SCRIPTING A DOCUMENTARY

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A large part of the fascination of doing documentary is this: What happens in the real world can be far more interesting - and often more exciting and astonishing - than anything that could be made up by a scriptwriter. The modern documentary quite often will run from beginning to end without a word of narration or dialogue and without anyone acting out a written scenario.

Which means that unless the screenwriter is a hyphenated producer-writer or director-writer—his or her role in a documentary production often ranges from ambiguous to nonexistent. One reason is that under the best of circumstances, cameras and word processors don't always coexist peacefully. Good writing is the skillful use of words to create images in the mind. While a good documentary film comes from the skillful use of all the tools of production to create images on a screen.

So what does a screenwriter do in documentary?

The answer depends on the kind of documentary. If it's a historical documentary, a biography, or a reenactment of some event, and if there is no existing footage to use, the writer's work will be very similar to writing a feature film. The writer must gather and organize the information and then write a screenplay containing a well-structured series of scenes, which can be created on film or video. If archival footage exists, then reviewing it becomes part of the research process.

On the other hand, if the production is a spontaneous documentary of some kind of behavior or of a unique event with the end in doubt, there may never be a script in the sense of a screenplay because no one knows ahead of time exactly what is going to happen. In writing a spontaneous documentary the emphasis is on organization and visualization, not on writing narration or dialogue. This might be called the art of writing without words.

It is also unfortunately true with a spontaneous documentary that the writer may not be brought into the production until the last minute. After all the footage has been shot and edited, the director shows the cut to the writer and indicates what needs to be written for narration, in which case, the writer is nothing more than a translator, turning the director's notes into a narration script.

Or, as has happened to me more than once, the writer is brought in after shooting and before editing to organize the footage into a coherent entity.

THE WRITER'S GIFTS TO THE PRODUCTION

When the writer's involvement is limited to doing a polished draft of the words to be said, the production uses less than a fourth of the talent a screenwriter potentially brings to a documentary. These are the things that documentary scriptwriters do:
1. Research and planning.
2. Organizing a structure for the documentary.
3. Visualization.
4. Writing the words that are said.

Yes, the writer may also be used to write proposals for funding, grant requests, and other business matters. But these are not properly scriptwriting concerns.

RESEARCH AND PLANNING

Unfortunately, many people think that because they are making a film about actual events, the truth will jump inside their cameras and will almost automatically reveal itself on the screen to their audience.

This is nonsense.

Good images don't just happen. You have to plan for them. And you have to be ready to recognize them—and even more important - ready to record them on film or tape when they do occur. Then you have to select and organize them to present a visual argument to an audience.

What will eventually be shown to the audience is an extremely high level abstraction from the original event. Among all the possible things happening at any moment, only a tiny fraction can be recorded. And then, from all the footage and sound recorded, only a small amount is edited into the final version of the film.

Making a documentary is an exercise in model building, creating an analog of some event. And the scriptwriter is the architect. Which is why, if a writer is to be used at all, it's important that he or she come into the process as early as possible.

This is a story about scripting a documentary of a unique event, which I tell in my book, Video Scriptwriting: How to Write for the $4 Billion Commercial Video Market.

A chain of restaurants had opened several new locations and had added some new items to their menu. They decided to make a "day" out of officially opening (or reopening) the restaurants, having them blessed by a minister—which is a tradition in Hawaii—and having live music, balloons, prizes, and freebies at each of the five locations. Members of the executive staff traveled from location to location accompanied by a Dixieland band and my client's video crew. Customers were encouraged to visit all five stores that day and get a special "passport" stamped to win a prize.

I got a call from a good friend, also a producer-director, who said his company had shot a lot of video of this event. He told me that the public relations firm that handled the restaurants was originally going to write the script, but now they wanted him to bring in a writer. (I found out why the PR firm passed on the script as soon as I got a look at the footage.)

In spite of the fact there were two cameras in operation all the time, and the same procedure was gone through at each of five restaurants, the footage was woefully
incomplete. It didn't contain a complete sequence of a blessing, a complete statement of the purpose of the event by management, or a complete song by the Dixieland band. What it seemed to do was make the same set of mistakes five times. In essence I had to do the script research after the video was shot. These are excerpts from a letter I sent to my client about the footage:

• There are no shots whatsoever of the special passports (500 to be given out at each restaurant). No shots of anyone receiving a passport. No shots of anyone explaining the passport. No shots of a passport getting stamped at a store.

• Although six different radio stations participated, there is only limited footage of two radio DJs, and no radio broadcast audio.

• There is only one shot of a drawing for a door prize (which is also one of the two shots of the DJs).

• Too much camera time is spent on people from the PR firm riding the bus.

• No close-up of an employee wearing the Celebration Day button.

• I don't see in the footage any evidence that "each restaurant will be decorated professionally" as indicated in the "Game Plan."

• There is. . . no systematic coverage of the new menu items. There is one shot of the menu, close-up of the word NEW, and no return to what is NEW.

• There is no complete coverage—establishing shot, MS, CU while the sound continues—of the Country and Western band at Westridge Shopping Center or the Hawaiian music group at Windward City Shopping Center.

• No footage of the 20 x 30 posters announcing Celebration Day.

• We have no interviews or statements from (company execs) such as:

  "This is an important marketing test for use on the mainland."  "We're introducing a new image, brighter more complete restaurants, rather than take-out places, and a new menu."  "This is going to be great for business."

I want to stress that these were not a bunch of rank amateurs who had gone out with their camcorders and gotten into trouble. This was a highly regarded film and video production company in Honolulu. The production involved an award-winning director who would never shoot a 30-second commercial without extensive preproduction planning. But he has, to my certain knowledge, twice gone off to shoot documentary style, with little or no planning, in the belief that all he has to do is be there with cameras and reality will jump right in the box.

And with just a little research and planning, the footage could have been so much better. That's what the scriptwriter does, and it's one of the gifts the writer brings to the documentary when brought in at the beginning.
You do the same kind of research for a documentary film that a writer would do for a magazine article: visit the location, talk to the people, and get the facts—the who, what, when, where, why, and how of the event to be documented. Out of this should come, at a minimum, an outline of the information, a list of copy or story points, and a shot list of people, places, and events which should be filmed.

When the film will document events where the outcome is uncertain, a comprehensive treatment will often take the place of a script. The treatment will show you what to look for and how to use it in the documentary you are planning. A treatment is often referred to as an outline for a film. But it's more than that. It's really an explanation. It describes the content of the documentary and the style in which it will be shot. It includes all the elements—the people, places, things, and events—which must be a part of the film. It includes the philosophy of the documentary and suggests how the film will be organized to communicate with an audience.

Any competent scriptwriter could have spent less than an hour with nothing more than the written background information I received for the restaurant documentary and written a treatment which would have eliminated all of the problems listed in my memo to the producer. A good scriptwriter might well have spent a little longer and come up with some suggestions of concept and coverage that would have made it an exceptional piece.

ORGANIZING A STRUCTURE FOR THE DOCUMENTARY

As with a feature film, structure is one of the most important—and least under-aspects of production. Bad structure is worse than bad writing, bad cinema, and bad acting. You can lose your audience almost before you start, and will never know why.

A documentary may not have the same three-act structure as a feature film, with turning points, barriers, and other structural elements designed to advance the plot. But it does face the same structural need, which is to keep the audience interested from the beginning through the long development of the middle to the resolution and closure at the end.

Years ago in a creative writing class at the University of Pennsylvania, Dr. Bruce Olsen explained beginning, middle, and end this way.

The beginning is the point in your work before which nothing needs to be said. The end is the point beyond which nothing needs to be said. And the middle runs in between.

BEGINNING: THE POINT BEFORE WHICH NOTHING NEEDS TO BE SAID

Defining the beginning this way eliminates the problem of two and three opening scenes, which plagues so many documentaries and information videos. Does the audience have to know this? No? Then leave it out.
The beginning states the theme, asks a question, or shows something new or unexpected. It gets the documentary started and raises the expectations of the audience. If you can unsettle the world of your audience just a little in the first two minutes, you'll find you still have them with you when you get to the end.

Within or following the beginning, you weave in a brief presentation of the theme of the documentary, the problem it deals with, the main people involved—whatever the viewer needs to know for the documentary to go forward. Keep this short! Too many scriptwriters have a tendency to stop the documentary dead at this point and try to explain everything. Trust your audience and limit this section to the absolutely essential information without which the audience won't understand the documentary.

If you don't get caught up in the idea that you have to impose an order on your documentary based on some sort of exterior logic (first you have to know this, then you have to know that) you'll find that exposition will take care of itself. Let essential information come in when it is needed and relevant. You may play hell with chronology, but your documentary will flow smoothly from point to point, and I'm convinced that is the key to good understanding and retention on the part of the audience.

MIDDLE: THE PRESENTATION OF EVIDENCE

You've gotten the audience interested. You've given them a notion of what the film is about. Now you need to present some hard information to keep them interested. The middle explores conflicting elements of the situation by showing visual evidence in support of and opposition to the theme.

Evidence related to the theme. This may be evidence supporting the theme (or some part of it) or it could be evidence that appears to contradict the theme you've established.

Opposing evidence. If what you presented first was positive, this is negative, or vice versa.

Note that evidence related to the theme and opposing evidence may be repeated several times as you explore a variety of sub-themes. They could also be presented simultaneously, as when the narration seems to contradict what is being shown.

The purpose is to introduce something like dramatic conflict into the structure of the film. Dramatic conflict doesn't mean some kind of encounter situation with adversaries yelling at one another. It is a structural tension which keeps the outcome of the documentary somewhat in doubt—and keeps the audience interested.

You can also provide dramatic conflict without playing opposing scenes against each other if the evidence you are presenting runs counter to the expectations or experience.
of the audience. In documentaries of human behavior and documentaries of unique events, the outcome is often sufficiently in doubt that there is tension built into the film from the nature of the event itself.

A documentary is expected to explore conflicting elements of the situation. This doesn't mean it has to be passively neutral. But even when it takes a strong position in its theme, it should be able to acknowledge its position isn't universally accepted. If it were, there would be little reason to make the documentary. One of the differences between information and propaganda is the willingness of the former to acknowledge that other points of view may legitimately exist, even if they are considered wrong.

And, as with a feature film, a documentary may also have subthemes and subtexts.

ENDING: RESOLVING THE CONFLICT

The resolution is the outcome—which up to now has been somewhat in doubt—in which the conflicting elements are handled and resolved. It is really the point of the film, toward which all the evidence has been leading. If the documentary is about a scientific experiment, the resolution is the point at which the theory is confirmed or the explanation of why it wasn't. In an informational video about employee benefits, resolution might be the point at which the employee is told how to sign up for or select the benefits that have been discussed.

The ending is a final sequence within or after the resolution, which ties up the loose ends, drives home the theme, and completes the documentary for the audience.

The third necessary element in writing a documentary is visualization. What will be shown? What will make up the visual evidence for the argument presented in the documentary? If you can show a picture of the topic, you can cut down substantially on the words that must be spoken.

I cringe whenever I hear a documentarian—producer, director, or writer—talk about documentary in terms of shooting interviews. Getting people to talk about the subject of the documentary is important, but mainly as research information. Yes, you always hope for a great sound bite that will drive home a point. But you need a lot more than just people telling about the topic. The audience needs to see it, to experience it on film through images that are powerful and unarguable.

The writer's research should be focused not just on the facts of the documentary topic, but also on ways to show it clearly to an audience. If you're doing an environmental documentary, you could go and interview an environmentalist who says a chemical plant is polluting the river. Then you could interview an official from the chemical plant who says they're not. That's a standoff. It's what you get on local TV news. But if you've got footage of ugly stuff pouring out of a pipe into the river, you're beginning to show the problem. And if you can get some neutral party to test the ugly stuff on camera and demonstrate through the tests it either is or isn't pollution, you're building a chain of visual evidence.

The same skill with words that turns out a sizzling proposal may result in a script that is overwritten, dull, and talky if the writer fails to make the shift from the linguistic to
the pictorial mode of communication. Words are sometimes easier to understand - and
to get approved by a boss or client - than a string of images written down in sequence.
But it's the images that will make the film.

In a documentary, script words are used to describe what will be shown and to explain
the thrust of the film. Be very careful about the use of words in narration and
dialogue. Always let the pictures carry all the meaning they can. I can't say this often
enough: When language is used in narration to evoke images, it can get in the way of
the images you are showing on the screen.

The purpose of narration is to tell the audience the things which they need to know
and may not be able to pick up from the footage on their own. Its purpose is not to fill
the soundtrack with meaningless words like the three guys in the booth on Monday
Night Football.

My preferred way to handle narration has always been, wherever possible, not to have
any. Life doesn't come with narration or music (or a laugh track either, for that
matter). Therefore, I reasoned, a film that observes life shouldn't either. Through
several films I stood on principle and avoided narration completely.

The problem is that life also doesn't come with a limited running time, but films do.
And a few words of well chosen narration can often cover what would otherwise take
several minutes of film to explain. So, when running time gets short, and the
documentary material is rich, even the most committed cinema verité filmmaker can
find himself typing out a narration script.

If the footage is good, the narration can be straightforward, written in simple, easy-to-
understand English. What belongs in a narration script? The things the audience needs
to know to understand your film, that are not covered by the film itself. And nothing
more. Honest. Nothing more.

Always write narration as late in the process as possible. Sponsors, clients, even
producers love to read the narration ahead of time. It's the one part of the script they
feel they truly understand. But the documentary producer who writes the narration
before editing the picture is borrowing trouble.

In the first place, the lazy person inside all of us is likely to look at a well, but
prematurely-written, narration and just select pictures to illustrate it, which is the
worst thing a documentarian can do. Shooting "visuals" is what happens in
advertising and public relations, not documentary.

In the second place, your images are the visual evidence of your documentary. They
have to be able to stand on their own.

The problem of dialogue in a documentary can usually be decided on the basis of
whether real actors will be used. If so, you can write dialogue just as you would in a
feature film. If not, don't write dialogue.

For instance, if you have a scientist playing herself and telling about an experiment
she's done, don't write dialogue. It won't work. When you write dialogue for a
nonactor, you risk turning him into a bad actor. Most people will be themselves on camera, if you'll let them. But if you try to turn them into actors when they're not trained for it, what you'll get is bad acting and an unacceptable performance. When real people are used in a film, I simply suggest what they can be expected to say and leave it up to the director to elicit the information from them.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN CONVERSATION AND DIALOGUE

Conversation maintains contact among two or more people and sometimes carries information. It is made up of incomplete ideas and fragments of sentences. The parties feel free to interrupt each other, to talk at the same time, and to change the subject capriciously. Dialogue, on the other hand, takes place among two or more characters for the purpose of informing a third party—the audience.

Dialogue is artificial speech, which must be accepted by an audience as believable. You have to write the dialogue the way people think they are talking and not the way they actually speak. But remember that it never happens in real life that two people who share the information recite it to each other. That only happens in bad radio commercials.

SUGGESTIONS FOR DOCUMENTARY SCRIPTWRITERS

For heaven's sake, if you're new to documentary, look at documentaries and information videos. And look with a critical eye. Documentaries, like any other creative form, range from excellent to lousy. Try to find the films that appeal to you and analyze what it is you like about them. Do the same with the films you dislike.

Think in pictures. Making the change from the linguistic to the pictorial mode means thinking film. And that can mean placing yourself mentally in a theater seat looking at a screen, instead of in your office facing a word processor. If you can't see it, you can't film it. If you are a writer trying to get a handle on how to write a script, remember that the hardest thing to do as you begin to work in film and video will be to stop relying on words.

Show the research as well as the results. Take the audience through a process of discovery that is similar to your own. Show the good and the bad. If you have the screen time, you can even take the audience down a few false trails. You know what is going to happen in the film, but you didn't when you started your research. Don't deprive your audience of that delicious uncertainty.

Don't write a novel when you only have room for a short story. It's better to develop one theme completely in a short film than to try to cram in too much and lose the flow of the film. Resist the pressure to try to make a single film that will be all things to all people. Such a film ends up meaning nothing to anyone.
Be careful of interviews. Interviews are an important pan of documentary and nonfiction films, but they can get awfully dull. And they slow up the film. A person talking can only say 100 to 200 words per minute. But in the same minute you can show six to ten different images, if you want to, at a comfortable pace.

Film is concrete. You have to have something to show. But it isn't literal. A man can walk out his office door and be anywhere—on the moon, in the 14th Century, or across the country. You can cut from one location to another without a transition, as long as the difference is clearly evident. When I started writing for films, I asked a documentary writer-director the best way to get from one scene to another "That's easy," he said. "Hit the space bar on your typewriter twice."

You can hardly go wrong if you write narration as if you were being fined $10 a word. Keep it to the bare essentials. Don't talk it to death. As a writer, I've always looked askance at the statement, "A picture is worth a thousand words." As a scriptwriter, however, I take it literally.