

A GUIDE TO STORYBOARDS!

By Megan Ann Boyd & Featuring Little Baby Soots



INTRO

I've always loved storyboarding, but in school I struggled with the way all the different information was presented to me. Storyboarding is a difficult job with lots of components. It can feel overwhelming to a new board artist!

I really wanted to make a guide that would break down the different aspects of storyboarding in both a technical and visual way. Something I wish I had when I started out.

I hope this helps!!

-MB



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BEFORE WE DIVE IN...

I know that there's lots of storyboard resources out there already, and I encourage you to look at them all! Everyone works differently, and maybe how I approach storyboarding doesn't quite work for you and that's A-OK!

Not only that, but every project has its own boarding style. I've worked on shows that contradict the boarding rules of the last show, etc. Treat this more as suggestions, rather than a hard list of do's and don'ts.

A quick note: I storyboard (and made this guide) in Storyboard Pro!

(and please ignore the inevitable spelling errors LOL)

Alright! Here we go....

☆ BREAKING DOWN A CHARACTER FOR BOARDS

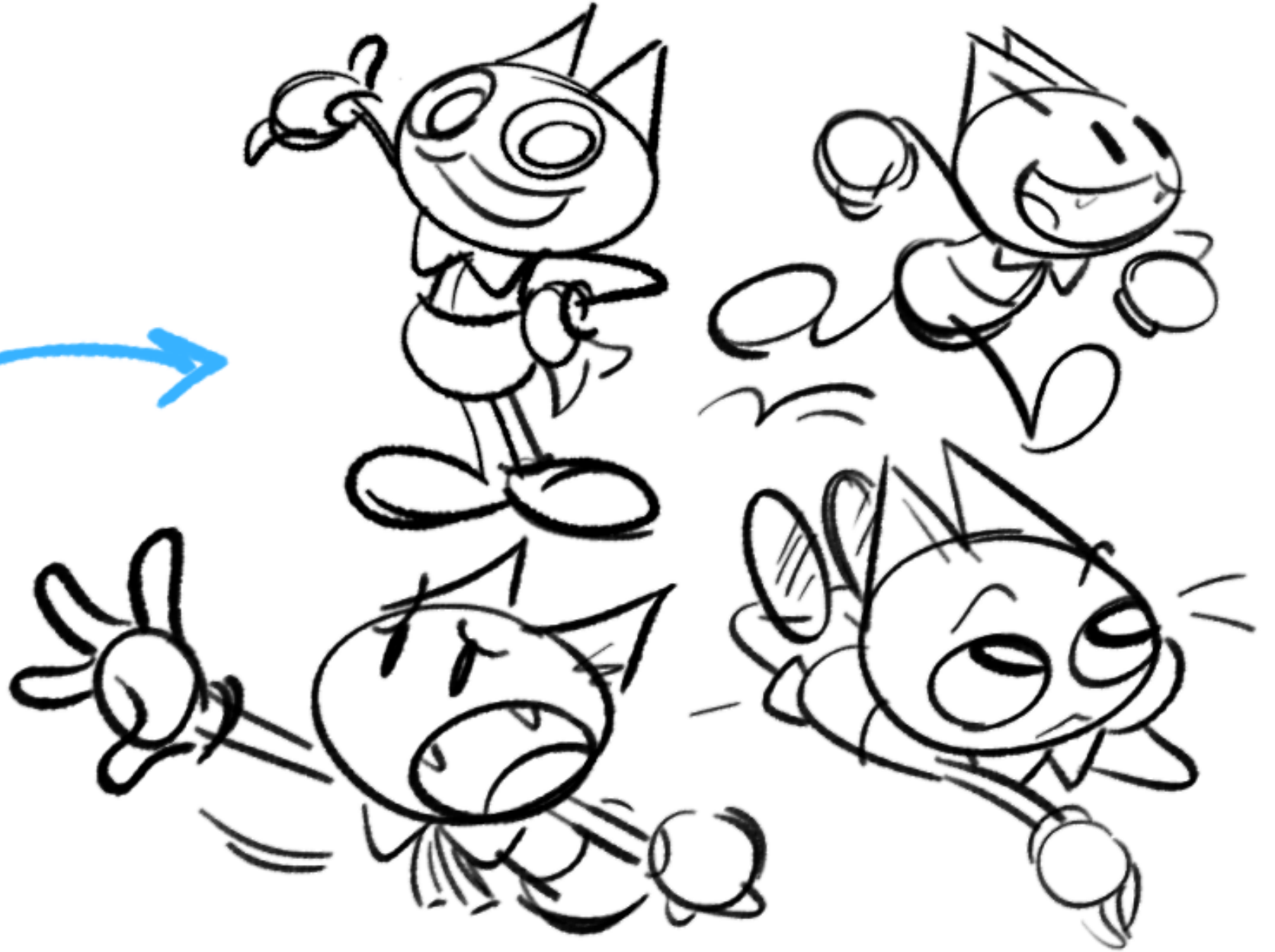
AKA developing a shorthand

As a storyboard artist, you're drawing hundreds of drawings a week! Time is crucial, so it is important to convey the characters clearly and quickly.

Design



Shorthand



CIRCLES!

Simple,
YAY!



-Think about a character in shapes.
It helps to break down a character's features.

TRIANGLES!



Design

- This is more of a personal preference, but try to work in quick, broad and confident strokes! Don't worry about the details. You'll find yourself working faster this way too.



VS

(Added bonus is your thumbs
are clear and clean without extra
work)



-Use elements from the design to help convey volume, like the pants line and angle of the bow.



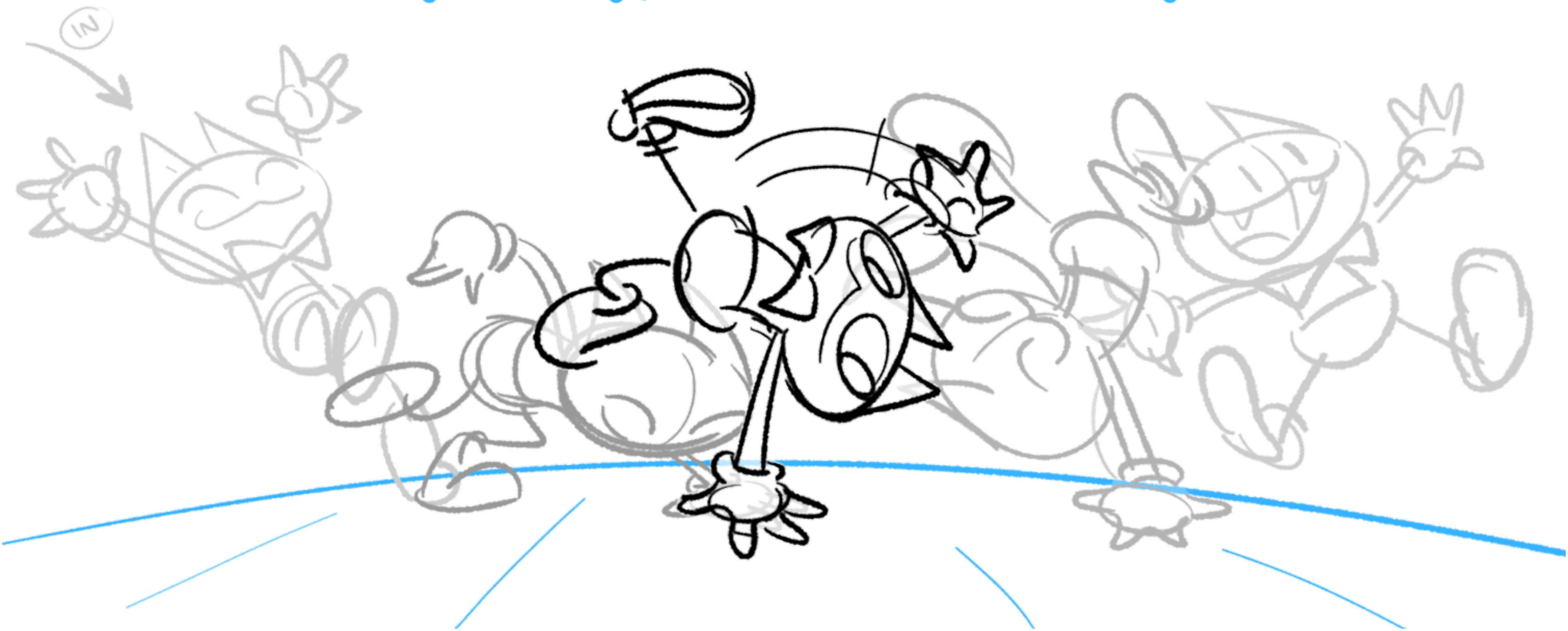
Don't get too caught up in forcing a shorthand though.

The more you draw the characters the more you'll develop one naturally!



(The way I drew characters on an early episode of a show always looks diff from the last episode haha!)

Some shows will want tighter drawings, and others will be looser. Nothing's ever a strict "rule"

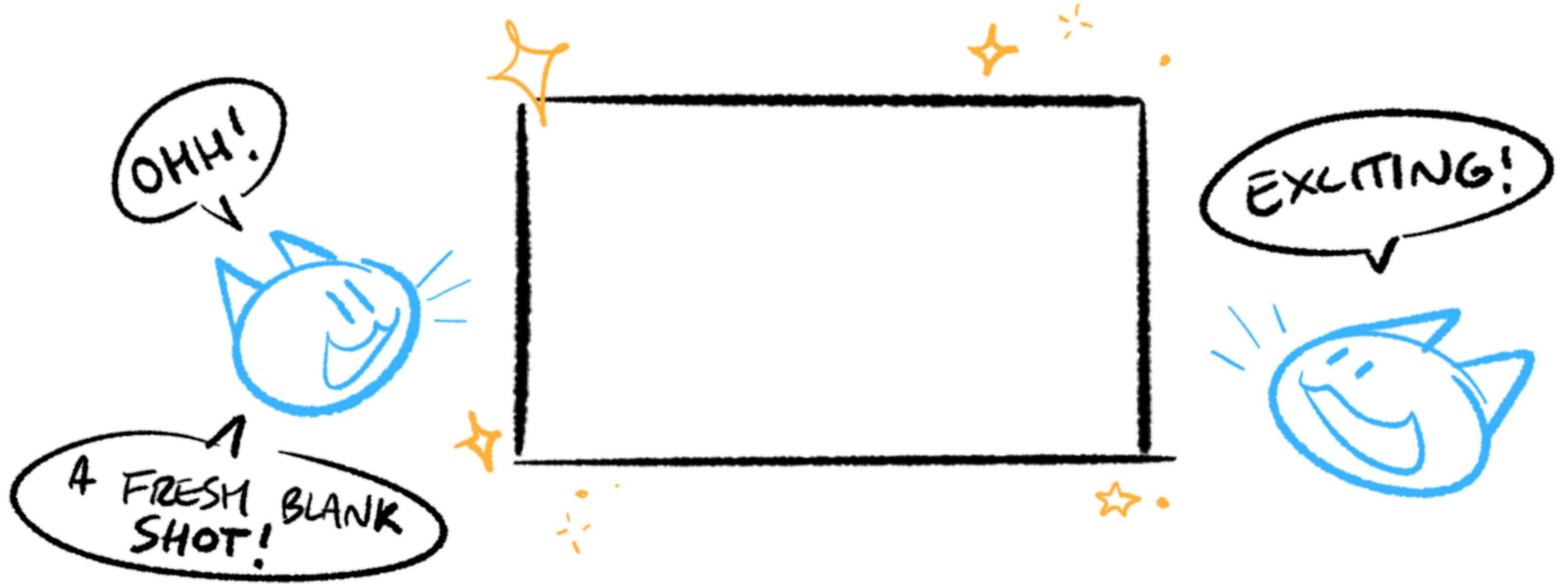




The most important thing is being able to read what a character is doing and emoting!



STAGING BASICS



Starting off might seem daunting at first, but do not fret! There's some simple guidelines we can think about to help us compose our shot.

SAFE AREAS

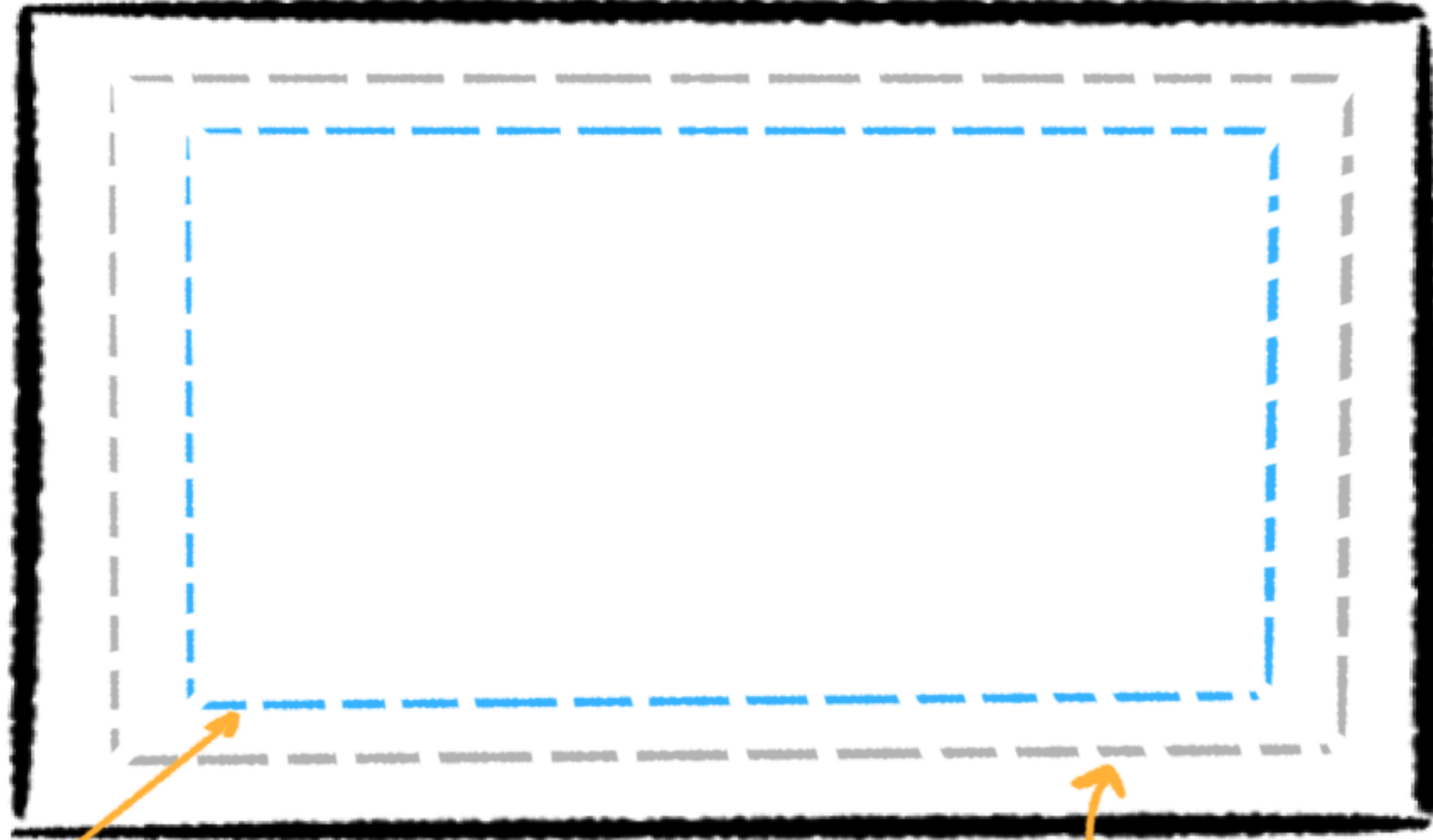
Here is our shot:



STORYBOARD PRO:



These are your
safe area guides



Project Resolution
is typically:
1920x1080

(But can change
depending on
the project)

TITLE SAFE: Important info/text
should primarily stay in the area
within the blue box.

ACTION SAFE: Typically
everything inside the grey box
is "safe" from being cropped
off from broadcast.

-Does any of this matter in the age of online streaming/digital broadcast? Whether or not shows are cropped anymore, having important info staged within the grey box is a lot easier to read/follow than having important info hugging the edges.

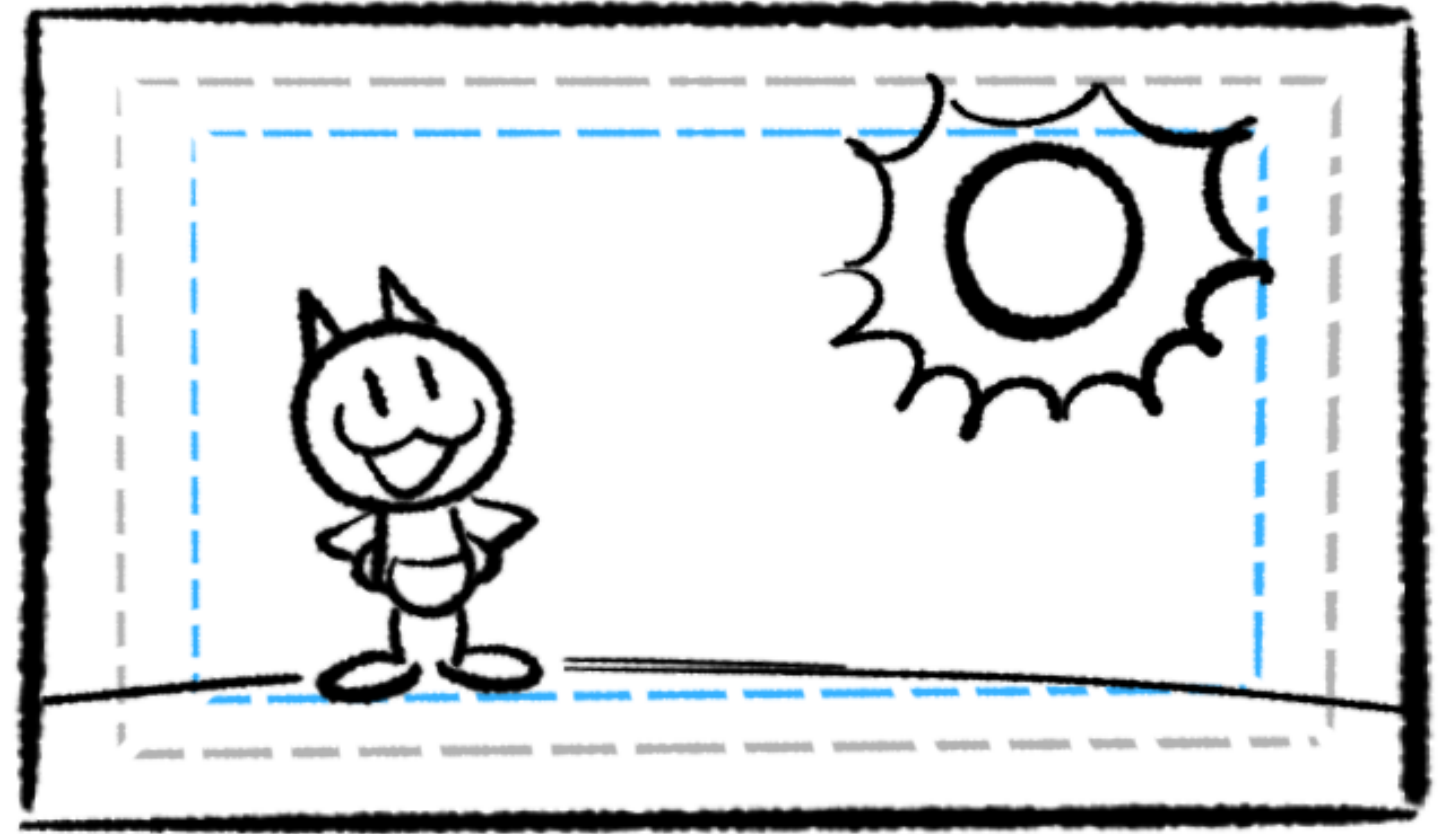
SAFE AREAS

ex:



-Feels kind of empty and cramped at the same time

VS.



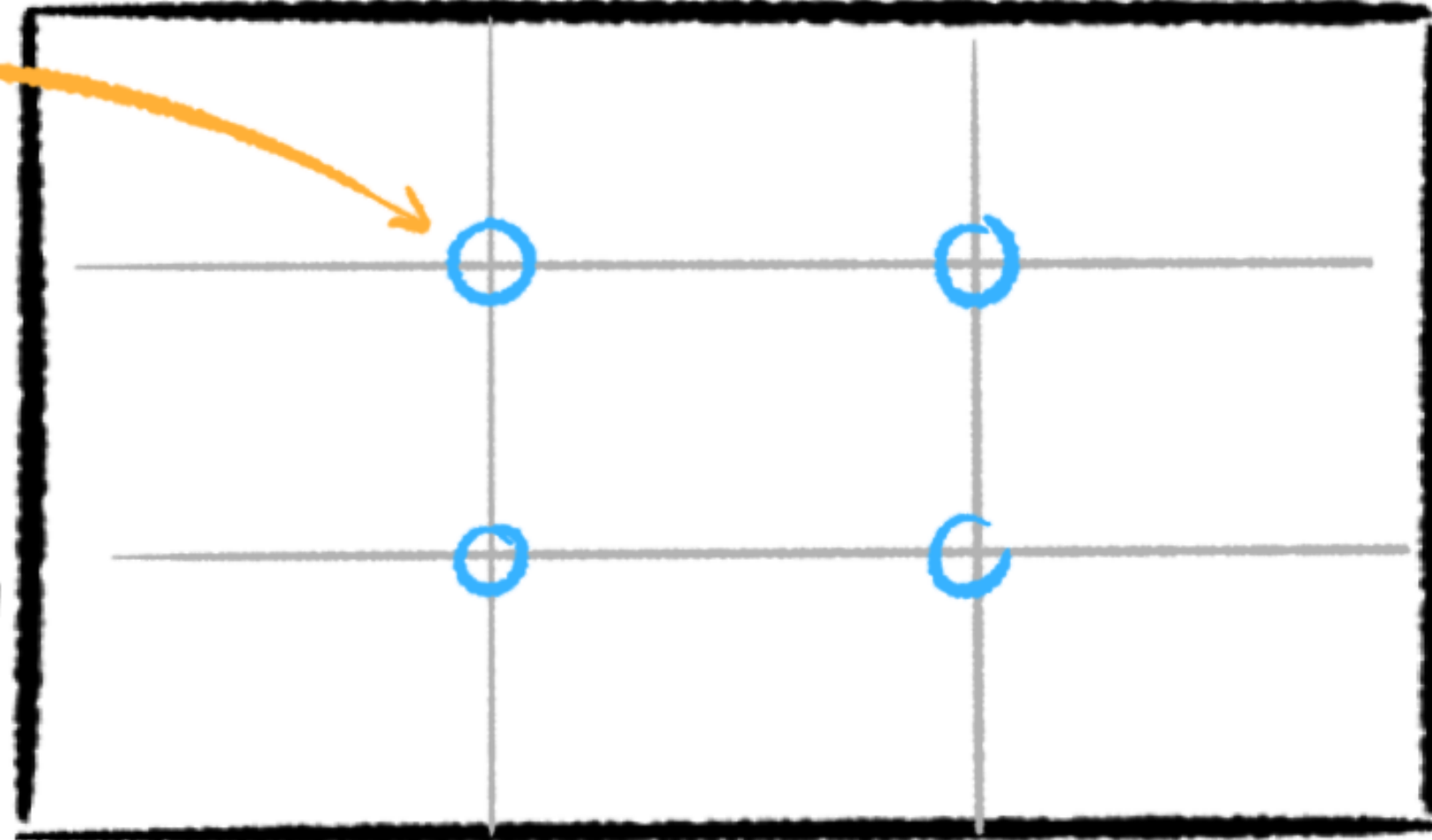
-Breathing room!

This brings us to....

RULE OF THIRDS

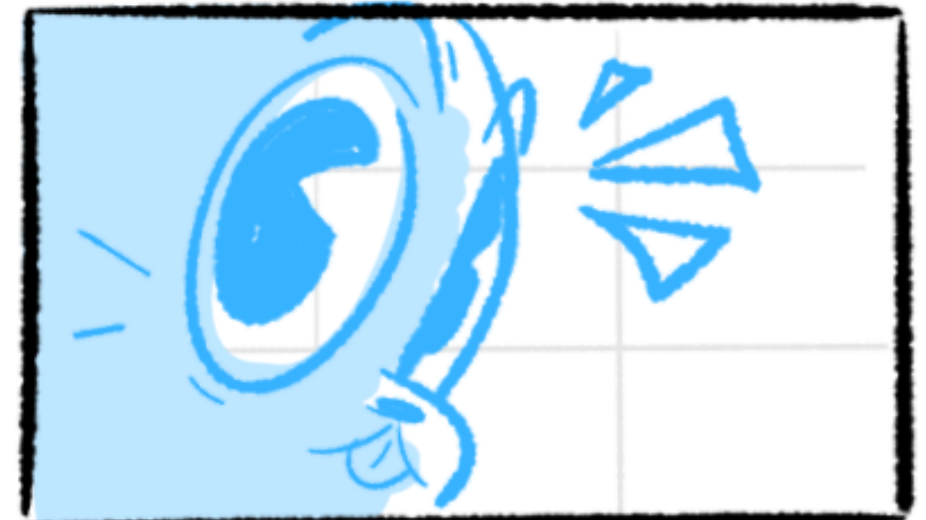
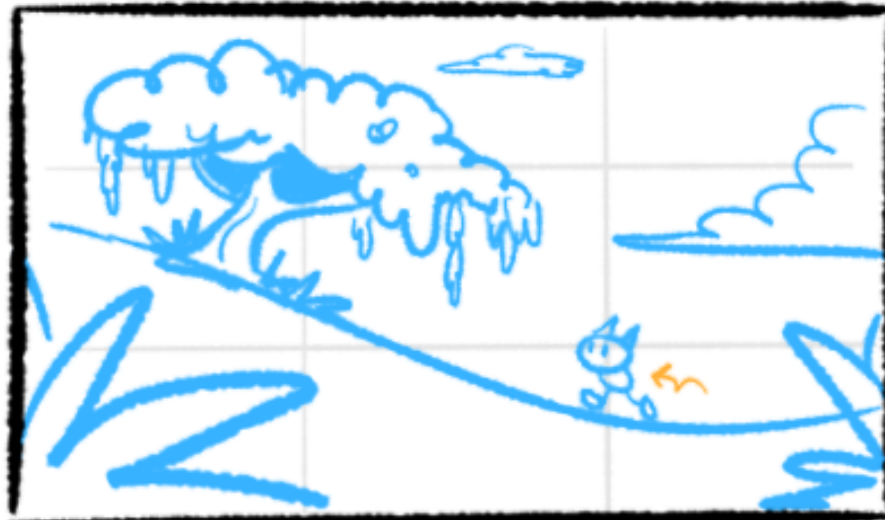
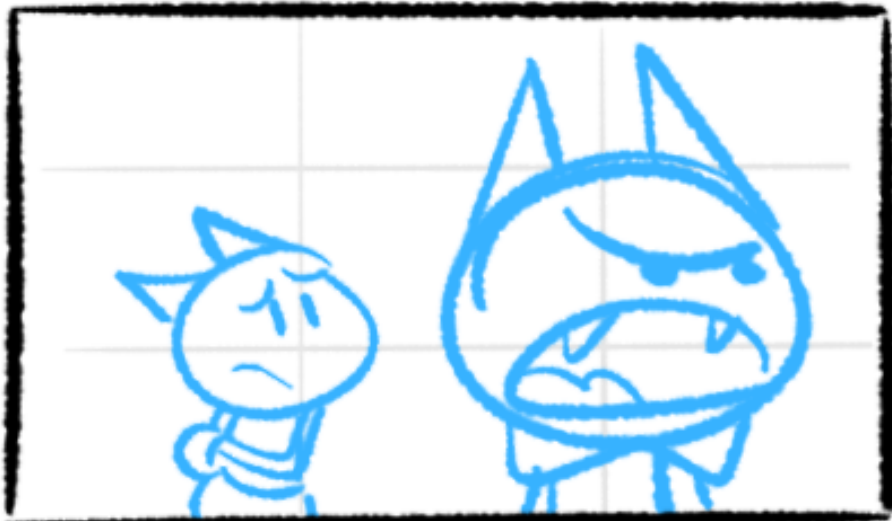
-Putting our characters and important information on these key points helps to draw the viewer's gaze around the composition

-This also applies to how you construct the background elements in a scene and other graphic elements



-You don't literally have to draw these lines on every shot, it is something you think about while you're planning out the staging.

ex:



RULE OF THIRDS

The Rule of Thirds is just jumping off point for your composition. There are a lot of other ways to stage a composition, whether to highlight an emotional beat or simply a stylistic choice.

-Maybe you want a cool power pose!



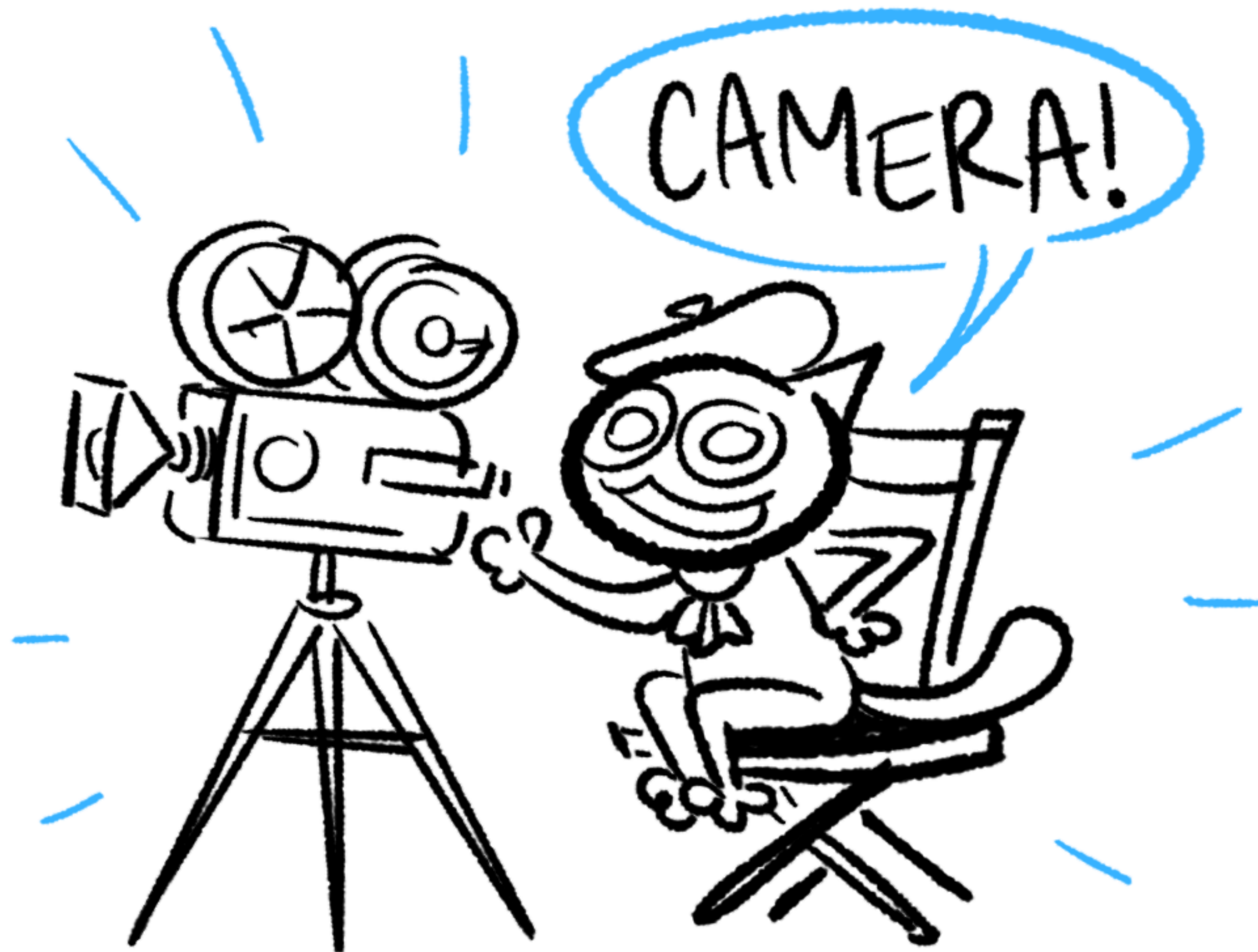
-Or an extreme close-up! (Technically the pupils are on the thirds I guess hah)



-Or you want the audience to feel uneasy, purposely cutting off something lurking in the edges of the frame

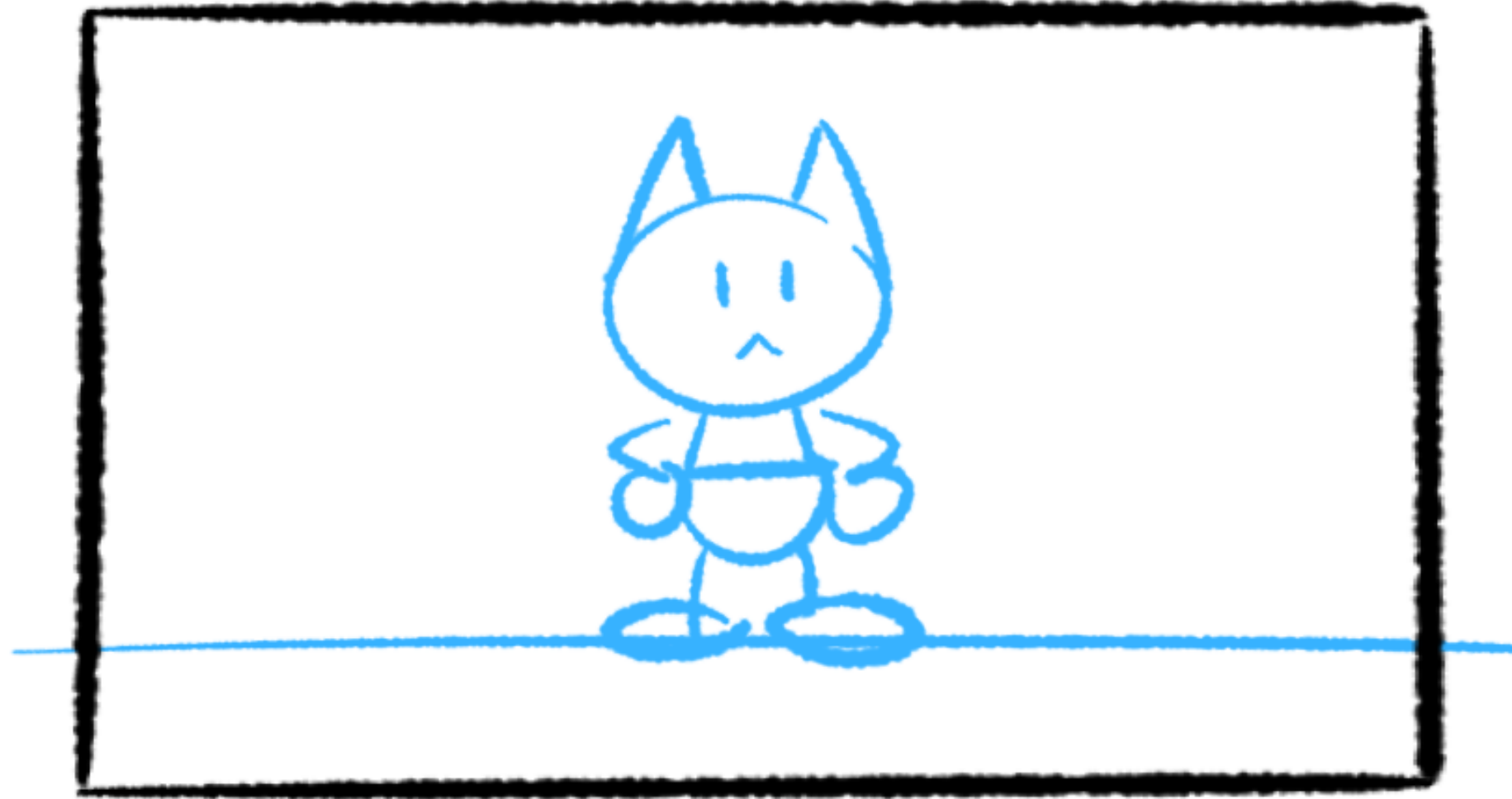


You get the idea! It's good to vary your staging. Everything staged on thirds is fine and technically works, but it can get dull. Another element that we can play with is the...



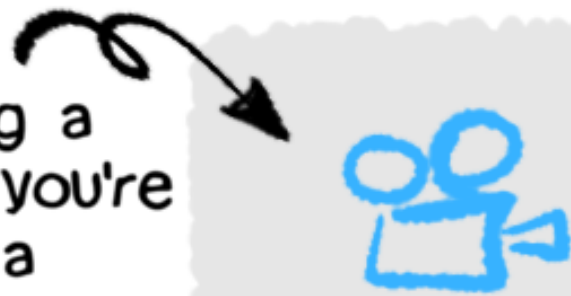
CAMERA

Changing the position of the camera can bring your scene to the next level!



Here's our shot. Pretty basic and flat.

-When you're drawing a shot, think of it like you're a film maker behind a camera

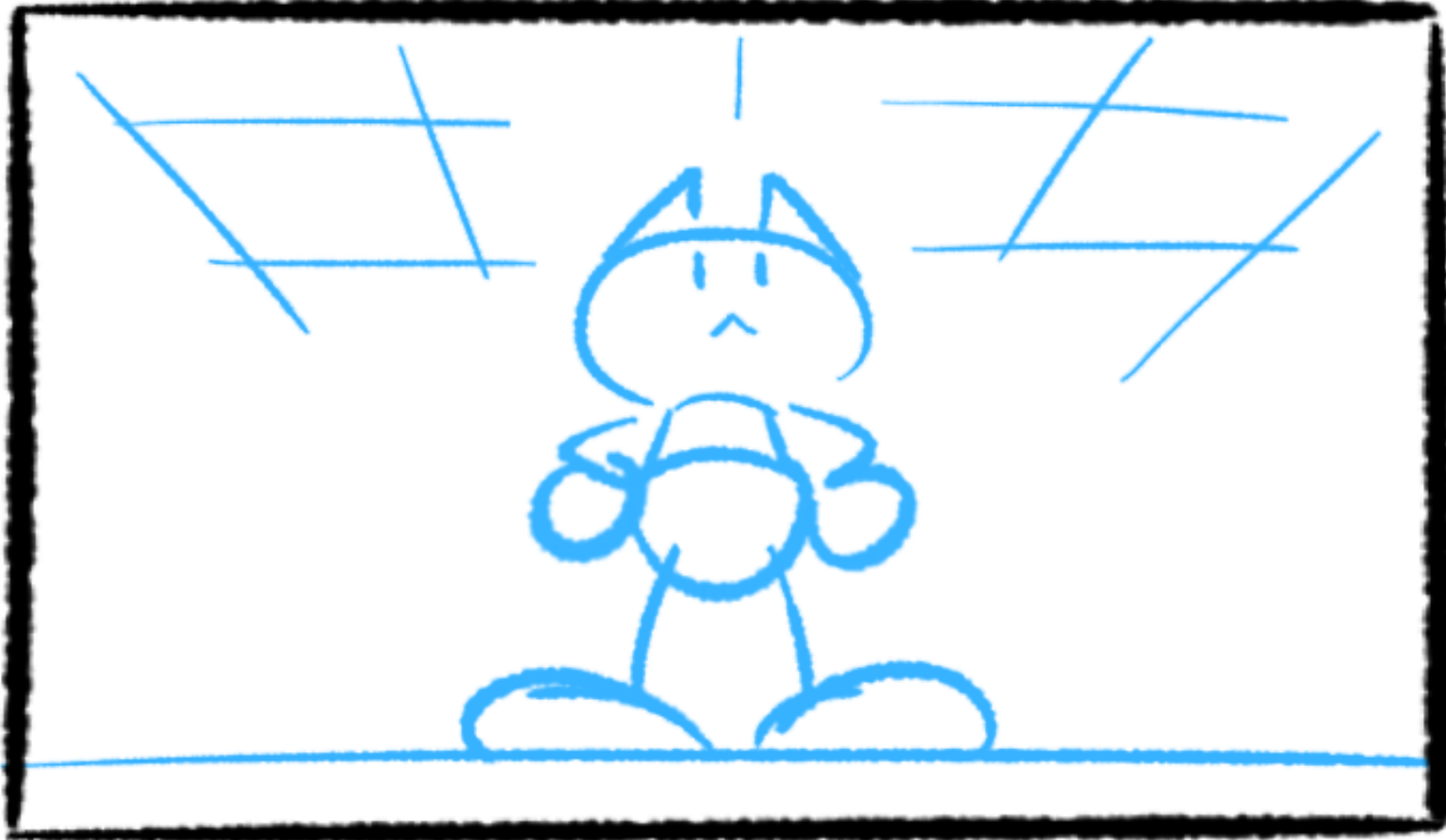


(okay the camera isn't like 100% accurate placement for where a camera would really be, but close enough to demonstrate haha)

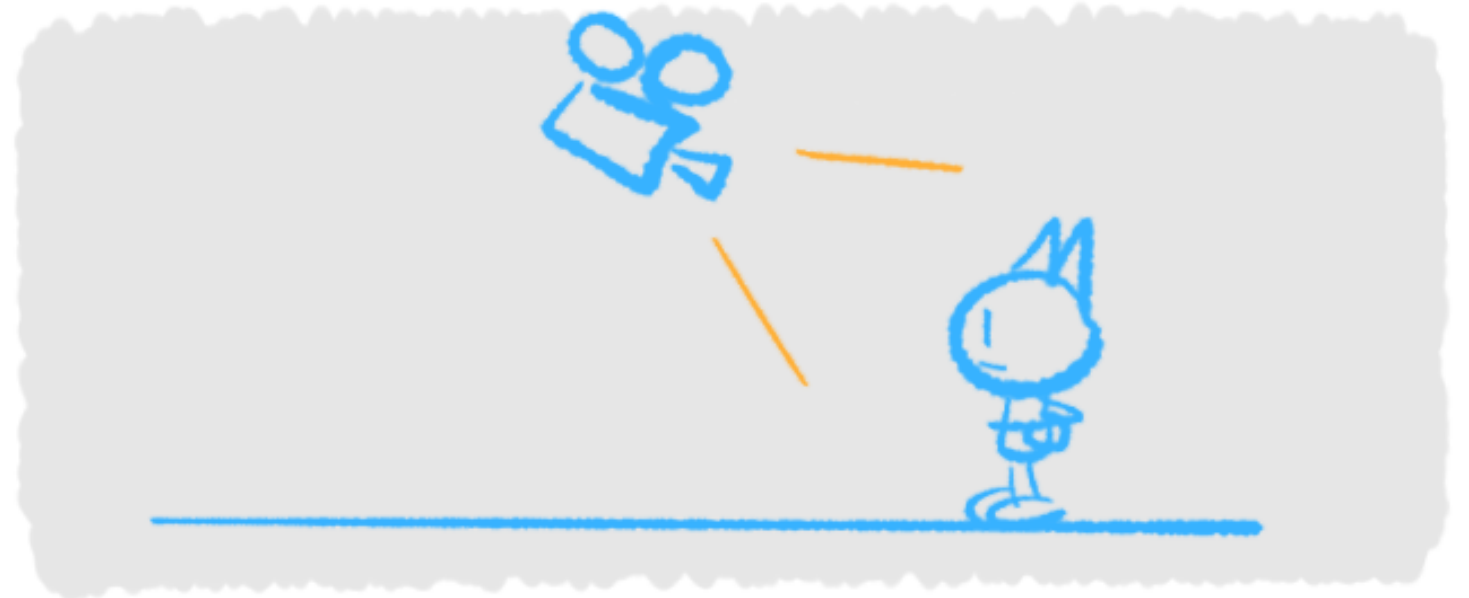
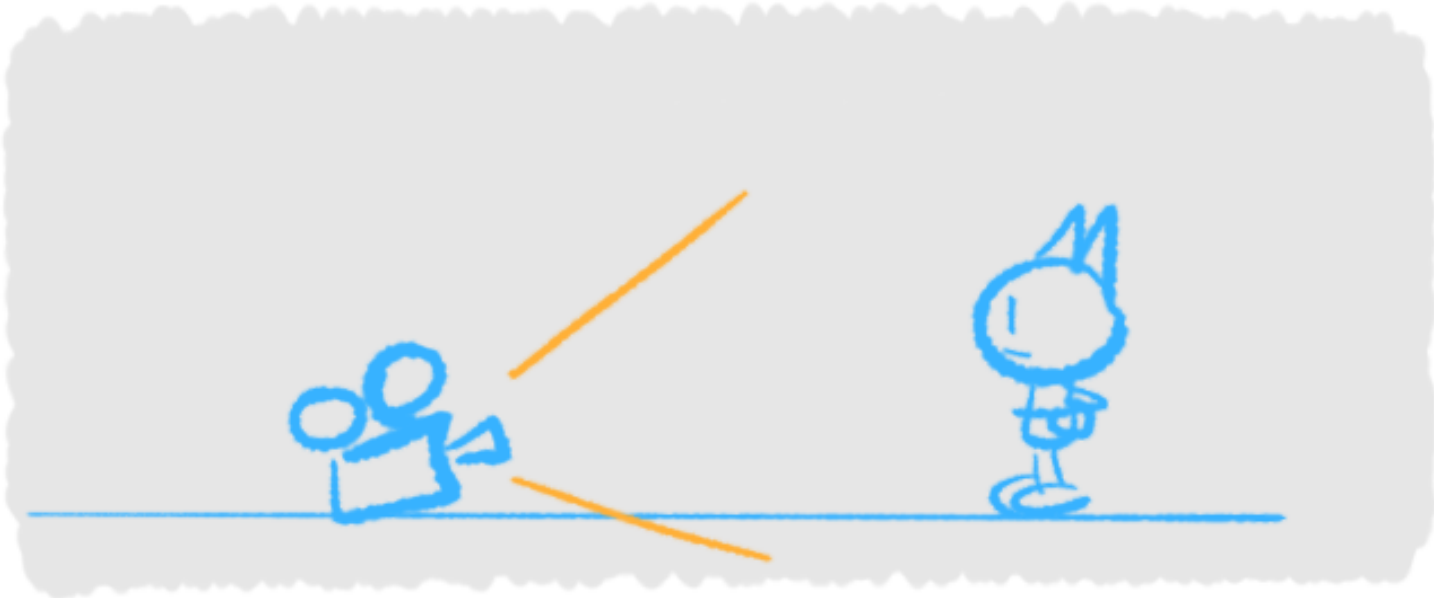
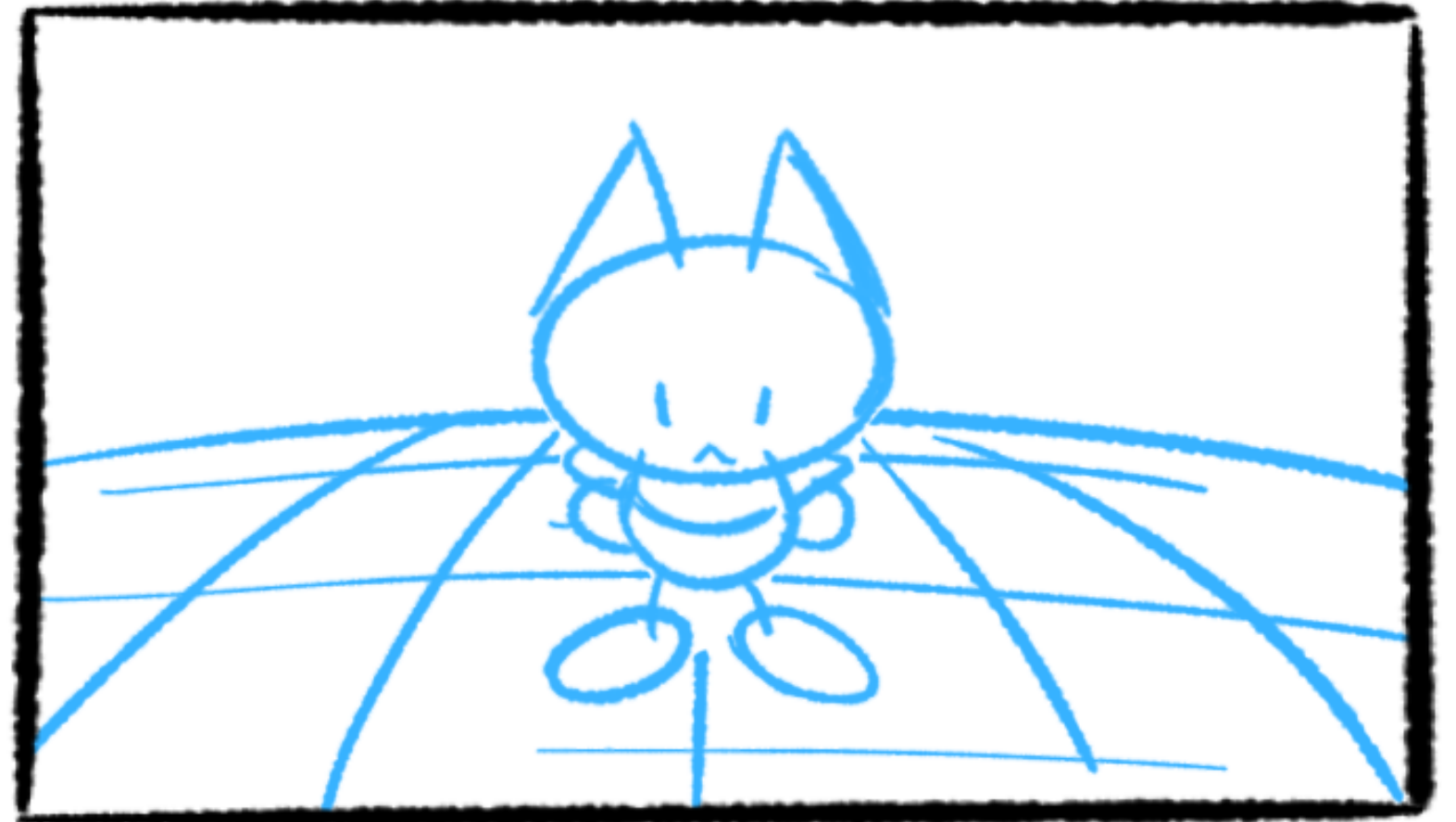
CAMERA

Here is some ways we can position the camera!

Upshot:

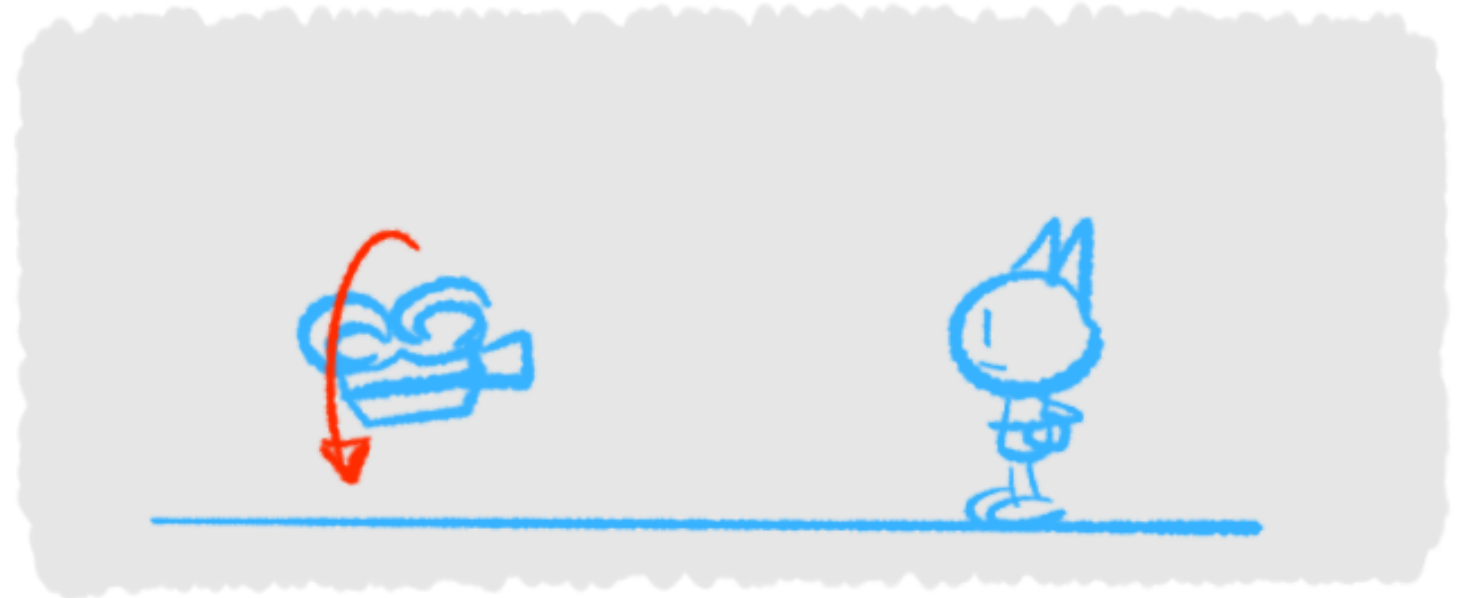
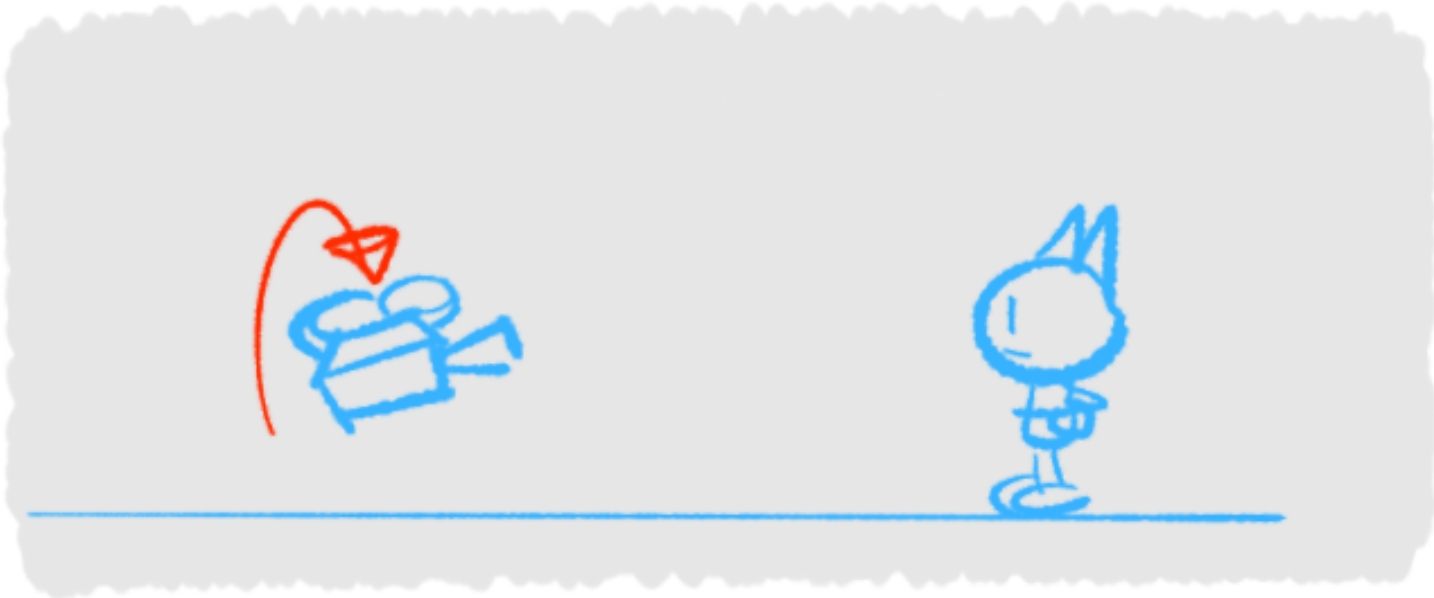
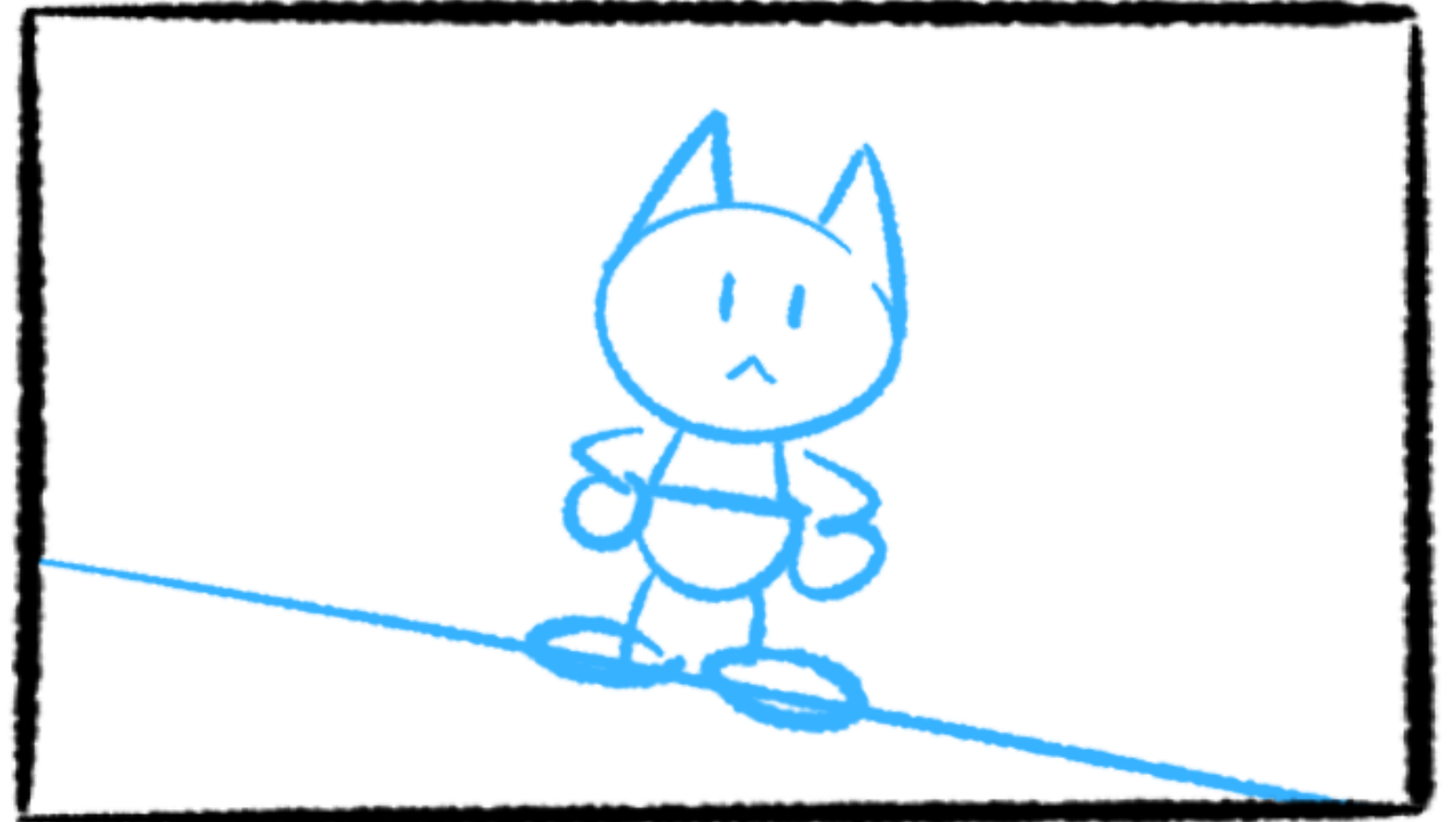
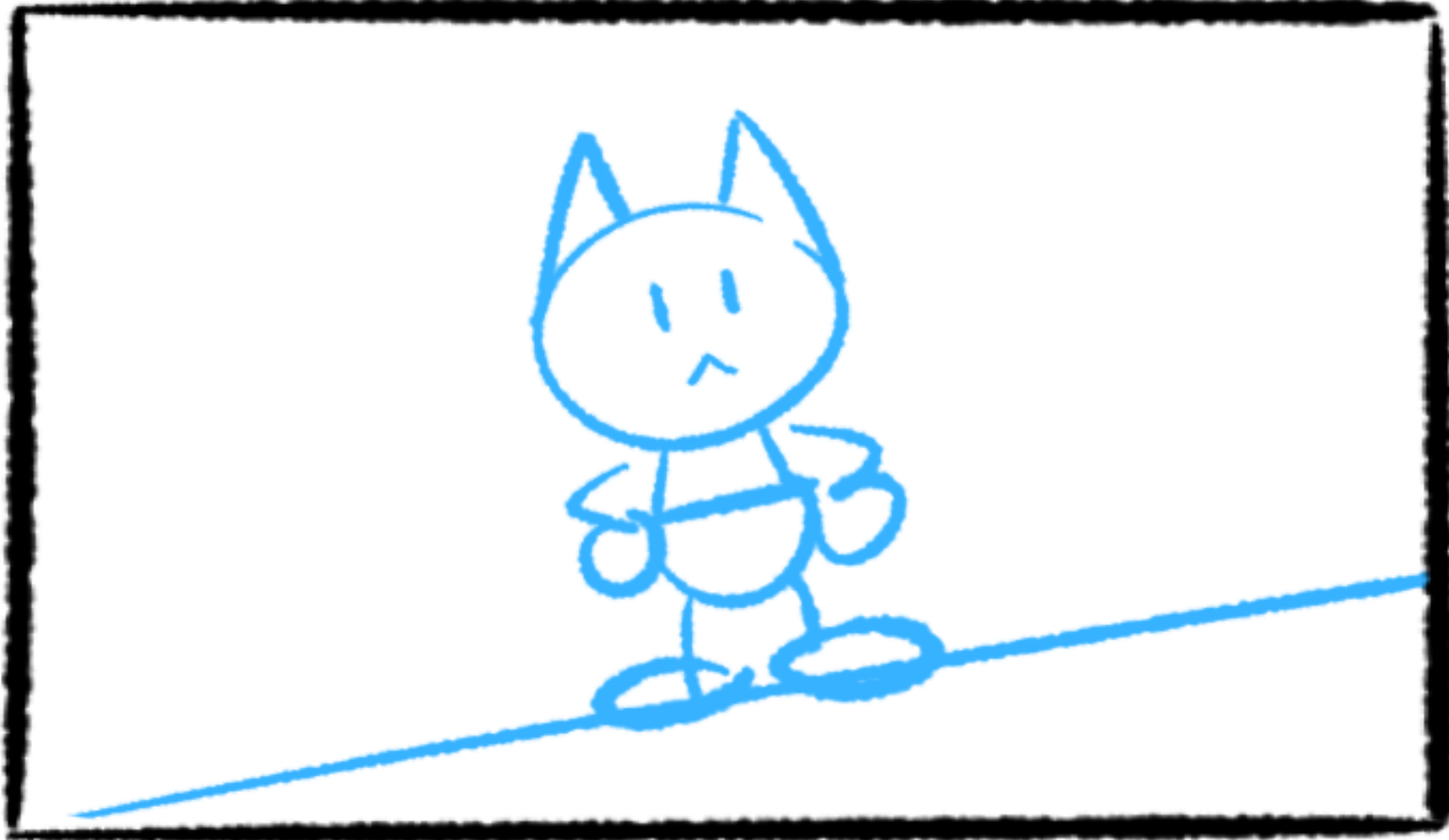


Downshot:



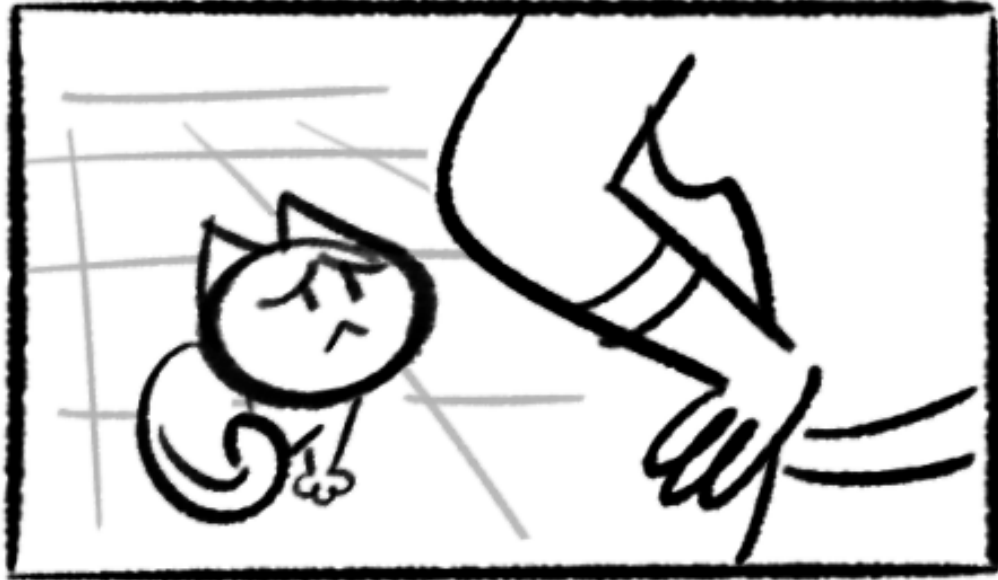
CAMERA

Dutch Angle:



CAMERA

The way you position a camera can also elevate the emotion of a scene!



Downshots can be used to make a character feel small/inferior



Upshots can be used to make a character appear confident/superior!



Dutch Angles can be used to create uncertainty, unease and suspense



Wide, Establishing Shots can be used as an emotional "reset" button to bring us into the next scene.

MORE CAMERA STUFF!

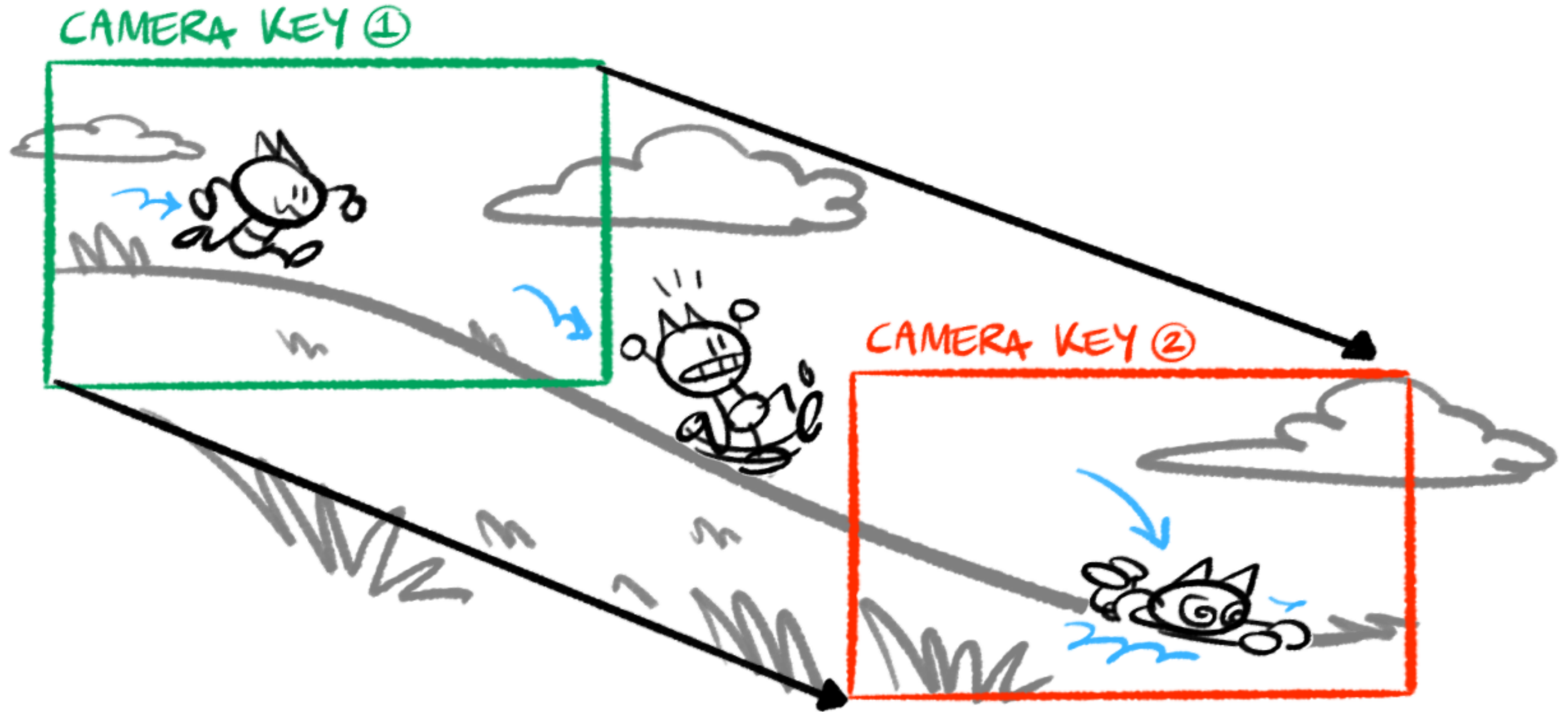
Specifically, Camera Moves!!



CAMERA

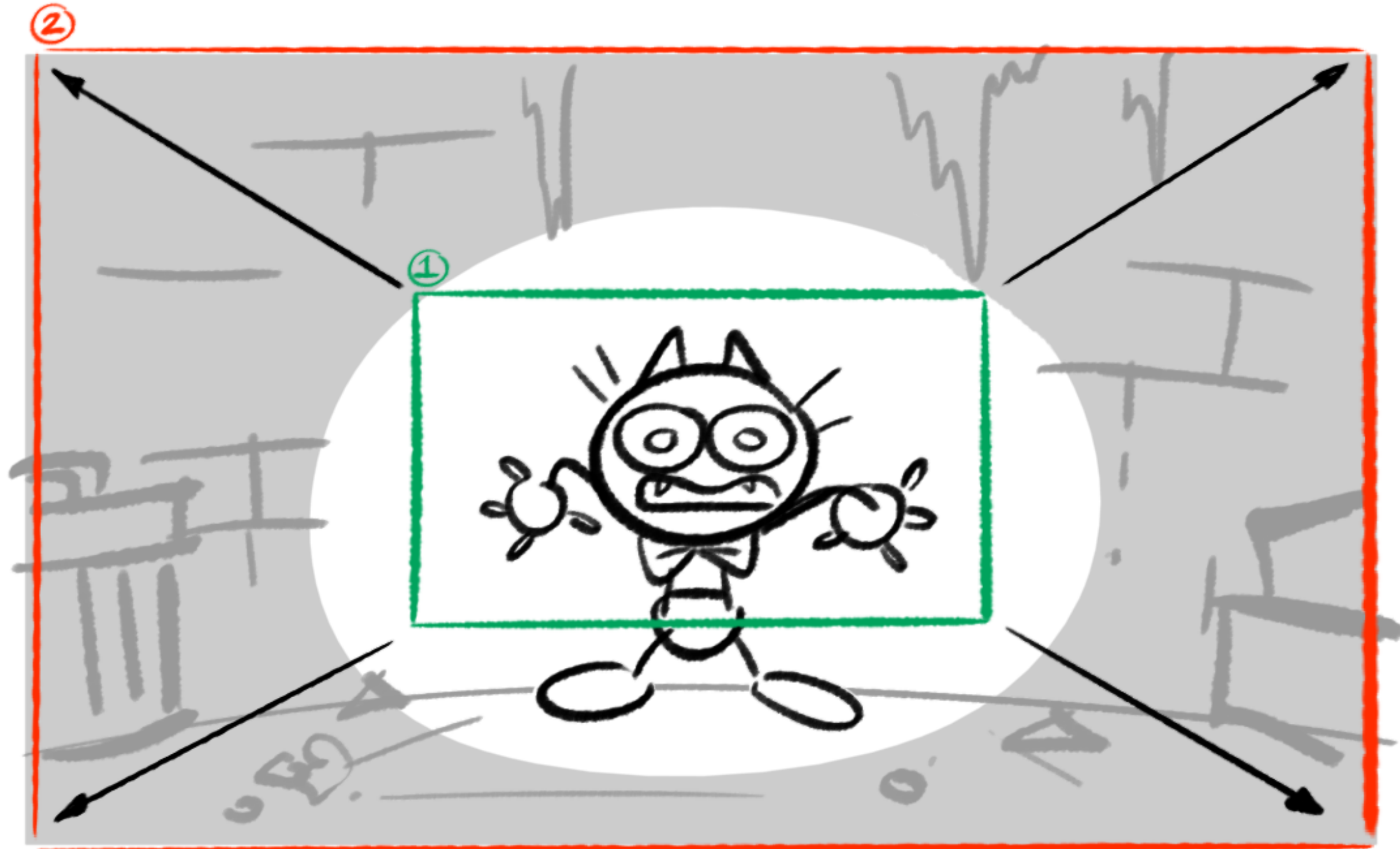
PAN A Pan is when you move the camera up, right, left, down etc..

ex:



CAMERA

ZOOM A Zoom is literally that, when you zoom in and out of the shot.



CAMERA



-Use Camera moves for emotional/comedic emphasis, reveals, and to further progress the narrative.

-There's much more than Pans and Zooms too! Different camera moves (like a camera being rotated around a character) can be achieved by "animating the camera". Basically, you gotta draw the camera moves out pose by pose.

ex:



-Take this Superhero Soots for example! These are all ONE SHOT! When Soots flies off the roof, the BG would animate away into the distance as Soots flies into camera. The BG animates into zipping clouds and when Soots stops flying, the BG stops animating and settles.

-If it sounds like a lot of work, IT IS! The animator's going to have to go in and animate all those moving BG elements. These shots can look SUPER COOL, but it can be strenuous on the production pipeline.

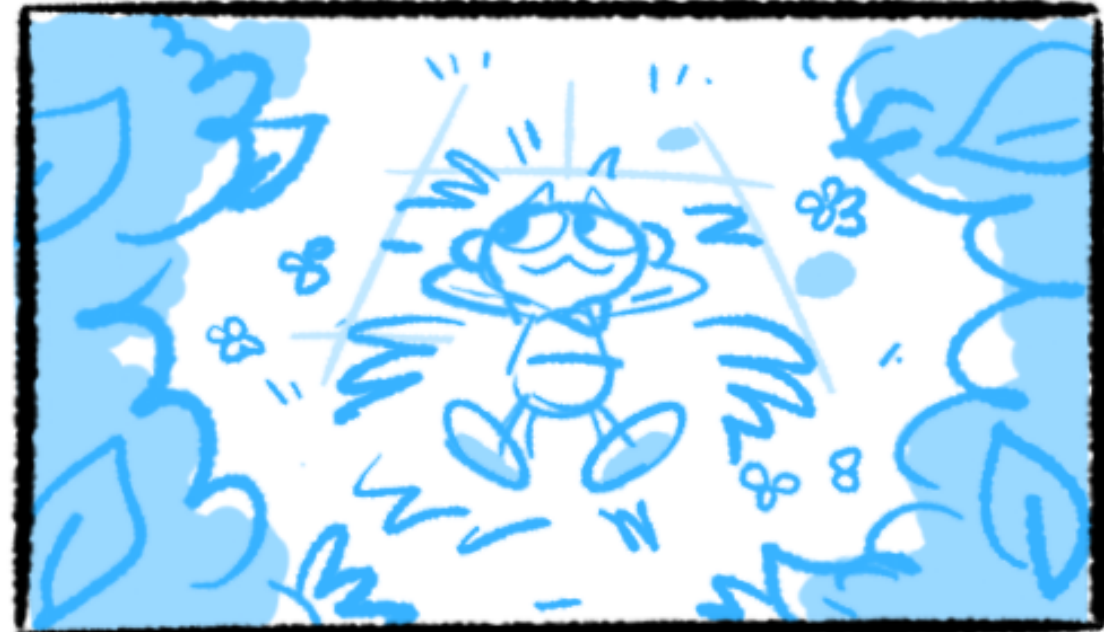
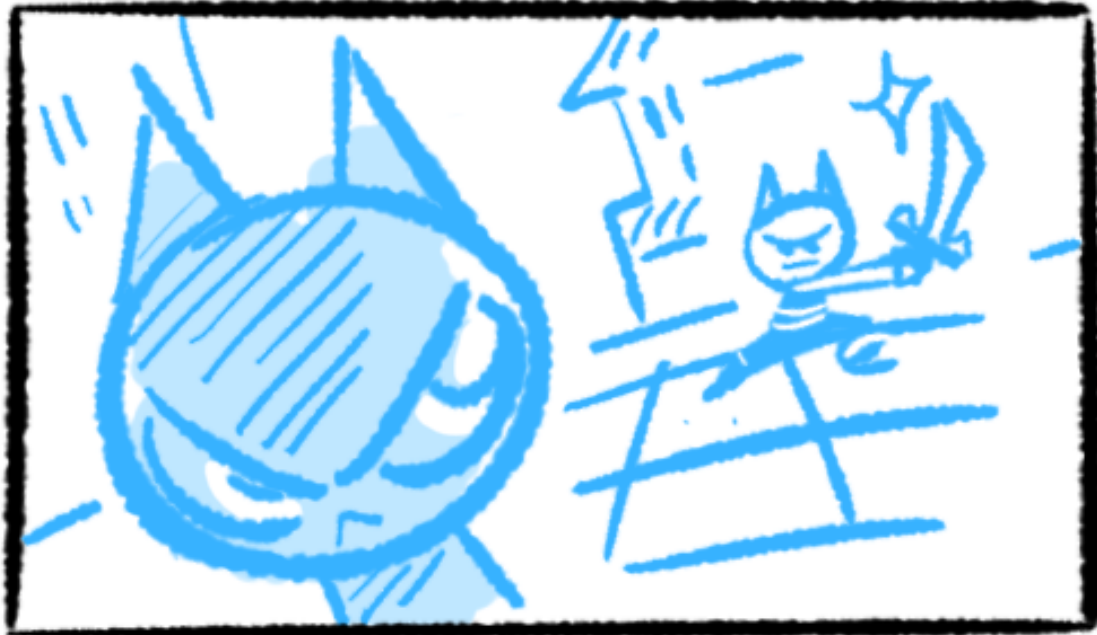
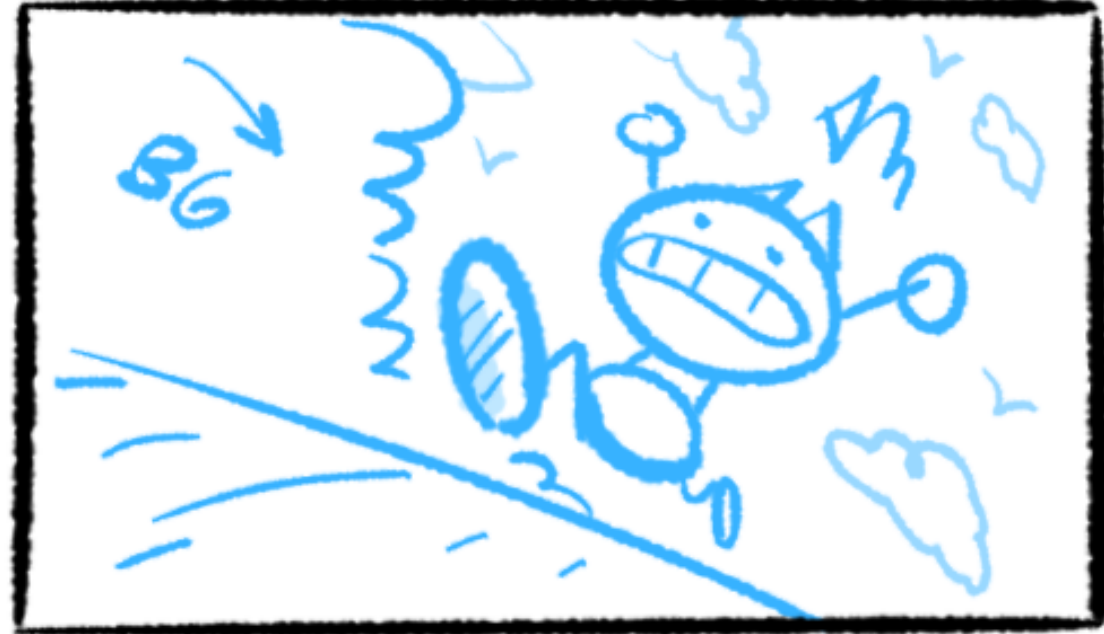
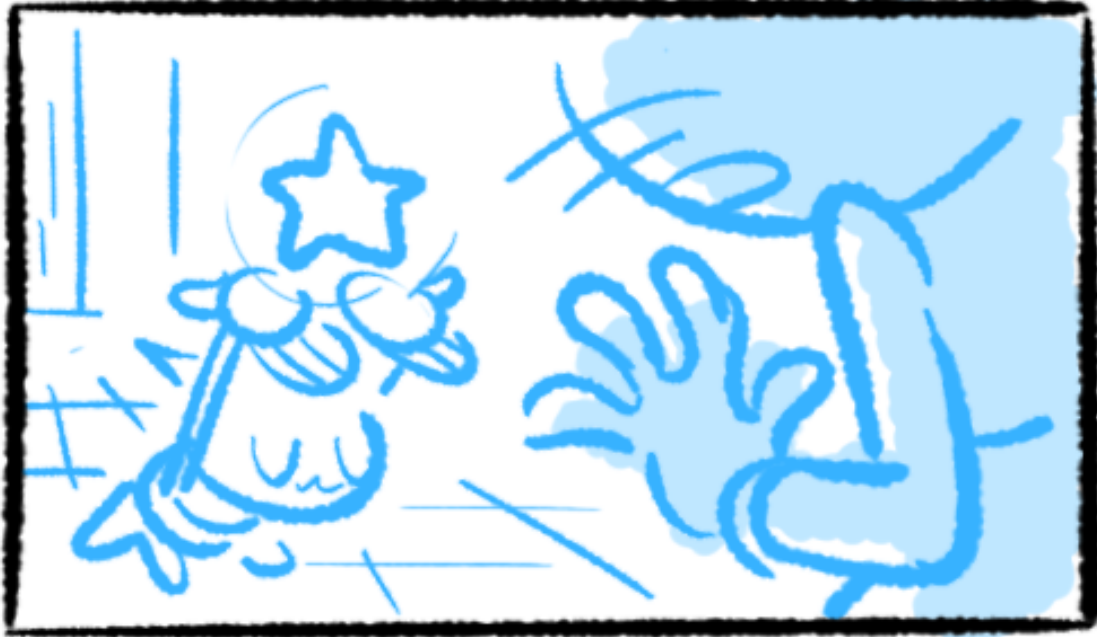
-Typically shots like these are used for action sequences! I try to save these for the big story moments.

-Big sweeping shots like these can be more easily done in a 3D production, because of the ready built sets.



CAMERA

The camera is your biggest tool as a storyboard artist, so don't be afraid to use it!



So now we've got all these shots. How do we string them together?



COMPOSING YOUR SCENE

A story in its most basic form is about moving from Point A -> Point B.



Storyboards show that momentum in a visual way.

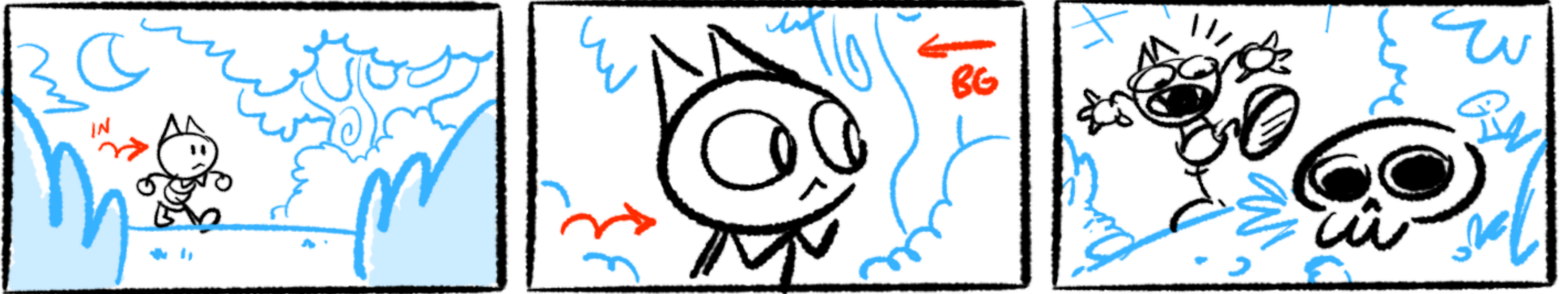
Shots should flow from one shot to the next (unless your intention is to purposely be jarring!)
You don't want your audience to be thrown out of the story for a technical reason.

Here's some things to keep in mind when composing a scene...

SCREEN DIRECTION

When reading a book or comic, your eyes are moving in a certain direction (left to right or right to left)

Compose your shots to flow in a similar way!



-The screen direction can change depending on the movement of the characters. As long as you're tracking where the movement is going it'll still read clearly to the audience. This ties into the 180 rule.

180

Definition of the 180-degree rule from Wiki:

"The 180-degree rule is a basic guideline regarding the on-screen spatial relationship between a character and another character or object within a scene."



Basically, when you cut back and forth between shots, you want to be consistent with how the characters are staged within the scene. It is especially important during scenes with multiple characters speaking. It can get confusing real fast who's talking to who!



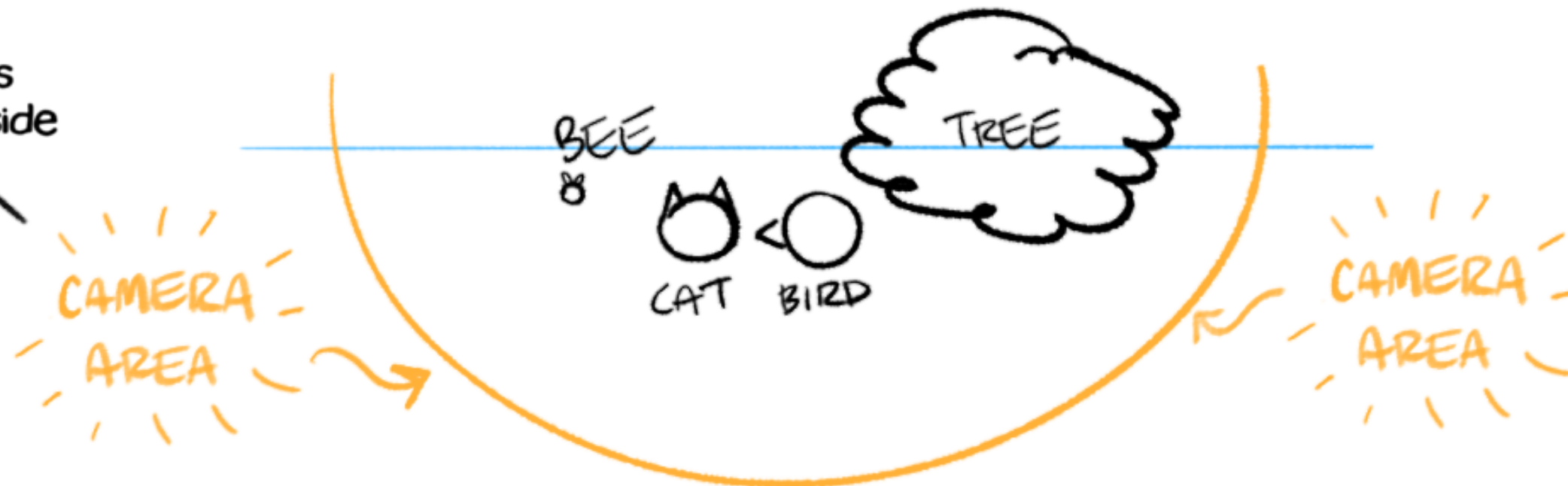
I'll demonstrate a little scene to show how the story flows with and without the 180 rule applied.

180 Rule:



A top down view would look something like this:

The camera's always positioned on this side

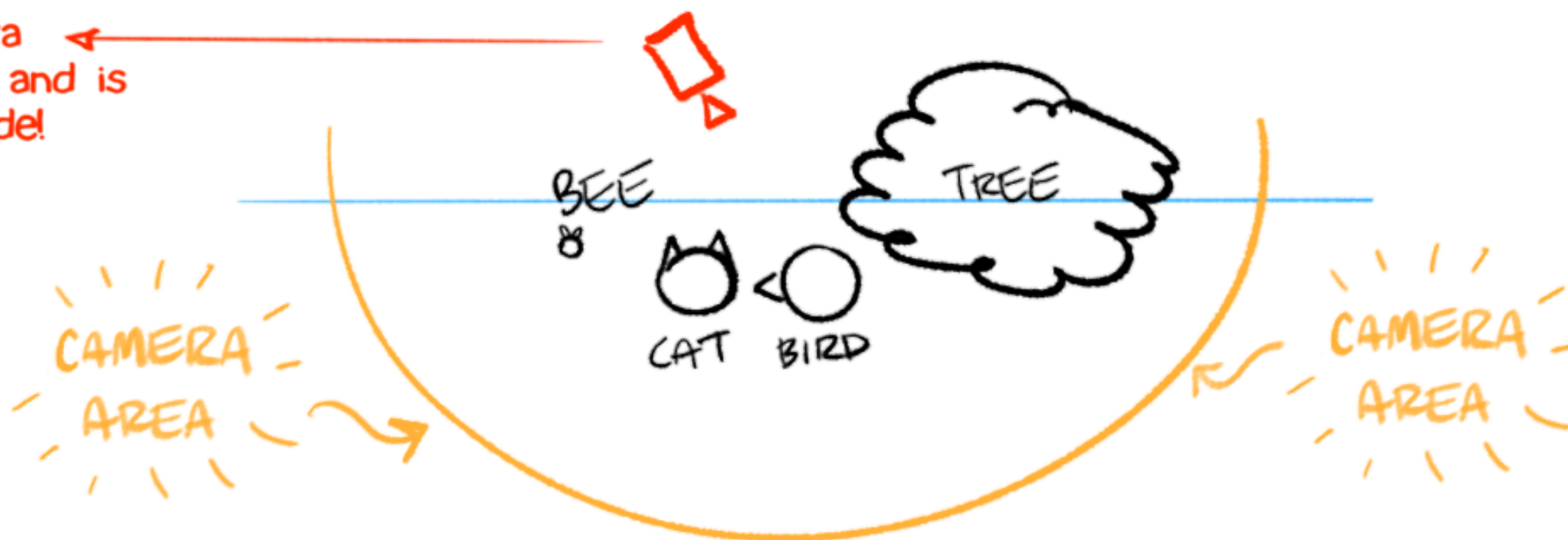


Here's an example with one shot not applying the 180 Rule:



Woah! What happened there? Who's the cat talking to? And the tree appears to have flipped sides!

The 4th shot's camera
jumped the "180 line" and is
shooting from this side!



That was a SUPER simplified example, but I hope it gets the point across!

A couple more thoughts:

-The camera can switch sides, but usually through a camera move or the characters physically moving within the space.

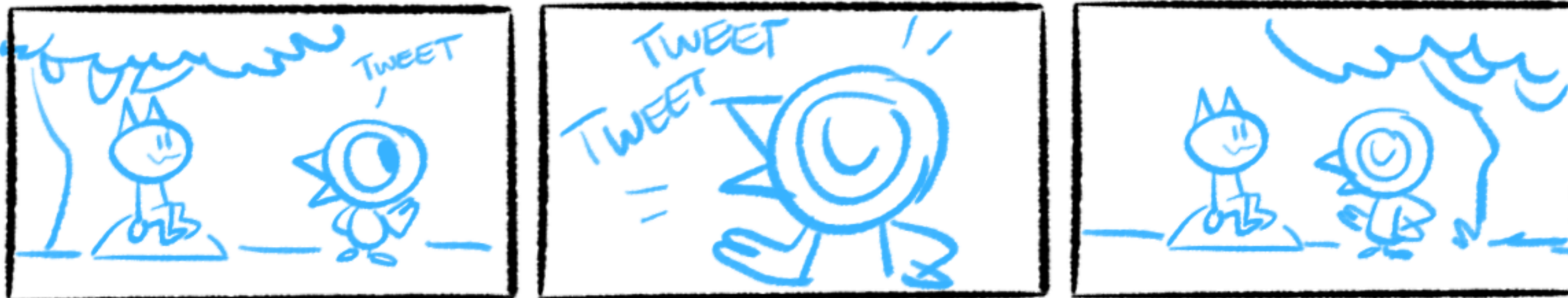
ex:



BG elements continue to move towards screen right, foreground elements continue to move towards screen left and use a wipe to transition to the next shot.

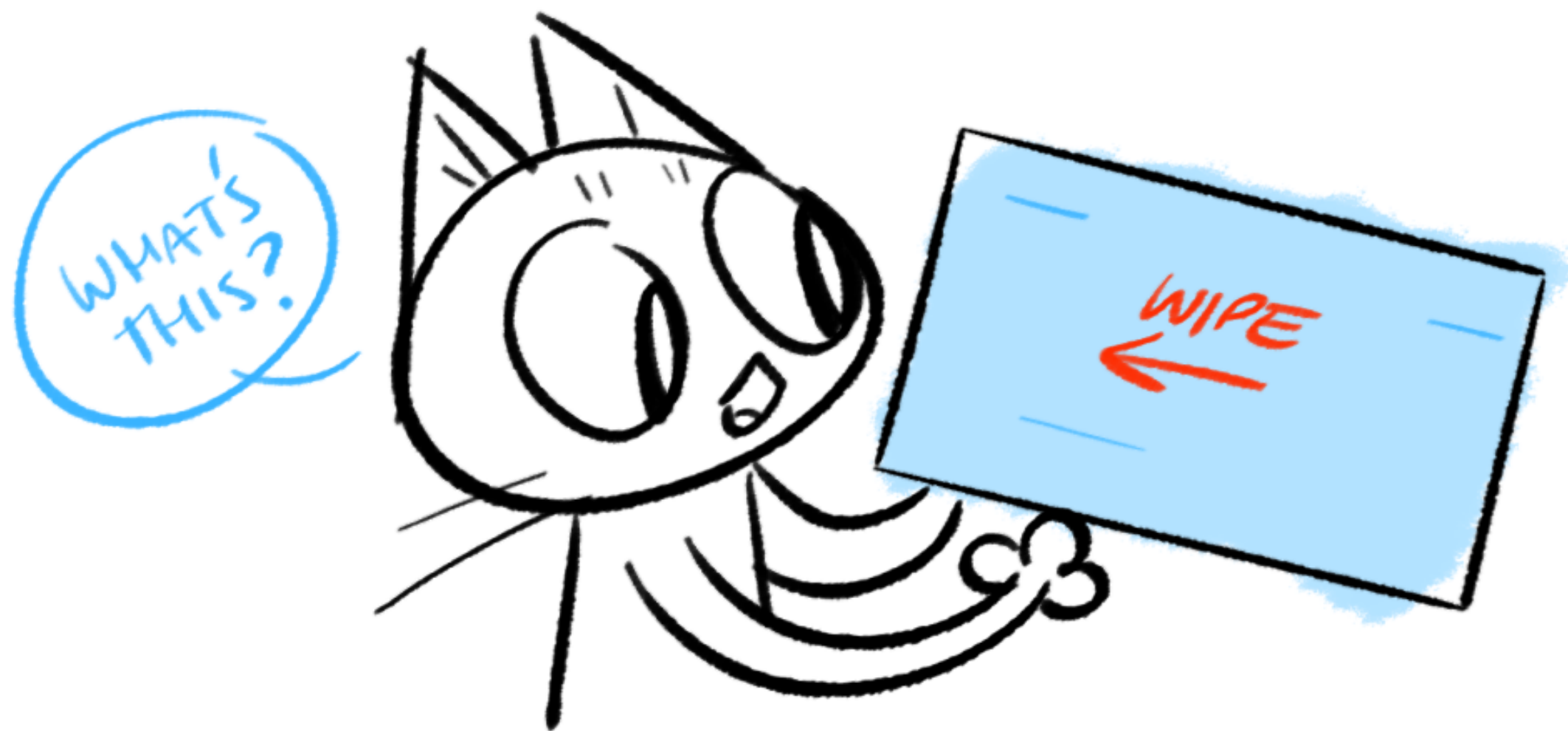
-Be aware of where characters/props are in relation to each other too! While the camera might not cross the 180, if you change where the characters are in space it can be just as confusing. Thinking about the layout early on in your boards will help in the long run!

ex:



Tree location changed, so now the shots don't hookup!

So far, we've been cutting from shot to shot, but on the last page I showed an example that utilized a "Wipe" transition.



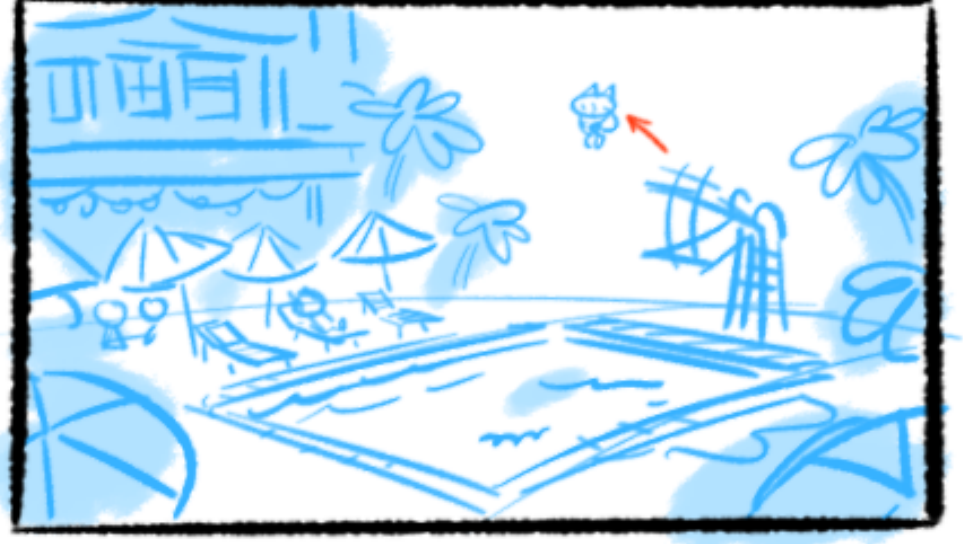
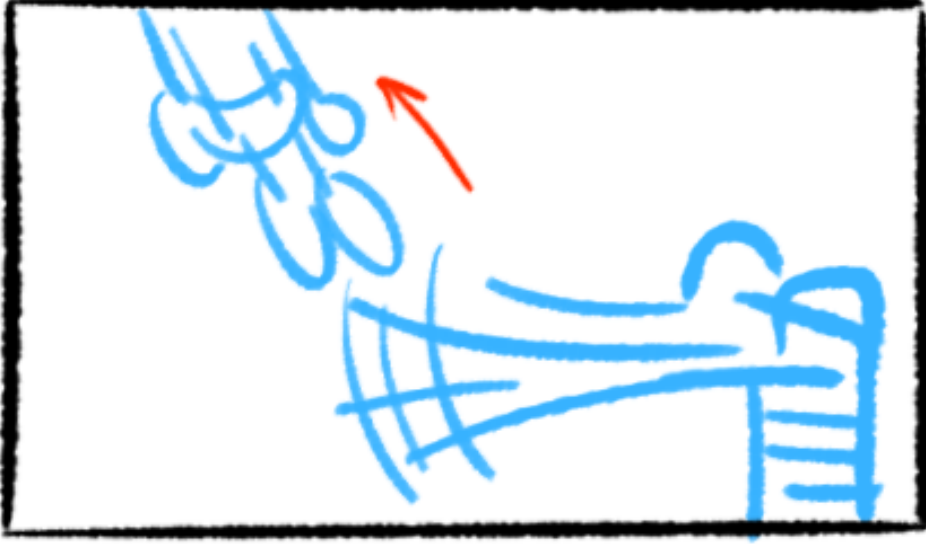
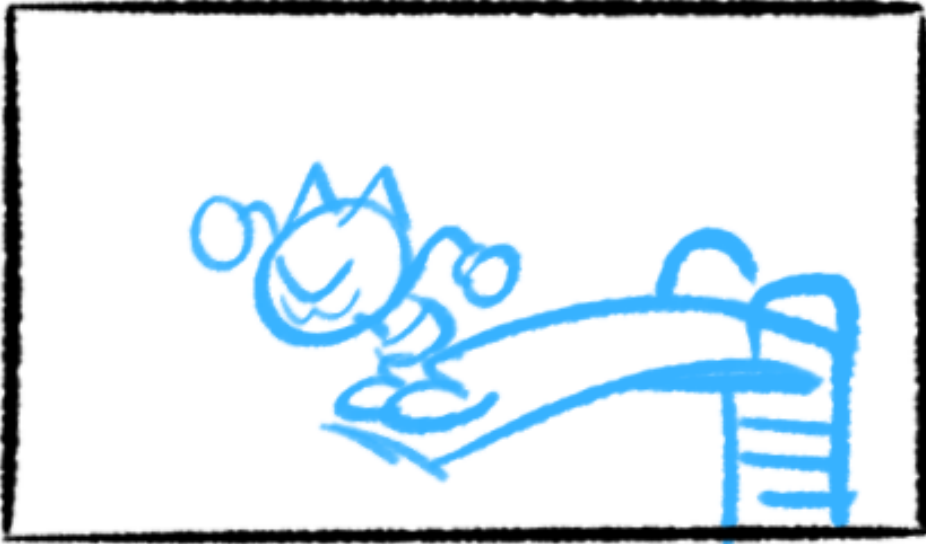
So let's talk about transitions next!

TRANSITIONS

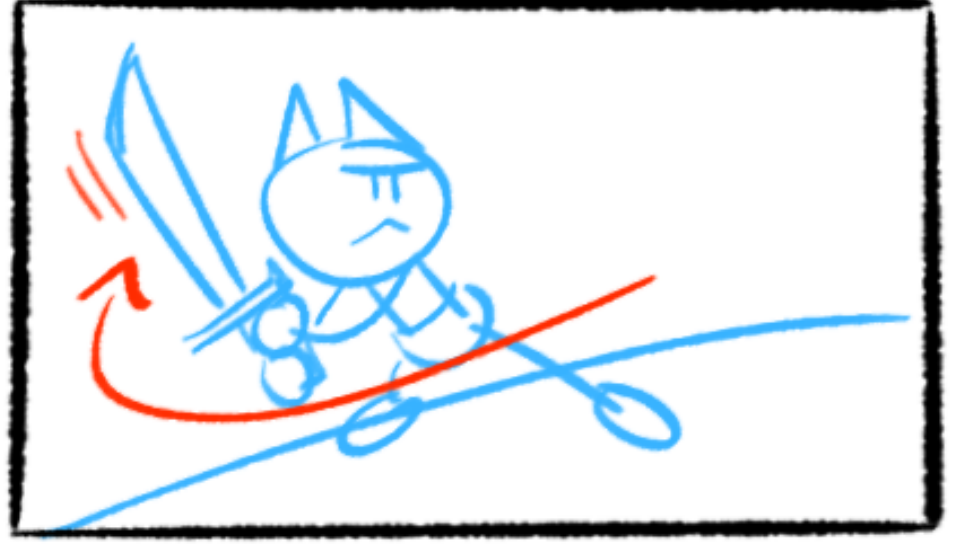
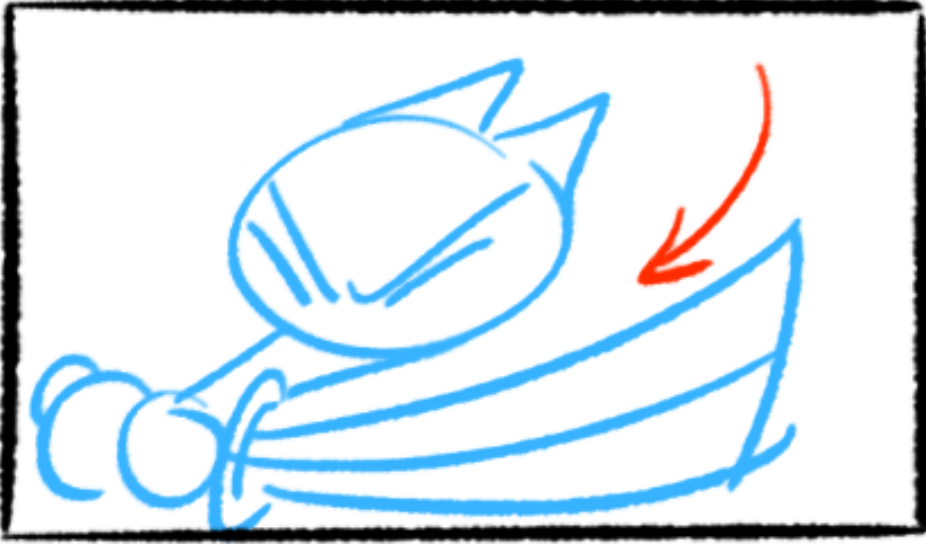
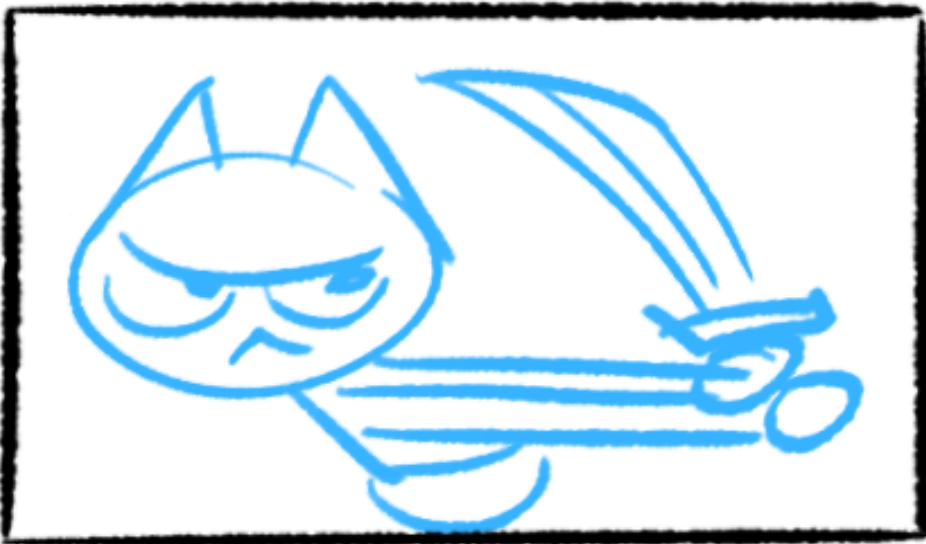
Cut on the Action

Okay this is still technically a cut, but you start and finish an action between two shots to connect them together!

ex:



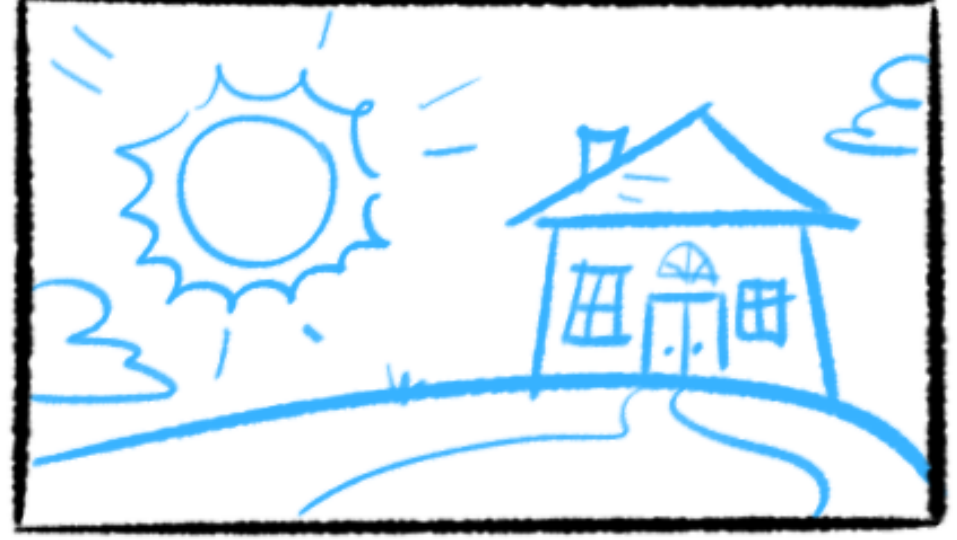
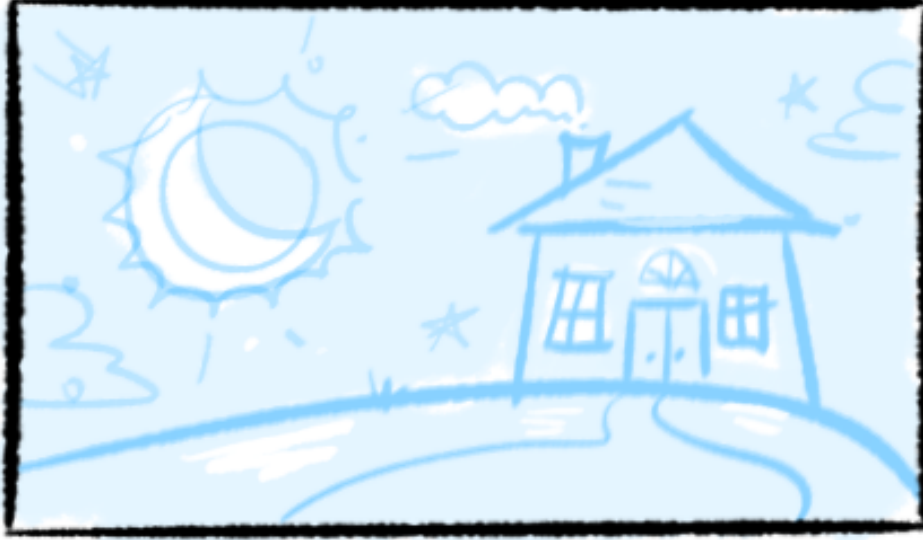
ex:



TRANSITIONS

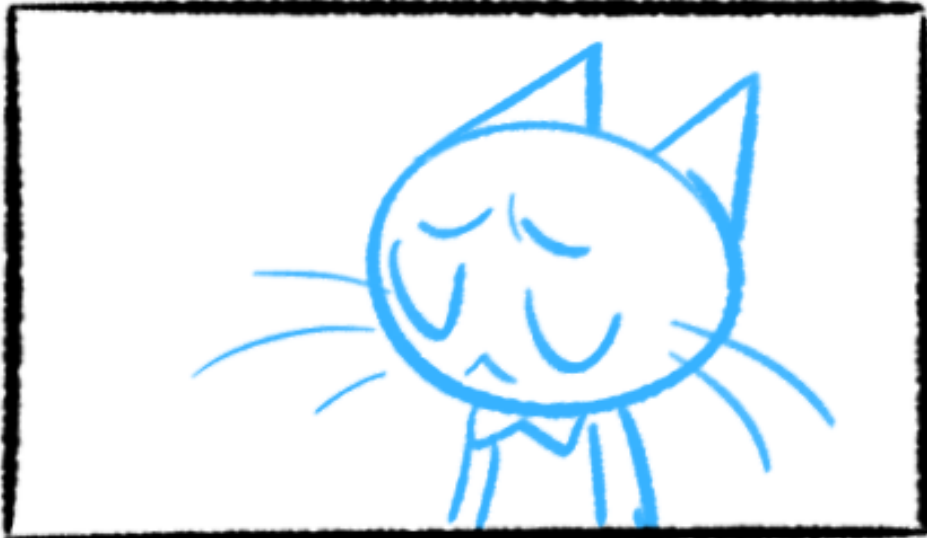
DISSOLVE

ex:



FADE IN/OUT

ex:

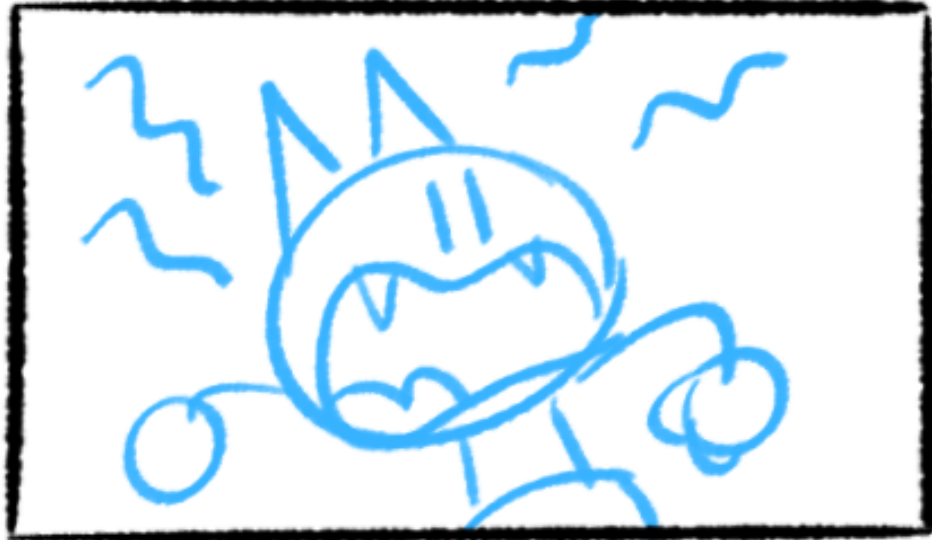


(Usually fading in/out to black or white)

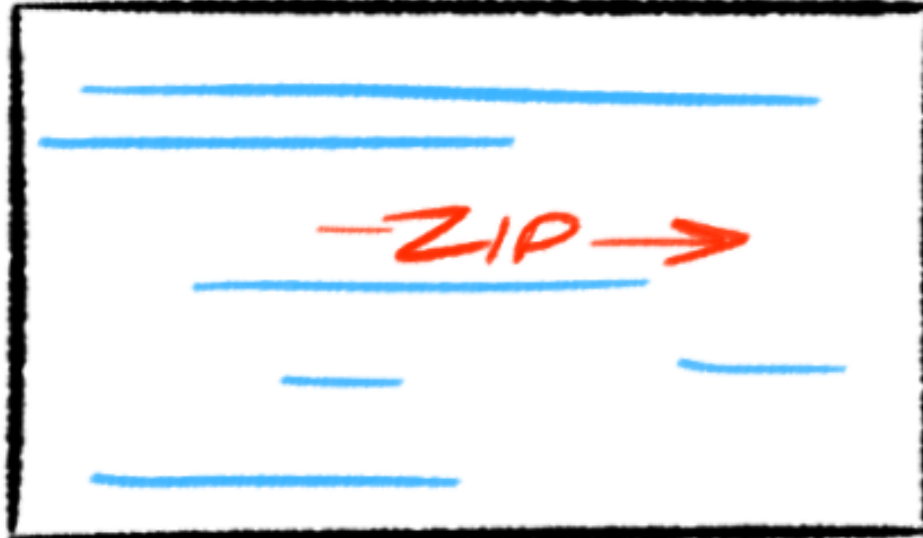
TRANSITIONS

WHIPS/ZIPS*

ex:



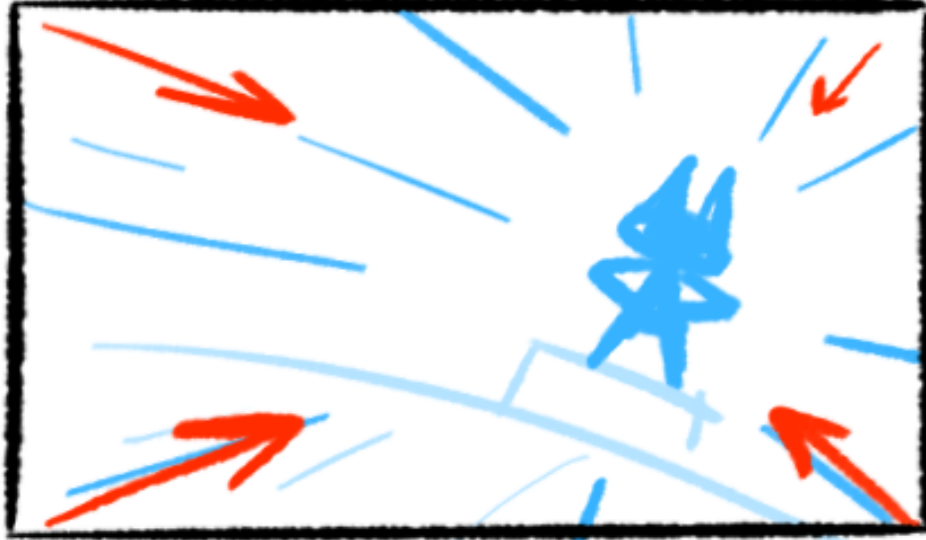
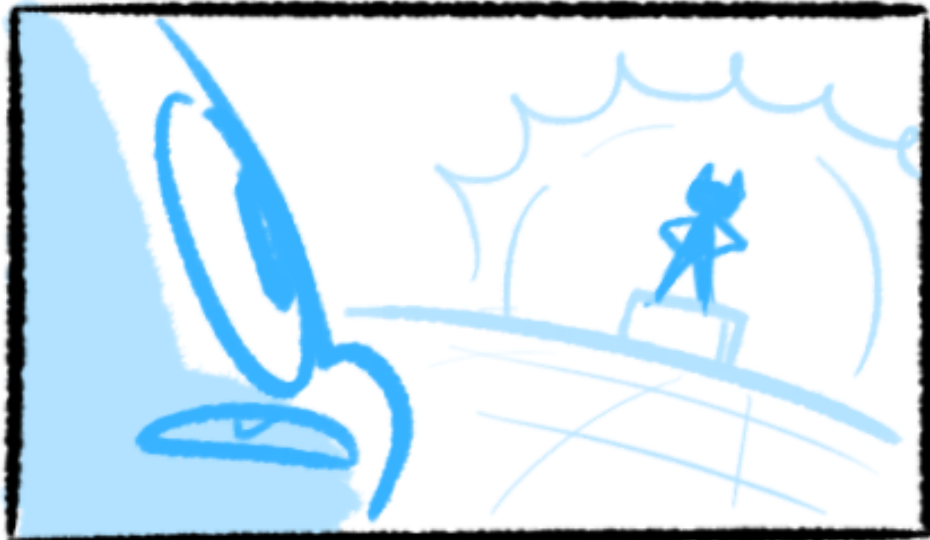
"A GHOST!"



"WHO, ME?"

ZIP IN/OUT

ex:



*I've worked on shows where these terms are interchangeable, and on others where they mean slightly different things. Either way, when you board a zip or a whip you usually just use a couple lines and arrows to show the camera quickly moving :-P

TRANSITIONS

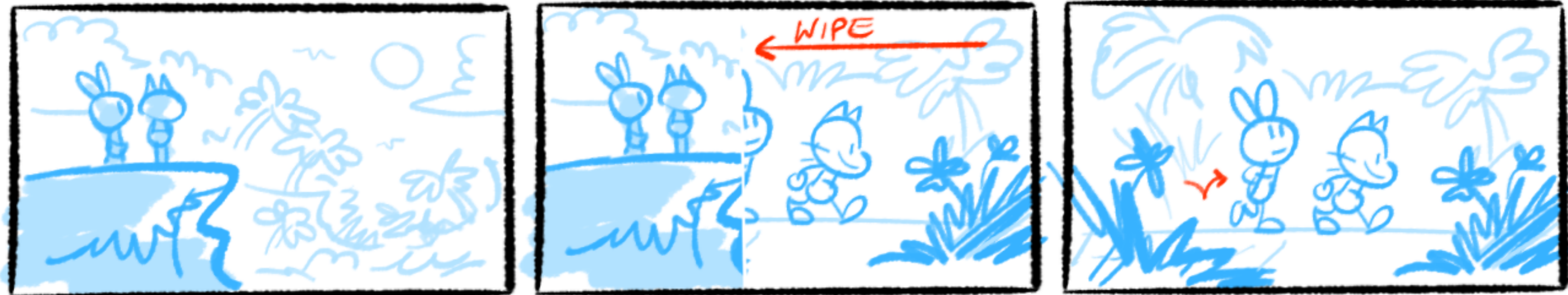
WIPE

ex:



A character/object "wipes" across the first shot to reveal the second shot

ex:



Or Star Wars style, the second shot wipes across the 1st
-In boards, you can literally just write "wipe" with an arrow



WAYS TO INTERPRET A SCRIPT



The cool thing about storyboarding is that there's all sorts of different ways to interpret a script!
If you're feeling overwhelmed by options, here's a couple thoughts to help you out-

INTERPRETING A SCRIPT

COMEDY

-When boarding a joke, flat staging is funny! So if you're stuck on staging a funny reveal or gag, you can always fall back on flat.

-If your jokes are staged clearly, they'll read for themselves! If you find you're having to explain what's happening in the scene, then there's probably a better way to stage it.



-When boarding a comedy or action scene, keep your compositions clear! Don't distract the audience with multiple things happening in the same composition. There's only so many things our eyes can keep track of at once!

-When boarding a comedy or action montage, think of the rhythm of your scene. Typically, odd # of shots flow better. For example, you're given a "Character does a training montage" sequence. I would give myself 5 different beats to get the point across.

ACTION

-When boarding for action, there's a tendency to want to board everything super dynamic with crazy camera angles and the like. Remember to add contrast! If all your shots are super complex and crazy, they'll just become dull. Add some "breathing room" to make your action POP.

-Less is more! Think of how you can convey an action in the fewest amount of shots. Boarding an action sequence requires a lot of pencil mileage, so don't burn out on giving yourself more work than necessary.

-These are just some broad ideas I like to keep in mind while I board. Think of them as jumping off points.

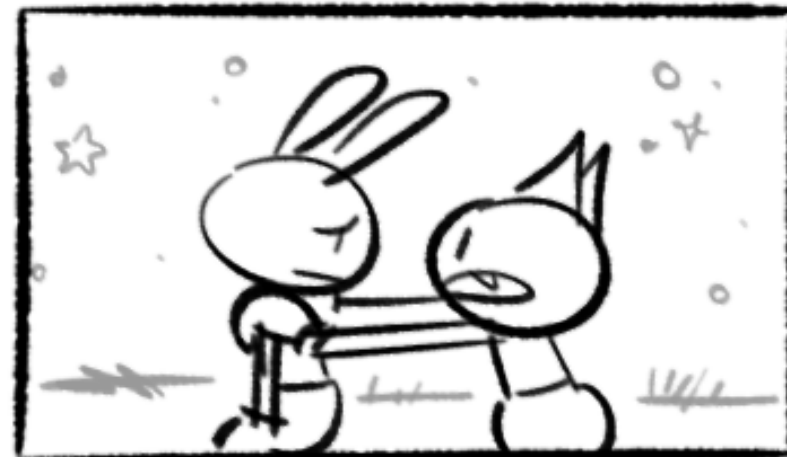
INTERPRETING A SCRIPT

Show Style, tv vs theatrical production, character emotion etc are all contributing factors in creating a scene. The same line of script can have different visual outcomes!

Here are some examples of the same moment, but boarded both Flat and Cinematic.

FLAT

Sometimes artists misconstrue flat as bad, which isn't the case! Flat shots are just as valuable as cinematic shots. It is more about knowing when to use a Flat shot vs. a Cinematic shot.



CINEMATIC

still "flat" but adding foreground elements is a quick way to add depth to the scene

INTERPRETING A SCRIPT

A quick note....

-Don't get too caught up in the whole "Flat vs Cinematic" stuff.
I put it in this guide because it comes up a lot in discussion/note sessions.
"Can you make this more cinematic" is kind of a cop-out critique IMO, because making something more "cinematic" can mean so many different things!

-Think more in terms about what kind of shot best serves the story.

-Like other stuff in this guide,
A lot of this will come to you intuitively as you gain boarding experience.



INTERPRETING A SCRIPT

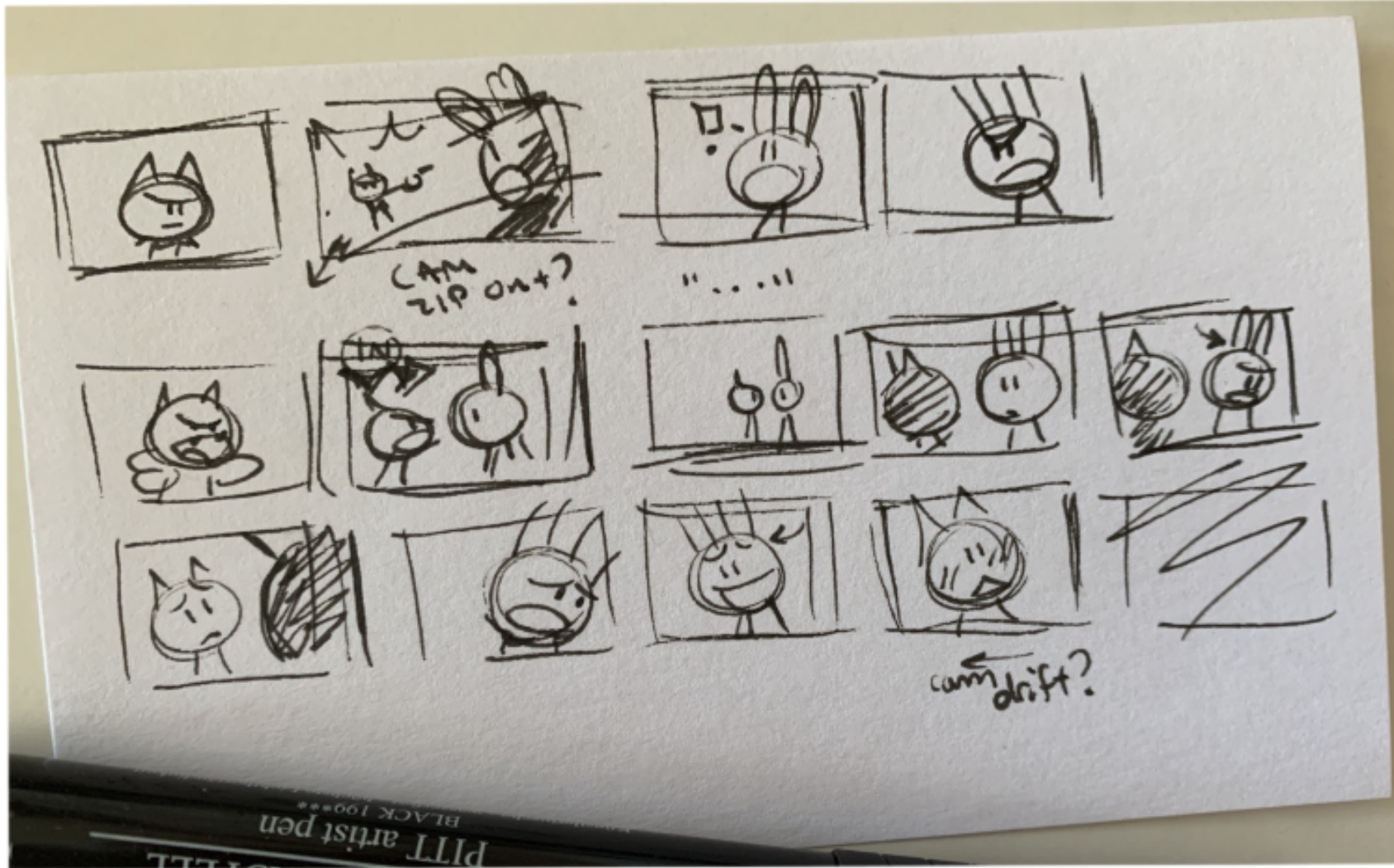
Still feeling stuck? It happens to the best of us!



Here's some different things I do to help me when I'm faced with a tough script!

INTERPRETING A SCRIPT

Make a crappy first pass on paper & scribble out all your thoughts!



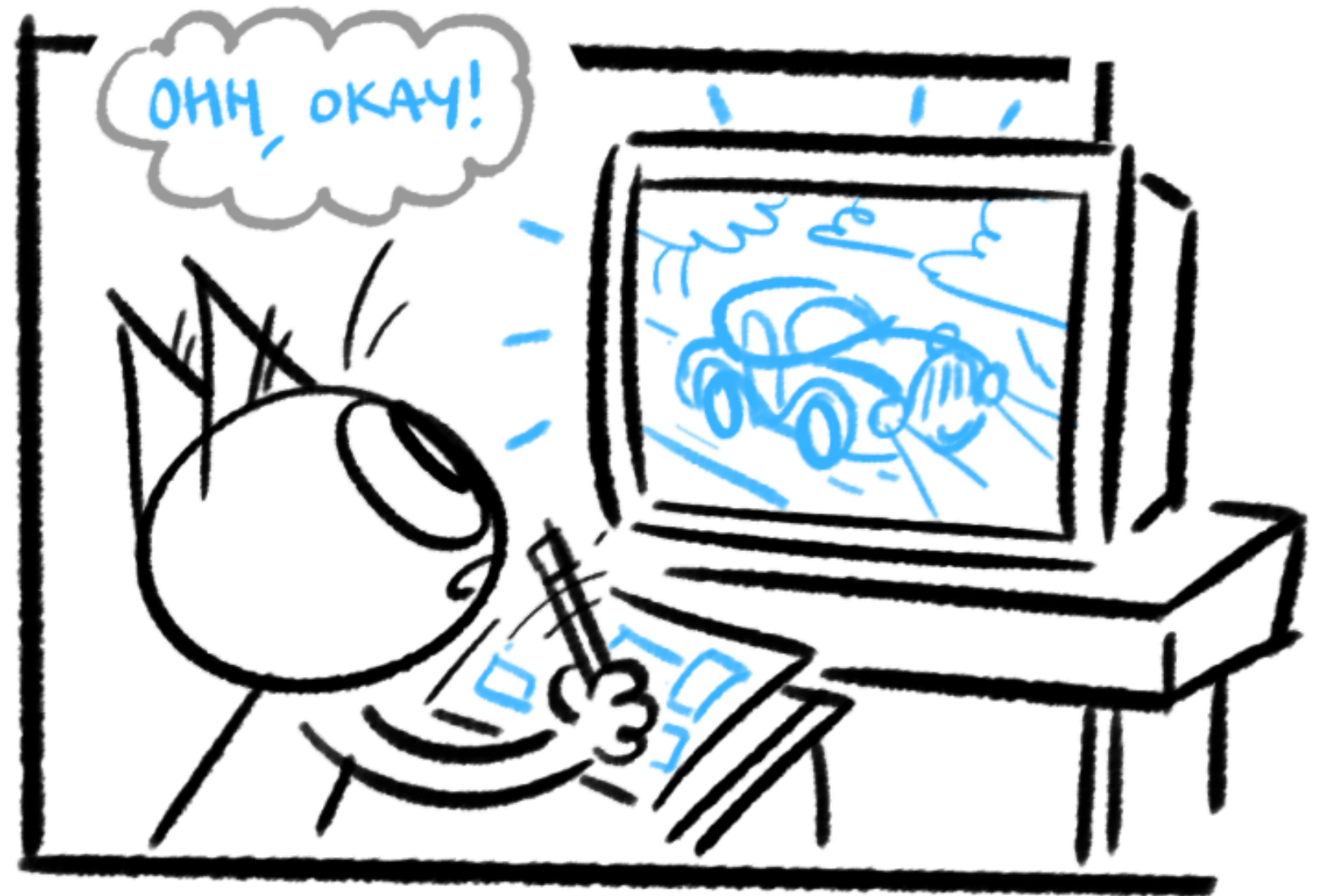
-I'll usually work on notecards, post-its, or scrap paper and dump out my ideas as quickly as possible. No one's gonna see this, this is just for you! I do this a lot if I'm figuring out complicated action sequences, or if I'm straight up art blocked.

-Sometimes working straight in digital, I have a tendency to want to keep my boards too polished early on. Working this way helps me break out of that!



INTERPRETING A SCRIPT

Look at reference! You don't need to reinvent cinema.
See how other movies and shows handled similar sequences!



INTERPRETING A SCRIPT

What about boarding to a song?

- Assuming you are boarding to lyrics, I first create blank shots to sync up to the lyrics in the song
- I do the same if there aren't lyrics, just break up my shots to the beats instead.

Let's use Twinkle Twinkle Little Star as an example. Here's how I would start my board:

Twinkle Twinkle
Little Star

How I wonder
what you are

Up above the world
so high

Like a diamond
in the sky

Twinkle Twinkle
Little Star

How I wonder
what you are!

-I personally chose to break it up into 6 shots to start, based on the flow of the song. I could break it up further, but I want to keep it simple.

-Now I have a roadmap for my song! Time to fill these 6 shots with visuals.

This is my method for handling a song. I'm sure there's many others, but I find this helps me tackle it in a manageable way.



INTERPRETING A SCRIPT

-I've figured out the main beats I want to hit with each lyric below.



Twinkle Twinkle Little Star



How I wonder what you are



Up above the world so high



Like a diamond in the sky



Twinkle Twinkle Little Star



How I wonder what you are!

-Now I'm going to string the shots together so everything flows nicely. I'll either add breakdowns, transitions, or combine some of the beats into the same shot etc.

Let's see how the boards will flow with all these additions...

INTERPRETING A SCRIPT



Twinkle Twinkle Little Star



How I wonder what you are



Up above the world so high



CAMERA PANS UP &
ZOOMS INTO STAR



Like a diamond in the sky



Twinkle Twinkle Little Star



How I wonder what you are!



DISSOLVE

(I tried to make this as clear as possible, since you obv can't watch it with the music! Sing it in your head, LOL)

INTERPRETING A SCRIPT

☆ I treat boarding an action/fight sequence in a similar way! ☆

Say you get a script line like this: "Character A sword-fights Character B, Character A Wins"

-First I bullet point all the main beats in the fight that I want to hit visually.
This helps me think about the fight in a much more manageable way:

- Character A pulls out sword, swings at Character B.
- Character B dodges, pulls out their sword.
- 3-5 shots of them fighting, seem to be equal strength.
- Character A knocks Character B's sword away.

-And just like the song lyrics, I'll break these out into blank shots, draw in the main moments and then fill in the gaps!



ACTING!



ACTING

☆ I'm going to keep this section brief because there's SOOO many good guides and references out there! ☆

-STRONG POSES, STRONG SILHOUETTES



-TRY TO KEEP POSES OPEN TO CAMERA

It helps keep the actions clear!



VS



ACTING

-DON'T OVERPOSE

When you add too many breakdowns, the poses begin to lose their impact.
It can also be distracting!



-USE YOURSELF AS REFERENCE

Act your poses and actions out!



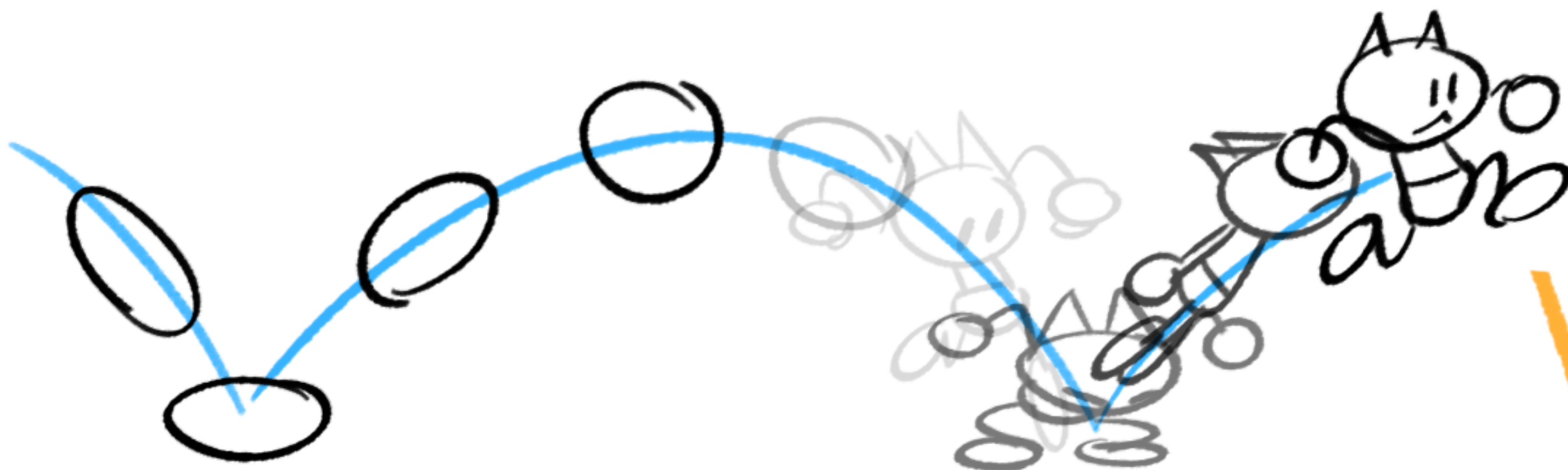
ACTING

-STUDY ANIMATION!

BUT I THOUGHT THIS
WAS STORYBOARDS...



Storyboards are a blueprint for the animators.
Having an understanding in animation basics will
really help you with poses, acting and movement.



Gotta love that bouncy ball LOL

ACTING

-STUDY ANIMATION!

ex:

These read fine to sell an emotion



ex:



But these are stronger and livelier!

ACTING

-STUDY ANIMATION!

ex:



ex:

Boarding a walk/run? At most, you only really need to cycle between contact and passing poses



Having an understanding in animation will also help you out if you need to pose out cycles in your boards, like Soots' tail above!

A simple line drawing of a cat with a round face, large eyes, and a wide, open-mouthed smile. It has spiky ears and its arms and legs are outstretched in a playful, jumping pose. A speech bubble above its head contains the text 'WHA?!'.

WHA?!

CHEATS

That's right- CHEATS!

I am ALLLL about making things simpler, cartoony and fun!

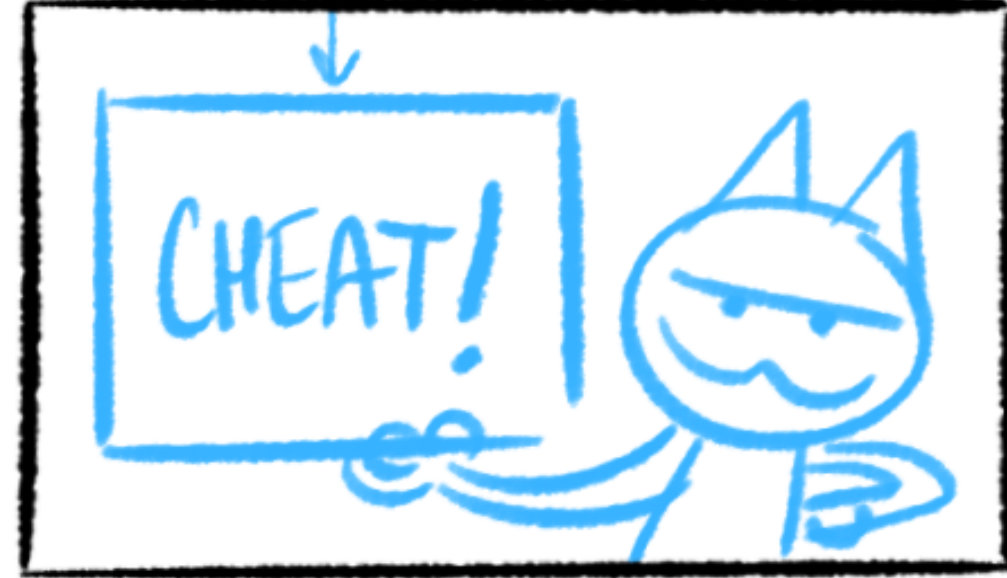
We're not limited by real world constraints, so don't get caught up in technicalities.

Here's a couple examples

A hand-drawn blue arrow that starts with a curved line and ends in a simple arrowhead pointing to the right.

CHEATS

The classic pull item from behind the back or off screen

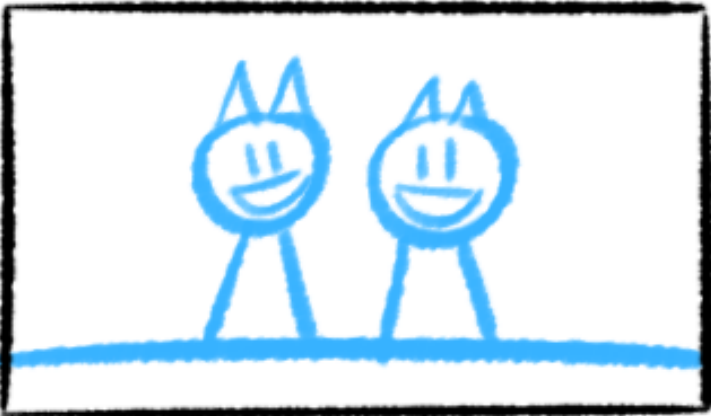


CHEATS

Shift elements in/out of frame during a camera move for better composition



-I want to zoom into the character on Screen R, but when I key the camera, the other character is cropped weird. I only want one character in the frame.

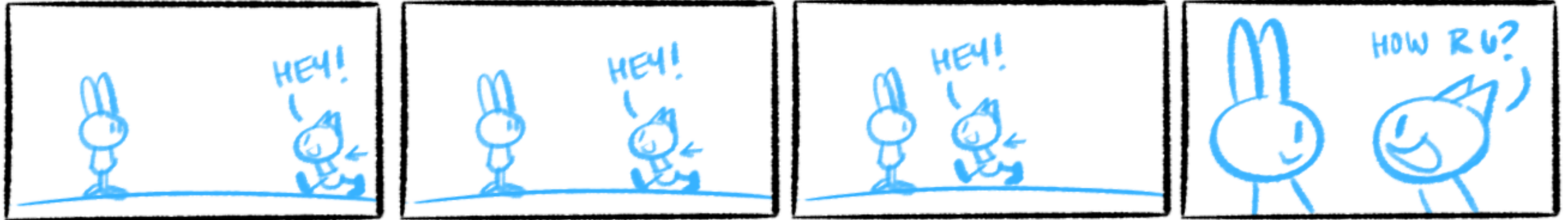


-To achieve a clearer shot, as the camera zooms in, I'll shift the other character out of frame. Doing this in a camera move makes it a smooth transition!

-This obviously looks more noticeable on paper- but in the edit this would happen so quick you wouldn't fixate on it.

CHEATS

You can board someone walking into the scene like this...



But its quicker to have them start to walk into scene, then cut in on them finishing the movement!



- IDK if this is even a cheat, but its more efficient.
- Typically, it's better to cut around the "boring" actions.
- This saves valuable boarding time, animation etc...

CHEATS

Characters can Zip IN and Zip OUT of frame



Fight clouds (obviously this won't work in every show HAH)



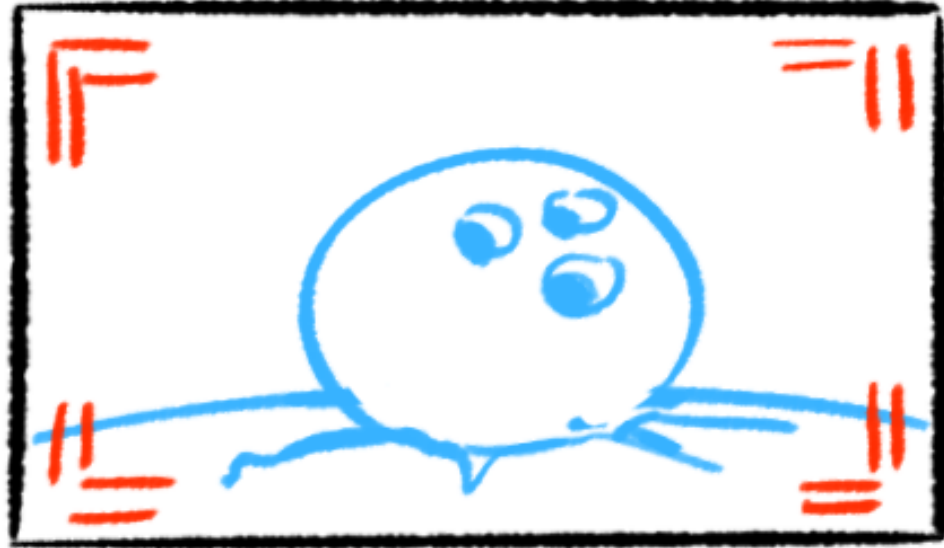
You get the idea!

OTHER THOUGHTS...

Stuff I wanted to mention but didn't know where to,
so I'm dumping it in this section LOL



OTHER THOUGHTS...

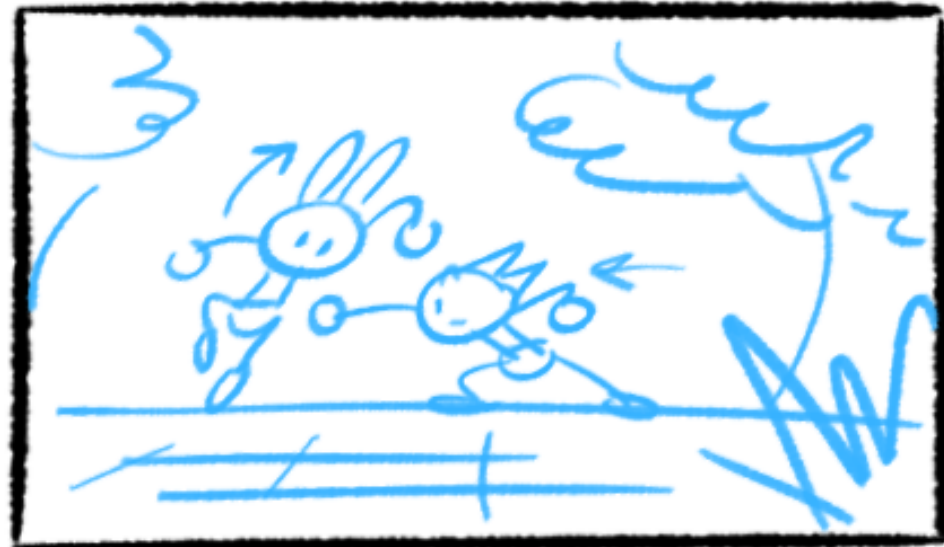


CRASH!

-Camera shakes can help add emphasis to an action, like a heavy object crashing into the floor!



-This is how you show a camera shake in your boards



-A shaky camera can also give the illusion that a camera can't keep up with the action (a sort of live action feel).

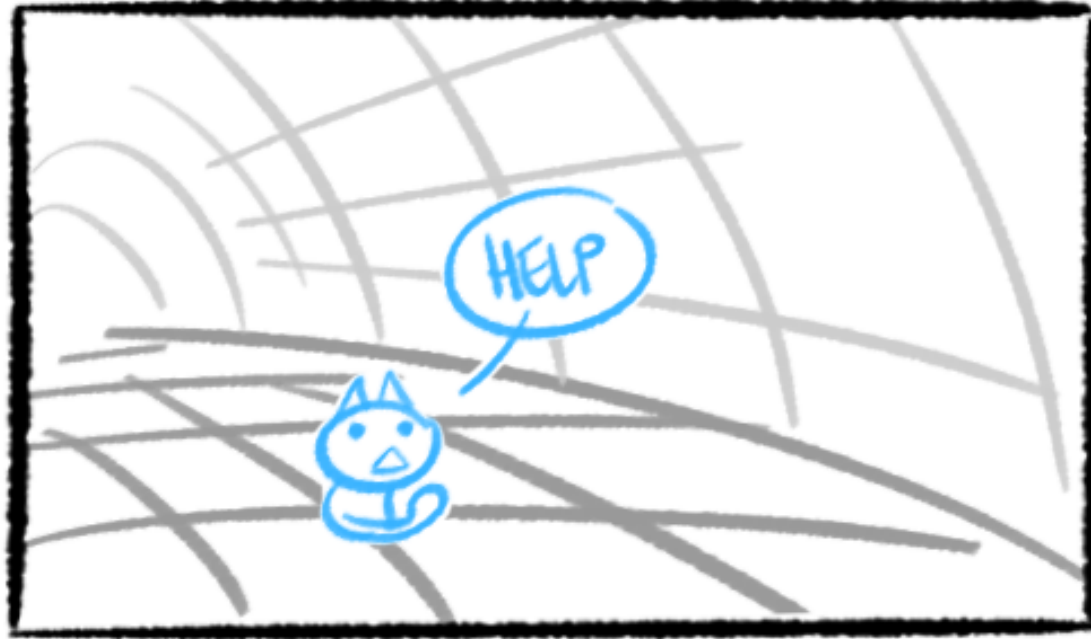
-This is moreso for editing/animation, but be careful to not go TOO crazy with the camera jerkiness. Too much camera movement makes it hard to see what's going on, and can even make a viewer feel motion sick.



OTHER THOUGHTS...

Grids are a great way to show a sense of depth/perspective in a board, but don't only rely on them!

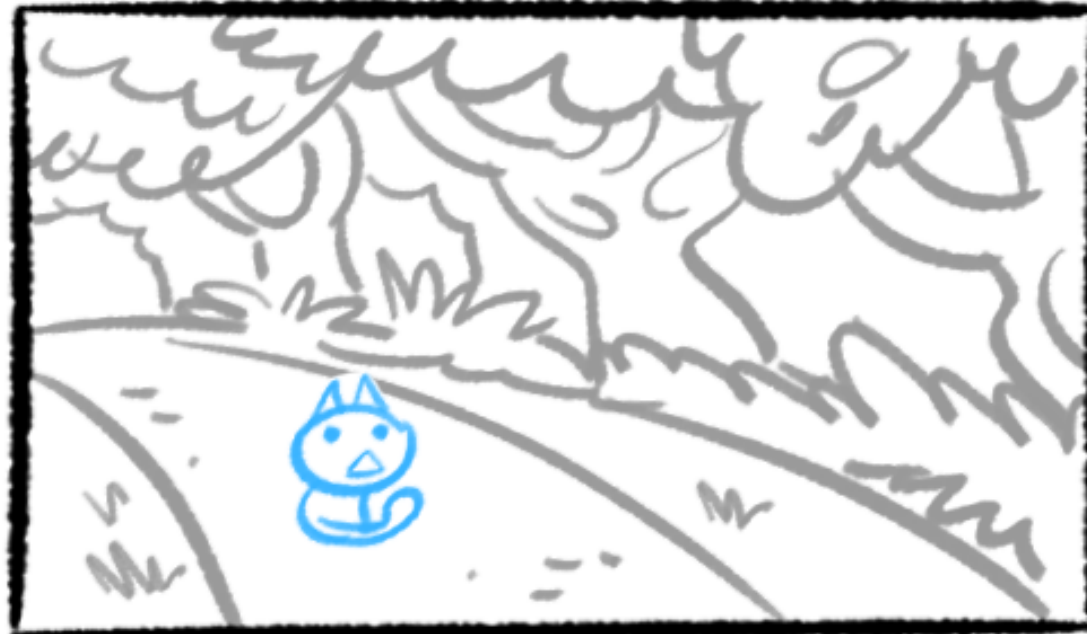
The endless void...



When you're roughing in grids, it's totally okay to eyeball it. It doesn't have to be 100% accurate, but it should be close enough to get the idea across.

Try to anchor your location with a couple of BG markers to keep your layout consistent.

This can also help you avoid any staging issues down the road...



This took the same amount of time to draw as the grid and gives us way more story info

OTHER THOUGHTS...

Don't burn yourself out adding a million overshoots and settles to your poses (that's the animators job, afterall). Try to use it sparingly for emphasis

When you do use overshoots/settles, try to do more than scale the image. Think about which elements overthrow, keep in mind squash and stretch etc. When you only squash OR stretch the entire pose equally, it can lose its impact.

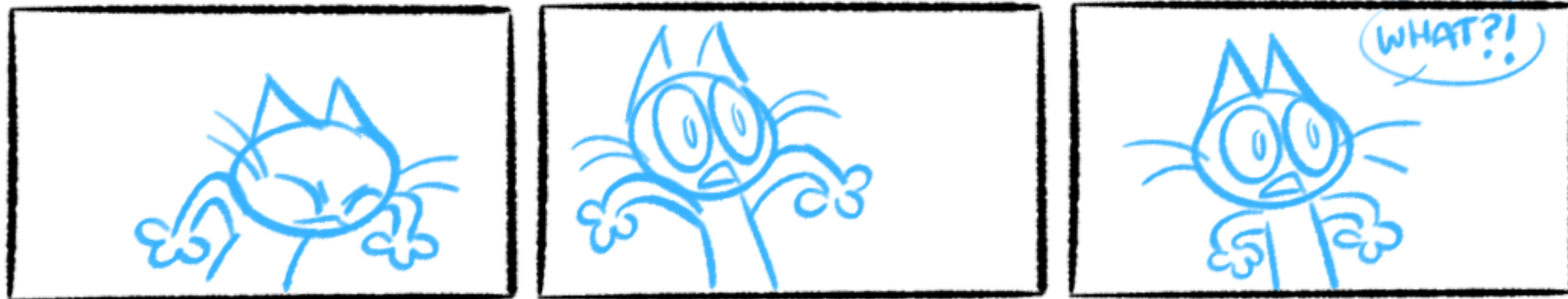
ex:



Only stretching pose by scaling image up

(and sometimes translates weird to the final animation)

ex:



Squash/Stretch and Manipulating the Pose

OTHER THOUGHTS...

Do you have to draw something complicated, like a vehicle or intricate prop?

Look up toy versions for reference! Toy design simplifies an object down to its basic shapes. I find that toys are way easier to use as reference than the actual object.

Ex: Let's say you had to board something with a crane



See how the toys simplify the truck?
It is a whole lot easier to see what the important design elements are!

IN CONCLUSION...

I hope this guide is able to help all you aspiring board artists out there!

I just want to reiterate that nothing is a hard rule, and every show/project will come with its own boarding style.

Like most things, storyboarding will take a lot of practice. Keep drawing, watching movies/shows, and see what your peers are doing!

Storyboarding is a hard job- you're an artist, writer, director and problem-solver all smashed into one job title. My biggest piece of advice is whatever you can do to simplify- do it.

It is not about being the board artist with the best drawings, the coolest shots or the most broken down boards. Your goal is to work with a team to visually tell a story in the most effective and entertaining way!



