



The Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University

# **VISUAL STORYTELLING**

## The Digital Video Documentary

*by Nancy Kalow*

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*Visual Storytelling: The Digital Video Documentary*

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**A CDS BOOK**

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## INTRODUCTION

*Visual Storytelling: The Digital Video Documentary* is for anyone who wants to make a watchable short documentary with a consumer camcorder, digital SLR camera, or cell phone. My aim is to show you the no-nonsense, inexpensive, and ethical approaches to creating documentary video with these tools. Making low-budget documentaries is particularly rewarding because you maintain independence and control over the project. You, the filmmaker, get to decide what to research and how to shoot. You're the one who spends time with and learns the most from the participants in your documentary. And you decide how to tell the story during the editing process. In the pages that follow, you'll find technical guidance, fieldwork how-to's, and practical advice from my ten years of teaching low- and no-budget filmmaking.

I began teaching documentary video after extensive immersion in documentary work in North Carolina, both as a folklorist making videos about local traditions and as a programmer watching hundreds of films submitted each year for the Full Frame Documentary Film Festival. I came to be passionate about the democratization of documentary filmmaking and wanted to pass on what I'd learned as a practitioner and viewer.

Indeed, the documentary arts are flourishing in Durham and Chapel Hill. A wide range of institutions and programs—including the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University, the University of North Carolina's Folklore program, and the Full Frame Documentary Film Festival—engage the public in documentary inquiry.

### Rise of the Digital Documentary

Today's digital documentaries rose out of a decades-long process of simplifying shooting and editing. Digital filmmaking has become much more accessible and personal as a result of the popularity of consumer camcorders. Documentary films, which had been heavily scripted and shot with cumbersome film cameras, evolved with the arrival of directors like Richard Leacock, D. A. Pennebaker, and the Maysles Brothers. In the 1960s and '70s, they used compact and relatively lightweight 16mm film cameras, and smaller crews. They filmed events observationally rather than following a preconceived script, and anticipated the practice of shoot-



From *Weather Diary I* by George Kuchar.



From *Sadobabies* by Nancy Kalow.

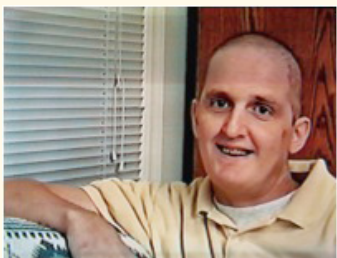
ing with high footage-to-final-running-time ratios. Craig Gilbert's twelve episodes of *An American Family* (which was the precursor to MTV's *Real World* and other reality TV series) and the films of Frederick Wiseman were similarly shot without scripts using small crews, 16mm film, and many hours of footage taken over long periods of time. Documentary became increasingly distinguishable from journalism by the filmmakers' artistic ambitions and the investment of time devoted to fieldwork.

Ross McElwee's first-person documentaries, such as his popular 1985 film *Sherman's March*, presaged the boom in personal video making. McElwee shot the film with a 16mm camera while recording sound with a reel-to-reel tape recorder. Indeed, he was a "one-man crew" doing both camerawork and audio. The *Dogme 95 Manifesto*, created by Danish directors Lars van Trier and Thomas Vinterberg in 1995, advocated against added lighting and other non-naturalistic techniques in feature films. Their ideas mesh perfectly with the ability of camcorders, digital SLRs, and cell phones to record video in natural and low-light settings. The rise of extremely low-budget (or no-budget) video allowed personal expression to become almost wholly unrestrained, as in the videos of George Kuchar.

Ethnographic documentaries also began to use low-budget video to depict communities off the beaten track. Louis Hock's *The Mexican Tapes: A Chronicle of Life Outside the Law* (1986) and my 8mm video *Sadobabies* (1988) are two early examples. Camcorders and cell phones have also been used by activists, journalists, and citizens, as well as issue-driven documentary filmmakers. Popular and revolutionary movements around the world are being documented with digital video.

## The Documentary Approach

I love the masterworks of nonfiction film, and find much to admire in a well-produced hour-long or feature-length documentary. But there are so many untold stories that would make great movies, and there isn't enough production funding to pay for them. Small, inexpensive camcorders, digital SLR cameras, and cell phones allow the solo videomaker to get started on a short film without waiting to raise thousands of dollars. The *Visual Storytelling* approach leads to good technical quality and engaging storytelling by taking advantage of the inherent strengths of the camera, namely closeness, showing rather than telling, and shooting to edit.



Alonzo Felder

The camera picks up better detail when positioned near the subject.

**Closeness** suggests to the viewer that you have the consent and collaboration of the person you are recording. An audience may not be thinking about consent while watching the film, but they will respond to and get a better feel for the characters if you shoot in close proximity to them. Also, the sound and image quality are better when the camera is positioned near the subject; the camera picks up detail better, the footage is less shaky, and the microphone records sound more clearly.

**Showing rather than telling** means to make the documentary primarily visual. You can establish location, relationships, story transitions, and other elements visually, and reduce explanatory text or narration. Learn to shoot and use plenty of footage that shows people *doing* things rather than *talking* about doing things. As François Truffaut said, “A filmmaker isn’t supposed to *say* things; his job is to *show* them.”

**Shooting to edit** means using your time on location carefully to record all the material you will need in editing, because the situation in the field can’t be recreated later to fill in the gaps. Shooting to edit comes naturally with experience, and you can get good results from diligent advance planning combined with improvising in the field.

With your ideas for a documentary video and the guidance in *Visual Storytelling*, you’ll be able to shoot and edit a well-made and audience-pleasing piece.

## CHAPTER 1 SHOOTING

Using a camcorder, DSLR, or cell phone leads to intimacy and immediacy, which helps to draw an audience into your story and characters. A documentary film may appear to be a faithful record of events and people, but no documentary is completely objective. The filmmaker makes the decisions, such as how to frame a shot, which subjects to use to develop a story, and what to leave in the edited video. The result is a uniquely personal document that is subjective and imaginative.

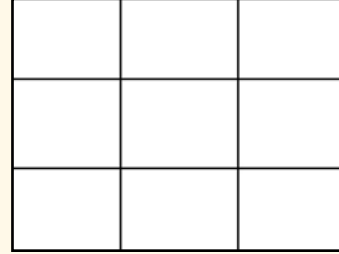
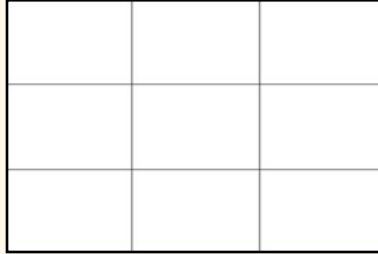
Videographers learn from experience that a camera has its own sight and hearing (see [Chapter 2: Listening](#)). A person can see much more in a scene than the camera is able to record, so the filmmaker will need to make decisions to create what his or her audience should see. Filmmakers go through a process of discov-



ering what works and what doesn't work, and part of that process is training the senses to compensate for the camera's limitations. The following pages cover technical advice on composition, framing, camera movements, and shooting in the field.

## Framing

LEFT TO RIGHT: The frame for high definition (16 x 9 aspect ratio) video; the frame for standard definition (4 x 3) video.



Angie Lee



Use the "rule of thirds" to frame subjects.

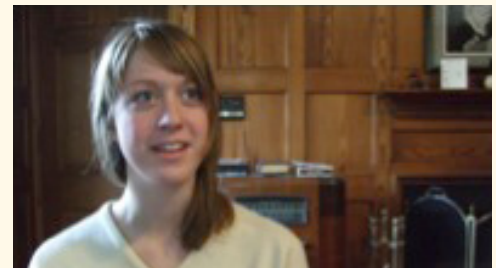
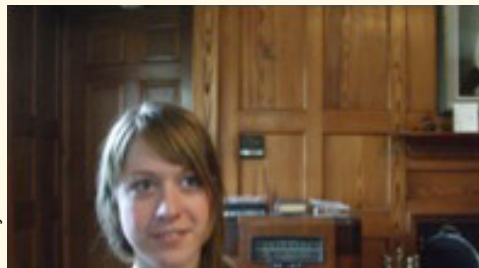
The first thing to keep in mind is the "rule of thirds" of motion picture composition. Think of the frame as divided into thirds, both horizontally and vertically.

When you look through your viewfinder to frame a scene, try to visualize the grid and put the most important features on the intersections of the lines. In other words, the middle of the frame is not the most visually interesting. Newscasters, for instance, are always framed in the center of the television screen for a stable but dull visual image. A more dynamic framing sets objects or people on the intersections of the grid lines, as the two people are in the asymmetrical frame by Angie Lee.

Two basic concepts in good videography are headroom and noseroom. Headroom refers to the amount of space above a subject's head. The shot is visually distracting if the subject is either crammed against the top of the frame or placed too low in it, with too much space above his or her head. Try to position the subject's eyes on the top line of the rule of thirds grid.

LEFT TO RIGHT: Too much headroom; better framing.

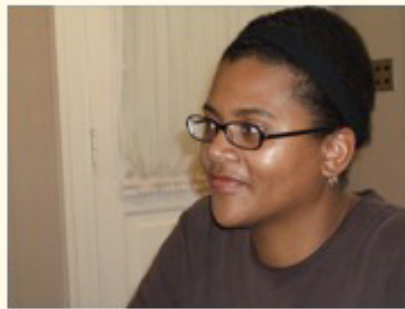
Nancy Kalow



Noseroom is also called "look space," and it refers to composing a shot so that there is some space in front of the subject's nose

LEFT TO RIGHT: Too little noseroom; corrected framing.

Nancy Kalow



when he or she appears in partial or full profile. You don't want the viewer to perceive the nose as hitting the side of the frame.

Many camcorders and DSLRs have an autofocus feature, which you should turn off because the autofocus mechanism constantly searches for focus, ruining many shots with distracting blurry-sharp-blurry adjustments. To focus manually, zoom in all the way on what you want to focus on, such as a person's eyes, and adjust until the subject's eyes are in sharp focus. Then zoom back out to your desired framing. Always use manual focus and compose with the rule of thirds, with your subject to the left or right of center.

## Shooting Do's and Don'ts

The camera does not see as the eye sees, even though it records visual information. Your eyes can naturally and effortlessly dart from place to place, follow the action, and focus in on the telling detail. You'll notice an important limitation of the camera's eye when you look at video footage in which the videographer or camera is moving too much. Footage is much more watchable when the camera is still and the subjects are moving. With the camera in hand, videographers are tempted to veer all around ("firehosing") or zoom in and out, both of which render the shots hard to watch and hard to edit. Use a tripod to stabilize the camera, or train yourself to hold the camera still. Prevent firehosing to give your video a more professional look. Any movements, such as zooms or pans, should serve to advance or deepen your story. Always remember to settle on a shot for ten to fifteen seconds. If you shoot a lot of activity or a performance, position yourself close to the action even if you feel that the tripod takes up a lot of space. Curiously, a videographer tends to become invisible—people become so used to seeing you and your camera that you really don't interfere with the action when you document from close in.

Allow your subject to move beyond the edge of the frame without panning the camera. Similarly, if a person walks through the scene, allow him to enter the frame and walk through it without a pan.

Nancy Kalow



Try letting your subject move across the frame without panning the camera.



If a person is walking away from you and the camera, let her get smaller and smaller; resist the urge to use the zoom button. It might seem counterintuitive not to always follow action with pans and zooms, but they are often more distracting rather than illuminating.

## Camera Shots

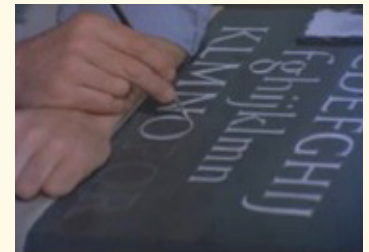
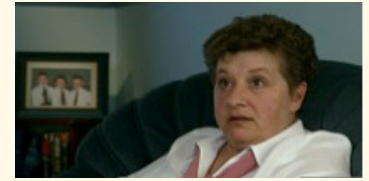
Filmmakers share a language of shots and camera moves. Many fiction filmmakers plan their shots in advance, seeking emotional resonance and story advancement through compositional choices. Documentary videographers may not be as rigid in pre-planning their shots, but they do respond to situations at hand with a toolkit of possibilities. Planning a documentary shoot means that you need to be prepared to use several standard types of shots that you've practiced: close-ups, medium shots, and wide shots.

### Close-up

A close-up positions a person or object as the most important element in the frame. A head-and-shoulders framing of one person is often used in documentary interviews. Close-ups of objects allow the audience to see them clearly without other visual distractions.

### Extreme Close-up

An extreme close-up is a shot of a detail, such as an eye or a tiny object, which can be dramatic or explanatory.



TOP TO BOTTOM: Close-up shots from *Pack Strap Swallow* by Holly Paige Joyner; *49 Up* by Michael Apted; and *Final Marks: The Art of the Carved Letter* by Frank Muhly, Jr., and Peter O'Neill.

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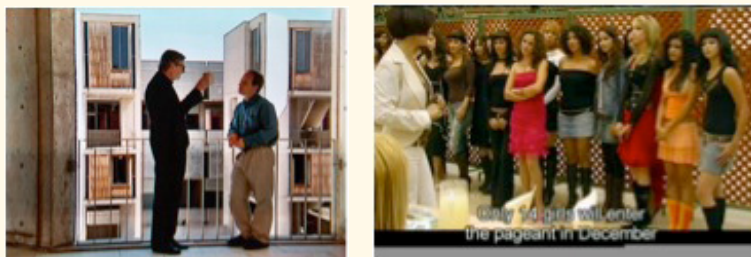
### Medium Shot

A medium shot frames the head and torso of one person; it can also be used for framing two or three people.



LEFT TO RIGHT: Medium shots from *Buena Vista Social Club* by Wim Wenders; a student project by Terry Grunwald; and *Banished* by Marco Williams.

LEFT TO RIGHT: Wide shots from *My Architect* by Nathaniel Kahn; and from *Lady Kul El Arab* by Ibtisam Mara'ana.



### Wide Shot

A wide shot shows the larger setting or situates people in their environment, to create a sense of location and context.

### Establishing Shot

An establishing shot provides an overall view of the landscape. People, if they are included in the frame, are very small.

LEFT TO RIGHT: Establishing shots by Nancy Kalow; and from *The Cove* by Louie Psihoyos.



## Camera Movements

Camera movements, when done well, provide the viewer with new information or underline a visual or thematic point. Keep in mind that you will want to begin and end your camera moves with well-composed shots—using a fluid-head tripod will help to make sure the movements are smooth.

### Zoom

With the zoom feature, the camera stays in the same place but the lens moves. For example, a shot may begin by showing a house with the doorway in the middle of the frame, then the camera zooms in on the door, and from there the house number above the door. Use a tripod and hold the camera steady for ten seconds or so at the beginning and end of every zoom.

### Pan

In a pan, the camera swivels horizontally. Panning works best if the movement has a purpose. Pan from one object to another, for example, rather than stopping halfway. Use a tripod and hold the camera steady for about ten seconds at the beginning and end of every pan.

## **Tilt**

The camera moves vertically during a tilt. This move can be effective when revealing something, for example, you might tilt down to show that a man in a tuxedo is wearing unusual shoes. Make it a habit to hold the camera for ten seconds at the start and end of every tilt, and definitely use a tripod.

## **Tracking**

Also called a “dolly” shot, this shot moves the entire camera as if along tracks. Hold the camera very steadily and walk alongside the subject, or ride beside him on a car, cart, or anything on wheels. You can also dolly toward or away from a subject.

## **Crane or Jib**

This is a technically sophisticated shot used to achieve swooping overhead movements or to move the camera up and down along a vertical axis. Special equipment is needed to keep the camera movements steady.

## **Checklist of Standard Shots**

The more types of shots you have when editing your documentary, the better. Before you get to a location, plan out a set of standard shots and improvise from those starting points. Here are some suggestions to help you make your own list for a shoot:

- wide shot of the interior
- looking out the window of an interior
- sign or logo indicating location
- details of objects in a room
- photographs from albums
- art or photos on walls
- items on a refrigerator or bulletin board
- long shot of characters from far away
- unusual angle on characters
- group of characters seen from the back
- slow and steady pans from person to person, or from an object to a person
- reaction shots (people reacting to an event or comment)
- reverse shots (from behind the backs of people to show their points of view)
- observation of people doing their normal routine
- close-ups of faces
- visual of the source of a sound (such as showing a cuckoo clock or a passing train)



When framing a subject, position the camera close to eye level.

## Interviewing Subjects: A Camera Checklist

The best documentaries rely on a variety of visual elements rather than merely showing people talking. No matter how much “talking head” footage you use, make the visuals professional-looking with the following checklist. For sound, go to [Chapter 2](#).

Always use a tripod if you’ll be talking with your subject for an extended period of time. Small, lightweight cameras are hard to hold steady.

Set the camera on the tripod at eye level, because it is the most straightforward and character-revealing camera position. Looking down at the person with whom you’re speaking can appear to diminish the subject and can convey a sense of the filmmaker’s superiority. However, it is also important to keep in mind that a very slightly elevated position can help to minimize double chins or jowls and so is a good choice for making your subjects look their best. Filming someone from below, while it can be unexpected and unconventional, is usually less flattering than filming with the camera at close to eye level, as in the framing by Phoebe Brush. Also remember to shoot your subject walking around to give a sense of how he or she moves and fits into the space.

Make sure you’ve left room at the top, bottom, and sides of the frame. The screen of a camera’s viewfinder (and often your editing software) can show more of the image than viewers will see on a TV screen. While the viewfinder or your editing software may show that all of someone’s head is fully in the frame, for example, some television screens (or other monitors and projectors) may not. Be sure to practice with your camera and software so that you have a good idea of how the footage will translate to the screen.

Keep the subject’s gaze consistent. Students often ask, “Is it better to have a subject look at you, rather than into the camera lens?” The subject sometimes chooses to look directly into the camera. Documentary “talking heads” are more natural when the subject looks at a questioner seated next to the camera, rather than into the camera lens. Viewers feel that they are taking part in a conversation rather than watching a scripted monologue. Whether you decide to ask subjects to look into the camera or at the person asking the questions, keep your vantage point the same so that the speakers don’t change their gaze, which is distracting to viewers. Also, be sure to place the questioner relatively close to the camera. Subjects will appear to be shot in profile if they have to look too far to the side. To give your audience the best sense of the person speaking, it is important to show the whole face, including both eyes.





For more visual interest, position the camera and subject to create a sense of depth, as in the top example. From *Winter Dreams* by DeWitt Sage (top); and by Nancy Kalow (bottom).

Nancy Kalow



To ensure proper exposure, move your subject away from a window or bright background.

Position the camera and the subject so as to create a sense of depth. A camera flattens three dimensions into two. For more visual interest, a good videographer will position the camera and the subject so as to create a sense of depth. For example, instead of placing your subject right in front of a bookshelf or on a couch, change your position to show the space in the background. The two set-ups to the left show the same subject, but the top example is better than the bottom one because of the deeper background, more attractive camera angle, and softer lighting.

If there is greater spatial depth in the frame, the subject's movements will animate the scene. If a subject leans forward, gestures with his hands, or picks up an object, it is visually interesting even if he briefly moves out of the frame.

While it's important to include well shot interviews, also remember to shoot other visuals to enliven your storytelling. Shoot "observationally," that is, record people and events in their natural setting, as if you were a fly on the wall. Allow events to unfold, observing and capturing reality. Your subjects don't need to narrate for the camera because you can always add explanatory narration later, during the editing process. Good observational technique reveals character and story, bringing deep visual interest to your documentary.

### Troubleshooting Common Problems

Because your eyes see three dimensions and a camera doesn't, you might not notice visual clutter such as lamps, plants, and light switches behind your subject until you play your footage back later. During a shoot, take note of the elements in the background as the camera records them (for instance, to avoid the awkwardness, or unintended humor, of an object seeming to grow out of someone's head), and move the camera to adjust the framing. There are several other visual difficulties that you will experience while shooting that are easy to prevent. The following list tells you how to handle shooting in a variety of situations, from white or light backgrounds and direct overhead sunlight to dim lighting.

A white or light background, such as a bright window, will turn the subject into a dark silhouette, because many cameras will set the exposure for the brightly lit scene outside the window and compensate by darkening what is in front of the window. Move your subject away from a window or other bright background.

Direct sunlight casts unflattering shadows on faces. In *Grey Gardens* by the Maysles brothers, Edie Beale is shot in the mid-



Avoid direct sunlight, which casts unflattering shadows on faces (top). From *Grey Gardens* by Albert Maysles and David Maysles.



Jane Folk & Julia Maserjian



Close blinds when shooting indoors to create softer, more indirect light (bottom).

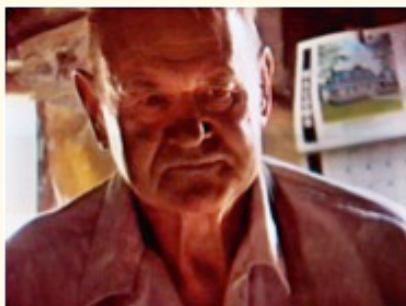
day sun (top) and on a shaded porch (bottom). (*Grey Gardens* was shot on film, rather than video, but the lighting issue remains the same.)

Shooting in direct sunlight can provide uneven lighting on a subject, even if you are filming indoors and the light is coming in through a window. In the two shots by Jane Folk and Julia Maserjian, it's easy to see the difference between shooting in a room with direct sunlight (top) and after closing the blinds, shooting with same scene with softer, more indirect light (bottom).

Some cameras automatically expose for brightness and dimness, to even out a scene's lighting, and the result can be problematic. You may have to move to a less sunny or more evenly lit place. Use manual exposure to help make your footage look more professional.

Dim lighting, which is the norm when you're shooting indoors, will make your footage appear grainy and colorless. The image will be discernible but will lack vibrant colors and sharpness. During the day, seek out natural light from a window—a north-facing window gives flattering light without the harshness of direct sunlight. If you think you'll need additional lighting in a room, you can bring inexpensive work lamps along, on stands or with clamps.

Another thing to try in a tricky lighting situation is pointing a work lamp at a white ceiling or a white wall to achieve uniform brightness, rather than shining a light directly at the subject. Classic lighting design for shooting film calls for a key light (primary light source), a fill light (secondary light source), and a light behind the subjects to separate them from the background, but you don't need a lot of extra light. Be careful to avoid the "halo effect" around a subject's head and hair that is a danger of over-lit lighting set-ups. A use of excessive lighting can also lead to artificial-looking hot spots, such as shiny foreheads on balding men.



LEFT TO RIGHT: A dimly lit subject will lack vibrant colors and sharpness (Nancy Kalow). When shooting indoors, seek out sources of natural light, such as a window (From *Crumb* by Terry Zwigoff). Inexpensive work lamps can be used for additional lighting indoors (Nancy Kalow).



You can make the lighting look a lot more professional if you use a simplified key-light and fill-light method. Bring a poster-sized white foam-core board, called a bounce board or reflector, to your shoot. Position the board to reflect the key light to create a fill light—the key light can either be a work lamp or natural light from a window, or, if you are outdoors, bounce the light from the sun to create a fill.

Set the white balance on your camera to match the type of light available at your shoot: usually either indoor light, which casts a yellow tinge or outdoor (natural) light, which adds a blue tinge. Most of the time, the automatic settings for white balance work fine. Read your camera manual's section on white balance and learn how to adjust for it manually.

Venetian blinds and other horizontal line patterns appear to vibrate when seen on a TV screen. Make sure to move the subject away from a background with blinds and avoid stripes generally.

## Choosing Engaging Storytelling over High-Tech Camera Features

While some digital cameras make use of sophisticated, and appealing, technology, many of the new camera features are not useful in producing effective documentaries. Extra features and options are fun to play with, but they can become visual distractions in your video that are difficult to control and edit. Digital zoom, for example, tends to zoom in too much, and creates a blocky grid of pixels instead of a distinct image. What you'll need for developing your story, and editing your piece, is the best possible footage from your location. If you shoot your documentary carefully and consistently, without technological add-ons, you can focus on developing your characters, recording events faithfully, crafting your story, and building rapport with the viewer. Special visual effects and transitions can be added sparingly to your edit during the post-production process.

A compelling story is the key to a memorable documentary, not flashy technique. It is better to break the rules of “correct” composition than to miss a one-time opportunity to catch a person or an event. Always seek out what's meaningful for your story, rather than attempt to achieve technical flawlessness. A video can be showy and sensational, beautiful even, but if it lacks a gripping narrative or intriguing characters, viewers won't remember or care about it. In *Pack Strap Swallow*, filmmaker Holly Paige Joyner



Nancy Kalow

One-sided lighting is sometimes used to create a dramatic effect (top). The same light source directed toward a bounce board placed on the other side will even out the lighting (bottom).



From *Pack Strap Swallow* by Holly Paige Joyner.



From *Hands on a Hard Body* by S. R. Bindler.

tells the story of several women imprisoned in Quito, Ecuador, for drug smuggling. The camerawork is often shaky and the framing erratic, but the film is so honest and entertaining that we forgive any technical imperfections.

Similarly, S.R. Bindler's *Hands on a Hard Body* conveys the excitement of a Texas auto dealer's promotion to give away a new truck. Twenty-three contestants start the competition, which requires that they remain standing with at least one hand on the truck for seventy-eight hours. They are given few breaks, and as this marathon of endurance unfolds, with unexpected plot twists and in-depth character study, we barely notice any camera shakiness or missed bits of dialogue.

However, the audience is more likely to get engaged, and stay engaged, if there aren't glaring technical problems. Almost always, good footage that is well framed brings out the best in your subjects and their stories, thereby diminishing the distance between the subject and the viewer.

## CHAPTER 2 LISTENING

Thinking visually is only part of the story for making digital documentaries. Developing your listening skills, the subject for this chapter, is equally important. The challenge is to be a good listener *and* to record the best possible audio.

What does it mean to listen well? Think about your own family. Most families have one member who is a natural documentarian. This person is the one who can be counted on to take the snapshots, make the videos, or preserve family stories. In my family, my father is the storehouse for the Great Depression and World War II stories of his aunts and uncles—stories that others tired of hearing or didn't have time for. Now, we're grateful to my dad for asking probing questions, listening carefully, and recording these indelible stories.

Personal stories make effective low-budget documentaries because they draw on the intimacy of the small camera and one-person crew. Stories that characterize a family, such as how a married couple met or the origin of a hobbyist's passion, are often known to everyone in a family but have never been recorded or written down. Sometimes a seemingly small family story can be juxtaposed against grand or tragic historical events happening at the same time and can shed light on the larger sweep of war, economic depression, or natural disaster.

When recording someone for a documentary, listen for the telling of stories that lend themselves to editing. Such stories (they don't have to be lengthy) begin with a natural conversational cue such as "Well, I first began to . . ." or "How we met was . . ." and continue with the body of a story. The speaker often closes with "And so that is how I ended up . . ." or some other concluding remark. A complete story like that, with a beginning, middle, and end, works well as a sequence in a longer documentary video and can be enlivened by editing with photographs and other relevant visual materials.

Personal recollections can root documentary videos in real-life experiences and stories. For a documentary I was making about the worship traditions of the Primitive Baptist denomination, I collected visionary narratives to show the function of dreams in religious conversion. These videotaped tellings of dreams form a rich counterpoint to observational footage of church worship. A documentary maker interested in occupations would make someone's work history the focus. A life in politics, farming, or on an assembly line can lead to fascinating and unique stories, from the founding of a company to the learning of a now obsolete trade. Excellent documentaries about labor movements, military service, musicians, and artists, for example, have relied on deep and thoughtful narratives for their dramatic power.

When you ask people about their lives, you get an important perspective on historical events and a contrasting narrative to the "great men/great deeds" version of history. By exploring personal recollections of war, social and political movements, tragedy, escaping a hurricane, crossing a border, or countless other examples, a documentary filmmaker will begin to see a larger story unfold. Historical subjects, such as the Japanese-American internment at Manzanar, the Soviet gulag, or South African apartheid, come to life when told by an individual in an intimate setting. A community can also collectively tell a story, as in *Four Little Girls* by Spike Lee, which is about the 1963 church bombing in Birmingham, or in *The Two Towns of Jasper* (Whitney Dow and Marco Williams), which explores the cruel murder of an African-American citizen. Both films feature interwoven commentary from many people, allowing us to begin to understand the complexity as well as the brutality of these events.

In documentary biographies, recollections not only enliven the central character but also avoid dry narration. In *The Times of Har-*



From *The Times of Harvey Milk* by Rob Epstein.



From *Crumb* by Terry Zwigoff.

*vey Milk* by Rob Epstein, a film about the gay San Francisco politician and activist killed by an assassin in 1978, a diverse group of people offers an unforgettable portrait of a dead hero. The film's structure is carefully edited so that none of these witnesses repeat each other; instead they build and add to the forceful and sympathetic character study. In video biographies made when the subject is still alive, an assortment of colleagues, friends, or relatives adds insights but doesn't need to carry the full descriptive burden because we can hear from the main character directly. In Terry Zwigoff's *Crumb*, the cartoonist Robert Crumb is seen and heard as he interacts with family, friends, and strangers, while comments from art critics, former girlfriends, and others who know Crumb deepen the portrait and our understanding of his provocative and endearing art.

## Improving Your Listening Skills

Anyone can improve his or her listening skills through practice. Try an open-ended and exploratory approach to recording someone's autobiography. Ask questions that encourage your subject to look back at a life and its branching points. "That June, I could have either gotten married or gone overseas for a year," someone might say, and then the questioner can prompt the speaker to explain the reasons behind that decision. People enjoy the chance to share their choices and experiences.

Ask short, open-ended questions that require more than a yes or no answer. Rather than asking a recent immigrant, "When did you first come to the United States?" which would give you a brief answer such as "1998," you might ask, "How did you decide to come here?" (Asking questions that start with "How" such as "How did you come to be a member of . . ." tend to work better than questions that start with "Why" such as "Why did you become a member of . . .")

It is crucial not to interrupt. Don't jump in with your next question. When the subject is finished answering a question, stay silent and let the answer "breathe" for a few moments. Frequently he or she will launch into a second part of an answer, as if to fill the silence—some of the best parts of documentaries happen in just this way. Trust in a leisurely pace and improvisational feeling so that you can delve into seemingly irrelevant byways, which may turn out to be important, dramatic, or surprising. Certainly write up a list of questions that you prepare ahead of time, but don't hold onto the piece of paper during the recording. Trying to adhere to the questions on the list can stifle the flow of words, and the pa-



per's rustling can become an unwanted background sound in your recording. And, ask your subject if there's anything to add.

While recording, always leave the camera on, even if you need to move it or if the person talking has strayed far from the planned topic of the documentary. There's an etiquette to documentary listening: it's insulting to appear to be choosing what you think is important and what you think isn't by turning a machine on and off while the person in front of the camera tells a story. In addition, try not to be distracted by equipment settings or camera movements. Select a framing and stay with it, checking the viewfinder now and then so that your subject is still framed correctly. If a documentary video project calls for complicated camera movement during recorded conversations, perhaps have a second person present.

It is awkward and distracting to ask someone to first repeat your question, although this is often recommended: "OK, when I ask, 'Why did you join the army,' be sure to answer the question by saying, 'Why did I join the army?'" This sort of artificial prompt is unnecessary. In the edited video, if you think the question or response is unclear, include the audio of your voice asking the question. Some professional filmmakers, however, have a different approach, which might work well in some situations. Spike Lee, when taping Hurricane Katrina witnesses for his four-hour *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts* (2006), assembled several interviewees in one place. A reporter recounts, "On the set Mr. Lee asked all the questions from a typed list. ('You have to say the question in the answer,' he said to those he interviewed. 'Don't look at me, keep looking at the lenses.')"

Some subjects never loosen up no matter how good your listening skills. They don't want to talk, and they remain uncomfortable through what is for them a long and burdensome process. A documentary student whose father simply would not talk about his experiences after the partition of India in 1947, for example, realized it was impossible to record his full story. Perhaps this father, like some other survivors of traumatic events, did not want to discuss the violence that he witnessed or his personal feelings in general. On the other hand, sometimes people can be very different during a second visit, and you don't have to give up after one stiff and unproductive discussion. Simply asking, "Can I come again next week to find out some more about . . ." can lead to great insights.



Katharine Reynolds

In this shoot, one person interviewed the subject while another operated the camera.

## Recording Good Audio

Being an engaged listener helps you to notice and improve the recording conditions at a given documentary location so that you record audio cleanly, without extraneous and distracting sounds. Simply put, the technical side of recording audio is all about “shooting to edit.” Stay silent and listen while the subject is talking. Train yourself to avoid normal conversational flow and to stifle audible acknowledgements, such as “uh-huh” and “oh, really?” To respond to or encourage your subject, nod your head or smile. Laughter and conversational fillers (“sure,” “wow,” etc.) need to be silent. It is so difficult to edit when your voice is overlapping with the subject’s voice that it is worth the awkwardness of keeping absolutely quiet.

When you listen to a recording you’ve made, it should be mostly the other person’s voice, not yours, because it’s a documentary, not a chat with normal give-and-take. If you want to set up a tête-à-tête between you and your subject as part of the documentary, then position both of you in the frame. It might be necessary at such times to have another person operate the camera and ensure that the microphone records both voices.

It is much easier to edit when you have some silence on either side of a question and response. In addition, always record about thirty seconds of “room tone” to provide you with extra silent moments to match the ambient sound; this will allow for seamless editing. Every space, indoors or out, has its own audio character—“room tone” is simply the sound of the room with no one talking. You’ll use the matching room tone when editing so that we won’t hear a disconcerting audio emptiness if you cut out a cough or other audio glitch.

Imperfect audio is more of a problem than imperfect camera-work in a low-budget documentary. Training yourself to listen every time you turn on your camera will help you avoid common audio problems. A lot depends on being aware of the sounds in your chosen shooting location. What extraneous audio can be silenced before shooting? If you ask to silence a noisy refrigerator (a common source of location noise) by unplugging it, put your keys inside the refrigerator as a reminder to you to plug it back in when you leave. Politely ask to turn off a television or radio playing in the background before starting to record. The background sound will be chopped up during the editing process if you decide to rearrange or remove some of the footage. Furthermore, the material





Wear headphones to monitor sound when recording.

you inadvertently capture from a TV or radio might be under copyright protection and therefore can't be used in your documentary.

To hear what your camera is recording on location, always wear headphones plugged into the headphone jack of the device, if there is one. If you are using a DSLR camera to record video, you may want to use a separate audio recorder with your headphones plugged into its headphone jack. A small headphone set can work just as well as large professional ones to monitor the audio. The microphone can best record what is closest. If the camera is placed nearest to you when you talk to someone, your voice will be louder, and you can hear this through your headphones. To record the voice of your subject most clearly, use a clip-on microphone—and remember to turn it on. Your video will look more professional if you hide or cover the clip-on microphone cable. Note that not all cameras have a spot to plug in an external microphone. A microphone, whether built-in to the camera or external, will not discriminate between the sound you want, such as someone's voice, and sound you don't want, such as traffic noise out the window or people talking in the next room. If you listen with headphones, you can try to move the microphone closer to the subjects or adjust the sound in the location.

A common documentary audio problem is known as the “cocktail party effect.” When you are trying to record someone in a busy room, office, or restaurant, your microphone picks up all of the surrounding noise. Even if your ears can hear someone talking to you over the cocktail party, the microphone does not discriminate, but instead picks up all that surrounding conversational and ambient noise. Therefore, listen well and capture good audio on the first try, because “cocktail party” noise is next to impossible to fix in the editing room.

Another challenge to recording audio is a strong wind blowing across a microphone. The human ear can hear what people say in a stiff breeze, but many microphones can't. Try to monitor the sound with headphones so that you can anticipate the problem and move to a less windy place. Even thick windsocks on external microphones don't completely avoid the hissing and flapping sound of a microphone on a windy day.

Some external microphones are too sensitive for the camera's audio capabilities and bring in additional hum or hiss. Many cameras automatically even out sound, in effect amplifying a silent room to the point of hearing a hum, or reducing the sound in a

noisy place. For a very important shoot, consider hiring a professional sound recordist using equipment with audio meters to set sound levels precisely. Most inexpensive digital camcorders and cell phones don't include a meter to set audio levels.

Audio recording for a documentary means that you are constantly repressing your own human, conversational reactions to what is going on around you, and at the same time, monitoring the recording as you go with headphones. It takes practice to get good sound if you are a "one-person crew," but it can be done by positioning your microphone close to the source of the sound you want, and listening.

## **CHAPTER 3 FINDING THE STORY**

Why do you want to make a documentary video? For many of us, we want to communicate our passion for a story that needs to be told. You might come to a project already having insider access, or you might need time to develop the relationships and knowledge needed to make a documentary. Insider or not, you should try to make the documentary visually compelling to tell the story well. This chapter will discuss how narrowing down from the general to the specific—a tightly focused topic highlighting individuals within a larger group—improves visual storytelling.

At the start of a project, filmmakers often have a broad theme, such as "the environment" or "women in sports." Any documentary film, particularly those shot with camcorders, DSLRs, and cell phones, needs to have a narrower focus. The big idea, such as "documenting the African American community in North Carolina," might be worthy of a book or a very long film. But a ten-to-fifteen-minute video documentary topic works much better when its scope is brought down to a manageable, and watchable, size. In this example of portraying African American history in an entire state, the topic was distilled to "personal stories of the desegregation of one town's high school."

Going from the general to the specific also helps your documentary avoid the pitfalls of promotional pieces and home-movie subjects. For example, a documentary about a rock band's origins and rise can be truly new and inspiring, but it can seem like a marketing promotion if you try to cover every step of the band's career. Similarly, you can make home video subjects more meaningful for people outside your circle of acquaintance by going deeper than the very general themes characteristic of tribute dinners, retire-

ment parties, weddings, or your children's activities. In a video showing a quinceañera party, for example, observational footage of Mexican traditions influenced by American hip-hop, along with character studies of the honoree's family, added documentary value beyond the typical keepsake video.

You can successfully make low-budget documentaries about subjects who have specific avocations and passions, such as a passion for service. A documentary can be an effective tool for outreach and fundraising for many groups, such as clinics, shelters, and food co-ops, especially if you stick with showing individuals and their zeal, rather than general facts and figures.

### Suggestions for Narrowing in on the Story

Try documenting hobbyists and enthusiasts of various kinds who are willing to share fascinating details about their lives. For example, one documentary video portrayed a woman who modifies Barbie dolls, repainting their faces and immersing them in boiling water to remodel their poses. The subject's framing included elements of her day-to-day life so that we see her as a well-rounded personality, a wife, and mother who also loves to create new identities for dolls. Betty Hatch used a camcorder to capture delicate work on the dolls in a series of close-ups.

Passion is always fascinating on video because enthusiasm, shown at close range and respectfully, is so powerful. A documentary about off-the-grid hippie survivalists showed the group assembling a natural-materials house and espousing their environmentalist philosophy. Evangeline Weiss told their story by cross-cutting the step-by-step process of building the house with revealing observation of and statements from members of the group.

A visually varied domestic or artistic process lends itself to the closeness of this documentary approach. Try to show several angles, such as an artisan's face, surroundings, and hands. In a video about African American hair braiding, Alonzo Felder depicts his wife braiding their daughter's hair. Every step of the process is shown, including burning the ends of each braid. We not only follow the narrative of the hair from start to finish, but also the personalities of the two women in the video and the slice of life observed by the camera.

Artists, musical instrument makers, repairmen and carpenters, potters and blacksmiths, chefs, and choreographers are lively documentary video subjects. Acoustic music and vocal groups, rock bands, and many other kinds of musicians are also great subjects.



Betty Hatch



Evangeline Weiss



Alonzo Felder





Kelly Martin

Shoot in close proximity to your subjects. The filmmaker documented this string quartet by positioning the camera in the middle of the four players.

Shoot in close proximity at performances and events and document one song, one process, one item very deeply and thoroughly, rather than shooting broadly. A professional string quartet's rehearsals of a difficult passage of an avant-garde composition, for example, were documented in an effective way because the filmmaker positioned the camera in the middle of the four players.

Similarly, theater, dance, performance art, comedy, and other events can be excellent subjects for video documentaries, but the videographer must place him or herself close to the stage or performers. Avoid shooting from the "camcorder row" at the back of an auditorium; many parents film their child's ballet recitals and school plays from that unforgiving angle. Even if the camera is on a tripod, the quality is not as good as it would be if the videomaker were to move up and get close to the performers. Show individual faces rather than a group shot of all the performers. If you have access to a performance that is worth documenting, it might as well be shown to best advantage. Shoot from the wings off-stage or from the front row (the sides of the front row can work just as well as front row center), and utilize dress rehearsals for capturing reactions, interactions, or costumes up close. At the actual performance, be sure to record the audience and their reactions as well.

Video documentarians show church services, choir performances, and other religious events meaningfully, as well as non-religious community gatherings of all kinds. In contrast to these sorts of videos with movement, music, and dynamic cinematic interest, a documentary about a professor's lecture or a computer programmer at work is usually not going to be as visually engaging. Abstract concepts shown by on-screen text, voice-over narration, or footage of speakers at a podium are always weaker on screen than activity and characters.

A video showing very quiet and repetitive work, such as beading or sewing, needs more about the artisan's character and less about process because the process alone may have trouble holding our attention. Instructional videos, showing the steps in cooking a meal or a progression of yoga poses, for example, can be brought to life by moving nearer to your subjects, shooting cutaways of details and close-ups, and showing the fronts of people rather than their backs.

It takes patience to find an engaging way to capture a motionless scene even when you know the people and setting well. For example, for a class assignment "to shoot footage of people going about their business," one student videotaped three waitresses folding napkins before their shift started. The waitresses quickly



forgot about the camera because the filmmaker was also a waitress at the same restaurant. The napkin folding sequence delighted the audience because the three young women reeled off stories about groping bosses, drunken customers, and crazed co-workers. Video can also capture the unexpected drama between two people, such as doctor-patient, teacher-student, parent-child, salesman-customer interactions. For a big group, such as many guests at a dinner table, try recording individuals and small groups to document the conversation's flow and energy, rather than a distant shot of the entire table.

Most meetings and conventions make for monotonous documentary footage and are sometimes best used to briefly indicate that a certain meeting did occur. Acoustic muddiness in conference rooms and offices make it hard to record audio there. A documentary about the runaway hubris of an affluent suburban homeowners' association avoided these sorts of meetings entirely and used audio interviews supplemented by photographs, fliers, documents, and other paper ephemera to provide abundant visual appeal. By narrowing down the subject and providing interesting visuals, the film succeeded in enlivening what could have been yawn-inducing. On the other hand, conflict and disagreement, such as at courtroom trials, are high-energy on camera, especially if you show faces and expressions.

Sometimes, a quiet moment or intimate conversation without visual pizzazz can be emotionally powerful. A subject in a student video, for example, sat on a lawn chair in her backyard, speaking about her wild youth in Key West, Florida: the drugs, the parties, the eccentrics. She paused for a moment and then said, "All of those people are dead now. They all died of AIDS." Her matter-of-factness and on-camera presence are deeply moving, but the camcorder was motionless and zoom-free throughout.

Would you like to make a documentary about yourself? Many low-budget documentary makers find opportunities exploring autobiographical topics. Personal documentaries such as *Sherman's March*, *My Architect*, and *Tarnation* have moved us, but not all personal documentaries succeed. Making an autobiographical documentary video allows you to understand yourself better, gain sympathy, or even settle old scores, but you may not have the distance to make an effective film that appeals to people who don't know you. Documentaries that grow out of the "And so I went back . . ." storyline, such as returning to the small town where something

horrible or abusive happened in the past, need a focused and character-driven story to engage us. Nevertheless, by addressing recent history through a personal filter, the digital documentary can move and educate people. After all, you know your own story best, and a visual approach offers a unique way to communicate that story.

What about edgier subjects, with unattractive characters? Keep in mind that showing inebriated people or street kids sniffing glue is not valuable documentation, nor is showing anyone at their worst. A trickier issue arises when a filmmaker chooses to do a documentary about someone who is truly reprehensible all the time, not just when angry or incoherent. “I’m going to interview members of the KKK and show how evil they are” is one such notion. Giving airtime to bigots of all kinds can be problematic, especially when your subject succeeds in using you for promotion—even negative coverage is still coverage. Thus, when you do decide to depict the worst of humanity, be sure that they aren’t exploiting your project for their ends. One example of the context and analysis needed in this kind of documentary is *Milosevic on Trial*, by Michael Christoffersen, which shows the War Crimes Tribunal in The Hague. Slobodan Milosevic and his henchmen are shown speaking for themselves, as are their Serb supporters, but the portrayal also suggests the scope and magnitude of their crimes and capacity for evil.

Your documentary can either be about a subject you know well or a subject that brings you to new territory and exciting discoveries, but keep in mind that the camera loves fascinating people who have a certain gregariousness or rapport with the audience. Not everyone is a good subject. Natural performers whose personalities somehow penetrate through the screen can seemingly establish relationships with us and make us care about them. You’ll learn to rely on these charismatic participants as you narrow down from the general to the specific in telling a documentary story.

## CHAPTER 4 **TELLING SOMEONE ELSE’S STORY**

The New Deal-era photographers of 1930s America took pictures of poor tenant farmers and refugees fleeing the Dust Bowl. Do the photographs, now in a publicly available archive at the Library of Congress, show vulnerable people at their most desperate, or do they depict hard times without condescension? These photographs had an impact on opinion and policy. Now, years after their





Representing others respectfully has been a recurring question in documentary work.

immediate impact, images such as “Ditched, Stalled, and Stranded” by Dorothea Lange remain valuable as aesthetic objects and useful documents of American history.

A photograph like Dorothea Lange’s, or a film that shows conflict or poverty, generates questions about how the people pictured feel about how they are portrayed. The people in documentary photographs and videos don’t have much say in how their images are used. Documentary artists are the ones who have this control, by choosing images twice: once during shooting and then again during editing. The documentarian depicts individuals and communities; his subjective interpretation straddles the line between art and objective description. This control over whom the camera is pointed at—and what gets cut during editing—is what this chapter is about.

## The Ethics of Documenting Others

All documentary films that demonstrate ethical depiction of their subjects and convey long-lasting meaning share three attributes: a significant investment of time in the project, a departure from preconceived conclusions and stereotypes, and choosing actuality over staged manipulation. These essential attributes create a workable approach to documenting others. Make your documentary with ample time, openness to the results, and transparent realness. When we watch such a film, we’re moved by the humanity of the characters and the power of their stories.

### Time

Effective documentary filmmaking always takes time for research, shooting, and editing. If you’re on a short schedule, then it’s probably best to stick with people you already know, so that less time is spent building relationships. One way or another, the filmmaker needs to know the lay of the land in the community to be documented. Spending time before, during, and after shooting differentiates documentary work from the “just passing through” recording done by TV reporters and tourists. One example that clearly differentiates the documentary approach from other video genres is the 1973 public television documentary, *An American Family*.

The *American Family* filmmakers spent seven months with the Louds, a family in Santa Barbara, filming events as they occurred. Producer Craig Gilbert recalled the time-consuming nature of the process: “. . . on a normal day the crew (Alan and Susan Raymond and an assistant) would arrive at the Loud home at about eight in

the morning and would leave at about ten at night.” Often, as this series shows, the distancing and formalizing effect of the crew and equipment may be a concern at the beginning of such a project, but the more the filming goes on, the less people “act” for the camera.

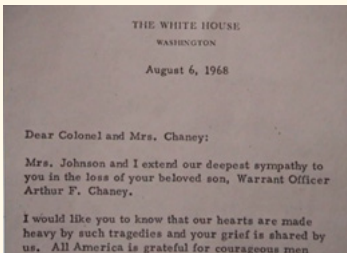
Later, the filmmakers edited 300 hours of footage into twelve one-hour episodes, with the emphasis on attempting to render the family accurately and fairly. “Our job was to put this film record together in such a way that it would not violate the characters of the individuals, the lives they led, or the events they participated in. To put it simply . . . I was asking the editors to let the material speak for itself,” said Gilbert. Because the filmmakers spent a generous amount of time with the Louds, the editors of *An American Family* were able to draw from a rich variety of visuals to tell the family’s story.

*An American Family* is an extreme example; not all documentaries need to take so many months or result in so much raw footage. Another example, on a smaller scale, also shows the value of the documentary method. In *Searching*, Vivian Bowman Edwards documents her husband’s memories of a friend whose helicopter was shot down during the Vietnam War. *Searching* draws on the “regret to inform” letters from the various levels of the U.S. military up to President Lyndon Johnson to make a larger point about the impact of an individual soldier’s death. Bowman Edwards displays the texts of these letters without additional commentary or music, rendering the stark words more powerful. Bowman Edwards’s familiarity with her husband’s research into his friend’s death resonates in the thirteen-minute completed piece.

### Openness to Possibilities

Another attribute of ethical documentation is avoiding preconceptions that can limit what the piece is going to be about. For example, writing a script before shooting may lead to an interview with questions and answers that fit a pre-fabricated and predictable story. For a more compelling and truthful portrayal, observe the characters and allow the story to develop in the words and actions of the people in the film. Minimize scripted narration that is simply a disembodied voice of authority telling us what to think. We may be skeptical of a narrator who sets us up to regard the subjects a certain way: an enthusiastic “chamber of commerce” voice, a humorous narrator of something eccentric or cute, or a stern speaker on the subject of poverty or disability.

However, a well-scripted voice can be welcome as an efficient



*Searching* by Vivian Bowman Edwards is especially powerful because of the filmmaker’s deep familiarity with her husband’s memories of war.

way to propel the storyline in many documentaries, on subjects ranging from political issues to faraway cultures. Writing a narration is no substitute for finding relevant people who participate in the film and whose voices provide needed context and commentary, but there shouldn't be any strict rule against all narration in a low-budget documentary. It's better for the viewer, and for your story's flow, to have a few words of narration rather than awkwardly patching together visuals and talking heads to make the same point.

Depicting the exotic, the disappearing, and other cultures in general works best if people in a given culture or community speak for themselves. Shortening the amount of scripted narration invariably leads to a more valid, lively, and visually interesting portrait. When actual community members give voice to their experiences and perceptions, we have more of an opportunity to become engaged in their story. This is true even if a speaker of another language needs subtitles, which are superior to audio dubbing that was typical in the condescending educational documentaries of the past. Many people who watch documentary videos are interested in hearing actual voices and expressions, and they are comfortable reading subtitles. CDS student Rocío Callejas Angeles filmed her father singing traditional Mexican songs and asked him how he learned to play. Later, their conversation and his song lyrics were translated into English and subtitles were added to her edited video—easy to do in most computer editing programs—so it could reach both an English-speaking and Spanish-speaking audience. The humor, rhythm, and expressiveness of the spoken Spanish are retained, and the translation allows English language speakers to appreciate the father's character and musicianship.

Breaking from preconceptions has other benefits. The small size and ease-of-use of digital equipment encourages candid observational footage and improvising freely according to the field situation at hand. Allowing events to unfold brings both gravitas and watchability to many types of non-fiction videos, such as advocacy films, which investigate important contemporary issues or problems. We respond and learn from observing real people in real situations rather than from a staged scene, and we are persuaded by common sense, decency, and understatement. Personal attack, for example, can be alienating, as can a lapse in ethical behavior and common courtesy. Don't choose a subject such as polarizing cultural practices or religious views if you plan to produce a piece that is preconceived or polemical.

Rocío Callejas Angeles



To retain a subject's original language and lend authenticity to your video, use subtitles rather than audio dubbing for translations.

## Transparent Realness

The last key attribute of documentary filmmaking is choosing actuality over manipulation. Documentary filmmakers sometimes interfere with and change the scene being shot. Be mindful of the pitfalls of re-created sequences with actors, studio lighting, and other fiction film conventions. An edited documentary film is already manipulated; for many of us, staged dramatization, however beautifully shot, leads to an additional loss of credibility.

In crafting a documentary story, there will always be subtle variations in the degree of staging or amount of intervention, both on location and during editing. Instead of following a set of doctrinaire rules, filmmakers must decide what constitutes credibility on a case-by-case basis. For example, if the subject of a documentary is a performer, and there is practically no one in attendance, is it fair to make the audience look larger and more enthusiastic than it really is? Sometimes a cut or pan to the tiny audience is more interesting anyway.

Although what you shoot should not be staged, the taping and editing choices you make can accomplish what you want to convey. For example, student Maria Hernandez filmed her son's middle school graduation. As cameraperson and editor, Hernandez shows each element of the graduation day: her son getting dressed, the family driving to the school, the speeches, diplomas, cheers, a party, and the drive home. The footage also includes a long take of her son chatting with a teacher. Hernandez uses only the parts where her son and his teacher are smiling and animated, rather than the footage where they appear expressionless. This choice emphasizes on screen that both the son and teacher are likeable and attractive. The same editing decision arises with speech, where it is possible during a voice-over to edit out verbal hesitations and mistakes. It is a fine line as to what is appropriate intervention. Some filmmakers want to smooth out the audio by taking out multiple "you knows" and "ums." Too much artificial cleaning up of "bad" grammar implies your value judgment about the speaker's lack of education, for example, and perhaps change our perception of the character. Carefully thought-out editing is part of important ethical choices of documentary. The filmmaker has the power to make someone look stupid, evil, or silly in the editing process. He or she can willfully distort or sugarcoat the person's words to bend the viewer's opinions. The higher road is for the filmmaker to include what is honest and complex.

Depicting people honestly also leads to careful choices of soundtrack music. Inappropriate music can lead to a wrongful understanding of the people and community in the film. Soundtrack

music can often be emotionally manipulative, culturally incorrect, or simply stuck into the film in an attempt to beef it up. It is more honest to use the music that the subjects depicted in the film really listen to. For example, world music can cause more problems than it solves; Peruvian highland flutes may not be suitable in a film about organic farming in the Midwest—unless the farmers themselves are the ones listening to it. Documentaries on serious issues or terrible human atrocities also have their own stereotypical soundtracks, usually an ominous low “thrum” in a minor key, which has become a cliché in its own right.

## Obtaining Permissions

Finally, in addition to investing time, avoiding preconceived notions, and choosing actuality over staged manipulation, it is important for documentary filmmakers to explain their intent at the start of a project and to obtain informed consent in writing. Shooting without permission undermines a film’s documentary value. Tourists with cameras typically don’t ask for consent, instead recording homeless people from a distance, exotic locals at the open-air market, or other curiosities to take home as a visual souvenir; home-video enthusiasts similarly may wander around shooting without signed releases from family or friends.

When you take control of someone’s image, voice, and likeness by using them in a video, you have to get his or her permission, regardless of the film’s length, your goals for it, or the audience you want to reach. Film festivals and exhibitors universally insist that your production must have the proper releases, or they won’t accept or present them. I think that the same scrupulous attention to permissions is as important for personal, small-scale documentaries as for more ambitious projects geared to a wide audience. By asking for a release form ([see sample at end of the chapter](#)) to be signed, the filmmaker indicates that he or she has a serious intention. Filmmakers should let people know up front that they will need subjects to sign release forms so it isn’t a surprise when it’s time to shoot footage. A documentary video release form should cover a variety of outcomes. Your film may eventually be shown to a live audience, played on television, streamed on the Web, or used in formats that have not been invented yet, and so the release form should allow for any type of exhibition or presentation. For a particularly complex or ambitious project, you may want to check with a lawyer to tailor your release form language.

You should print out two hard copies of the release form for





Although signed release forms are not required, be sure to demonstrate sensitivity when recording crowds in public spaces.

each of your subjects, using your own letterhead (or put your name, address, and contact information at the top). You and your subject sign both copies; you keep one copy in a safe place. I suggest that you staple a description of your project to the copy that the subject keeps. I always hand out a one-page synopsis of my project with my contact information and encourage people to let me know if they would like to know more about the project. Be aware that the parent or guardian must sign the release form of children under the age of eighteen. I like to include language for minors on my standard release form; you might not use it, but it is there when you need it.

A signed release form also provides you with important and accurate information, such as correct spelling of names and an address and phone number. It is important to know the last names of the people in your video. Many documentary films identify people experiencing war, natural disaster, or poverty by their first names only—or worse, do not identify them at all—while experts and affluent people are shown with full names and titles. Farm workers, the homeless, drug addicts, prisoners, and refugees deserve to have a full name just like your other subjects, unless they ask that their name not be included. If you use pseudonyms, put a note at the beginning of the film indicating that names have been changed to protect your subjects' privacy.

What about a parade, a sports event, or a performance? The people fleetingly depicted in your video shot in a public place do not need to give their signed consent. However, good documentary practice means making sure that people see you and understand that you are shooting video. Cameras are so ubiquitous that most people accept them. Some bystanders intentionally get out of the way or signal that they do not want to be shown. Respect their wishes and be sure not to point the camera at that person. In a bar, store, or other non-public setting, such as a privately owned piece of land, the filmmaker needs to ask the owner's permission as well as that of the performer or subject. It can be more difficult to get a sense of permission in public places in a foreign country or region in your own country that you are not familiar with, and it is better to be careful and restrained if you are not sure of the situation. A local person's help can be invaluable.

There are three types of hindrances in dealing with release forms. First, big or bureaucratic entities, such as corporations, malls, and concert arenas, are often uncooperative with independent filmmakers. It is also difficult to get permission from su-



permarkets and other retail chains and it may be simpler to find another location. In the case of exposing reprehensible corporate behavior, such as dangerous equipment in a factory, child labor, the repackaging of expired groceries, or the dumping of industrial toxic waste, a witness with a camera is put in a dilemma. There are ways to get permission through negotiation and it is rarely a good idea to base a documentary film on infiltration and stealth.

A second kind of hindrance to getting permission is a denial from an individual. Participants may be shy at first but may be willing to be filmed later, after they have a chance to see what you are doing while you continue to treat them respectfully. Before recording members of a small fundamentalist congregation in Eastern North Carolina, I attended several Sunday services at their church. I was not motivated solely by a video project but also by genuine interest in the worship traditions and music in that community. Once people got to know me and began to understand that I was doing a project on visionary narratives for a religion and culture class, they asked to be included. If you discover that your primary subject is simply unwilling to participate, then you should stop the work.

A third hindrance is internal—and very human: the documentary filmmaker's own discomfort with asking people to sign release forms. It's understandable to have mixed feelings about making a film about other people's lives, and to be sensitive to the inherent invasiveness of documenting, but don't let these feelings paralyze you and prevent worthwhile work. Most subjects enjoy and appreciate being listened to and documented.

The only exception to shooting without permission would be certain activist films employing hidden cameras by necessity. Such clandestine shooting can expose a wrong, such as recording dire conditions in North Korea or exposing violent repression against nonviolent protesters in Burma. In *Burma VJ* by Anders Østergaard, the immediacy of the footage attests to the dangerous conditions facing the undercover reporters who used camcorders to document monks marching on the streets.

Take time, avoid preconceptions, steer clear of manipulation or staging, and obtain permissions. These are the key elements in depicting people. Ultimately, representing individuals and their situations in a documentary isn't abstract or generated by rules, and the film's viewers will be the best judges. Both the documentary subjects and the wider general audience are arbiters of what is an inappropriate or sensationalistic stereotype and what captures the enduring message of the person or situation.



From *Burma VJ* by Anders Østergaard.

## SAMPLE RELEASE FORM

I hereby give permission to [name of producer] to use my image, voice, words, and/or performance in all forms and media for the documentary project, [working title of your production]. I understand that he/she may edit, reproduce and exhibit the project.

Print Full Name:

Address:

Signature:

Date:

*Addition for Minors:*

I am the parent and/or guardian of the minor named above. I give my permission for his/her participation and agree with the terms in this release form.

Print Parent/Guardian's Full Name:

Signature:

Date:

Print Producer's Name, Address, and Phone number:

Signature:

Date:

## CHAPTER 5 **FINISHING AND SHARING THE STORY**

Low-budget documentary shorts don't need a lot of complicated editing. Full-length documentaries often emulate the three-act story structure of fiction films. But all that is needed for a short digital documentary is a clear vision of what the story of your film is really about. Always try to narrow down to the material that bears on the story at hand. For a workable structure, arrange your footage so that there is a definite beginning, middle, and end—but there is tremendous leeway within these concepts. The documentary value of your piece depends more on organizing and narrowing down your options than on complex narrative structures. This chapter discusses the steps in transforming raw footage into a watchable video that others will enjoy and talk about.

### **Organizing Footage**

I ask students to know exactly what they have recorded and where to find it. Get to know your footage by using the logging feature in your editing program. Raw footage on the tape or digital file is a series of shots. For the purposes of logging documentary footage, a shot can be defined as each time the camera angle is changed, or each time the camera is turned on and off, or each time the action changes if the camera is motionless. Logging is a way to keep a running list of each shot, including a brief description of the content of the shot and where it can be found on the recording. Digital video has a time code number for every frame, so it is easy to keep track of all your shots. The best time to log your material is on the same day that you shoot the footage.

You will lose track of your footage unless you label systematically. Each tape or file gets labeled with its own number, so that every frame of footage that you shoot can be available when you need it. Perhaps start with the year and then number each tape or file in sequence (2006:1, 2006:2, 2006:3, etc.), or group by subject (Grandma:1, Grandma:2, etc.).

In taking the time to log and label your footage, you grow familiar with the material you've shot, and you will find yourself better able to judge which parts of the footage are relevant to the story. Take note of the shots that you think are good and should be used. These shots jump out during logging—there's no great mystery to finding the best material. Your response to visually striking, humorous, or otherwise useful moments stays consistent even after several viewings. You'll begin to see what is simply unhelpful to

your documentary, such as extensive historical information, eccentric traits of minor characters, or beautifully shot scenes that are not relevant to the story.

### **Selecting, Capturing, and Sequencing Footage**

The editing stage begins by selecting scenes that you'd like to use in the final piece. List the best shots for telling your story and begin to arrange the shots in order, with a beginning, middle, and end. It is also helpful to note which shots would be used for cutaways, to establish location, or to otherwise advance the story. Perhaps there are parts of your subject's conversation that would be pieced together, or elements of a performance or event that are most compelling. Find the shots that let a mystery unfold, even if it's primarily a visual one. Allow the audience to wonder what someone is doing, and give them the fun of finding out for themselves. Look for an opening that can grab our interest, such as a defining moment in a subject's recollections. Perhaps you have an establishing shot showing a city skyline or a distant landscape, but consider whether an interesting or unexpected close-up is a better way to bring us into the story. Find elements in your footage that are in chronological order, such as the steps of a process or the history of an event, and intercut them to help drive the story along. Perhaps add a flashback or foreshadowing to this chronology. Begin to decide which shots would work well as the audio or visual "last word" to end the film.

The next step is to capture this selected footage to a computer. Place the footage onto an external hard drive, rather than onto the computer itself. Each computer editing program has a slightly different method for importing footage. Follow your software's suggestions about backing up your data in case something goes wrong. Whichever software you use, it is helpful to import a few seconds of extra footage before and after the shot you have selected. Capture the room tone recorded at your locations so it is handy when you need it.

Once your footage is captured, you can bring shots (the editing software might call them "clips") into a sequence along your editing program's timeline. Computer editing programs have many features and options. The results range from simple assembly of shots in the order you want them to the full barrage of editing program features. You can position speech, process sequences, performance footage, and observational scenes. You can do cutaways and voice-overs, slow motion and other effects, and add music or

sound effects. Audio levels and audio glitches can be improved. All the time you spent in the field getting clean audio, putting the microphone close to your subject, and taking the time to get a variety of shots of your subject from different angles will be rewarded here. Most importantly, you can constantly review the piece as a whole to make sure you are staying with the story you want to tell by paying attention to the following:

### **Characters**

A documentary with many characters can work well, but introducing new ones takes the focus away from the story. Make sure each character is relevant to what you are trying to say rather than just an interesting digression. Soft-spoken, non-charismatic people are more difficult to build a story around, but you can compensate by cutting to scenes with visual interest.

### **Interviews**

You have an opportunity to be creative in using your subject's words for storytelling and character development. Some narratives look best uninterrupted, some have a few or many cutaways, and sometimes, the audio is almost entirely an accompaniment to visual images and action sequences—the “talking head” is only shown briefly for context.

We like stories, “Well, once I . . .” rather more than description: “Our after-school program provides at-risk students with . . .” Stories and personal accounts are more evocative than statements of fact. A character might say, for example, “When I grew up in Milan, it was so polluted that my collar turned black every day,” which provides information about the environment and also imparts a concrete image of its own. It is a better piece of audio than someone saying, “Milan was polluted in the 1960s and '70s.”

### **Activity**

Showing people doing things, performing, interacting, or making something is not only easy to shoot, but also helpful footage to have in editing. We tire of watching talking heads, no matter how gripping their words. As long as the activity doesn't look like it was artificially set up, use as much of this kind of material as you can. Potter Sid Luck and quilters Jereann King and Portia Hawes spoke and worked in videos produced by the North Carolina Arts Council.

In a documentary about the design of everyday objects, filmmaker Gary Hustwit recorded designers in a brainstorming meet-





In addition to interviews, be sure to capture footage of subjects performing, interacting, or working to add visual interest. (Community Folklife Documentary Institute, North Carolina Arts Council)



Close-ups of objects or notes can also help narrate your story. From *Objectified* by Gary Hustwit.

ing. To add to the observational footage of people coming up with ideas, Hustwit shot their notes.

## Humor

Many documentaries are bleak because reality may indeed seem bleak. But we respond to and appreciate hopeful notes and humor, both visual and verbal. Commercially successful documentaries such as *Super Size Me* by Morgan Spurlock and the films of Michael Moore do a great job of engaging us with humor. Although your documentary may not be on the same scale, always look for the engaging visual juxtaposition, the wry moment of a conversation, or other opportunities to find humor in your material when you are editing. Limit funny sounds, repetition, and effects, and avoid cheap humor based on putting down the people in the video. It is easy to generate a one-time laugh, but be careful of your intentions and respect the audience and subjects.

## Putting It All Together: A Review of Documentary Elements of Editing

In editing your video together, consider the use of the following practices and techniques: observational footage, transitions, narration, music, text, home movies and historical moving images, and photographs and other still images.

### Observational footage

Observational sequences have made many good documentaries into great ones, but it should disclose character, push along the narrative, or otherwise be relevant to the film. Long scenes of travel, daily routine, and meals work best if you relate them to character development, interpersonal dynamics, or storyline.

### Transitions

Straight cuts, simply shifting from one scene to the next, work well for video documentaries. An occasional fade-to-black (where the scene's visual gradually darkens to black) or fade-up (the reverse) makes a big impact if used judiciously, but avoid the busy graphics and transitions that computer editing programs provide. Straight cuts also keep the pacing faster. A series of ponderous fades-to-black in the second half of your piece makes us think the film has ended, over and over. We may sigh when it fades up and gets going again.

## Narration

Narration is something you might wish to add at the end of the editing process in places where the narrative is unclear. Surprisingly few words can help us to get directly at the most important or dramatic themes of your video. Some projects, such as a personal documentary, are built around first person narration.

## Music

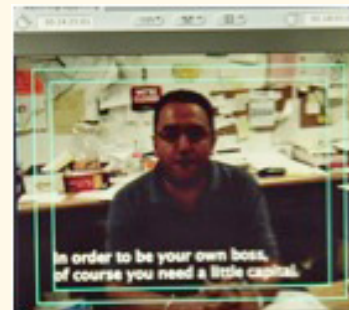
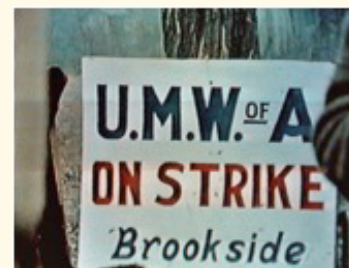
If your subjects listen to or perform music, it can add subtle commentary and emphasis to enrich your video enormously. In contrast, music that is marketed as movie soundtrack music often won't fit with your characters. Try to find local musicians who may be able to create original music for your film.

Music is not a “filler” for documentaries. Critic Adam Mars-Jones writes, “There are things that only silence can express. Music best retains its power by being rationed. When music is everywhere in a film, audiences feel less rather than more.”

## Text

We will understand the context of your documentary more readily if you name the people in the video; editing programs have a simple way to superimpose text at the bottom of the frame. But try to show rather than tell when it comes to adding explanatory, back story, or advocacy text. In Barbara Kopple's *Harlan County, USA*, about coal mining in Kentucky, typed text was infrequent because the filmmakers documented signs and other information during the shoot.

Sometimes, explanatory text is absolutely needed to move the story along and to keep us from getting lost. Just keep the number of words to a minimum: we are watching a movie, not reading a book. Make sure every word and name is spelled correctly. Subtitles offer translation for foreign language speakers or intelligibility for hard-to-hear subjects and are added near the end of the editing process. Check your translations for subtitles with a native speaker. Whenever you place text in the video, be sure that it is in a readable font such as Lucida and avoid placing white subtitles over white or light areas in the picture. Put the words within the “TV-safe” lines indicated in editing programs so that the edges of your text don't get cut off when played back on a different screen.



Try to show rather than tell when adding explanatory text, but if subtitles are necessary, be sure to place text within the “TV-safe” lines indicated by your editing program. From *Harlan County U.S.A.* by Barbara Kopple (top); and by Antonia Monroy (bottom).



Documents, letters, and pictures add visual interest. Courtesy of the collection of Louise Moore (top); and from *Football Under Cover* by David Assman and Ayat Najafi (bottom).

## Photographs and Other Still Images

Use documents, letters, and pictures to add visual interest by cutting away from a talking head.

Added visuals need to be on-screen long enough for us to really absorb them. Be aware that using editing software to establish a freeze-frame can sometimes make a photograph appear shaky when seen on a TV screen, although it looks acceptable on the computer monitor.

## Super-8 and Other Historical Moving Images

Old footage always adds an extra layer of thematic interest, visual variety, and historical depth. It's worth looking for and transferring cleanly. A good resource is the Prelinger Archive, which collects period historical, educational, and ephemera films. Beware of using false historical footage, such as street scenes of the 1940s when footage from the 1920s is called for. Inaccurate clothing, cars, and other clues undermine the scene's veracity and put the rest of your video into doubt.

## Screening Your Video

How does your completed video get seen by a broader audience? Showing your work is the happy result of all the effort involved in making a documentary video. It's an incentive to finish your work in a timely way, and not to let your project take years and years. There is nothing sweeter than hearing an audience respond to the characters, to laugh, cheer, or be moved by what you have produced. Start by screening the film, even in a rough form, for the community it depicts and for your own family and friends. These screenings for friendly viewers help to prevent factual errors and ensure watchability. Ask people specific questions after they watch the video and be sure to really listen to their comments before you go to a wider public.

The audience is always right and will respond truthfully, such as being restless during a boring sequence, even if they know you. Viewers similarly can't hide being absorbed by something fascinating. As you learn to listen to an audience you develop competence in critiquing your shooting and editing, and your work will improve thereby. You learn to be on the side of the audience and to be able to cut out what doesn't move the video along, even when you love your own footage.

Some low-budget documentaries triumphantly find a much broader audience, and a distribution strategy might involve uploading some or all of the video to a website and submitting to film

festivals, both of which you can do from home. More extensive distribution, such as on television and in movie theaters, is much more time-consuming and uncertain. Find a professional to help you navigate big time distribution, and start planning your next project. Everyone, from reporters to producers, will ask what you are working on, and you should have an answer ready.

### **And for Your Next Video . . .**

Making your first documentary is a real accomplishment, and you'll probably crave the chance to make another. Seek out courses in videography, find other people who are interested in making and screening documentaries, attend documentary film festivals, and above all, keep shooting.

## APPENDIX LINKS AND RESOURCES

### Websites

*Documentary Starts Here* blog with additional examples and discussion:

<http://documentarystartshere.blogspot.com>

Appalshop: Media arts center in Whitesburg, Kentucky:

<http://appalshop.org/>

Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University:

<http://www.documentarystudies.duke.edu>

East Austin Stories: Short documentary videos from the University of Texas, Austin:

<http://www.eastaustinstories.org/>

Folkstreams: A wealth of documentary films and videos on folklife subjects are streamed from this site, which also has extensive notes, transcripts, and other information.

<http://www.folkstreams.net/>

*Get the Money and Shoot: The DRI Guide to Funding Documentary Films*: This downloadable pdf includes ample information on writing grant applications and advice on working with funders.

<http://csac.buffalo.edu/gtms.html>

Scribe Video Center, Philadelphia:

<http://scribe.org/>

Southern Oral History Program at University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill: Includes useful “how-to’s” on doing oral history.

<http://www.sohp.org/content/resources/>

Witness: Fostering documentaries on human rights. Downloadable chapters from the training guide, *Video For Change*:

<http://www.witness.org/>



## Books

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nancy Kalow is a folklorist and filmmaker who began teaching at the Center for Documentary Studies in 2000. Several of her video documentaries are online, including *Sadobabies*, winner of a Gold Hugo at the Chicago Film Festival and the Special Jury Trophy at the San Francisco Film Festival, and *The Losers Club*. She has been co-chair of the Selection Committee of the Full Frame Documentary Film Festival since 2003.

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