

CHAPTER 14

Storytelling: A Checklist

Here's a list of questions to be asked at each stage of production, and especially as you near the end of the editing process:

- Given a choice between your film and the latest sitcom or indie drama, which would you choose? Are you telling a compelling and dramatic story and giving the viewer a reason to watch?
- Does your film involve the viewer in a story unfolding on screen, rather than talk at them?
- Are there interesting questions being asked and answered throughout, offering mystery, intrigue, and suspense?
- Are you offering new information and an unusual perspective, or just rehashing tired, unchallenging material?
- Have you established your story and themes sufficiently, so that viewers can anticipate where you're going and will be surprised and engaged when you take unexpected turns?
- Are you in the driver's seat of your film, steering toward emotional and intellectual highlights? Have you created moments of discovery for the audience, allowing them to reach their own conclusions before having them confirmed or denied?
- If there is backstory in your film, have you gotten a story under way that motivates the audience to want to go there?
- If your subject is complex or technical, are there points in the forward-moving story that motivate viewers to want to understand that complexity?
- Have you "cast" the film carefully, with a manageable group of characters who fairly represent the complexity of an issue and not just its extremes? Or, if your focus is the extremes, have you made that context clear?
- Do individual characters stand out and play differentiated roles in your overall story and film, or is their presence generic?

- Does the story that was set up at the film's beginning pay off at the end? Can you articulate that story in a sentence or two?
- As creative or unusual as your film is, are the choices you've made transparent enough that the film can genuinely be considered a documentary, meaning that it truthfully reflects the factual record as remembered or reported by you and your team?

SOURCES AND NOTES

Credit and thanks are due to Steve Fayer and Jon Else, who created earlier versions of this list for the producers at Blackside, Inc., in Boston.

Planning and Pitching

You've decided on the film you want to make and done enough research to determine that it seems feasible. Now what? This chapter is very broadly called "planning and pitching" to describe a range of activities that includes pitching, outlining, and casting your film.

PITCHING

A pitch is the core statement of your film's story, stated clearly and succinctly. It confirms to you and to others that you not only have a good subject, but you have a good *story*, one that you can tell in a way that will interest others. You'll be pitching your film, revising your pitch, and pitching it some more from the moment the idea begins to take shape until you are out in the world with a finished product that needs promotion. The good news is that pitching is the single best way to determine that you actually *have* a clear, coherent story as discussed in Part I of this book. If you can't pitch your story concisely—on an elevator, say, after you've discovered yourself by sheer luck riding up four floors with the head of acquisitions or a well-connected celebrity—then chances are you're still muddling through and will be spending time and money on film elements you don't need. The ability to pitch your story effectively and briefly does not suggest that it's a simple story or a commercial one; it simply means that you have a handle on it.

On Pitching Well

An ineffective pitch introduces the topic but not the story, as in "This is a film about the ethics of genetic testing and about how some people face hard choices." An effective pitch does both: "This is a film about genetic testing in which we follow an executive making the tough decision about whether to be tested for the disease that claimed her

mother's life." The pitch works because it compels the listener to ask follow-up questions: What will she do if the test is positive? Will she let you follow her through the process? What if she doesn't take the test?

Here's another example of a weak pitch: "Four years ago, Vietnam veteran Martin Robinson decided he would scale the heights of Mount Whatsit at the age of 63—with one leg. He succeeded, and in the years since has inspired veterans' groups across America." Where's the story here? There *was* a story (his efforts four years ago), but unless you have some plan for telling it now, what's holding the film together? A 67-year-old man standing before various groups of veterans. Not coincidentally, the problem with this pitch is that it does not suggest a train (Chapter 4). Your train is the skeleton on which you hang your story and by which you hook and hold your viewer; your pitch articulates the train.

In other words: *If you don't have a grasp on your train, you probably don't have a grasp on your story—and you won't be able to make an effective pitch.*

With that in mind, a better version of this pitch might be: "Four years ago, Vietnam veteran Martin Robinson became the first amputee to scale the heights of Mount Whatsit. Now, he's going back—and bringing two Gulf War veterans, amputees who thought their best athletic days were behind them, along with him." Not a bad pitch, especially if you can follow it up with good access to these people and some information about your own skills as both a filmmaker and a mountaineer (to show you'll be capable of following them up the mountain). In many cases, the pitch will be even stronger if you show a tape that introduces your main characters, allowing people to see that they're appealing and will work on camera.

On some projects, producers pitch their stories at in-house development meetings, not once but several times as the film or series take shape. We did this during the planning of *I'll Make Me a World: A Century of African-American Arts*. Rather than survey a hundred years' worth of dance, theater, visual art, literature, and more, the six-hour historical series presented two or three stories per hour arranged in a way that moved forward chronologically. The century's thematic arc, revealed in our research, helped producers and project advisors decide which stories best exemplified a particular era, and we were careful to include a range of artists and art forms. Here is the pitch for one of three stories, called "Nobody" for the purpose of quick reference (but not titled on screen), that was to be included in the series' second hour, *Without Fear or Shame*:

"Nobody" follows Bert Williams as he teams up with George Walker and they head for the Broadway stage, where they face an audience

whose expectations of black entertainment have been shaped by 60 years of minstrel traditions. Can they reject these stereotypes and still attract a mainstream audience? This story continues through the death of George Walker; we end with Bert Williams performing with the Ziegfeld Follies alongside stars including W. C. Fields, Will Rogers, and Fannie Brice—and yet, as actor Ben Vereen portrays him on stage, still facing intense racial hostility.

The other two stories in this hour were related thematically. One was about Edward “Kid” Ory and the rise of New Orleans jazz, and the other was about early filmmaker Oscar Micheaux. Each story was conceived of as having its own three-act dramatic structure. In the editing room, they were interrupted at key moments and interwoven with the other two stories, but in the planning stage, they were kept apart in order to see more clearly that they each had a beginning, middle, end, and arc. It’s worth noting that this was also possible because these were historical stories to be built of archival material and interviews, so the structure could be significantly anticipated in advance. Our research, including pre-interviews, had made it clear which emotional moments we were driving toward, so that we knew which elements of an overall biography or history we wanted to emphasize and where we were driving to at the end of each act.

Pitching Out Loud

Giving a pitch in person can be tough. Too often, filmmakers load their pitches with parentheticals about all the information you need to know or they should have mentioned: “Okay, well, it’s about this guy (well, okay, 20 years ago he won this amazing award for scientific research, but then he thinks someone ripped off the idea), so this guy was trying to (actually someone *did* rip him off, which sort of explains his motivation but I’m going to get into that later in the film), so this guy has been working to . . .” And so on.

The point is, if you’re pitching out loud, it’s a good idea to practice beforehand. Your pitch needs to be clear, focused, brief, and attention-getting.

OUTLINES

Most filmmakers go well beyond the pitch when planning their films. The next step is an outline which, like the pitch, will continue to be revised and honed over the course of production and editing. The outline is where you begin to flesh out your train, by anticipating and

Story Structure

A good way to gauge the status of a film in progress is to ask the filmmaker to tell you the story of the film in a brief, one- or two-paragraph pitch. If he or she immediately launches into a lengthy description of the opening shot or an amazing scene, the film might be in trouble. Visuals *serve* a story; they are not the story. Along the same lines, if the filmmaker starts to talk about the subject in broad terms—the film is about a soccer team, or World War II, or a famous author—there may also be a problem. To really get to the heart of the story, you need to have a sharper focus: What *about* World War II or that author or team? Given that subject, what story are you telling and how are you telling it?

This is where structure comes in. Think about the times when you've tried and failed to effectively tell a joke. A good joke needs structure: a setup, followed by complications/escalation, followed by a completely unexpected—but in hindsight, inevitable—punchline. If the joke teller gives the punchline away, or interrupts the joke with too many unnecessary details or asides, the joke loses its power.

Narrative structure tends to work in the same way. If your pitch sounds like a grab bag of ideas and explanations, chances are you're missing the structure, whether the project is still at the treatment stage or you think you're nearly finished editing. Lack of structure is evident when a film is strung together with a series of "and then this happened, and then this, and then this," or when it's a jumble of ideas and scenes that feels disorganized and repetitive, with no variation in rhythm and no real build of ideas or argument.

Structure is the foundation of narrative storytelling; it's what gives it a beginning, middle, and end. It puts the filmmaker(s) in the author's seat, driving the film forward in a way that compels the viewer to want to come along to find out what happens next. Perhaps counter-intuitively, *simplicity* of structure is what allows for complexity in the overall film. If you have a strong narrative spine, you can hang a tremendous amount of content onto it and audiences will stay with you. This strategy is a big part of what distinguishes and defines the best of creative nonfiction film.

THE NARRATIVE SPINE, OR TRAIN

Films move forward in time, taking audiences with them. You want the storytelling to move forward, too, and to motivate viewers to be curious about the information you're giving them. The train is the single thread—either an action or a question/argument, generally—that drives your film forward, from beginning to end. The narrative spine, the base-line story, is what you pitch in order to encapsulate what your film is and allow others to imagine it as a story on screen, rather than a subject. It is your narrative framework, and the way it's stated suggests a possible outcome.

- The train for *Super Size Me* might be stated as: *To test whether or not fast food is really as bad for your health as people claim it is, a filmmaker sets out to eat only what is offered at McDonald's for 30 days, measuring his health with the aid of doctors.* Possible outcomes: Either the McDiet will harm the filmmaker or it won't.
- The train for *Daughter from Danang* might be stated as: *A young Amerasian woman returns to Vietnam to meet the birth mother who gave her up for adoption 22 years earlier, in 1975, as Saigon was evacuated.* Possible outcomes: Either the reunion will go well or it won't.

Get a good train going, and you can make detours as needed for exposition, complex theory, additional characters, backstory—whatever you need. Because this is a foundational device, the train does not need to be present at every moment in your film; in fact, in many films the actual screen time devoted to the train is quite small. But you must return to the train periodically throughout, and the train that began the film needs to be resolved as you end the film. All along the way, even as you detour, you must remember to ask yourself, *what does this detour mean for my train, how does it advance or complicate it?* These detours aren't there just as distractions; they add depth and tension to the forward moving narrative.

Identifying the Train

Identifying and articulating a film's train, whether the film is still at the idea stage or has already been produced, can be difficult. One of the key strategies is to think simpler. In the classroom, student filmmakers often struggle with the train because they get caught up in details of the plot rather than thinking in basic terms about something on which to hang that plot. Try to strip the film's structure to its core question

or action. Michael Moore's *Roger & Me* follows a lot of issues and characters, but at its core is a very simple device: Moore sets himself up as the protagonist, trying to get a meeting with Roger Smith, CEO of General Motors. That device enables Moore to string together otherwise difficult-to-connect material. As complex as *Sound and Fury* is, the spine is built on one question: Will Heather Artinian be given a cochlear implant?

Look at Maysles Films' *Gimme Shelter*, the 1970 film that follows the Rolling Stones through the end of a 1969 tour, focusing heavily on their efforts to organize and then perform at a free concert at the Altamont Speedway in northern California, where events spiral dangerously out of control. The film's narrative device is not the concert or the stabbing death that occurred there; it's the Stones *watching* the concert on a flatbed editing machine (Steenbeck), in part to see the stabbing that had not been apparent to them from the stage. "This gives us the freedom, all you guys watching this," filmmaker David Maysles explains to the Stones as they sit around the Steenbeck. (The film is directed by David Maysles, who's seen recording sound; his brother Albert, unseen, who's shooting; and editor Charlotte Zwerin, who's operating the Steenbeck.) "We may only be on you for a minute," he continues, "and then we can go to almost anything."

The device allows the Maysles to set up the mysteries of the film—what happened, what was the involvement of the Hell's Angels, did the Stones have any idea what was happening?—and launches the film. By periodically cutting to Mick Jagger and Charlie Watts watching and reacting to the footage that we (the film audience) are watching, the filmmakers are more free to cut between scenes and sequences that are otherwise somewhat disconnected: Footage from concerts that preceded the one at Altamont; scenes showing the complication and risk of trying to organize the free concert and find a venue for it; scenes of chaos in the hours before and during the concert, scenes of performances by Grace Slick, Tina Turner, and others. And at the end of the film, they return again to the editing room, as the Stones ask them to rewind and replay the images captured by one of the cameras, freezing on a gun in the hands of the man who was stabbed. With their responses, the film is essentially over.

The Train Conveys One Story

The train of the film is its core story, its foundation. You will likely be able to identify the train within the opening sequence (whether it runs

two minutes or ten; it depends on the film), and if you're right, you would expect to see the film return to the train periodically throughout and then conclusively at the end. This doesn't mean it should be an easy journey to get to that ending, nor should the ending be entirely predictable. It just has to connect to the story you promised when the film opened. If, during production, the film takes a detour and ends up with a powerful end to a different story, it's probable that you and your team will need to rethink how the film opens and what the actual spine of the film is.

Each Film's Train Is Unique

The narrative spine is part of what differentiates your film from someone else's. For example, the website for Firelight Media offers a three-paragraph description of *Jonestown: The Life and Death of Peoples Temple*, directed by Stanley Nelson. The third paragraph suggests the structure of the film: "On November 18, 1978, over 900 members of Peoples Temple died in the largest mass suicide/murder in history. Using never-before-seen archival footage and survivor interviews, *Jonestown: The Life and Death of Peoples Temple* tells the story of the people who followed Jim Jones from Indiana to California and finally to the remote jungles of Guyana, South America in a misbegotten quest to build an ideal society." The journey is implied in the title and this description.

In contrast, another filmmaker drawing on the same history might make a film called *Massacre at Jonestown*, which might have as its train the final days in Guyana. Someone else might make *Jonestown Survivor*, which might tell the story of an individual's journey from that fateful day to a new life. Nelson's film, bookended by the massacre, follows the temple and its members on a harrowing journey that seemed to begin with free choice and ends with entrapment, brutality, and death.

Sometimes, you can confirm your hunch about a train by looking at the DVD box: *Waltz with Bashir*, for example, "chronicles one man's descent into his own half-forgotten past." (If you are pitching it as a train, you'll likely want to add specifics: an Israeli man's descent; half-forgotten past as a soldier in Lebanon.) *Man on Wire* shows how Philippe Petit "overcame seemingly insurmountable challenges to achieve the artistic crime of the century." Alex Gibney's *Taxi to the Dark Side* "investigates the torture and killing of an innocent Afghani taxi driver in this gripping probe into reckless abuses of government power." As Gibney discusses in Chapter 15, the story of the young taxi

driver's murder provided a narrative framework for a subject he'd been struggling with: "I was approached to do a film about torture, and initially reluctant because it was a very difficult subject and I wasn't sure the subject would be a film. And so I looked for a story . . ."

Remember, though, that the train may not be neatly articulated on the box, and that in fact there may not be a clear-cut train. Eugene Jarecki's *Why We Fight* is a well-structured and complex film, but the description on the box ("an unflinching look at the anatomy of American war-making") doesn't describe the train; instead, it talks generally about the film. *Why We Fight* is an interesting example, however, because the film uses the arc of a grieving father, retired police officer Wilton Sekzer, as a narrative *framing device*. Having lost his son in the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Center, Sekzer wants revenge and believes the U.S. government's argument that the target should be Iraq. By the end of the film, his views have changed. Sekzer is not an active protagonist, and his story is not the train, because he does not have a goal that propels the film forward. But his presence and arc helps to give the film's overall essay a coherent and satisfying shape.

A Train Is Both Universal and Specific

Films generally appeal to our emotions before they appeal to our heads. In fact, the reason to tell a story for maximum (genuine) emotional impact is so that you *can* appeal to people's heads. Think about the documentaries and even the fictional dramas that appeal to you. At their most basic level, the questions they raise are: Will the guy get the girl? Will the outbreak be stopped? Will the town/puppy/hostage be saved? Will the team/first grader/unemployed father win the competition?

The train is the device that gets to the heart of your film, whether it's a story of competition or a question that demands an answer. Here's an example. I am not naturally drawn to space exploration. I understand that it's complex and important, but when people start going into details about lunar modules and orbits and heat shields, my eyes glaze over. There are, of course, people who will buy any book or video that comes out about the space program, people who know everything there is to know about Sputnik and Goddard and the Sea of Tranquility. So the question is, how do you make a film that will appeal to both groups? You don't want to make it so superficial that you bore the aficionados, or so dry that you will never attract audiences like me. (Note that I did not say "so technical," because if you get a good train going, you can be surprisingly technical and people will

want to follow you.) A student of mine came up with a solution that I thought worked well.

The assignment was to write a treatment for a historical documentary on any U.S. subject. He chose the tragic Apollo 1 mission. (In 1967, a month before they were to become the first men to land on the moon, three U.S. astronauts died in a fire during a routine test.) One possible train that he considered was the government investigation that followed the fire, but it quickly became apparent that this would mire the film in bureaucracy—committees and reports and testimony—and lose anyone not interested in the details. Instead, he used the day of the fire as his train, moving the events forward in a way that motivated a look into the history and politics of space research and the lives of the astronauts involved. Since he presented the story from the point of view of those with something at stake in its outcome, he was able to bring the “initially disinterested” audience members along, giving us a reason to care and want to learn more.

Thinking about the “initially disinterested” is a good strategy in general. It’s very easy for your own knowledge of or passion for a subject to get in the way of good storytelling. Assume that a big portion of the people you hope to reach don’t know (or perhaps don’t care) about something that you know every detail of. As you think about the story you want to tell about these topics, what are the key points that most fascinate you? How might you pitch the film at a family event, or in an elevator should you bump into a commissioning executive? What are the three to five “bullet points” you might fold into a pitch that will not only get people to pay attention, but might prompt them to ask you for details?

BUILDING ON THE NARRATIVE FRAME

The train, or spine, summarizes the film’s structure at its most basic. Now you need to build a film that will hold an audience’s attention, whether it’s for 20 minutes or two hours or more. We’ve all sat through documentaries that seemed pointless and meandering. Maybe they had great beginnings, but then they seemed to start again, and again, and again. The film seemed to be about one thing, but the rousing conclusion was about something altogether different. The story started in the present, and then quickly plunged into background and never resurfaced. Or the situation and characters were so weakly developed that we found ourselves caring little about the outcome. These are often problems of structure.