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Writing a Script for Documentaries

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Writing a script for a documentary involves creating a compelling narrative that combines factual information with emotional engagement. Below is a general guide on how to structure your documentary script.

Unlike fiction films, documentaries do not rely on actors or an imagined story line. However, this does not mean that scripting is any less relevant in documentaries. Structuring a documentary is a demanding process and writing plays an important part in this process. Different types of documentaries approach writing differently. While documentaries which use a voice-over narration will rely heavily on a script writer, even observational documentaries which do not use any voice-over might require an element of text to convey information or to move the story forward.

This research paper will familiarise you with a few modes of documentary narratives and the role of writing in framing these narratives.

Renowned documentary theorist Bill Nichols (2001) categorized documentaries into six primary modes: expository, poetic, observational, participatory, reflexive, and performative. While this classification is not comprehensive and does not address other forms like autobiographical documentaries, it provides a valuable framework for organizing and understanding documentaries. A concise overview of these modes can aid in determining the appropriate approach to writing for each.

Expository documentaries use voice-over narration to build the main argument of the film. The commentary delivered by an unseen neutral narrator ties the visuals together in these films. Visuals generally serve a secondary role and are used to mainly illustrate the point made by the voice-over. The film *Gaddis* (N.K. Issar, 1970) produced by Films Division is a good example of an expository film. Poetic documentaries pay more attention to visual rhythms and juxtapositions. *Rain* (Ivens & Franken, 1929) is a beautifully made film which can be categorised as a poetic documentary. This film which shows a rainy day in Amsterdam creates visual poetry through carefully filmed images of the city. These images are edited together to give the viewer a feel of the rain and its aftermath.

In observational documentaries, the camera aims to stay as inconspicuous as possible. This technique, often referred to as the "fly on the wall" approach, involves capturing life as it unfolds naturally, without drawing attention to the camera's presence. In such films, the filmmaker follows the characters, interventions are kept to the bare minimum. Observational films avoid expository voice-overs. Frederick Wiseman's film *High School* (1968) is a very well-known observational film. Unlike

observational films, participatory films foreground the presence of the camera and the director. Interviews and other interactions form an integral part of such films.

Bill Nichols identifies *Chronicle of a Summer* (Morin & Rouch, 1961) as an example of participatory filmmaking. In contrast, reflexive documentaries emphasize the methods and techniques used to construct narratives, shedding light on how specific arguments are crafted within documentary cinema. These films expose the inherently constructed nature of documentaries, as well as the political implications underlying certain portrayals. Renzo Martens Episode III: Enjoy Poverty (2008) prompts the viewers to question the manner in which conflict and poverty in the third world becomes marketable commodities for aid workers and filmmakers from developed countries. The sixth mode as per Nichols's categorisation is the performative mode. These documentaries aim to form an emotional connect with their audience and they use a subjective way to address. Marlon Riggs' *Tongues Untied* (1989) is an example of a performative documentary. It uses a subjective way of address to bring the viewers face-to-face with the prejudices faced by black gay men in USA.

Now the question arises that how important is writing in different kinds of documentaries?

The role of scripting varies across different types of documentaries, yet every documentary relies on a structure, and writing often plays a crucial role in establishing it. In expository documentaries, scripting is essential for shaping the film's narrative, with the voice-over serving as the primary source of information for the audience. This makes it necessary for the writing to be engaging enough to maintain the viewer's interest throughout the film. Conversely, poetic and observational documentaries minimize the use of narration, yet they still require some level of scripting to organize the filmed content into a coherent structure. In these cases, the focus is less on creating a voice-over and more on shaping the material collaboratively with the director and editor. These types of films may also include intertitles or on-screen text to provide necessary context or details.

In participatory documentaries, the filmmaker may choose to incorporate a voice-over, which can highlight the collaborative process and the dynamics between the filmmaker and the subjects of the film. Reflexive documentaries, on the other hand, often utilize on-screen narration to encourage viewers to reflect on the power dynamics and constructed nature of the documentary-making process. Lastly, in performative documentaries, scripting tends to focus on exploring the subjective experiences of the characters, offering deeper insight into their personal worlds.

Writing serves varying purposes across different documentary styles, but it consistently plays a role in shaping documentary narratives, even if only minimally. For instance, it can be as detailed as creating a voice-over for an expository documentary or as minimal as structuring raw footage in observational films. Unlike scripting for fiction films, which involves creating dialogues and scenes, scripting for documentaries often focuses on selecting and organizing filmed material to construct a coherent story arc.

The story arc is a vital element in shaping the narrative of a documentary. Like fiction films, documentaries typically follow a structure with a beginning, middle, and end. However, documentaries rely on real-life material, meaning the narrative must emerge from the content captured during filming. Simply arranging the footage in chronological order is often insufficient to create an engaging narrative. Instead, the story arc is developed by organizing the material in a way that allows viewers to connect meaningfully with the film. This process may or may not involve a writer, but when one is included, they collaborate closely with the director and editor to create a compelling narrative.

In character-driven documentaries, the story arc is often centered on the lives of the featured individuals. For example, in *Sita's Family* (Dewan, 2002), the narrative begins by introducing the women in the filmmaker's family through a journey. Their choices and conflicts are gradually revealed through interviews and the filmmaker's personal voice-over. The film's climax—a

confrontation between the filmmaker, her sister, and their mother—is strategically placed near the end, serving as the most intense moment. This buildup helps the audience gain a sense of resolution by the film's conclusion. Here, the filmmaker constructs the arc by starting with a gentle introduction and building toward the most dramatic moments.

However, structuring a documentary isn't restricted to this approach. Some films may place key moments at the beginning to immediately engage the audience. While there are no rigid rules for developing a story arc, the focus is on crafting a narrative that captures and sustains viewer interest.

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