



From Pride Rock to the Rendering Engine: An Observation-First Pedagogy for Teaching New-Age Adaptation through The Lion King (1994) and Mufasa: The Lion King (2024)

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Abstract— Adaptation pedagogy has tended to introduce theoretical vocabulary before students are asked to analyse a text-pair, on the assumption that concepts such as fidelity, medium-specificity, and intertextuality must be taught before they can be applied. This article proposes an alternative, observation-first sequence: students first complete a structured comparison exercise recording concrete production, narrative, and performance differences between a source and its adaptation, and are introduced to interpretive framing only afterwards. The model is illustrated through Disney's *The Lion King* (1994) and its 2024 prequel *Mufasa: The Lion King*, a text-pair whose contrasting production technologies make adaptation choices unusually visible to students encountering the field for the first time. The article outlines the two-stage classroom design, reports on its transfer to a second, technologically minimal text-pair (*Twelve Angry Men*), and reads the sequence retrospectively against established learning theory, drawing on Kolb's experiential learning cycle, cognitive load theory, Vygotsky's account of scaffolding, and the revised Bloom taxonomy, to explain why observation-before-theory sequencing supports undergraduate analytical writing. The article closes with a discussion of the model's implications and limitations.



Keywords— adaptation pedagogy, cognitive load, experiential learning, scaffolding, virtual production

I. INTRODUCTION

Adaptation studies occupies an uneasy place in undergraduate literature curricula. Students arrive with strong, often unreflective opinions about films “ruining” or “doing justice to” a book, but rarely possess the conceptual vocabulary to explain why an adaptation succeeds or fails on its own terms. This difficulty has intensified rather than eased in the current moment, as adaptation itself has changed shape: today's adaptations are as likely to be produced through virtual-production stages and computationally assisted animation pipelines as through a screenwriter's fidelity to a printed page, and they are as likely to circulate across games, merchandise, and social media as through a single theatrical release. Teaching

adaptation in this environment requires a pedagogy that treats technology, production process, and platform as primary objects of analysis in their own right, not as background detail to a purely literary comparison.

This article documents a pedagogical sequence built around exactly that shift, developed for an undergraduate literature classroom and refined through repeated use. It uses the pairing of *The Lion King* (1994) and *Mufasa: The Lion King* (2024) as the primary case study, because the two films share characters, setting, and thematic concerns while differing sharply in production technology and narrative position (sequel/prequel), making adaptation choices unusually visible to a first-time student of the field. Rather than anchoring the sequence in a single named theoretical

framework, the model is organised around four practical questions that any technologically driven adaptation raises for a classroom: what has technology changed, what does the newer text assume the audience already remembers, how does showing differ from merely telling, and how should students evaluate change without treating it as automatic failure.

II. A PRACTICAL FRAMEWORK FOR CLASSROOM ANALYSIS

In place of a single theoretical authority, the teaching sequence organises discussion around four practical questions, each translated directly into a classroom task.

- Technology as narrative choice. What has changed technologically between the source and the adaptation — animation style, rendering, motion capture, sound design — and what does that change make possible or impossible for the story?
- Intertextual memory. What does the newer text assume its audience already remembers from the earlier one, and how does it use that memory to create meaning it could not create on its own?
- Telling versus showing versus immersive experience. Is a given story beat narrated in passing, dramatised at length on screen, or extended into interactive and transmedia forms — and what does each mode add to or subtract from audience engagement?
- Change as design decision, not deviation. Rather than asking whether the adaptation is “faithful,” what specific effect does each point of departure from the source achieve, and for which audience?

These four questions are deliberately practical rather than doctrinal: they can be asked of any adaptation produced in a digital or transmedia environment, and they do not require students to first absorb a scholarly vocabulary before they can begin analysing. The classroom sequence maps each question onto a corresponding task — noticing technological and design differences; tracing how the newer text depends on memory of the older one; comparing narration against dramatisation against interactivity; and evaluating change on its own terms rather than as automatic loss.

III. PEDAGOGICAL RATIONALE

Three design considerations guided the choice of case study and shaped the sequence overall.

3.1 Shared cultural fluency

Nearly all students in the cohort had seen *The Lion King* (1994) and a large proportion had seen *Mufasa* (2024) on release, which meant class time could be spent on analysis rather than on establishing basic narrative comprehension — a persistent obstacle when the source text is unfamiliar or requires extensive plot summary before discussion can begin.

3.2 A visible technological shift

Mufasa was produced using an extensive virtual-production pipeline in which performers in motion-capture suits drove a quadruped capture system mapping human movement onto the lions' anatomy, while the director and cinematographer previewed and adjusted scenes in real time using a virtual camera within a real-time rendering engine before any shot was finalised (Failes, 2025). The 1994 film, by contrast, relies on traditional hand-drawn animation. This contrast makes production technology perceptible rather than abstract: differences in lighting, texture, camera movement, and facial expression become concrete evidence students can point to, rather than a theoretical claim they must take on faith.

3.3 A prequel structure that foregrounds “showing”

Because *Mufasa* dramatises a backstory that the 1994 film only narrates in passing, the pairing offers a clean, low-friction illustration of the difference between telling and showing: students can identify a specific moment that exists as brief exposition in one film and as an extended, visualised sequence in the other, and can then discuss what that shift in mode adds to, or subtracts from, the story. The franchise's parallel life across games, theme-park attractions, and social media further allows discussion to extend, where useful, into the transmedia and interactive dimension of adaptation.

IV. DESIGNING THE LEARNING SEQUENCE

The assignment is sequenced in two parts, on the principle that undergraduate students generalise more confidently once they have first been trained to observe closely. Part A withholds abstract vocabulary and asks only for structured comparison; Part B introduces the four framing questions from Section II and asks students to apply them to the same material.

4.1 Part A — The Observation Exercise

Before any framing questions are introduced, students complete a comparative observation exercise structured around five categories: narrative structure, character adaptation, performance elements, technical elements, and theme. For each category students complete a short

comparison table and answer a brief reflective question. An abbreviated version of the grid is reproduced in Table 1.

Table 1: Abbreviated observation grid used in Part A of the assignment

Aspect	The Lion King (1994)	Mufasa: The Lion King (2024)	Student Observation
Narrative	Simba's story	Mufasa's origin	
Animation	Hand-drawn	Photorealistic CGI	
Engagement mode	Backstory implied	Backstory shown	
Production tech	2D animation	Motion capture, RT rendering	

This stage is intentionally kept free of abstract terminology: students are asked to notice and record differences before being told what those differences might mean. The category of “performance elements” additionally supports assessment of performance-analysis skills common to adaptation and drama courses, asking students to compare voice acting, emotional expression, and physical gesture across the two films.

4.2 Part B — Applying the Framework

Once the observation grid is complete, students apply the four framing questions from Section II to their own evidence: identifying moments where Mufasa repeats a motif from the 1994 film in a new technological register; evaluating whether the prequel's photorealistic aesthetic enhances or constrains the story's emotional and fantastical

register; and considering what the shift from a hand-animated classic to a motion-captured prequel says about how adaptation itself is changing as a creative practice.

Because students have already generated their own comparative evidence in Part A, they are able to answer these framing questions with specific textual reference rather than generality — for example, using their own notes on lighting and colour grading to discuss how production technology shapes meaning, rather than reproducing a claim about medium abstractly.

4.3 Assessment Rubric

Each section of the observation exercise is weighted equally and assessed against a shared rubric spanning five criteria, condensed in Table 2.

Table 2: Condensed marking rubric applied to each section of the assignment

Criterion	Excellent (4)	Basic (2)	Limited (1)
Comparison	Specific examples	Few examples	None
Characterisation	Insightful	Basic	Minimal
Technique ID	Named/explained	Named only	Missing
Reflection	Thoughtful	Descriptive	Minimal

V. CASE STUDY: WHAT MUFASA MAKES VISIBLE

5.1 Technology as the primary entry point

Classroom discussion consistently begins with technology rather than theme, because it is the most immediately legible difference between the two films. Industry reporting on Mufasa's production describes several thousand motion-capture performances and a year-long virtual-production shoot conducted on a real-time rendering stage (Failes, 2025), giving students concrete, nameable evidence for a claim that might otherwise remain impressionistic: that a shift in production technology is never neutral, but actively

reshapes what a story can express. Discussion then moves productively into critique — students frequently connected the film's photorealistic rendering to a perceived reduction in the exaggerated facial expressiveness available to traditional animation.

5.2 Intertextual memory in practice

Because Mufasa is a prequel rather than a remake, it cannot rely on direct repetition of scenes; instead it must evoke the 1994 film through motif, framing, and anticipation — moments designed to be recognised retrospectively by an audience who already knows what Simba's story becomes. This gives students a clean example of adaptation as

intertextual memory work: the newer film's meaning is legible only in dialogue with the audience's memory of the earlier one.

5.3 Fidelity reframed as a design choice

Rather than asking whether Mufasa is “faithful” to The Lion King, the sequence asks students to treat every point of departure as a decision with an identifiable effect — expanding a minor character, reworking a theme of leadership and legacy for a contemporary audience, or restructuring the timeline as a frame narrative. This consistently shifts student writing away from evaluative statements about betrayal or disappointment and toward analytical statements about function and audience design.

VI. TRANSFERABILITY

The same two-stage design was subsequently adapted for a text-to-film pairing at the opposite end of the technological spectrum: Reginald Rose's play *Twelve Angry Men* and its 1957 film adaptation. Despite the very different register of the material, the underlying structure held: students first complete a comparison grid before being asked to evaluate the specific cinematic techniques — camera angle, lighting, sound — that the play cannot deploy on the page. The transferability of this model across a technologically maximal contemporary franchise and a technologically minimal, mid-century stage-to-screen adaptation suggests that the underlying framework in Section II does not depend on any particular production era or budget.

VII. LEARNING THEORY IN RETROSPECT

The observation-first sequence was not originally derived from a specific learning theory; it was arrived at through classroom trial and refinement. Read back against established learning theory, its design choices align closely enough with several well-established models of how learning is structured that those models offer a useful retrospective explanation of why the sequence works.

7.1 Experiential learning

The two-stage structure maps closely onto Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle, in which a concrete experience is followed by reflective observation, then abstract conceptualisation, and finally active experimentation. Watching and comparing the two films supplies the concrete experience; Part A's observation grid operationalises reflective observation; Part B's framing questions supply abstract conceptualisation; and the transfer of the same method to a second, unrelated text-pair (Section VI) constitutes active experimentation.

7.2 Cognitive load and sequencing

Cognitive load theory (Sweller, 1988) suggests that learners with limited working-memory capacity struggle when required to acquire new vocabulary and apply it to unfamiliar material at the same time. By deferring theoretical vocabulary until after the observation stage, the sequence reduces this extraneous load: students are not asked to hold an unfamiliar conceptual framework in mind while simultaneously trying to notice basic differences between two films.

7.3 Scaffolding and the gradual release of structure

The observation grid and shared rubric function as external scaffolding in a sense consistent with Vygotsky's (1978) account of the zone of proximal development: they provide enough structure that a novice can complete a genuinely analytical task before being able to do so unaided. The later transfer of the method to *Twelve Angry Men* (Section VI) is conducted with a comparable but not identical grid, requiring students to adapt the method themselves rather than simply repeating a fixed template.

7.4 Moving up the cognitive-skills hierarchy

The sequence also tracks the standard progression, in revised taxonomies of cognitive skill (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001), from lower-order tasks such as identifying and describing to higher-order tasks such as analysing and evaluating. Part A confines itself to identification and description; only in Part B are students asked to analyse the significance of what they identified and to evaluate the effect of specific adaptive choices.

None of these frameworks was used prospectively to design the sequence, and the fit described above should be read as a retrospective, explanatory alignment rather than as evidence that the sequence was built according to any one theory.

VIII. PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

8.1 Implications

The sequence suggests three broader implications for the teaching of adaptation studies. First, sequencing matters: postponing generalisation until after a structured observation task appears to produce more evidence-based student writing than introducing framing questions first. Second, production and technical vocabulary functions as a low-stakes entry point for students hesitant with literary theory. Third, a shared, popular, technologically self-conscious case study reduces the preparatory burden of plot summary and frees class time for analysis.

8.2 Limitations

Several limitations qualify these claims. The model depends on students having prior familiarity with the source and adapted texts. The observations reported here are drawn from classroom assignment design and instructor reflection rather than from systematic assessment data, and the claims made about improved analytical writing should be read as provisional rather than empirically validated. The alignment with learning theory offered in Section VII is similarly retrospective rather than predictive. The heavy weighting toward technical and visual noticing also risks encouraging students to stop at description of technique without moving on to cultural and ideological questions. Finally, the case study's reliance on a globally circulated, English-language franchise raises the question of transferability to source material that is less commercially dominant or less uniformly familiar across a cohort.

IX. CONCLUSION

Teaching adaptation to undergraduates works best when generalisation follows observation rather than replacing it, and when the classroom vocabulary keeps pace with how adaptations are actually being made. By pairing a widely known, technologically self-conscious case study with a structured observation exercise and only then introducing framing questions about technology, memory, mode, and design, students are able to build analytical claims out of evidence they have generated themselves. Read retrospectively against established learning theory, this sequencing follows a pattern of concrete experience before abstraction, reduced cognitive load through careful ordering, scaffolded structure that is gradually withdrawn, and a progression from descriptive to evaluative skill. The resulting model is portable and offers both a method for classroom analysis and a foundation for further refinement grounded in how students actually learn to think theoretically about adaptation.

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