

Creating a Video Documentary and Building Community

Diana C. Roberts and Chip Curry

Volunteers
Golden Gate National Recreation Area
Marin Headlands

NAI Interpreter's Workshop
2002

Equipment

Technical requirements

Video camera, mini-dv format.

Lavalier microphone for interviews. The sound from the camera's microphone is too echo-y for interviews.

Computer with at least 80 gigabytes hard drive, preferably separate from the drive that has the software. Keeping the application drive separate from the data drive has two advantages:

- It speeds access and processing time.
- It allows you to reformat the drive when you're finished with the project, to avoid fragmentation problems that result from erasing files.

Video editing software. NOTE: this comes at no extra charge with newer Macintosh computers.

Tripod. Get the best you can afford, and make sure it gives you smooth camera movement.

For more information, check out macfilmmakers.com.

Your crew

Things to do

Send thank-you notes to everyone that participated in any way whatsoever. We wrote formal letters on letterhead that could be used in a portfolio.

Send complimentary copies of the documentary to key participants.

Provide copies at cost to other participants.

Place the documentary for sale in the local organization bookstore.

Plan a party for the premier showing.

Plan a reenactment outing to include as many people as possible.

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Reenactments

Types of reenactments and dramatizations

Reenactments can be scripted or improvised. They can include voice or not. The actors can direct their speech to the camera or to another actor on stage. Some ideas:

- Monologue directed at the audience
Example: in PBL (Point Bonita Lighthouse: Vital Link Between Keepers and Sailors), Lighthouse keeper; Hawaiian Chieftain “interviews”
- Voice-over. This can be a monologue if there is only one person on the screen, or a dialogue if multiple people.
Example: in PBL, Lighthouse keeper’s wife.
- Voice only, no character on screen
Example: in PBL, Lighthouse logs.
- An on-screen narrator representative of the subject matter (for instance, the historical period of your documentary) who narrates the whole show.
- Multi-character reenactments.

Interviews

Great interview answers are ...

Animated. The interviewee shows and inspires emotion and passion.

Short and concise. Thirty seconds holds predictably. It has to be a fascinating answer to hold the audience’s attention much longer.

Understandable in context. Remind your interviewee to rephrase the question in the answer.

Pertinent to the documentary purpose.

Correct. Check any information from your interviewee that you aren’t sure of.

Amenable to visual coverage. (If you can’t get good coverage, you can’t use the answer, not matter how compelling.) NOTE: A very few interviewees are so strong that they can play all alone, but most need visual support. Our style is to use a lot of coverage, but there were a few interviewees in PBL* (Kimball Livingston and Cathy Petrick in particular) who presented such a strong personal presence that minimal coverage was necessary.

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Tips for interviewing

Ask the person how they feel about doing something OR ask them to describe their experience of an activity or a thing. Then show footage of them doing it.

Example: in PBL, Alice Watts describes how much she enjoys volunteering on a historic sailing vessel, and the supporting visual coverage shows her doing it.

Tune your question to the coverage that you have or you anticipate getting, keeping the documentary purpose and theme in mind.

Example: in PBL, we knew that we wanted to show the rails for lowering lifeboats to the water, so we asked Steve Anastasia to discuss the process.

The details of your documentary's script comes from the interviewees but you determine the structure and which material to cover. SO... your job is to design the theme and structure of the video, and to formulate interviewee questions to enable the interviewees to provide the content.

Be clear on the structure and theme as you design your interview questions. Also, make sure you know enough of the material to be able to judge the appropriateness and accuracy of the interviewee responses.

It's your responsibility to get the answer you're looking for. Remember that interviewees can't read your mind. Also, many people feel insecure "behind the camera," so make your interviewees feel comfortable. Some tips:

- If the answer is too long, try saying, "This is a great answer. We need this answer! I need to try it again to see if we can go shorter than this. Would you do it again?"
- If the interviewee is not showing enough emotion, ask, "How do you feel about (fill in the blank)?" Get their imagination going.
- If they seem uncertain or insecure, ask a question that focuses on something they're proud of. Build up the interviewee's sense of comfort, confidence, and enthusiasm.

It's up to you to get the intensity of the response you want.

Tips for prepping

- "Rephrase my question because I will not be on this video and we want to know what you're going to talk about. For instance, if I ask you what your name is, say, 'My name is...'"
- "We're going to have some fun with this thing, and if we don't get it right the first time, we'll do it again. Tape is cheap. Just have fun with it."
- "We're gonna do retakes. Don't worry about it."
- "You're the expert here and we just want to hear what you know, and give the audience a chance to meet you too."
- List ahead of time the areas you want to cover and the visual coverage you have or anticipate getting so that your interview questions are targeted.

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- Let the interviewee know in advance that they're going to have to feed the wire for the Lavalier microphone down their shirts so they aren't surprised. (ALWAYS use a Lavalier mike for interviews for the sound quality!)

Samples

Approval form for interviewees

Permissions form for music and other potentially royalty items

Visual coverage for interviews etc.

Public archives. We used Maritime Museum and records of GGNRA.

Scenery.

Landmark.

Reenactments with no voice.

Music and sound

Where do you get good audio coverage? Good music, narration, ambient sounds blend to form the right mood for your documentary.

- Get permission to use recorded music.
Example: in PBL, David West and Brassworks are friends who are professional musicians; Rick Erlien we contacted after we found his recording in Yosemite.
- Go to a bar and record the band.
Example: in PBL, Skip Henderson's band of sea shanty music. We found out about him at a wooden boat show we attended that was otherwise a dead end.
- Get someone to record for you.
Example: in PBL, Leann Peterson and Paul Blankenship are friends who make music as a serious hobby.
- Record in your own "studio."
Example: in PBL, narration, Lighthouse logs, Lighthouse keeper's wife.
- Record ambient sound. VITAL to the authenticity of the documentary.
Example: in PBL, ocean, birds.

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Do's and Don'ts

Data management

- Get one notebook to hold all items chronologically so that sheets of paper don't get lost.
- Manila folders for each subtopic (will eventually become section of the documentary). Keep all information about shipwrecks in one folder, for instance.
- Keep all business cards together!
- Keep contact list and records of contacts up-to-date. Develop an email list ongoing and use it to update participants on progress and activities.

Relationship management

- Get approval agreements and permissions from anyone who donates footage or sound to the documentary, for example, interviewees and musicians.
- Be sure to include the person's title to the agreement form because you'll need to know what to call them in the "lower third" title bar.
- Give a business card and a flier that describes the production to hand to everybody – new contacts, interviewees, volunteers. The flier should look professional and be highly informative so that they can decide whether to participate, or they understand what they are participating in.
- Credit everything and everyone. Really.
- Warn people that there is no guarantee that we will use their footage, and it's not because of them but rather because of the way the topic develops.
- Offer a gift in exchange for participants who do a lot of work on the documentary. You don't NEED to do it, but the volunteers are offering their time for free. It's a dance of joy; have fun doing it and help them have fun, too. The gift can be a thing or an opportunity. *Example:* in PBL, we offered participants an excursion on the Hawaiian Chieftain at no cost, subsidized by the Hawaiian Chieftain and our modest budget.

Equipment and technique

- Do not rely on the camera's autofocus for most purposes. The camera repeatedly refocuses to check its focus. You can see that flaw in our footage.
- Carry charged backup batteries and backup equipment whenever possible.
- Wide-angle lens would be a nice luxury item... You can't get a picture of the whole room with a standard lens.

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- As soon as you remove a tape from the camera, label it!! Write-protect it IMMEDIATELY, no matter what!
- Don't skimp on tripods. Get a good tripod. It's one of the cheapest ways you can get a professional look. Smooth pans and camera movement. Probably can rent them.
- Keep your pans slow and even. Practice frequently.
- Always save a backup program of the video as you're editing on the computer.
- Digitize footage ongoing so that (1) you don't have an enormous backlog when you start (2) you can do reviewing and editing ongoing
- Keep your materials clean, including the car. You need to look presentable.
- Organize your equipment for travel on the road. Use lots of bags. Don't carry stuff loose; it will get lost.
- Test your equipment early; get to know it like a musical instrument
- If you're going to rent stuff, rent it in plenty of time to check it out because there's a good chance it won't work and you'll have to exchange it.
- Only change 10% of your system at a time ... don't get a new camera and a new software system and a new lens all at once; it'll be overwhelming.

Process

- Pick a good topic which is multi-dimensional and emotional
- Watch example videos of the competition
- Plan on about 3 or 4 hours for an interview. This includes
 - prep time
 - getting-acquainted time
 - the interview itself with retakes
 - shooting visual coverage nearby for establishing shots.
- For narration from script, give copies of the script to the readers in advance to improve the readings and lessen the retakes.
- Clipboard is VERY useful to keep your papers from rattling, so you can write on a flat surface, etc.
- Go away one weekend! In the middle of the production, completely get away. You'll be amazed by the ideas and the opportunities that come to you.
- Get a reliable advocate/primary contact. Cathy Petrick moved mountains.