NEW DOC EDITING™

Documentary Editing

Karen Everett

Documentary Editing, 3rd Edition

"With an insider's love and knowledge of documentary form, Karen Everett takes us into the beating heart of documentary filmmaking. Expressive and comprehensive, Documentary Editing gives us clear-headed and insightful strategies for a range of filmmakerly approaches to a variety of nonfiction subjects. Filled with useful references and possible scenarios, the book will be of enormous help to those of us who have sat in front of our unmade films and wondered how the hell we were going to move forward."

Robb Moss
Director, *The Same River Twice* and *Secrecy*
The Rudolf Arnheim Lecturer on Filmmaking
Department of Visual and Environmental Studies
Harvard University

"A concise and invaluable guide to the editing process that will serve the novice and veteran alike. Karen Everett covers everything from finding and structuring your story to hiring an editor to making a fund-raising trailer in language that is precise and inspiring. This is an invaluable text from someone who knows."
Susi Korda
Producer, *William Kunstler: Disturbing the Universe*

"In simple language, Karen Everett offers a prescription for emerging filmmakers to translate their ideas into film. By following the exercises at the end of each chapter, filmmakers can save themselves untold hours of frustration, by foreshadowing some of the problems we create for ourselves from lack of foresight in pre-production and production."

Ken Schneider
Editor of Peabody Award-Winning *Regret to Inform*

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Holly Million's How to Ask People for Money

We all know an editor who needs to get out of the edit room more often (I just have to look in the mirror). So I was delighted recently to have the heady experience of being on the OTHER side of the fundraising table, giving the thumbs up or down to a slew of documentary directors seeking money for their works-in-progress. Granted it was a mock exercise, part of fundraising guru Holly Million's popular *How To Ask People For Money* class sponsored by the San Francisco Film Society. But as I wielded the power of "yea"or "nay" along with my fellow make-believe funding execs, I learned something very interesting.

The nervous director sitting across from us invariably spent most of his or her precious time and chutzpa trying to convince us that the topic of their documentary was worthy of funding. In most cases, their films were social-issue docs that I deemed worthwhile in a liberal knee-jerk second. The issue that my cohorts and I were most interested in was this: Are *you*, dear director, the right person to bring this film to fruition? Do you have the editorial know-how and right structural vehicle? In short, do you know how to tell a story? If the directors in the class convinced me of that, I forked over the imaginary cash every time.

Structural Models Getting Funding

So I set my New Doc Editing research team on a mission to determine which structural models attract the most funding. We talked with grant agency managers and acquisition

editors, including HBO's Lisa Heller, who stressed the premiere cable station's interest in funding "small stories that illuminate issues." Our research confirmed my sense that the most popular structural mechanism receiving funding these days is the character driven documentary, trailed closely by the essay-style documentary.

Top funding entities like the Ford Foundation, the Sundance Institute and the MacArthur Foundation have differing mission statements, but the recent documentaries they funded all had similar traits: they expose an important social, political or human rights issue; they are often set abroad or portray minorities living in America; and *they are character driven*. And don't forget non-traditional funders, who may have an interest in your topic. See Chapter 19 for more on pitching them.

Other Big Documentary Funders

What about the other big funders? Many films featured in the program guide for ITVS (Independent Television Service), which funds dozens of documentary projects every year, read like a synopsis of three-act structure, featuring a protagonist on a quest against great odds. For example, *Last Chance Journeys* follows brothers Sergei and Sasha as they set off on a long journey through frigid temperatures on handmade wooden sleds, sleep in tents and struggle for survival off the land. We empathize with the protagonists as they face obstacles on their journey to the Arctic Ocean. These character driven synopses are commonplace.

However it would be a mistake to assume that ITVS is primarily seeking character driven documentaries. According to former executive Richard Saiz, while there is nothing wrong with this structural vehicle, ITVS is more interested in funding innovative stories that showcase innovative structural approaches. He points to *Herskovitz*, a documentary broadcast in 2010, as an example of a film that adds interesting storytelling twists to a tried and true model.

Networks like HBO and the Sundance Channel, which may step in with finishing funds for works-in-progress, are likely to green light stories where the climax scene of a character driven doc is a sure thing. And according to the former ITVS Program Manager Cynthia Kane, who developed *Doc Day* for The Sundance Channel, commissioning and acquisition editors are also risk-averse to projects whose outcome is in question. "Broadcasters are coming in later with their finishing funds," says Kane. "As money's gotten tighter, they really need to know that something's going to work." At a minimum that means outlining the protagonist's quest, the obstacles they face, and plausible outcomes. Unlike many broadcasters that offer finishing funds late in the production cycle, ITVS offers research and development (R&D) money and has a special Diversity Fund geared toward giving early R&D revenue.

Having helped many filmmakers apply for the same pots of film funding--including ITVS, Gucci Tribeca and Humanities Counsels--I know how highly competitive these traditional financing sources are. I've also seen how directors with a superb character documentary that tackles a social issue can iterate their application and eventually receive funding from film agencies. But distribution consultant Keith Ochwat says, "Stop applying for the same old grants!" Check out my webinar with Ochwat about getting non-traditional funding. See Appendix B.

Government Funding

Let's not forget U.S. governmental organizations like the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and the National Endowment for Humanities (NEH), which are natural first stops on the documentary filmmaker's journey to fundraising. They are competitive. Projects that do get funded often feature a 3 act structure and obligatory climax scene.

NEA has two principal funding initiatives for filmmakers: The Arts on Radio and Television (Sept deadline) and Access to Artistic Excellence (August deadline). NEH runs the 2-deadline per year initiative called "America's Media Makers" (August and January deadlines). This is probably the single largest pool of funding available to filmmakers through an application process. Check online for the latest deadlines.

Top Box Office Docs

Finally, a glance at the top documentary hits on box office mojo reveals that essay films are running neck and neck with character driven docs in terms of theatrical revenue. Michael Moore's trilogy of essays (*Fahrenheit 9/11*, 2004), *March of the Penguins*, 2005; and *Sicko*, 2007 skew the figures slightly, but it's interesting to notes that structurally, these films are centered around ideas, with characters filling in as mini portraits and vignettes rather than full-blown character arcs. In my opinion, essay films that succeed require the well-honed voice of a master narrator, such as Moore or Werner Herzog (*Encounters at the End of the World*, 2007) or Morgan Spurlock (*Supersize Me*, 2004). First-time filmmakers tend to be drawn to essay-style films because they want to explore an idea, but if they want *funding*, they may be better off pursuing a character on a quest or at least adding a quest to an idea-based film. Note that *Supersize Me* is a great example of a complex documentary that marries a character driven arc with a compelling essay about nutrition.

As mega box office hits like Free Solo (17.5 million, 2018), *Mad Hot Ballroom* ($8 million, 2005), and *March of the Penguins* ($77.4 million, 2005) lure more documentary filmmakers to seek a risky theatrical release, audiences are drawn, too, by the promise that nonfiction cinema can tell stories that are as dramatic and entertaining as feature films. Intensifying a trend that began a decade ago when the acclaimed 1994 film *Hoop Dreams* began its $7.8 million run, commercially released documentaries are more often satisfying a universal human craving for a good story. The late philosopher Hannah Arendt wrote that storytelling reveals meaning without committing the error of defining it. Were she alive today, she might have continued her quest for meaning with a bucket of popcorn and a slate of story-driven documentaries.

Essay-Style Documentaries

Clearly not every documentary filmmaker sets out to tell a story. Historically, PBS-style documentaries often favored a didactic essay format, structured around a central hypothesis. This tradition thrives today in the films of Michael Moore, whose agitprop opus *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004) generated a whopping $119.2 million--the highest theatrical revenue of any documentary to date. *Sicko* (2007) is number twelve in box office revenues at nearly $25 million, and *Bowling for Columbine* (2002,) an earlier Moore film essay structured around a series of questions, grabs the number fifteen spot for box office revenues at $21.6 million.

Developing quietly alongside this dominant essay format are Academy Award-nominated documentaries that grip audiences with the narrative twists of a well-told historical film (*The Times of Harvey Milk*, 1984), the suspense of a social-issue vérité film (American Factory, 2019), or the character transformation of a powerful memoir (*Complaints of a Dutiful Daughter*, 1994). All these well-crafted documentaries borrow from the plot devices of fiction films.

Complaints of a Dutiful Daughter, 1994

Rise of Dramatically Structured Docs

Robert McKee, author of the book *Story* (Harper Collins, 1997) and mentor to countless Hollywood screenwriters, built his career on his claim that "the art of story is in decay." His crusade to revive the craft of storytelling in "razzle-dazzle" Hollywood films may have rubbed off. In the past ten years, the development of dramatically structured documentaries has accelerated, with the success of films like *Capturing the Friedmans* (2003), RBG (2018), Free Solo (2020), and *Enron:The Smartest Guys in the Room* (2005). Oddly enough, some producers credit reality TV with paving the way. Others say that the newsmagazine format perfected the three-act structure for nonfiction moving pictures.

“Robert McKee was old news in the early 1990s in New York,” says Bob Calo, a former Dateline producer. “Clever producers who really wanted to write screenplays took the utter formula of the McKee book and laid it on top of news production—enter Primetime Live, Dateline, and 20/20.” Regardless of the origins of the trend, “narrative” films no longer have a lock on storytelling, and viewers now know that nonfiction can deliver drama. Still, as relative latecomers to the art of storytelling, documentary filmmakers can learn a great deal from screenwriters about the intricate design of three-act storytelling.

The brave documentary filmmakers in Holly Million’s fundraising class reminded me of my own earnest efforts to attract funding for my early documentary films. While I managed to stumble upon a compelling character driven story in my PBS biography *I Shall Not Be Removed: The Life of Marlon Riggs*, some of my other greenhorn efforts weren’t so lucrative. Looking back, I see now that it wasn’t that funders didn’t believe my films about politics or lesbian relationships weren’t worthy topics. It’s that I didn’t even think to ask myself whether the structural models for conveying these topics were being funded or whether I had the editorial know-how to craft these models. Now that I do, I want to spread the word.

CHAPTER 1: POSTPRODUCTION OVERVIEW

As contemporary directors shoot more footage than a cinema vérité old-timer like Richard Leacock could ever have dreamed possible, the process of viewing and logging that footage has become more laborious. Whereas previously the director of a standard 40-hour PBS documentary would view every frame of footage in the stretch of a single week, it's not uncommon now for directors who have accumulated several hundred hours to outsource not only the transcribing and logging, but also the initial culling of best scenes and sound bites. Directors of longitudinal docs (shot over many years) also frequently begin the logging and selecting process as they shoot, in order to avoid facing a mountain of unseen footage at the end of production.

For interviews, transcripts are important. They'll speed up the edit. I suggest using a software program like Rev.com or another transcription software. If you have a lot of footage, avoid renaming your clips, or relinking media can be a nightmare. We'll save the naming for our *sequences*.

View Rushes and Logging

However you decide to abbreviate this initial process, at some point you need to start exercising editorial judgment. Begin by gathering your footage into specific sequences, sometimes called "string outs". What's a string out? "Simply put, a string out is a series of shots that a Story Producer assembles and gives to an Editor," according to narrative feature editor Steven Friedland. These sequences serve two functions: to give the editor a "head start" and to identify a "road map" of the story, Friedland says.

Create individual sequences for each important verite scene. Include *only the key moments*. As one of my editors said, "It's easy enough to find the surrounding clips to build scenes." With verite footage and home movies, also search for interesting dialogue. Distinguish between scenes in which something actually happens, and scenes that will

conversation. I suggest using a software program like Inqscribe or voice recognition technology to speed up the transcribing process.

However you decide to abbreviate this initial process, at some point you need to start exercising editorial judgment. Begin by noting scenes that move you -- moments that evoke laughter, contempt, interest, or empathy. You may not see yet where they fit into your overall plot map, but don't worry too much about structure now. Go for the juice. For interviews, note sound bites that make compelling points, either emotionally or intellectually.

Distinguish between scenes in which something actually happens, and scenes that will primarily function as b-roll over voiceover (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, ask yourself, should it be in the film? Stay alert to potential plot points as well: what scenes might work as the inciting incident, an act climax, a back-story, a reversal, and the final film climax? Here's one final logging tip that I learned from master documentary editor Kim Roberts. Note quiet moments and close ups of character's faces. Kim has successfully used these "portrait" shots of a teen watching TV, a man stroking a cat, even a man looking out the window, to allow the viewer to imagine the interior world and character traits of the people in her films.

After logging, update the Doc Plot Map (a fluid tool described in detail later) and move on to the paper edit.

The 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, and it is excellent tool for an essay-style film. The potential weakness of a

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

Traditionally, documentary scripts are formatted differently than narrative scripts. You can buy software to help script your film or simply use a two-column table in word processing software like Microsoft Word. In the left-hand column type a description of the visual content and, in the right-hand column, word-for-word sound bites and narration. Some people like to put the sound bites in all caps.

Assembly

An assembly edit is your first cut, designed to clarify the film's structure. Construct an assembly edit after ninety percent of your footage is shot, digitized, logged and you have etched a structure out on paper. This could be a paper edit, an index card outline, or a simple, preliminary timeline of your three-act structure, such as a customized Doc Plot Map.

The assembly cut should not be shown to anyone outside the film's family of editors, directors, and creative advisors. Why? Because it looks terrible to the uninitiated eye! Its chunky look actually helps the postproduction team see the big picture, the film in broad strokes, when shooting is winding down. The chief questions that the assembly should answer are "Is there a story here?" and "Is there a film here?"

For this reason, the assembly edit should be no more than 40 percent longer than the final film. If longer, it becomes difficult to assess the film's pace and rhythm. Therefore, for a 60 minute documentary, the assembly should be no more than 84 minutes. Again, the assembly is your best first guess at structure. If you don't know where to start, try a strictly chronological approach.

What do you include in your assembly? A little chunk of every scene that might make it into the film. (I define "scene" as footage shot at a particular venue during a particular time. For instance, morning football practice is one scene and afternoon football practice is another scene.) Include all your characters and experts, including yourself if you are in the film. Include all your "greatest hits" 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. You don't need to cut a traditional scene with a set-up shot, reaction shot, cutaways, etc. Edit with sync sound, meaning no L cuts, J cuts or voiceover. Why? 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 determine whether a film's structure is working.

What else should you leave out of the assembly cut? Narration, music, dissolves, cutaways, inserts, and special effects. Jump cuts are fine. It's important to use cards for missing interviews, archival footage, etc. because those are important factors in judging structure.

After viewing the assembly, determine what characters can be dropped. Whose role is not pertinent? Whose role is repeated by a better character? Which characters work well as foils and should be kept?

If you film is talk-heavy, what ideas and themes can be dropped? What scenes are not needed? Once the assembly cut has been assessed, update your Doc Plot Map if you are using one.

Rough Cut

Unlike the assembly cut, your rough cut will be seen and evaluated by test audiences and funders. For this reason the length should be within ten percent of the estimated final

TRT. For example, the rough cut for a 60-minute documentary should be 54 to 66 minutes long. That way, viewers can accurately judge the film's structure and rhythm.

While J and L cuts (audio starting before video, or video starting before audio) with voiceover are OK, don't finesse your edits too much. You're likely change things and shouldn't waste time fine-tuning scenes that may change. The rough cut is not a time to begin your audio mix but, by all means, lower distracting ambient sound. It's very irritating to try to zone out loud ambient audio during a screening.

Include a first draft of narration as either on-screen text or a scratch track (temp) narration. Include temp music, borrowed from available CD's or a sound library. If you have a composer in mind, try some of their tracks, but don't worry about cutting beats to images at this point. Credits are also unnecessary at this point.

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

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.

You should show your rough cut to test audiences and, since this is such an involved and important process, I've dedicated an entire chapter to conducting a successful rough cut screening.

After the rough cut screening, you need to determine the following:

- What problems did viewers consistently mention?
- How can you solve those problems?

- Does the beginning effectively launch the film with an inciting incident or clearly articulated central question?
- Does the middle of your film maintain momentum?
- Does your film have an effective climax?
- Is the denouement short enough to allow viewers the luxury of thinking about the film on their own?
- Is narration required?
- Is new material needed that require a pick up shoot or additional interview?
- Should certain scenes or characters be dumped?

After these questions have been evaluated and structural decisions have been made, update your Doc Plot Map. You may decide to try a second rough cut in order to nail the structure before heading on to the fine cut.

Fine Cut

In composing the fine cut, I recommend rescreening your rushes if you have time, or at least rereading your transcripts. Footage and sound bites that escaped your attention the first time around may jump out at you now that your know your structure and sequences.

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

The film's structure should now be in place, and for this reason the length of the fine cut should be within three percent of the final TRT. Now's the time start bringing in the sexy goodies, including the film's title treatment, temp music, temp narration, placeholders for every single forthcoming shot, graphic treatments, and window dubs of archival material. Include special effects (visual and audio) to make sure they work, and micro cutting.

The fine cut maximizes your editor's micro-cutting and aesthetic skills. It should contain no credits (still), 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;
- animation

You will lay back the following audio:

- final composed music
- final narration recording
- final sound FX

Once the fine cut is complete, you are ready for what used to be called "onlining", or these days, "finishing." That means adding the final audio mix and color correction. Films with adequate budgets will frequently phase out their editorial staff and move their project to a high-end editing facility where technicians finesse the EQ, brightness, contrast and color saturation, as well as output and transfer to various tape and digital formats.

CHAPTER 2 DOVES™: THE DIRECTOR'S OUTCOME, VISION AND EDITORIAL STATEMENT

DOVES is an acronym that stands for the Director's Outcome, Vision and Editorial Statements. Created by New Doc Editing to kick off the editing phase of the film, its purpose is to clearly establish the director at the helm, define the director's goals and vision, and act as a compass that keeps the entire postproduction team working harmoniously on the same film. A well-composed DOVES will foster harmony.

DOVES is composed of three statements:

1. Outcome Statement

The Outcome Statement defines the director's tangible, quantitative goals for the film. It specifies the demographics of the primary audience, the projected release date, desired film festival screenings, specific broadcast outlets. It may also include the film's influence on larger tangible goals such as policy or legislative changes.

2. Vision Statement

The Vision Statement describes the psychographic profile of film's ideal viewer as well as the film's emotional effect on them. Specifically, how does the director want viewers to *feel* after watching the film? What does the director want viewers to feel motivated to do? The film's tangible *outcomes* (above) depend on the successful realization of the film's emotional *vision*.

3. Editorial Statement

The Editorial Statement specifies the storytelling strategies the director is choosing to achieve the emotional vision and tangible outcomes. In the Editorial Statement, the director defines such things as the film's genre, the protagonist's quest, the structure, the central question and length.

Here is an example of the DOVES exercise that the director of the documentary *An Inconvenient Truth* might have written:

Outcome Statement

I want to complete *An Inconvenient Truth* by May 24, 2006 and I want it to premiere at major documentary film festivals, win awards and air on HBO in order to reach its primary audience of American viewers between the ages of 18 and 65. At a societal level, I want the film to put global warming on the forefront of everyone's mind, persuade people to conserve energy, pressure politicians into passing laws that severely limit carbon emissions, and inspire businesses to use green materials and develop renewable energy.

Vision Statement

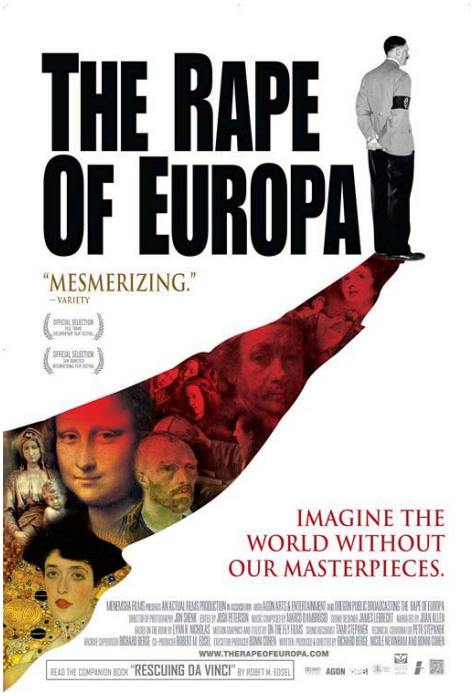
I envision *An Inconvenient Truth* as a wakeup call that highlights an impending global crisis that cannot be ignored. I want the film to speak to ordinary, somewhat informed American citizens--people in the vast middle of the political spectrum who may have heard about global warming, but who are too busy with their work and family lives to do anything about it. After watching the film, I want them to feel *jolted into awareness*. Viewers should feel inspired to take immediate action, contact their politicians and demand more sustainable policies.

Editorial Statement

In order to reach large audiences, effect policy changes and awaken people to this crisis, I will create a powerful essay-style film that will make the case that global environmental disaster is looming. The film has one central question: "Is global warming real and dangerous?" And it answers with a resounding "Yes!" The six chief aims of this film's structure are: 1) to establish that the earth is "sick with a fever"; 2) to debunk the

naysayers of global warming; 3) to scientifically prove that temperatures and sea levels are rising; 4) to present the catastrophic effect that severe water shortages and drought will have geopolitically; 5) to confront the psychology of apathy and 6) to propose solutions.

CHAPTER 3 SEVEN TIPS FOR HIRING AN EDITOR



According to Actual Films producer/director Richard Berge, who directed *The Rape of Europa,* hiring an editor can easily be the most expensive personnel line in your budget. It's an investment you don't want to blow. Here are seven tips to ensure that your postproduction funds are spent wisely.

You're ready to hire an editor and start asking colleagues for referrals. Soon you have a short list of top editors. You make a few phone calls. You quickly realize you either can't afford these big names, or they aren't available. Or perhaps, due to the challenging economy, a few of them are actually wooing *you* … and yet… something's not clicking. Something you can't quite put your finger on…

Tip #1: Find an Editor Who Shares Your Sensibility

The dictionary defines "sensibility" as "a mental or emotional responsiveness toward something." In this case, that "something" is your film, your vision, your dreams and concerns for getting it into the world. How do you know if your potential editor shares your sensibility? Partly by the questions they ask. Have they asked you how you imagine this film will make a difference in the world? Have they inquired about how you want the audience to feel when the credits roll? Do they solicit your heart-felt vision for the film?

An informal survey of documentary directors showed that the most important quality sought in hiring an editor is shared sensibility. Filmmaker Sam Green, who advised the

Documentary Edit and Story Lab at the Sundance Institute in 2008, said that participants came from a wide range of sensibilities. “Directors and editors gravitated toward other people who shared a common aesthetic and sensibility,” reports Green. “If someone understands where you are coming from in a filmic sense, it’s much more possible that they can help you. The most important factor, I think, in finding an editor is connecting in terms of sensibility.”

This can mean a shared political affiliation, socioeconomic background or aesthetic vision. But ultimately, a kindred mindset goes beyond any of these. It reflects one’s attitude toward life and, by extension, the tone of the film. If you want to make an uplifting film, steer clear of someone who relishes pinning the bad guy to the wall. If your vision is one of redemption, hire someone familiar with this theme-- either in their own life, their friends’ or ancestors’ lives.

Another good way to zero in on your potential editor’s sensibility is to ask her to describe her ideal client or her ideal project. For example, your potential editor might say that she likes to work on films relating to social justice, spirituality and the environment. If asked, she might tell you that for her, the perfect director is someone with a refined awareness and appreciation (i.e. *sensibility*) for the power of one’s mindset to influence outcome. An intelligent optimist with good communication skills. Humor is a plus.

Kind of sounds like a personal ad, right?

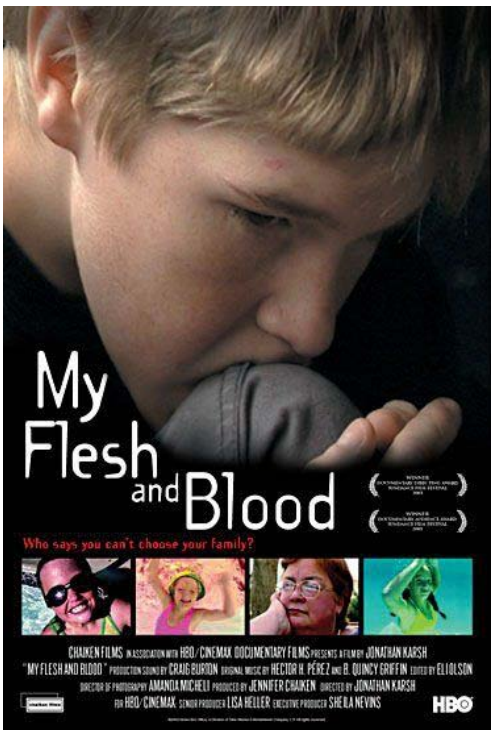
And like a first date, if it’s not a good fit, you’ll feel it in your bones. And sometimes that may mean little shared sensibility. Why? Hiring from outside your comfort zone just might widen your film's audience. Editors who aren't familiar with your topic are a good check for when you're using jargon or making assumptions about what your viewer understands.

Tip #2: Demand Business Savvy

Imagine that you've found an editor who understands your vision, listens well and has more awards than you as a director can ever hope to win. With a sense of relief you prepare to sign on the dotted line, but discover that your editor is reluctant. "We really can't put deadlines into the contract," says your potential editor. "We don't know how long it will take to edit the film."

In a sense, that is true. Why? Because only you, the director, can say when a cut is done or your film is complete. That said, your editor should be able to give you a prioritzed list of editorical tasks for the next 2-3 week. Check out our Accelerated Post schedule.

It's easy to feel gleeful about getting on with the creative aspect of filmmaking, and directors may be tempted to let down their guard when it comes to sound business practices with their editor. Don't. Expect that your editor will respect *your* business enterprise, *your* budget and *your* fundraising efforts with good boundaries.



As an independent, you do not have the luxury of a legal staff or retainer found at many postproduction houses. And it is not the editor's responsibility to draw up a "work for hire" contract, according to Eli Olson, who edited *My Flesh and Blood*, winner of the 2003 Sundance Audience Award. However, many editors have such a contract ready if you need help in this area. In addition, free work-for-hire contract templates are available online, or you can arrange a free legal consultation or take a free class from a non-profit such as the San Francisco Film Society or California Lawyers

for the Arts. Better yet, spend a little money to obtain a customized contract from a reputable attorney who specializes in entertainment law and documentary filmmaking, such as Richard Lee (rjl@leelawless.com), Alan Korn (aakorn@igc.org) or George Rush (george@gmrush.com). According to Rush, small disagreements can easily snowball into major falling outs in the absence of a legal agreement. (He adds that the maelstrom is even worse when collaborators have been romantically involved--which happens more often than you'd think with co-directors!)

While some of the following stipulations are controversial in the independent world, expect your editor to agree to the following:

- A work-for-hire contract that includes a clause assigning IP rights to you;
- a clause with target delivery dates;
- a mechanism for amending delivery dates if needed;
- fee that reflects professional rates in your area;
- invoicing system.

While this may seem like common sense, it's amazing how many directors and editors operate without a written contract. Don't get stuck wondering how long the next cut is going to take, and then feeling resentful when it's not delivered when you expected. Your creative comrade should be just as business savvy as you are. After all, you're paying their salary.

Tip #3 Vet Your Editor's Ego

One of the biggest reasons directors fire their editors is role confusion. Either the director thinks they're an editor, or the editor is a closet director. In the indie world, job descriptions frequently overlap, but it's useful to envision the director as the film's

captain and ultimate creative decision-maker. The editor is the first mate, a structural navigator, and storytelling specialist. Now, since you can't afford to get this part wrong in today's economy, how do you trust your editor to steer the right course while you maintain control of the ship?

One way to do this is to check references. Ask fellow directors how your potential editor was to work with and how they handled conflict. Speaking of conflict… it's inevitable. When ideas jostle about in a creative brew, ideally your editor will have the courage and conviction to make her case--more than once if needed--and the grace to leave the final decision to you. Be aware that ego-deflection can be difficult given that your editor's name will be attached to your project.

Editor Vivien Hillgrove, who will retire from a 40 year award-winning career next year to consult on both Deann Borshay Liem's *In the Matter of Cha Jung Hee* and Deborah Garcia's documentary on *Soil*, says that she tries to "read" what the director really wants and to stay focused on that. Each director has a theme or arc that she has to intuit. "But I'm a pretty bossy doe and will fight for what I think is deep in the director's heart," says Hillgrove, "and some directors may not like that. The bottom line is that I have their baby in my hands and I want to be sure that they are not humiliated or embarrassed when they go out there and that the film is what they truly want to say."

Another way to observe your editor's sense of boundaries and decorum is to audition them first as a story consultant. Before spending thousands of dollars to have them watch your 150 hours of footage and edit an assembly cut, hire them for one day to give you advice on story structure. Assess their reaction when you question or disagree with them. Do they listen to and engage with your ideas? Or are they stuck on their own story?

You too, my dear director, need to watch out for role confusion. One of the saddest stories I've heard about a malfunctioning relationship involved a director who went through four editors, blaming each for not listening to his ideas. I had to wonder if he was

the one who was not listening, because, perhaps, he was so intent on his way of structuring the film. If you're prepared to let an expert help craft your story, then hire a good editor and give them space to do their job. If not, edit your own film--and beware that you may not have the requisite perspective. In that case, hire a top-notch story consultant.

Finally, if the film has two directors, watch out for dysfunctional triangle dynamics, such as your editor playing favorites or directors playing good cop/bad cop. Most of these dynamics can be diffused if your editor knows how to leave his ego at the door. A supportive editor will encourage the two of you, thank you both and make it clear she appreciates your roles as the vision-holders and driving team behind the film.

Tip #4: Get *More* Than Your Money's Worth

The first thing most directors ask upon finding a potential editor is, "What's your fee?" Then they check their budget to see how many weeks of editing they can afford. To really make a great hiring decision in today's economy, you need to ask a few more questions.

I don't mean that you should exploit your editor by demanding 10-12 hour days. In a recent thread in Doculink, editors railed on directors with unreasonable expectations: dozens of DVD's of various cuts, twenty email responses in a day, and extensive handholding throughout reshoots. Getting more than your money's worth really means looking at what your potential hire can offer beyond editing acumen. In business speak; feel confident that your editor is bringing "abundant value" to the table.

Ask your editor about other things they offer. Maybe it's equipment that they'll lease at a discount. Maybe it's their cutting edge technology or their skill with special effects software that will save you from needing an After Effects designer. Maybe it's their address book and contacts. Do they know someone who can help you with fundraising or

distribution? Can they provide you with an assistant editor? Do they have contacts at HBO or IFC? Getting more than your money's worth is a must in a challenging economy.

Another possibility is to keep your eye open for editors who generate ideas for giving value to their director/client. One way I've done this, for example, is to provide directors not only with an experienced editor, but also a day's consultation with an independent, seasoned story consultant. That way the director doesn't have to hunt for a story doctor, plus they get several hundred dollars worth of quality professional work at no charge. Another idea gaining some currency is to give the director guidelines for culling the footage himself, especially if the project contains more than a hundred hours of footage. If the director or an experienced subeditor can cut down the amount of footage the editor handles, obviously that lowers the bill.

Tip #5: Demand Superior Interpersonal Communication Skills

Creative conflicts are fine as long as they don't deteriorate into personality conflicts. The most deadly personality clashes will cost you big time, because you will either be stuck with miserable rapport or foot the bill to hire someone else. Most directors suffer with the former because after investing in an editor to watch hundreds of hours of footage, they can't afford to start from scratch. All this can be avoided if you make the right hiring decision.

How will you know if someone is a good communicator? In your initial interview, determine if they listen well. If they seem confused, do they ask clarifying questions? Do they seem capable of expressing a divergent viewpoint? Are they able to intuit your vision? Ask them to repeat it back.

Editor Vivien Hillgrove (*The Devil Never Sleeps, The Future of Food*) admits to "giving good phone for the initial conversation." She says that before cutting a frame for *The Devil Never Sleeps*, director Lourdes Portillo played *Song for Athene* sung by Celilia

Bartoli. Hillgrove was immediately able to intuit Portillo's vision for the film from the music. "Communication is a subtle thing," says Hillgrove. "Body language or a hesitation before speaking, are all part of a complex relationship." She says that later in the editing process, "when there is an argument regarding a scene or piece of VO with a director, you just hash it out until one of you gets tired, then you try it, and if it works, great. If not, you try something else."

The need for terrific communication skills increases exponentially in situations where two directors are co-creating a film and hashing out structural issues with an editor's voice in the triangle. Director Nancy Kates, who co-directed *Brother Outsider* with Bennett Singer, says that "no matter how sincere and committed everyone is, having more than one director is always going to be a lot more complicated than a single director, especially for the editor." Kates recommends setting up ground rules for dealing with communication issues before they arise. "When I was in film school," she says, "I cut out a quote from one of my documentary books and pasted it above my editing bench. It said something to the effect that documentaries are only as good as the relationships that allow them to be made. This is usually thought of in terms of one's relationships with interviewees, but is just as true among members of the team or crew."

So, what kinds of ground rules or preliminary communications are important for your potential editor to know?

Written documents may include deliverable and deadlines for assembly, rough cut, fine cut, etc. (see Tip #2), but also your goals for the film. Communicating your goals in writing establishes you at the helm of the film and gives the entire postproduction team a compass to keep everyone working together harmoniously. At New Doc Editing, we offer a free writing exercise called DOVES, which stands for Director's Outcome, Vision and Editorial Statements.

The Outcome Statement outlines the director's *tangible goals* , such as projected release

date and desired festival screenings. The Vision Statement describes the film's intended *emotional effect*. Specifically, how does the director want viewers to feel when the credits role? The Editorial Statement specifies the *storytelling strategies* the director is choosing (with help from the editor) to achieve the outcome and vision goals.

Of course, not every producer/director will take a few minutes to outline their objectives in writing, but if you do take this safeguard to ensure that the people you hire stay with you, you've made an important investment during an economic downturn. Your team is waiting to hear from you!

Tip #6 Sync Your Collaboration Styles

How do you like to work with editors? Do you want to be in the edit room (on *your* premises) and sit with your editor several hours a day? Or do you prefer to hand off the digital files and leave your editor to work in their own space for several days at a time? Knowing your collaboration style and hiring someone who synchronizes with it will save you the nightmare of having an unhappy editor resign mid-project.

Deborah Hoffmann, an Academy-nominated editor and director who now works exclusively as a story consultant, likes to hole up with the footage for a spell without the director breathing down her back. She compares working successfully with a director to making a marriage work. "Some people read self-help books and others stumble along on their own," says Hoffmann. "I'm more of a stumbler. But bottom line is it's all about communication, in both cases."

To delve a bit deeper into the psychology of communication and work habits, let's define a couple terms. In self-help jargon, an introvert is someone who gets their batteries recharged by being alone. They love to think things through in the solitude of their own minds and then present their findings—which are often perfectly thought out. Extroverts, on the other hand, get jazzed by being around other people. Their creative juices flow

best by bouncing ideas back and forth until a masterpiece emerges from the jostle. If your editor is an introvert and you are an extrovert, she will feel crowded and mentally shut down if you are, in her mind, standing over her shoulder. Instead, leave her alone and she will flourish. Now…if she is a hard-core extrovert and you leave her alone in the editing room for two weeks, she will find the silence suffocating and mind-numbing.

That doesn't mean a marriage of opposites can't work, but it's important that you know your preferred collaborative style and hire accordingly. When considering *where* your editor will work, keep in mind that "location doesn't equal craft", as Doculink subscriber Gregory Singer put it. Just because your editor works out of her home doesn't mean she's an amateur. These days many veteran editors, who used to work in post-houses or on the director's premises, prefer the solitude and ease of their own surroundings.

How will you know how to judge your editor's and your collaboration styles? For the truly curious, there are several personality tests available online, including the famous Myers-Briggs test at http://www.humanmetrics.com/cgi-win/JTypes1.htm. But the simplest question you can ask yourself is this--do I want to consult with my editor every day or two--or every week or two? Then ask your potential editor, "How often do you like to check in with a director? What arrangement is conducive to your best work?" Hire someone who is clearly comfortable with your working style. Know, too, that it doesn't have to be a perfect match. In my experience, the editing profession tends to attract introverts. But even directors who are deeply social beings can work with introverts. Go chat up some HBO execs, do pre-interviews for your next project, have a cup-o-Joe with an angel investor--and give your editor space to create.

Tip #7: Hire a Structural Specialist

One of the biggest reason postproduction budgets spiral out of control is because the editor is still hunting for the film's structure. What should be a 5-part postproduction cycle--paper edit, assembly, rough cut, fine cut, locked picture—gets bogged down at

rough cut stage when the editor churns out a second, third, fourth and sometimes fifth rough cut. While it's not uncommon for docs to have two rough cuts, more than that is a red flag that this editor may bust your budget.

In her excellent workshop on film structure, expert Fernanda Rossi, urges directors not to hand over the structural work of the film to the editor, but rather to *own* the editorial approach by doing the hard work of figuring out the story yourself. Sage advice. Any Joe with FCP loaded on their laptop is calling himself an editor these days.

To make the best hire, bring on board a qualified editor who specializes in storytelling and can talk structural shop as your equal. Beware of hiring a hard-headed structural purist who approaches every film with a pre-conceived formula within which your content must fit. As Sheila Bernard Curran says in her highly-rated book *Documentary Storytelling*, films about real life *approximate* the three-act structure. Having said that, your editor should know the classic three-act structural model inside and out, particularly if you are making a character driven film.

So grab the bull by the horns and ask your potential hire some tough questions… such as "I'm curious--how does each act in the three-act structure differ from the other acts?" (For the answer, see my Storytelling Article in Three Acts.) In their opinion, what makes a good opening? How would they deal with a sagging middle? If the film had too many characters, what criteria would they use to cut some? What makes a good climax? Ask them to explain the difference between an essay-based doc and a character driven doc.

Then check their work. Are their films well-composed in your opinion (did you get bored)? Have they written or taught about structure? The more your editor knows about structure, the less likely you will waste money funding their discovery process.

CHAPTER 4 ORGANIZING YOUR BINS

Ingesting Footage

The majority of non-linear editing systems employ a bin or folder method to help editors organize their footage. This chapter displays screenshots of the Final Cut Pro Studio Browser window, but it is easy to duplicate this strategy in other software programs. Planning out your organizational strategy before you start ingesting footage is critical, and for the anal, left-brained editing geeks among us, myself included, this will be fun. For the rest of you, remember that having a clear structural hierarchy for your clips will save you time and money in the editing process, particularly if you have to change editors midway through post.

The following recommendations are based on years of experience as well as tips from several top editors. Take what works for you and feel free to improvise.

Before formatting my Final Cut Pro project, I like to keep a footage guide during production. At a minimum, whether you are shooting tape or on cards, I recommend tracking the name of your source material, the location, date and contents. Note that in the sample guide on the next page, each folder is labeled with a 7-digit name. Before shooting, I recommend creating folders on your external drive to transfer footage to. Folders should be labeled very specifically with a 7-digit name: the date, plus a letter for each P2 card cycle. For example, the first card shot on September 11, 2008 would be labeled 080911A. This naming protocol will keep your files chronological.

Note: The data on P2 cards is stored as .MXF files (Material eXchange Format). MXF files are made up of two parts, a folder named "CONTENTS" and the "LASTCLIP.TXT." NEVER CHANGE THE NAME OR CONTENTS OF THESE TWO ITEMS! Copy the "LASTCLIP.TXT" file first to speed up data transfer. Then copy the "CONTENTS" folder.

Tip: Highlight the folder you transferred data to with a color (under File menu) so you know which folder to transfer data to next.

Eject the P2 card, undo the Write Protect tab, put in camera, reformat card in camera (to avoid mistakenly reformatting card in computer before transfer is complete.)

If you are shooting tape, I recommend labeling each tape with a three digit number, for example, 001, 002, etc.

Sample Footage Guide

PROJECT NAME:
YOUR NAME:

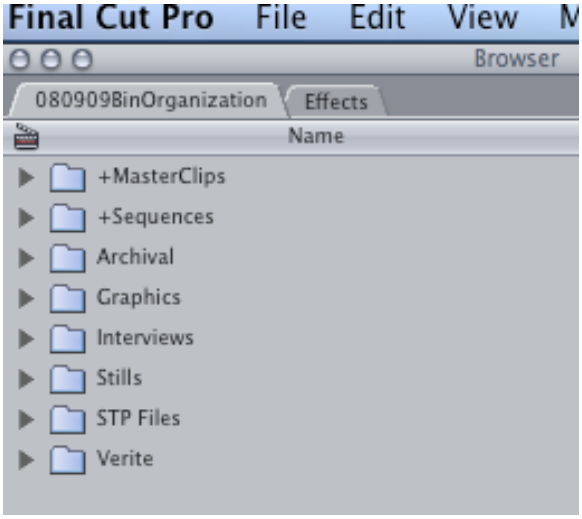
FOLDER name	Shoot location	Contents
080910A	San Francisco	Jon Brown interview
080910B	San Francisco	Jon Brown interview
080910C	San Francisco	Jon Brown interview; Jon Brown at piano
080910D	San Francisco	Jon Brown at piano
080910E	San Francisco	Jon Brown at piano
080911A	Berkeley	Misty Crow at office
080911B	Berkeley	Misty Crow at office; Exteriors of office
080911C	Berkeley	Exteriors of office; Tracking shot of MC's street

Project Naming Protocol

In naming your new NLE project, I suggest using the 6-digit date, again in this order: the year, the month and the day. For example, a Final Cut Pro project slugged "school" that was created on September 11, 2008 would be called 080911School. This new naming policy assures that all projects and sequences will appear chronologically. I borrowed this technique from a postproduction supervisor at Current TV and found it very helpful in tracking multiple projects and sequences for both my clients and students at UC Berkeley.

Bin Hierarchy

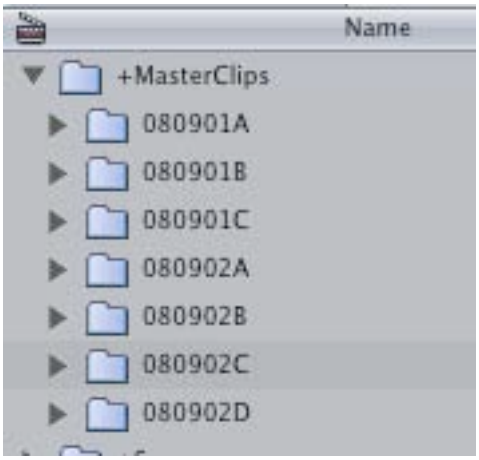
Organizing your bins is not that difficult. In the protocol suggested below, note that I've created a bin for every type of footage: interviews, graphics, vérité footage, etc. I also have two very important bins appear at the top of my Browser



I like to keep an unadulterated version of my master clips in a Master Clips bin. I name that bin with a "+" prefix so it will appear at the top of the Browser. If I am ingesting footage from P2 cards or a similar device, I will retain the name and metadata from that

clip so have the original clips remain available. If my media ever becomes unlinked or my .mov files are lost, this process will make it easier to re-link to the original data.

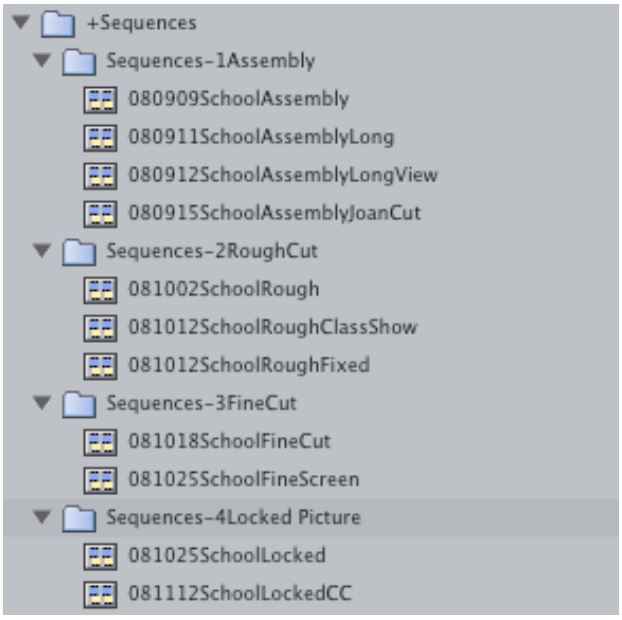
Once all my bins are created and organized (more on that in a minute), I will duplicate my master clips and place a copy in the appropriate bin. Note that in Final Cut Pro, you cannot simply duplicate (Option D) and rename a clip without changing the name of the master clip. Instead, control click on the clip and choose "Duplicate as New Master Clip." That way you can rename the clips without changing the name of the original master clip. In the example below, sub bins keep original clips organized by date. Knowing the date and name of your master clips, you can always refer to your Footage Guide to find out the location and content of the footage.



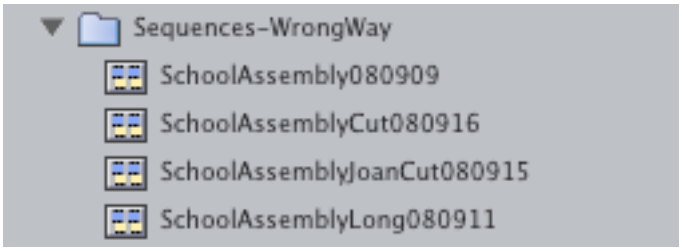
Sequence Naming Protocol

I also label my Sequences bin with a "+" prefix so I will not have to hunt for this frequently used bin. It appears at the top of my Browser. Within the sequence bin, I recommend creating four sub bins for the four stages of postproduction: Assembly, Rough cut, Fine cut, Locked picture. Note that within these sub bins, sequences are labeled with a six-digit date (year, month and day) and then a short description. While this may appear anal or like too much work, the payoff is that your sequences will always appear in chronological order, no matter what descriptive name you give them.

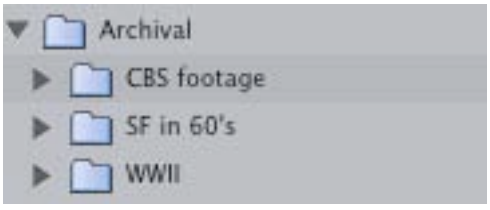
Note: avoid labeling sequences “final”, as there is inevitable one more “final final” to add to the confusion. Use sub bins and six-digit dates instead.



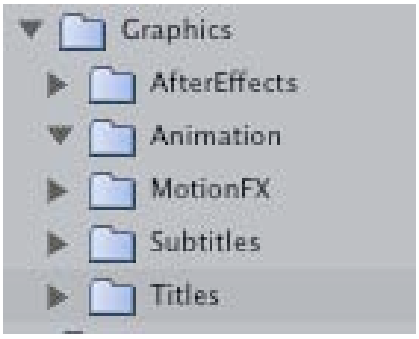
In this example, the date appears at the end of the name, thereby undermining the ability to list sequences chronologically.



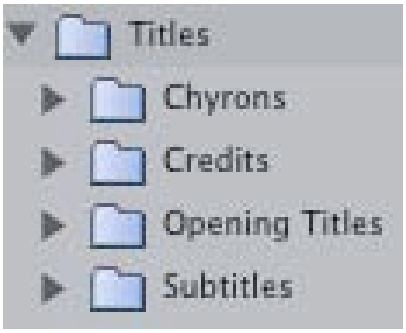
Many projects will feature an “Archival” bin, which can be subdivided into types of archival footage for easy access.



Graphics can mean many things, so use your intuition to separate out the different types of graphic elements that will appear in your film. Include a sub bin for titles if you want, but I suggest making a separate "Titles" bin that includes sub bins for subtitles, chevrons, credits, etc.



This example features sub bins for titles.

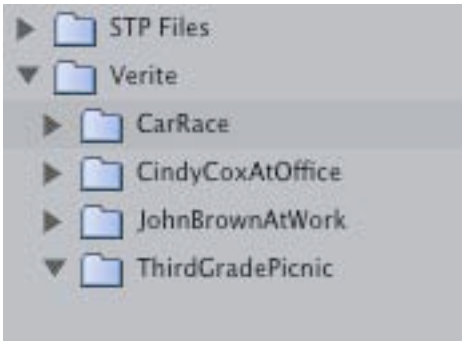


The interview bin features sub bins for each character. If you've interviewed your film's participants more than once, you may want to separate out these clips, as in the example below.

Stills can mean photographs, newspaper clippings, screenshots, or any variety of so-called “flat art.”

I recommend keeping your Soundtrack Pro files (or any special audio files, such as sound FX) in a separate bin. If you have multiple special video effects, create a special bin for these as well, separating out color correction filters applied to specific interviews if appropriate.

Finally, I recommend creating a b-roll or vérité bin, and making sub bins within to categorize each scene, generally by character. If you have several characters whose story arcs do not overlap, you may want to create sub bins by character, and then a third tier of sub bins within each character bin that contains scenes pertaining to that person. The following example does not display that level of complexity.



CHAPTER 5 RATING YOUR DOCUMENTARY'S STORY POTENTIAL

"We'll fix it in post," may work fine when you forgot to white balance or turn off a noisy air conditioner, but if you forgot to vet your story potential, constructing a narrative arc in the edit room may prove challenging.

I recently worked with a director who took advantage of my free initial consultation, in which I rate the story potential of a director's documentary. I watched her trailer and read her synopsis the night before, and while the protagonist of her film was clearly admirable for her compassion and generosity, I was, well, bored. I was watching a profile, not a story. The profile was a pleasant slice of life--devoid of obstacles, but containing myriad words of praise for the main character. The combination made the trailer Pollyannaish. On a scale of 1 to 10, I rated the story strength at a 3. How was I going to break this to the director? First I congratulated her on gaining access to such a talented and spiritually evolved musician. I then asked her what she felt she most needed to move her film forward, having already shot sixty percent of the principal photography. Fortunately, she said she needed help with dramatic structure.

Tutorial on Story Structure

So I gave her a mini-tutorial on story structure. She needed: A) a character who deeply desires something (Act One) that is B) difficult to obtain (Act Two) and C) calls forth the character's deepest reserves in a final emotional scene (Act Three) that answers the film's central question-- did the protagonist get what he wanted?

My client was all ears. She realized that her protagonist needed a clearly defined quest and had to face conflict in obtaining his goal. Working with such an open-minded director, our next task would be fun: using well-developed strategies to elicit and shape the poignant stories that live in everyone's life.

Today's Funding Climate

Before we get into the specific criteria that will help you determine if you have a story, let's revisit the reality of getting a doc made and seen in today's funding climate. It's interesting (and, to some, infuriating) to note that of the eleven world-class documentaries that won awards at the 2009 Sundance Film Festival, ten of them easily fall into the genre that has stormed the independent documentary world since *Hoop Dreams* debuted in 1994: the character driven documentary. Of the eleven documentaries listed below, the first ten all are character driven. Only the last one, *Good Hair*, is an essay-style documentary.

Hoop Dreams, 1994

The 2009 Sundance Film Festival Award Winners:

- Grand Jury Prize: U.S. Documentary - *We Live in Public*
- World Cinema Jury Prize: Documentary - *Rough Aunties*
- Audience Award presented by Honda: U.S. Documentary - *The Cove*
- World Cinema Audience Award: Documentary - *Afghan Star*
- Directing Award: U.S. Documentary - *El General*
- World Cinema Directing Award: Documentary - *Afghan Star*
- U.S. Documentary Editing Award - *Sergio*
- World Cinema Documentary Editing Award - *Burma VJ*
- Excellence in Cinematography Award: U.S. Documentary - *The September Issue*

- World Cinema Cinematography Award: Documentary - *Big River Man*
- World Cinema Special Jury Prize: Documentary - *Tibet in Song*
- Special Jury Prize: U.S. Documentary - *Good Hair*

This trend continues a dozen years later in 2021. Why has the character driven approach dominated the market, becoming the genre of choice for funders and acquisition editors at HBO, PBS and other broadcast outlets? And what if your footage doesn't fall into a story?

Character Driven Documentaries Entertain

First realize that you may have a theme-based film. If you have a "story" in the classic screen-writer sense (which Hollywood guru Robert McKee articulated in his seminal book *Story*), your film will *naturally* fall into the three act structure that has enthralled audiences on stage, in literature and in narrative films since Aristotle first laid them out. With a little guidance from a story editor, you don't have to manipulate reality or make something up. The truth is that character driven films are popular because they are fun to watch. They're entertaining--a good antidote for delivering the depressing social-issue message that we American documentarians do so well and often.

If you *don't* have a story--a character in pursuit of a desire against great odds--then you will probably curse the popularity of this dominant genre as you do backbends to fit your idea into "narrative structure" (inciting incident, plot twists, climax, and denouement). If it's any consolation, every significant documentary trend (ethnographic films, historical biography, direct cinema) has waxed and waned, and the character driven film someday too be eclipsed by a fresher documentary form.

Definition of Character driven Film

Now, what exactly is a character driven film? How do you know if you have one? A recent discussion on *Doculink*, a popular online forum, revealed that many filmmakers think “character driven” means following an interesting character around. But that’s only the start. The character must want something, and the more specific the object of desire, the better. For example, “making it to the border of Mexico” is a more concrete and riveting goal than “escaping the law” (to use an example from the classic three-act narrative film *Thelma and Louise)*.

In the example below, the story synopsis for *Home* (Sundance Channel, 2005) identifies the protagonist (Sheree Farmer), her goal (to purchase her own home), and the obstacles she will face in pursuit of this goal (drug-infested streets, looming debt and a fight with her daughter).

“Documentarian Jeffrey Togman presents an intimate, "warmhearted [and] unsparing glimpse into the psychology of poverty" (*Village Voice*) by following a single mother's quest to purchase her own home. Determined to leave the drug-infested streets of Newark, where she is raising six children, Sheree Farmer seeks help from Mary Abernathy, a former fashion industry exec who runs a non-profit program offering affordable housing. But looming debts and a fight with her daughter pose seemingly insurmountable obstacles on the pathway to Sheree's dream.”

What if your protagonist has a great goal but the story is yet to emerge? I recently worked with a frustrated director to re-cut a documentary short that featured a great quest. We were trying to “fix it in post.” I was initially perplexed that the film was being rejected by festivals and distributors. The director followed a young woman who competed in the male-dominated world of windsurfing as she pursued the state title. He had a classic built-in goal, the race, and his cinematography was remarkable. But once I watched the film, the problem was evident: there were no obstacles. With the support of her parents,

her coach and her own disciplined practice, this young woman quickly rose to the top of her game. Nice ride, but not riveting.

Compare that to the synopsis for *Cowboys in India*, a recently-funded ITVS project which emerged from some 385 submissions in the 2008 International Call to become a riveting character-based film:

"Aided by two inept locals (already we sniff conflict), director Simon Chambers goes to the poorest area in India (conflict) where a tribe is fighting to save a sacred mountain from multinational mining moguls (conflict featuring mighty opponents) who say its resources will bring prosperity to the people. *Cowboys in India* explores accusations of murder (dangerous obstacle) and whether the company-built hospitals and schools actually exist (more challenges)--landing these investigators in bigger trouble than expected (promises of even more conflict)."

Story Focusing Exercises

If you're not sure if you have a story, try the following simple, story-focusing exercise that I use in my documentary editing seminars. Fill in the blanks for these three sentences. Note that each sentence represents the gist of each of the three acts in classic narrative structure. Remember, Aristotle gave us a form, not a formula, so there's endless variation within these three simple guidelines. If you have more than one protagonist, then focus on just one character for now:

ACT ONE LAUNCHING THE QUEST

_____ (protagonist's name) wants _____ (goal--be as specific as possible) when _____ (inciting incident) happens.

ACT TWO ENCOUNTERING CONFLICT

In pursuit of this goal, protagonist encounters _____, _____. and _____ (obstacles, complications, challenges--place three in order of escalating difficulty) when _____ happens

.

ACT THREE SUPREME DIFFICULTY/RESOLUTION

The protagonist finally reaches/doesn't reaches their goal after _____ _____ (most emotional and challenging scene) happens.

Now you have an easy way to rate your story potential on a scale of 1 to 10. If you've shown a bit of your footage to other people and they think you have an interesting character, give yourself 3 points. If you were able to fill in the first sentence with a specific object of desire, such as ousting a corrupt tribal leader (*Wounded Knee*, 2009 Sundance selection), winning an American-idol type contest (*Afghan Star*, 2009 Sundance World Audience Award) or swimming past the guards to expose a dolphin-slaughter pit (*The Cove*, 2009 Sundance Audience Award), give yourself 3 more points, bringing you to a 6. If you can find three obstacles that your protagonist faces (and that you can capture on film), give yourself an 8. Congratulations, you have a story--almost! If you have a protagonist with a desire for something that is difficult to achieve, you've probably got enough mojo to get funding and start shooting a vérité film.

Crafting a Story Climax

I have a friend who is directing a documentary about a 7-year-old boy who dresses like a girl, acts like a girl, and wants to play the part of a girl in the school play. Does my friend have a story? Yes. Assuming she has access to the people in the child's life, it's highly likely that conflict, and even a climax scene, will emerge given the clash between this child's emerging gender identity and societal norms. Maybe the conflict is with the boy's parents (who think it's time Billy stopped playing in mommy's high heels). Maybe it's

Billy's second-grade playmates (who think it's strange that their classmate wants to wear skirts and jump rope). Maybe it's the drama teacher who insists that a girl must play Juliet.

When will you know if you have a climax? You'll feel it in your bones. But for the more left-brained among us who seek a clearer definition, the climax of a character driven film is the most riveting emotional scene in the film, because it requires a supreme effort from the protagonist. It's the final hour, the heat of the battle, the dark night of the soul that summons one's deepest reserves. That's half the equation. The other half is that the climax scene must answer the film's central question—did the protagonist get what they want?

EDITING YOUR FOOTAGE

CHAPTER 6 SQUEEZING REALITY INTO THREE ACTS

Aristotle's three-act structure has withstood the test of time for centuries. But how does this enduring *dramatic* structure apply to nonfiction films about *real* people and events? Novelists and screenwriters are free to design scenes into a scrupulously plotted three-act structure. They are limited only by their imagination and the credibility of their characters' actions. Documentary filmmakers, however, must design scenes based on real life.

The tension between "what was filmed" and "real life" presents special challenges. The documentary editor selects from a finite audio and/or visual recording of real conversations, actions, events, and images. If the bona fide event—what filmmaker Jon Else calls the "genuine article"—wasn't filmed, then substitutions must be found. The editor then attempts a meaningful ordering of real life.

Whether the editor is using a three-act storyboard or some other narrative design, she must stay true to actual happenings while simultaneously coaxing and contorting them into climaxes and plot turns. "I've spent a lot of my career," Jon Else writes in Documentary Storytelling (*Focal Press*, 2004), "trying to make real people in the real world behave like Lady Macbeth or Hamlet or Odysseus or King Lear." In this chapter, I outline the principles of classic three-act structure as taught by professional screenwriters, and examine how documentary filmmakers can adapt these structural demands to the limitations of their medium and the random unfolding of real life.

Definition of Story

Many first-time documentary filmmakers are stumped as soon as they enter the editing room. They had set out to explore an issue by telling a story rather than narrating an essay-type film. They had heard that, unlike fiction films, documentary stories are often composed during the editing process. As they assemble footage from even the rosiest production scenario--brilliant interviews, stunning cinematography, and never-before-seen archival footage--these filmmakers discover in postproduction that they are adrift. Their instinct to hire an editor, or at least a consulting editor, is a good one. They are too close to the material. Sometimes, however, after reading the treatment and looking at the footage, an editor will determine that the project has a fundamental flaw: a story was never present from the beginning.

A story, in the screenwriter's sense of the word, is not a profile (for example, a film about an eccentric uncle who farms nuts), a condition (human rights abuses in Haiti), a phenomenon (the popularity of multi-player video games), or a point of view (Social Security should be privatized). Robert McKee defines story as "the great sweep of change that takes life from one condition at the opening to a changed condition at the end." The key question in defining this "great sweep of change" is: "What does the main character want?" The answer to that question launches the film's narrative arc.

Unfortunately, many novice filmmakers wait until postproduction to come to grips with this question. Seduced by cheap technology and the thrill of directing the camera like a fire-hose, they amass hundreds of hours of footage but fail to capture the launching point and plot turns of a story. Straddled with expensive transcription costs, they hope a miracle-working editor can cure their postproduction paralysis. Sometimes a few pick-up shoots and a well-written narration can do the trick. Sometimes the best advice is to move on to the next film. Screenwriters understand that defining the hero's quest is the foremost dramatic requirement of a three-act structure. For documentary filmmakers,

honing in on the protagonist's desire in their earliest concept paper is a mandatory preamble to rolling film.

Approximating the Three-Act Structure

According to Syd Field's *The Screenwriters Workbook* (Dell, 1984), "A screenplay follows a certain lean, tight narrative line of action." By contrast, documentaries do not fit tidily into three acts and their narratives often take detours or are slowed with weighty exposition. Editing nonfiction is an approximation of the screenwriter's precise three-act structure. Devising a narrative arc, however, does not mean dividing the film into three parts and arbitrarily labeling each part an act. The first, second, and third acts look remarkably different from one another and each fulfills a unique and specific purpose. Act One sets up the protagonist's desire (boy meets girl). Act Two presents obstacles that thwart the goal (boy loses girl). In the final act, the climax reveals whether or not the protagonist achieves his heart's desire (boy wins girl forever after).

CHAPTER 7 EDITING THE INTRODUCTION

Introductions are frequently the most difficult part of a documentary to craft. Often it takes several passes to get it right. Don't stress about nailing the perfect introduction on the first or second cut. Be open to experimenting with different approaches.

An ideal introduction (first 3-5 minutes of the film) will achieve five objectives: impress with production values, hook the viewer, showcase an interesting title design, provide a "roadmap" to give the viewer a sense of what the film is about, and introduce the film's storytelling grammar. In addition, if your film is a character-driven story, try to get to the inciting incident (catalyst event) as soon as possible.

Impress With Production Values

Aim to impress your viewer straight out of the gate with your film's high production values. The first 20 to 30 seconds should feature some of your best cinematography. Include shots with breathtaking lighting and composition. Also, make sure the audio is pristine – no poor audio at the top. Why? Research shows that the first thing audiences notice when watching the movies is not what the film is about, but how it's made. Impress your viewer at the top with the excellence and professionalism of your moviemaking! For an example of an impressive documentary introduction, check out the opening shot (pictured) of Joshua Oppenheimer's *The Act of Killing* (2012).

Three-Part Documentary Convention

Think of the opening of your film as consisting of three parts: the pre-title footage, the title, and the post-title footage. A common and useful documentary convention states that the first part--the footage *before* the title--looks remarkably different than the footage just *after* the title. This gives your film the advantage of an additional fresh start after the title, as well as more opportunities to get your unique storytelling devices off the ground. For example, if you start

with performance footage and narration, then after the title you might open with soundbites, and archival footage.

Establish the Film's Storytelling Grammar

In the first seven minutes of the film, establish your film's storytelling grammar. Introduce early on all the unique stylistic you've chosen, such as stylized interviews, montages, animation, recreations. archival footage, news footage, etc. Then cultivate these unique signature stylistic choices by returning to them throughout the documentary. These include special-effects and editing styles (such as the use of jump cuts).

Periodically returning to a signature look or sound will give your film a cohesive artistic feel—and avoid startling the viewer well into the film with "grammar" they've never encountered before. It's OK to book end (start and end) your film with a particular storytelling device, such as archival footage of a funeral scene. But try to avoid the "one trick pony" aesthetic. Randomly featuring a particular style only once in the film risks startling the viewer. That lone animation, for example, will stick out like a sore thumb. Again, aim for a well-designed integral feel.

CHAPTER 8 ACT ONE: LAUNCHING A CHARACTER DRIVEN DOCUMENTARY

Act One: The Set Up

The function of Act One is to establish the world of the film, introduce us to the characters, and launch the protagonist's quest. In a two-hour dramatic film, Act One (also called the "setup") runs about 30 minutes, or a quarter of the film. At the start of the act, the audience is introduced to the film's setting and characters. The audience doesn't yet know whom to root for. When the world of the film is "normal," meaning without life-altering conflict, all characters have relatively equal value in terms of audience empathy.

A true protagonist emerges at the "catalyst" or "inciting incident," when an external event upsets this character's world. This mandatory structural device kicks off the real story, as the protagonist begins her quest to restore equilibrium to her life. For example, in the action movie *Jaws* (1975), a woman is killed by a shark and the town sheriff finds her decaying body. This horrific discovery is the inciting incident, or catalyst, because it begins the sheriff's quest to kill the shark and thereby restore tranquility to the terrorized resort town.

The inciting incident does not have to be a negative event. In a love story, for instance, the inciting incident is falling in love, which launches the lovers' quest to stay together against the odds. The passion between Romeo and Juliet in Shakespeare's play, though euphoric, uproots life as they knew it. Falling in love, like any catalyst, throws life out of balance and initiates these two characters into the story as "protagonists." While many people use the word "protagonist" to simply mean "main character," screenwriters define the protagonist as a character who possesses a yearning or desire for something. In Romeo and Juliet, two protagonists share a common quest.

Portraying the Inciting Incident

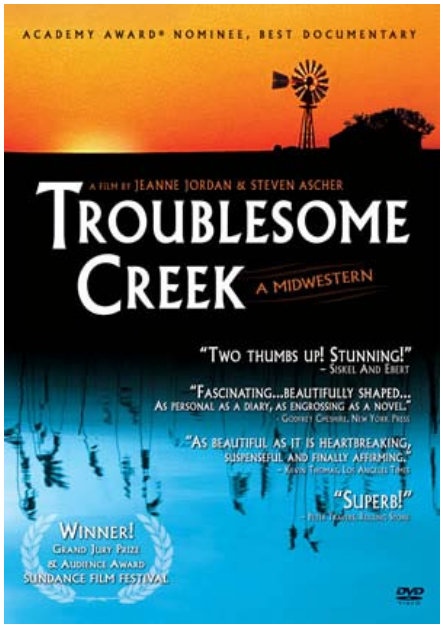
The inciting incident plays such a critical function in the overall story structure that Hollywood screenwriters follow a rule: the inciting scene must be visually depicted on screen, preferably in present story-time. In other words, the story cannot be launched through exposition (boring) or back-story (too removed). This imperative presents a major problem for documentary filmmakers. Frequently, by the time a documentary filmmaker gets interested in a film, the inciting incident has already happened. Equally problematic, this rousing scene was probably not caught on film.

Sometimes filmmakers get lucky. They set out to film one story, and a more powerful story unfolds in front of the camera. In *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised* (2003), Irish filmmakers Kim Bartley and Donnacha O'Briain set out to profile Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez. Well into production, the directors suddenly found themselves in the midst of a coup. They caught the violent political upheaval on camera, the film shifted gears, and the filmmakers had a visually riveting catalyst for their first act.

Other filmmakers get lucky by discovering home movies or archival footage that will portray the inciting event. But these instances of serendipity are the exception. If a documentary filmmaker does not have footage of the actual inciting incident, how does she bring it to life on screen? One common solution is to comb through interviews for a sound bite that reconstructs the inciting incident. Sometimes even a periphery character can recall a particular moment that will change the lives of the characters forever. In *Capturing the Friedmans*, an 88-minute documentary, the inciting incident occurs seven minutes into the story, when a postal inspector appears on screen for the first time. He recounts that in 1984, U.S. Customs had seized some child pornography addressed to Arnold Friedman. The postal inspector describes how he then entrapped Friedman by dressing up as a mailman. He delivered Friedman a magazine for pedophiles and returned an hour later with a search warrant.

Constructing an Inciting Sequence

If an interviewee is going to relate the catalyst event, an editor should choose the most detailed and charismatically told incident possible. Remember, this moment is when the story is supposed to take off. If a lackluster sound bite can't fuel the launch, an editor may need booster material like narration, location footage, reenactments, or animation. Whereas a screenwriter can start the story with a single inciting scene, the nonfiction storyteller must often construct an inciting sequence. As long as the sequence gets the story off the ground, it's fine to employ a slow burn rather than pyrotechnics.



The film *Troublesome Creek: A Midwestern* (1995) makes use of this solution, cleverly constructing a sequence of scenes rather than one inciting scene. Filmmaker Jeanne Jordan sets out with her husband and fellow director Steve Ascher to document her parents' struggle to save the Jordan family farm from foreclosure. As often happens, by the time Jordan showed up with the camera, the inciting incident had already occurred. The family had held a terse meeting with the town's new banker, who declined to give them the usual terms for their annual operating loan. Now the farmers faced financial ruin.

To reconstruct this inciting event, Jordan (also the film's editor) begins with a shot of her mother tallying the family's troubled accounts and her father bottle-feeding a calf after sundown. She uses voiceover narration to explain what's at stake financially. She cuts to her father telling a joke about heartless bankers, followed by her brother who gives an incensed account of the meeting with the new banker. Finally, Jordan takes us into the imposing bank building itself, where we meet the clean-cut young banker. As he instructs

her in the mechanics of risk assessment, we absorb not only the exposition about impending foreclosure, but we witness the cultural clash between struggling farmers and corporate bankers. And since the bank scene happens in present story time, we feel we are witnessing the inciting incident itself. This injects suspense into an otherwise remote back-story. By carefully constructing five scenes into an inciting sequence, the filmmaker sets in motion the quest to save the family farm.

Posing the Central Question

The inciting incident gives rise to the protagonist's quest--alternately called the "hero's journey" or "object of desire" --and articulates the film's central question. Will Romeo and Juliet stay together? Will the sheriff kill the shark? Will the Jordan family save their farm? The central question is always some variation of the question: "Will the protagonist reach her goal?" After a long period of struggle in Act Two, this central question is answered for better or worse in Act Three--at or just following the film's climax.

Like narrative films, documentaries are at their best when the protagonist's object of desire and the movie's central question are concrete and specific. In *Troublesome Creek*, the family's larger desire was to survive financially, but their concrete goal was to pay off their loan and get off the bank's "Troubled Accounts" list. In, the protagonist wants to promote gay rights, but his quest is drawn into dramatic focus by his bid to get elected to the San Francisco Board of Supervisors (Will he win the election?). In *Spellbound* (2002), the central question that causes the viewer to hold his breath every time a child spells a word is very specific: Which child will win the national spelling bee?

The Times of Harvey Milk

While casting the right subjects is critical to a documentary, many seasoned filmmakers won't undertake a film featuring even the most colorful cast unless they foresee that at least one character's quest will provide the film with a narrative spine. In a historical documentary, this feat is relatively doable with the advantage of hindsight. But the dramatic arc of a vérité film, in which life is recorded as it unfolds, is understandably difficult to predict. Filmmaker Fredrick Wiseman probably did not write a detailed, three-act treatment for *Titticut Follies* (1967). Likewise, the Maysles brothers couldn't have foreseen the dramatic arc of *Salesman* (1969) before filming. Sadly, these grand experiments in cinema vérité would most likely not get funded today. Commissioning editors and foundations require that a treatment for a vérité film describe the protagonist's quest, articulate the central question, then envisage the conflicts the protagonist will face during the course of the production schedule.

The Act One Climax

Each act in the three-act structure concludes with a climax--an emotionally charged plot point that takes the story in a new direction and determines the ensuing events. According to Robert McGee, the first act climax may or may not be the inciting incident. In *Metallica: Some Kind of Monster* (2004), the inciting incident and the first act climax are two separate plot points. The inciting incident occurs a slim four minutes into the 140-minute movie, when an MTV news clip announces that the bass player has left the band. This incident launches the narrative arc of the movie, as the remaining three members seek to improve their interpersonal relationships and, by extension, their next album. The first act's climax, however, is a separate event. It occurs 32 minutes into the film, after a series of creative quagmires and arguments prompt singer James Hetfield to enter rehab.

Sometimes the inciting incident is the first act climax. In the Oscar-nominated film *The Story of the Weeping Camel*, the first 20 minutes of the 88-minute film introduce us to a family of herders in the Gobi Desert. Their quest for survival is not the dramatic arc, but

the “normal” way of life in this unforgiving land. The real story begins when family members assist a camel through a difficult pregnancy. One quarter into the film (the textbook length for the first act) they pull the newborn—still breathing—from the birthing canal. But the mother will have nothing to do with the tiny, albino-looking camel. Can she be persuaded to nurse and keep her offspring alive? The inciting incident, which poses this central question, is also the first act climax.

CHAPTER 9 ACT TWO: SUSTAINING MOMENTUM

Act Two: The Long and Winding Road

In Act Two, the protagonist encounters obstacles as she pushes toward her goal. In a two-hour feature film, the second act will typically last 60–70 minutes. This vast stretch, known as "progressive complications" or simply "development," lacks the guiding mandates of Act One (setup, inciting incident, defining the central question) and Act Three (climax and resolution). Many screenwriters rely on the help of a guidepost halfway through the long act called the "midpoint."

The Midpoint

The midpoint is a crisis, often of life and death proportions, that provides the second act with momentum and direction. In action films, the hero often faces death or his nemesis at the midpoint. In the first *Star Wars* movie, Luke Skywalker nearly dies in a contracting galactic garbage bin. In character driven films, the midpoint may spell hazard to a character's old way of being, or to the life of a relationship. Screenwriting teacher Jeannine Lanouette illustrates this concept with the movie *Thelma and Louise*, a narrative film about two women whose weekend getaway turns into a run for the border (*Release Print*, November/December 2002). Halfway through the film, a drifter robs them of the money they needed to make it to Mexico. This catastrophic event transforms Thelma, the true protagonist of the film, from a docile housewife into a formidable outlaw.

The concept of midpoint easily applies to documentary storytelling. In *Metallica: Some Kind of Monster*, lead singer James Hetfield returns from an alcohol recovery program a quarter of the way through the second act. "I'm in a very different place," he tells his band mates. And indeed, James has learned to identify and express his feelings. But he is still a control freak. At the midpoint (67 minutes in), drummer Lars Ulrich lashes out at

James, calling him “self-absorbed” and accuses him of “controlling us with rules.” The band members face an existence-threatening crossroads. Lars warns, “I don’t want to end up like Jason,” a reference to a former bass player who quit the band because of James’s oppressive personality. The midpoint scene also marks the start of James’s true transformation. Prior to the midpoint, he controls the band’s membership, practice schedule, and even the tempo of the songs. After the midpoint, he changes to work in an increasingly humble and collaborative fashion to create the best album possible.

In *Capturing the Friedmans*, the internal transformation of Elaine Friedman marks the midpoint. In the first part of the documentary, Elaine is a dutiful mother and faithful wife. She asserts that the pedophilia charges against her husband were “hard to believe,” and she defends him saying, “He wasn’t proud of the porn.” Even when she calls her marriage a “big mistake,” she laughs and gives a self-effacing shrug. Then, 53 minutes into the 105-minute film, Elaine reveals the dynamics that will doom her devotion to her family when she complains that her husband and three sons “were a gang” in which she had no membership. A minute later we see Elaine at a family dinner looking depressed. At 57 minutes Elaine calls her husband Arnold “a rat.” At 58 minutes, home video of a family dinner shows Elaine getting angry for the first time. At 59 minutes, she explodes at her son David, “Why don’t you try for once to be supportive of me?”

As Elaine’s passive persona dies at the midpoint, a new aspect of her character is born. By the second act climax, when she discovers that her husband has lied to her, she says, “I went berserk.” At the end of the film Elaine screams at her sons to leave the house. “I cannot put aside my anger,” she shouts. “You have been nothing but hateful, hostile, and angry ever since this began.” After her son Jesse is sent to prison, Elaine divorces her husband. “That’s when I really started to become a person and started to live,” she says. Her transformation from long--suffering housewife to self-actualized person is complete. The midpoint marked the tilt.

The Problem of Pacing

Having gauged the film's direction with the help of a midpoint, many editors' biggest challenge in Act Two is sustaining momentum. Since Act Two is the longest act (a little more than half the film), the editor needs to ratchet up conflict. Ideally, each barrier the protagonist faces should be more daunting than the last. A screenwriter can plot progressive complications without being constrained by journalistic ethics, but what can a documentary filmmaker do if the actual chronology of conflict ebbs and flows rather than steadily escalates? How can he ramp up the action while staying true to the facts?

One solution is to shuffle the order of events, recognizing, in the words of Jon Else, that "a chronicle does not have to unfold chronologically" to be true. For example, an editor can begin Act Two with events unfolding in the order they actually took place, and then reveal a crisis that happened years earlier. The back-story is revealed when it provides maximum impact, raising the stakes for the protagonist and contributing to an escalating sense of crisis.

The film *Metallica* doubles back to earlier years on several occasions. In one instance late in the second act, archival footage from MTV introduces an important back-story. In April 2000, Metallica drummer Lars Ulrich sued the music-trading web company Napster for copyright infringement. Ulrich criticized Napster for selling technology that allowed fans to download the band's music free of charge. The so-called Napster controversy made headlines worldwide, and turned Metallica into a target for angry fans. This back-story, placed well into the second act, achieves two important structural goals. First, the stormy incident steps up momentum at the required time--as the story approaches the climax of the second act. In addition, the Napster back-story raises the stakes for the very next scene, in which band members discuss going on tour and whether their album will be a hit or not. With the recollection of hate mail and irate fans in the viewer's mind, the stakes of the band's album tour become even higher.

Reversal

Another way to create escalating suspense is to allow the protagonist a taste of success, or a respite from the fray, just before a particularly stormy turn of events. The "reversal," writes Linda Seger in *Making a Good Script Great* (Samuel French, 1994), "catapults the story by forcing it to take a new direction." In her personal documentary *Complaints of a Dutiful Daughter* (1994), Deborah Hoffmann uses a reversal in the portrayal of her struggle to come to terms with her mother's Alzheimer's disease. In Act Two, the ruthless progression of the disease supplies a predictable structure of increasing tension, but the truth is sometimes life seems to get better for Hoffmann and her mother. As a filmmaker, how could Hoffmann stay true to what happened while satisfying the structural demands for increasing conflict?

In Act Two difficulties mount. Hoffmann tries to correct her mother's jumbled memory, but despite a rash of reminder notes, the declining woman begins showing up for medical appointments on the wrong days. In the middle of Act Two, life gets harder when Hoffmann's mother expresses shame at being her "stupid mother," then forgets she's Hoffmann's mother, and eventually directs hostility at her daughter. Finally, Hoffmann has what she calls "a liberating moment" when she realizes she doesn't need to insist on reality. If her mother thinks that the two of them went to college together, what does it matter? Hoffmann's acceptance of her mother's version of reality makes things easier for a while. Then, at the climax of Act Two, Hoffmann retrieves a frightening phone message from her. The 84-year-old woman has locked herself outside her San Francisco apartment at night. Hoffman must face that her formerly independent mother cannot continue to live alone. The placement of the second act climax directly on the heels of Hoffmann's reprieve is a clever "calm before the storm" juxtaposition. It compresses yet stays true to the times when Hoffmann's life was relatively tranquil (the length of the reprieve in real life is unknown). Equally important, the reversal satisfies the dramatic requirement that Hoffmann's life, in her words, was growing "out of control." By abruptly reversing the languid mood, the second act climax jolts us into Act Three.

CHAPTER 10 ACT THREE: CRAFTING AN EFFECTIVE CLIMAX

Act Three: Answering the Central Question

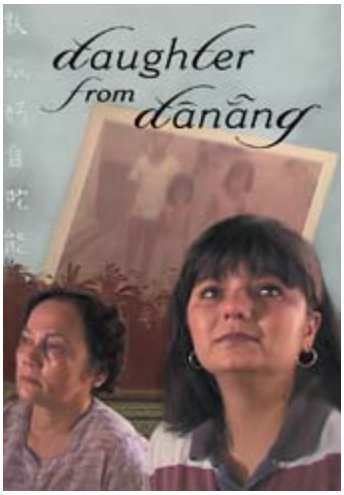
Comedian George M. Cohan said that in the first act you chase your man up a tree. (His "quest" is to get down safely.) In Act Two, you throw rocks at him. And in Act Three, you force him out onto a limb that's ready to break before you finally let him down. Screenwriters know that at the end of Act Two, things should be as bad as they can imaginably get. Then in Act Three, they get even worse. The function of the third act is to ramp up suspense to a crisis that is so unbearable that the protagonist must summon a supreme effort. This crisis, the story climax, will conclusively answer the film's central question: Did the protagonist get what she desired?

Plotting a Cinema Vérité Documentary

Screenwriters often begin plotting a film with two points in mind: the inciting incident and the story climax. With these two coordinates in place, they can chart progressive complications from inception of quest to quest pinnacle. In the documentary world, only backward-looking films can provide a treatment with a conclusive climax. For example, in the Oscar-nominated *Tupac: Resurrection* ($7.7 million, 2003), a film made after the rap star's death, MTV producer Lauren Lazin could pinpoint the film's climax as the 1996 drive-by shooting murder.

In cinema vérité (or direct cinema), the ending is impossible to predict. By extension, so are the production schedule and costs—which is why observational films are unpopular with funders. Vérité films that are good bets for funding are likely to be structured around a contest, an election, a performance, or a challenge of some kind, i.e., having a baby or organizing a trade union. These measurable endeavors furnish predictable obstacles and

probable climaxes within foreseeable time constraints. For example, *Spellbound* (2002), a film about a national spelling bee contest, and *Journeys with George* (2002), a vérité film about George W. Bush's first campaign for president, each contain an obligatory scene (the contest or election) that supplies a treatment paper with an obvious third-act climax.



While funding may be hard to come by, filmmakers undertaking less predictable vérité films can take heart. A vérité documentary can deliver a powerful third-act punch precisely because the ending is unexpected. In *Daughter from Danang* (2003), the startling story climax helped earn the documentary an Academy Award nomination. The film begins when a young American woman named Heidi Bub travels to Vietnam to meet her birth mother, Mai Thi Kim, who gave her up for adoption as a baby. The goal of Heidi's journey is to reunite with her biological mother. The poignant reunion at the airport (the climax of Act One) belies the heartbreaking story climax. Like a well-constructed scene in a fiction film, the climax scene begins at one emotional extreme (or "beat") and ends at the opposite extreme. Heidi's Vietnamese family gives her presents at a farewell gathering. Through the help of a translator, Heidi's brother says he hopes that she will be able to bring their mother to America someday. When Heidi says that would be "impossible," her brother suggests she might be able to help the family out with a stipend. Feeling hurt and betrayed, Heidi shakes her head, holds back tears, and leaves the room. When her mother tries to comfort her, Heidi sobs "No!" and pushes her away.

While difficult to portray in words, this climactic scene captures the real-life dramatic complexity that makes documentaries, and particularly vérité films, so compelling. According to critic Nigam Nuggehalli, writing in the online journal *Culture Vulture*, the suspense of this climax scene is palpable because "no one, including the filmmakers, has a clue about what's going to happen next."

Daughter from Danang could have been scripted by a screenwriter, paced by a director, and performed by an actor. But the documentary crew capitalized on the essence of cinema vérité: noninterference. Director Gail Dolgin could not have predicted her third act climax. She could only have laid the groundwork by building trust. There's no evidence that cameraman Vicente Franco cued participants; family dynamics seem to play out in front of his lens naturally. And Editor Kim Roberts, cutting with the confidence of an editor who doesn't have to hunt for a story, permits the climax to unfold in long takes.

Denouement: Giving the Audience Closure

In documentaries, as in narrative films, the denouement (also called "resolution") serves two purposes. First, this short ending sequence provides viewers with a moment to catch their breath after the climax and gain their bearings before the credits roll. Second, the denouement gives viewers a glimpse of what life is like now that the protagonist has concluded her journey. Whether or not she has reached her original goal, how has her struggle changed her personality and her circumstances?

The denouement is occasionally constructed as an epilogue, a device more commonly found in documentaries than in narrative films. As in *Daughter from Danang*, the epilogue can take the form of a "two years later" vérité snapshot. Or, the epilogue may consist solely of end cards that tie up loose ends and update viewers on character's lives. This short and snappy textual summary, generally accompanied by music, can provide desirable relief from dialogue-laden documentaries. Some films, like *Capturing the Friedmans*, combine both vérité scenes and textual narration to resolve the story.

Whatever form the denouement takes, it should not drag on. After the story's climax, the audience is ready for the film to wrap up. Allow protagonists a minute to say what it all means, give significant updates, then roll the credits. Ambitious attempts to spell out the

film's meaning, or the influx of new conflicts that require a bumpy double climax, can be fatal to a film. Audiences want one ending, not two. They appreciate a denouement that will allow them to exit the theater with enough energy to ponder the story's meaning in their own company, not the director's.

Audiences today bank on the promise that nonfiction cinema will thrill them with the hero's call to adventure, bringing them into a real world they have never visited before, and then safely guide them through the obstacles, reversals, and climaxes of a meaningful story. While screenwriters aren't the only ones who can deliver good narratives, their stories can provide invaluable structural guidance to today's documentary storytellers.

CHAPTER 11 MULTIPLE PROTAGONISTS AND SUBPLOTS

How do you structure a documentary with multiple story lines? I get asked this question a lot in my story consulting practice. Many filmmakers fashion documentaries with more than a single protagonist.

Ask yourself, do you have a dynamic duo such as *Thelma and Louise*, or the mother and daughter as in the *Daughter from Danang*, or the Ecuadorian attorney and American lawyer in the documentary *Crude*? These pairs essentially act as one protagonist pursuing a single goal.

Is your documentary about many people, such as the group of coal miners in Barbara Koppel's *Harlan Country, USA*? Or the Yuppies in the documentary *Chicago 10*, who fight for one cause--to improve working conditions for coal miners? In these cases you are essentially constructing one story line, although the characters may come to their shared purpose from different inciting incidences. In other words, you may need to craft a different compelling catalyst scene for some of the key characters in the group. But generally by the end of Act One, members of the group should be united in their object of desire.

Are you editing a documentary with a classic antagonist such as Batman and the Joker, or Joe and Dupan in *Murder Ball*? The shared goal (to win the game, for example) dictates one single story line (again, with differing inciting incidences).

Multiple Story Lines

If your protagonists truly have separate goals, then you will need to structure multiple story lines. For example, the documentary *American Teen* reveals four archetypal teenagers: the jock, the popular/pretty girl, the misunderstood artist, and the nerd. Each

teen has her or his own goal (to get into a prestigious college, to find a girl friend, to win the basketball championship) that takes each on separate journeys within the same venue (high school).

Your first decision is whether to "clump" their stories (i.e. tell one at a time) or checkerboard the stories, that is weave them together. If you can, it is preferable to checkerboard the stories because inter-cutting narrative arcs tend to give your documentary a more cohesive feel. There are some specific situations in which inter-cutting will not work, and your best strategy is to tell one complete story after another. Reasons for "clumping" include:

1. Your characters' journeys are too intricate and complicated to follow when inter-cut. For example, the four stories in the documentary film *Long Night's Journey into Day* are such detailed crime investigations that only a genius could follow the plot twists if the four stories were inter-cut.
2. The geographic or temporal setting of each of your stories differs remarkably. In *Iraq in Fragments* for example, filmmaker James Longley tells the tale of a boy in central Baghdad, militants in southern Iraq, and Kurds in the north. Each location is filmed with its own look and soundscape. This artful film required a clumping structure.
3. You have tried checker boarding and your characters look so similar to test audiences that they have trouble telling the characters apart. In this case, I advise either clumping or adding frequent lower-thirds (supers) to identify your characters within a checker boarded structure.

Separate Story Lines

If you determine that you can inter-cut your storylines, the next step is to separate out the storylines. Plot each character's journey within the three act structure. Do this on paper first (at New Doc Editing we use a Doc Plot Map) and then actually cut a separate assembly cut for each character. I advise limiting your documentary film to no more than four characters. Several documentaries feature the magical number four (*Long Night's Journey into Day, American Teen, Hurricane on the Bayou, Transgeneration, Four Little Girls*) as this seems to be the ideal number of character arcs that audience members can follow in a single viewing. Ideally each of your character's journeys will have an inciting incident and a first, second, and third act climax.

Long Night's Journey into Day, 2000

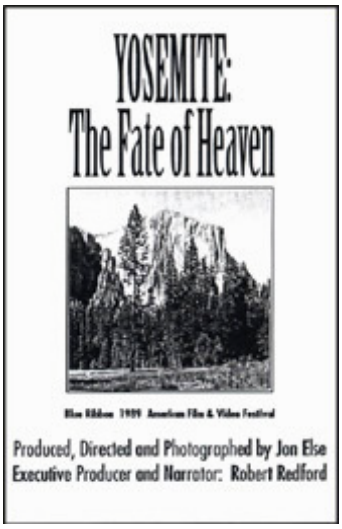
Once you have separated out your character arcs, determine which arc has the strongest climax. Which climax shows the character digging deep to overcome an obstacle? Which climax scene contains the requisite footage to bring viewers to the single highest moment of emotional intensity in the film? Which climax conclusively answers the film's central question: Does the protagonist reach their goal?

Having determined this ultimate climax scene, place that character's climax scene 95% of the way into your documentary. (See the Three Act Timetable in an earlier chapter). Then place the other characters' climax scenes before this most powerful one.

What about the Act One and Two climax scenes?

The goal is to ensure that some scene peaks in emotional intensity at the quarter way mark (Act One) and at the 80% mark (Act Two). Editing documentaries is not the exact science that screenwriters have developed for the Three Act structure. The point is to get as close to those marks as possible. It doesn't matter a whole lot which character's story peaks at the 25% and 80% mark. In your viewer's mind, the film will feel well paced if there are three points of emotional intensity at the requisite times as well as a steady escalation in Act Two.

Adding a subplot



If your documentary is more of a portrait than the story of a protagonist on a quest, consider adding a subplot, a minor story of a character in pursuit of a goal, to give your film a narrative backbone. Jon Else's *Yosemite: The Fate of Heaven* achieves this sense of forward motion through the addition of a story about early white men entering the Yosemite Valley on an Indian raid. Narrated by Robert Redford, this account adds an arc to otherwise impressionistic look at the overcrowding of Yosemite today.

CHAPTER 12 PACING WITH A DOC PLOT MAP

Arc Diagram

A plot map is a simple diagram that allows you to see the film's rising arc and climax peaks. The timeline of your film is laid out along the horizontal X axis, and the film's emotional intensity is charted along the vertical Y axis. Traditionally, each of the three acts has a climax, hence three arcs, with each higher than the previous. So as the film proceeds, the high points get higher.

At New Doc Editing, we have developed this notion into a customizable Doc Plot Map that allows users to specify in minutes the approximate time that each act climax should occur. For example, the Act One climax, which occurs about one-quarter of the way into the film, can be easily calculated if you know the final length of your film. Take the estimated TRT (total running time) and multiply it by .24. If your TRT is 60 minutes, then multiply that by .24 to get your first act climax at 14.5 minutes.

If the first act climax occurs ¼ through the film, why multiply by 24% rather than 25%? Frankly it probably won't matter to the pacing of your film, but I chose 24%, or just under ¼ of the film, to remind editors that the Act One climax is not over until there is a slight dip in emotional intensity. This is true for each act climax. Follow peaks with a less suspenseful scene, to give viewers time to absorb the action.

Rhythmic Nature of Act Peaks

You may be asking yourself a bigger question: Why is it important that my documentary peak at these three prescribed times? First, remember that applying the three-act structure to documentaries is always an approximation, since we don't have the luxury of crafting scenes out of thin air when they are convenient for our act timetable. But the real answer

is that Aristotle discovered that human beings respond with interest to the rhythmic nature of one fairly early emotional peak, a delayed (a little over twice as long) second emotional peak, and then a fairly rapid (less than a quarter of the film) third emotional peak. And this rhythm has worked, in myriad art forms, for six thousand years!

The following chart will give you the approximate times for a number of TRT's. You can easily calculate your own by multiplying the estimated length of your film by the percentage for each key scene: inciting incident, midpoint, and the three act climaxes. Note that screenwriting mentor Robert McKee counsels placing your inciting incident as early as possible in the first act, as soon as the audience understands enough about the setting and characters to care what happens to them. The midpoint happens halfway through the second act (not halfway through the film)--hence it occurs 54% into the film.

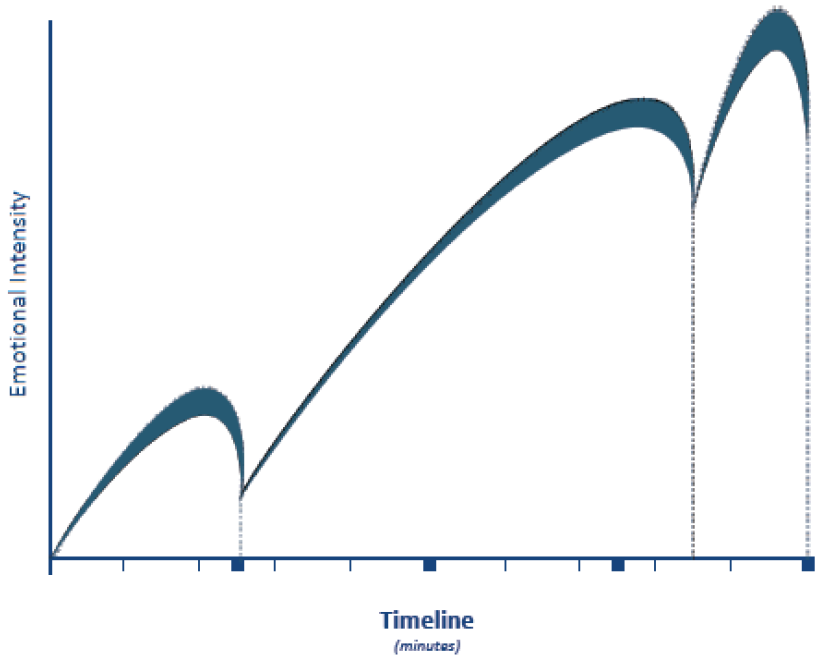
Three - Act Timetable

TRT	%	15	20	26	60	88	100	120
Inciting Incident	Under 24%	At or before First Act Climax	At or before First Act Climax	At or before First Act Climax	At or before First Act Climax	At or before First Act Climax	At or before First Act Climax	At or before First Act Climax
Act One	24%	3.5	5	6	14.4	21	24	29
Midpoint	54%	8	11	14	32.5	48	54	65
Act Two climax	80%	12	16	21	48	70	80	96
Act Three climax	95%	14.25	19	24.5	57	84	95	114

Credits end	100%	15	20	26	60	87	100	120

What if you don't know how long your film will be? Good question. If you're not beholden to a broadcaster's prescribed time, you will determine the length yourself. Most filmmakers understandably overestimate the length of their film because they are in love with the material and topic. These days, docs are getting shorter. Whereas a 90-minute doc might have intrigued audiences five years ago, today I would shoot for 75-minutes. I've always admired director Deborah Hoffmann for making her highly successful personal film *Complaints of a Dutiful Daughter* just 44 minutes long. When asked why she chose that length, she replied "that's as long as the story needed to be." Judge the length of your film by test audiences' reaction as well as the less biased opinion of your editor, story consultant and advisors.

Doc Plot Map

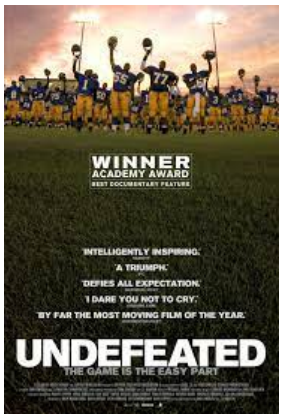


CHAPTER 13: CHARTING CHARACTER TRANSFORMATION

What can your protagonist do by the *end* of the film that they *couldn't* do at the beginning?

That was the key question posed by Dara Marks, a top-rated screenwriting consultant and author of *Inside Story: The Power of the Transformation Arc*. Speaking at the Esalen Inspirational Film Festival (where I presented on transformational documentaries), Marks showcased a screenplay about an alcoholic detective involved in a murder case.

"An inner transformation is required," said Marks, "Without his sobriety, we aren't going to find the killer." Marks consults with screenwriters developing fiction films. So how can we apply the power of character transformation to *documentary* films?

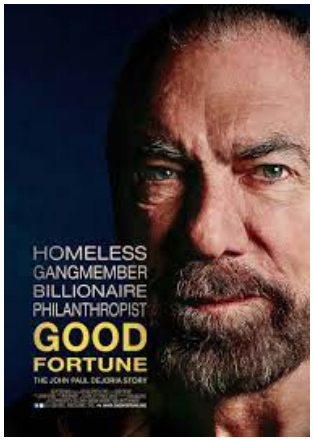


Consider one of the protagonists in the Academy Award-winning documentary *Undefeated*. Without his learning to check his temper, this high school football player is not going to help his team win the championship. Fortunately, he evolves and grows. Watch my analysis here.

Protagonist Bobby Fischer was not so lucky. In HBO's tragic tale of the late chess prodigy, *Bobby Fischer Against the World* shows how a single personality trait can propel a character to success and then drive them into defeat. According to one reviewer on IMDB, "chess" was not Bobby's problem; rather, it was "his obsessive immersion into all things chess." Obsession is a classic fatal flaw, as is hubris--both explored by Werner Herzog in *Grizzly Ma*n.

At the workshop, Marx gave the most psychologically astute definition of a fatal flaw that I've ever heard: "the protagonist's struggle to maintain a survival system that has outlived its usefulness."

If all this sounds too daunting to apply to your documentary, remember that character transformation does not require a fatal flaw. Return to the key question: what can your protagonist do by the *end* of the film that they *couldn't* do at the beginning? (Many filmmakers who've said that they feel "boxed in" by the three-act structure simply don't have a character quest documentary. Documentaries structured primarily around ideas rather than a character quest will not fit this format. See my chapter on crafting the essay-style documentary.)



In good narrative films, characters needs to evolve and change. Captain America started out as Steve Rogers, a scrawny guy who was rejected for the military. He transforms into a superhero by drinking a serum. But not every good documentary has a protagonist who experiences an inner change. As you contemplate the potential for character transformation in your own work-in-progress, you might watch documentaries featuring characters that undergo a personality shift. Here's a short list, including some documentaries that we edited or story consulted on: *Dick Johnson is Dead*; *A Fragile Trust; Baghdad to the Bay; I Am A Killer: Released*; *Connected*; *Going Clear; Wasteland; Jeffrey Epstein: Filthy Rich; The Inventor; Good Fortune; Capturing the Friedman's*; *The Boys In Red Hats*; and *I Shall Not Be Removed: The Life of Marlon Riggs*

Finding the Theme of Your Documentary

Theme is central to character transformation. Finding the theme of your documentary is more than simply identifying the film's chief idea. Love, progress, maturity, hope, childhood–these are not themes. They are concepts. It's what you *say about* love that makes it a theme. For example, "money can't buy love" is a potential theme.

"When you hit the land of the cliché," says Marks, "It's a doorway" to discovering theme. She cites the film *Dead Poets Society* in which actor Robin Williams inspires a group of stodgy high school students. The topic or concept of the film is manhood. But what is the film *saying* about manhood? The first act offers a clue when Williams delivers a speech atop a desk that urges his students to "seize the day". Breaking down that cliché, "seize" means "to take hold of". And "day" is a substitute for "life". So the theme, says Marks, is "take hold of life".

If you've mulled over the obvious clichés in your film and you're still not sure of the theme, look at your values and POV, from which themes emerge. As a story consultant, I've observed how challenging it can be for some documentary directors to claim their POV. "I don't want to tell the viewer what to think," I often hear. "Then tell them what *you* think and let them make up their own mind," I respond. In other words, don't be spineless or dwell in the land of the vague. Boldly author your film!

Once you identify your theme, you need to convey it. There are a few ways to do this. First, talk about it. In documentary films, especially essay-style structured films, *talking* about the theme is a primary vehicle. But if you have the footage to craft character transformation, you can convey theme through the story arc. It's often delivered in the form of a Protagonist's Statement of Desire, which is step four in the method outlined below.

Four Steps To Crafting Character Transformation

Consider these four simple steps to craft character transformation over a feature-length documentary. Use this guide alongside the three-act structure, which must begin with a character who wants something. In addition to having a concrete goal, a protagonist may also have a so-called "need", which is a subconscious psychological desire to embrace a character trait that they are lacking. Maybe they are lacking courage, or kindness, or in the case of the character Thelma in the Hollywood classic *Thelma and Louise*, a sense of independence.

The first step in charting character transformation is to define the polarity shift. In other words, how does your character change? From aggressive to passive? From self-absorbed to generous? In the case of Thelma, she changes from a passive housewife to an assertive outlaw. This is a classic shift (from dependent to independent) for many contemporary female protagonists.

The second step is to set up the midpoint scene. As you'll recall from earlier chapters, screenwriters use the term "midpoint" to mean many things; I am referring to a crisis that brings forth the first sign of character transformation. As screenwriting teacher Louise Rafkin has pointed out, at the midpoint of *Thelma and Louise,* Louise sleeps with a hooker (played by Brad Pitt) who steals her money. This causes her to take control of her life and leads to her first bold robbery.

As your character begins to change, identify a midpoint scene that marks the first sign of character transformation. Again, the midpoint is some form of crisis—generally a relationship crisis or a crisis to one's bodily existence. In this case, however, we're talking about a crisis of Self. When the old Self (or pattern of behavior) begins to change to the new pattern of behavior, the midpoint scene marks the transition. Marks calls this scene the "moment of enlightenment…It is not transformation," she adds. "It is the *threshold* to transformation." It's an important distinction.

The third step, going back to the polarity concept, is to establish that *initial* character trait, that is, the early "self". Do this in one to three scenes *before* to the midpoint. For example, you may recall Thelma cowing to her husband's demands in a phone call.

The fourth step is to then craft a couple scenes *after* the midpoint that show incremental change toward the new character trait. By the end of the film, your protagonist should face their most daunting task, one that calls forth a supreme effort and solidifies the "new self" they have been creating. This is your film's climax scene. Often it involve a

decision. In screenplays, this decision is often followed by a "Protagonist's Statement of Transformation"—often just a line of dialogue about how they've changed. It often takes the form of "I used to be like _____ (fill in the blank), but now I'm _____."

In documentary films--especially those involving big ideas--sometimes it's the character's viewpoint that changes, not their personality. In those situations, the word "realize" is important. "I used to think _____, but now I realize _____."

For example, in *Dirty Wars*, investigative reporter Jeremy Scahill documents how his views about the U.S. military shifted as he unearthed damning evidence. He ends the film with a well-crafted Protagonist's Statement of Transformation, which again you can watch in my 3-minute YouTube tutorial:

Of course, applying these screenwriting concepts to documentary films takes storytelling chops. In addition to the above-mentioned films, directors Alex Gibney (*The Inventor),* Andrew Jarecki (*Capturing the Friedmans),* Joe Berlinger (*Metallica: Some Kind of Monster*) show us masterful possibilities.

CHAPTER 14: CRAFTING THE ESSAY-STYLED DOCUMENTARY

Films Structured Around Ideas

The essay or topic-based documentary is the second most popular art form dominating today's independent documentary landscape. Although it shares in the festival accolades and box office commercial success of the character driven documentary, structurally the essay doc is a different beast entirely, usually organized around a central idea rather than a protagonist on a quest. It *looks* different too, often employing talking heads, text, statistics, man-on-the-street interviews, educational graphics and slide shows to make its points. Popular examples include *An Inconvenient Truth, Kiss the Ground, Bowling for Columbine,* and *The Social Dilemma*. Other essay films, such as Werner Herzog's *Encounters at the End of the World*, Chris Marker's *Sans Soleil* and Jean Marie Teno's *Sacred Places* (edited by Christiane Badgley), are more introspective tomes or poetic profiles than quantitative or data-heavy documentaries.

All of these skillfully crafted essays belie the chief difficulty that sinks many topic-based films: how do you keep your audience engaged rather than putting them to sleep? We are, after all, dealing with an *essay* (yawn). And yet most first-time filmmakers instinctually gravitate toward topic-based films because they are excited about exploring an idea. Filmmaker Jean-Pierre Gorin said that "at the core of all essay is an interest so intense that it precludes … filming it in a straight line…The essay is rumination in Nietzche's sense of the word, the meandering of an intelligence." This chapter offers editors and directors three specific strategies you can use in the edit room which I believe are in line with the contemporary trend in essay films--to reign in excessive "meandering" and keep your viewers glued to the topic until the credits roll.

The Blended Approach

Most documentaries are neither purely essay-style or character-driven (although *Man on Wire* comes close to the latter.) They are a blend. To edit a blended structure, first identify the *dominant* structure, and then fit the alternate structure within in it.

For example, if you've filmed a protagonist on a journey to achieve something in the face of great odds, that's your dominant structure (because stories are more interesting than essays.) At appropriate plot points, you'll blend in related ideas that are important take-away concepts. Think of plot points as launching pads for your essay concepts.

On the other hand, if you have an idea-driven film with no character arc, then the ideas will govern the structure. (See more in the Structural Strategy section.) You'll use character vignettes, or anecdotes, to illustrate your ideas. Most of Michael Moore's films follow this pattern, with the prominent exception of his breakout hit, *Roger and Me*.

Essay-dominated structures can also employ dramatic devices, such as an inciting incident, to add verve to an inherently intellectual tone. In *An Inconvenient Truth*, an essay about climate change, activist Al Gore reveals the inciting incident that drove him to become an activist rather than pursue his political career. When his son nearly died in a car accident, Gore consciously decided to make abating climate change his life's mission.

If you're unsure which structure will emerge from your footage as the dominant one, edit two separate sequences: story and essay. Which structure holds up best, flows more smoothly, keeps you most interested? Again, if your footage reveals a character intent on achieving or learning something, and if we find out by the end of the film if they achieve

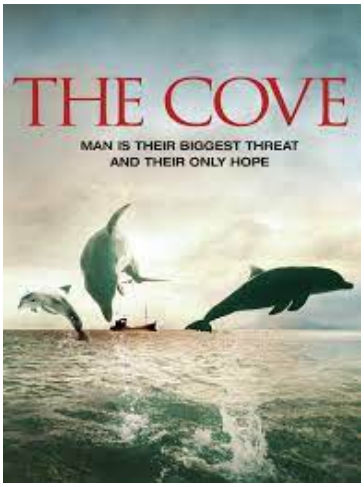
their goal, default to the character-driven model as your dominate structure. Why? Human beings find stories more inherently compelling. The well-told tale is the Trojan horse. It sneaks into your viewer's head, past their well-guarded worldview, where you can release squadrons of new ideas.

Supersize Me is a terrific example of the blended approach in which the story, albeit contrived, is the dominant structure. Director Morgan Spurlock attempts to stay healthy while only eating McDonald's food for one month. In the course of his various difficulties (vomiting, high blood pressure, impotency), Spurlock presents stunning evidence of the danger's of America's fast food diet in the form of essay conventions: expert interviews, statistics, animated research, etc.

The beauty of the blended approach is that you can construct an elegant, complex documentary that demands both left-brained analytical engagement and right-brained emotional immersion. Done right, your viewer is held rapt. Other successful examples of blended documentaries include *The Social Dilemma, Hip Hop: Beyond Beats and Rhymes, No Impact Man,* and *King Corn*. Note that the last two are personal documentaries in which, like *Supersize Me*, the director/protagonist has the advantage of contriving a narrative arc (living for one year without leaving a carbon footprint, growing an acre of corn) upon which he can hang his intellectual arguments. Plot points pave openings for cerebral proof. In *The Social Dilemma,* the story side is a fictional plot of a teen addicted to social media, while the essay delivers frightening data, conclusions and occasional anecdotes from former executives of technology giants.

Case Study: *The Cove*

The Cove is another brilliant example of a documentary that weds a three-act narrative structure with a powerful essay. Which is the dominant structure? As you'll soon see why, it's the story. Director Louis Psihoyos' thriller follows a team of activists who seek to expose the dolphin slaughter in Taiji, Japan. (Stay tuned for the essay as dominant structure later in this chapter.)



The *story* side starts with conflict: our activist hero Ric O'Barry, who trained dolphins for the *Flipper* TV series, is being followed by the Japanese police. We learn about O'Barry's backstory and the catalyst event that changed his life and propelled him on a mission to release dolphins from captivity. One day he was training "Cathy" (a.k.a. "Flipper") and she swam into his arms, looked him in the eyes and committed suicide. Seriously. Unlike humans, dolphins can voluntarily control and stop their breathing. Can you imagine a more riveting inciting incident than the beloved Flipper dying in your arms?

As O'Barry and his team seek to expose dolphin slaughter in the harbor town of Taiji, the film builds towards an extraordinary (and obligatory) climax when the team infiltrates the barricaded cove with hidden cameras. The resulting blood bath caught on tape is exposed at an international whaling confederation, where the film's sub plot about the Japanese delegate's efforts to lift the ban on whaling also wraps up.

Upon this narrative backbone, award-winning *Sicko* editor Lloyd Parry cleverly weaves the *essay* part of the film. The central premise is that dolphins are sentient, self-aware beings and we humans are mistreating them. At appropriate plot points, *The Cove* post-production team seamlessly segues into their essay points revealing supporting arguments for their premise. Among the pile of evidence: research on dolphins recognizing themselves in mirrors, evidence of mercury poisoning found in dolphin meat, and data on dolphin's acute sense of hearing and the suffering they endure at popular "swimming with dolphins" venues.

The Cove is a superb example of social activist filmmaking. It is a documentary that will thrill you with the hero's call to adventure (story) and rivet you with irrefutable evidence (essay).

Stylistic Strategy

Traditionally, PBS essay-style documentaries were characterized by talking heads, narration and occasional b-roll used as "wallpaper." Not very cinematically appealing materials, to say the least. Then along came Ken Burns who put his imprint on landscape beauty shots, reenactments, actor's voiceovers and rotating zooms on photographs. Today we may yawn at these once engaging tactics. According to filmmaker/editor Ken Schneider, "While it is in vogue for indies to dismiss Ken Burns, we should give credit where it's due. His best films are nicely researched stories which select details of personal stories to reveal the experiences of both average and extraordinary men and women." In the last few years, creative directors have racked their filmic sensibilities to come up with fresher stylistic approaches.

On the visual side, essay films are now employing animation (*Bowling for Columbine*), humorous vérité scenes structured as character vignettes (*Religulous* and *Sicko*), and most refreshingly, spectacular graphic gimmicks. I recommend studying such fine examples as the psychological profiles in *The Corporation*, the clever timelines in *I.O.U.S.A*, and the guilty/innocent verdict "stamp" in *Who Killed the Electric Car?* The other chief reason to use graphical representations in your editing repertoire, in addition to adding visual verve, is to convey complicated information. Witness the funny ballooning timeline in *I.O.U.S.A*, which helps us wrap our heads around economic theory and all those zeros in a trillion dollars. If you can afford it, develop both animation and graphic treatments for your more knotty concepts. If your budget is tight, then aim to convey ideas through simple reenactments, vérité scenes in which some genuine action unfolds, or spectacular landscapes heightened with simple Motion filters such as the "lens flare." The bottom line: give viewers a reason to *watch* your film, rather than read a magazine essay on the same topic.

What about the sonic landscape? Definitely hire a composer. Essay films are notoriously talking-head heavy, so the idea of introducing what filmmaker Jon Else calls more

“yackety-yack” seems counterintuitive. For a period, narration fell out of favor, as a generation of filmmakers eschewed the booming, omniscient voice of father god. These days, narration as text has become quite popular and effective. But voiceover narration is making a comeback. And it sounds different than the "Voice of God". See Chapter 12. I happen to favor narration. From an editing standpoint, it keeps your cuts spare (rather than wrestling with jump cuts and long-winded interviewees to make a point). From the audience’s vantage point, narration clarifies a welcome tactic when ideas get dense. Well-composed narration also helps give the film a voice.

3-Part Structural Strategy: Thesis Statement or Central Question?

While there are plenty of exceptions, many idea-based films can be divided into three parts. I use the word “parts,” rather than “acts” intentionally, to distinguish the powerful essay we are crafting from the classic three-act narrative structure first articulated by Aristotle. At the end of this chapter, I'll present what's been called "the evolving question" structure.

In Part One, which runs no more than one-quarter of the film’s length, you introduce your viewer to the film’s topic and ethos, or intellectual sensibility. What is the film about? Is your approach critical, affirming, and investigative? Most importantly in Part One, you present your thesis, or umbrella idea. Let me stress: your documentary's thesis should be a remarkably simple idea, i.e. “global warming is real”, to really grab your viewer. Filmmakers with multiple dissertations and agendas make the mistake of diluting their vision and diverting their viewers’ attention. Another way of presenting your essay film’s single thesis is by asking a central question. For example, Alex Gibney employs this central question technique Steve Jobs: The Man And The Machine (2016). Within the first five minutes, Gibney asks, "What accounted for the grief of the millions of people who didn't know him?"

In *Grizzly Man*, Werner Herzog poses the question about humans’ relationship to the

wilderness: Why did Timothy Treadwell get so close those big bears (that they ate him)? The documentary *Who Killed the Electric Car?* poses its central question in the title.

In Part Two, the bulk of the essay film, you craft arguments in support of your thesis and then organize these claims in a way that keeps momentum building. In *An Inconvenient Truth*, Al Gore (and by extension, director Davis Guggenheim) puts forth several contentions to support his now rarely contested thesis—that global warming is an impending crisis. First, he debunks the naysayers' research. Then he presents scientific evidence that temperatures and sea levels are rising, species are drowning, water shortages are creating arid farmland, food shortages are becoming epidemic, etc.

If your central idea is posed as a question, then Part Two explores different answers to that single question. Why did the Grizzly Man get so close to the Alaskan bears? Was it because he was a fearless advocate for four-legged endangered species? A showman? Was he a man with an intuitive, non-verbal, bear-whispering talent? An egomaniac? Was he insane? Likewise, in *Who Killed the Electric Car*, director Chris Payne cross-examines one suspect after another to find who should answer for this crime against the environment. Was it the car company CEO's? The marketing executives? The American consumer? Technology?

How do you order your arguments or answers into an escalating format? Generally, you save the most intellectually powerful and damning evidence for last, although this will depend on whether you have the footage to illustrate it. Sometimes spectacular cinematography trumps the power of points made by talking heads. In other words, you may decide that great visuals accompanying a less powerful argument merit placing it toward the end. Or, your organizational strategy may be chronological, if your timeline naturally builds suspense. Or, you may hold for last the arguments that are best illustrated through moving character vignettes. I say "vignettes" because essay films are more likely to feature character snapshots rather than full-blown character arcs. Michael Moore excels at this strategy in *Fahrenheit 9/11* and *Sicko.*

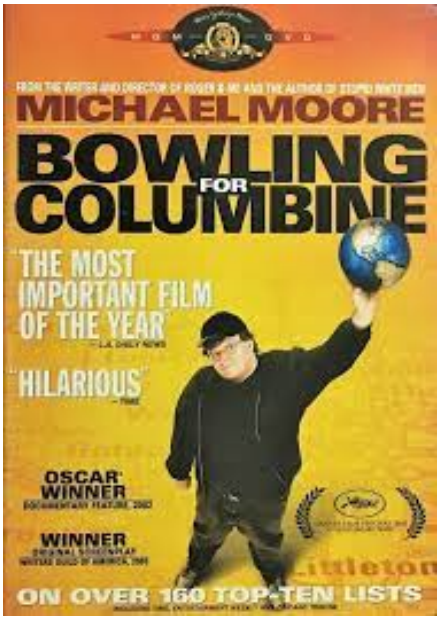
Part Three of an essay film raises the stakes even higher, perhaps by expanding the geographic realm of the topic, looking into the future at the implications of your case, or presenting solutions. Now that you've made your argument, it's time to turn a structural corner and spend a little time (not much) speculating on what it all means. OK, the earth is heating up. What are the consequences? What can we do about it? In a similar vein, now that we've pointed the finger at all the suspects who could have sent the twentieth century electric car to a premature tragic death, where do we go from here? (Hello, Tesla!)

In Part Three, you need to decide on how you want to end your film in terms of tone. What is the emotional takeaway? Do you want your audience to leave feeling hopeful? Outraged? Troubled? My instincts tend toward the hopeful, particularly if you've spent most of your viewer's attention span in a critical analysis of the status quo, as many social issue documentaries do. *The Celluloid Closet*, a terrific essay film that indicts Hollywood for its homophobic erasing and vilifying of gay people, ends with a flurry of hopeful signs: gay characters appearing in television sitcoms and dramas, straight actors playing gay characters, gay actors coming out. Give your attentive audience a dessert for their denouement--such as a sweet montage of success stories--and they just might honor your film, as evidenced by *Fields of Fuel*, an ultimately buoyant documentary about bio-fuels that won the 2008 Audience Award at the Sundance Film Festival.

Finally, a great exercise to help focus your essay film is to write a logline for your documentary during pre-production, production and post. This will help you clarify your film's central thesis. Editor Ken Schneider says that, "A clear thesis, clear title and clear poster, all of which are related, will help people experience your film."

The Evolving Question Structure

Some essay-style driven documentaries are structured in layers, like an onion. I call this the evolving question structure. This option suits a documentary in which concepts are related, but they do not fit neatly under a thesis statement or central question. Like peeling an onion, this structure probes deeper and deeper into a complex issue.



For example, in the introduction to *Bowling for Columbine*, Michael Moore poses his first question to a bank clerk. Is it OK that banks are handing out guns? That question leads to an answer, which then leads to another question, which leads to an answer, which leads to another question until the final question. At the climax, Moore asks NRA head Charlton Heston, "Why does America have the highest homicide rate from handguns?" For a great scene-by-scene case study of *Bowling for Columbine's* essay structure, check out *Documentary Storytelling* by Sheila Curran Bernard.

Chapter 15 Ten Tips for Writing Documentary Narration

You heard it here first. Voiceover narration is making a comeback in documentaries. For the past few decades, independent filmmakers have eschewed the omniscient "Voice of God" narration, choosing instead to use (silent) text on screen as a vehicle for exposition.

But now narration is back. And it's no longer always the deep authoritative male voice. Consider the feminine voice of the mushroom/protagonist in *Fantastic Fungi* (2019). Or, check out the poetic voice of a 10,000 year-old woman in *I Am Belfast* (2015). Or, listen to the gentle murmur of actress Samira Wiley in *Night on Earth*, (2020), a recent British nature series on Netflix.

Make way, beloved narrators Peter Coyote and David Attenborough!

In *Fantastic Fungi: The Magic Beneath Us*, "she" is plural, and speaks directly to the viewer: "When you sense the oneness, you are with us," begins Actress Brie Larson (a *Captain Marvel* star). "Whether you believe in us or not…we are the wisdom of a billion years, we are creation, we are resurrection…we are [wait for it] mushrooms!"

Nice work, director Louie Schwartzberg!

Here's an example of a female narrator who is both singular *and* plural, personifying a city in director Marc Cousins' ode to Belfast: "I was beautiful once, but I wonder if I became ugly. And if so, what made me ugly?" Of course, the new voiceover narration is not all female. But it *is* personable. And occasionally it is omniscient. For more examples to inspire your own works-in-progress, check out:

- The grandfatherly croon of Morgan Freeman in *March of the Penguins,* (2005).

- The husband and wife narrating team in *The Biggest Little Farm* (2018).
- The only voice (of a rap artist) over 112 minutes in *Tupac: Resurrection* (2003).
- The bright heralding of Tiffany Shlain in *The Future Starts Here* (2014) as well as *Connected: An Autobiography About Life, Death and Technology* (2010).

Ten Tips

If you're ready to compose your own documentary narration, keep in mind that writing for the screen is very different from writing for print. Here are ten tips to guide you.

Tip #1: BE CONVERSATIONAL. Narration should not sound like a college lecture or an ideologue's sermon. Be colloquial. It's OK to use contractions. Where can you pose questions for your viewer? When you're done writing, read narration out loud to make sure it's easy to say.

Tip #2: AVOID STARTING sentences with a long participial phrase. Why? People don't generally talk that way; they *write* that way.

Instead, put the phrase that is set off by a comma at the end of the sentence. For example, don't say, "After working in the documentary world for 32 years, I've gathered ten tips to write compelling voiceover narration." For narration, turn the sentence around so the subject-verb-object is not preceded by a long phrase: "I've gathered ten tips to write compelling voiceover narration, after working in the documentary world for 32 years."

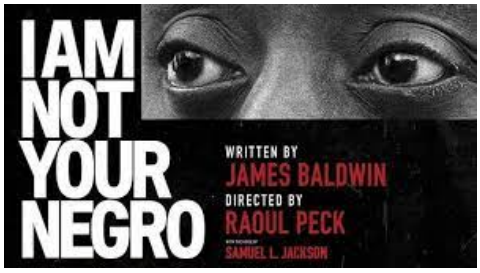
Tip #3: SHORT SENTENCES. Keep sentences short. Like this. Similarly, avoid long phrases set off by commas, which are hard to wrap one's tongue around. Give your talent a chance to breath… by using ellipses … or adding [PAUSE] to your script to guide pacing.

As writer Bill Harrington says in *Videomaker*, "Often, simple pauses can be very effective in highlighting dramatic moments. The narration should reinforce the video, not compete with it."

Sometimes saying *nothing*... says it all. Bypass the brain's executive function and let pictures and music stimulate viewers' limbic system, especially during dramatic scenes. Harrington warns, "The audience won't forgive you for intruding on the moment."

Tip #4: CRAFT VOICE. Is your narration too dull and factual? Save the stats for text cards. (For variety, assign a role to text on screen, such as delivering factual exposition regarding legislation or dates or common nouns; this will take the burden off the narrator and render them less monotonous.)

Rather, use narration to imbue your documentary with a personal "voice".



Check out the contrasting narration in these three Oscar short-listed hits: the warm cuddly voice of Morgan Freeman in *March of the Penguins* (2005); the tech-friendly, youthful male voice in *The Internet's Own Boy* (2014); and the wise, prophetic voice of James Baldwin (read by Samuel L. Jackson) in *"I Am Not Your Negro* (2016).

Tip #5: ACTIVE VOICE. For verve, write in the active voice, not passive. "The Armistice was reluctantly signed by the Germans in 1918," is passive. Leverage drama by using the active tense, "Reluctantly, the Germans signed the Armistice in 1918."

Tip #6: SAY COW? Avoid "say cow, see cow", that is, saying in narration exactly what we're seeing on screen. Let pictures add to the exposition, and vice versa.

For instance, if the narration says, "Black and white dairy cows are popular among farmers," don't *show* a farmer feeding black and white dairy cows. How boring. Present an image that

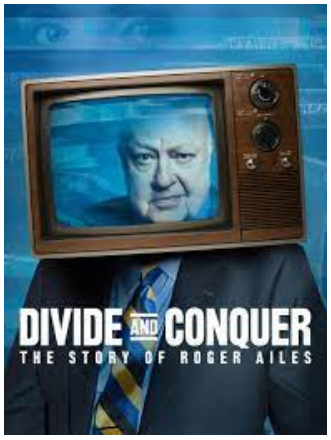
gives more information, such as a cow giving birth, or a calf nursing, or a close up of an electric milking pump.

Tip #7: TITLE FIRST. Here's an old radio tip: prepare the listener that they're about to hear a name by preceding it with a title. Otherwise, the name might fly right past them (and they can't go back and *read* it).

For example, rather than writing, "Stephen Yale-Loehr contributed to the 21-volume 'Bible' of immigration law," give Stephen a descriptive title, such as "Co-author Stephen Yale-Loehr contributed to the 21-volume 'Bible' of immigration law."

Tip #8: NTK? Scrutinize every line by asking, "Does the viewer *need to know* this?" PBS producer Jon Else used to mark-up narration scripts with the "NTK?" shorthand. And I've seen many essay-style rough cuts slouch under weighty "fun facts" that belong on a film's website.

My former student Alexis Bloom, director of *Divide and Conquer: The Story of Roger Ailes*, says she had countless criteria for cutting information that would "bore you senseless." For a look at four very important criteria for making cuts, read my blog "Documentaries are Not Encyclopedias".



(A corollary to tip #8: "Don't tell me shit I already know," from Michael Moore's Filmmaking Rule #2.)

Tip #9: AVOID JARGON. While we're on the topics of boredom and condescension, scan for phrases or words the audience may not understand. If you must use jargon, define it, make fun of it, or otherwise risk tainting your documentary with confusion or perceived bias.

Tip #10: TRANSITION. Narration is a god's gift to filmmakers for succinctly transitioning from one topic to another, one plot point to another, and in and out of soundbites. And I'm not

talking about the omniscient “Voice of God” narration style that ruled in the days of WWII journalist Edward R. Murrow.

As a result of backlash to that heavy-handed style, voiceover narration today remains underrated as a storytelling device. Here are four reasons why you might want to use narration in your documentary.

STORY DOCTORING

CHAPTER 16 HIRING A STORY CONSULTANT

Are you feeling unsure about which interview bites to choose? Where to begin your story? How to build suspense? Which sequence of scenes will bring your climax to a successful conclusion? Whether you are editing your documentary yourself, or hiring an editor, bringing a story consultant on board will save you time, money and a lot of angst. See Appendix A for more information on working with a consultant at New Doc Editing.

Editing a Film Yourself

Let's first assume you have a low budget documentary and to save money you are editing it yourself. While many people have learned to "edit", i.e., operate a non-linear software program and successfully cut and move footage, only a fraction of those that call themselves "editors" have honed actually their craft over several years. Hiring a story consultant (also known as a "story editor", "story doctor" or "documentary doctor") will not only help you craft a tight narrative structure, you'll do it in half the time.

A post in the online forum Doculink entitled "Story Consultants Gone Wild" points to the growing popularity of using story consultants (the proper term from the narrative world is "story editor") for structural advice. This trend has grown in reaction to the large number of filmmakers who are now editing their films themselves. While the practice of editing one's own documentary is still frowned upon among seasoned pros, the reality of funding cuts and the large influx of people using affordable digital cameras have spawned a new, do-it-yourself generation of "one-man band" documentary filmmakers. While many of these filmmakers are intelligent and experienced, the majority can benefit enormously from the expertise of a story editor. In fact, for a low budget director who is adept at

editing, it's an extremely wise choice. Listen carefully to your story consultant and edit according to their instructions, and you'll save yourself tens of thousands of dollars that you would have paid an editor.

The Editor/Story Consultant Relationship

Of course, if you can afford an editor, this is preferable. And if you are already working with an editor, a story consultant will support your existing collaboration. While some editors may fear being replaced by a story consultant, this is rarely the case, unless the editor isn't very good to begin with. Many editors moonlight as consultants, but they rarely want or have the time to usurp the editing role on a documentary project for which they are consulting. If your editor's ego is threatened, reassure them once, and hopefully they will be confident enough in their skills to welcome the perspective of an outside consultant.

You may be wondering why you need a consultant at all if you have a professional editor. There are three reasons. First, your editor will eventually lose perspective too, just as the director or anyone who works with the material long enough does. You'll need a fresh perspective, someone who can view the material anew, as your viewers will see it. The second reason to hire a story consultant is to help mediate the often volatile and creatively chaotic director/editor relationship. A story consultant provides a valuable third opinion, and he or she can marry the best of two conflicting structural approaches--or provide a third approach that works even better. Finally, a story consultant is experienced at seeing the big picture and can quickly hone in on structural issues that may blind an editor who has been busy cutting scenes at a micro-editing level.

When to Hire a Story Consultant

Ideally you'll hire a consultant for ½ day during pre-production, when you are determining the story potential or essay components of your film. They will be able to assess the story strength of the film you have in mind, and offer suggestions for the kinds of scenes and sound bites you need to elicit during filming. Television acquisition executives and audiences want compelling stories. Story consultants understand what it takes to craft a story. They may even tell you that you don't have a film--yet. Heed their advice and keep digging.

If you like their work, hire them again before cutting your first assembly, when you can show a bit of footage and communicate on paper what you actually ended up capturing on film. A good story consultant can see plot points on paper, thus saving you the expense of hiring them to watch several hours of footage. On the other hand, you may want to show them four hours of your best footage. If you have a film with multiple protagonists, I suggest cutting separate "character cuts", or 20-30 minute sequences of the best material for each character. Viewed separately, these clips will help your consultant evaluate the story arc of each protagonist.

For best results and continuity, I recommend hiring the same consultant periodically throughout making the film--and definitely at the assembly cut, rough cut, fine cut stages. If you are stuck on a particular problem, for example, how to cut your film's opening scene, ask for a quickie consultation. Remember that story editors are much more adept at troubleshooting structural pitfalls and generating storytelling solutions that will keep your viewers glued to the screen than are members of your advisory team, or participants at a rough cut screening.

Rates

Rates vary widely, from $150/hour to $400/hour, and you usually get what you pay for. (More up-to-date rates can be found online). Many story consultants have a package or day rate, which is cheaper than hiring them by the hour. The good news is that you are not hiring these professionals for weeks at a time. Budget for ten days of story consulting and you'll be in great shape. You may not even need that much.

Finding a Story Consultant

I recommend four methods:

1. Inquire on an online forum such as D-word or Doculink;
2. Ask veteran documentary filmmakers and editors for referrals;
3. Check to see who is teaching classes on documentary structure at non-profit organizations such as the San Francisco Film Society (SFFS) or the International Documentary Association (IDA).
4. See Appendix A or click here.

Keep in mind that since story consultants don't need to work with high-resolution footage, you don't need to hire locally. In other words, you can upload or email low-resolution cuts anywhere on the planet. Many story consultants use video streaming software that allows you to watch the cuts together, though you may be thousands of miles apart.

One of the great things about the independent documentary community is that colleagues are frequently willing to help one another. They'll view a rough cut and offer advice at no cost. We filmmakers applaud this community spirit. But realize that a colleague volunteering time will not give you the detailed story guidance that you need to edit your documentary over time. Imagine getting valuable outside perspective, reassurance about where you are on the *right* track, trouble-shooting from assembly cut to locked picture,

and the confidence of knowing exactly how to craft the next cut. Your film deserves the unparalleled value that a professional story editing service will provide.

To help you in your quest for the ideal story consultant for your film, imagine working with a story consultant who knows precisely when momentum should build in your documentary. A good consultant will be generous with their know-how, and you will learn (for your current film and your next one) the essential elements that your film must have to grip viewers straight out of the gate. Wondering how to open your film? Your story consultant can give you ideas on how to edit an inciting incident to launch your story. Picture yourself learning several strategies to *ethically* ramp up suspense at just the right times. Now you know which scene to choose and where it belongs. You are gaining an understanding of how to reverse-engineer a scene, beat by beat, and how to craft each act, down to the minute. You're receiving detailed directions on how to construct a satisfying climax and how to avoid a prolonged ending. You're learning how to close your film in a way that will leave viewers feeling deeply moved.

You'll want to get clear on your story arc as early as possible in the filmmaking process, ideally, before you shoot a frame. Now that you know the benefits of working with a story consultant, begin your interviews from that state of mind. As the old saying goes, the right teacher appears when the student is ready.

CHAPTER 17 MAKING MICRO CUTS: EDITING AESTHETICS

Over the years I have picked up a great deal of lore about editing aesthetics. Had I been able to learn these editing tips at the start of my career, from a book or a mentor, I would have been very grateful indeed! I offer these tips to emerging editors, knowing that they will add their own exciting innovations to the field as well.

While Walter Murch's popular book *In the Blink of an Eye* is a great introduction to video or film editing, his examples and teachings come from the world of fiction films. This chapter will reveal the fundamental "do's and don'ts" for the micro editing stage of documentary filmmaking. I will reveal ways to transition smoothly from one shot to another and one scene to another. Look for the following opportunities to make great transitions while logging your footage and at rough cut stage, and then hone them during fine cut and locked picture stages.

Traditional editing aesthetics

Let's start with three traditional "don'ts."

1. Don't allow a jump cut. A jump cut occurs when the focal length (close up shot, medium shot, wide shot, etc.) and the position of the subject does not change from one moment in time to the next. The classic example is an interview in which the interviewee's speech jumps from one moment in time to another. Traditionally this gap in time is covered by a cutaway, that is, a reverse shot of the reporter (in television news) or a shot of some other person or object in the scene. Sometimes a jump cut is softened with a dissolve. These days, documentary filmmakers can deliberately choose to include jump cuts as a conscious aesthetic choice. The

deliberate jump cut conveys a tone of transparency (i.e. we are not hiding the fact that there is a break in the conversation here.)

In Kirby Dick's documentary *This Film Is Not Yet Rated*, for example, the editor uses occasional jump cuts and audiences seem to take it in stride. Multiple uses of jump cuts within a short period of time, however, should be avoided because the constant cutting is jarring to the viewer. Note that jump cuts used within a vérité scene, in which action is unfolding in front of the camera, can be used to speed up the process as well as convey a humorous effect.

So if you are looking to add humor to a scene, consider ways in which you can incorporate jump cuts. A great example of this is in the personal documentary Blue Vinyl by Judith Helfand. The director/protagonist uses jump cuts in a scene of a family conversation around the dinner table to add a funny effect to her efforts to persuade her parents to remove the vinyl siding from their home.

2. Don't cut on motion. Motion in this context is defined as camera motion, not the motion of the subject in front of the camera. The camera can make the following possible motions: zooming (moving in), pulling back, tilting (moving vertically up or down), or panning (moving horizontally left or right). The rule states that if the A shot (the first of two adjacent shots in a timeline) is moving, it is bad form to cut to a static B shot. The A shot should first stop movement and "resolve" itself. Of course, this rule is being broken all the time as newbie filmmakers who are not aware of the rule introduce new aesthetics to the documentary field. (Similar to how shaky footage has gained a following as a popular "gritty" look). We shall see later in this chapter some legitimate reasons for breaking the rule not to cut on motion.

3. Don't cut before leaving the frame. This rule specifies that if a person or object is moving toward the edge of the frame, allow the person (or animal or soccer ball or vehicle, etc.) to exit the frame before cutting; otherwise the effect on the viewer is jarring.

Split edits

Split edits, also known as J cuts or L cuts, have the harmonious effect of stitching together two shots. Technically speaking, either the video track is preceding the audio track in the timeline, or vice versa, the audio track is preceding the video track. For example, imagine watching a vérité scene of a rock band on stage. We see the band performing and hear them singing. Then the sound of the song lowers and we hear a new voice say, "After his first concert tour…." Then the image cuts from the visual of the band to the visual and audio of the rest of the person delivering a sound bite. "…Pete never looked back." If you examine the shape of this cut in a non-linear editing timeline, the sound bite resembles a "J" shape, hence it is called a J-cut. If the editor had begun with the sound bite and then covered the last part of it with the vérité footage of the rock band, the shape of the sound bite would resemble an "L." Good editors use split edits liberally.

Eight ways to make great cuts

Split edits are not the only way to knit your shots together. The following 8 methods are professional tricks to transition from an A shot to an adjacent B shot. Make sure to put them into your own documentary editing toolbox.

1. Cut on motion. Cutting from one shot in motion to an adjacent shot that is also in motion is aesthetically pleasing. For example, shot A pans from left to right as the camera moves along with a football player jogging across a field. The player never

exits the shot. This shot cuts with the B shot, also panning left to right, of the coach pacing the locker room floor. The effect is pleasant: two shots smoothly knitted together. Note that cutting from a pan moving in one direction to a pan moving in the opposite direction can give the illusion of time passing. This technique was used in the narrative film *Black Stallion* as the horse gallops along the beach first to left, then in the next shot to the right, then to the left, giving the effect of the hours passing by.

2. Cut on gesture. Cut on gesture simply means that a gesture made in the A shot is mirrored in the B shot. For example in the personal documentary film *Super Size Me*, there is a shot in which director/protagonist Morgan Spurlock shakes hands with one nutritionist to say good bye, which is then cut with another shot of Spurlock reaching out to shake hands with a second nutritionist. Another example, from the documentary film *Indiana Aria*, features a sound bite in which a man is gesturing with his hands to indicate "large breasts". It is cut with a shot of an opera singer onstage who is making a similar wide-armed gesture. You may have also seen the cliché cut on gesture when the A shot shows one door closing and the B shot shows another door opening. It is a great way to transition fluidly from one scene to another. Look for opportunities as you log to cut on gesture.


Indiana Aria, 2002

3. Cut on wipe. A wipe can be fashioned when an object passes in front of the camera so close that it completely fills the camera for a flash. Typically the scene turns black for a split second or, in the case of a vehicle moving in front of the camera, there is brief blur that fills the frame before the vehicle passes. The moment in which the passing

object completely fills the frame is a great place to cut to a second shot. Allow enough frames for the viewer to get a sense of the wipe, that is, the fast moving motion from left to right or right to left. The wipe can also occur on vertical motion. The "cut on wipe" is a great transition device, ushering in the next shot.

4. Cut on action. This is an old golden rule from the Walter Murch era that will never go out of fashion: You will produce a more dynamic cut if you edit in the middle of the action. For example, imagine watching a shot of a man sitting in a chair, talking to a companion. He reaches in his pocket and then strikes a match to light a cigarette. The best place to cut to the next shot is the moment he strikes the match. The action "hides" the cut into the next shot. This technique is much more dynamic than cutting from one still shot to another.

5. Cut on blink. Cutting on *The Blink of an Eye* (the title of Walter Murch's book) is a variation of a cutting on action. It simply means that when you are cutting away from the human face, the transition from one shot to another will appear seamless if you cut when the eyes blink. Try it. And start paying attention to those kinds of cuts in both documentary and narrative films. You will be amazed at the results.

6. Cut on swish. A "swish" in this sense is when the camera quickly moves away from its framing, as if the camera person is suddenly turning to refocus on something else. That quick blurred motion is a great way to transition into the next shot. You only need 30 frames of the swish to gracefully lead us to the next shot.

7. Clean entrance. Look for opportunities to cut on a "clean entrance." In other words, start your shot with nothing in the scene and allow something--a person, animal, or object--to enter the scene.

8. Cut on clean exit. This is related to an earlier don't ("don't cut before leaving the frame"). It simply means you should allow the person, animal, or object to completely leave the frame before cutting to the next shot. Of course, some editors bend the rules with great success. "The 'cut on clean exit' is a rule that, for the record, often doesn't work for me," says Editor Ken Schneider. "I learned this from filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard, although I softened his cuts. I find it often cuts best if I cut a few frames before the person fully exits frame."

Motion effects

Speeding up, slowing down or even reversing your shots can convey a variety of moods and even fix problems. For example, let's say that your shot pans from left to right. But you need the pan to move from right to left. Simply reversing the shot will achieve this result. You need to be careful, of course, that there are no people, vehicles, or other moving objects that would start to look strange if they are moving backwards!

SLOW MOTION

Slow motion can be used for dramatic effect as well as to solve technical problems. In general, slow motion adds a serious, weighty tone to a scene. You have seen this dramatic, sometimes somber effect before in slowed archival footage. (By the way, slowing archival footage saves you money because you don't need to buy as many seconds).

If your footage is shaky, you can sometimes use slow motion to stabilize the shot. For example, let's say you have a close up cutaway shot of an audience member that is too shaky to use. Try using two seconds of the most stable part of the shot and slow it down by 15-25%. Just be sure that the motion does not appear to be slowed.

You can also use slow motion if you need to extend a shot by a few frames. Let's say you have a shot of someone giving a dramatic speech on stage and, just after the person finishes their sentence, the shot quickly pans around. You can extend whatever valuable frames you have by another quarter or half a second by slowing down those last 5 or 10 frames. This kind of micro edit can have dramatic results.

FAST MOTION

Fast motion is a great way to infuse a scene with humor. For some reason, the image of people moving quickly reminds us of a Charlie Chaplin scenario and conveys a funny effect. Fast motion can also be used, of course, to condense an activity that takes a long time. For example, you can speed up the preparation of an apple pie either through jump cuts or through the use of fast motion.

Dissolves

Dissolves should be used judiciously and with a clear purpose in mind. In general, dissolves add a softening effect. So if you are going for a hard news feel, an investigative feel, or any kind of tough gritty mood, you want to avoid dissolves.

There are three good reasons to use dissolves. First, use a dissolve to indicate that time is passing. For example, let's say that you show four scenes from a baseball game and each scene transitions with a dissolve. The overall effect is that innings are passing by.

A second great reason to use a dissolve is to transition from an interview or vérité scene into flat art, such as a photograph, a newspaper headline, or some other two dimensional graphic element. And if you are going to use a dissolve to transition to flat art, you'll probably want to dissolve out as well. Dissolves used between a series of photographs, for example, will often convey a pleasing effect. But again, ask yourself, what mood am I

trying to convey here? If you mood is a kinetic pace or an indictment of the bad guy, you probably don't want to use dissolves.

A third reason to use a dissolve between two shots is to transition a hard cut. For example, let's say that the A shot is tilting vertically and never comes to rest. The B shot is an interview sound bite. Use a dissolve to transition and essentially soften the breach of the rule not to cut on motion. Dissolves can also be used between jump cuts to soften them.

Note that fading to and from black typically conveys the sense that a new scene or segment is beginning. As such, avoid dipping to black within a scene.

Length of shots

In the last decade, cuts have gotten quicker. Much quicker. Whereas shots used to stay on screen 6-8 seconds, these days 2-4 seconds is the norm. While cuts (and sound bites) are getting shorter, at times it's appropriate to keep a shot on screen for a longer than normal time. Obviously if there is action unfolding on screen, you want to let it unfold without cutting away. This is particularly true in scenes involved with human drama. In *Daughter from Danang*, the climax scene shows the protagonist involved in a difficult conversation with her family. Editor Kim Roberts allowed long uncut shots to convey to the viewer a sense of authenticity about what was unfolding. Viewers understand at a subconscious level that long takes mean we are seeing the real thing unfold. There is no manipulation of time via cutaways distorting the experience.

Music

While it is fine to experiment with "temp" music during the rough cut stage, save your fine tuning of music for fine cut and locked picture. Otherwise, you'll find that you have wasted time on scenes that you will either move or dump later.

Music is a great way to not only convey emotion but, in a pacing sense, to transition from one scene to another. A music "sting" is a few notes, lasting only a brief moment, that convey the movie is shifting from one scene to another. You see it all the time in reality TV shows. The music sting usually accompanies an external shot of the new location.

Music underneath a vérité scene can be used to guide the editing if you start out cutting shots based on the beat. But it is important to mix it up a bit and allow a few beats to go by before making a cut. Cutting on the beat is fine for a short time, but it can lead to a repetitive, monotonous experience for the viewer. So vary your cuts on and off the beat within a scene. Your composer, if you have one, will fine tune the music once he or she possesses your "locked picture"--meaning every frame of video will stay where it is. The composer needs the locked picture version of your documentary film to compose frame-specific music.

Photographs

When editing your rough cut, I suggest not taking the time to put moves on your photographs-- just place them to indicate the visuals that you will require. However, at fine cut stage, it is time to try out some moves and effects on your photos. While the so-called "Ken Burns effect" of slowly zooming into a photo is now a cliché, it is still a very useful technique to add drama to the visual experience of still art. Watch the documentary *Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room* for some great examples of conveying character through moves on photographs. Take care that you don't zoom in too close and loose video resolution, unless you've scanned the images at a very high resolution and start off

with a large frame size. My rule of thumb is to not increase the scale of the video by more than 25-30%. If you have a photograph scanned at a very high resolution (300-800 dpi), and you use a large frame size, you can zoom in even more. According to Editor Ken Schneider, "I try to scan very high res for final on-line use--at least 50 MB for a color still and 30 MB for a black and white. I also make a low-res version for offline editing, as the large frame sizes are difficult to work with."

Titles

It is amazing how few variations there are in the look of titles in documentary films. Some titles serve as exposition, a kind of written narration. Generally these appear as two to four sentences on the screen and the colors are off-white on a black background (though black backgrounds seem to be falling out of vogue). When editing titles, leave them on screen long enough to read. My rule of thumb is that you should be able to read them through twice before cutting away from the title. This gives even the slow reader enough time to absorb the meaning.

Another type of title is a subtitle. Subtitles are used when translating from one language to another or to clarify dialogue that is difficult to discern due to an accent or speech impediment. Again, off-white or pale yellow is the preferred color for titles because they pop against almost any video background. Be sure to add at least a drop shadow and perhaps an outline to your titles/subtitle to help them further stand out. I suggest font size 30 for subtitles, making them large enough for your middle aged and senior viewers to read easily.

Subtitles should not exceed two lines per shot. It is fine to add five-frame dissolves to either end or, if you prefer, just cut from one subtitle to another. If you are using subtitles to translate a foreign language, it is not necessary to translate word-for-word. Just make sure to check with an expert to convey an accurate translation. If you're using subtitles to make clear someone's accent or speech other than proper English, it's usually fine to tidy up the grammar of the subtitle rather than include grammatical errors.

CHAPTER 18: MY SEVEN TOP EDITING PEEVES

I don't mean to sound grumpy, but sometimes I get a bit exasperated when even experienced editors make these mistakes. So, in the spirit of solution-oriented story doctoring, here are mine top seven editing peeves, along with lessons to learn and suggested fixes:

1. I can't make out what an English-speaking, talking head is saying because of an accent or a mumble. Lesson: viewer comprehension rules.

   Fix: It's OK to subtitle even just a phrase.

2. Voiceover has been edited over an image containing more than five words of text. Lesson: viewers can't process two streams of language at once.

   Fix: move the voiceover, and replace with music or sound effects.

3. Scenes include gratuitous entrances and exits, such as boarding a plane or opening a door. Lesson: unless it's an artfully shot "clean entrance" or "clean exit," such "ins and outs" undermine a scene's drama**.**

   Fix: Unless they reveal important information, cut these shots.

4. Edits are consistently made on static images, when any motion in the frame has stopped. Lesson: movement on screen allows the viewer's eye to easily transition to the next shot.

   Fix: where possible, cut on movement—even on, or just after, the proverbial "blink of an eye".

5. Two shots rather than three. Lesson: "Rule of threes" means that three of anything—title cards, cutaway shots, photographs, archival clips—creates a *rhythm*.

   Fix: to improve pacing, leverage your two shots by adding a third.

6. Tiny, trendy fonts are used for subtitles, text cards, lower-thirds, and credit roll. Lesson: Editors under forty may not realize that older viewers often can't read text that small.

   Fix: Use a sans serif font (like Helvetica or Ariel) that is 26-32 points in size. Also, pale yellow trumps 100% white by "legal" U.S. broadcast standards.

7. Narration sounds boring, like a textbook being read aloud. Lesson: Writing for the screen is markedly different than writing for print.

   Fix: Read my chapter on Ten Tips for Writing Narration

CHAPTER 19 HOW TO HOLD A SUCCESSFUL ROUGH CUT SCREENING

Getting feedback on your rough cut is critical to the postproduction flow. This guide will explain the steps to prepare for and conduct a successful rough cut screening. It is primarily aimed at in-person screenings which will never lose their charm. Increasingly, though, busy filmmakers are turning to online platforms to solicit feedback. One of the best that debuted in 2021 is showandtell.film.

One thing to keep in mind: if you showed a perfectly edited film (for example, *Encounters at the End of the World*) to a test audience and asked for feedback on your rough cut, they would instinctively find something wrong with it. In other words, people tend to think giving feedback means pinpointing what's not working. This guide will stress the importance of getting feedback on what's already working with your film in addition to what's not. As a director, you need to know both.

PREPARATION

Who to Invite

There are three types of people you should invite to view your rough cut: 1) experts on the topic who serve as your advisors, 2) seasoned documentary professionals, and 3) people representative of your film's target audience.

Each audience should be handled differently. This guide is geared more toward showing your film to a group of everyday people who will likely want to see your film when it's released. But let me first say a word about the first two groups. Experts on your subject

matter, including any advisors, should watch your documentary mid-postproduction with an eye for accuracy and balance. If you need to do some key fact checking, or if your essay-style doc depends on an argument that one of your advisors deems invalid, you'll want to handle these problems now--before heading into the fine cut.

As for documentary professionals--including filmmakers, editors and story editors (consultants)--this group of peers should watch your rough cut at their own special screening, so they can talk shop without alienating anyone or having to dumb down their use of terms like "protagonist", "story arc", etc. Your third group, roughly a dozen people who are representative of your documentary's intended audience, will require special care outlined in this article.

Where to Hold the Screening

While it's OK to give advisors and documentary professionals a copy or link to your rough cut and ask them to get back to you, filmmakers with a budget for screenings may want to rent out a screening room at a local filmmaking agency.

This arrangement builds esteem for your film, encourages invitees to take the event seriously, and creates a nice pre-release buzz for your film. In addition, filmmaking professionals will appreciate the face-to-face networking opportunity.

For our third group, the everyday people who will see your film, it is fine to hold a screening in the living room of a friend who has agreed to host you. In fact, a host is advisable--given that you will likely be a bundle of nerves. Your job will be to listen (more on that later) so don't burden yourself with the traditional tasks of hosting: taking coats, offering refreshments, cleaning up.

Helpers

Enlist your staff and friends to help out. You'll need a greeter, cook, host, and cleanup crew. You may also need audio/video technical assistance if your gathering is in a screening venue. I highly recommend getting a note-taker. Having someone other than you to take notes during the verbal feedback part of the screening allows you to stay present to absorb all the comments.

Refreshments

Feed people before the screening. Not a lot, just some light refreshments (protein will help keep people alert) to encourage conviviality and boost blood sugar for the requisite concentration. I advise against serving alcohol, again because you want people to stay mentally sharp, but if you do serve alcoholic beverages just open a bottle of wine rather than mix a blender of cocktails. Appearances matter and this is not a party.

Sign In Table

A sign in table at the front door serves two functions: it gears the guests toward the seriousness of the event and it pads your mailing list with people who are likely to donate and who will want to know about your film's release.

Transcripts

A complete and accurate, word-for-word transcript of your rough cut is expected at screenings for advisors and filmmaking professionals. Ideally the transcript is formatted is a way that is easy to follow. For example, sound bites might be in all caps, or you might have the dialogue on the right side of the page and images listed on the left side. Include page numbers for easy reference. For the third group, average folks, a transcript is not required.

Questionnaires

Before your screening, write up a 1-2 page questionnaire to hand out directly after the screening. An anonymous questionnaire will solicit people's truest feelings since they won't have to worry about hurting your feelings. Begin the questionnaire with an open-ended question like "What did you think of the film?" For the second questionnaire, I like to ask, "What did you like about this film?" or "What's working well in the film?" Since people tend to focus on giving criticism and forget that you need to know what's working well, this question is important to include. It's also helpful for the filmmaker's delicate ego to have positive feedback near the top of the questionnaire. Ask how the film could be improved and then ask about areas you are specifically concerned about like, "Do you like the music?", "What did you think of the old man character" or "Did the film take too long to get going?"

DURING THE SCREENING

Introduce the Rough Cut

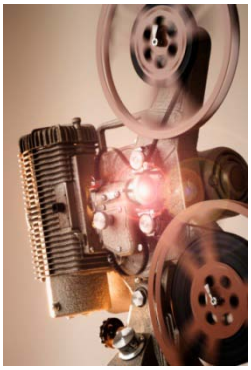
Greet, thank and mingle with guests for 30 minutes before the screening. Then ask your host to announce that the screening will begin and guests should get settled. Have your host introduce you, and then it's your time to shine. Since this will be the only time during the evening when you will seriously transmit information, I recommend practicing this 5-minute introduction.

First, thank your guests and let them know how valuable their feedback is. Explain that you need to know what's working in the film as well as what's not working. Explain that you specifically want to know if there is anything in the cut that is confusing.

If there are any significant materials missing from the rough cut, let your audience know. For example, "We're using temporary music and narration, not the final." Or, "We're going to shoot one more interview with an expert who doesn't appear in this cut." Explain that, because this is a rough cut, you haven't finessed the edits, music, or smoothed other little things. *Then stop*. Many filmmakers over-apologize for the condition of the rough cut and test audiences don't want to hear it. They want to get on with the show!

Finally, tell your audience how long the cut is and inform them that immediately after the screening you will be handing out anonymous questionnaires. The questionnaires are designed to solicit their honest, first-impact impressions. They should used this quiet time to reflect, write and share their feedback on what worked and what didn't. Ask them if there are any questions and then press play.

After the Film



When the film is done, turn off the TV, raise the lights and have someone immediately hand out questionnaires and pens. Quickly stand in front of your group, quietly thank them for their attention and ask them to take 15-20 minutes to give their feedback on the questionnaires. Explain that this is an introspective time and that group discussion will follow. If they need to use the restrooms, that's fine. Keep your announcement brief. Your audience needs to hear their own thoughts, not yours.

After fifteen minutes ask if anyone needs more time, allow five minutes more, and then begin the group discussion. Remind people that it's very important for you to know what's working as well as what's not working and suggest that they begin their comments with something they liked about the film. Throw out an opening question to get things started such as, "What did you guys think of the film?" Then sit back and listen. If you are a first-time filmmaker, listening may be the hardest part of the evening for you. Your

instinct will be, understandably, to explain your reasons for doing things, explain the stories behind certain scenes, and most deadly of all, explain what something means (and why your confused viewer shouldn't be confused).

To curb the tendency to justify our rough cut, keep in mind the following observations. First, if your viewer is confused or if they didn't like something, they are right. You can't argue with someone's taste or lack of understanding. Do you really want to waste your time justifying and explaining what you meant to convey in a scene? Of course not! You certainly won't be able to do that with the tens of thousands of future viewers. So say “thank you” and ask for clarification if you're confused by their comment, and then shut up. Let your note taker take notes.

The second thing to keep in mind is that, while your test audiences are usually right about what's not working in the film, they are rarely right about how to fix it, says veteran filmmaker Jon Else. So graciously accept their feedback (this is valuable information) and know that later you and your expert postproduction team will tackle solving the editorial problems. Don't take viewers' fix-it advice too seriously unless your viewers are seasoned filmmaking professionals. But do pay attention to any problem that’s mentioned more than once.

Third, remember that people from whom you solicit feedback can't help but put most of their energy and attention into what's not working. They think that's their job. Knowing this, you can tell the defensive little voice in your head to cool it and keep mum. Allow 20-40 minutes for discussion. Half-way through, announce how much time is left and ask to hear from people who haven't spoken--especially if a few people have dominated the discussion. Be alert for discussion dominators, because they can easily skew the group-think towards a certain "take" on the film (fortunately you already have their first impressions documented on the questionnaires). If you feel certain voices are dominating or skewing the discussion, thank them and change the subject. For example, "I'd really like to know what people thought about the pacing. Did the film move along at a good

clip? Were there times you felt bored? If you haven't spoken yet, I'd love to hear your thoughts."

At the appointed time, graciously thank everyone for their valuable feedback. At this point, the host should take over, invite people to have more food (or not) and tell people when the gathering will end. I suggest ending fairly quickly because you have some serious work head of you.

After Guests Leave

In an ideal world, your clean-up team dives into tidying the house while you, and possibly a trusted co-worker, squirrel away to review the questionnaires. No doubt you're anxious to read viewers' first impressions but if you can't find the privacy to do this, then wait until you get home. Remember as you head into this exciting and vulnerable moment--your viewers invariably stressed what's not working and, to make matters worse, you are likely to focus 90% of your attention on the negative comments. So I suggest reading your questionnaires with a grain of salt and every time someone says something good about your film, read it twice, feel it, circle it, and let it sink in, congratulate yourself and then move on. The purpose of this initial reading is to get an overall sense of reaction to your film and satisfy your curiosity. It's important to limit the evening's reading to that. It's been a long day, likely full of emotional ups and downs. Bottom line: this is not the time to start solving problems. Your job is to get a general impression of the state of your film. Tomorrow you can focus on troubleshooting structural issues and decide whether or not you need a story editor (consultant) to help.

CHAPTER 20 SOLVING STRUCTURAL PROBLEMS

Structural pitfalls will appear frequently at both the assembly and rough cut stages. With the help of test audiences and a story consultant, these can be identified and fixed. For a more exhaustive do-it-yourself structural analysis, I recommend the "Story Doctoring Kit for Documentary Rough Cuts," available at http://newdocediting.com/products.

Before you begin, gather all the feedback you've solicited from members of the film's family (assembly cut screening) and test audiences (rough cut screenings). If you have a lone criticism with which you disagree, I wouldn't worry about it too much. But if more than one person makes the same comments, for example, "the film takes too long to get going," then take this concern seriously.

For identifying and fixing structural problems in a character driven documentary, I like to use an Act Timetable (example below) and a Doc Plot Map (the customizable, copyrighted plot diagram from New Doc Editing). The Act Timetable will tell you where, in minutes, the act climaxes should fall for each of the three acts. If your film is not peaking at these times, then you are not in sync with Aristotle's classic story rhythm.

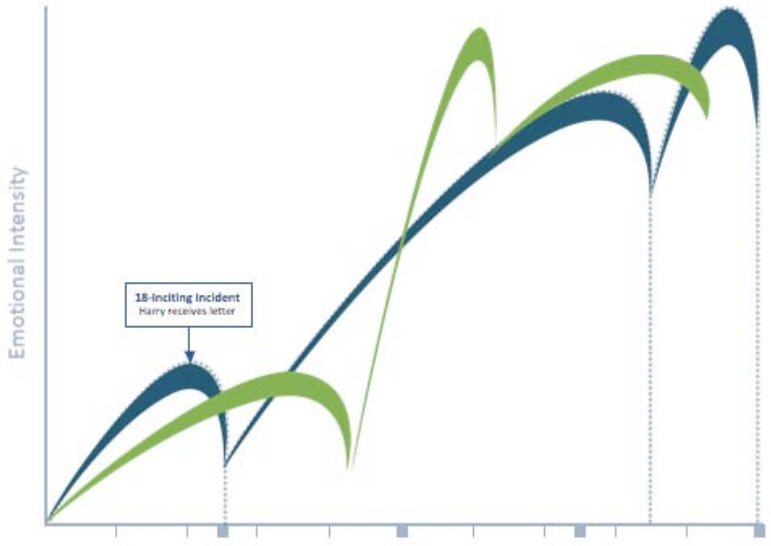
Three - Act Timetable

TRT	%	15	20	26	60	88	100	120
Inciting Incident	Under 24%	At or before First Act	At or before First Act	At or before First Act	At or before First Act	At or before First Act	At or before First Act	At or before First Act
Act One	24%	3.5	5	6	14.5	21	24	29
Midpoint	54%	8	11	14	32.4	48	54	65
Act Two climax	80%	12	16	21	48	70	80	96

Act Three climax	95%	14.25	19	24.5	57	84	95	114
Credits end	100%	15	20	26	60	87	100	120

In the example of a Doc Plot Map illustrated below, the blue arcs show ideal arc lengths and where the peaks for a three act narrative structure should fall. Notice that the X-axis displays the film's timeline, while the Y-axis shows emotional intensity. Ideally, the first act climax occurs ¼ into the film, the second act climax peaks a little over ¾ of the way through the film, and the third act climax makes the highest peak just over 7/8 into the film.

In this example, the green arcs show where a particular rough cut's arcs are appearing. Notice that the first act takes too long to get going, the second act climax peaks just after the film's midpoint, and the third act climax is not only too soon, it isn't the film's highest peak. In other words, this film takes too long to get going, never recovers momentum after the sixty percent point, and takes forever to end. That's a prescription for comatose viewers, who are glazed over rather than glued to the screen!



Story Doctoring

Is your doc-in-progress suffering from S.A.D. (Structural Affective Disorder)? Here are ideas for diagnosing some of the most common structural maladies and prescriptions for fixing them:

Inciting Impotency.

Is your opening scene limp? Do test audiences complain that your film takes too long to get going? Here are three ideas for fixing this problem. First, make sure that the first few minutes of your film employ your best production values and hook the viewer with an interesting scene, idea or visual. Within five minutes, the viewer should have a good idea of what the film will be about.

Second, check to see that you have either an inciting incident in the first act or a central hypothesis at the beginning of your topic-based documentary. The central hypothesis should be one and only one simple idea. If it's too complex, or if you're proposing more than one thesis (or none at all), who can blame the viewer for feeling lost? For character driven docs, the inciting incident is an event that throws the protagonist's world out of order and gives rise to their goal or quest.

Third, if you already have an inciting incident, see if you can move it earlier. The sooner the story starts, the better. Robert McKee advises bringing in the catalyst scene, or unexpected moment, as soon as the audience has a reason to care about the main character.

Sagging Midpoint.

How do you escalate suspense in Act Two? Proper use of back-story, reversals and a midpoint are three solutions. A dramatic back-story placed late in Act Two will rev up

the film's suspense at the requisite time. See if you have a moving back-story that can be repositioned after the film's halfway point.

A reversal works like ice-skating. Your plot pushes one way (for example, a negative polarity) and then it pushes the opposite way (positive polarity). Ideally, a reversal is an abrupt 180-degree turn in action. Again, placing this device late in Act Two ramps up the action at the required moment.

Can you craft a midpoint for your film? Midpoints have a few different functions, as explained in Chapter 8, and one of them is to bolster a sagging middle or Act Two. For this to work, you need to portray a life-and-death crisis for either 1) a character; 2) a relationship; or 3) a person's way of being. In this third type of midpoint, the personality crisis, we see the first signs that your character is undergoing a profound transformation.

Climax Constipation.

When the great push is on, don't plug up the climax. There's a reason Act Three is the shortest act in the film. Shorter means tighter cuts, raised stakes and a sense of accelerating action. Time out your third act and if it's longer than 20 percent of your film, review carefully for places to cut. Remember, the rhythm of this act is more important than getting every last treasured scene in your film.

Deadly Denouement

If test audiences complain that your film takes too long to end, you either have a constipated climax or a deadly denouement. The latter means that you are taking too long to wrap up the film after the climax scene. Once we know whether or not the protagonist has achieved their goal, it's time to show a brief glimpse (2-3 minutes) of how this outcome has affected the protagonist's life. The temptation with both character driven

and essay-based docs is to spend too much time ruminating on the film's meaning. Let the audience do that, and they will appreciate you and see your next film.

Major Social Issue Depression

There's nothing wrong with tackling a depressing social issue, but if you don't do it in an engaging and even entertaining way, you have only yourself to blame when your film gets pulled from the theaters after a short run. Who wants to spend a Friday night at the movies watching a kill joy doc? Here are some solutions for treating depressing documentaries.

First, find a way to be entertaining. Think Morgan Spurlock in *Super Size Me* or Michael Moore in all his films. Assembly stage is not too late to craft an engaging and funny narrator/persona (on or off camera). Where else can you provide comic relief? Where is the film particularly grim? Ask test audiences about this issue. They won't be able to tell you how to fix it, but they can certainly spot a prolonged downer. You may need to revisit your transcripts to recall funny comments or scenes. Remember that comedy often has its roots in anger, so channel your outrage in a way that disarms your viewer and tickles their funny bone.

Second, consider using animation to craft a lighter tone. Two great examples of how animation is used to temper what are essentially angry indictments are the South Park clip in *Bowling for Columbine* and the MPAA rating board phone scene in Kirby Dick's *This Film Is Not Yet Rated*. I recommend watching these films for inspiration.

Third, if your essay-based film's sensibility is a loud wakeup call (*An Inconvenient Truth*), a nail-the-bad-guy investigative piece (*Enron*) or an agonizing look-at-the-mess-we're-in (*No End in Sight*), it's a good idea to make the ending hopeful. I know you don't want to make a "feel-good" movie, and that's not what I'm advocating. But consider this: if you spend the bulk of your film proving an essentially negative thesis,

such as “global warming is real” or “corporations are corrupt”, then don’t you want to help your audience out by catapulting them into taking action? If they’re depressed, they won’t. Give hopeful examples, or create a call to action that addresses the problem rather than staying stuck in it.

Character Identity Disorder.

Are test audiences getting your characters confused? There are a couple standard solutions. The simplest and perhaps most effective is to simply identify your characters frequently (rather than just once at the start of the film) with liberal use of lower-thirds. Sometimes more drastic measures require de-lacing a film in which multiple storylines are woven together. In other words, rather than checker boarding multiple protagonists, separate the arcs out and tell one story at a time. This technique worked well in *Iraq in Fragments*, a film that profiles three Iraqi characters, one after another.

Cleft Lip Look.

Do your first-impression visuals require reshoots? This isn’t a structural problem; it’s a significant cosmetic one. If your cinematography is dark, shaky, soft or otherwise visually flat, you may need to bolster your production values with some powerful shot-in-the-arm visuals, such as aerials, animation, graphics, dramatically-lit interviews and even beauty shots at the magic hour. Hire a cinematographer for one day and knock off two or three of the items from this list. Hire a graphics student to create a title treatment. Your film will shine from the face-lift.

Information Overload.

If your test viewers say they are confused, that can mean a lot of things. First, don’t argue--find out more information. You may need to clarify a specific reference or explain jargon. Or, maybe they’re confused in the sense that they don’t know what the film is

about because you haven't told them in the first few minutes (see Inciting Impotency) or the film isn't structured in a clear fashion. But if dazed viewers complain that they can't absorb all the information you present, there are a few specific steps to consider.

Go through your film and eliminate instances in which voiceover competes with simultaneous text on screen. This is a common mistake. Understand that viewers cannot process both written text and voiceover at the same time, unless there are only a couple of words on the screen.

Can you take some of the burden off your overly verbose cast of talking heads by creating animation or graphics that explain concepts that the left-brain will grasp quickly? See *I.O.U.S.A* for a great example of how graphics (ballooning timelines) can portray visually what the heavyweights attempt to impress upon us with words.

Finally, check to see that you haven't either repeated ideas or made a non sequitur. It's amazing how repetition can confuse viewers. They often feel like they are going in circles—because they are. You get to make your point once, but then it's time to move on. If moving on means a transition that doesn't make sense (the non sequitur), you'll have to craft music, narration or rearrange your footage to fix it.

CHAPTER 21 CASE STUDIES FROM THE SUNDANCE FILM FESTIVAL

If you're holed up in an editing room seeking solutions to specific structural problems, I invite you to look no further than the last two decade's big hits from the Sundance Film Festival for inspiration. The documentary that won the 2008 Directing Award, *American Teen*, is a vivid example of how far the character driven documentary has come since the 1994 trend-setter, *Hoop Dreams*. Talk about thrilling audiences with the same twists as a well-told narrative tale! During the first few minutes of *American Teen*, I thought I had walked into the wrong theater and was watching a feature film.

Multiple Protagonists

If your challenge is how to structure multiple protagonists, you basically have two options. You can inter-cut the storylines, as *American Teen's* Nanette Burstein did so effortlessly, or you can "clump" the stories by telling one after another. Most directors and editors prefer to inter-cut storylines--if they can get away with it--because it gives the film a more cohesive feel. Two of my favorite examples of how to do this are Robb Moss's *Same River Twice* (2003), a portrait of five former hippies hitting midlife, and Johnny Symons' *Daddy and Poppa* (2002), in which editor Kim Roberts interweaves three stories of gay fatherhood.

Perhaps the best way to understand how to inter-cut multiple stories is to study the talk of the 2007 Sundance Film Festival: Brett Morgan's *Chicago Ten*. Everyone talks about this film for its groundbreaking use of animation (it is impressive), but what struck me most was how editor Stuart Levy (A.C.E.) managed to

checkerboard two complex storylines: the 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago and the infamous trial that followed. I recommend watching this film with a notepad and the display option activated on your remote. The first, second and third act climaxes for each of the two stories occur at precisely the right times. The Act One climaxes are ¼ of the way into the film, the Act Two climaxes are about 5/8 of the way in, and the Act Three climaxes are 15/16th of the way in. Such precision takes the breath away from an editing geek like me.

Now, for all you filmmakers with multiple protagonists, there are two reasons you may want to clump your stories. Either the storylines are too complex to inter-cut or your test audiences have a difficult time telling your characters apart. These criteria can usually be diagnosed upon watching the assembly cut, but certainly no later than rough cut.

Clumping Documentary Stories

For a great example of the "clumping" method watch *Iraq in Fragments* (2006--the first documentary to win Sundance's award for excellence in Documentary Film Editing. Director James Langley tells three tales separated by location and artistic style.

Another stellar example of a film that tells one story after another is *Long Night's Journey into Day* (2000). I remember weeping at the climax of this amazing film about South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The film's theme of reconciliation embodies the sensibility of films that we at New Doc Editing love to work on: documentaries which ultimately inspire rather than depress. I took a long walk in the cemetery off Kearns Boulevard afterwards to meditate on the film's meaning. Directors Deborah Hoffmann and Frances Reid decided to tell their four amnesty stories separately because the storylines were too complex for audiences to follow when inter-cut. The filmmakers took a lot of heat for starting the film with the story of a white American woman, Amy Beale, who was murdered by apartheid protestors. I think they made the

right decision though, because this story provided an important point of reference for the film's primary audience: American viewers. The film premiered on HBO.

Starting Your Documentary

Along those lines, if you're struggling with how to start your film, check out my all time favorite historical documentary, *The Times of Harvey Milk* (1984). Also edited by the legendary Hoffmann, this four-act film starts with a news clip of a chaotic press conference in which then San Francisco supervisor Dianne Feinstein announces to the horror of the crowd that Mayor George Moscone and Supervisor Harvey Milk have been assassinated. In addition to griping the audience, another important objective achieved by this opening was to orient heterosexual viewers who may not have been familiar with or particularly cared about a gay activist named Harvey Milk, but who admired Mayor Moscone.

Starting your film with a point of familiarity, a reference point, is particularly important for films about minority experiences that aspire to cross over and move mainstream audiences. (It's interesting to note how closely the structure of the narrative film *Milk* mirrors the Academy-award winning documentary. Both films start with Feinstein's press conference and Milk's tape-recorded will and both films employ the same act climaxes: his election, the Brigg's initiative, and his assassination. The documentary has a fourth act climax, the White Night Riots).

Act Two Momentum

Structuring Act Two can be one of the most challenging tasks of editing, and if you're wondering how to keep momentum escalating during this long act, check out Tommy Walker's *God Grew Tired of Us*. This 2006 Sundance Grand Jury Prize winner does a nice job of pacing the increasingly difficult obstacles faced by two African boys after

their first act's climactic plane ride to the U.S. (remember, a climax doesn't have to be anxiety-provoking, it can be explosively funny).

Another example of ramping up momentum can be found in *Nanking*, a devastating look at the Japanese invasion of China in 1937. This film won the 2007 Documentary Editing Award, so take this with a grain of salt, but I had to stop watching as one horrific incident after another produced an unremitting vision of cruelty, maiming and rape. While storytelling dogma dictates that the protagonist face increasingly difficult obstacles in Act Two, *Nanking* might have helped me through the carnage by cutting in more moments of insight, victory or comic relief. On the other hand, part of the film's power is its unrelenting pace. For a winning example of how a reversal can create momentum in Act Two, see Deborah Hoffmann's *Complaints of a Dutiful Daughter*, a 1995 Sundance crowd-pleaser.

Climax Considerations

Your film's climax scene may be obvious, or it may take some deliberation. One of my favorite Sundance films is Josh Tickell's *Fields of Fue*l, which won the 2008 Audience Award. While I think the storytelling is remarkable and again epitomizes the kind of stirring, solution-oriented docs that I love to work on, I wonder if the film ends with just too many success stories. Perhaps if one of these served as the climax, the rest could have been massaged into a short montage, effectively serving as a denouement. Once a film hits its final emotional peak, audiences will be eager to wrap up so they can mull over the film's meaning.

If you're still shooting a vérité film and don't yet know your film's climax, take heart by watching Gail Dolgin's *Daughter from Danang*. This 2002 winner of the Sundance Grand Jury Prize answers the film's central question (will a young Vietnamese American woman successfully reunite and bond with her birth mother?) with an astounding "no" at the climax scene.

Great Denouements

Finally, check out the denouement in *Capturing the Friedmans* for a great example of how to wrap up your film--and avoid a deadly long ending. The denouement should serve three purposes: 1) give viewers a breather after the climax; 2) wrap up unanswered questions; 3) provide a snapshot of what life is like now that the protagonist has achieved her goal or not. Many documentaries achieve these objectives through an epilogue. In the "two years later" epilogue of *Capturing the Friedmans*, Elaine Friedman reunites with her son Jesse, who has just been released from jail. The scene is moving but brief, an important factor in crafting in denouement. After the climax, audiences want to think about the film's meaning on their own.

CHAPTER 22: CUTTING THE 2-MINUTE TRAILER

(Theatrical and Fundraising)

The 2-minute trailer is a wondrous work of art, often taking 3-5 days to edit well. While used for different purposes, the theatrical trailer (that showcases a finished film) and a fundraising trailer (to raise funds during production) can both share similar structural elements. In addition, these trailers should showcase high production values, establish credibility, and give a sense of the film's quest or central inquiry.

The Theatrical Trailer

Research shows that the first thing that viewers notice is *how* a film is made, not what it's about. With aesthetic choices rather than *content* determining first impressions, make sure to privilege production values while choosing footage for a trailer. Before cutting, make a list of striking visuals.

My rule of thumb is to feature your best shot and *not* to include any poorly shot footage. Every element—whether it's verite footage, interviews, narration, photos, graphics, moves on stills—should look broadcast quality. Do not include anything amateurish or that would lead funders to believe you are not an experienced professional filmmaker. (The production values for the feature itself can be more forgiving.)

The quality of audio is even more important. In particular, take care that the very first bit of sound is crystal clear, not distorted, muffled, or requiring subtitles.

Along with impressing your viewer with stellar production values, lead with credibility by leveraging any awards in a brief title card. For example, at 22 seconds in the trailer for *Won't You Be My Neighbor?* about TV personality Fred Rogers, we read "From the Academy Award Winning Director of… *Twenty Feet from Stardom*".

Ideally, in terms of style, your trailer should also feature your film's signature style. For example, maybe your film features graphics of an animated time line as in *I.O.U.S.A*, or maybe you have developed a unique camera angle, as in *Free Solo* or *Murder Ball*. In *Murder Ball*, the camera is mounted onto a wheelchair that races across the court. If you developed a special look either in your cinematography or editing, the fundraising trailer is a great place to showcase it.

A problem that plagues many trailers I receive for review: a constant bed of music leads the viewer to drone out. Use music intelligently: for punctuation, scene transitions, emotion and structure (see "Three Movements" below). *Take music away* to punctuate a point; silence is powerful. Then when music comes back, it makes another point. Rarely use music with lyrics or heavy melody. Open, spare compositions that allow the viewer to interpret the mood are best. For a fundraising trailer aimed at only a handful of individual funders, filmmakers often use music for which they don't currently have the rights.

Structurally, it's useful to imagine a 2-minute trailer in three "movements", each defined by dramatic shifts in music.

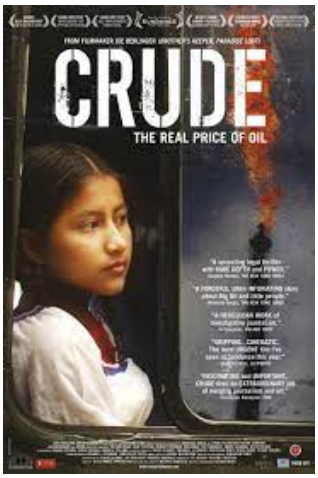
Movement 1: The Set Up

The first few minutes of your trailer should set up the film's subject. Who is the protagonist and what do they want? Or, what is the central idea of your essay-style documentary? What central question are you trying to prove or explore?

In character-driven trailers, the first movement typically introduces us to the inciting incident, which leads to the protagonist's goal. It also conveys, through early title cards, social proof in the

form of the director's past awards, or some other title cards revealing credibility. Three well-written, short title cards can also set up the film's themes and quest.

Title Cards



Rather than use the authoritative male voiceover narration that typifies narrative (fiction) film trailers, documentary trailers often employ 3-4 brief text cards to set up the story. Within the first minute of the trailer, use text on screen to explain what the film is about. Don't waste time contorting sound bites to explain background information when a title card can convey the background exposition quickly and simply.

For example, the trailer for the documentary Crude features the first short title card at 22 seconds: "In the heart the Amazon rainforest…" Four seconds later, we read the second title card: "A $27 billion legal battle is raging."

This is followed by the Protagonist's Statement of Desire at :36 seconds: "We are suing for environmental cleanup."

If possible, just before the Protagonist's Statement of Desire, include an inciting incident. For instance, the theatrical trailer for the Sundance-Award winning film The Russian Woodpecker features an inciting incident at 27 seconds: footage of the 1987 Chernobyl nuclear disaster in Russia. This theatrical trailer also provides a good example of setup title cards that are succinct and gripping.

(I advised on *The Russian Woodpecker* and was happy the filmmakers took my suggestion to construct a more personal inciting incident for the protagonist. But this particular catalyst event was too complex to include in the 90-second trailer.)

In *Free Solo*, the protagonist is Alex. He wants to climb El Capitan without safety ropes. At 35 seconds into the official theatrical trailer, he begins his Protagonist's Statement of Desire: "I'll never be content until I at least put in the effort." Ten seconds later he responds to the question, "Would you like to do that?" with "Yes, for sure!"

Remember, your audience has a lot to assimilate in 2 minutes. In a short trailer, there is rarely time to introduce complications such as a back-story or tangents. Focus on one character or one issue and keep it simple.

Movement 2: Obstacles

Heralded by a change in music, the second movement adds a story twist or intellectual wrinkle that shifts the trailer's direction. For a character-driven film, present at least one obstacle or complication 30-50% of the way through. We should already know what your protagonist wants, so throw something in their way to bring them to a halt.

For example, let's say your film is about a non-profit agency executive who wants to create an eco-center in the city's most neglected neighborhood. Halfway through the trailer, African-American community leaders call a press conference charging that the Executive Director, a white woman, is not hiring enough community members to work on the project. That's a complication.

In the trailer for *Free Solo*, we learn of two obstacles that the climber must overcome. At 59 seconds, we meet his girlfriend who says, "It's really hard to grasp why he wants to do that." She's supportive but conflicted. Then at 1:18, we hear about the high probability of injury and death of anyone who's tried to free climb El Capitan.

If your trailer is teasing an essay-style documentary, present an argument or solution to the central premise you are trying to prove or explore. Or, present a new solution to the challenge/problem you have identified in the first movement. In the documentary *Kiss The Ground,* which I story consulted on, the filmmakers introduced a new solution to the problem of depleted soil at :52 seconds: "Bio-sequestration is using…techniques to capture carbon and store it in the soil".

For a theatrical trailer, the second movement often begins to reveal critics' quotes, such as "brilliant and inspirational," along with the name of the source, such as *Variety*. These quotes can continue into the third movement.

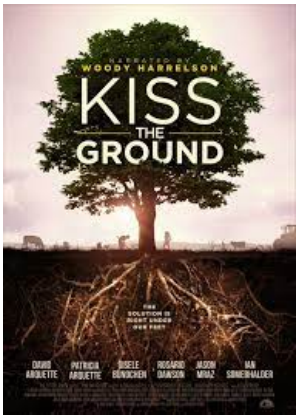
Movement 3: End on Suspense

Similar to the third act in the three-act structure, the third movement of your trailer should be the shortest and most dramatic. End a 2-minute trailer on an unresolved note to leave your audience wanting more.

For example, imagine watching a documentary trailer about a woman who is climbing Mt. Everest, with the help of her husband who is stationed at the base camp. Midway through the trailer, she falls and breaks her leg. Now, at the end of the trailer, we learn that the radio connection with her husband goes dead. What's going to happen next? The cliffhanger ending ensures the viewer doesn't feel like they've already watched the film (by watching the trailer).

In *Free Solo*, we see our hero Alex climbing a vertical expanse of rock without ropes. His friend on the ground turns his head from the nerve-wracking view. Will he make it?

If you can't find a way to leave your trailer on a suspenseful, unresolved note, try adding an additional obstacle. Obstacles perpetually interest the audience because challenges foster empathy for the protagonist.



Yet another way to end a trailer, particularly for an essay-style film, is to either pose a question, or expand a particular situation to reflect a wider cultural, historical, or political context.

Finally, consider ending your trailer on a humorous note. Again, check out the trailer for *Kiss the Ground*, an immensely hopeful film about combating climate change. The trailer ends with a clever animation of a plant talking, leaving the viewer with a chuckle rather than the depressing paralysis of so many climate films.

The Crowd-funding Trailer

The purpose of the fundraising trailer is to entice people to give money to support developing a work-in-progress. These days they commonly appear in a crowd-funding campaign such as Kickstarter or Go Fund Me.

Structurally, it's fine if they mimic the three movements of the theatrical trailer. (Or, edit something simple after just one interview.) In addition, crowd-funding trailers are often more effective when the filmmaker's own on-screen 1) introduction and 2) pitch bookend the three movements. Keep these appearances short—10-15 seconds--so the entire trailer falls under 2.5 minutes. Busy people checking their email often won't watch anything longer than 3 minutes.

And don't worry, everyday people generally know right away if they want to support your film! Unlike funding partners, they may not care about the film's production values as much as whether they align with the film's values.

CHAPTER 23

EDITING NON-TRADITIONAL LENGTHS FOR REVENUE RAISING

"Stop applying for the same old grants," says my colleague Keith Ochwat, founder of the highly successful Show&Tell.film platform for filmmakers. He has a point. Having helped many filmmakers apply for the usual film grants--including ITVS, Gucci Tribeca and Humanities Counsels--I know how highly competitive these grants are. I've also seen how directors with a character-driven documentary that tackles a social issue can improve their proposal over several seasons of grant applications with the help of a talented grant writer. Some receive funding from film agencies.

But these are the lucky few. Bottom line from Ochwat: broaden and then prioritize your fundraising approach, by creating various length cuts for different purposes. I've recently begun suggesting that filmmakers prepare the following length cuts, some traditional, some not:

- 30-60 Second Clips – for social media outreach
- The 2-Minute Fundraising Trailer – A traditional tool for crowd-funding campaigns
- The 6-Minute Extended Fundraising Trailer – A more innovative tool for peeking the interest of non-traditional film partners, such as businesses, foundations and NGO's
- The 15-minute Cut – for sealing the deal when booking conference screenings or receiving funding from *non-film* agency donors
- The Sample Reel – required by some traditional film grantors, length varies
- The 45-minute Community Screening Reel – ideal for gatherings (and classrooms) that include a Q&A or discussion
- The 50-59 minute TV Hour – a traditional length cut for television

In the next chapter, I'll explain how to repurpose your completed feature-length documentary (typically 70-90 minutes) into two lengths: The TV Hour and a 45-Minute Community Screening Reel. This chapter will focus on editing the five shorter lengths.

The 30-60 Second Clip

Create several of these bite size clips for posting on Facebook, You Tube, Instagram, your website, etc. Convey a single concept per clip, either through a sound bite, B-roll with voiceover, or a verite moment. Title cards are fine. Most importantly, use subtitles for all the dialogue/narration because many busy users scroll through their social media sites without listening to audio.

These clips can be used throughout production to create enough buzz to launch a crowd funding campaign and create a fan base for distribution.

The *Extended* Fundraising Trailer

Typically 6 minutes long, this length is perfect for pitching your documentary to non-traditional film funders. (See Chapter 18 for tips on editing the 2-minute trailer.) Think of all the organizations—from corporations to foundations—that would love to have a gorgeous, compelling documentary to draw viewers to their particular topics. Then think of all the conferences that would be excited to have an engaging, objective, non-promotional film with which to showcase their issue!

For instance, the documentary *The Bowmakers* has produced tens of thousands in revenues by partnering with American symphony orchestras. The PBS documentary *Get Busy Living* has led keynotes presentations for several national conferences. For more examples, check out the

Show&Tell.film platform that coaches filmmakers in how to create relationships with future funding and screening affiliates.

Pitching to potential fundraising and screening partners requires a cut that is not too long (they're busy) but gives enough of a sense of your film to convince them they're watching gold. To help get your foot in the door, edit a six-minute, extended fundraising trailer.

The 6-Minute Extended Fundraising Trailer

To plot this trailer, start with the organizational structure of the 2-minute fundraising trailer described in Chapter 18. Plot three "movements" that 1) hooks the viewer; 2) presents a complication and 3) teases the ending.

Now, to parlay this structure into an *extended* trailer, you'll need to modify a few things. Movement 1, hooking the viewer with the Set Up, stays the same. But Movements 2 and 3 will change.

Expand Movement 2 from just one complication to two or three complications. For example, if your protagonist's goal is to recover from toxic mold exposure, the first complication might be searching for a specialist (and coming up empty-handed). Imagine in the space of 2-4 minutes introducing a couple more challenges, such as finding the source of mold and the problems of remediation.

Essentially, you're taking the second movement of your fundraising trailer and expanding it into three mini-movements. It's similar to how a three-act structure gets expanded into a five-act structure for a feature film. The challenges presented in Act Two get expanded, so Act Two becomes longer, with three "mini-acts" over 60% of the film. Meanwhile, Act One retains the

goal of launching the protagonist's quest within the first 25% of the film, and Act 3 resolves the quest in the final 15% of the film.

Now… back to the extended fundraising trailer. In the second movement, as you add more complications, develop them into bona fide scenes. For example, what might have been a burst of dialogue in the 2-minute fundraising trailer becomes an actual conversation in the 6-minute extended version.

Next, how does Movement 3 of the extended fundraising trailer differ from the ending of its shorter 2-minute counterpart? Essentially, rather than leaving the viewer with a feeling of suspense--by presenting a mystery or cliffhanger--Movement 3 will reach a *conclusion*.

For a character-driven documentary such as *One Child Nation*, that means we find out whether or not the protagonist reaches their goal. For the essay-style documentary such as *The Social Dilemma*, we should understand how the thesis idea gets proven. In both cases, the viewer should be given a sense of how this documentary's ideas can make an impact on their organization's mandate. Because remember, the viewer of the extended 6-minute cut as well as the 15-minute cut will likely be *funding* partners. Unlike a consumer watching a 2-minute theatrical trailer, or the potential donor to a crowd-funding campaign, these viewer/donors don't want to be left in suspense. Show them how the film concludes.

The 15-Minute Complete Cut vs. The Sample Reel

Similar to the 6-minute extended fundraising trailer, the 15-20 minute Complete Cut can be used to book conference screenings, as well as apply for grants from *non-traditional* donors. You can pique the interest of a potential partner with the 6-minute cut, but you'll want to show something more substantial (15 minutes) to seal the deal.

Note that Sample Reels (or Rough Cuts) requested by *traditional* film funding agencies are a different beast entirely. Lengths vary (check with funders guidelines.) Essentially, these funders want more than a 2-minute trailer because they need to know that your film a) can sustain a narrative arc that unfolds visually, not just on paper, and b) contains fully formed verite scenes, rather than talking heads and b-roll (if your application claims as much).

Acquisition executives at HBO counsel documentary filmmakers who want to pitch their film to the premium cable station *not* to spend a lot of money on an expensive fundraising trailer for their sake. They would rather see 20-30 minutes of select scenes, or an entire rough cut. *But those cuts don't have to look pretty.*

For instance, ITVS or HBO executives who provide finishing funds are experienced in looking at incomplete cuts. These film industry professionals are OK with temp music, temp narration, select scenes, etc. They're not put off by dissolves to black in lieu of elegant transitions. And they're familiar with placeholder text on screen to describe upcoming scenes or materials, such as animation and archival footage to come.

But a decision-maker at a *non-film* agency isn't schooled in seeing a rough cut's potential. For that reason, you'll need a 15-minute cut that looks and sounds stellar. Pay close attention to your film's production values. As with the fundraising trailer, don't use poorly lit or badly composed shots. Rather than use temp narration, hire a professional, even if you replace them later. If the audio needs a sound mix, get it done for the 15-minute cut.

Again, check with funders for Sample Reel lengths. At the time of this edition, ITVS's Open Call (round 1) asks for a 10-15 minute Sample Reel, which the Sundance Documentary Fund guidelines say that anything less than 20 minutes won't be as competitive with longer cuts they receive.

Structuring the 15-Minute Complete Cut

Aesthetics aside, how should a 15-minute cut be structured? Ideally, it's similarly to the feature film, just slimmed down. For a character-driven documentary, you'll need an inciting incident, challenges that the protagonist faces in pursuit of their goal, and (as in the 6-minute extended fundraising reel) a satisfying conclusion. Does the protagonist reach their goal or not? Let this type of viewer know.

For an essay-style film, you'll need a way of organizing ideas that showcases your potential funding partner's issues in a fluid way (see Chapter 12 on Crafting the Essay Documentary).

So the bigger question really is what *don't* you need? What will 15-minute version exclude that the feature film will contain?

Case Study: *Get Busy Living*

Consider the heartfelt PBS documentary *Get Busy Living*, directed by Chris Burket. Spoiler alert! In this character-driven documentary, Nick gets into a skydiving accident (Act One), recovers through the help of his girlfriend-turned-caregiver (Act Two), and successfully resumes skydiving (Act Three). It's a film about how a loving relationship can galvanize the will to live passionately.

Full disclosure: I first watched the 15-minute "conference-booking" cut of *Get Busy Living* first. And I wondered whether the 57-minute version would be boring in comparison. The shorter cut seemed so dramatic that I suspected that the longer cut would feel redundant or tangential. But that wasn't the case.

For example, the feature version contained a subplot involving the protagonist and his mother. Nick's mother was initially supportive of her son's skydiving, even joining him on a dive together. But when he began recovering from his accident, she balked at his goal to skydive once again. Eventually mom comes around.

Nick's announcement that he's going to skydive again--and the response from loved ones--takes up 10 minutes in the 57-minute cut, but only 1.5 minutes in the 15-minute cut. In the shorter cut, the subplot with his mother wasn't necessary in order to tell a satisfying story. That's partly because the shorter version featured Nick's *key* relationship, with his girlfriend, whose support helps him walk and eventually skydive again.

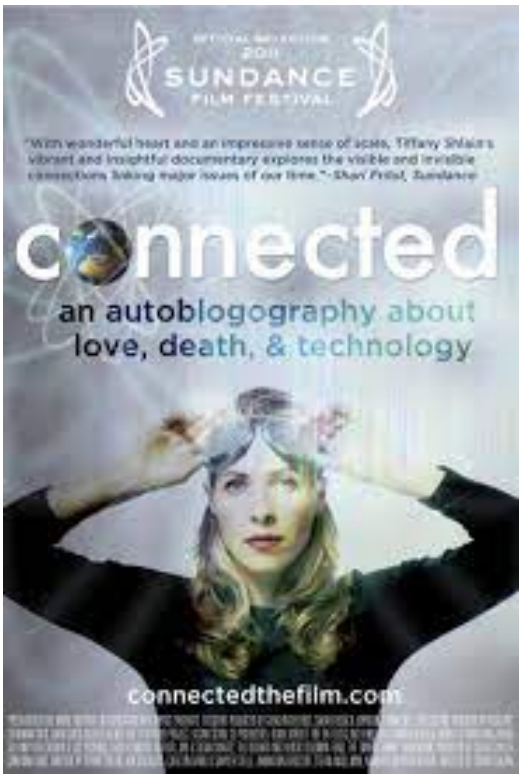
On the other hand, in the "TV hour", the subplot involving the protagonist's relationship with his mother served a well-crafted purpose: it shed light on the protagonist's relationship with his girlfriend. The girlfriend modeled unfailing support. She never wavered. The mother modeled *conflicted* support. Both arcs were genuine and both said something true about human nature. And the contrast between these two relationship storylines made each storyline more vivid.

As I watched the feature, I enjoyed several additional scenes that kept me riveted. For example, in a section where Nick is fitted for prosthetics, verite footage reveals how the protagonist learns to walk, bowl, and swim. These scenes weren't fleshed out in the shorter cut. The feature also addressed how the couple's sex life changed after the accident.

CHAPTER 24: CUTTING A FEATURE INTO A TV HOUR

How do you cut a festival-length feature into a 51-59 minute TV hour? While the task may seem overwhelming, several criteria can guide your cutbacks. Described below, the same criteria apply to culling a feature into a mid-length cut for community or classroom screenings. This 30-45 minute mid-length cut allows ample time for discussion, and possibly community organizing.

Case Study: *Connected*



As she was finishing post-production, filmmaker Tiffany Shlain hired me to story consult on her documentary *Connected: An Autobiography About Love, Death and Technology*. After it premiered at Sundance, she asked me to help her cut the 82-minute feature down to a 55-minute "TV hour". In *Connected*, which went on to garner 17 awards, Tiffany relates a year when her famous father Leonard Shlain was dying from brain cancer while she was pregnant her first child. The film's dominant structure was a story, and folded within were several interesting ideas ranging from cell phone addiction to the honeybee crisis.

My first task was to calculate that we needed cut a 34-page script down to 25 pages.

Next, with page length in mind and script in hand, I watched the feature with an eye toward non-essential cuts. My goal was to keep as much as the story as possible, since that's the entertaining "Trojan Horse" that gets inside the viewer's mind where the army of ideas can be unleashed, without sounding like a sermon.

While privileging story over ideas, here are the three criteria I developed and have used since when cutting feature documentaries into a TV hour.

Criteria #1: Cut Repetition

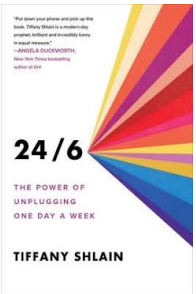
First, cut repetition. This includes sound bites that repeat an idea (which should have been cut earlier anyway), but also characters or subplots that aren't needed to convey the gist of the film's story and theme. You'll recall in Chapter 20 that the subplot about the protagonist's mother was deleted from the shorter version of *Get Busy Living*. In *Connected*, we also (coincidentally) cut anecdotes about Tiffany's mother that weren't essential to the main quest: Tiffany's efforts to come to terms with her father's imminent death.

Criteria #2: Cut Tangents

Second, cut tangents. What plot points aren't really critical to your character-driven documentary? What ideas does your essay-style documentary explore that aren't essential to your thesis?

In *Connected*, Tiffany had created several essay sections narrated by actor Peter Coyote that complemented the plot points of her personal story. These sections illustrated the importance of human connection throughout the evolution of humanity, a theme about which her father had written.

And here is where I found the majority of cuts for the TV hour. It's not that these ideas weren't interesting, but they could be regarded as tangential to the main plot. For example, we cut lines about the final book her father was writing, about Leonardo da Vinci.

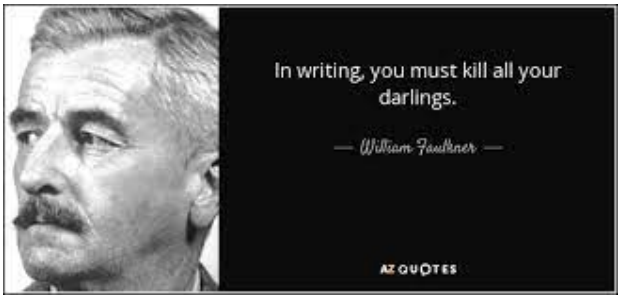


A more difficult cut involved Tiffany explaining how her family became closer by taking a "Tech Shabbat", unplugging one day a week. A few years later, Tiffany used both of these topics as episodes in her *The Future Is Here* series for AOL Original, which received 40 million views and was nominated for an Emmy Award.

And more recently, Tiffany wrote a best-selling book on the topic called *24/6: The Power of Unplugging One Day A Week*!

Here's the takeaway about cutting tangents: you can always repurpose them in another film, blog, or bonus section on your website.

Criteria #3: Cut Your Darlings



About writing, novelist William Faulkner famously said, "In writing, you must kill all your darlings."

While "darlings" may refer to characters, subplots or interesting tangents, what I'm referring to now are scenes with which the director has fallen in love. They may appear exceptional but play no role in advancing the film.

For example, in a recent story consultation, I saw how a filmmaker had opened his rough cut with a scene of two elderly women driving. One woman compliments the other's diving skills, and they immediately get into an accident! It's a dramatic, funny moment.

But it goes nowhere. The women are barely featured in the film, the accident has nothing to do with the plot, and the scene plants false expectations (a.k.a. “false conflict”).

The director was attached to the scene, partly because he had shot it from the back seat of the car. It was a hair-raising moment that colored his viewing of the footage. Fortunately, he had the clarity to see how the scene only raised more questions than it answered. And it wasn’t a substitute for genuine conflict and drama, which we developed in later sections of the film. (For the record, as an experienced director, Tiffany let her darlings go easily.)

Regarding all three criteria for making cuts, if you’re feeling resistant, my advice is to at least try the cuts, sooner rather than later. The longer that questionable material remains in subsequent rough cuts, the more attached one becomes. Kill your darlings early. Amputate; don’t hesitate! If you watch the film and really miss one, you can stitch it back in later.

Chapter 25 A Movement of Many Names

Most of us don't need another newsletter in our email in box. But I'm going to plug mine. It's also my blog that I've been writing weekly since 2007. To my everlasting delight, many readers (who are from the documentary world) tell me how much they appreciate reading it. (Go to my homepage to subscribe!) In addition to giving editing tips, I report on trends in the documentary world, such as the return of voiceover narration, the quickening pace of editing, and the movement toward shorter lengths and series. But the biggest movement afoot by far is the way social issue and political documentaries are being conceived. Move over, Michael Moore!

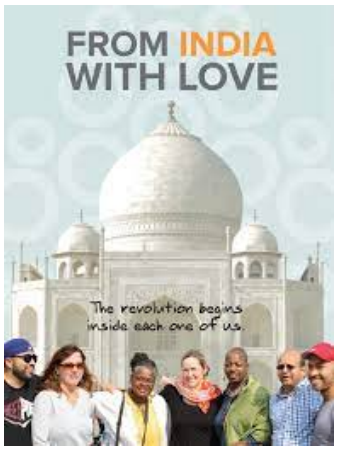
A New Movement Afoot

Actually, Moore with his signature humor has trained audiences to expect to be entertained, and I appreciate his 13 Rules. As educated, critical thinkers aware of global crises, we well-meaning documentary filmmakers tend to make movies that critique the status quo. The American independent documentary community has been doing that for decades—and initially very effectively. But apart from nature films, documentaries have gained a reputation as "downers". Especially, says director Joe Berlinger, "take down" documentaries. Who wants to go out on a Saturday night to see a depressing documentary, except for a shrill chorus of jaded activists? (I can say that because I used to be a soprano in the choir.)

Don't get me wrong. In an age of declining print journalism, we need well-made investigative documentaries more than ever. Some of my favorites are *The Social Dilemma, Murder Among the Mormons,* and *Citizen Four*. But such films don't have to leave viewers feeling glum or impotent.

Fortunately, there's a movement of many names afoot. Some call them "uplifting" documentaries. My two favorites in 2018 rang up impressive numbers at the box office. *RBG,* about Supreme Court justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg, grossed $14.5 million. And *Won't You Be My Neighbor,* about Mr. Rogers, is approaching $23 million, according to Box Office Mojo.

"I think that maybe it's a filmmaker's job to look for hope, look for good behavior, to find examples of when people do things right rather than when they do things wrong," director Debra Granik recently told *Filmmaker Magazine*. Granik, who directs documentaries and narrative films, says the trick is to "celebrate that without making it vanilla and dreadfully didactic and treacly."

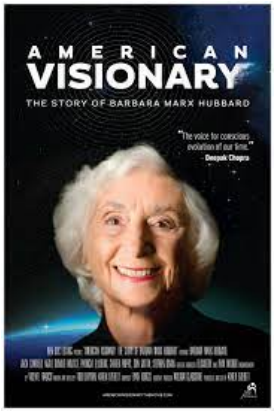


One way to avoid vanilla is to take on a tough social issue through a protagonist who makes headway solving it. For example, we recently edited the documentary *From India With Love*, about a protagonist who brings together victims and perpetrators of violence on a healing trip to India.

And it's not just indies that are leading the trend in inspirational docs. According to *Variety*, CNN Films "clearly has a handle on empowering protagonists and great stories". The article quotes Courtney Sexton, VP of CNN Films, who said "positive stories are breaking through".

This movement gained mainstream traction with Arianna Huffington's "What's Working" solutions-oriented journalism initiative at the *Huffington Post.* "Journalism can be so much more than just gloom and doom." That's the motto of Solutions Journalism Network. Representing 67 news organizations, this innovative network supports and connects journalists who are interested in "rigorous reporting about how people are responding to problems."

Their tagline, “reimagining the news,” is the newsroom counterpart to the call for reinventing documentaries that I began years earlier from my own pulpit. In 2012, I began producing the documentary *American Visionary* about the late Barbara Marx Hubbard (See it on Amazon). Her hopeful outlook for humanity’s future galvanized me.



After 18 years of teaching editing at the Graduate School of Journalism at UC Berkeley, which at the time was the #1 U.S. documentary program (according to *Documentary Magazine)*, I had become jaded. Hubbard helped me see that the news media, rather than being balanced and objective, was deeply biased toward negative stories. Along with others, I began calling for more positive, transformational stories.

Transformational Documentaries

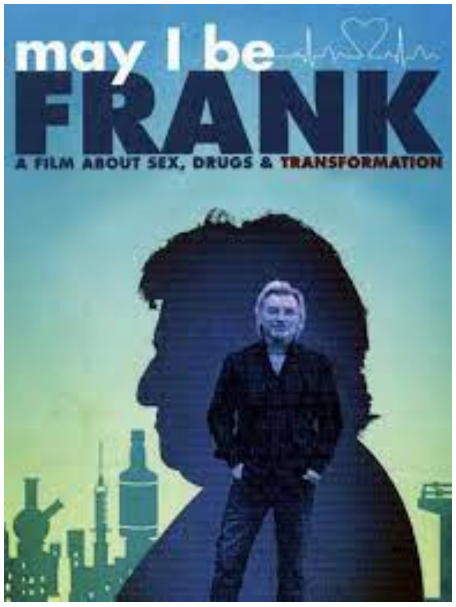
There’s a new genre of films emerging known as “transformational documentaries,” I declared in a 2012 blog. “A transformational film,” according to AwareGuide founder and CEO, Gary Tomchuk, “seeks to inspire the movement of society toward ideals, values and practices that create a better world for everyone. They focus on solutions…”

I posited that this new category of documentary, which has its roots in social issue docs as well as the human potential movement, leaves viewers feeling inspired when the credits roll—rather than disempowered by a troubled world.

“More and more filmmakers are drawn to the ‘genre’ of Transformational Film,” says Celeste Allegrea Adams, Producer of the 2009 Conscious Life Film Festival in Los Angeles. “Transformational films, which are films that focus on creating a shift in thinking, can be spiritual, metaphysical, political or environmental.”

I argued that traditional ways of making social issue documentaries, as powerful as they once were, are reaching their limitations for viewers. For decades, important documentaries have fiercely critiqued the wrongs in the world–often inadvertently

leaving viewers depressed and immobile. In contrast, solution-oriented films are hitting the sweet spot, inspiring viewers to be the change they are waiting for.



Transformational documentaries such as *An Inconvenient Truth, The Ghosts in Our Machine* and *May I Be Frank?* tend to be more motivating than the bulk of documentaries made in the last three decades about poverty, environmental degradation, injustice, and other global crises.

Are transformational films too New Age-y for the mainstream? Not at all. According to statistics on the LOHAS market (Lifestyles of Health and Sustainability), approximately 1 in 4 Americans will pay for goods and services (and films) focused on health, the environment, personal development, social justice and spirituality. And the projected annual LOHAS expenditure? A whopping $290 billion.

"The current growth in this market group strongly supports the notion that spirituality is no longer relegated to the New Age periphery but is undeniably migrating to the center of mainstream cultural awareness," says LOHAS. Before 2015, creating transformational films felt like pioneering new territory without a field guide. But according to the market research undertaken by the Global Alliance for Transformational Entertainment (GATE), "The audience is ready" for films that embrace or at least land on a positive viewpoint.

"What differentiates these movies," according to Matthew Gilbert, former editorial director at the Institute of Noetic Sciences, "is their explicit intent to either affirm a positive vision of ourselves or the world or to actually change people."

The Ghosts In Our Machine

In 2013, a friend invited me to see *The Ghosts in Our Machine*, a just-released documentary about animal abuse. Although I routinely watch new documentaries, initially I resisted, not wanting to subject myself to yet another horrifying documentary depicting animals in cages. But since my friend was a vegan and I wanted to support her, I went to the community screening in Oakland, CA.

Within minutes, I was pleasantly surprised to find myself transported on the quest of a young protagonist who set out to photograph animal abuse and get her evocative work published. She faced the same challenge that I had initially displayed: how does one depict abuse in a way that evokes a caring response rather than revulsion?

By the end of the film, I had only covered my eyes once. Mostly, I felt touched and transformed. Why? Because I had experienced a connection with other sentient beings (animals) that made me realize that someday, at least for my own spiritual and moral growth, I would need to face the implications of my carnivorous ways. When the credits rolled, I didn't decide on the spot to become a vegetarian or vegan, but I did take a big step closer to a behavior change that, if enacted en masse, would profoundly change the world.

How was director Liz Marshall able to effect this transformation? Among other things, she didn't vilify the meat industry or gratuitously portray animal suffering. She focused on a solution-oriented character with a noble quest. And she used innovative cinematic techniques (focusing on animals' eyes) to evoke a connection between the two-legged viewers and the four-legged "characters" on screen. As it turns out, *The Ghosts in Our Machine* tied with *Take Back Your Power* to win the 2013 Aware Guide Viewer's Choice Award for Top Transformational Film. Both are terrific example of transformational filmmaking.

According to the award-winning film production company Way To Go Media, “In the film world there is currently a movement afoot to add a new cinema genre or classification, which could be called Transformational Media.”

Hopepunk Documentaries

With the debut of the word “hopepunk” in 2017, the trend in inspiring documentaries showed no sign of fading.

What’s hopepunk?

Emerging from the literary scene, hopepunk is the latest storytelling template that centers around the “concept of hope itself, with all the implications of love, kindness, and faith in humanity it encompasses,” according to *Vox Magazine.* Writer Alexandra Rowland, posting on Tumblr, says “The opposite of grimdark is hopepunk. Pass it on.”

So what is *grimdark*?

It’s a literary term used to describe a grim, cynical and pessimistic worldview. One could argue it applies to the bulk of social issue documentaries in the last forty years. These well-intentioned films often left viewers feeling depressed rather than empowered.

Director Joe Berliner (*Crude,* 2009*)* rightly says that investigative “take-down” docs will always be needed, especially with the decline in print journalism. But, he added, there’s been an imbalance, which his stirring 2016 documentary *Tony Robbins: I Am Not Your Guru* helps to correct.

What Is A Post-Progressive Documentary?

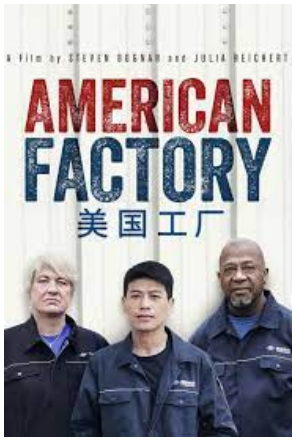
In early 2021, when President-elect Joe Biden was calling for unity, I read one political philosopher who said finding "common ground" is no longer viable. What we need, says Steve McIntosh, is to find a "*higher* ground", or a post-progressive perspective.

That got me thinking, what would a "post-progressive documentary" look like?

First, it would include multiple perspectives. This idea is not new for anyone trained to think critically. But even college-educated filmmakers forget, in our hyper-polarized era, the value of including and transcending multiple viewpoints. Instead, as far back as 1989 when Michael Moore's *Roger and Me* plowed both the box office and GM's CEO Roger B. Smith, we've seen a trend in *polemic* documentaries. It's still going strong.

Of course, investigative documentaries such as *Inside Job, Crude, Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room*–and more recently—*The Inventor, The Social Dilemma,* and *Totally Under Control*–are vitally important to our democracy.

But they don't at their core display *empathy* for their hubris-filled villains (Kenneth Lay, Elizabeth Holmes, Donald Trump, etc.) One exception to the trend in one-sided documentaries is this year's Academy-winning *American Factory*.



Notably, it was the first film backed by the appropriately named production company "Higher Ground", founded by Barack and Michelle Obama in 2018. This verite film observes the complex relationships between Chinese management and American factory workers at a shuttered GM plant in Ohio.

"What's extraordinary about 'American Factory' is its ability to tell the story from multiple perspectives," says Thom Powers, Documentary Program Director of the Toronto International Film Festival.

"It's a great, expansive, deeply humanist work, angry but empathetic to its core," agrees *New York Magazine* film critic David Edelstein.

Co-directors Steven Bognar and Julia Reichert realized early on their film would have multiple points of view, according to the podcast *Pure Non-Fiction with Thom Powers*. (I highly recommend Episode 113). They tried to "craft something that immerses you and gives you empathy for people who maybe don't even agree with other people in the film—for whom we *also* hope you'll have empathy," said Bognar.

He described building a structure where viewers would be transported "upstairs on the Chinese side or downstairs on the American side or vice versa, and you'll care about multiple people."

I'd love to watch more "post-progressive documentaries" that reveal injustice while at the same time evoke compassion for "un-woke" or unenlightened characters. From a moral perspective, a political perspective, and a business perspective, such films will also elevate *viewership* to a higher ground.

Maybe times are a changin', even in the knock down genre of political documentaries. For example, the uplifting verite hit *Knock Down the House*, featuring polarizing then-candidate Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, received an astonishing approval rating of 100% on *Rotten Tomatoes*. Rather than paralyzing viewers, these expectant films feature solution-oriented protagonists combating wicked social issues—with success.

Whether we call this emerging movement Hopepunk, or Solution-Oriented, or Conscious Cinema, or Transformational Films, or Post-Progressive, or simply "inspiring documentaries", directors are succeeding in entertaining, informing and uplifting viewers. If that's the case, what are the editorial mechanisms and narrative devices at work in documentaries that don't depend on bad things happening to grip an audience? That's the topic of the next chapter.

Chapter 26

Strategies for Producing Solution-Oriented Documentaries

In 2014, Michael Moore famously told the audience at the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF) that he placed a sign on the door of his edit room. It read, "Remember, people want to go home and have sex after this movie." In other words, he said, "Don't show them a documentary that is going to kill their evening!"

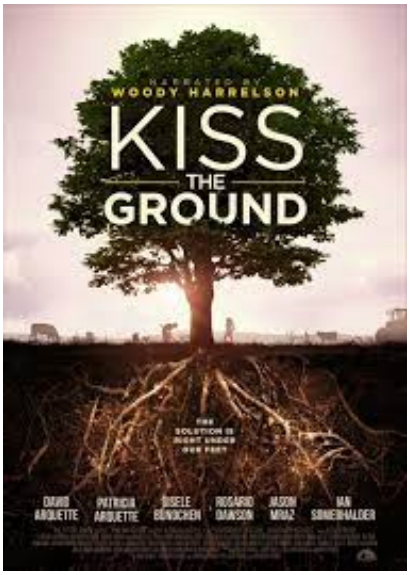
So, without throwing out our critical faculties, how do we documentary filmmakers integrate the best of the old school, Michael Moore-type documentaries (that decry the status quo) with the emerging paradigm that the human condition could radically improve within our lifetime--or at least that there might be solutions to our vexing global crises? It's a big question that could change the tone of documentary filmmaking even more in the next five to ten years. First, let's face the challenge head on.

The Challenge of Producing of a Solution-Oriented Documentary

Why is it so hard to produce a social issue documentary that delivers solutions? It's a delicious question that I once posted on Doculink. Here's a theory I recently discovered on the podcast "Pure Nonfiction with Thom Powers" (episode 124). It especially applies to progressive makers who see solutions in congressional action. Unfortunately, says director Jeff Orlowski (*The Social Dilemma*, 2020), legislative scenarios may strike many viewers as "propaganda".

"If you believe the solution to climate change is legislation, if you say that in a film, it very quickly will rub some audiences the wrong way," said Orlowski, who also directed *Chasing Ice* and *Chasing Coral.*

But “this can be frustrating for a documentary viewer,” responded Powers. “You’ve just made me really angry at something, now what do I do?” One answer is to partner with existing organizations to create follow up campaigns. For example, after story consulting with Josh Tickell on *Kiss the Ground*, I was deeply inspired by the film’s Impact Fund, which supports their Media Program, Farmland Program, Stewardship Program, and Educational Outreach. Another avenue is to let a business or non-profit handle solution-oriented action campaigns. Groups that specialize in this include Working Films, Firelight Media’s Impact Campaign Fund, and Jon Reiss’s 8 Above.



But there’s another big reason why so many filmmakers haven’t (yet) figured out how to leave viewers feeling hopeful. It’s *darn hard* to make a solution-oriented documentary! The parallel in the narrative world is that it’s easier to create dystopian science fiction films than optimistic ones. Why?

Because an optimistic view of the future is harder for filmmakers to imagine and document.

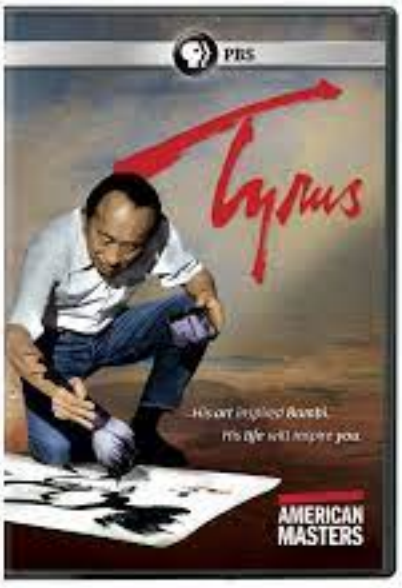
“It’s harder to find drama in that situation,” says television producer Ronald D. Moore in a recent AEIdeas blog titled ‘Dark Hollywood’. “It’s harder to figure out what the conflict is. You have to work a little bit more. So it’s a little easier [for] a writer to draw up the dystopian scenario.” Moore says *Star Trek* dominates the “positive” space. “*Star Trek* stands alone in its optimistic idea of the future, at least in terms of pop culture science fiction on film and television.” Well, that’s a problem.

Tips for Producing A Solution-Oriented Documentary

Being the solution-oriented story consultant that I am, here are several strategies for production inspirational documentaries.

First, find a character who is involved in solving a tough social issue. For example, check out *From India With Love*. It's a documentary we edited that takes on the problem of urban violence by following a protagonist who brings victims and perpetrators of violence on a healing trip to India. Specifically, find stories about social entrepreneurs and document their efforts, which is why the Sundance Institute partnered with the Skoll Foundation for three years to fund documentary "stories of social entrepreneurs".

Second, resist your high school English class schooling about the necessity of conflict. Don't rely solely on conflict for your film's drama. Don't milk *suffering* for emotional juice. Documenting creativity is inherently dramatic and inspiring. Study award-winning films on which I've recently collaborated, such as *Good Fortune, Tyrus, Love Thy Nature* and *Kiss the Ground.* Note the drama implicit in the protagonists' creative acts. See more examples in the next chapter.



Third, don't wait until the end of the film to reveal a solution or sign of hope, as Davis Guggenheim did in *An Inconvenient Truth (2006).* What was innovative ten years ago—ending an activist documentary with a call to action–but may not work now, when viewers have a shorter attention span and less of a wow response to expose docs. Interestingly, Guggenheim pivoted to positivity in his follow up, *An Inconvenient Sequel: Truth to Power* (2017).

How can you find ways *throughout* your film's dark arc to give the audience hope? Check out Michael Moore's documentary *Capitalism: A Love Story,* which reveals prior to the midpoint the hopeful and then revolutionary concept of "alternative currency".

Fourth, pay close attention to the emotional tone you set when the credits roll. "What's the end note?" asks Emmy-nominated editor Will Znidaric on a recent *Once Upon a Timeline* podcast. "What's the climax? What's the feeling there?" If you want to inspire hope, make sure

that your film *ends* on an empowering, uplifting note. With my own documentary *American Visionary: The Story of Barbara Marx Hubbard*, although an inspiring ending had been my intention all along, early test screenings revealed that many people felt sad and depressed afterwards.

With a few changes–a new concluding sequence, transcendent music, and a final image of Barbara laughing–we dramatically changed the film's tone leading into the credits. Subsequent rough-cut screenings revealed that people felt inspired by the end of the film. With iterative effort, my editor and I had, thankfully, hit the right departing note.

Finally, as I've had to do on more than one occasion, check in with your own motivations. Do you feel angry and *only* want to take down an institution or person? Are you always blaming the bad guys, pointing the finger at corporate villains? Angry, vengeful, or self-righteous motivations aren't great mindsets from which to create a galvanizing documentary. How can you find a way to be *for* something, seeding your film with possible solutions, rather than solely against something?

Chapter 27 Broaden Your Audience With An Integral Lens

Most distribution consultants will tell you to cater to your niche audience, make a splash there, and maybe you'll be lucky enough to attract a cross-over audience. It's good advice. In our polarized times, it's become increasingly difficult to make a documentary that speaks to more than one worldview. One way of looking at this situation is to recognize that it's OK to sing to the choir. The choir needs your voice. But if you aspire to make converts and widen your audience, I have a few thoughts.

Integral Theory and Worldviews

In America today, according to some cultural theorists, there aren't just two competing worldviews (left and right), there are actually three major worldviews. The first worldview is often called "Traditional" because adherents support traditional values like family, security, morality, order, and fundamentalism. About 25% of the U.S. population is estimated to be at the Traditionalist stage of development. It's an ethnocentric worldview that sees the world in terms of us and them.

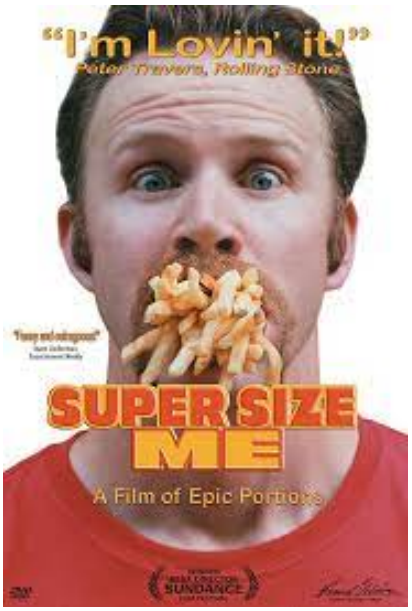
The second worldview in this model is Modernism. Modernists value science, merit-based capitalism, democracy, self-reliance, and achievement. It's the start of a world-centric way of seeing things, and it's estimated that 50% of the U.S. population operates from this perspective.

The third major worldview in America today has been called Postmodern. In many ways, Postmodernism is defined by a reaction to the excesses of modernism. Postmodernism is at play for about 20% of Americans (and for most of the documentary filmmakers I work with). Their major values are equality, environmentalism, social justice, and pluralism.

Building an Audience

In many places in the developed world, these three worldviews are enmeshed in a cultural war. So, given that these three titanic worldviews are clashing, what's the takeaway for us filmmakers seeking to build an audience?

It's a leap, but imagine making a documentary from an *Integral* perspective. An Integral worldview—estimated at 5% of the U.S. population– *sees the value in all the other worldviews.* Such a film would use language and stress values that appeal to Traditionalists, Modernists and Postmodernists.



The documentary *Supersize Me* succeeded in many ways because protagonist/filmmaker Morgan Spurlock appealed to values across the board: he had a (presumably) postmodern, vegan girlfriend. He relied heavily on the modernist value of science and medicine to track his progress while eating Big Mac and milkshakes. And when he interviewed tradition-driven people (mostly during street interviews), he didn't disparage them. He seemed to value their salt-of-the-fry perspective.

Imagine a documentary about climate change that speaks directly to the values of traditional viewers. The language might not be "sustainability", but "being good stewards over the gifts of the Creator," which means caring for the natural world. Harder still for many, imagine a documentary that points out the *origins and gifts* in the Trump presidency–while not endorsing his administration.

Research suggests that the main reason people *like* a film is because it reflects their values, their moral worldview. Any documentary that can respectfully evoke and integrate multiple worldviews will likely appeal to a wider audience.

In 2017, the NEA's report from the Documentary Sustainability Summit called for a more "open and solution-oriented" approach to filmmaking. Elevating the conversation, said IDA director Simon Kilmurry, would "build a stronger documentary field that not only survives but thrives". Films like *Godwatch*, *Searching for Sugarman,* and *An Inconvenient Sequel* are solution-oriented, social issue documentaries that leave viewers feeling inspired rather than depressed. According to integral theorist Ken Wilber (considered by some to be the greatest American philosopher), no moral worldview is *wrong*. Each contains a kernel of human wisdom. "Some are simply more inclusive, more encompassing, more holistic," says Wilber. Wilber is by no means a moral relativist. But integrally-informed documentaries can include and transcend multiple points of view, helping heal the culture wars. The integral movement is catching on. Today there are integrally-identified psychologists, integral business owners, integral coaches, integral think tanks. So why not integral filmmakers?

What Readers Think

Can we documentary filmmakers really help heal today's culture wars? I asked readers from my newsletter list of 6500 people in the filmmaking industry for input on this question. Put another way, can transcendent works of non-fiction cinema can move audiences beyond the polarizing tone of the current political conversation?

"This is a very interesting idea," wrote Carolyn McCulley, who produces films for clients on many sides of the political spectrum. "I also heard some similar themes at the AFI DOCS Forum. It would be really fantastic if filmmakers could lead the charge in healing our nation's divide!"

Filmmaker Jason Smith points to *RGB* and *Won't You Be My Neighbor*—two of my favorite documentaries in 2018. There were many things to love about Betsy West and Julie Cohen's *RGB*, a timely masterpiece given our national divide on the judicial confirmation of

Brett Kavanaugh. I loved the converging plotlines of a) Justice Ginsberg moving from center to left, while 2) deepening her 35-year friendship with right-seated Justice Antonin Scalia.

"I'm so glad you are bringing more awareness of these new formats into our community," said director William Gazeki. He told me about two such films that screened at the recent Illuminate Film Festival in Sedona, AZ: *Miracle Morning* and *We Rise Up!*

Such potent and popular documentaries could help heal our current cultural and political polarizations. According to Gazeki, "It's a tangible advancement to the documentary genre." Filmmaker Jocelyn Ford has expanded her audience with *Nowhere To Call Home: A Tibetan in Beijing*. The documentary speak to both Tibetans and Han Chinese. viewers According to Ford, "It's been able to promote constructive discussions at over 50 screenings in China." Wow!

So what does *integral* filmmaking look like? And how can an integrally-informed documentary compassionately reflect on different stages of development? I asked filmmakers for some examples, and I received several responses.

Integral documentary films would be less about blaming the bad guy (or bad institution) and more about understanding their cultural origins and development.

Integral films would devote as much screen time to investigating solutions as documenting problems.

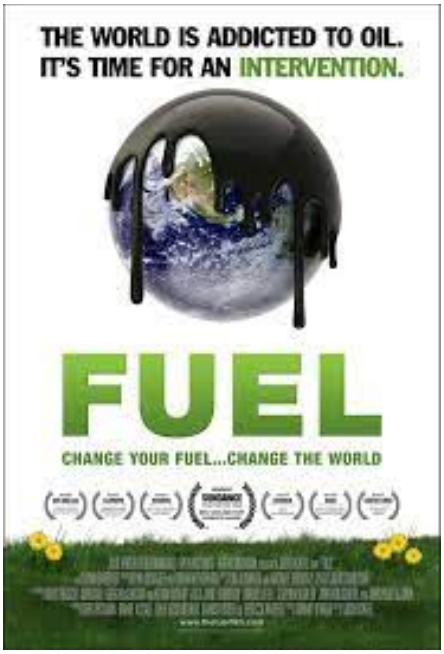
It would critique any global crisis engendered by the fruits of modernism (predatory capitalism, climate change, cybercrimes) while still upholding the values of entrepreneurship, material progress, and technological know-how.

It would, at a minimum, transcend the gloomy tendency of many progressive-minded makers. For example, many investigative or social issue documentaries critique economic injustice or environmental degradation without offering the viewer more than crumbs by way of hopeful alternatives. Examples include *Inside Job, No End in Sight* and *Capitalism: A Love Affair.*

Wilber uses the phrase "mean green meme" to call out a sensibility that is overly-focused on critiquing. Who wants to watch a mean-spirited, vindictive and depressing film?

And who wants to watch, say, a film about HIV in South Africa? Well, you might some upcoming Thursday night, if the story was about a young urban professional who quit his job to make a difference there. Which is the narrative arc of a wonderfully inspiring film that we at New Doc Editing cut for director Anthony Ream. Check out *Into The Haven.*

Positively Trending Documentaries



Here at New Doc Editing, we are pioneers in the solution-oriented film space. Below are more example of "positively-trending documentaries" for which we have story consulted and/or edited. Take Josh and Rebecca Tickell's new documentary *Good Fortune*, which tells the story of a John Paul DeJoria. An outlier of the so-called "one-percent", this entrepreneur embodies Conscious Capitalism by giving away half his fortune to charities.

I story consulted with these directors after we met at Esalen, where I was teaching about transformational documentaries. Having inspired audiences with *Fuel* and other social issue docs, this dynamic couple saw a huge audience hungry for

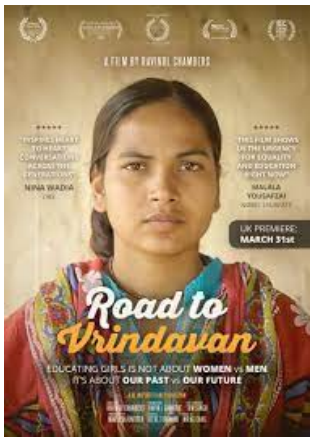
progressive documentaries that, in their words, don't "paint a fear-based view of the world."

Two years later, the Tickells reported that their Los Angeles premiere audience gave a *ten-minute standing ovation* "for a movie that is really a positive message of brotherhood." Critic Roger Ebert called *Good Fortune* "terrifically engaging" and *Deadline Hollywood* says, "Inspiring doesn't begin to describe it." I was delighted to consult on their follow up documentary, *Kiss the Ground,* mentioned in the fundraising chapter. It's hard to imagine a more hopeful and better researched documentary on climate change.

Can you imagine an inspiring documentary about the holocaust? Check out Steven Pressman's uplifting HBO documentary about saving Jewish youth from the Nazi regime. Pressman took my class "Directing the Character-Driven Documentary" just prior to bringing me on as story consultant for *50 Children: The Rescue Mission of Mr. and Mrs. Kraus*.

Next up is Karen Akins' *El Susto!* You don't expect an investigative documentary to be inspirational, but that was Akin's goal from the beginning. Check out the trailer we cut this inspirational investigative documentary about Big Soda in Mexico. According to reviewer Danielle Nierenberg, the film "could have been a horror show--depicting how a monster, in this case a big corporation, is literally creating an epidemic of diabetes." Instead, it's an inspiring story that follows "a solution-oriented protagonist".

Another great example is *Finding Courage*, a documentary on which I story consulted. The directors tell the story of Chinese characters persecuted in the Falun Gong spiritual movement—

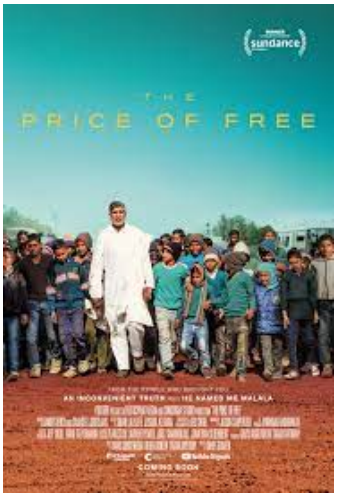


and at the same time manage to convey compassion for a Chinese bureaucrat whose job is to enforce abusive policy. You can see more examples in our Portfolio, including Katie Teague's *Money and Life* and Tiffany Shlain's *Connected* and Ravinol Chambers' *Road to Vrindavin*.

Examples of Integrally Informed Documentaries

Whether it's called "integral" or by some other name, this emerging movement calls for directors to recognize stages of cultural development and communicate through multiple worldviews. For example, an integrally-minded director might try to understand the level of moral development of a dictator and his culture, as in *The Act of Killing,* directed by Joshua Oppenheimer.

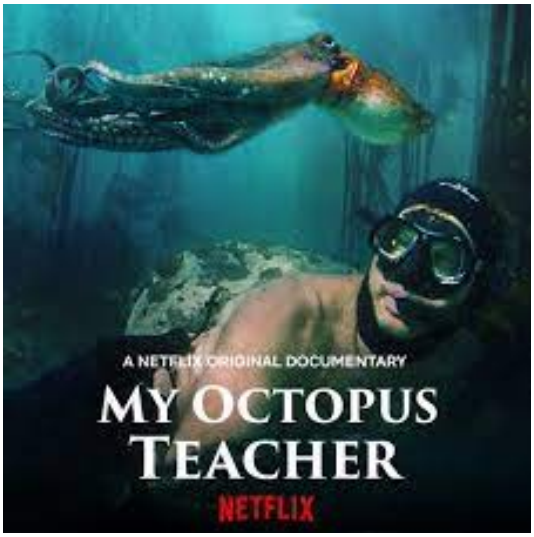
Or take *The Price of Free*, about an Indian activist who helped liberate thousands of children from sex trafficking. These inspiring documentaries consciously eschew a doom-and-gloom sensibility without shying away from problems such as sex trafficking, conspiracy theories, or our debt-based banking system.



I'm also excited to see the HBO documentary *Alternative Endings*. It's about dying, but as *Psychology Today* reports, it's "not a doom and gloom film". On the other hand, there's Roberto Minervini's *What You Gonna Do When the World's on Fire?* I've read conflicting reviews. According to critic Lillie Ross, it's a race documentary that "wallows in tragedy but offers no solutions". This collection of interviews with black people in Mississippi and Louisiana is, in Ross's eyes, "the most unproductive type of sociopolitical film, especially in today's climate, in that it aims to incite but not to motivate." I haven't seen the film, but reviews like that are my red flag. As a consumer, I steer clear of tragedy porn, and I'm a sucker for problem-solving, hopepunk docs!

Speaking of which, I really enjoyed *The Biggest Little Farm.* According to director John Chester, who interviewed with *IndieWire*, most non-fiction films about farms or the environment are "fear-based…The enemy is a human corporation or greed," he says. "The victim is always the planet. And at the end the audience leaves feeling fear or despair or depression, their eyes are more tight, not more wide. I wanted to show … the cure." "It's a forward-thinking, problem-solving heart-tugger," says critic Anne Thompson.

In the trailer to Davis Guggenheim's follow-up documentary *An Inconvenient Sequel*, activist Al Gore says, "Despair can be paralyzing, but this to me is the most exciting development. We're seeing a tremendous amount of positive change." Gore was talking about climate change, of course, but his upbeat, solution-oriented tone can be seen in a number of recent documentary debuts.



Samples include Sundance documentaries such as *Sing Your Song* and *Being Elmo*, as well as Joe Berlinger's *Tony Robbins: I Am Not Your Guru*, which premiered at SXSW. More recent examples include *Science Fair, Free Solo, My Octopus Teacher,* and *Quincy.*

So, what documentaries are beckoning the hopepunk in you? There will always be a place for David and Goliath-type documentaries that speak truth to power. But the future of documentary filmmaking is becoming more integral-minded. Let's create documentaries that galvanize viewers—not through doom and gloom, but through the power of solutions.

APPENDIX A

WORKING WITH NEW DOC EDITING

New Doc Editing, LLC offers three services for documentary filmmakers:

- Story Consulting at every stage of production
- Editing Services with award-winning editors and complimentary story consulting
- Fundraising Services for raising cash from film funders and non-traditional funders

Story Consulting Services

Founded in 2007, New Doc Editing pioneered the adaptation of screenwriting principles for documentary films. I have personally trained my (already experienced) editorial staff in how to craft compelling documentaries. To learn more specifically how we can help you in every stage of film production, see our story consulting checklists here. Below are some personal stories about how we've helped filmmakers.

And don't forget to check out The Art of Documentary Storytelling Podcast to listen in on my actual story consultations with real filmmakers.

Story Consulting In Pre-Production

Why would a filmmaker collaborate with a *story consultant* in pre-production? Here are four compelling reasons.

1. Contain the Terrain

Recently I critiqued a director's Rough Cut that made a sprawling case for global warming--years after Davis Guggenheim and Al Gore did. While *An Inconvenient Truth* made an timely "one-off" in its day (2006), such a film fifteen years later might seem dated--unless it was conceived as a *series* that took on the many contemporary battlefronts of climate change. (See *True North* or *Years of Living Dangerously*.)

So, to extend the military metaphor, it's better to *chronicle a single battle well* than survey an entire war. A story consultant can help you contain the terrain.

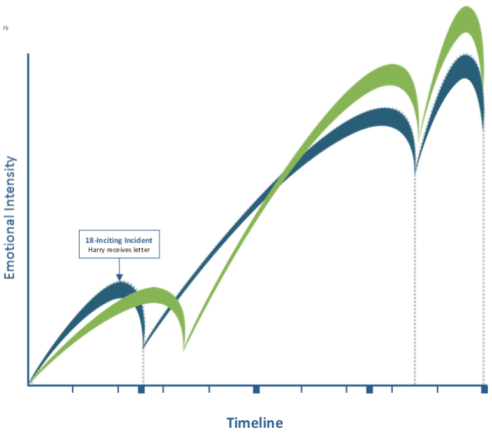
2. Stylistic Palette

Is the documentary concept you have in mind suited to a cinematic medium? For example, if you want to make an historical documentary, but there's no known archival material, first ask, "Might this make better long-form *article* than documentary?"

If you're still set on making a film (and you probably are), a story consultant can help in pre-production by brainstorming the signature visuals that will inform your film. From the aesthetics of interview settings, to the style of animation, to the advantages of drone shots, you'll develop a rich stylistic palette before shooting a frame.

3. Structure the Arc

In pre-production on a verite film, a director may not know the film's ending yet. But they should at least know the catalyst event that kicks off the quest, the quest or goal itself, and the likely challenges their protagonist will face.



I've helped many filmmakers pinpoint an inciting incident and develop a desired endpoint that would at a minimum show incremental progress toward a qualitative goal. I call this objective marker a micro-manifestation of the quest. Such a story launch (Act One) and probable challenges (Act Two) will form the scenes--and shot list--you'll need to cover in the production stage. You begin to structure the arc.

What about a documentary structured around ideas rather than a quest? To shoot efficiently, you'll want a log line that captures your film's single central question, or its thesis statement. In addition, a story consultant can help you create a one-sheet promo and a list of 7-10 key takeaway concepts. The one-sheet can help you nail down difficult-to-get interviews, and the lists of key ideas will inform your interview questions going into production.

4. Research the Field

Has another filmmaker already covered the topic you have in mind? If so, what unique angle can you bring? A story consultant can help you brainstorm ideas, from recent developments on the topic to fresh editorial approaches. Learn more in Appendix A.

Story Consulting During Production

Recently we edited a documentary that lacked a third act. I was getting a little nervous. But the director, who is also an experienced, get-it-done kind of producer, tracked down the film's apparent antagonist, who had been reluctant to appear on camera. With a little coaching on how to keep the scene from becoming an insensitive ambush, he came back with a compelling apex for his film. Not every director can get down to business on the turn of a dime!

My point?

Save your editorial team anxiety and get the third act in the can. A story consultant can help you decide *before* post-production what scenes you need to film to chronicle and cap your protagonist's quest.

Moreover, if character transformation is a potentiality (yes, that's a word), what behaviors do you need to film to show your protagonist changing over time? (For a great example of character transformation, watch *Undefeated*, even if you're not a football fan.)

A story consultant can also help you design interview questions that provide succinct sound bites needed during the edit. Examples include a Protagonist's Statement of Desire, such as "I needed/wanted _____ ("to know what happened to my sister").

Or, capture a Protagonist's Statement of Transformation, such as, "I used to be _____ ("so cautious"), but now I realize _____ ("that I gotta take risks to make headway").

Or, "I used to think X, now I realize Y."

Or, "Last year I wasn't able to _____ (stand up to my father), but now I've been able to _____ (let him see my anger).

To get full-bodied responses, interview questions can be converted to *requests*, such as "Explain to me…", "Tell me about…", and "Describe for me…"

Until recently, many independent filmmakers didn't think to budget for a story consultant. Or, if they did, it only happened after they edited a rough cut. But having someone advise you on what situations you can set up should be your most important line-item in pre-production when you're developing a concept. And it should be your *second* most important ledger expense in production, after a DP.

Story Consulting During Post Production

During post-production, my job as a story consultant often involves fixing a film's ending. If the film lacks a climax scene, that's a big problem. What can be done?

The director could continue shooting. Or, they could create a climax. As documentary and narrative filmmaking continue to borrow from one another, staging the likelihood of a climax scene is more acceptable than ever. For example, a director can arrange an encounter between two antagonists. In *Revenge of the Electric Car*, two competing electric car CEO's meet-up at an auto show. I was so intrigued by this dynamic scene that I asked co-producer Jesse Deeter if they had posed the players. While the producers had let one character know that the other was at the show, they didn't try to script or control the conversation. Subsequently, the scene feels vibrant and not manipulative. Imagine asking your subjects to have a respectful fight on camera. Filming arguments between key subjects can create genuine blow-by-blow plot points, and possibly a climax scene.

Another solution? Move a dramatic story to the end of the film, framing it as a backstory. For a terrific narrative example, see *The Prince of Tides* with Barbra Streisand and Nick Nolte.

There are loads more problems to fix in post-production, including creating an effective story launch, organizing your ideas, threading a theme, maximizing dramatic timing, and fixing a deadly denouement. Learn more about our story consulting services in post-production.

Editing Services

Our award-winning documentary editors rank in the top 5%. They can cut your trailer, cut an entire film, finish editing your film, or help you at any time during post-production or fundraising. To learn how we can help you save time and money, check out the Accelerated Post schedule, also described below in this Appendix.

Collaborating to execute your vision, a New Doc editor will:

- Help structure your character-driven, essay-style or hybrid documentary
- Maximize the dramatic potential of your film
- Edit efficiently, with clear objectives for Assembly Cut, Rough Cuts, Fine Cut and Locked Picture
- Craft Character Transformation (if that potential exists)
- Suggest strategies for delivering exposition, such as narration or text.
- Advise on music
- Provide personal collaboration by email, phone and/or Skype as often as you like
- Engage in periodic, recorded reviews of cuts with your team and Karen, who provides complementary story consulting
- Edit a fundraising or theatrical trailer (optional)
- Provide preliminary color correction and set audio levels (optional)

Is Remote Editing Too Remote?

For the record, ninety-five percent of the work our staff editors do is performed remotely, that is, not in person. Remote editing was a growing trend well before the COVID-19 epidemic. Our deeply experienced employees are based in LA, Portland, NY, and the San Francisco Bay Area. We often work with directors who live thousands of miles away.

At stake for these directors is the quality of the director/editor relationship—generally regarded as the most important creative relationship in documentary filmmaking! If that bond is not strong, then how can the editor understand the director's vision, much less abet it?

Of course, some directors will always prefer to work in person. But in my experience, many directors who *think* they need to be in the edit room change their mind once they understand that remote editing can actually enhance the collaboration. (Not to mention greatly increase your chances of landing a talented editor who is available on *your* timetable.)

So how does remote editing work?

First, let's dispel with technical objections. It's easy enough for directors to ship us a mirror copy (clone) of their drives. And these days, file transfer technology is so simple (and teachable) that it's a snap to collaborate on cuts electronically, share screens, etc.

But what about establishing a *relationship*?

We begin with a three-way call with myself, my staff editor, and the director. The purpose of the call is to feel out the fit, and ensure that we all understand the director's vision. As the collaboration proceeds, the director can communicate with our editor as often as they want by phone, email, text, Skype, Zoom, etc. Here's the bottom line: it's actually *easier* to focus on editorial issues without the distractions that in-person visits can bring. Occasionally, the director

opts for an in-person visit to our editor's studio, but it's not necessary. It's sometimes easier for creative people to leave their egos at the door if they never have to walk through one in the first place!

When it's time for major reviews—which happen every few weeks with a new cut—we set up a recorded conference call. I email Story Notes in advance to guide our editorial agenda. On the call, we problem-solve and brainstorm free of small talk, snacks, or interruptions. In focused, ninety-minute editorial discussions, we put storytelling principles first. Later that day, my editor will deliver what we call a Prioritized List of Editorial Tasks that the director will review and approve to guide the next cut.

Accelerated Post

The traditional cost of hiring an experienced documentary editor ($60-120K) is out of reach for many indie filmmakers. Accelerated Post is our fast-track editing solution. We reduce the time of a traditional documentary edit–which can take several months–into approximately ten weeks.

This innovative approach is for veteran and emerging filmmakers who don't have a budget for a traditional post-production. Whether you're just approaching post, stuck in editing, or dissatisfied with your current editor, Accelerated Post can help you finish your film in record time on a modest budget.

Accelerated Post FAQ

These FAQ's will clarify how our unique Accelerated Post program works. Many of these questions and answers also apply to our Editing services in general.

1. **Q: What makes your editing services different from just hiring an editor?**

A: Two things. First, you're getting the skills of a talented editor and an experienced story consultant for the price of one.

Second, I've already vetted and further trained my editors in my innovative work of adapting screenwriting principles to documentaries. These techniques to make documentaries as dramatic as narrative films have informed many award-winning films, including Sundance winner *The Russian Woodpecker*, Emmy-nominee *The Future Starts Here*, and HBO's *Fifty Children*.

2. **Q: What are the stages of your post-production process?**

A: We follow the industry's professional 4-part post-production process: Assembly Cut, Rough Cut, Fine Cut, Locked Picture. Using our Accelerated Post™ system, we can significantly shorten the time each stage takes, turning a 6-12 month process into a 10-week edit. This depends in part on your culling your footage to 30 hours. Here's an estimate:

- Assembly Cut – 3 weeks
- Rough Cut (A and B) – 4 weeks
- Fine Cut – 2 weeks
- Locked Picture – 1 week

3. **Q: How much does it cost?**

A: That depends on how many weeks of editing you need. Our rate at the time of this writing is $3200/week, which is a competitive rate among deeply experienced documentary editors. But the real savings comes in time. The Accelerated Post™ program generally runs 10 weeks. At our weekly editing rate of $3200, that's a $32,000 investment. Not bad when you consider that post budgets often call for $60,000-$120,000 in editor fees alone. Note that I require pre-payment, which ensures the editor is available when you want them.

4. **Q: How long will it take to edit my documentary?**

A: If have not yet begun editing or are in the preliminary stages, our Accelerated Post™ schedule will take about ten weeks, from Assembly Cut to Locked Picture. If you already have a decent Rough Cut, we can finish in 6-9 weeks, depending on whether your Rough Cut is preliminary or advanced. *These estimates assume that you have identified 30 hours of footage for our editor to watch and have completed transcripts for key interviews.*

5. **Q: Can you send me the names and credentials of your editors?**

A: Eventually, yes. But first we'll talk about your vision so I can determine which editor's sensibility best fits your film. Then we'll have a three-way conference call with the editor so you can feel out whether it's a good match. *Fit* is so important to me that it comes before credentials. I'll send resumes, clips, and testimonials after our three-way call so you can do your due diligence. Meanwhile, take it on faith that my editors are top-notch!

6. **Q: How often can I work with the editor?**

A: As often as you'd like. We encourage frequent collaboration. Most of our editing collaborations are remote, but you can visit in person if you'd like. We encourage you to work with your editor by phone, Skype, Zoom, and email frequently. As well, allow time for them to work alone. These days, location is no longer a barrier to working with a talented editor. And because our editors work in their own homes and studios, you don't have to pay the extra fee of renting editing equipment or an editing suite.

7. **Q: Where are your editors located?**

A: Currently our editors are in New York, San Francisco, Pittsburg, and Los Angeles.

8. **Q: Is the editor employed by me?**

   A: No. Editors work for New Doc Editing, LLC, and they are contracted not to accept employment from directors to whom we've introduced them. When you hire New Doc Editing, you get an experienced, talented editor *and* an acclaimed story consultant working directly with you. Business-related questions should be directed to me (the owner, Karen Everett) who will make sure you're satisfied at every stage of post-production.

9. **Q: Where does the story consultant come in?**

   A: For every week you use an editor, you get at least three hours of complimentary story consulting. This time accumulates so that after key cuts are completed, an experienced story consultant, generally Karen, watches the cut and delivers notes. Then we'll schedule a conference call to discuss the cut with you, the editor, the story consultant, and anyone else on your editorial team. Out of this discussion, our list of Prioritized Editorial Tasks for the next cut emerges.

10. **Q: I have 200 hours of footage. How do I narrow it down to 30 hours?**

    A: We'll guide you or your assistant with criteria that help you quickly identify the most important interview sound bites, B-roll, archival and live action footage. In Accelerated Post, we're going to jettison the traditional, time-consuming method of logging footage from A – Z, so let go of your perfectionist mindset. You'll take the first pass at editing your interviews, for example, organizing *only the best* sound bites into sequences. This process generally takes you 1 -3 weeks, depending on the amount of footage you have, whether it's already ingested, and how much logging you've done to date. Then you'll ship a mirror copy of your drives to our editor.

11. **Q: What if I miss something good in logging?**

A: That's bound to happen in any editing scenario—much less an accelerated one. Remember, we're letting go our perfectionism. *The goal is to make a compelling documentary with a limited budget.* In the unlikely event that the footage you cull doesn't produce a good rough cut, then it's time to go hunting again through your selects. Or shoot more.

12. **Q: What if I don't want to cull the footage myself?**

A: No problem. We'll do it for you. We'll add approximately 40 hours (one week) to the post-production schedule for every additional 20 hours of footage our editor watches. For example, if you give us 30 hours of footage, we'll complete the Assembly Cut in our standard 3 weeks. But if you hand us 50 hours of footage (twenty hours more than usual), we'll add 40 hours to the Assembly Cut schedule. So, the Assembly Cut would take four weeks rather than three. Depending on whether your footage is talk-heavy, this extra time could shrink or increase, so decisions about the Assembly Cut schedule will be made on a case-by-case basis.

13. **Q: What's the difference between an Assembly Cut and a Rough Cut?**

A: Imagine making pebble art—an image assembled from small, smooth rocks found on a beach. Editing an Assembly Cut is like **collecting** the prettiest pebbles you've found in the sand. From 30 hours, we'll collect the best 100 minutes of footage.
Editing the Rough Cut involves **arranging** the pebbles into a pretty, preliminary design, or structure. Normally both cuts can take months to edit, but we will accelerate the process.

14. **Q: How do you edit so quickly?**

A: Before we enter each cut, we'll work with you to *prioritize* the 5-15 specific, editorial tasks needed to complete the cut. For example, during the Rough Cut, our top three priorities might include outlining the protagonist's narrative arc, constructing the inciting incident, and roughing out narration with text on screen. Using this protocol, we streamline our workflow without excess experimentation.

We'll also work hard to understand your vision for the film, so we're all on the same page. That saves time. To realize an ambitious timetable, we will not be able to rework sections as often as we might with a more traditional or copious editing budget.

15. Q: What else do I need to prepare?

A: A treatment, transcripts and script are welcome but not required.

16. Q: What makes this program different than just hiring an editor?

A: You're getting the skills of a talented editor and story consultant rolled into one program. Our Priority-Based Editing System makes sure your documentary is edited on time and on budget. We at New Doc Editing are pioneers in adapting screenwriting principles to make documentaries as dramatic as narrative films. We excel at bringing your film to life. And we work hard to understand and augment your vision for the film.

17. Q: Who is this program *not* for?

A: It's not for chronic complainers, drama queens, or inattentive directors! Accelerated Post™ is not for someone who can't take the time to cull footage--or who doesn't have a budget for our editor to do it. Also, if you don't have funds for pre-payment, you are not ready for this program yet. In that case, email me about our story consulting services to move your project forward.

Accelerated Post™ is also not for directors who have considerably *more* resources for post-production and who want to spend more time experimenting in post. If that's you, let's talk about what a more expansive editing scenario might look like. Our *accelerated* program is aimed at filmmakers who want to finish their film quickly on somewhat limited resources.

18. Q: You claim to edit a documentary in ten weeks. Can you guarantee that?

A: No. That's because only you, the director, can truly say when your documentary is done. It's up to you to take responsibility for the Post-Production schedule by a) realizing

Accelerated Post ™ doesn't allow the luxury of multiple editorial experiments and b) helping the editor create a prioritized list of changes for each cut.

As well, ultimately the length of the edit is up to you, the director, because only you can decide on important variables that are outside of our control, such as pickup shooting and deliverables such as composed music and. We *can* guarantee that we will deliver what we consider an excellent Assembly Cut, Rough Cut, Fine Cut and Locked Picture on schedule.

19. **Q: Can I take some time off between cuts?**

    A: Yes, if we can likely arrange that in advance. But keep in mind that editing for several consecutive weeks sustains momentum and ensures that your editor is available for your project. However, we understand that sometimes directors need time for pickup shoots, art work, and rough cut screenings. Keep in mind that our editors need to keep working, and I will try to accept other work in between your breaks. This can potentially push the return to your edit further ahead that you might ideally like. But do not worry. We will work with you to create the most efficient schedule possible!
    Read more about Accelerated Post here.

Fundraising Services

Documentary filmmakers often find *fundraising* a time-consuming, perennial challenge. In response, New Doc Editing now offers guidance for raising funds from non-traditional film grants. We can help you create a fundraising deck, fundraising trailer and crowd-funding campaigns. To get started, check out the bottom of our Editing page for a webinar on raising funds from non-traditional funders. This is cutting edge stuff that you should consider prioritizing!

For traditional film grants, we also help filmmakers refine *boilerplate* essentials used in the Documentary Core Application. Film funders such as ITVS, the Sundance Documentary

Fund, and the Gucci Tribeca Documentary Fund use this as a basis for their funding applications. Learn more here.

APPENDIX B: FREE STORYTELLING RESOURCES

Get started with these complimentary storytelling resources!

Storytelling Article

Karen's evergreen article on what documentary storytellers can learn from screenwriters.

Editing for Fundraising Webinar

Go to the bottom of our Editing page to watch this 90-minute webinar. Karen joins fundraising strategist Keith Ochwat to reveal new techniques for editing and pitching non-traditional funders. Stop applying for the same super competitive film grants!

Blog Talk Radio

Fundraising guru Carole Dean interviews Karen about editing (starts at 1:10).

DOVES

Guide your entire editorial team by filling out DOVES: the Director's Outcome, Vision and Editorial Statements.

The Art of Documentary Storytelling Podcast

Learn editorial techniques as you listen in on Karen's story consulting sessions with actual filmmakers.

Stages of Post Production

Learn professional standards in this excellent overview of the post-production process.

Story Focusing Exercises

Developed when Karen was teaching at UC Berkeley and the San Francisco Film Society, this simple worksheet will bring your documentary structure into focus.

The Documentary Life Podcast Interview

Host Chris Parkhurst interviews Karen Everett on how to "Bring Scriptwriting Principles to Your Documentary Film". Start at 24 minutes.

Storytelling Seminars

We offer two online seminars for structuring compelling documentary films. These seminars were filmed between 2007-2010 and contain case studies from award-winning films that are still relevant to storytelling today. The first is free. Shot at the San Francisco Film Society, *Editing the Character-Driven Documentary* is available to download with the links to six modules below. The second seminar*, The Ultimate Guide to Structuring Your Documentary*, is $50. See details below.

Links For Editing the Character-Driven Documentary

Module #1:
http://newdocediting.com/editing_course1/M1EditDocumentaryOpen.mov

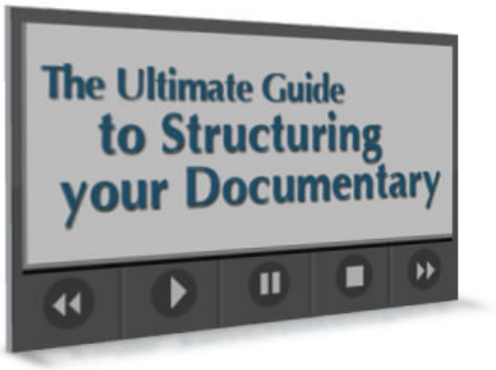
Module #2
http://newdocediting.com/editing_course1/M2DocumentaryAct.mov

Module #3
http://newdocediting.com/editing_course1/M3EditDocumentaryActThree.mov

Module #4
http://newdocediting.com/editing_course1/M4DocumentaryArc.mov

Module #5
http://newdocediting.com/editing_course1/M5DocumentaryProtagonists.mov

Module #6
http://newdocediting.com/editing_course1/M6PostProduction_Director_Editor.mov



The Ultimate Guide to Structuring Your Documentary

Formerly $297, now download this seminar for $50. Learn how to craft scenes, shape a story, and organize any type of documentary.

BIOGRAPHY

Karen Everett, owner of New Doc Editing™, is an award-winning editor and story editor who helps documentary directors convey their vision by adapting screenwriting and other storytelling techniques to films about real life. She has edited and consulted on dozens of award-winning documentaries. Since 1994, Karen Everett has taught editing at UC Berkeley's Graduate School of Journalism, the top-ranked documentary program in America according to *Documentary Magazine*. Karen has directed and produced five documentaries, including the critically-acclaimed PBS biography *I Shall Not Be Removed: The Life of Marlon Riggs*. Her latest film, "American Visionary", is available on Amazon Prime. Her website is newdocediting.com and you can also email info@newdocediting.com.