



On the Role and Significance of Animals in Our Stories

**A tool\* for screenwriters, dramaturges, producers, and other decision-makers in the film industry, as well as for authors and creators of other media.**

If you've been dissatisfied with how animals are portrayed in the media and are looking for ways to craft your (animal) stories ethically and respectfully, this checklist offers you thought-provoking insights. Through targeted questions, it helps you make deliberate decisions to integrate animals into your narratives in a mindful and reflective way.

#### What we want:

- To inspire and support creators in portraying animals in stories respectfully and authentically, without compromising artistic freedom.
- To provide guidance on how to incorporate animals into media from the very beginning in ways that uphold their well-being and dignity.
- To harness the power of storytelling to evoke emotions and foster awareness of respectful relationships between humans and animals.
- To promote understanding by addressing topics like animal welfare, species conservation, and animal dignity in a way that avoids clichés and encourages empathy for animals.

#### What we don't want:

- We do **not** want creative minds to feel restricted in their artistic freedom, expression, or ideas. Instead, we see this checklist as a tool to inspire new, profound perspectives.
- This checklist is **not** intended to suggest that stories involving animals are inherently problematic or should be avoided. Rather, it's about making informed choices and recognizing that certain portrayals can have both positive and negative impacts. This checklist is designed to help weigh these considerations and discover new, ethically thoughtful ways to tell compelling stories.

\* This checklist is a supplementary tool to the **Green Storytelling Checklist** (<https://filmbuero-nds.de/service/news/green-storytelling.html>).

**We view this document as a living, evolving resource.** Your feedback is not only welcome but essential (email: [dordel@filmbuero-nds.de](mailto:dordel@filmbuero-nds.de)).

**The appendix (beginning on page 3) offers deeper insights into relevant questions surrounding animal ethics, welfare, and conservation.**



**This list uses concise Yes/No questions to enable a quick and effective review of the inclusion and portrayal of animals in your screenplays (or stories in other media).**

### **Animal Ethics**

**Yes No**

- Are animals essential to telling the story?
- Do the depictions of animals reflect their true nature and behavior, without being made to act like humans or shown in a stereotypical way?
- Are the needs and interests of animals treated as important?
- Are animals used only to serve human purposes or are they controlled by humans?
- Are characters who care about animal protection or conservation shown as having good and valid reasons?
- Does the story depict positive interactions between the main characters and animals?
- Does the story avoid showing the use of animal products, or does it question this use?
- Are animals shown resisting exploitation and, if doing so, offering alternative perspectives?

### **Species Conservation and Biodiversity**

- Are species conservation and biodiversity presented as important topics?
- Are endangered animal species and their natural habitats depicted in a way that raises awareness of the need for their protection?
- Are questionable practices involving wild animals (e.g., hunting, fishing, wildlife tourism, zoos, circuses, etc.) critically examined?
- Are ways to coexist with wild animals, such as large predators (e.g., wolves, bears, etc.), shown in a manner that respects the animals' needs and interests?
- Is the trade, keeping, and breeding of (wild) animals critically addressed?



## Appendix

**For a deeper exploration of these topics, we invite you to review the appendix, which includes additional, detailed reflection questions related to the core issues mentioned in the checklist. Some content from the above checklist will be repeated here.**

### **Why did we create this Checklist?**

This checklist provides an opportunity to consciously leverage the ethical and educational potential of depicting animals in media. By portraying animals in a nuanced way, important environmental topics such as species conservation and biodiversity can be addressed, while reexamining the relationship between humans and animals from a fresh perspective.

Animals need not be reduced to stereotypical roles; they can be represented as complex beings with their own abilities, interests, and needs. By emphasizing their intrinsic value—independent of their usefulness to humans—this approach can foster awareness of environmental issues, species conservation, and animal ethics. It can also inspire audiences to take more ethical and sustainable actions.

To this date, in most stories, animals have often been confined to clichéd roles and functions. They frequently appear as heroic companions, such as Lassie in the film and television series, or as threatening antagonists, as seen in *Jaws*. In some cases, animals serve as symbols or tools to illustrate human conflicts, as in George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, where the animals represent human societal structures and power struggles. Similarly, humorous portrayals, such as the talking animals in the *Shrek* series, often overlook the needs, perspectives, and dignity of the animals—even though they are part of the narrative.

### **The Current State of Science**

Over the past decades, research in the natural sciences, the social sciences and the humanities has produced significant findings that support a more respectful relationship between humans

and other animals. Ethological studies reveal, for example, that many animals demonstrate complex emotions, high intelligence, and intricate social behaviors (Huber 2020, Brensing 2017, among others). Despite these insights, animals are often portrayed in the media in one-dimensional or overly simplistic ways.

Science emphasizes the potential to depict animals in stories with greater accuracy and empathy. Additionally, research increasingly highlights the negative ecological impacts of practices involving animals, such as their use in agriculture, on the environment and biodiversity.

It is important to recognize that the welfare and dignity of individual animals and the protection of species often go hand in hand. However, there are situations where these priorities may diverge or even conflict with one another.

### **The Impact of a Story on the Well-Being of Living Animals**

Even during the early stages of story development, writers can significantly influence the well-being of living animals. For screenwriters or novelists whose work may be adapted into film, it is important to consider that filming with animals can be mentally and physically stressful for them. While CGI technologies or footage of animals in the wild (provided it does not disturb them) could be alternatives, these decisions are typically made later during production. Even if writers have the best intentions while crafting their stories, they may have limited control over how animals are treated on set during filming.



# Animal Storytelling Checklist

The portrayal of animals in stories can directly affect the well-being of real animals. A well-known example is Hedwig, the owl from the Harry Potter series. The success of the books and films is believed to have caused a significant increase in demand for pet owls, which in some parts of the world led to wild owls being captured and kept in unsuitable conditions (Nijman & Nekaris, 2017).

Thus, it may be worth considering whether a “real” animal is necessary at all. If it is, reflecting on how the animal is portrayed can be helpful. Even if no immediate harm affects the animals and filming complies with animal welfare regulations, the messages conveyed by the story are highly significant. Stories featuring animals inherently make a statement about the human-animal relationship and are rarely neutral, even if this aspect is not explicitly addressed.

Scientific studies show, for example, that people are less likely to support the conservation of great apes in the wild if they see images of the animals alongside humans or in human environments. Similarly, anthropomorphic (human-like) portrayals of animals can have both positive and negative effects (Grasso et al., 2020; Schroepfer et al., 2011; Ross et al., 2011).

It is essential to consciously use the ethical and educational potential of depicting animals in films and stories. Through the portrayal of animals, important environmental topics such as species conservation and biodiversity can be addressed, and issues surrounding the human-animal relationship can be explored. Animals should not only appear as secondary characters but also as main actors offering alternative perspectives. The goal should be to depict them as complex beings with their own abilities, interests, and needs:

valued for their intrinsic worth, not just their usefulness to humans (Benz-Schwarzburg, 2012).

For instance, films like *Finding Dory* provide evidence that storytelling can raise awareness of animals and foster interest in learning about them, rather than increasing demand for them as pets. After watching the film, many people searched online for information about the featured species, suggesting that such films can spread knowledge about animal species and ecological challenges rather than encouraging impulsive purchases.

These findings highlight the important role films and stories can play in raising awareness about animal conservation and promoting responsible behavior toward nature (Verissimo et al., 2020).

## Conclusion

The conscious and respectful portrayal of animals in stories offers creative opportunities to craft impactful narratives while fostering a deeper understanding of the relationships between humans and animals. By depicting animals in all their complexity and individuality, we can inspire audiences to reflect on their interactions with animals, develop greater empathy toward the animal world, and raise awareness about conservation.

We encourage creators to explore and implement these possibilities in their stories, contributing both to raising awareness and actively supporting the protection of animals.





## Further Reflective Considerations

### Interactions with Animals, Ethics, and Awareness

- To what extent could the screenplay (or a novel that may later be adapted into a film) expose animals to risks or stress during filming?
- How are ethical questions regarding animals addressed and reflected upon in the story?
- In what ways are animals depicted, and how are anthropomorphism, stereotypes, and biases avoided?
- How are the needs and interests of animals acknowledged in the narrative?
- To what extent are animals used for human purposes in the story, and how free are the relationships in which they are shown?
- How is the death of animals portrayed, and what role does it play in the narrative? Is the suffering or killing of animals addressed, and if so, how is it depicted and reflected upon? (Note: Could real animals be endangered or harmed during filming for such scenes?)
- How are already deceased animals represented, and what significance does this hold for the narrative? (Note: Could real animals have been endangered or killed for these scenes during production?)
- How are the concerns of characters advocating for animal welfare, conservation, or animal rights treated in the story? Are these characters portrayed positively and respectfully, or are they associated with negative stereotypes or ridicule?
- Are animals given the agency to resist practices of exploitation?
- Is the right of animals to freedom of choice considered, and are they portrayed as sentient beings with their own needs and interests?
- How are positive interactions between characters and animals depicted to promote awareness of respectful treatment of animals?





## Species Conservation and Biodiversity

- How are species conservation and biodiversity addressed in the story?
- How are endangered animal species and their habitats depicted to raise awareness of their protection?
- Are fears about the return of large predators like wolves or bears amplified, and how is this topic explored?
- How are ways to coexist with wild animals presented in a manner that respects the animals' needs and interests?
- How is wildlife tourism portrayed, and are critical perspectives on this topic included?

## Keeping, Breeding, and Trading of Animals

- How critically does the story address the trade, keeping, and breeding of animals (ranging from pets to factory farming and wild animals)?
- How is the adoption of pets from shelters portrayed compared to purchasing from breeders?
- Are issues surrounding harmful breeding practices addressed, and if so, how critically are they handled?
- Are trends in pet ownership influenced by media critically examined?
- Is the trade in exotic animals or their portrayal as pets critically discussed?
- How are the breeding, keeping, and use of animals for scientific experiments portrayed?
- How are zoos depicted, and is their role in education, research, or species conservation critically questioned?

## Hunting and Fishing

- How are hunting and fishing portrayed, and is romanticizing or glorifying violence avoided?
- Are the ecological and ethical impacts of hunting and fishing discussed?





## Environmental Impact

- Is the story set in sensitive habitats where filming might disturb or harm the environment and its wildlife?
- Does the story highlight or critically reflect on the connections between animal use and environmental pollution (e.g., the link between animal farming for meat and dairy production and climate change)?

## Consumption of Animals and Animal Products

- How is the consumption of animals and animal products portrayed and reflected upon?
- Are alternatives to consuming animals and animal products presented or encouraged?
- How are characters depicted who avoid or reduce the consumption of animal products?
  - Motivations: Ethical, health-related, ecological, or social reasons
  - Challenges: Social resistance and personal conflicts
  - Social and Cultural Influences: The impact of societal norms and traditions
  - Everyday Depictions: Scenes showing characters buying, cooking, or ordering alternative products in restaurants
  - Impact on Relationships: Tensions and misunderstandings with other characters
  - Positive Role Models: Characters are respected and portrayed as inspiring examples
  - Critical Reflection: Open discussions of the benefits and challenges of avoiding animal products
  - Educational Aspects: Integration of scientific findings and personal experiences

## Education and Awareness

- Does the story include educational elements to raise awareness about species conservation, animal rights, and animal welfare?
- How accurate, well-founded, and based on current research are the presented facts about animals and their living conditions?





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