STAGES OF POST PRODUCTION

In the spirit of community-wide collaboration, we would like to share these time-tested post-production procedures, as well as some of our own editorial inventions, with other editors and directors. New Doc Editing first compiled this step-by-step post guide for its popular seminar "Editing the Character-Driven Documentary", developed for the Film Arts Foundation and the San Francisco Film Society. We would like to thank all the documentary directors and editors who contributed to these professional guidelines.

Director/Editor Collaboration Begins

Articulate the director's vision to the editor, writer, narrator and graphics team. We've codified this process and call it DOVES™ (Director's Outcome, Vision & Editorial Statements). This powerful document outlines the Director's goals and approach to the film. Its purpose is to guide and foster harmony within the post-production team, making sure that the director stays in control of the film by clearly communicating their objectives.

Create First Draft of Doc Plot Map™ based on DOVES™. This copyrighted diagram, available to New Doc Editing clients, outlines the story arc of the film with the same detailed precision that a screenwriter would compose three distinct acts.

View Rushes and Logging

Note scenes that move you, even little moments that strike you emotionally

Note sound bites that make compelling points intellectually.

Distinguish between scenes in which something actually happens, and scenes that will primarily function as b-roll over VO.

In the scenes in which something actually happens, identify the actions that are relevant to the plot, i.e., to the protagonist's quest. If it's not relevant, should it be in the film?

What scenes/footage might work as inciting incident, act climax, backstory, turning points, film climax?

Update Doc Plot Map™.

Paper Edit

When editing projects that are talking head heavy, editors often employ transcripts that are cut and pasted into a paper edit.

The strength of the paper edit is that it can help organize ideas, an excellent tool for an essay film.

The potential weakness of a paper edit is that your first edit will be dialogue heavy and you may miss the potential of verite scenes and visual moments.

Assembly Edit

Construct an assembly edit after ninety percent of your footage is shot, digitized and logged and you have some kind of structure on paper. This could be a paper edit, an index card outline, or a simple, preliminary timeline of your three-act structure.

The assembly cut should not be screened to anyone outside the film's family. It is a tool for editors, directors, and creative advisors. Its function is to see the big picture, the film in broad strokes, when shooting is about ninety percent complete. The chief questions that the assembly should answer are "Is there a story here?" "Is there a film here?"

For this reason, length should be no more than 140 percent of final film. If longer, it is difficult to assess the film's rhythm. For a 60 minute documentary, the assembly should be no more than 84 minutes.

The assembly is your best first guess at structure. If you don't know where to start, try a strictly chronological approach.

Include a little of every scene that might make it in the film.

Include all your killer emotional moments.

Edit the assembly quickly, within a few days. Sequences should be bulky-

represented by two or three long unedited shots. Resist the temptation to finesse edits.

Edit with sync sound. No L cuts, J cuts or vo. This level of fine cutting is a waste of time because you will probably change things. Also, you don't need to see cutaways, etc. to tell is a film's structure is working.

No narration, music, dissolves, cutaways, inserts, special effects. Jump cuts are fine.

Use cards for missing interviews, archival footage, etc.

After viewing the assembly, determine what characters can be dropped because they are not pertinent or they are repetitious?

What ideas/themes can be dropped?

What scenes are not needed?

Update Doc Plot Map™.

Rough Cut

Your rough cut will be seen and evaluated by test audiences and funders.

For this reason the length should be no more or less than ten percent of estimated final TRT. This is so test viewers can accurately judge the film's structure and rhythm.

Lower distracting ambient sound.

J and L cuts with voiceover are OK but don't finesse edits too much.

Include first draft narration as either on-screen text or scratch track narration.

Include temp music, borrowed from available CD's or sound library. If you have a composer in mind, try some of their tracks.

Aim for the correct proportion of the materials that will appear in your final film: live action footage, archival, narration, reenactments, still photos, art work, etc. If some element is missing, for example, an interview that hasn't been shot, then

use a textual placeholder.

No credits.

When showing a rough cut to creative advisors, include an accurate film transcript that they can mark up. Use the left column for listing visuals and the right column for word-by-word dialogue and narration. Include page numbers.

Screening Tips: Show to test audiences, including some experts on the film's subject, and some viewers who are lay people. The audience is always right about what isn't working for them in the film, but rarely right about how to fix it. If viewers are confused, you can't argue with them. They're confused. Directly after screening, ask views to fill out an anonymous questionnaire. The first question should ask about initial impressions of the film. After collecting the questionnaires, then start discussion. Ask people to tell you what's working as well as what isn't working. Ask any specific questions you have. If certain people are dominating the discussion, ask to hear from people who haven't said anything. Don't waste this valuable feedback time trying to explain what you had in mind or defending your cuts. You are there to listen.

After the rough cut screening, determine:

What problems did viewers consistently mention? How can you solve those problems? Is narration required? Is new material needed that require a pick up shoot or additional interview? Should certain scenes be dumped?

Update Doc Plot Map™.

Fine Cut

In composing the fine cut, it's recommended that you rescreen your rushes if you have time, or at least reread your transcripts. Footage and sound bites that escaped your attention the first time around may jump out at your now that your know your structure and sequences.

The fine cut will be viewed by advisors, funders, test audiences. Give them an accurate, updated transcript.

The length should be within three percent of the final TRT.

The film's structure should now be in place.

Include film's title treatment, temp music, temp narration, placeholders for every single forthcoming shot, window dubs of archival material.

Include effects and micro cutting.

No credits, black holes or jump cuts (unless planned for final film).

It's a good idea to do your fact checking at fine cut stage, as you are finalizing your narration.

Update Doc Plot Map™ if needed.

Locked Picture

Locked picture means just that: from now on there will be no more changes to the video part of your film or to the length of your timeline.

After you lock picture, you will overlay the following video: - master archival material - final graphics and animation; - You will lay back the following audio: - final composed music - final narration recording - final sound FX