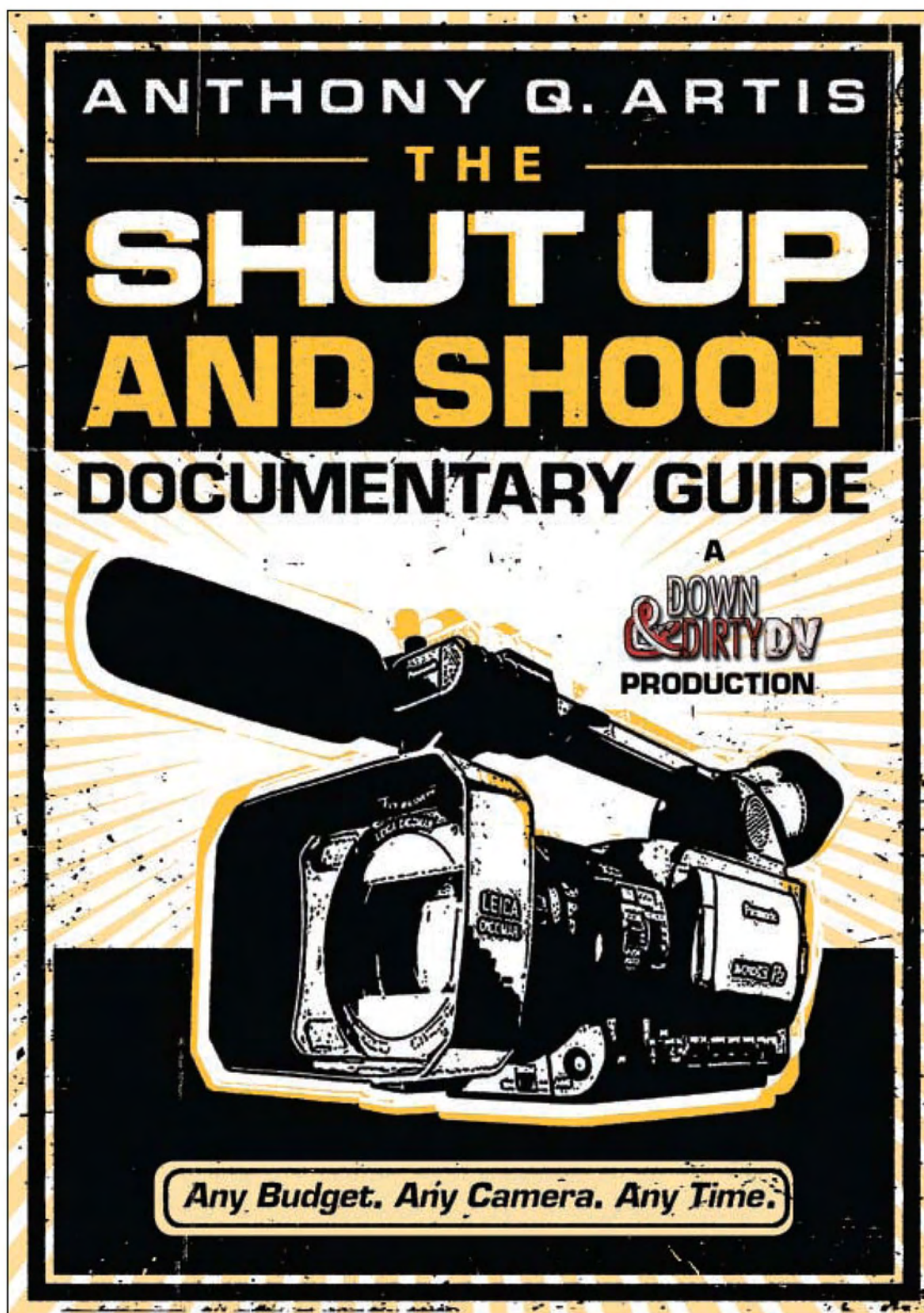




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CHAPTER 1

PREPRODUCTION



Plenty of people have bright ideas. Plenty of people are geniuses, but will never know it, because they don't execute.

*—Fat Joe
from the documentary Paper Chasers*

Shut up and shoot.

—Anthony Q. Artis



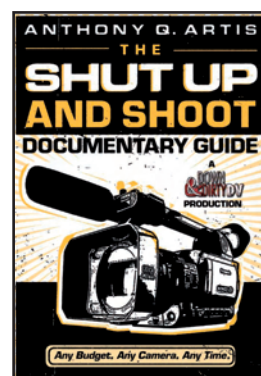
LEARNING THE FILMMAKING PROCESS

Know this: Filmmaking is not magic or rocket science. All the crafts and practices of filmmaking can be learned. Pretty much anyone can be a filmmaker (or even a rocket scientist for that matter). All you've gotta do is *study and learn* what the task involves, then methodically do it, step-by-step, and at the end of the day you will have a film (or a rocket). Whether or not your first efforts take off is another story, but you will be well on your way to success if you study, practice, and—above all else—persist.

Filmmaking, especially DV filmmaking, is constantly evolving. The tools, practices, and industry are all constantly changing and you need to stay up to be Down and Dirty. If you weren't in film school, once upon a time, it would've really sucked to be you, but in this new digital age you have many options outside of film school to learn and hone the craft. Use them all.

Film Books

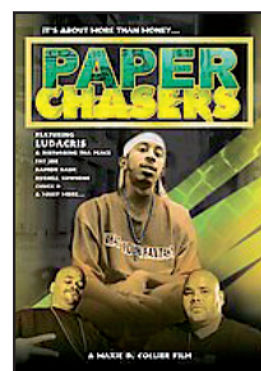
You're already off to a great start with this book, but you need more. In my personal filmmaking journey, books have been invaluable to expanding my knowledge as a filmmaker. Film books come in many flavors and styles. Some are simply collections of inspirational filmmaking anecdotes, some are technical blueprints, some are more academic and philosophical, and others are in-depth case studies. I have found they all have something to offer. Ask fellow filmmakers what they recommend. (At DownAndDirtyDV.com you can find a collection of specific film books I recommend.)



Film Books

DVD Extras

DVD extras are probably the best thing to happen to film education in a long time. Whenever possible, try to rent or purchase DVD versions of your favorite movies that include director commentary and other extras that detail the filmmaking process. Apart from telling you specifics about how certain scenes were pulled off, you can learn a lot about how a real crew functions and how the film actually came together from idea to distribution. Mini-documentaries that show the behind-the-scenes struggle to make a film are also becoming quite prevalent. Moreover, many of these DVDs also contain storyboards, set and costume sketches, director's early works, research material, scripts, crew interviews, deleted scenes, and other previously unseen elements of the filmmaking process. Try watching a movie once, then look at the making-of documentary (doc) and all the extras, then watch it again with the director/crew commentary. After that, you'll never look at that film the same way again. Every time you look at it, it will be like taking a mini-film studies course.



DVD Extras

Podcasts

The newest entry to filmmaking instruction is podcasting. If you're not down with podcasting yet, you really need to get down, because you're sleeping on some amazing free resources. In short, podcasts are audio and high-quality video clips that can be downloaded, saved, and played on your computer or your iPod or other portable media player. There is of course the pimped-out superfly Down and Dirty DV Podcast, which I highly recommend. And there are also many other great audio and video shows out there that can help you understand the filmmaking process, if not teach you in outright step-by-step lessons. The filmmaking podcasts out there include feature interviews, tutorials, call-in Q&As, news, Web links, interviews, product reviews, trailers, shorts, and even feature-length films. See the Resources section of this book for a list of filmmaking-related podcasts.



Podcasts

Workshops

In major cities all over the country there are filmmaking workshops, panels, and classes that will help you learn the craft of filmmaking. These range from scriptwriting classes to hands-on workshops to Q&A panels about industry issues. Time and price also vary from one hour to one year or free to thousands of dollars. There is something out there for everyone from kids to old-school video veterans.

Filmmaking organizations typically sponsor panels and workshops, but there are also commercial and college workshops to help every level of filmmaker expand their skills and knowledge. Down and Dirty DV offers short guerrilla filmmaking workshops, but there are plenty of other workshops out there with different focuses. Poke around on the net, ask fellow filmmakers, and comb your local college course listings.



Workshops

Cable TV

There are always a handful of cable TV shows about filmmaking. IFC and The Sundance Channel have programming entirely dedicated to indie films and filmmaking. Among my past and present favorites are *Project Greenlight* (Bravo), *MTV's Making the Video* (MTV), *Iconoclasts* (Sundance Channel), *Film School* (IFC), *Inside the Actor's Studio* (Bravo), *On the Lot* (Fox), *Anatomy of a Scene* (IFC), and *E! True Hollywood Story* (E!). All of these shows feature filmmakers discussing the craft and in many cases cameras are rolling behind the scenes to show you the filmmaking process unfolding up close and personal with all the ugly seams showing.



Cable TV

Instructional DVDs

Books are cool, but ultimately filmmaking is a visual process that's easiest explained in pictures. There are a number of DVDs out there (seemingly all with the subtitle "film school in a box") that will help walk you through the technical aspects of the filmmaking process step-by-step. From lighting tutorials to camerawork to non-linear editing, there's probably a DVD product out there to teach almost every aspect of DV filmmaking. If guerrilla is your style, check out the Down and Dirty DV DVD Series at www.DownAndDirtyDV.com.



Instructional DVDs

Web Sites

There are endless filmmaking blogs and Web sites online. You can look up do it yourself (DIY) projects, case studies, articles, tutorials, get your filmmaking questions answered, join an online filmmaking community, research equipment and prices, and on and on. Some such as FilmSchoolOnline.com or CyberCollege.com offer free and low-cost filmmaking instruction in the form of online tutorials and instruction. See the Resources List in the back of the book for more film-related Web sites.



Web sites

Magazines

Magazines are a great way to stay down with the latest trends and practices of the industry: in-depth case studies, equipment reviews, tutorials, and interviews with today's filmmaking movers and shakers. Some mags, such as *StudentFilmmakers* and *DV*, are offered free to qualified people in the industry. As far as I can tell, qualifying usually involves giving up your e-mail address and filling out a brief survey once or twice a year. It's a fair trade-off and beats the cover price.



Magazines

Crewing

Any place where people are making films and videos is a great place to learn the process up close and personal. If you are willing to work for free, there are infinite opportunities to work on film and video crews. (I call this OPM Learning, because the only thing better than learning from your own mistakes is learning from **Other People's Mistakes on Other People's Money**.) Crewing is cheaper and less stressful and painful with many of the same first-hand learning benefits of working on your own film. More important, you will have informal teachers and you will meet



Crewing

and feel out people who you can later recruit to work on your own projects. I've worked for no money a hundred times over, but I've never worked on a project "for free" in my life. The knowledge, skills, and contacts I've acquired while helping fellow filmmakers with their efforts have been invaluable to me. Never think of it as *working* for free, but *learning* for free. In the best case scenarios where there is a real budget for crew and you have some experience under your belt, you will actually be getting *paid* to learn. Production Assistant, Craft Services, and boom operator are all excellent positions for observation. Check your local film organizations, college bulletin boards, and Web sites like Mandy.com or Craig's List for film crew announcements.

Doing

It doesn't matter whether you study all or none of the previous resources first, at some point you are going to have to actually make like Nike and *just do it*. This is the hands-down most effective way to learn. Don't worry that you don't know everything (you never will). Don't worry that you're not as good as that other kid (you will be later). Don't wait until you can afford a better camera (it's just a tool).

Don't worry that it's gonna suck (it probably will).

Stop BS-ing yourself and everyone around you and just shut up and do it! The real learning process begins the moment you commit to a project and hit the record button. I've had one simple goal on every project I've shot, and that is to make it suck *less* than the last project. When you take this approach a magic thing happens over time . . . you go from sucky to mediocre to good and maybe, just maybe, if you eat your guerrilla vitamins and say your prayers, someone will call your work "great." But you'll never know if you don't actually start doing it, screwing it up, and getting better at it. No professor, course, book, or DVD can teach you nearly as much as actually hitting the streets with a camera and doing it. Straight up. Guerrilla.



Doing



BEEN THERE, DONE THAT

WHY MAKE A DOCUMENTARY?

ALBERT MAYSLES, DIRECTOR/DP

(*Grey Gardens, Gimme Shelter, Salesman, Lalee's Kin, etc.*)

Very simply put one of the great needs—maybe certainly one of the greatest needs in our world—is for us to know one another, to know what's really going on in the world around us and to feel a commonality of need and purpose with other people. People of different walks of life, other nations, other ethnic backgrounds, economic statuses, different philosophies, and religions . . . We need to find a common bond with the rest of humanity and the documentary allows us to do that. I think it's the most effective way of connecting with another person's life. You film somebody in a particular situation that is the same or different from that of the viewer, and that viewer feels a connection with that person and that person's experience—an engagement with the life around that person, who is the viewer. And it's what we need. As I think of it, it's a documentary filmmaker's way of making a better world.

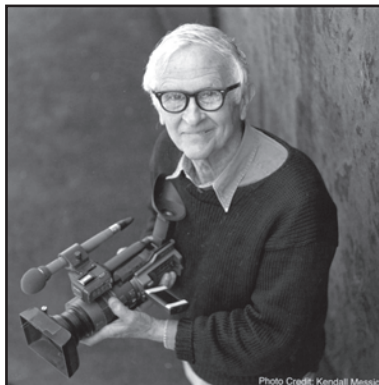


Photo Credit: Kendall Messers

If you go into documentary filmmaking, you are making a connection with life itself. And you have an opportunity to inform people in such a connective fashion. You know the word "entertainment" is an interesting one. A documentary is an entertainment, but not as a diversion, which is the first definition in entertainment, but in engaging. You're engaging that person by making a good documentary and that's a wonderful form of entertainment.

I've always had a great deal of confidence in the value and even in the eventual popularity of documentary as a form of filmmaking . . . Also, I've felt that eventually just as we say, "the truth will out," so there will be a very strong trend toward nonfiction, away from fiction, because the nonfiction has already within it a source of truth that is difficult for fiction to match. And so, that's what's happening now. There was a movement in the direction of documentary. I just hope that that movement flourishes and becomes stronger and stronger as people make good documentaries and we don't rely on so-called "reality television" and that way of recording reality in a way that's really kind of documentary, but not really.



DOC PREPRODUCTION

Basic Steps of Documentary Preproduction

1. Brainstorm ideas and develop goal(s)
2. Research story
3. Choose interview subjects
4. Choose equipment package
5. Make budget
6. Write production plan
7. Hire crew

Introduction

A good shoot begins long before production with extensive preparation, otherwise known as **preproduction**.

Carefully planning out what you will do and double-checking your equipment will help ensure that you get it right the first and perhaps *only* time. Proper preparation will also greatly boost your confidence when it's time to shoot, particularly if you're new to filmmaking. Just say the tongue-twister to the right three times and never forget it.

✓ *Proper preparation prevents a poor performance.*

Documentary Goal

Regardless of whether you're making a documentary feature, short, news story, reality show, or even shooting a wedding, you should always start with the same basic questions: What's the focus? Why are you making this project? What story do you want to tell? What topics will be explored? What information do you hope to convey to your viewers? What aspects of your topic are most compelling? Are there new angles to explore on your topic? In short, ask yourself what story do you want to tell and why? You should to be able to make a statement such as:

- I want to make a documentary about the birth of modern video games, because most people don't know the fascinating story behind the people who started it all.
- I am making a video project about the history of my church to inform new members and preserve the story of the founders for future generations.
- I am documenting the underground culture of squirrel fighting to expose the exploitation of rodents to a prime time news audience.

The primary purpose is for you to get a clear grasp of what it is you want to do, then gear everything else toward that goal. These are some of the first questions you should ask yourself, because your ultimate goal will affect many of your decisions during preproduction.

✓ *Determine the goal of your doc first in order to focus your preproduction in the right direction.*



BRAINSTORMING YOUR IDEA

Use the Internet, personal contacts, trade organizations, books, magazines, and newspapers to begin researching your topic, then track down potential interview subjects. If you don't spend a lot of time on the Web, you need to start. There simply is no single greater, cheaper, or more convenient source of *starting point* information for documentaries than the Internet.

Once you pick a topic, you can begin looking up information on that topic by using search engines such as Google, Yahoo, or Dogpile. If you haven't already determined your goal or the focus of your documentary, this process will help you brainstorm and clarify exactly what aspect(s) of the broader topic you want to examine. The chart below illustrates just some of the information you could easily find on three diverse topics depending on where you decide to look.

	SKATEBOARDING	POLITICS	DEATH PENALTY
News Web Sites	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Products ■ Recent events ■ Photos/video ■ Major skaters 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Recent events ■ Major figures ■ Photos/video ■ Upcoming events 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Statistics ■ Upcoming executions ■ Photos/video
Personal Web Sites	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Tricks and tips ■ Most popular skaters ■ Fan perspective 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Public opinion ■ Activist movements ■ Upcoming events 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Pro/con activists ■ Protests ■ Essays
Blogs and Podcasts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Fan perspective ■ Tricks and tips ■ Popular products 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Latest rumors ■ Insider info ■ Public opinion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Public opinions ■ Inmate POVs ■ Advocate POVs
Trade/Professional Organizations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Upcoming events ■ New developments ■ Pro skater perspective 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Organizations' political stance ■ Upcoming events ■ New initiatives 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Law enforcement opinion ■ Statistics

Also check a *major* public library and sites like Amazon.com or Netflix.com to see what films and books already exist on the topic and what approaches have been taken to the material in the past. Try to gauge what was successful and why. Did these previous works exhaust the subject or are there still new angles, stories, and approaches to be mined?

✓ *Use the Internet to help you identify potential themes, characters, and stories to pursue.*



THE IMPORTANCE OF RESEARCH

It's important that you try to keep an open mind during this phase of preproduction. You want to gather all the potential directions you could take before settling on an approach. Once you've done your preliminary "brainstorming" and research you'll be ready to further define exactly what your documentary should and should not cover.

By mentally separating the normal from the extraordinary in your observations, you will know what's interesting and worth shooting and what's routine and boring. Potential characters, themes, and, most important, *stories* will begin to emerge. Think about how these will play onscreen. Has the general public seen these stories and people before? From what angle were they presented? Is there enough compelling material to hold an audience's interest? What *new* ideas or questions will you examine in your doc?

Research is simply forming the answer to these questions *before* you dive in. If you skip this vital step, you may easily find yourself wasting countless hours and budget dollars pursuing people, themes, and events that will never see the light of day. The better you know your story ahead of time, the more focused and successful your efforts will be.

I know fellow filmmakers who have spent months shooting hours of video of some subject only to discover in the end that the material has no useful or coherent narrative thread. There is no focus, no compelling new info, no real characters . . . no story. All they have is some bits and pieces of interesting footage that don't add up to Jack. (And you know his last name!)



✓ *Research and study your topic beforehand to determine which aspects are most worth shooting.*



BEEN THERE, DONE THAT

RESEARCH AND FACT CHECKING

SAFIYA MCCLINTON, PRODUCER

(Diamonds: The Price of Ice) and Assoc. Prod. (Brown vs. Board of Ed.)

The main thing with researching documentary is to not approach it like you did your senior English paper. Don't just stay on the Internet and think that those are sources that are reliable, because many times they're not . . . How do you present something and say, "This is official. This is true?" Now you might have one professor at the university of such and such in Iowa and he says this is the case and this is how it went down. You can't stay with that one man's approach to it. You can present it, but you definitely have to show a balanced picture.



The best way to do research is to just take a camcorder and go to as many people as you have access to and really just interview them. First person primary sources are the best way to make sure that your information is valid and is truly coming from the horse's mouth.

In addition to that, just make sure if they [offer] statistics you can back up those statistics. If someone says, "35% of the people . . . blah, blah, blah," you can go and dig up that information in journals, in newspapers . . . If they're saying that 35% of women who have this problem are XYZ, then go find that, because many times people know that their authority and their expertise will make it so they can say anything and you're not going to research it. So you really just have to follow up with reliable sources.

You just have to look at the standards in particular periodicals or any type of media, any type of additional media . . . you really have to look at their standards for journalistic excellence or fact finding. People can be very convincing in their accounts . . . and you're listening to this story thinking, "Man, this is amazing! This is gold!" And you just have to make sure that the gold that you have is not fool's gold.



INTERVIEW SUBJECTS

The people you select to appear onscreen will ultimately make or break your documentary. Choosing interview subjects is to documentary productions what casting is to **narrative filmmaking**. The only difference is that docs have *real* characters instead of character actors.

A compelling character can really make a project. In fact, many of the most successful documentaries are **character studies**. *American Movie* (about a filmmaker), *Crumb* (about a comic strip artist), and *The Cruise* (about a NYC tour guide/poet) are all notable documentary character studies. All of these docs are built around the unique perspective of a compelling central character. These docs would be entirely different creations without these colorful individuals. You can't separate the two and still have the same film, if you'd even have a film left at all.

Don't get it twisted. You can't just point your camera at someone interesting and make a good character study doc. You still need to manage structure, pacing, story development, and approach the same as you would for any other doc, but the most important core element will always be the character(s) at the center of it all.

While your project may not be a character study, the people you ultimately choose to speak on your topic are still equally crucial to the success of your doc. The better your subjects communicate and express themselves verbally, the more articulate and interesting your piece will be. So what else makes for a good interview subject?

The Ideal Character/Interview Subject

- ☐ Candid and forthcoming
- ☐ Able to speak coherently about topic
- ☐ Unique perspective
- ☐ Knowledgeable about topic
- ☐ Passionate about topic
- ☐ A recognized expert
- ☐ Clear viewpoint

If you can check off three or more of the above, you've probably got a decent candidate on your hands. If you crap out and choose a poor character, it only means you've wasted your tape, time, and resources and you'll have to find another subject or cut that segment from your finished piece. You may have plenty of videotape, but time and resources are always limited. Research and choose wisely.

✓ **Choose
interview subjects
who are compelling and
knowledgeable about
your topic.**



APPROACH AND STORYTELLING

The one thing that separates documentaries from each other, especially those dealing with the same subject matter, is **approach**. Approach is just a general term that refers to how you choose to tell the story on screen. What tone, storytelling techniques, and elements will you use? For example, will the subject of your documentary read narration or will you hire an actor? Or will you forego narration entirely and use **screen captions** to tie elements of your story together? Or will you just let the action speak for itself without any embellishment?

Will you be an onscreen character in the documentary like Michael Moore (*Fahrenheit 9/11*) or Morgan Spurlock (*Supersize Me*)? Will there be re-enactments in your piece? If so, how will they be stylized to distinguish them from the rest of your footage? Are you going to include an animated segment? Will your doc be shot “naturally” with no artificial lighting? The answers to all of these questions will form your doc’s *approach*.



Think it out. Experiment. Look at other documentaries and analyze how different filmmakers approached their subject. The possibilities are as endless as your imagination. Even though there have been countless documentaries on Tupac or teen pregnancy or corporate pollution (often using much of the same source material), yours can be made compelling and unique with a new *approach*. The story may have been told before, but you have your own perspective, focus, and a unique voice that the world has never heard before. Your storytelling style *is* your approach. It may include any of the following or more. Mix and match, research, and invent new ways to tell your story.

✓ **Decide on an approach and storytelling techniques that are most effective for your material and style.**

What's Your Approach?

- ☐ **Narration** (*Fahrenheit 911*)
- ☐ **Reenactments/recreations** (*The Civil War*)
- ☐ **Animation** (*Bowling for Columbine*)
- ☐ **Direct or natural cinema** (*Grey Gardens*)
- ☐ **Filmmaker as part of story** (*Paper Chasers*)
- ☐ **Interviews** (*The Fog of War*)
- ☐ **Confessionals to camera** (*Blue Vinyl*)
- ☐ **Archival footage** (*Eyes on the Prize*)
- ☐ **Archival photos** (*4 Little Girls*)

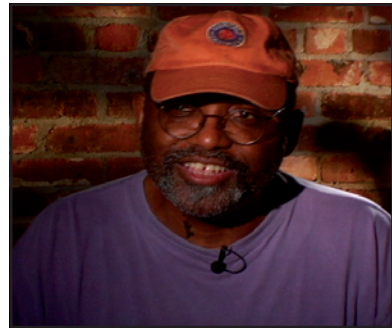


CONCEPT AND STORYTELLING

SAM POLLARD, PRODUCER/EDITOR

(4 Little Girls, Jim Brown All-American, Eyes on the Prize II, When the Levees Broke, etc.)

As a producer, part of my job is to figure out what the material is, which is all in my head. So, now I have to translate all these ideas from my head to communicate to a cameraperson and a sound person to shoot that stuff . . . Really, the ideas, the concepts are all in my brain, as a producer, and I have to make them become real when someone goes out to shoot the material . . .



The key thing as a documentary producer is to develop the concept. To find the subject is number one. Then after you find the subject, what's the concept? What's the theme that this subject is going to help you tell? The third thing is, how to tell the story. What is the story and how to tell it?

So, for example, I'm leaving on Tuesday to go to Minnesota to shoot on a pig farm, with a lady and her husband. The lady's a singer and the husband's a farmer. So, I have to figure out what the story is. The story is how they met, their lives on the farm, the pros and cons of her singing career, and being married to this farmer who has this very big farm. So, that's the story I'm gonna tell. I have to figure out what to visualize to help tell that story. Okay, so I'm gonna go out and shoot the pig farmer early in the morning feeding the pigs, sunrise, the waving fields, planting corn, planting soybeans. Then parallel, back at the house, the wife is rehearsing, practicing her singing, playing the piano, and warbling to the mirror.

Then, maybe there's a scene with the husband and the wife together out in the fields; then, an interview with both of them in the house; then, single interviews with each individual so I can get their own particular, personal backstories. It's good to shoot stills, if they have scrapbooks, pictures of them together and them separately . . . , so I'm thinking about the story and how to visualize it.