

Documentary (aka Non-Fiction) Films

What do you think of when you hear “documentary”?

Maybe you think of boring films you had to watch in middle school about sea anemones or the lifespan of the tsetse fly with “old school” sounding voiceovers and lilting music, like this: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PRmawTin7fA>. Maybe you think of *Blackfish*, a film that accused Sea World of negligence and abuse in its care of orcas. Perhaps you think of Michael Moore, whose films always court outrage from conservative Americans. Maybe Morgan Freeman’s voice comes to mind as narrator for *March of the Penguins*. And then there’s *Loose Change*, a film that’s billed as a documentary, but many argue is more like a work of conspiracy fantasy. What about long investigative segments on shows like *60 Minutes*? And what do we do about the mockumentary, *This is Spinal Tap*? Consider the series [Documentary Now](#) as another example.

Professor, film critic, and theoretician, Bill Nichols, identifies 6 “modes” of documentary that are useful for you as both a viewer and soon-to-be-creator of the form. These are: *Expository*, *Observational*, *Participatory*, *Poetic*, *Reflexive*, and *Performative*. (For specific definitions of each, see: <http://www.meridianstories.com/media-resource-collection/creative-how-to-guides/six-principal-modes-of-documentary-filmmaking/>.) According to these categories, the aforementioned films—yes, even *This is Spinal Tap*—can be defined as “documentary.”

Do some searching and you’ll find there are many discussions about audiences having particular expectations for truth, fairness, and unbiased presentations in the documentary form. But the goals of the documentarians and the styles they choose only promise their incarnation of truth; and collectively, these run a spectrum.

Note that even the *selection* of a particular subject presents a bias. Someone thought the story they wanted to tell was more important than any other story they could tell at that moment. Consider how access to power determines what stories get told and how. Who has access to instruments of storytelling?

With the explosion of increasingly affordable technology, many people who wouldn’t have otherwise had the means are now able to tell stories important to them. There is great power in being seen and heard in ways determined by you, not by someone else’s interpretation of you.

Ethical Manipulation?

According to renowned documentarian Ken Burns, documentary—like all storytelling—is about persuasion and manipulation: <https://vimeo.com/40972394>. It sounds sinister, but if you think about it, engaging someone in your story, making them care and perhaps even agree with you, relies on strategy. Whether it’s ethical or not is dependent upon the intentions that motivate it. For example, Ken Burns wants you to feel moved because something about a story he’s telling moves him, and so he uses music, zooms and pans, editing, and narration to get you there, too. As he acknowledges, that’s manipulation.

We all have a point of view and bring it to everything we do. You have a lifetime of experiences and influences that have given you the lenses you have for seeing the world in a particular way. Recognizing this is important. Thus, when you decide to tell a story or present information, you'll make choices that make sense for that view. Sharing a viewpoint or persuading an audience is best done with the most honest presentation of ideas you can muster. If you can't do it without hiding or twisting information, perhaps you need to reexamine your own position.

It's not that willful misrepresentation of information doesn't happen. Sadly, it happens all the time. That doesn't mean you should do it, too.

Telling a story from your point of view and wanting your audience to understand it that way is different from trying to mislead them. One is natural and unavoidable, but something to always keep in mind. The other is unethical and never acceptable.

Expository Mode

The style of documentary that is most familiar and that likely will be the style you use for your work is Nichols' "Expository Mode."

"Expository docs are heavily researched and are sometimes referred to as essay films because they aim to educate and explain things — events, issues, ways of life, worlds and exotic settings we know little about. Typical production elements include interviews, illustrative visuals, some actuality, perhaps some graphics and photos and a 'voice of God' narration track. Scripted narration connects the story elements and often unpacks a thesis or an argument." (<https://www.videomaker.com/article/c06/18423-six-primary-styles-of-documentary-production>)

Finding Your Subject

Working through the *Invention* process you'll fully "discover" your subject matter. This means reading everything you can by experts and lay people alike to see what the *der Zeitgeist* might be. Talk about it with others. Brainstorm about it: What are the arguments or beliefs that exist about it? What questions have been raised? What's not clear? Who would care about this topic?

And finally, what's the STORY? What's your point? What's your THESIS?

It's important to know, very clearly, what your major claim is so you can carefully structure your evidence in a way that makes a compelling argument. The thesis is the position you're taking, with a promise that relevant evidence will be presented.

This is different from a film's summary or *logline*. A logline is a generalization of the subject matter that doesn't wade into any argument being made. Take a look at these documentary logline examples: <http://www.filmdaily.tv/blog/funding/top-box-office-documentary-loglines>

Remember the tsetse fly documentary? Here's what a logline and thesis might look like for this documentary:

Logline: An account of the tsetse fly's life and habitat.

Thesis: From birth to mating to death, the tsetse fly's life is shockingly complex and poses a continuing challenge to many African nations.

Watch this student-made documentary about Joe Paterno's firing from Penn State. What do you think the logline would be? What's the thesis?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zBwwOK77H8w>

Making the Documentary

Once you've worked through the *Invention* process (decided your subject, researched and read and viewed and talked about its many facets, determined your claim and outlined the kind of evidence you'll need to make your case) it's time to gather all the pieces and make a plan for the production and editing of the documentary.

There's a pretty good chance that as you did all this work at becoming an expert in your subject, you were collecting loads of materials for the scripting, shooting, and editing. These may include: video clips, images, newspaper headlines, names or kinds of people you'd like to interview or find interviews of. You'll want to continue to do that as you build your script.

The Script

The script is your plan on paper. Having a script will insure you have everything you need once you head into the editing booth.

Remember: You're writing for a visual medium. This medium also has the capacity for sound. You're not writing a speech or a paper. You're writing in a way that allows for multiple senses to be engaged. If we agree that a picture is worth a thousand words, let's agree that you'll let those words speak for themselves when possible. In other words, write as minimally and efficiently as possible. Allow the people or images on the screen to do the talking. The most powerful filmmakers are the ones who trust their audience's intelligence and let them put some of the pieces together.

An outline of your plan is a great way to start, but as you get more detailed, you might find it useful to use the script format below; it allows for notation of narration, and a plan for visuals (what's on screen and what effects are used) and sound (including ambient sound that comes from the visuals, sound effects, and music).

As you write, you may find that you need to create graphics (statistics, titles, [lower thirds](#)) or you're missing a particular kind of evidence for a claim. Think of the scripting process as one that will require a number of revisions and which is useful for realizing that you're missing some pieces. It's no fun to go into the editing room only to find that you don't have enough content or the right kinds of images.

SCRIPT FORMAT

<div>Rob's Voice</div> <div><u>Narration</u></div>	<div>INT : Indoors EXT : Outdoors</div> <div><u>Visuals</u></div>	<div>Sequence Location</div> <div><u>Sound</u></div>
<div>ROB</div> <p>I think about him all the time. His memory follows me around like my shadow.</p> <p>Sometimes I see a movement in the side of my eye, but when I turn around, there's nothing there.</p> <p>It's driving me crazy.</p> <div> <div>Close up</div> <div> WS = wide shot LS = long shot MS = mid shot CU = close up ECU = extreme close up </div> </div> <div>SUE</div> <p>I do try and get out as much as possible. The more I sit at home, the more I think about what happened.</p> <p>But there's no escaping the memories. I carry them with me. I feel guilty if I don't think about him constantly.</p>	<div>INT: Rob's living room</div> <p>Rob walks to the window and looks out. Then he moves to the sofa and tries to read a book.</p> <p>Rob looks up from his book and his eyes move around the room.</p> <p>CU of Rob's eyes.</p> <p>Rob closes his eyes.</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Dissolve to:</i></p> <div>EXT: Bench in park</div> <p>CU of Sue's eyes.</p> <p>Sue looks around her as she sits on the park bench.</p> <p>Sue opens her purse and takes out her wallet. She looks at a picture of herself standing with a man.</p> <p>She closes the wallet and puts it back in her purse.</p>	<div>Sound effect</div> <p>Continuous Ambiance</p> <p>FX : Echoing footsteps on floor</p> <p>MUSIC: Faint note of string instrument.</p> <p>FX : Echoing sigh</p> <div>Sequence Transition</div> <p>Continuous Park Ambiance</p>

Source: <https://www.nyfa.edu/student-resources/how-to-write-a-documentary-script/>

Down and Dirty Tech Advice

Cameras

Smart phones are amazing. In some cases, they may do a better job than an “actual” camera. But they also have their limits. For example, you probably haven’t purchased a tripod for your phone, and the zoom might distort images or lack sharpness. Audio quality can vary and use of a good microphone is often impossible.

Borrowing an actual camera and tripod will give you more control of your steadiness for static shots as well as pans, tilts, and zooms. You’ll also be able to borrow a microphone, giving you a better chance at obtaining a high quality audio recording.

Whatever you do, don’t go shoot something important without practicing and reviewing your footage for quality!

Shooting

Unless you have a very good motivated reason not to, USE A TRIPOD. The attention of the viewer should be focused on your subject, not how shaky the shot is.

Frame your shot carefully. Here’s a quick, “down and dirty” look at how to do that:

<http://www.nikonusa.com/en/learn-and-explore/article/hojlp49c/video-composition-rules-establishing-medium-and-close-up-shots.html>

Be sure that you don’t start the action of your shot as soon as you hit the record button. Hit record, then count to five, then begin the action. Likewise, continue recording for about 5 seconds after the action is complete. Failing to do this may result in the loss of the beginning or end of something important.

Don’t backlight your subject unless you want your subject to be a silhouette. If bright light is behind your subject, reset your camera and subject so the light is in front of or off to the side of your subject.

Audio

If you’re recording audio as an important component, make sure it’s good.

Whenever possible, use a microphone and try to get it as close to the subject as possible. If you don’t want it to be in the shot, either camouflage it (plants are excellent for this) or have an assistant hold it just outside the frame. You might be able to check out a boom arm to help with this.

Things to be aware of:

- Big empty rooms will have an annoying echo. Look for places with carpeting or curtains.
- Wind is the enemy of microphones. If you must shoot in the wind, be sure the microphone is facing away from it; the wind should not blow into the microphone.

- Background noise can overwhelm the audio you're hoping to get. If you're interviewing someone on the street and a bus drives by (as an example), don't be afraid to ask your subject to repeat what they said once the bus has passed. It's pretty much guaranteed that audio with bus in the background will be unusable.

Editing

Being a good editor is a lot about the "feel." As an editor, you set the pace of the film. A good editor knows the Ken Burns effect should be motivated and end in a satisfying, not random, place. A good editor will make the documentary feel like it's moving along at a good clip without feeling rushed. A good editor gives the audience a second to breathe when they need to. A good editor knows when the person that was interviewed best made their point and cuts the rest. A good editor doesn't chop off the beginnings and ends of words. A good editor uses music and transitions tastefully—no fancy wipes unless he or she is being ironic or retro, for example. No cheesy or unnecessary music unless it's for ironic or retro reasons.

The best editors are the ones viewers don't think about. If you've edited your work in a way that doesn't make people notice it, you've done your job.