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INTRODUCTION

Gene Fowler once said that writing is easy, just a matter of staring at a blank page until your forehead bleeds. Well, if anything will draw blood from your forehead, it's writing a brilliant documentary script!

Often in our real lives, ideas and emotions, mind and passion, revolve in different spheres altogether. On film, if we see a dead body, we react immediately with emotion, perhaps even pondering the waste of life and questioning our own existence. However, if we were to see a dead body on a street as we drove by, our immediate reaction may be shock, even revulsion. Emotion may enter the picture long after the experience has ended. In *real* life, experiences become meaningful with reflection in time. In *reel* life, they are meaningful the moment they happen. A well-written film script is an instrument through which you can create emotion and epiphany at will. That is one reason why it is possibly the most critical aspect of the filmmaking procedure.

The script is also, often, the most underrated aspect of the documentary process. A school of thought suggests that the documentary-making process should be fluid and organic, whereby the filmmaker experiences the film as he makes it. Many filmmakers write a 'paper-edit' after shooting in place of a script. This process has and does work with many types of films. Especially when the filmmaker is recording events beyond his control like political rallies, events, natural disasters, riots and demonstrations etc. However, in most films, the filmmaker will find himself asking the question, "What should I shoot?" Here, it is imperative to start out with a well-written script, *whether or not things change during the shooting process*. Often preparing a script beforehand can make the difference between a bad film and a good film. Or, at best, a good film and a great film.

There are two stages of documentary scriptwriting:

      (i)   The Pre-shoot or Shooting Script
      (ii)   The Post-shoot Script

A **pre-shoot or shooting script** is like carrying a map when you set out on a road trip. You may stumble across many unseen barriers or unexpected surprises. You may discover wonderful, uncharted areas off the beaten track. You may decide to go in one direction or the next or perhaps even a third. A map helps you on your way and prevents you from getting lost. A shooting script is a conceptual map for your shooting journey. It consolidates research and outlines the film's story, providing a visual guideline for the shoot. It uses the same format and elements as a post-shoot script and can be as comprehensive or generic depending on the information available to the scriptwriter at that stage.

A shooting script should not be confused with a shot list. A shot list is a production tool which contains shot numbers, descriptions and transitions along with production details. Even though some director-scriptwriters often combine the shooting script and shot list, the two are separate entities. A shooting script rarely delves into detailed aspects of

production unless integral to the story. It is more conceptual in nature; descriptive, but leaving room for interpretation.

The **post-shoot script** is the final version of the shooting script. This is often a modified or re-written version of the shooting script and is created between the shooting and editing processes of the documentary. The post-shoot script combines conceptual elements along with audiovisual information gathered at the production stage and may also include any new knowledge gathered along the way. It then weaves it all together into a cinematic story, which is used by the filmmaker to edit the documentary. The post-shoot script often includes descriptions of shots and actions and is quite comprehensive.

Again, the post-shoot script should not be confused with a paper-edit, which contains detailed shot and production information. Even though the two are often combined by director-scriptwriters, they are separate entities. The paper-edit is a tool for the editor to cut the footage and includes elements like time-counters, tape numbers, shot in-points and out-points etc. The script is conceptual and descriptive of action but should leave some room for creative interpretation at the editing stage.

Both the pre-shoot and post-shoot scripts are time-specific versions of the same entity. The same elements and technique can be used to create both depending on the amount of information available at that time.

Writing for Film and why Documentaries are different

Writing for film, fiction or non-fiction, is quite different from writing for print. There are a few unique features of film that a screenwriter must consider:

Film is visual. The words that a screenwriter writes will never be read by anyone. They will only be seen and heard as images on a screen. The most important skill of a screenwriter is that he must be able to write visually. Theorizing or explaining a concept in a script is pointless; if the audience can't 'look' at the theory, it's not worth writing. A screenwriter must think, 'Is what I'm about to write visual in nature? If not, then how can I make it visual?"

Film shows motion. Most of the images you see on screen have action. It's what separates moving images from photographs. Stories for film must be translated by a screenwriter into active images.

Film reveals what the eye often can't *see.* A tiny cell in our bodies, a country we've never been to, details that we would normally miss. The screenwriter must bring things to life for the audience who may have never before experienced what they see on screen.

Film transcends time and space. A film doesn't adhere to our dimensions of time and space. Once made, it continues to exist in a little bubble of its own, transcending the limits of our present lives. A screenwriter must understand that writing for a film means creating a being that should have a life of its own long after the writer has moved on from it.

Film is Subjective. By simply pointing the camera in a specific direction, a subjective choice has been made. The very nature of film, like our eyes, is to focus on what is considered to be the object of interest and eliminate what lies beyond the lens, thereby losing all sense of objectivity.

Film chooses audience. The screenwriter must always keep in mind that each film chooses its own audience depending on how he chooses to tell the story. By varying a script, he may be showing the film to very different people in the end.

Film repeats accurately. Film footage doesn't discriminate between objects, doesn't hide, cheat or lie. It consistently reproduces what the camera sees in full detail. It is the filmmaker who must shoot objects in a particular way to include or eliminate details.

Film may have colour and audio elements. It's not only about moving images. Most films, unless the filmmaker chooses not to use them, have the elements of sound and colour. These elements are always, if present, incorporated into the script.

Film emphasizes and emotionalizes. Films can evoke different kinds of reactions in the audience, from grief to anger. They can make the audience think and send powerful messages across to them.

When it comes to documentaries in particular, there are a few more things to be kept in mind before starting to write a script. Documentary scripts do share many common elements with scripts for fiction films, shorts and features alike. However, they also have their own specific considerations:

Documentary deals with fact, not fiction. Most importantly, documentaries delve into a non-fictional world with real events, real issues, real conflict, real people and real emotions. Everything seen and heard on screen is grounded in accuracy and has no element of fiction.

Documentary is flexible. Unlike fictional films, documentaries have no fixed visual and conceptual guidelines per say. It's impossible to concretize events or decide one way or the other about how the film will turn out eventually. There are fewer 'rules' to be followed, which reflects the fact that there are few rules in the real world as well. This makes it more challenging but infinitely more exciting.

Documentary inspires movement and action. At the very heart of documentary, there is an issue and a message at hand. The passing on of this message to the audience is usually the reason that the film was made in the first place. Documentaries have long been used as an instrument to inspire change in their audience, be it social change or inner change.

Documentary involves less control. Unlike fiction films, documentaries must be shot in the real world and show real events happening. Often, the filmmaker is unable to control the event he is shooting as well as the circumstances surrounding the event. It's difficult to think about lighting when in the middle of a sniper shootout! There is less control over the subject in documentary; however this unmodified, improvised element is often the very charm of non-fiction films.

Documentary subject is paramount. Documentaries are inherently bound to their subject matter. Since their purpose is so issue-specific and their circumstances are non-fictional, the subject is the most important aspect of documentary films and is given precedence over other aspects, for example: entertainment value. In fact, until recently filmmakers scoffed at the idea of a documentary being entertaining. This attitude has, of course, changed now but subject still remains the dominant element.

Credibility is key in Documentary. The emergence of the documentary as a recognised cinematic genre in the 1920's inherited the trust of the audience in the veracity of the image as an authentic representation of the real. Today, we are much more skeptical, even with documentaries. Audience trust, once lost is gone

forever so a documentary, in this day and age, must always provide credible information and sources to put a suspicious audience at ease.

Form is more important than formula. There are no recipes in documentary films. Every subject and issue is specific and is showcased on film in its own appropriate manner. Form and the layout in which a subject is showcased in a film are important as they add value to the film, but there is no one tried and tested way to do this.

In addition to these conceptual considerations, the screenwriter must ask a number of practical questions as well:

- Why is this film being made?
- What does the producer/client/financier want to achieve through the film?
- Who is the targeted audience and what should their reaction to the film be?
- How much does the audience already know about the subject?
- What will be the film's technical conditions of use (Black & White/Multi-colour? Animation? Etc)
- What is the budget of the film?

These factors contribute significantly to the nature of the script for the simple reason that, at the end of the day, film like any other art is a product. Artistry must go hand in hand with practicality, production technicalities and, of course, economics. You may ask yourself, "What difference does a film's budget make to a script?" The answer is, enormous. It would be easy to write a powerful scene about an ancient battle in a foreign country but the reality of it is that the film crew would have to fly there, hire hundreds of men, use elaborate costumes and props and perhaps even hire trained horses for authenticity. There would even be the additional costs of transport, food etc. This could be an expense the budget does not allow. The scriptwriter will probably have to write a 'cheaper' version of the same scene, which might be to shoot abstract visuals of a few men's feet running, weapons clashing, bloody faces etc and supplement them with the voice of an historian talking about the battle in question and what happened in it. Less elaborate? Certainly. Less powerful? Not necessarily.

SHORT INTRODUCTION TO DOCUMENTARY STYLES

Over the years, several documentary styles evolved that came and went from fashion. These styles ranged from newsreel to realist to romantic to propaganda and many more. However, three emerged as the most popular and encompassed most of the documentary films made well up to the 1990's.

Classical Cinema

This is the most structured and traditional form of documentary. It gives great importance to clarity of narrative and images. Characters drive the plots, and continuity editing ensures the seamless progression of events. These kinds of documentaries often made extensive use of didactic narration, as was seen in the most famous documentary in this style, *Night Mail* by John Grierson, which showed, in dramatised detail, how mail was transported by train overnight. The sequences were tightly controlled and the 'feel' was quite formal. The element of 'realism' was often interfered with by the filmmaker, who interspersed on-location shots with studio shots and sound dubbing to show real events and make them more 'filmable'.

Cinéma Vérité / Direct Cinema

This style of documentary originated in the late 1950's and reached new heights of popularity in the 1960's. It was, much like the generation that pioneered it, a rebel with a cause. This style was spurred on with the advancement of film technology, including portable cameras with mobile sound. Cinéma Vérité, meaning 'True Cinema' in French, aimed for an extreme naturalism, using non-professional actors, non-intrusive filming techniques, a hand-held camera, genuine locations rather than sound stages, and naturalistic sound without post-production or voiceovers. The camera was a 'fly on the wall' and took in everything that went on before it. This broke all the rules put into practice by the classical tradition. Direct Cinema and Cinéma Vérité are often used interchangeably, although there are opinions that make distinctions by the degree of camera involvement. The fundamentals of style, however, are very similar between the two. Famous cinéma vérité/direct cinema films include *Showman*, *Salesman*, *The Children Were Watching*, *Primary*, *Behind a Presidential Crisis*, and *Grey Gardens*.

Documentary Drama

This style mixes the techniques of drama and the factual elements of documentary. Real events are acted out by professional actors in controlled settings in an obviously constructed style. This theatrical retelling of facts began in the early days of broadcasting when practical concerns and unwieldy equipment made it difficult to shoot live events. However, it is used even today. Most modern documentaries include some form of event recreation. The popular UK television show, *Coronation Street*, was originally thought of as a drama documentary.

The docu-drama style has been one of the most controversial ones till date and many have questioned whether it is a documentary style at all. Contention arose because, while documentaries are thought to be "real", docu-dramas were thought to cheat by obviously reconstructing reality. This opinion has been more or less discarded now as most people not only accept the diminishing lines of distinction between different styles of film, but also the overall artificiality of the subsequent editing process for all styles.

These days, with the advent of documentary films into the worldwide commercial film arena as well as their ever-expanding production in most countries of the world, most generic classifications of style have been put to rest. New stylistic elements are experimented with every year and the lines between genres have been crossed so many times that specific categories are impossible to define. Reality TV, for example, has stormed the world of television, taking direct cinema to new levels of voyeurism.

Whether they are wobbly, out-of-focus home video diaries or the 'making-of-a-feature' promotional films included in DVD packs, they have all served to broaden our definition of the traditional documentary.

So how does all this concern the scriptwriter of a documentary film? This evolution, leading to the overlap of styles and genres, has placed far more overt, interpretive control in the hands of the filmmaker and, consequently, in the hands of the scriptwriter. Before embarking on the writing process, it is important to know the various stylistic options available to you as a scriptwriter. It is also important to recognize the contribution of various traditional styles to modern ones, even if their only use is as a guide to finding a style and 'voice' of your own.

RESEARCH, RESEARCH, RESEARCH: YOU CAN'T SAY IT ENOUGH!

Every film, especially a documentary, has a 'value'. This could be social, political, historical, philosophical, artistic or of some other kind. The amount of research a scriptwriter puts in is directly related to the 'value' of the film.

In the rush to get started, many people often skim over the research process. Especially in films that involve subjects of a personal nature; for example: a person's journey within his own family to explore social dynamics. A scriptwriter could be instructed to write a script on a live event that was shot some time ago, like a riot, or for a film on the thoughts and feelings of a celebrity already captured in detail on camera. He might ask himself, "How can I possibly add anything more to the subject information?" Even in films that seem straightforward and detailed information has already been given to the scriptwriter, there is always room for more research. There are simply no shortcuts that will provide the quality of a well-researched film.

Suppose a scriptwriter has the footage of a live riot, shot by the filmmaker, along with a detailed log of the events that took place before, during and afterwards, the filmmaker's personal thoughts about his experience and on-camera interviews with people on both sides about their views. He may think he has enough information to write a fairly comprehensive script and he would be right. However, what if he did a little study on the political, historical and social reasons why that riot may have taken place for some extra context, or if he spoke to a few more people who were involved on that day and who may have seen something he didn't know about. Perhaps he could visit the riot site, or meet an expert on riots and get his perspective on what happened and even collect the newspaper coverage of that riot and think about the role of media in that event. He could even go so far as to place himself in the middle of a riot (highly unadvisable) to get a first-hand perspective on the experience. In the end, he may or may not use any of the so-called 'extra' information he gathered, but his in-depth knowledge on the subject would be extremely valuable in creating an insightful and engaging script.

Curiosity

The best research is done when there is a genuine desire on the part of the scriptwriter to learn more about the subject of his documentary. This is easier said than done, especially when you get that dreaded call about writing a script on the inner components of a diesel generator, but inspiration and curiosity go a long way in helping a scriptwriter. After all, if you're not excited about it, how on earth are you going to make hundreds, thousands or even millions of people excited? Therefore, the first step in the research process would be to develop a healthy interest and curiosity about the subject of the film. The scriptwriter must ask himself some important questions:

- What have I not yet been told about this subject?
- Is everything I have been told the truth? How much do I need to verify?
- What would I personally like to know about this subject?

- If I were a member of the audience, what would I want to learn about this subject?
- What can I find that is little known on this subject?
- If the shooting has not yet started, what information can I gather that would aid the filming process?

Quantity Vs Quality

One of the more important questions that scriptwriters have is, "How much research is enough?" The quality of research is far more important than the quantity. After all, if you were a writing a script for a film on the First World War, you could spend a lifetime studying the subject and never meet that script deadline. One of the more important skills of the scriptwriter is to segregate relevant information from the irrelevant. This can be done by having detailed and on-going communication with the filmmaker at all times. The focus of the film and the subject matter it is dealing with must be kept in mind at all times. Any information gathered or lead followed must first be put through a 'relevancy test'. The scriptwriter must ask himself:

- Is this information or source of information directly related to the subject of my film?
- Is it necessary for the audience to know this information?
- Will this information add to the overall quality of the film?
- Even if it is relevant and will add value, is it *more* relevant than all the other information I have gathered so far?
- Will I be able to incorporate this information into the script even if it is relevant to the subject?

The 'Strategy'

Almost every scriptwriter starts off with a research strategy. After all, it's extremely inconvenient to be in the middle of writing a script when a new piece of information crops up. It's important to think about and list down every approach and every source you will use to gather information needed for research. The all-important question that usually crops up is, "Where do I look?"

Each scriptwriter has his own sources and approaches for gathering information and many use the same tried and tested ways throughout their careers. A few places to start are:

- Print Research :

  There are millions of places to look in print: Newspapers, books, magazines, journals, digests, reports, archives, diaries…the list is endless. The scriptwriter must decide which one will be suitable for subject-related information gathering and then physically get hold of the required publication. The usual places to go for finding print material are libraries, bookstores, institutions and organizations

with archives and, of course, the internet. Other places could be antique book stores, publishing houses and academic institutions. People also keep print material in their houses and that out-of-print, obscure thesis you were looking for could be lying in your neighbour's house so it never hurts to ask around.

Unless your film is about something extremely specific, chances are you'll have a stack of a hundred relevant publications lying in your house waiting to be read. Chances also are you'll probably not have enough time to read all of them. The art of scouring through large amounts of print material quickly can only be picked up over time, however a novice scriptwriter should try and train his eye to skim over words and stop to read bits of text which occur to him as something he could put in his script or which sounds interesting and should be kept aside. It also helps to keep a look out for 'keywords' or words that strike a chord because of their meaning. These words can be used later on in the script, if you are going to write narration. In addition, you may be exploring the idea of including visuals of print material in your film as well, in which case you must select and isolate this material carefully for filming later.

- Field Research :

Since film is a visual medium, it is integral that a scriptwriter get an accurate picture of the visual information in the film. He could go to the various locations in which the film will be shot, or to locations where events took place earlier or will take place in the future. The scriptwriter could attend related events or even put himself into places where the people in the film will be or would have been. He could even go to museums, art galleries or any kind of public viewing space where he could gather information. The 'field' exists only in relation to the subject of the film and therefore the options are endless and should be visited upon the scriptwriter's discretion.

Once the writer reaches a location, it is important to look out for things which might be relevant to the script. You could track events as they happened or look for clues that could reveal facts much like a detective. How to gather field material when on location is subjective to the film, but the scriptwriter must keep a look out for all things visual that can be incorporated as images within the script. The culture of the area should be learnt, the people met, the details noted. Once you gather this knowledge, you must keep it aside for future reference. It also helps when on a shooting location, to note things like where the sunlight comes from at what time and what the sounds are heard around the area. These little details will help you design the script in a more artistic and insightful way.

- Interview Research :

Nine times out of ten, a scriptwriter will be called upon to write a script about something he knows nothing about. Factual knowledge can usually be easily attained from print and field research; however the scriptwriter must also gather

perspective. Not one but many. The best way to gain perspective is to speak to people directly and indirectly connected with the subject. Films are a medium for people, by people and therefore a human perspective is imperative for any film. Interview research, which is basically meeting people and asking them questions, is a must for every film.

The scriptwriter must first decide whom to speak to and what to ask them. Normally, the first person or people to seek out are the experts on the subject at hand. They can provide the scriptwriter with not only knowledge but the benefit of their experience. If there are specific events in the film, then the scriptwriter can speak to people who were involved with the events, directly and indirectly. The selection of people should be varied to get different, even opposing, types of information from each. The questions to ask them should cover a range of ideas and should typically include factual and emotional elements as well as opinions and insights. These conversations should be recorded carefully and relevant points should be kept aside. It always helps to listen to any ideas they may have about how you can 'treat' the film conceptually, irrespective of whether you incorporate their opinions into the script or not. Who knows? Somebody may give you a gem of an idea.

- Inner Worlds & Metaphors :

Every scriptwriter has a different personality, a different perspective. Consequently, every scriptwriter has something unique to contribute to a film. This is often one reason why filmmakers come to a specific writer to write their scripts again and again. Imagination is the biggest talent and tool of the scriptwriter. Although not for everybody, a very effective approach at the research stage can be to look within oneself and gather the benefits of past experiences and try and create an emotional stance on the matter at hand. On a spiritual level, meditating upon the inner world within oneself can be a powerful way of harnessing knowledge locked within the sub-conscious mind and perhaps, if one believes so, the power of the collective unconscious or the cosmos.

Metaphors or parallels exist all around us in our lives. Sometimes, we see something that reminds us of something else or inspires us in a particular way. It could be completely unrelated to the object or concept it invokes a memory of, but still portray it in a meaningful way. You could see a highway ridden with rush hour traffic and be reminded of thousands of ants filing in an out of an anthill carrying food. Or the same sight, with horns blaring and drivers swearing, could make you think about the conquest of a robotic age over humaneness. The possibilities and metaphors around us are endless, just waiting to be picked out by an inventive and imaginative writer.

Digging Deep

Every scriptwriter wants to write a brilliant script and it's a well known fact that some profound investigation needs to be done for this to be accomplished. So what exactly is digging deep and going beyond the facts? What exactly is the scriptwriter looking for and how can it be defined? There are a few ways of looking at these concerns. Suppose a scriptwriter is researching a film on the migratory killer whales or Orcas off the New Zealand coast. Here is an example of the kinds of research material he might look for:

- The 'Top' of the issue

  The top of the issue includes the facts; killer whales and their appearance, migratory patterns and when they go, where are they spotted, their behavior, their sounds, activities, intelligence. The scriptwriter could delve into scientific research being done on the whales by interviewing two marine researchers, lets call them Ted and Sue, a couple who live and work on the New Zealand coast. The writer could find out the history of the Orcas and the role that humans played in it. Ted and Sue could even take the scriptwriter on a whale observing expedition, where he would experience the whales first hand and also get an idea of what could be shot for the film.

- The 'Heart' of the issue

  The scriptwriter could find out more insightful details about the whales as living creatures and fellow mammals. Do they love, do they hate? Why do they beach themselves all together – is it really collective suicide because they mourn their dead like us humans? What kinds of relationships do they have among each other? Yes, a mother whale is attached to her calf, but are the aunts, the uncles? What do they say to each other when they click and whine? Have Ted and Sue ever come into close contact with any whale? Did they feel a connection? How did the whale react to human contact and was it significant in terms of its emotional value? What did the scriptwriter feel when he looked at a whale for the first time and did he get a sense of the 'spirit' of the creature?

- The 'Root' of the issue

  The scriptwriter would find out that the whales have a tragic history because of the excessive whaling that took place in past decades. This tragic and brutal past was because of people, who hunted them almost to extinction. Could their subsequent conservation by people later on be a result of guilt? The scriptwriter could ask what larger role this film could have and the answer might well be to aid in conserving the Orcas for the future by dispelling myths and increasing awareness. This could the message of the film; that everybody needs to get on board to save the killer whale and help them flourish in the oceans.

- The 'Branches' of the issue

  The scriptwriter could try and find related issues that would add value to the film. Does the migration of the whales have any effect on the surrounding ecosystems? How about thinking about the spirit of travel or of the ocean itself? Perhaps talk to a person or a group of people who have saved a beached killer whale in the past. Or go in the opposite direction and talk to a person who has killed a killer whale or eaten one. The possibilities of branching out to explore the issue in greater detail are endless. The scriptwriter should then choose which of the details add value to the film.

- Finding Challenges

  An issue, when explored in a film, is incomplete when there is nothing introduced that challenges it. The scriptwriter must study the challenges facing the killer whale and their survival as a species. What is being done by people that is hurting their health and causing their numbers to decline, if at all? Are there any challenges put forth by nature that they have to overcome, for instance, like changing temperatures in the waters of the Antarctic? How about large sharks and the threat they pose? Then, the scriptwriter must ask, 'Is it possible for the killer whales to triumph over these challenges?" and "If they can, then how?" and possibly even, "What can people (i.e. the audience) do to help?"

Sifting the rice from the chaff: The Post-it Method

Once you've done all there was to do, gathered every bit of relevant information, followed every interesting lead and asked every insightful question, chances are you'll have more material than you need. At this stage, it's time to start thinking about which bits of information are going to figure in the film. It's time to start ruthlessly eliminating material that just doesn't tell the story. A film lasts for only so long and there are only so many things to be said.

Organizing research into a comprehensive story basically involves cutting and pasting and seeing which bits of material can follow and 'flow' into each other. A good technique is to write down each piece of information in a few words on a post-it or cue card or simply any small piece of paper. For example: one post-it could state "Whales regularly beach themselves in large numbers" and another one could say "Sue looked into the whale's eyes and cried" etc. Then, stick the post-its in random order on a blank board or wall in columns and rows. After that, the scriptwriter must start a painful process of plucking, discarding and re-sticking until he forms an information chain, which tells the story the writer wants to tell. The only requirement of the story at this stage is that the information must 'flow' and all the futile bits of material are discarded. It's now time to start thinking about writing that script.

ESSENTIAL SCRIPT ELEMENTS

Whereas film has no grammar per say, there are certain 'rules' of usage in cinematic language and *syntax*, or systematic arrangement, orders these rules and the relationships between them. This syntax has been determined as a result of the usage of film elements over the years and is not necessarily a determinant of them. Film syntax evolved much like a language. It was an organic development, descriptive rather than prescriptive and constantly changing and evolving. This evolution is still taking place and new thresholds are being pushed by filmmakers everyday. As a basic guide, however, it is important to know these 'rules' even if only to break them.

There are three elements of film 'language' that should be studied by a script writer and incorporated into a script:

1. Visual Elements

The visual elements of film, or what the audience 'sees' on screen is one of the most integral aspects of writing a script. It's important to understand, firstly, how a film is composed structurally from its smallest component. In a script, this is usually a shot.

- ### The Shot

  A shot is a single 'take' on an image. It starts and finishes at a 'cut-point', which is an editing break in the image. A shot is not defined by any particular image, action or event that takes place on screen. It is more a technical concept. You can have a single shot of a man picking up a paper or two or three of the same thing. It's basically what occurs between two breaks in editing. In a script, a shot is the smallest visual unit of structure.

  Action, Action, Action. You can't say it often enough!

  There is a reason why film is called 'moving images'. It's what differentiates it from photographs or painting. Technically, a shot may be a structural unit of film language, but what it contains is more important – action. Shots are made of action. Something needs to be 'happening' in a shot for the audience to see – a man walking, a dog barking, a car reversing, a machine working, a river flowing – anything at all that has action, images moving. These actions form events that drive the shot forward to completion.

  It's not enough however, just to have random action on screen. The images, the action, the events have to be meaningful. A documentary, like any film, has limited time in which to convey a multitude of things and to tell a story. Therefore, all the components within the film must be specific and meaningful so as not to waste precious screen time. Each shot has an underlying 'meaning' depending on the nature and arrangement of objects and actions within it. This

visual way of communication or language has evolved through the years and has three basic elements:

1. **Icon** is showing an object or emotion through its likeness – it is what it is and what the audience sees. The signifier represents the signified through similarity to it. For example, a face on screen showing fear is a face showing fear. There are no other meanings, no 'reading between the lines'. This is the most straightforward approach to a shot.

2. **Index** measures a quality not because it is identical to it (like an icon), but because it has a direct and inherent relationship to it. For example, to show heat, or the idea of heat, as a visual, the shot could show a thermometer or heat waves over an empty road or perhaps even a man sweating profusely. This works very well because the scriptwriter can translate an intangible object, like heat, into a tangible and visual reality.

3. **Symbol** or **Metaphor** is an arbitrary sign in which the signifier has neither a direct nor an indexical relationship with the signified, but rather represents it through convention. For example, a rose could be shown to signify love or romance, falling calendar pages could denote time. This technique of using symbols to express ideas and objects has become very popular for its artistic appeal but can and should be used with caution and with a view to the audience's ability to 'read between the lines'.

*   The <u>Sequence</u>

    A sequence is a collection of shots put together that tell a story continuously. A sequence is an autonomous piece of the larger story of the film. An entire film is made up of a series of sequences, which can be of varying durations, and are connected to each other in some way. Each sequence has a visual and audio aspect to it.

    If a shot is made up of action, a sequence is made up of events. Events mean change in action. These events are built up by the action in the shots to make some sort of sense to the audience and pass along information to them.

    Sequences usually fall into one of two categories:

    1. **A Continuity Sequence** is a unit of continuing action which ends in a break in time. This type of sequence is a collection of shots that show an event or events that happened in the same block of time. The end of the sequence occurs when that event is complete and the film moves on to another point in time. The shots within this kind of sequence must be functional, must be logical and must give the illusion of continuity. For example, a continuity sequence could be of a man walking from his

house to his office. The sequence starts from when he is outside his front door and the first shot could be of him locking it. After that there could be shots of him walking along the street in his neighbourhood, passing people on the street, going past a children's park, walking on a pedestrian path with other office goers and, finally, walking into the entrance of his office building. The shots in this sequence would all appear to be in chronological order and continuous.

2. **A Compilation Sequence** is a unit of information or thought and is sometimes called a 'newsreel sequence'. There may be many breaks in time during this kind of sequence because the scope is broad. The shots within it could be of events that occurred independently, at different points in time, at different locations and contain different people doing different things. The common aspect that ties all these shots together is conceptual, which is the subject of the sequence. It usually ends when the film's discussion of the subject ends. For example, the sequence could be about worldwide protests against war and could contain different shots of people from all parts of the globe, some holding banners, some marching hand-in-hand, some giving speeches etc. the sequence would end, when the subject of these protests ended in the film.

A scriptwriter has many choices to make when deciding about the content, treatment and nature of sequences. They can have their own distinct 'personalities'. A sequence can have a completely autonomous audio-visual and conceptual quality to it. A sequence can be a mere chronological aspect within the film, like a link in a chain, without anything distinct about it. A sequence can be descriptive, where it doesn't take a stand but just establishes details. Or it can be a strong part of the narrative within the story and contain events that drive the story forward. A sequence can occur in linear time, which is the real time in which events occur, or in non-linear time, when it can cut back and forth between different moments in time.

Documentary sequences, for the most part, are observational. This means that they observe events as they happen. If the film didn't record the event, it would still take place. For example, a village farmer herding his cattle to graze in the fields is an event that would occur everyday, whether or not there was a sequence that contained it. However, sequences can also be organized. These days, many filmmakers choose to construct or initiate events that can be then included in a sequence. For example, if the film dealt with the issue of the fur trade and how animal rights activists are combating this evil, the filmmaker could organize a rally with a group of activists and use that sequence in the film. The rally would be a real event and the filmmaker's involvement in organizing it doesn't affect its authenticity.

- The Montage

  A montage is a sequence of sorts. It's a process of combining a number of small shots and weaving them together to communicate a large amount of information in a short time. The shots are usually not strictly continuous in nature nor need they be compiled according to subject. A montage can create a whole new meaning out of the two original meanings of adjacent shots just by coupling them together in a flowing, musical way. This visual technique is often used extensively by filmmakers to cover either broad areas of subject matter or to portray emotion. For example, a documentary may use a montage to portray the past life of an individual character in the film, covering large chunks of childhood, adolescence, young adulthood and middle age, all in a matter of seconds.

- Talking heads

  One of the most common features of a documentary is talking heads. This includes either interviews of people on camera or people talking directly to the audience on camera or both. Since documentary is non-fiction, the idea of people talking to the camera, or a filmmaker seated behind the camera is an acceptable story-telling/information giving technique. Often these talking heads are experts, people involved in the stories or people who are directly or indirectly related to the subject matter in some form. For example, a film on forest conservation in the Himalayas may have interviews with officials from the government forest dept, with villagers who live in the forests, with conservation experts, people involved with logging and maybe even people protesting against logging.

- Colours, textures and Lines

  Elements of line, texture and colour all carry their own weights in a film, counteracting, reinforcing, counter pointing and balancing each other within frames in a complex system. These are read by the senses of the audience on a sub-conscious level and are used extensively by filmmakers to add new dimensions in film.

  With the advent of multi-coloured films, a whole new visual world opened up to both the audience, who could now see images as they existed in real life, and for filmmakers, who could experiment that much further with the medium. Colour and its presence or absence from a film can make a significant difference to the film's message and mood.

  Colour Symbolism is when colour is used deliberately as a symbol on film. Colour speaks and the language of colour, harnessed in a film, is a powerful one. The choice of hues for certain items or its use in out-of-the-ordinary contexts and even the type of lighting used portrays subliminal messages to the audience. A red t-shirt worn by the subject during a sequence may subliminally portray him as a

passionate person to the audience. Background colours or the time of day (an orange sunset or an over-exposed, sunny afternoon) have their own symbolism. A dark silhouette of a person walking in an alley may imply he is up to no good.

If a sequence is being organized by the filmmaker, the scriptwriter can have more of a free hand with colour. Demonstrators wearing the colours of a funeral may be protesting the death of democracy; Bright, kitsch clothing may, on the other hand, represent a generation breaking away from tradition. Streets filled with different colours may present a vibrant society, a cultural hub, festivity, growth; the same streets in dull grey or faded colours may present poverty, disease and degeneration.

It is important, however, not to get carried away with colour. That is where **Colour Pertinence** comes in. There are millions of hues to choose from and vast possibilities when using colour to communicate with the audience. It is easy to get carried away and try and use colour excessively as a medium. Documentaries are about authenticity and the scriptwriter must always remember that subject comes before form. The elements the scriptwriter uses must be in keeping with real events and people. Also, colour can be a powerful element when it is used with discretion and subtlety. Too much colour may give irritate the audience's senses or may confuse them. Too many colours may lead to the audience overlooking their individual significance or misunderstanding the message.

Textures within a film work on very much the same principles as colour. Texture is important, not only in terms of the inherent texture of the subject but also the texture of the image. Documentary filmmakers often use texture to their advantage by giving old footage a 'grainy' texture, thereby signifying that the footage is of real events that happened in the past. A 'sepia' texture is often used in recreations/flashbacks for the same purpose. Layering of different shots on top of each other in a half-dissolve has become a popular technique with documentary filmmakers as it creates an almost musical texture.

Lines and form within a frame in a documentary film are also important and can add another dimension. A man walking tall amidst the vertical columns of an old building will immediately be perceived by the audience as someone powerful. The same columns bathed in dark lighting so that only the layers are shown may imply that he has a dark or negative power. In the same way, a man lying in a field of short grass and looking at a flat, striking horizon may be perceived as submissive to the grandeur of nature.

In feature films, these elements are used extensively by filmmakers and they can be applied within real environments by documentary filmmakers as well. Even though, in documentaries, there is sometimes little control over the objects and locations to be shot on camera, the scriptwriter can still incorporate them into the story in many ways by suggesting interesting shots and sequences that are pertinent and relevant to the subject matter. However, this level of detail need not

be attempted for every shot and every sequence within the script as documentaries naturally tend to involve less image control.

Sound Elements

Sound is as important as the image. Unfortunately, this fact wasn't realized until quite recently. Sound has always been an extremely underrated aspect of filmmaking and, consequently, sound syntax and even technology developed quite slowly compared to its visual counterpart. One of the reasons this may have happened is because the audience does not 'read' sound in the same way that it does the visual image. Sound is not only omnipresent but also omni-directional and this pervasiveness led to it being traditionally discounted as an important medium of film.

These days, the same pervasiveness is considered beneficial and filmmakers have learnt that sound can be manipulated effectively to enhance a film. The fact is, sound is sometimes far more effective a medium in film than the visual image. Christian Metz identified five channels of information in film: (a) the visual image (b) print and other graphics (c) speech (d) music; and (e) noise. Interestingly, three of the five channels are auditory rather than visual, giving testament to the importance of sound in any film.

However, even though it's given its due by filmmakers, fiction and documentary alike, sound is often not considered enough at the scriptwriting stage. A soundtrack can strengthen script moments and sequences and realize both space and time. In documentary, sound can be a vivid counterpart to the visual, adding to the drama and realism of the overall film. It is for this reason that the scriptwriter must incorporate sound into the script.

Normally, there are six types of sound in a film:

1. Narrative commentary / Voice over

    Narration is the sound-track commentary that sometimes accompanies a visual image in a documentary. It's also often called a 'voice-over' and it can be spoken by one or more off-screen commentators. The commentator can be virtually anybody, from a character in the film, the filmmaker to even someone completely unidentified, whom the audience only relates to by his/her voice. Voice-over narration has always been a very popular tool in documentaries because it is an easy and effective way to communicate verbal information in the absence of dialogue between actors. However, many filmmakers choose to do away with narration, preferring to communicate verbal information to the audience through talking heads.

2. Talking heads

    The speech element of talking heads, or interviews, is an important element of the soundtrack and also an effective way to communicate information to the audience. In documentary, filmmakers often choose to discard narration completely in

favour of talking heads, as they come across as more credible and in keeping with the non-fiction nature of documentary. The audience is able to identify the person talking, thus making their experience more organic for them. The filmmaker is then also able to show the interviewee talking, cut to visual images while continuing the voice of the interviewee over these images, which may support or supplement what he is saying. This provides a smooth flow of sound for the audience, who will 'know' the voice they are listening to and thus feel more empathy with it.

Narration and talking heads are not exclusive of each other as audio communication techniques. Even though some filmmakers prefer only using talking heads these days, many documentaries have a bit of both and they work quite well together.

3. Music

Feature films have traditionally always relied heavily on music as part of the soundtrack. Music directors and composers would create masterpieces, which sometimes carried entire visual sequences. Some films were even defined and identified by their trademark musical soundtracks. It is often said that the musical theme of the feature film *Jaws* (1975) created an entire generation of people afraid to swim in the ocean for fear of a shark attack. Like feature films, documentaries also use music to enhance moments and create moods and cultural flavour in the film. Background music appeals on an emotional level with the audience and increases the level of empathy with the events on screen. Music is also used to establish a particular geographical location or identify a particular community; for example, images of a rice field, accompanied by Indian folk music, easily identify the location as somewhere in India.

4. Ambiance sound

The sound that is naturally present in the atmosphere surrounding the visual image and is recorded simultaneously with it is called ambiance sound. Traditionally, this sound was referred to as 'noise' and speech and music were given more attention. However, as sound technology developed, filmmakers realized its importance in the construction of a complete soundtrack. More than anything else, this type of sound is essential to the creation of a location atmosphere. The environment's sound or what is often called 'room tone', based on the reverberation time and harmonics of a particular location is its signature. In documentary, ambiance sound is a necessary part of the soundtrack as it establishes the film's visual in reality and gives the audience a realization of space and time. This is invaluable when dealing with non-fictional subjects. Normally, ambiance sound is used continuously, along with other types of sound, throughout most of the documentary.

5. Sound effects

   Any sound that is not speech, music or ambiance and is artificially injected into the soundtrack to enhance it is called a sound effect. This could be a natural sound like a bird chirping to a digitally created or distorted sound like microphone feedback etc. In the old days of film, sound technicians would have to create thousands of sound effects to put in a film in the absence of ambiance sound. This was needed when either the camera was unable to record sound or when shooting took place in studios, where the ambiance would have been at odds with the visuals on screen. These days, sound effects are used to enhance the film's subject or mood, during recreations or when the required sound is missing from the recorded ambiance. For example: sounds of horses galloping, men screaming and the clang of weapons against each other could be used while showing a recreated sequence of an ancient battle; or the sound of a helicopter could be injected into a shot of a helicopter flying that was shot from too far away to catch the original ambiance.

6. Silence

   It may sound odd to add the lack of sound as a type of sound element, but in the world of film, where everything is deliberate, even silence within the film means that the filmmaker has chosen to put it there.

   In the days of silent films, filmmakers used to hire live orchestras to play while the film was being screened to add to their entertainment value. Today's filmmakers have realized the power of silence. The lack of any sound over a particular moment in a film forces the audience to focus on the visual and heightens their anticipation for the moment when the something happens or when sound re-enters the picture. This is a technique used quite frequently in horror films. In documentary, the scriptwriter can use this technique when he wants the audience to hone in on the visual to such an extent that it takes them into a kind of suspended or unnatural reality. However, unless it is a silent film or silence plays a thematic role in the film, this element should be used sparingly. Too long a gap between sounds will struggle to hold audience attention.

Story Elements

Music, whether it's hip-hop or classical, would just be noise without a story. A painting would be just a collage without a story. Across art forms, the innate story is as variable as it is constant.

A script is not just a compilation of words. It is a compilation of conceptual elements that tell a story. These elements when woven together with audiovisual elements create a good film.

Every film, fiction or documentary, tells a story. The elements of story have been borrowed over time from other art forms like literature and theatre and adapted to suit film form. The story and its structure are often what make the difference between a good script and an average one and it is important for any scriptwriter to study them thoroughly.

Like in all other art forms, film story has three broad structural elements:

- A beginning
- A middle
- An end

The beginning

The importance of a good beginning cannot be stressed enough. The beginning sets the audience up for all the events about to occur in the film. It sets the tone and mood for the film and hints at surprises that lie ahead by raising the right questions in the minds of the audience. In documentary, the beginning always addresses the issue at hand and introduces the subject to the audience.

A good beginning does these things:

1. **Creates an audiovisual** 'hook' to catch the audience's interest. A 'hook' is something that demands attention and places the film contextually in space and time. It sets up the flavour of things to come, both in a story and audiovisual sense.

2. **Establishes the** 'core assertion' **of the film**, which is the point the filmmaker wants to make through the documentary and the message he wants to communicate to the audience. It is this message around which the entire film is built going forward.

3. **Creates curiosity** among the audience. A good beginning reveals the subject and issue at hand to the audience in such a way that they become keen to see the events that follow in the film.

4. **Shows change or the promise of change**, which is one of the inherent elements of story and of film.

5. **Creates the element of consequence**, which is one event leading to another. Cause and effect will direct the audience and increase their understanding of the subject matter.

The Inciting Incident is often a common feature used in the beginning to start a story. It is an incident that radically upsets the balance of forces within the film's story. It is a dynamic and fully developed event, not something vague. As a story

begins, the forces at play are arranged in a particular way, whether they are balanced or not. The inciting incident is any event that swings reality in either a negative or positive way, creating imbalance relative to the previous way. This storytelling technique is useful because the forces within the film must then react to the inciting incident, setting the story on its way into the middle. For example; the leader of a small desert community could be informed that a large corporation was planning to buy the nearest oasis from the government, effectively creating a water crunch in his community. The leader could be spurred to then organize his people to ensure the government doesn't sell their precious natural water supply.

The leader obtaining the knowledge that his community's water supply was in trouble is the inciting incident. This incident upset the balance of forces and impelled them to react.

The Middle

The big, unwritten space that is the middle of the film is often a daunting challenge for the scriptwriter. Many scriptwriters focus on the dramatic beginning and end of their film and get confused and lost in the middle, leading to a meandering series of events that lack focus.

The key to a good middle is structure. The scriptwriter must ensure that the middle of the film presents a chain of logic designed to prove its core assertion. Each event and action must be pertinent and in keeping with the subject and tone of the film. The issues at hand must be kept in strict focus and events must be arranged in such a way to ensure that the film keeps moving along and progressing. This 'tight' structure will result in a dynamic and interesting middle.

In order to ensure an effective middle, it helps to divide it further into independent parts, which come together to form a whole and tell the story. Thereby, the scriptwriter can think in terms of small, contained chunks of information and place them according to relevance and importance. These chunks of information are sequences.

A good middle consists of good sequences, which also have their own beginnings, middles and ends. Within the sequences, the flow of events determines these parameters. There could many types of sequences within a film, ranging from the dramatic ones that decide the film's direction, to the sequences that lead up to and follow after the dramatic ones. The scriptwriter must allot a particular message for each sequence and ensure that each one has an impact on its own. Then, he can explore the order in which he will place them all depending on flow of information and the gradual increase of impact.

These sequences must be related to each other and unified as a whole in order to give the film a flow. The scriptwriter can use the following criteria to relate and unify them:

1. Concept, idea, thought – The most common link between sequences is subject matter. Each sequence is related with the others through the common issues it deals with.

2. Action – Sequences can be related to each other through the kinds of events and actions they portray.

3. Setting – Many of the sequences may share a common location and many more may have different locations within a common, larger setting.

4. Character – Sequences in a film often share the same characters and are, therefore, unified by these common characters.

5. Mood – Sequences can often relate to each other by having a common flavour or mood. For example, one sequence could show slum streets around the world, another could show the defeated faces of employment seekers. The two sequences are related by the gravity and desolation of their mood.

The Elements of Pacing - Rhythm and Tempo

Because a story is a metaphor of life, we expect it to feel like life, to have the pace, rhythm and tempo of life. *Rhythm* is set by the length of sequences. It is important to vary the length of sequences and not keep them long or repetitive. Most sequences are visually expressive in one location within two or three minutes. A sequence held too long in one place becomes redundant and loses audience attention. *Tempo* is the level of activity within a sequence. A person staring out of a window contemplating life may have a low tempo; a riot will naturally have a high tempo. In a well-told story, the progression of sequences normally accelerates pace. As he heads toward a dramatic point in the film, the scriptwriter could take advantage of rhythm and tempo to progressively shorten scenes while the actions in them become more and more brisk. Immediately after a dramatic point in the film, the scriptwriter can 'let the audience breathe' and slow down the pace. Dramatic sequences themselves are usually played out for maximum impact and the length depends very much on the subjects and events of the individual sequence. Pace begins in the script and it is important that the scriptwriter to incorporate it at this stage.

'Beats'

Beats are a useful technique often used by scriptwriters in creating pace for the film. A beat is the smallest element of structural technique. It is an exchange of behavior in action/reaction. Beat by beat these changing behaviors shape a sequence. A sequence needn't be built up of just one action. It can have multiple actions, and each action is one beat. For example; A man could walk into a room,

walk to the window and look out, sit down on a chair, pick up a book and read it, put down the book, get up and leave the room. This sequence has five beats – 1. Walking into the room, 2. Looking out the window, 3. Sitting down, 4. Reading a book 5. Getting up and out of the room.

The scriptwriter can benefit from breaking down each sequence into beats because he can then have greater control over the sequence. He can shave off beats to make a sequence shorter, add more beats to make it longer or increase and decrease the tempo of beats to suit the point of time in which the sequence occurs. In documentary, the scriptwriter may have limited control over the nature of actions that take place in a sequence, but he can control how many of them feature in the final film.

Linear Vs Non-linear time

The scriptwriter also has a choice whether to order the sequences in linear time, meaning a temporal order of the events that occurred, or in non-linear time, a random order where the film can switch back and forth between events that occurred at different points of time without any temporal continuity. Whereas linear time is a more traditional method of arranging sequences, many documentary scriptwriters these days opt for non-linear time to tell a story. Non-linear time is generally held to the more 'interesting' of the two because the scriptwriter has far greater control over the amount of information revealed to the audience at every stage since they may not initially follow the order of events. However, this is a difficult arrangement to master and the scriptwriter needs to be completely clued into the audience reactions and provide information in a succinct manner so as not to confuse or overwhelm them. The scriptwriter can also combine the two arrangements to the extent that he can have some sequences arranged chronologically and occasionally slip into the future or the past using flashbacks and recreations.

Transitions

Every story needs to have a seamless progression between sequences for the entire thing to work. For this, it needs to have something to link the tail of each sequence to the head of the next sequence. Generally, we find this linking element in one of two possibilities: what the two sequences have in common, or what they have in opposition. A 'Transition' is something held in common by two sequences or counter pointed between them. This common or counter element can be many different things:

- *A character trait or situation*; Two adjacent sequences could feature people with similar or completely opposite traits and the transition would be smooth. For example; the eyes of a man to the eyes of a woman, or the eyes of a man who can see to the eyes of a blind man.

- *An action*; Any event that continues naturally from one to the other has a smooth transition, as do events that may follow each other chronologically, but are opposites. For example, boisterous noise in a room to cold silence.

- *An object*; A smooth transition would be between two similar objects, like a greenhouse interior to a forest, or two opposites, like the Sahara Desert to the Arctic.

- *A word*; a word or a phrase used in the narrative could link two sequences. For example, the same word occurring in both sequences or one sequence featuring the word 'dark' and the next featuring the word 'light' in the narrative.

- *A quality of light*; two similar or opposite moods created by film lighting could transition sequences smoothly. For example; a shadowy meadow to a shadowy room or a bright afternoon to a clear, moonlight night.

- *A sound*; one sound or similar type of sound could be a 'sound-bridge' between two sequences, or one type of sound could turn into its exact opposite. For example, the notes of a violin from one violin player to an orchestra or from the notes of a violin to the din of construction machinery.

- *An idea*; an abstract idea, metaphor or concept could connect two sequences as well. For example, a wilting bunch of flowers to the deathbed of an old man.

The Element of Progression

Many a time, a film starts off with a bang and fizzles down to a boring rut by the time it reaches the middle. This is the result of the scriptwriter's imagination going limp at the worst possible time. The scriptwriter must keep in mind that a story must not retreat to actions of lesser intensity or magnitude but move progressively forward to a final action. The events must become bigger and better and their excitement and involvement must gradually increase as the film move forward. This is called progression. The scriptwriter must never resort to repetition, staying on one point too long or showing too many similar events. The movement forward needs to be sharp and planned. This presents a tricky problem to the scriptwriter in terms of how to express the element of progression. Broadly, there are four techniques to this:

- Social Progression – this is when the film progressively widens its character's actions and expressions into society and social situations. Gradually, the film may feature more and more people,

allow their actions to ramify outward into their communities and into the world around them thereby affecting the lives of other people. The idea behind this technique is to start small with only a few people and a simpler story, then gradually build and add more dimensions to it in a powerful progression of events. For example; a story about a farmer's land being repossessed by the government could lead to the documentary questioning government policy and involving farmers from all over the country.

- Personal Progression – If the subject matter of the film doesn't require an outward progression, then it can be just as effective to progress inwards instead. Human beings are deeper within than has been discovered and there is plenty of material inside our minds and hearts for a documentary to explore. The idea behind this technique is to start with a simple storyline and go from the outside in, making it more and more layered emotionally, psychologically, physically, morally and perhaps even go into darker elements of the human personality. For example; a story about a man struggling to deal with survivor's guilt could go deep into human psychology and explore how we perceive death and dealing with surviving a deadly situation while another didn't make it.

- Symbolic ascension – There are countless, imaginative realms of symbolism to which a film could progress. The scriptwriter could build the symbolic energy of the story from the particular to the universal, from the specific to the archetypal. Subliminal symbolism, added subtly to a film in layers lifts the telling of a story into the next level of expression. As the story progresses, the film could feature concepts and images that are more and more meaningful until everything stands for universal ideas. This technique may not be completely in keeping with the realism of documentary, but it can be used extensively if the subject is in keeping with the symbolic nature of the film. For example; a film on art could progress from a painter's story to symbolic expressions of art and the universal need for artistic expression.

- Ironic ascension – Irony is not a straightforward concept. It sees life in duality and plays with our ideas of what seems and what is. To portray irony with words is easier than in a story on film. The scriptwriter needs to have an ironic sense to incorporate it into a film with élan. He must also put a lot of trust in the audience's ability to 'get' the irony. A film with ironic ascension could show a progressively dominant play between actions and results and between appearance and reality. For example; a documentary could feature a community fighting for their right to information and for the government to release confidential local documents.

They could, as the film progresses, discover that they could gain the right to access confidential documents, but most had already been destroyed.

<u>The End</u>

In the words of Aristotle, an ending must be both 'inevitable' and 'unexpected.' The end of a film is what the audience takes home with them. It is the primary factor that determines audience opinion about the film they've just seen. The end is when the film concludes with a conclusion, usually a reiteration of the core assertion of the film. In many films, this is done by hammering home the assertion with a 'key feature', which could be a anything from a phrase to a visual, or many visuals, to one last event that sets the impression to be left on the audience in stone. All or many issues are hopefully, or at least temporarily, resolved in the end of a film. That is why it is also called the Resolution of the film.

Broadly speaking, there are two types of film endings in documentary:

- Closed End

  A closed ending is usually one where all the questions raised in the story are answered and all emotions evoked are satisfied. The audience is left with a rounded and closed, overall experience that leaves nothing further to doubt or question. This type of ending is absolute and irreversible and the film's subject cannot be extended. For example; a documentary about a particular sect of women working to change divorce law by passing a bill in parliament could end with the bill being passed and the battle being won. This kind of ending doesn't leave anything further to be said on the matter and the audience is left with a feeling of closure.

- Open End

  An open ending is usually one which leaves one, some or many questions unanswered and some emotions unfulfilled. This type of ending relies heavily on audience imagination to fill in the gaps once the lights have come on. The 'open' implication doesn't mean the film finishes in the middle, leaving everything hanging unresolved. The questions left are answerable and the emotions resolvable and all that has gone before has led to clear and limited alternatives that make a certain degree of closure possible for the audience. For example; a documentary about inter-religious relations during Independence Day celebrations in a particular country may end as night falls on the festivities, but many questions as to the future of relations between the religious groups may be left unanswered. This type of ending has become very popular in documentary films after many filmmakers started realizing that the issues most

documentaries deal with are part of larger problems facing the world to which there are no clear cut solutions or answers.

Each ending has a decided flavour, a mood. A resolution can occur in so many different ways. 'Happy endings' have always been popular in feature films as they leave the audience on a 'happy high.' In documentary, things are not so straightforward. The flavour or mood of the ending must be determined by the events of real life and cannot be controlled by the scriptwriter. Depending on the events that occur, the ending can be optimistic, pessimistic or even ironic in nature. The scriptwriter must judge the mood of the ending after studying the conclusions the film has come to based on the turn of events. Some issues may be left unresolved, some may have taken a turn for the worse. Many scriptwriters feel the pressure to 'find the silver lining' and leave the audience on a high, but they should be obliged to stick to the truth and tell it like it is.

The end of a feature film is often called a 'climax'. It is when the story builds to a last revolution in values from positive to negative or negative to positive, with or without irony, at maximum charge that's absolute and irreversible. Basically, something big happens in the end that changes the film radically and moves the audience. The process of building to this climactic end is also often applied to documentaries in a toned down manner because it works so well in feature films. 'Saving the best for last' is the old adage and the climactic sequence/series of sequences are the most meaningful and dramatic in the film in terms of resolving the issues at hand. The climax is the last leap of the scriptwriter's imagination and should be clear and self-evident, requiring no explanation and playing out in a dramatic rhythm and tempo. For example; a documentary about two boxing champions may end with a climactic series of sequences in which they fight each other for the boxing title. The scriptwriter could make winning or losing the title into a spectacular drama played out in the ring and keep the audience on the edge of their seats.

Character

Traditionally, characters were the people in the film. However, as both fiction and documentary films became more varied and complex, this simplistic view of who or what is a character was discarded and a new definition was coined based on a broader scope.

Simply put, characters are the significant 'beings' in your film. A character can be human, animal and, in some films, even an object or a location. Anything that has the ability to take action or suffer consequences can be a character. However, a character is always viewed from a human perspective. This is just simply because the filmmakers are human and the audience is human and therefore, we unconsciously try and attribute human qualities to all characters in a film, even though they may not be human. For a scriptwriter, it helps to think of characters from this angle as it makes them more understandable. People are easier to deal with than, say, a rock. As humans, we may never understand a rock completely, so we can portray it as a character in a film with

regards to its relationship with humans. When studying characters, it always helps to go back to the traditional definition and think of them as human, the people in a film.

Character is a central part of story structure and is regarded as possibly the most important aspect of a film by many. Every film must have characters and whatever happens within a film, must happen to the characters. They are our representatives inside the film, experiencing it for us, making complex topics accessible to us as viewers. If the story is about people, then the people the story is about are the characters. If the story and subject is not about people then the people the story affects are the characters. For example; if the documentary is about a married couple and the process of them getting a divorce, then the characters in the film are the couple themselves and the people facilitating or opposing the divorce like family members, lawyers etc. If the film is about democracy, then the characters in the film could be representatives among a larger population whom democracy, or the lack of it, affects. These could be citizens of a country, policy makers or perhaps members of government institutions and the press.

There are two broad types of characters in a film:

- Central character/s

  The character the story is about is a central character. This is the protagonist whose story is being told in the film. It could be one person or a few people. These people are directly related to the subject at hand and are the primary vehicles that carry the story forward through their actions and reactions.

- Secondary character/s

  The characters that surround the central character are the secondary characters. These characters are usually indirectly related to the subject at hand and are playing a part in helping the central character proceed in the story. The story is not about them, they are part of the larger story. These characters interact indirectly with the story through the central character.

Single Protagonist Vs Multiple Central Characters

A film about a school boy who faces bulling in school has one central character – the boy himself. A film about a group of four school children who have been victims of bullying and have come together to stop this practice in their school may have the four children as central characters unless the scriptwriter chooses to tell the story through only one of the children, thereby making him the central character. The decision to tell a story through one protagonist or multiple protagonists depends on a few factors like the scope of the subject and whether it needs more characters to cover that scope, the types of people involved in the story and to what extent they are a part of it and the length of the film and how many characters can realistically be featured during that time. A single protagonist

may result in a focused, simpler film and will also be easier to tackle in terms of story. However, multiple protagonists, while making a story more complex and difficult to write, may add variety, multiple dimensions and interest to the film. It is not advisable, however, to have too many protagonists in one film as the audience will get confused after a point. Many multiple characters make a story more horizontal, spreading it out in scope, and this may hinder the vertical progression of the film after a point.

True Character and Characterisation

Characters have personalities. In fiction films, characters are created by the scriptwriter and are fictional representations of real people. In documentary films, characters actually are real people with real traits. While the scriptwriter may not have control over the kind of personality traits the characters in his film have, it is imperative that he study these traits and incorporate them in the script.

Characterisation is a writer's term for the sum of all the visible traits of a character in the film. Age, gender and IQ, speech and gesture, education and occupation, personality, values and attitudes. The totality of various combinations of these traits makes each person unique. A character may be an ambitious, confident woman, who has a good sense of humour and loves sports. She may be impatient and demanding of others around her and have a chip on her shoulder about being a woman in a man's world. She may have feminist beliefs but loves cooking and cleaning. These traits are visible parts of her personality and can be incorporated easily by the scriptwriter into the woman's actions in the film. These traits are also important in making the audience 'connect' with the woman on a human level. She is like them, shares parts of their own personalities and, therefore, they can relate to her.

True character is revealed in the choices a character makes under pressure – the greater the pressure, the deeper the revelation, the truer the choice to the character's essential nature. True character lies beneath characterization and is revealed slowly to the audience over the course of the film through the actions of the character. It asks the question, 'Regardless of appearances, who really is this person?' Is the woman courageous or cowardly, generous or selfish? As she chooses, she is. For example, the same woman, despite believing herself to be a compassionate person, may witness an accident on the road in the middle of the night and not stop to help the victims for fear of her own safety. By her choice, she has revealed an aspect of her true character to the audience. This is an important aspect of character and should be studied and incorporated by the scriptwriter into the documentary as far as possible. The gradual revelation of true character adds incredible dimension, surprise and audience interest in a film.

The 'Plot' of the Story

The words 'to plot' literally means to figure out a path to enter or exit a situation. In a story sense 'the plot' is when a story navigates through branching possibilities to choose a path that will lead to a resolution. The plot of a story is where every sequence in the film makes the next one inevitable because of their events and design in time. Every story

needs to have a plot, no matter how small, to move the story forward towards a goal. There needn't be dramatic twists and turns or high pressure suspense or shocking surprise. A plot can merely be a selection of events and their patterns displayed through time in the film. The scriptwriter must make event choices – what to include and what to exclude – and place them in a particular order.

The plot is a unifying force that holds a story together. If the film were a human body, then the plot would be the spine, creating unity between all the elements. Even when the story portrays chaos, the plot is what keeps the audience on track. The plot always adheres to a 'controlling idea', which is the ultimate point that the film is trying to make.

The plot of the film is designed as a larger whole by the scriptwriter. In many cases, the film starts a plot in one direction and then makes it change direction sometime during a film towards a completely new goal. For example; a documentary film that shows a lawyer trying to defend his young, male client could start off with a strong belief in the innocence of the man. Then, in the middle of the film, the lawyer could be presented with startling evidence that shows his client was guilty and he could actually try and have him convicted. This sweeping change that takes the film from one condition to a changed condition by the end is called the *Plot Arc*.

There are broadly three types of plot:

- The Archplot – The Archplot is a classic plot design. It has well-defined characters that face situations outside of themselves. The progression is more social and external and the treatment is set in continuous, linear time. The Archplot has a strong sense of reality and there is a closed ending. The plot arc has absolute, irreversible change.

- The Miniplot – The Mini-plot is a minimalist form of archplot. It features trimmed, simpler elements with less fuss over the details. There is an economy of both design and treatment and audiovisual rules along with the rules of story are less rigidly followed. The elements of a miniplot can include internal or personal progression, an open ending and multiple protagonists.

- The Antiplot – The Anti-plot reverses everything classical and contradicts most of the traditional elements of story and structure. The idea perhaps is to ridicule the very idea of formal principles. Although uncommon so far in documentaries, films with anti-plot are becoming more popular. These kinds of films tend to be ambitious, revolutionary and even extravagant. Their elements often include coincidence, nonlinear time and inconsistent realities.

Many films also have *Subplots*. These are smaller plots that make up different, simultaneous and, often contradictory, parts of a larger plot. Subplots are self-contained stories that adhere to the controlling idea of the film but also add a new, related dimension to the film. Most documentaries have one or more subplots as they often tend to deal with issues that are tied in with other issues. Subplots don't take away but rather

add to the main plot and their individual beginnings, middles and ends take place in the middle of the main plot. The resolutions of subplots help drive the main plot to its own resolution. The scriptwriter can use this technique to include different ideas and events that are related to but not directly part of the main storyline. For example; a film about an adopted girl's search for her birth mother could also feature a subplot about another girl who found her birth mother and wished she hadn't started looking in the first place. This subplot then raises doubts as to whether the main character's meeting with her own birth mother would be a happy or sad one.

The 'Backstory'

Simply put, the backstory is the background story that occurred before the start of the film. For example; a film about a farmer trying to stop a bank from repossessing his farmland could very well start with the farmer having a conversation with a lawyer. The backstory in this film would be that the farmer was going about his work but having trouble repaying his debts to the bank when, one day, he was given a repossession notice and asked to vacate. The backstory is crucial in providing the audience with some context for the story and the scriptwriter must provide them with this information at some stage, either visually or verbally, in the narrative. A few ways of doing this are having characters talk about what happened previously, show it visually through a dramatized recreation of events or through records of events like newspaper clippings etc.

Point of View/POV

Each story is set in a specific time and place, yet sequence by sequence, as the audience look at events happening on screen, where do they locate themselves in space to view the action? This is point of view – the angle taken to look at the events and characters, their interactions with each other and the environment in the film. The scriptwriter's choice of point of view or POV makes an enormous difference on how the audience views the film. This is because who or whatever's POV is shown is the person/thing that is telling the story to the audience.

A story is told in many different ways – through visuals, sound, words, characters, events etc. However, the scriptwriter must make the decision early on as to who will tell the story to the audience. This decision then binds the story to the limited experience of that entity. Suppose a number of people had a shared experience like a plane crash. Each person on the plane had a different experience and different POV so each one would have a different story to tell. One of them couldn't tell you anything about another's experience. So, as a scriptwriter, if you wanted to show this event on film, you would need to narrow down on one or a few of the passengers and only show the event through their eyes. It would be possible to hopscotch through time and space, picking up bits and pieces of everyone's experience, but this would probably make the story sprawl and become unfocused.

The way in which the scriptwriter chooses to tell the story through focused POV is called a *Narrative*. This literally means someone or something is narrating the story. Narrative

is different from Narration, which is restricted to the spoken word. Narrative is a combination of audiovisual elements, story elements and is when a particular entity's POV uses the various elements to tell the story. In other words, POV gives or drives the narrative. Once the POV of a sequence has been decided, then the shots are taken from that POV, the sound is tailored towards it and the information given to the audience is limited by it.

First-person POV

This is one of the most common types of POV used in documentary. It is the direct POV of one or more characters in the film. They talk in terms of 'I' and the narrative is done through their eyes and records their experiences. In this type of POV, the character can either be featured on screen in an interview, perform actions or be part of events on screen and/or his voice can be featured as part of the sound track while the visuals can relate to what he is saying. For example; a film about a boy who ran the marathon could feature him narrating the story. The visual structure would be from his POV, the events would be limited to his experience of them as would his story.

Sometimes, a film switches between different POVs of characters in a film to get a more rounded view of events and give the audience a wider perspective. Each person whose POV drives the narrative is then allotted sequences of their own and the scriptwriter must tailor these sequences to comply with that particular character's limited POV. This way the audience may experience the film from different POVs but is still only experiencing them one at a time.

Second-Person POV

This kind of POV, where the narrative of the film directly addresses the audience as 'you' and forces the audience into the story is less common in documentaries and more a feature of television video magazines and news stories.

Third Person POV

This kind of POV is much more common in more classical documentaries. It is a narrative told from the POV of someone unknown to the audience, a god-like omnipresent person who see events from all sides and can read the inner worlds of characters. This person is never identified by the film, but usually the soundtrack features this person's voice talking about the characters directly to the audience in terms of 'he' or 'she'. This person knows everything about everyone and therefore the narrative is from a general perspective, as if the camera itself is this person. This kind of POV gives the audience a less direct view of the story, since the characters aren't dispensing information themselves, but it also allows the audience to have a much fuller experience of the story.

Sometimes, films combine first and third-person POVs and have an overall third-person POV while switching to talking heads with the characters during the film. However, while this gives the characters a voice in the film, their own part in the narrative is only as characters and not as narrators.

PUTTING A SCRIPT TOGETHER

As difficult as it seems, combining visual, audio and story elements into a documentary script, at its most basic level, can be as simple as following a few scriptwriting tips and techniques that have been known to work in many films.

The Three Sacred 'C's

Character

Everyone knows films have characters. But why? In a film about democracy, for example, what is the need for characters when the subject of the film is an idea? The answer is simple; characters give a human face to any story. They experience the story for the audience watching the film. Even if the subject of the film doesn't involve people, most films will show characters within the subject to 'humanise' the film and make it more accessible. That said, in a film about an idea like democracy, it wouldn't make sense to include characters that are not directly or indirectly related to the subject matter. For instance, a woman experiencing having a baby is not really connected in any way to democracy, so it wouldn't make sense for her to be in the film. Not unless she was a reporter who was talking about freedom of the press and there was very little of her pregnancy covered in her film experiences.

There is also a reason for the scriptwriter to study characterization and true character carefully and represent both in the character's actions on film. The more the audience knows about a person in the film, the closer they feel to that person. This empathy is important to create because, through it, the audience can get emotionally involved in the film and be that much more affected by it when the lights come on. They start to 'root' for a character they empathize with because the have unconsciously put themselves in the character's place and are imagining having the same experiences. This audience-character bond will have the audience laughing and crying with the character throughout the film, especially in a documentary, where they realize that the character is real and so are the events.

Characters can often identified by the nature of their actions, or lack of them. *Active Characters* are those that initiate the events that take place around them. They take action and make things happen. For example; a character who decides that a particular law is detrimental to society and starts a campaign to change the law is an active character. *Passive Characters*, on the other hand, react to situations thrust upon them without any choosing of their own. Their actions are brought upon by things happening to them. For example; a farmer whose village has seen drought for 2 years may struggle to make ends meet is a passive character.

Sometimes, the filmmaker himself chooses to become a character in his film. In this way, he can directly experience the story for himself and his narrative can be

a much more personal one. The point in time that the filmmaker enters the film is called 'the point of attack.' This narrative works very well when the characters in the film are culturally and socially different from the audience, who may have trouble seeing things from their point of view. The filmmaker as a main character can then bridge that gap between the audience and the characters.

Conflict

Conflict is one of the most important aspects of a film, documentary or fiction. To put it simply, conflict is to film what sound is to music. Without it, all the elements of a film are useless because there is no reason for them to move forward. When the main character/s step into the inciting incident, they enter a world governed by conflict and when conflict ends, the film ends. The most difficult task of a film is to hold audience interest and attention and carry them through time without an awareness of it. Conflict has till date been the only thing able to do that perhaps because the audience themselves experience conflict in many forms every day of their lives and a life without conflict would seem abnormal and boring. Since conflict is, whether we like it or not, such an integral part of life and film replicates life, conflict becomes indispensable in film.

So who goes through conflict? The characters do. The try and attain their goals in the face of opposition and obstacles. These opposing forces could be big or small, one or many, brief or protracted and in any shape or form. Opposition could come from other characters with incompatible goals, organized entities or the situation and environment surrounding the characters. The characters struggling in the face of conflict, even if the amount of struggle is as miniscule as walking with a stone in your shoe, make the story move ahead.

In fiction films, the scriptwriter creates conflict in imaginary situations with imaginary characters. In documentary, the scriptwriter has to study the various conflicts facing the story's real life characters and portray them in the film. He must then follow the characters as they try and overcome their 'opponents' in the story.

The Principle of Antagonism is a good measure of conflict. It states that a protagonist and his story can only be as intellectually fascinating and emotionally compelling to the audience as the forces of antagonism make them. This is not to say the more the conflict the better the film. Instead, the more developed the antagonism or conflict facing the characters, the more they realize the story by facing them. They face a journey that helps them realize themselves as well. For example; a documentary film about first-year college students learning to live by themselves and being away from home may feature its main characters facing the challenges that come with living alone for the first time, like overcoming loneliness, keeping a house, studying hard etc. At the end of their first-year, they would be different people who realized new aspects of their personalities. Without

the challenges, they would have just been college students living uncomplicated lives and the story would have lacked interest.

There are generally two types of conflict that characters in a film must face. The first is Outer Conflict. They must face antagonism outside of themselves from the world around them. This could be from other people, objects, organizations or the environment. The second type is Inner Conflict. The characters must face conflict inside of themselves. This may include their psychology, weaknesses, fears, dark sides etc. It involves the inner world of the character's minds. Many films have a combination of both types because, as with real life, one rarely occurs with the exclusion of the other.

In documentary, it should obviously not be taken for granted that the character overcomes all or any of the conflict. Real life isn't always made up of heroes and villains and the character may fail to achieve what he set out to do.

Change

An audience watches a film with the desire to 'see what happens.' Therefore, something, or many things, must definitely happen to keep the audience in their seats. This something is change. Change is some aspect of reality becoming different in a particular way. It is at the root of everything in the world – it is what happens, has happened and will happen. Change is also an extremely intriguing thing for humans because it almost always has consequences, which affect our lives directly or indirectly.

There is no question that change must occur in a film. In the beginning, the inciting incident introduces change to the character's life. In the middle, the character must face conflict and, when he does, things change around him and he changes as well. In the end, something must have changed from the beginning and this change lead to the resolution. The scriptwriter must choose which change to include in the film based on how meaningful the change is. If it is not meaningful, then it doesn't complete the story. For example; a character could have learnt many things from the experience of trying to cook for the first time, the first being that he learnt how to cook a little better. He learnt from his mistakes and won't make them again, thereby changing him as a person. This is meaningful change. It is the job of the scriptwriter to decide which change is meaningful and incorporate it into the script.

Change naturally moves the story forward. Situation A changes to Situation B, which then changes to Situation C. The story moves forward in this way. Change can be small or big. Sometimes small changes can happen within or facilitate bigger change. In a documentary, the scriptwriter must study all the various changes that took or are taking place in a character's journey through conflict and decide how to formulate them in a story that is structured and meaningful.

There are, broadly, two types of change. The first is *Outer Change*. This is when the world around the character changes. This could be physical change, change in other people, objects, situations or the environment. The second is *Inner Change*. This is when the character himself changes within. This could be his opinions, beliefs, values, personality, psychology or mental or emotional state. When the character changes in a significant manner through the course of the film, it's called the *Character Arc*.

When the audience expects to see change, they naturally expect it to be irreversible. However, sometimes change can reverse back to the way things were before the change took place. This is in itself a new change even though the film goes back to a previous state. In documentary, as in real life, this often happens and, when it does, the scriptwriter should include it in the script even though nothing really changed in the larger situation. Here, the change itself is what happens.

Writing Visually

Writing visually is not just a question of blindly incorporating visual elements into a film. There are a few important things a scriptwriter must keep in mind:

- *Show,* don't *tell* – The scriptwriter needs to keep in mind that film is a visual medium. Unlike a novel, a film script is never 'read' literally by the audience and therefore the scriptwriter should try and incorporate most of the information he has to give into a visual format. For example; rather than telling the audience that a man is a farmer, the scriptwriter should show the man working in his fields. A potter should be making pottery, a hairdresser cutting someone's hair and so forth. It always helps to show character and event action rather than talk about it or include it in narration because the audience is then able to experience it themselves, making it more real for them. They can also grasp details and take in sub-conscious information. When given a choice, the scriptwriter must always try and start with a visual image as a base for portrayal of any concept and then use other methods of portrayal only when the visual is not possible.

- *Show through action and movement* – There is a reason we call them 'moving images' and the scriptwriter must always try to keep that fact in mind. The visual must be kept moving; the characters must be 'doing' something. The audience will react to movement on screen with interest and to static images with boredom. Wherever possible, the scriptwriter should try and communicate the story to the audience through a moving and action-packed visual narrative.

- *Visual pertinence* – Simply put, visual pertinence is keeping the visuals relevant to the subject and sustaining the flow of action. Don't show a farmer working behind a desk in a bank unless he works there part-time.

Also, it is important for the scriptwriter to structure sequences according to the point in time they appear in the film. If a character has just suffered a major loss, then don't show a sequence where she goes to a party unless that's what she would do naturally in that situation. The scriptwriter has to place the character's actions in the visuals within the story and make every choice of action, location and image relevant to the story and its subject.

- *Emotional pertinence* – When watching a sequence, the audience take in different aspects of it. One of the things an audience receives from a sequence is emotion. The audience naturally reacts to this emotion with their own emotional reaction. Emotional pertinence is controlling the emotional reaction of the audience and making it relevant to the story at that point in the film. This can be done by the scriptwriter by emphasizing emotional details or triggers which will provide the desired emotional response from the audience.

- *Moods and Metaphors* – The scriptwriter has many visual tools at his disposal including the control of visual mood and visual metaphors to represent an idea that would be otherwise difficult to portray visually. For example; a sequence which features a man working late into the night in his office could be full of shadows to add to the perception of time. Or, a sequence, which features a man on death row being executed in jail by electric chair, could focus on a light bulb momentarily flickering to signify that the man has died.

- *Special effects* – Sometimes, special effects like slow motion, where a visual is slowed down in time, help create and regulate tempo and rhythm in a film as well as enhance emotional value at certain points. Dissolving from one shot to another helps create smoother visual flow. Special effects may or may not be incorporated into the script in great detail. The scriptwriter should only include the specific effects he feels are required to tell the story and are relevant to the subject and mood of the sequence. It is not advisable, however, to use an excess of special effects in a documentary for the simple reason that they alter the nature of reality. This altered reality goes against the very nature of documentary and may or may not be accepted by the audience if it is overdone.

Writing Narration/commentary

An important point for the scriptwriter to remember is that, as crucial as sound is to films, the visual always comes first. Narration, therefore, is secondary to visual. It is a part of the overall narrative, but does not lead the narrative. Therefore, the scriptwriter, even though he is a writer and his first relationship is with words, should not necessarily give the narration a dominant role in the narrative.

The most important decision the scriptwriter has to make concerning narration is deciding who will be the narrator/s. This choice has to be made both on a narrative-relevance level and an artistic level. The narrator needs to be someone who adds value to the film and drives the film's narrative forward. The scriptwriter has the following options in narration:

- First-person narration

  A first-person *narration* backs up a first-person *narrative*, where the person whose point of view is currently being represented visually and story-wise is the narrator. This narrator talks in terms of 'I' and brings his limited POV across to the audience via the spoken word. This narrator is a character in the film and he may or may not be shown visually at the time his voice is speaking. When the filmmaker is a character in the film, then the narrator is often the filmmaker himself. First-person narration should follow the rules of first-person narrative, which is that only one character's POV can be shown at a time, despite the fact that multiple characters may be narrators in the film.

- The 'Voice of God'

  Third-person narration is often called 'the voice of God' in an unflattering sense. However, it is a popular choice for many documentary films around the world. It is when an all-knowing, omnipresent entity narrates the story, referring to all the characters within the film as 'he' or 'she.' Again, like the third-person narrative, this narrator's POV is all-pervasive even though it is less personal.

Keeping narration visual is normally a challenge for scriptwriters. It is important to remember that narration should back up a visual instead of trying to overpower it. Also, if something is being shown visually, then there is no need for the narration to mention it as well. The narration should say what the visual doesn't say and should be in tune with the actions taking place at that point in the film.

Keeping narration relevant is another challenge. Many scriptwriters use the narration for information-shoving at the audience. The narration should be as focused, clear-cut, short and relevant as possible. Information should be given on a need basis only and when the particular subject has been sufficiently covered, it should stop short of exposition.

Keeping narration simple is the final challenge. Big words and fancy sentences are lost on an audience that has to keep track of multiple elements coming toward them at the same time. In fact, a verbose narration only makes the film harder for them to follow. A good narration is precise and simple and works in tune with the other elements of the film without trying to be grandiose.

A method every scriptwriter must practice is speaking out aloud the words and sentences of the narration as he writes them. This is because the narration will ultimately not be read but spoken and the text has to be of the spoken word. Reading it out aloud with reveal how it sounds and the scriptwriter can correct and replace words or sentences that don't flow. This practice also gives an indication of how much time the narration will take to speak out aloud and will allow him to time the narration according to the length of visual sequences.

Writing Sound

The soundtrack of the film, the music, ambiance and sound effects, can be used by the scriptwriter in two ways within the film script. The first is to make a point on its own, like the sound of a train whistle when the visual only shows a train track, and the second is to reinforce a point that the visual is already making, like sad music when a character is crying with grief. Both are effective ways of incorporating sound at the script stage.

A soundtrack must have Aesthetic Relevance, which is simply relevance to the subject, location and emotion of a particular point in the film. After all, it wouldn't make sense to hear a western music track when showing visuals of rural villages in India or to hear upbeat drums at a particularly sad, slow moment in the film. The scriptwriter should make sure that the soundtrack is always in keeping with the narrative and the audience should hear only a seamless extension of what they see.

In most films, but especially in documentary, the scriptwriter should try and keep a more or less continuous presence of ambiance or natural sound. The ambiance volume may be kept low or high depending on the rest of the soundtrack, but keeping it constant reminds the viewer that the visuals are set in the real world. It is just one more layer that adds to the feeling of authenticity and credibility that documentaries try and establish.

Disclosure

The flow of information in a film is very important, as is the order, amount and frequency with which it is given to the audience. The scriptwriter can use a method called disclosure to control the flow of information. This technique is about withholding as much information as possible until the point when it is absolutely necessary to provide it to the audience. The scriptwriter gives the audience the information in bits and piece, as and when required and never too much at the same time. Then, progressively the bits of information start making sense and adding up to a whole context. The idea behind this technique is to keep the audience guessing and levels of suspense and curiosity high. The scriptwriter can 'bait' the audience with key pieces of information, never too little but never too much, right up until all is revealed.

Idea Vs Counter-idea

A popular technique to create tension and heighten interest in a film is using a debate of ideas. The scriptwriter can forge a story ahead in a dynamic way by moving it back and

forth across the opposing charges of its primary value. Simply put, different sequences alternatively express positive and negative dimensions of the controlling idea creating a debate between ideas and counter-ideas within the story. In this way, the scriptwriter can use the element of contradiction as a technique to make the film more vibrant.

Eventually, one of these ideas can 'win' and result in a resolution at the end. This technique needn't involve obvious positive and negative elements, like people doing good or bad things in the sequences. There needn't be a value judgment about what is good and bad either. This sequential debate is more to do with the message of each sequence. This message, regardless of the action portrayed in the sequence, has a positive or negative charge and this is what can be played against one another between sequences.

First you 'set up' then you 'pay off'

Another technique often used by scriptwriters is when they set-up layers in knowledge and then pay off by closing the gap and delivering knowledge to the audience. This is done by planting insights or 'visual clues' at various points in the film. These clues are hazy and without context when they are presented to the viewer, who doesn't quite understand them at the time but remembers them because they've been emphasized by the narrative. This is a deliberate move by the scriptwriter. The clue or insight is not meant to make sense on its own. Later on, the scriptwriter provides the larger picture or contextual information in other sequences, closing that gap in knowledge and making the meaning of the clue or insight clear to the audience. By suddenly having the haziness removed, the audience reaction is an 'aha! That's what it meant' and they are intrigued and involved in the story even further.

The scriptwriter's choice

Chances are that there will be many parts of a story that demand representation in a film. The scriptwriter must make a choice about what to include in the film and, more importantly, what to exclude. A gap in the story or missing information and information-overload are both extremely undesirable situations in a film. The scriptwriter's choice could make the difference between the film making being interesting or not. He must go over the story and narrative with a toothcomb to make sure the sum of all the various parts add up correctly, the flow of information is smooth and relevant and anything excessive or not focused enough is cut out of the film. This is a difficult but necessary decision and the scriptwriter needs to be harsh and let go of bits of the film that he may have grown attached to but just don't make the cut.

A note on Duration

Rarely is a scriptwriter given the privilege of deciding the duration of the film he is writing. This is something predetermined, set by the producer and/or TV channels or others, depending on the film's distribution plan. The scriptwriter has to work within those parameters and tailor the film to suit the desired duration. If, however, a scriptwriter is 'let loose' on the film's duration, then a word of advice; less is usually more. It is better to stay prudent with duration and limit the film to commercial

parameters than get carried away and try and say everything with leisure. The finished film will be more conducive to commercial viewing and the audience will stay glued. No matter how dramatic or interesting the subject matter may be, no matter how well presented a narrative, an audience will lose patience after a while and start thinking about their dinner.

WRITING A GREAT SCRIPT

What makes a good script? Yes, it is combining the various audiovisual and story elements together seamlessly. Yes, it is using story and script writing techniques in an effective way. Of course, it's having a good story to tell. The fact is, many scripts achieve this much. Most of them proceed to becoming good films too.

What makes a great script? That is a much harder question. Is it just the x-factor or can we pin-point certain things that have been noticed in award-winning films that go beyond the expected and set them apart from the ordinary? The answer is – we can. Anybody can make an award winning film. The key to this is just going that extra distance once the basics have been done and dusted.

Think!

It seems silly to ask a scriptwriter or filmmaker to really 'think' about his film. Of course he thinks about it – how could he not? However, does he really think enough? A great film is often a result of non-stop thinking about how it could be made great. The scriptwriter needs to go over everything related to his film over and over again in his mind and constantly challenge what he knows and how he thinks. Then he should rethink the rethinking process! The idea behind what seems like excessive 'thinking' is that, sometime or the other, an inspired, creative and never-before-attempted idea will seep through to the surface and change the film dramatically. Is it really as simple as that? Sometimes it is.

Pulling on the Emotion string

One of the biggest misconceptions among documentary filmmakers is that, since documentaries deal in fact and are based in reality, there is a need to be more intellectual than emotional. This is based on the assumption that the kind of people who would be interested in non-fiction films would be the intellectuals within society. Emotion in documentary films is looked upon by such filmmakers with scorn, as if it were too 'pedestrian' to be taken seriously. The fact is, as a race, we humans are more emotional than intellectual. This includes everyone but an inconsequential minority. A film with a strong emotional flavour takes the audience along with it on its journey. To touch an audience member's mind may be to show him a great film, but to touch his heart is to ensure that he remembers it.

So go ahead – make them laugh, make them cry. Make them feel fear and pity, empathy and understanding. Make them celebrate gain and mourn loss along with the characters in the film. Make them nod vigorously along and shake their heads in disdain. Don't be afraid to include a variety of emotional elements in the film. A range of emotions will provide an unconscious feeling of 'completeness' within the audience. This technique is often used in feature films to increase entertainment value. And, as many famous documentary filmmakers will tell you – there's nothing wrong with making an entertaining documentary.

Inspiring change once the lights have come on.

Never forget the message of your film. It is the reason behind the film project and the goal towards which an entire film unit has come to work together. Many people will, hopefully, spend time and money to watch your film after it is made. It is all for the message.

The idea of a documentary film is not only to showcase change, but to also inspire it. Documentary films are an effective tool in spurring people on to make social, political and issue-based changes in their own lives and communities. However, this desired response only takes place when the audience is inspired. A great script makes sure not only that the audience hears and understands the message of the film loud and clear, but also creates in them the desire to be part of the solution and 'do' something as a follow up. Therefore, the scriptwriter must tailor everything in the film in such a way that, when the lights come on in the screening room, every member of the audience has been inspired by the message of the film they've just seen and they go out into their own real lives with the conviction to change things for the better.

It's all in those telling details, those sudden surprises.

Imagine the Mona Lisa without that enigmatic smile. It is unthinkable. Out of millions of portraits painted over centuries, it is a simple smile, an expression that sets the Mona Lisa apart. A documentary equivalent of the Mona Lisa, though yet to be made, would almost certainly contain that same element of detail that springs up to surprise and intrigue the audience. As a scriptwriter, it is important to research these details and find the ones that will add extra dimension and elements of surprise to the film. These details could be absolutely anything – from a gesture to an expression to an action to a detailed image to a sound choice. They needn't be directly related to the subject and also needn't be covered excessively, but they can woven subtly into the fabric of the film. The choice of which details to use in the script is entirely up to the scriptwriter's imagination. It may help to think of dispensing these details as a form of 'playing' with the audience and staying a step ahead of them, anticipating every 'aha!' along the way.

No spoon feeding the audience. Challenge them!

It's easy to dispense information to the audience in a creative manner. It's also easy to tell them what to think as they go along in the story. The audience then becomes a passive observer to the events happening in the film. However, a great film makes sure that the audience is an active participant in the film process. The script should be structured in such a way that it questions the audience at every step, challenges their beliefs and encourages them to come to their own conclusions about events. Never say, "This is good" or "this is bad". If you let the audience make that decision themselves, then they will feel more strongly about it. The basis for this argument is that every filmmaker or scriptwriter needs to have a healthy respect for his audience. If the film is targeted towards adults, then the scriptwriter must keep in mind that every person out

there is a product of life experiences, has a mind of his own and has made important value-based decisions before. The scriptwriter needs to trust that an intelligent audience member will come to the right conclusion on his own.

Stand up for what you believe

The worst possible thing a scriptwriter can do is sit at his table just before writing a controversial sequence and think, "Maybe the audience won't like this. I should tone it down." The greatest films of all time weren't the 'toned down' ones. In fact, some of the best documentaries ever made were Nazi propaganda films! A documentary film is a platform to express and challenge ideas and issues and the filmmaker should not be restricted by the desire to 'please' the audience. In fact, it is much better to have an audience up in arms, disagreeing strongly with the filmmaker's point of view, than to have a bored audience who leaves thinking that the film made no point at all. Stand up for your views, back them up with conclusive arguments and don't be afraid to believe in your film.

Experience your script in every way

Naturally, as the scriptwriter, you know the script you are writing well. However, have you experienced it? Every script is a film experience and a good scriptwriter is able to read the script he has written and experience it audio visually in his mind, going through exactly what the audience will go through and feeling as they would during every moment of the film. The idea behind this technique is to be able to fine tune the script in great detail and direct its energy along the way. This is a skill which comes with experience. However, a novice scriptwriter should learn to experience the following aspects of his script:

- He must experience the motivation behind every sequence in the film.
- He must know the type of energy, positive or negative, of every thought and idea expressed in all the individual shots.
- He must really know all the characters, central and secondary in the film.
- He must try and put himself in the audience's shoes and 'feel' their journey as the film progresses.

Be sensitive, be privileged

As a scriptwriter, you may or may not have met all the characters in your film or been to all the locations and experienced them. However, it is extremely important to remember that all the people and places you are writing about are real – they exist and have lives of their own. Lives, that they have allowed you and the film crew to enter and, in a sense, invade. They have given up not only their privacy, but put their reputation and honour in your hands. This is a privilege they have awarded you and you must always be aware of that responsibility. In return, you must treat them with respect and sensitivity and give them their due. Always, no matter how you feel about the subject personally, try and see

things from their perspective. This attitude should apply to every character in the film, whether the film is eventually in agreement with their views or not.

Call it passion, call it inspiration

Needless to say, every person should be passionate about their work. However, often scriptwriters get bogged down by the extensive subject matter, structural elements and technical aspects that go into making a film and forget the spirit behind it. Filmmaking and film writing is all about passion – you must feel the spirit behind the subject matter and really want to put it out there for all to see. The closer you are to your script, the more imaginative and inspired you will be to try out new ideas and techniques and really make it special. Each script you write should be like a child you nurture while you work on it, each word you write should resonate with your passion. That is how masterpieces are made.
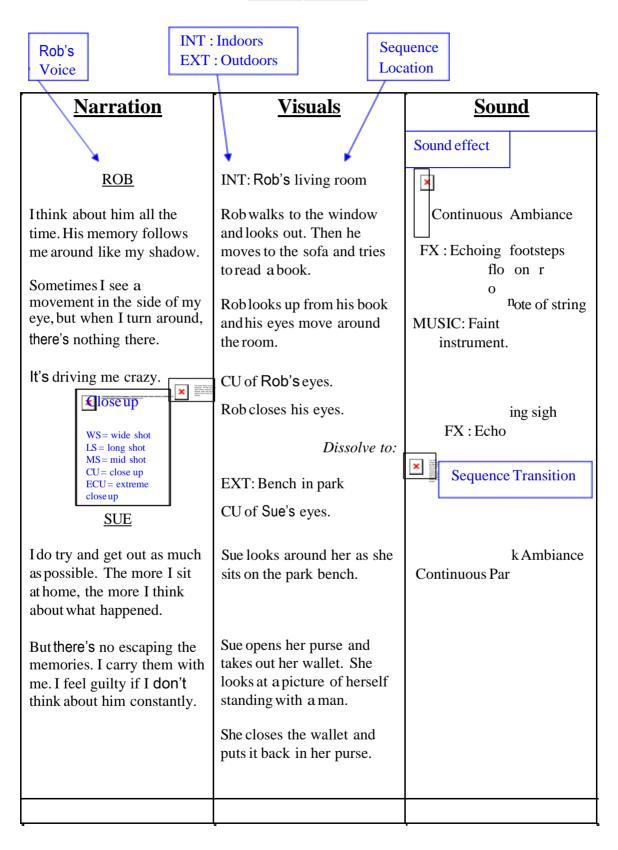
A word on simplicity

Coming back to the Mona Lisa; would she still be special if she were portrayed with the same expression but this time she was holding an infant on the back of a white horse galloping through fields of blazing fire in a charred landscape full of the souls of little children that looked like demons with their arms outstretched towards her baby? Maybe, but, probably not. The point is, it doesn't have to be complicated to be good. In documentary, there is a tendency to make the narrative overly intellectual and complicated. This can, at best, make the film a little difficult to follow, and, at worst, alienate the audience. However, sometimes simplicity in word and thought can pull an audience far more effectively into the film experience.

A word on film shelf-life

A common problem with documentary films is their shelf life. A film within itself may be a suspension of space and time but after it's finished, it still has to exist in the real time of the real world. Documentaries often tend to deal with current events and issues and, in the real world, anything current today is outdated tomorrow. To ensure that a documentary has a reasonable shelf life of at least a few years, the filmmaker and scriptwriter need to ensure that there are no time-restrictive elements in the film. It always helps to address larger issues, which cannot be dated for a while. Date-specific events can be put into a larger context and the scriptwriter can, as far as possible, try to avoid putting the film into a very noticeable date in time.

SCRIPT FORMAT

Rob's Voice

INT : Indoors
EXT : Outdoors

Sequence Location

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

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