As noted in our introductory chapter, a number of challenges must be negotiated when attempting to piece together the pre-history of storyboarding: the lack of surviving material, the sometimes unclear original usage of the documents that have survived, and the difficult task of defining what exactly might be considered an early or prototypical storyboard and what should not. Similar problems have confronted historians of early screenwriting, but there are significant, and revealing, differences.

Arguably, the need for screenplays came into being with the introduction of narrative films around 1903. Prior to this point, the unique attraction of film lay in its ability to represent the movement of objects that were not physically present in the space in which the spectator was situated. By the early years of the new century, however, relatively complex narratives were being devised by such film-makers as Edwin S. Porter in the United States and George Méliès in France; and while the surviving evidence is sketchy at best, it seems likely that what Edward Azlant terms ‘the prearrangement of scenes’, to facilitate the preparation and telling of a narrative tale in cinematic form, brought about ‘the birth of screenwriting’. More or less simultaneously, film-makers began to create written texts for an entirely different reason: to copyright their work in the face of the film piracy that was particularly rampant in the United States at this time. While the resulting texts look very different from the screenplays of today, the combination of these two commercial imperatives resulted in the creation of documents that can reasonably be held to have many of the functions of screenwriting practice today. Until the copyright amendment of 1912, however, there remained ‘a virtual free-for-all in the film business as making and distributing movies became increasingly profitable, with companies borrowing freely from each other’s films as
well as from literary properties and seldom, if ever, giving proper credit’. After this date, a film-maker seeking to copyright a film with the Library of Congress would have to deposit evidence of its existence. Commonly, submitted material included ‘press books, scenarios, synopses, credit sheets, or photographs’. Sketches, however, would not serve the same function, and are generally absent. In short, while questions of copyright materially advanced the development of early American screenwriting, it did not have the same impact on storyboarding.

The widely received understanding of what a storyboard looks like also poses potential problems when attempting to trace the form’s early history. In the context of archival work it requires that the researcher be alert to the cataloguing process itself. One example from the British Film Institute’s Halas and Batchelor archive saw nine colour illustrations, mounted, three per page, upon black A4-sized card simply defined as Animal Farm (1954) storyboard material. While the individual images are pre-production artefacts, from the archival description it was unclear whether the images had been produced in a formative storyboarding mode to plan a sequence of animation, or rather as a colour study to plan the visual mood of the sequence. The latter is accurate. As Vivian Halas and Paul Wells detail in Halas & Batchelor Cartoons: An Animated History (2006), first a comprehensive set of board-mounted, black and white pencil storyboards were produced to plot ‘the continuity of the film’, before Philip Stapp ‘joined Joy Batchelor in writing and producing a colour storyboard’. Troublingly, in Fionnuala Halligan’s more recent The Art of Movie Storyboards (2013), although two of the colour storyboard pages are reproduced, no reference is made to the formative, black and white pencil storyboard that would have informed these later colour boards.

As this example shows, the task of defining storyboard material in the broadest sense is problematic. Eadweard Muybridge’s serial photographs of animal and human motor function serve as a useful illustration. Arranged on the page as a series of independent yet related panels, both recording and suggesting motion through the movement of the reader’s eye, Muybridge’s photographic studies do indeed share a number of visual similarities with what might now be called a storyboard. However, Muybridge was not concerned with planning for motion, but rather capturing and revealing it. As Philip Brookman writes:

Muybridge created an analogous spatial grid of vertical and horizontal lines against which the time-based movements of his subjects were plotted. This grid of evenly spaced and numbered vertical lines, intersecting with the horizontal rules across the bottom of the frame, was