**Documentary Writing & Structure**

**Planning**

Many documentaries look as though they are just filming something that was already there. No need for much planning - just pick up the camera. Nothing could be further from the truth. Most documentary filmmakers spend months in planning.

**The topic**

Out of the vastness of actuality or reality, the documentary creator chooses a topic. The topic does not just come out of thin air. It is not objective and neutral. The topic a filmmaker chooses will be influenced by range of factors, including institutional factors and the filmmaker's own life experiences. personality and political beliefs, as well as the nature of the institution in which he or she works.

The documentary maker Michael Rabiger suggests choosing manageable topics that match the producer's budget and capabilities. Newspapers, magazines, books and even notice-boards can be sources of documentary topics.

Rabiger proposes the following questions:

• Do I already have some knowledge and opinions about this topic?

• Is this a subject I have a strong emotional connection with?

• What is unusual or interesting about it?

• How narrowly can the program focus its attention?

Think small, think local, Rabiger advises. A film about inner-city life may be too large and unwieldy. However, 24 hours in the life of a particular cafe in the city may offer a great deal. Experience in the small world can represent the larger world around it.

Once the topic has been settled on, the filmmaker can plan to use certain people, places and events to present a point of view of the topic. These are carefully selected, but are presented as being somehow typical of the way things are. This planning process involves research, visualizing, arranging interviews and developing the central idea, or exposition.

**Research**

In large production units, a team of researchers works on a documentary. By contrast, in a small scale independent production, individual filmmakers and writers must often do the research themselves. However, all tend to follow a concept development scheme based on the stages outlined on this page.

**Visualizing**

What can be shown? Television and film are visual media, and a documentary uses what can be seen as its main evidence. Action-filled pictures are preferable to lots of shots of people talking. This is the restriction of television, according to veteran current affairs anchor and reporter Peter Couchman. 'You can only tell the part of the story the pictures will allow you to tell.' Documentary makers select pictures of specific people and events from the full range of all possible people and events. These limited selections are then used to represent the larger reality associated with the topic.

**Arranging interviews**

The researcher or producer arranges the interviews during the planning and development stage of a documentary. In current affairs programs, the reporter arranges the interviews. Before filming, some general questions are asked of the interview subjects to determine if they will make 'good television'. To keep the discussion lively and spontaneous, the most interesting questions are left until the actual filmed interview.

An interview can be held anywhere, but the setting does affect the meaning. An interview subject may be more relaxed and communicative at home, or they may feel more anonymous -just one of the crowd - in a park. Unusual settings can add drama and interest to the interview. The setting can also provide a comment on the interview. For example, a documentary series on car crash safety carried out many of its interviews with automotive experts in a car wrecker's yard. In the controversial documentary Against Nature (1997), interviews with environmentalists were often filmed against odd backdrops, such as rows of nude mannequins. At the time, many environmentalists said this made the interview subjects look absurd.

Interviews usually begin with factual questions. These put the interview subject at ease. The more emotionally gripping questions are asked towards the end of the interview. 'The current affairs reporter may desperately want an expert to interview, but also must consider whether the "talent" is good for television. I once interviewed someone who was so nervous [that] their shaking legs were making a knocking sound and the sound recordist complained. The

reporter must consider whether the line-up of experts has appeal, as well as providing a range of viewpoints.

**Vox pops** can be used as light or humorous relief from serious narration or in-depth interviews. The term vox pop is short for the Latin **vox populi**, which means **'voice of the people**'. The technique consists of interviewing seemingly random members of the general public on the street, with each person being asked the same question. The replies are then strung together in a sequence. Vox pops are useful for suggesting there is general agreement about an issue. They can also suggest the opposite - that there is a wide disparity of opinion.

**Developing the central idea**

Once research has clarified the exposition, many documentary makers attempt to write it out as a single sentence. The supporting evidence is then listed in point form under the statement of the exposition. Interviews and action footage are included in the plan. One unique aspect of the documentary is that the exposition is often modified as the production of the program continues. The full expression of its ideas may not be finalized until late in the production.

**The documentary structure**

After the initial development work on the documentary, the material must be organized into a logical pattern. The resulting framework should show the relationship between the ideas and the supporting evidence.

**Narrative conventions**

The documentary genre borrows some of its characteristics from the narrative genre. The structure of most documentaries is dramatic. In other words, there is a definite beginning, middle and end, and a focus on character and conflict. Other conventions of the narrative media forms are also used, including music, special settings and lighting.

**The beginning**: The orientation has to capture audience attention as quickly as possible. There are many ways of doing this. The central question of the documentary can be posed at the beginning in an intriguing way. The most dramatic piece of action footage can be placed at the beginning, or quick interview cuts showing conflicting opinions can be used to capture audience attention.

**The middle:** The complication stage should be the most compelling. The middle section often examines the issue in human terms, with a focus on people and their opinions. Conflict is heightened in the middle section of the program. The script may even develop this conflict to provide blockages to the fulfillment of the exposition. For example, just when the exposition seems to have been made clear, a piece of apparently conflicting evidence may be introduced. However, all complications must eventually support the exposition, just as the narrative hero triumphs at the end of a dramatic movie.

An example of complication built into the narration is shown below.

**Narrator:**

... and the street kids' problems are the result of increasing youth unemployment, a poverty cycle and the breakdown of the family. But for some this simply isn't true. Samantha is 16 and from a well-to-do nuclear family unit. She's a straight-A student and a private school runaway ...

**The end:** The documentary makes the exposition fully apparent by the resolution stage. Any complication built into the exposition must be resolved. At this point the audience is in no doubt as to what the program is saying. It may even suggest a course of action the audience can take to address the problem.

**Conflict**

Issues that involve some kind of conflict make good documentary topics. Conflict can be between people with different beliefs, different goals, different circumstances or ambitions. The conflict can also be within an individual, between individuals and their surroundings, or between generations or social classes. Conflict in documentaries is often shown as developing through several stages. This allows the documentary to use the narrative technique of complication and tension.

The conflict must be shown in action; otherwise it remains no more than an abstract idea in the mind of the filmmaker. Usually some kind of confrontation is orchestrated for the cameras so the audience can see the conflict for themselves. For example, a program may be about a young woman's battle with long term unemployment. The conflict can be shown if she is filmed visiting an employment agency or at a job interview. Clashes with parents or meetings with luckier friends or successful classmates may also illuminate the conflict.

**Movement**

Additional strength can be given to the narrative elements of a documentary if the action has a sense of development or movement. According to documentary maker Michael Rabiger, this movement can take at least three forms:

• **Physical movement,** which can be represented by a journey, a change of job or a change of city

• **Movement in time,** which can be represented, say, by the change of seasons, the growth of a child or a change over a historical period

• **Psychological change**, which can be represented say, by an athlete overcoming fear of failure ex-prisoner adjusting to the world outside.

**Music and sound effects**

Sound is effective in producing an emotional in the audience. Sound can also work to the image or conflict with it and create meaning. In Dennis O'Rourke's documentary nuclear testing in the South Pacific with the images. Hawaiian guitar music mocks the idea of a South Pacific paradise.

Meanwhile beeping noises mixed over the interviews create the impression of background radioactivity.

**Structuring the exposition**

Edgar Willis and Camille D'Arienzo have suggested five commonly recurring patterns used to structure documentary expositions:

• Chronological order of events

• An order based on location, such as a journey

• Classification order, such as the effects of a problem on different groups of people or different environments

• Cause-and-effect order, such as a program on drugs and their effects

• Problem and solution order

**Narration**

Narration holds the documentary together, providing links between segments and controlling the flow of information. On television, narration serves to make things clear. It can also be used to comment on and reinforce what the pictures already show. Peter Mayeux, Professor of

Broadcasting at the University of Nebraska, suggests the following techniques for writing effective narration.

• Keep the narration sparse and concise. It should not dominate the program. Narration should not tell the viewers what they can see already.

• Give a mixture of on-camera and off camera narration.

• Keep the style conversational.

• Relate the narration directly to the progress of the exposition.

• Use narration to either support the image or conflict with it to create another meaning. Mayeux gives the example of pictures showing a war-torn city while a poetic voice-over describes the city as it once was. The narration conflicts starkly with the image and thus creates a sense of great loss.

Two other aspects of narration to consider are **style and timing**. Like news reports, documentaries use the specialized writing style of broadcast journalism. In relation to timing, documentary makers sometimes write the narration and cut the pictures to suit; at other times they may write the narration to suit already edited film sequences. In either case it is important to know the exact length of the narration. A rule of thumb is to aim for a speed of three words per second.

**Scripting**

Scripting for a documentary normally progresses alongside the other production stages. For example, aspects of the narration may not be written until the end of production.

There are usually three stages in script production: these are **the treatment, the outline and the full script**.

•**The treatment** sets out most of the main ideas, and shows the relationship between the main points and supporting evidence. It also suggests the final structure of the program. The treatment is a 'living' document that changes as the documentary production proceeds.

•**The outline** gives an explanation of the basic topic and exposition. It describes the purpose of the program, the audience and the content for major sequences, as well as the overall style of the documentary.

•**The full script** is often not completed until near the end of production. A variety of script styles may be used. However, news journalists often work on documentary projects, so many of them continue to use the news script style.