tools, Symphony Orchestra (www.apple.com) or www.bandloops.com

Loops can be repeated (looped) and combined with other loops to make up a song. Some have a green icon as they are made with synthetic software instruments. Some loops have a blue icon as they are recordings of real instruments.

To add loops:

• Click on the left Loop Browser button 4 (CMD-L)
• In the Loop Browser 5 click on the buttons for the instrument (guitar, keyboard, percussion...), genre (rock, electronic...) and mood (distorted, melodic...). You may have to drag the divider down to reveal all the buttons. The loops that match your description are listed
• Click on a loop to hear it
Sound versus noise

When recording audio, you want a clean, clear recording of the ‘sound’ with the least amount of other unwanted sounds – ‘noise’. Every recording will have some noise. These steps help reduce the amount of noise in your recording:

• Find the quietest room you can
• Turn off as many sources of noise as possible, eg hum of computer, tick of wall clock, and turn off your phone
• Shut the doors and windows to block any outside noise. Politely ask people in the next room to keep quiet (don’t forget to tell them when they can make a noise again)
• Have actors stand still and not shuffle their feet or rustle their clothes
• Wait until the plane has flown overhead or the neighbour has mown their lawn
• The remaining noise (drone of city traffic or wind in the trees) is the ambient noise you’ll need to accept. However, you can minimise the level of the ambient noise, in relation to the sound level you want to record, by moving the microphone as close as possible to the sound. For example, if the sound is 1 metre away from the microphone, reducing the distance increases the sound level but does not increase the level of the ambient noises, therefore the noise becomes less noticeable in the recording.

Move closer to the microphone for more sound and less noise
Plasticine – let your imagination run wild

Tips:
• If you want a character to move, use an armature to strengthen the arms and legs
• Where possible, use beads for eyes because they won’t lose their shape. The eyes are the ‘windows of the soul’ and give characters life
• Characters need solid feet and sturdy legs. Aim for a low centre of gravity so the character can easily stand and remain balanced when moving
• Use lightweight objects such as a table tennis ball to give mass to the body without weight.
Here are some examples of stage set ups:

**Standard stage with painted background**

Paint or create a background design or picture on a sheet of A2-size cardboard. Use any art medium you like. Use an appropriate scale for your characters. You can change the background during your movie to create scene changes.

- Position characters at the front of the stage so the camera focus can separate them from the background (see Make your stop motion movie look like a ‘film’ on page 81)
- For close-ups, use blocks to raise characters to get a better camera angle or image composition
- Place props on the base of the stage to hide the camera’s view of the horizon line – the bottom edge of the background cardboard.
And because a movie is more than one picture, you need to anticipate where your characters will move so that you don’t need to constantly move the camera (see Rule 1 on page 103). For example, if a giraffe is to walk onto your stage make sure that you won’t cut its head off if your other characters are much shorter.

Look out for dirt and hairs on your sets and characters. Spots of dirt may be small, but when viewed through the camera can look huge. Clean your sets and characters with a cloth and small soft brush, and when working with Plasticine make sure you have clean hands.

**The Rule of Thirds**

Which of these pictures looks the best?

The picture in the middle has good vertical balance. The character’s head is not squashed into the top of the screen, and it is not drowning off the bottom of the screen.

**Position the camera so that the character’s eyes are one third down the screen and you’re a long way towards having a good composition.**
In this chapter you will record the pictures for your stop motion movie. You will learn about:

- iStopMotion software
- Recording the pictures
- Making a Lego figure walk
- Making a character talk
- Creating visual effects and recording action sequences
- Avoiding common stop motion mistakes
- Adding a soundtrack
- Adding a background
- Saving your stop motion movie.

**Checklist before recording the pictures**

- Soundtrack is complete
- Tape down all backgrounds, including Lego base boards, so they can’t accidentally move
- Control all lighting sources, including blocking windows, using appropriate artificial lights with diffusers and bounce boards
- Set camera to manual focus
- Set all other camera settings such as white balance and exposure
- Position the camera for good picture composition
- Clear working area and secure tripod to avoid accidental movement.
**iStopMotion**

iStopMotion is a great program for helping to produce stop motion movies. The program comes in several versions with different sets of features. This book uses the ‘Express’ version, although the cheaper ‘Home’ version will be able to do most of these steps. You’ll need the ‘Pro’ version if you want to make movies with high definition. For more information about iStopMotion go to [www.boinx.com](http://www.boinx.com)

**The traditional task of editing raw movie footage doesn’t exist with stop motion.** Each picture is assessed when taken and if it is not suitable another picture is taken immediately. At any point in the process, all pictures should be final. So when the last picture is taken the movie is complete. Where editing is still required, the iStopMotion movie can be opened in iMovie, but this may only be for tasks such as adding a title or credits.

**The iStopMotion window**
The iStopMotion window has all the controls you’ll need to make your stop motion movie.
Making a Lego minifigure walk

The fastest and easiest way to move a Lego minifigure is to jump forward one row at a time. However, the result looks more like a glide than a walk, although this will be suitable for robots. Depending on the walking pace, press the keys 2, 3 or 4 to take several pictures in each position.

Actual step-by-step walking

You can make Lego minifigures actually appear to walk. It takes eight steps for a complete movement of left and right legs:

1. Start with the Lego figure standing still with both legs straight
2. Push the figure away from you and swing the closest leg forward. Stand the figure up again with the closest leg angled forward
3. Rock the figure forward so that it is between rows on the base board – standing on the heel of the front foot, and toe of the back foot. Straighten its back so that the figure is standing tall
4. Rock the figure forward again so that its closest leg is firmly connected to the next row on the base board. The back leg is angled back
5. Pull the figure towards you and swing the back leg forward so that it is standing upright again – ONE step completed
6. Pull the figure towards you and swing the furthest away leg forward. Stand the figure again (opposite action to step 2)
Rock the figure forward so that it is between rows on the base board – standing on the heel of the front foot and toe of the back foot. Straighten its back so that it is standing tall (opposite action to step 3).

Rock the figure forward again so that the furthest away leg is firmly connected to the next row on the base board. The closest leg is angled back (opposite action to step 4).

Push the figure away from you and swing the closest leg forward so that it is standing upright again (opposite action to step 5) and you’re back into position 1 – TWO steps completed. To continue walking repeat the actions from step 2.

Lego minifigure walk – advanced options

- With each step also move the figure’s arms. Swing them in time with the opposite leg.
- Move the head. This action may not be rhythmic but might be related to what the figure is looking at as it walks by.
- Bend the figure forward at the hips to look like it is running.
- Do the moonwalk using these poses from the above steps (for each step press 2 for two copies of the picture):
  - pose 8, pose 7, (slide back one space), pose 7, pose 6, pose 4, pose 3, (slide back one space), pose 3, pose 2 and repeat.
Whiteboard artwork

Another very flexible medium for stop motion movies is a whiteboard. It is easy to draw, erase parts of pictures and redraw them to get real animation.

Tips

In addition to all the tips on the previous page, here are tips for successful whiteboard stop motion:

- Whiteboards are highly reflective. Position the camera and whiteboard to avoid glare or reflection. Put a shade over lights for even lighting without reflections
- Wear white clothes to limit reflection
- Clean the whiteboard thoroughly before you start
- Use fresh whiteboard markers with full colour
- Use a cloth to cleanly erase unwanted details. Shadows from previous drawings can ruin the animation and make it look sloppy
- Lay a printed page on the flat surface to set the manual focus. Set the camera’s white balance and exposure, then leave the camera and mount alone. Don’t bump it
- Add interest by including sequences showing the artist’s hand on the artwork as if they were stretching or moving things with their fingers.

For other examples search ‘stop motion whiteboard’, or ‘minilogue/hitchhikers choice’ on YouTube, or go to http://comment.rsablogs.org.uk/videos
For more information about the Stop Motion Handbook email smbook@acumen.net.nz

To order more printed copies or to download the colour EPUB go to www.acumen.net.nz/pages/NMSSMHandbook.html
Teacher lesson plans

This book contains comprehensive information about a wide range of topics relating to making stop motion movies. When used in a classroom, teachers can easily derive lesson plans for curriculum activities. The following pages outline some possible lesson plans.

1. Write a 3-act story which develops a premise
2. Write a story into a script
3. Write the script for a 30 second TV advertisement
4. Create a plasticine character
5. Create a scene set in scale
6. Record a soundtrack in GarageBand
7. Record stop motion pictures in iStopMotion
8. Animate a Lego character to walk
9. Animate a character to talk
10. Dramatise an action sequence
11. Develop an interactive whiteboard illustration
12. Time lapse
13. Add a title and credits in iMovie

Most lessons can be undertaken in groups of up to three students.

Each lesson plan contains:

• A list of required prerequisites, equipment and resources
• Time allowance. Increasing the time will allow students to focus on quality improvement
• References to relevant pages in this book
• Suggested areas for assessment.
Learning area: *English narrative development*

Requires paper, pen and a copy of table on page 23*.

Allow 60 minutes.

**Lesson plan reference**

- Page 18; Whole group discussion on the importance of a story
- Page 19, step 1; Working individually, or in groups of up to three, write a premise
- Page 21, step 2; Brainstorm questions which develop the premise
- Page 22; Write the story in three acts. Hand out copies of the story outline table on page 23*. Students need to write at least one sentence for each of the seven prompts.

**Key things to assess**

- Originality of premise
- At least one sentence for each of the seven prompts in the story outline
- Logical idea development.

*You can download an A4 copy of the story outline at [www.acumen.net.nz/images/NMSStoryOutline.pdf](http://www.acumen.net.nz/images/NMSStoryOutline.pdf)
Learning area: *English narrative development*

Requires completed story outline from Lesson 1, paper and pen.

Allow 60 minutes for a one minute movie. Adjust for longer movies.

**Lesson plan reference**

- Page 22, step 4; Take the 3-act story outline developed in Lesson 1 and write the story into a script. Students need to determine the characters, locations, actions and lines of dialogue to support dramatising the story.
- Guide students on script parameters, for example:
  - include at least three characters with speaking lines
  - no more than 2 locations (this will simplify artwork requirements)
  - movie duration (this will determine the length of the script. A one minute movie should have 8-16 lines and fill about half a page. A five minute movie could fill 2-3 typed pages).
- Page 22, step 5; Add scene descriptions and labels (this is an optional step for formatting longer scripts).

**Key things to assess**

- Accuracy of interpretation of story outline from lesson 1
- Character development
- Meets stated script parameters.
Learning areas: *English, Arts, Social Science*

This is an alternative exercise to develop a script. It requires writing that is both clear and brief.

Requires paper and pen.

Allow 60 minutes. Full completion of the stop motion advertisement (Lessons 3 to 7) could be achieved in around 4 hours (thirty seconds of stop motion using 12 pictures per second is only 360 pictures). Titles and credits, if any, can be added to the end of the batch, not after each advert.

**Lesson plan reference**

- Group discussion on TV advertising
- Page 28, steps 1 to 4; Guide students on product or service parameters, such as:
  - something to promote healthier lifestyle
  - something to make you richer/save money.

The goal of most advertising is to convince someone of their need to buy a product or service. It can be a fun and challenging task to advertise something that no one wants, such as cobwebs, cat pee, dirty socks, traffic jams, teachers.

For presentation, use iMovie to edit together all class advertisements into a ‘commercial break’ as they would appear on TV.

**Key things to assess**

- Suitability of product or service for stated guideline
- Persuasiveness of proposed benefits
- Realistic and practical artwork requirements
- Script can be read in less than 30 seconds.
Stop Motion Handbook – Lesson Plan

Create a plasticine character

Learning area: *Arts*

Requires art working space, wire, plasticine, beads, modelling tools (see pages 64-65). Students may need supervision with use of bonding agent for armature.

Allow 60 minutes.

Lesson plan reference

- Page 65; Make an armature for a character and then mold it with Plasticine. The character should be able to stand balanced and have some limb movement (see also examples and tips on pages 66-68).

Key things to assess

- Solid construction and ability for some limb movement
- Ability of character to stand balanced
- Good use of colour, detail and overall presentation.
Learning areas: Arts, Maths

Requires art working space, art materials and access to camera, tripod and stage. Younger students may require supervision with scissors for cutting cardboard.

This exercise assumes that characters (Lego, Plasticine or other) for the stop motion movie have been created.

Allow 60 minutes.

Lesson plan reference

- Pages 70: Temporarily set up stage and camera. Look through camera and mark the maximum height, projected character head height and horizon area on background
- Pages 71-76: Create the artwork for background and props in the same scale as the character.

Key things to assess

- Appropriate size and proportion of background detail when viewed through camera
- Appropriate scale between characters, props and background
- Good use of colour, detail and overall presentation.
Record the soundtrack in GarageBand

Learning areas: Computer skills, Arts, Music

This activity can be achieved with students in the group taking turns to record the voices of each other, or with a helper to operate GarageBand, so all students in group can focus on their voice role.

Requires a recording space (see pages 58-60), microphone and computer with GarageBand (see pages 32-34). Students with musical ability could use USB keyboard or guitar.

Advanced students can be assessed to set up recording location with the criteria on pages 58-60.

Allow 1-2 hours to complete 1 minute soundtrack. Adjust for longer soundtracks, those which make significant use of sound effects or require music composition.

Lesson plan reference
• Group discussion on general topic of music copyright and specific guidelines for use of music in soundtrack (see page 30)
• Page 32; Group discussion on questions at top of page
• Page 38-40, steps 1 to 6; with reference, as required, to pages 35-60.

Key things to assess
• Clarity of speech
• Appropriate tone and passion of voices
• Appropriate selection of music and sound effects
• No use of music without copyright clearance
• Minimal unwanted and background noises.
Stop Motion Handbook – Lesson Plan

Record stop motion pictures in iStopMotion

Learning areas: Computer skills, Arts

Recording stop motion pictures is best done with longer sessions because of the set up time required. If you have an area that can be left set up, students can make progress with a series of shorter sessions.

Requires:
- soundtrack from Lesson 6, or other source
- a room with tables where lighting can be controlled
- stop motion stage set, characters, backgrounds, props, camera, tripod and computer with iStopMotion.

See pages 85-91 for set up of camera and lighting.

Hands-on experience of simple animation effects is a valuable learning exercise before completing the first movie.

Allow 1-2 hours per 30 seconds of movie, plus set up time.

Lesson plan reference
• Page 95; Pre-recording checklist
• Page 98-105, steps 1 to 9; Making a stop motion movie.

See also pages 77-84 (picture composition), 96-97 (using iStopMotion), 116-121 (creating actions), 128-130 (avoiding common mistakes).

Key things to assess
• Image composition. Good use of manual focus
• Good camera movements to dramatise the story and follow the character who is talking. Steady camera at all other times
• Appropriate character movements
• Consistent lighting
• Minimal common mistakes (see pages 128-130)
• Logical file naming system (see page 15).
Learning areas: *Computer skills, Arts*

Making a character walk is a fundamental skill for using Lego in stop motion. It can be adapted for other character mediums.

This skill can be incorporated into an actual movie, or as a list of prescribed activities: walking, running, dancing, moon walking, dodging bullets ‘*Matrix*’ style, turning around and slow walk, or whole body expressions, such as showing surprise.

Requires stop motion stage set, characters, camera, tripod and computer with iStopMotion.

Allow 60 minutes.

**Lesson plan reference**

- Pages 110-111;

See also pages 108-109 to use a video recording as a reference for movements.

**Key things to assess**

- Realism of movement
- Hand and head movements
- Integration with props, eg picking something up.
Learning areas: *Computer skills, Arts, English*

Can be used to dramatise a poem or text extract, instead of a story.

Requires stop motion stage set, characters, camera, tripod and computer with iStopMotion.

Requires a soundtrack with narrative or spoken lines, from Lesson 6, or another source.

This skill can be achieved as a specific activity (allow 60 minutes) or incorporated into a larger movie.

**Lesson plan reference**

- Pages 112 to 115; Communication is a fundamental skill for making movies, and more important for stop motion because all visual clues to the dialogue must be produced by the character’s ability to talk. The range of possible and appropriate mouth movements will depend on the medium used for the character.
- For scenes with a number of characters talking refer to Rule 1 on page 103 and Rule 2 on page 104.

See also pages 77-84 for information on picture composition.

Pages 108-109 to use a video recording as a reference.

**Key things to assess**

- Convincing lip sync
- Good camera movements to follow story and the character who is talking.
Learning area: *Computer skills, Arts*

Knowing when to move the camera and when not to, are key skills for creating stop motion movies (see Rule 1 on page 103, and Rule 2 on page 104).

This activity is to choose an active sequence (such as sport, battle, dance, race to build a tower, Plasticine art formations) and to move the camera as much as possible, to engage the audience in the flow of the action, while maintaining good composition and story flow.

Requires stop motion stage set, characters, camera, tripod and computer with iStopMotion.

This skill can be achieved as a specific activity (allow 60 minutes) or incorporated into a larger movie.

**Lesson plan reference**

- Page 119-121;

See also pages 79-82 for information on picture composition.

See ‘Rule 2’ on page 104.

**Key things to assess**

- Image composition
- Good camera movements to follow the action in the story
- Steady camera and stage at all other times
- Appropriate character movements
- Consistent lighting
- Minimal common mistakes (see pages 128-130).
Learning areas: *Computer skills, Arts*

Whiteboard stop motion is a quick start process as it does not require the preparation of characters and backgrounds.

An internet search for ‘whiteboard stop motion’ will provide many inspirational examples of a whiteboard as a medium for stop motion art.

Requires whiteboard and markers, camera, tripod, computer with iStopMotion.

 Allow 60 minutes, plus additional time to create a soundtrack (Lesson 6).

**Lesson plan reference**
- Page 123; A whiteboard can be used as:
  - a medium for telling a story with a soundtrack
  - an expression of moving art with a music backing added later.

**Key things to assess**
- Logical evolution of character shapes
- Useful or clever inclusion of other elements, such as a hand appearing to create or stretch certain elements
- Picture composition and use of screen area
- Steadiness of board and camera.
Learning areas: Computer skills, Science, Arts

Requires camera, tripod and computer with iStopMotion.

This is best done over a period of hours, but depending on the topic could be a much longer duration.

Lesson plan reference

- Page 14; Set up a camera in a vantage point to record a process for observation and analysis:
  - chemical reaction such as a melting ice block, water evaporation
  - nature study such as a flower opening, butterfly hatching
  - study of movement such as traffic queues at different times of day, people waiting for a bus, tracking shadows across playground.

See also example on page 126 which uses time lapse as a security system.

As a variation in visual style see Tilt Shift example on page 127.

Key things to assess

- Interesting choice of subject matter
- Suitable camera angle and camera settings
- Appropriate picture rate (FPS) for purpose.
Learning areas: Computer skills, Arts, English

Requires completed movie and computer with iMovie.

Allow 60 minutes.

Lesson plan reference

- Page 148-154; Add a title sequence and credits to an existing movie.

Key things to assess

- Spelling
- Appropriate style of title and credits to support the movie and not overpower it
- Final movie exported with same picture size as original iStopMotion movie.
“Stop motion animation has many educational benefits and uses within the classroom, from teaching skills such as teamwork, structural thinking, and planning to providing students with immediate results and instant gratification. Students of all ages quickly learn the simple ins and outs of the software, and are animating within minutes. It is so important to encourage creative thinking within the classroom, and with iStopMotion you can do just that. The Stop Motion Handbook is the perfect way to get acquainted with iStopMotion, from how to write your own storyboard, making clay models, recording the sound, and taking the pictures... Just follow the easy steps and you and your students or children will be animating in no time!”

Oliver Breidenbach, CEO, Boinx Software

Helps push the boundaries of creativity with each project.
Sandra McCallum – Principal
Stop motion gets Year 6-8 boys engaged and excited about learning in the classroom.
Ben Gittos – Teacher
This is such as useful book, full of good ideas and handy hints. I wish it had been around when I was doing stop motion with my class.
Hilary Hague – Teacher

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Stop motion movies
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• GarageBand, iMovie
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