Clay Animation Helpful Hints

From Teaching with Clay Animation by Melinda Kolk

Building the clay character

1. Claytoon™ animation clay is the best to use since it is an oil based clay and won't dry out. It can be purchased for under $4 at Hobby Lobby, Michael's, etc.
2. Before building your character, make a character sketch of how it will look, what it will wear and what movements it will need to make.
3. Keeping your character under 6 inches tall will take less time and require less materials for construction.
4. You may want to work with the clay on foam work mats. Avoid using newspaper or other materials with ink that bleeds, since this will discolor your clay. Make sure you wear an apron or old T-shirt to protect your clothing.
5. Because the Claytoon™ animation clay never hardens, your character will be somewhat fragile. It will not break if it tips over or is dropped but it will be dented and disfigured. It is helpful to store your character in a box or bin. Your props and accessories could be stored in there as well.
6. Clay animation modeling clay is very dense. It is designed so that you can sculpt long noses or big ears that won't droop or sag. The drawback is that this clay is very heavy. To avoid heavy characters that keep falling over, you can construct an armature for movement and an understructure to reduce weight.
7. Armatures are "skeletons" underneath the clay that provide a strong, flexible structure for your clay character, and allow you to position your character repeatedly. An armature can be made from chenille stems (pipe cleaners) twisted together to form a basic skeleton. While they may not be the strongest wire, they provide support and flexibility for small characters.
8. Instead of adding clay directly to the armature, use materials such as styrofoam, cork and aluminum foil to add bulk and shape to the character.
9. If you want your character to stand upright, you need to make sure the most weight is at the bottom of the character. Do not make the character's head completely out of clay or the head will be very heavy, causing your character to tip over constantly. Making large feet for your character will also help it stand up.
10. Animation clay responds to temperature changes. When it gets warm, it will be soft and when it gets cold, it will be hard.
11. To reduce character creation time, try adding accessories instead of modeling every detail with clay. Things you may want to include are: beads, buttons, eyes, paper clips, scraps of cloth, sequins, etc.
12. When you are finished working with the clay, using baby wipes to clean your hands will work best.

Designing and constructing the set

1. You do not want your background to overshadow your characters. Keeping the background simple will let viewers concentrate on the action occurring in the animation. Try to keep details to a minimum and create large, simple objects. Backgrounds and props should be important to or necessary for the animation.
2. Backgrounds created from construction paper are easy to make, and their bold and often contrasting colors look great in animations. Backgrounds do not have to be photo realistic – use colors for sky and ground that contrast with the colors of your character and make them really stand out.

Taking pictures

1. We will be using a digital camera to import jpeg images into Frames software to make the animations.
2. Taking pictures at a resolution of 640 x 480 is a **MUST!!** This picture size will still display the action in your animation, but won't take up too much storage space or require too much RAM for you to edit and complete your clay animation production on the computer.
3. Position the camera at least 3 feet away from your scene. Zoom out so that you can see the entire set through the camera lens. This will keep you from having to move the camera and will minimize the amount of pictures you need to take from different angles.
4. Using a tripod will make it **MUCH** easier to hold the camera still. If you don't have a tripod, use boxes, books and other objects to get the camera at the right height and the correct angle for picture taking.
5. Taking pictures in a well-lit room or in filtered sunlight will help make your images crisp and clear. Don't use your flash as a substitute for proper lighting. The flash will wash out your characters and background and can add harsh shadows.
6. To get an idea on time for your animation, 5 frames per second is a good rule of thumb. This will give you a rough idea of length of your animation and the number of pictures you will need to take to complete it. A project from last year was 4.5 minutes long and took about 300 photos.
7. If you are using Chroma Key, make sure the color of your back drop **HIGHLY** contrasts with your clay characters and is uniformly lit.

Using the software

1. We will be using Frames software to create your animation. There is a tutorial on how to use the software on the tech4learning web site. To access it, go to www.myt4l.com (my T 4 L) , click on Recipes, choose Frames – clay animation.
2. You will have the ability to work with the animation software at school. However, there is a free evaluation version available for 30 days if your parents would like to download it to your home computer. The evaluation version is fully functioning so you will have the same capabilities with it as you will at school. You can get the evaluation version at http://www.tech4learning.com/frames/index.html.