

DOCUMENTARY MAKING

For Digital
Humanists

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3. The Production Process

Creating a documentary, be it feature-length or short-form, can be intensely intimidating at the outset. The sheer amount of passion and dedication can leave even the most well-intentioned project unfinished or abandoned. To avoid this, you should aim to control the process as much as possible, lest it take control of you. Despite the distance between initial conception and the release of a final piece, every part of the process can be controlled and broken down into manageable segments.

Broadly speaking, the production process consists of three distinct phases: pre-production, production, and post-production. These three phases represent the planning, shooting, and assembly of your film. No one part of the process is more or less important than any of the others, because if any one stage is faulty, it can result in the failure of your project. Each stage of the process has its own inherent challenges, but by thinking about the production process in discrete stages it can be more easily managed and controlled.

The production processes behind different projects may vary considerably — every filmmaker will develop their own individual methodology. Pre-production for a highly scripted project will likely be one of the most important and intellectually rigorous stages in the whole process. For an observational documentary, however, one that follows a subject and cannot account for that subject's actions beforehand, pre-production will be more about planning logistics than fostering a very detailed vision of your final product.

Ensure that you understand what each stage of the production requires and involves. That will allow you successfully to manage the workload required to transform an idea into a finished product, ready for distribution and dissemination.¹

1 For a broader overview of the production process, see Francis Glebas, *Directing the Story: Professional Storytelling and Storyboarding Techniques for Live Action and*

Pre-Production

Pre-production is the period of planning that occurs before the cameras start rolling. It is during pre-production that you, as much as possible, plan the events and processes that will need to occur in order for you to achieve your vision. If you wish to shoot in more than one location, plan out when, where, and how you will get to that location. List all of the equipment you will require. If overnight accommodation is required, investigate costs, and availability. By the end of the pre-production process, all of your logistics should be resolved. Having to book last minute accommodation during the production phase will detract from your ability to immerse yourself in the more creative parts of the process. The more you make the most of your time in pre-production, the more you will be able to achieve once production actually begins.

Pre-production involves a lot of planning, but it is also a highly creative process. It is during this stage that you conceptualise your film and plan out how you will achieve your vision. If you envision a highly scripted, pre-planned TV-style history documentary, it is during pre-production that you will write the script and plot your production schedule. If, on the other hand, you intend to create a film that is more observational or reactive in nature (perhaps involving the collection of a significant number of interviews from which a main thesis or theme will be generated), you may instead spend pre-production securing interview candidates, writing questions for them to answer, and so on. Even a film that is reactive in nature, however, should have a creative element to the pre-production phase. Imagine the types of shots you wish to achieve, how your subjects will be interviewed (sat down in stable locations or moving through spaces) and practice using your equipment with test subjects to ensure that, when the time comes, you can realise your vision. Pre-production is the time during which you prepare; prepare yourself, your script (if applicable), your crew, your camera skills, your schedule, your storyboards, etc. Plan everything that is within your power. This will ensure that when you do step out

Animation (New York and London: Focal Press, 2009); Michael Rabiger, *Directing the Documentary* (Abingdon: Focal Press, 1987); David K. Irving and Peter W. Rea, *Producing and Directing Short Film and Video. Fifth Edition* (Burlington: Focal Press, 2015); and Michael Rabiger, *Directing: Film Techniques and Aesthetics. Third Edition* (Burlington: Focal Press, 2003).

with your camera, you will be able to devote all of your creative and intellectual energy to the actual making of your project.

It is also a good idea to record as many of your thoughts as possible, keeping a record to draw on for inspiration at a later date. Sketching or writing out ideas will help you to visualise them. Purchase a small notebook, something dissimilar to those you normally use in your everyday life, and dedicate it to your film. Carry this 'idea-pad' with you everywhere and whenever an idea occurs, record it. If you watch a film (documentary or otherwise) and something catches your eye, take notes so you can refer back to it at another time — whether it be an interesting transition, curious use of music or sound, or even the way in which written words appear on the screen.



Fig. 3. The location titles in *Looking for Charlie* (seen here) pay homage to the caption style utilised in Marvel's *Captain America: Civil War* (2016). *Looking for Charlie* (00:25:38–00:25:46).

Our film, *Looking for Charlie: Life and Death in the Silent Era* (2018), has virtually nothing in common with Marvel's *Captain America: Civil War* (2016) — except for the large, almost full-screen text used to describe locations in both films. As *Looking for Charlie* took place around the world, much like the third *Captain America* film, we were inspired by the clarity of that film's screen-dominating captions. They were bold, novel

(at the time), and communicated the changing locations of the film with exceptional clarity. So we borrowed them. We recorded sketches of how they might look in our 'idea-pad'. Always keep one eye on precedent (see chapter five) — be prepared to respond to filmic grammar, modern and historical.

Practically everything we learned as we were working on *Looking for Charlie* found its way into that 'idea-pad'. There is a page listing about a dozen possible titles for that film, still photographs, maps of New York (where we shot much of the film), questions that we might ask potential interviewees, ideas for the editing process, and (evolving) reflections on the nature of the film we were making. There are sketches for potential shots as well as discussions about the intellectual and emotional roles that certain shots might play. There are also pages and pages of notes on camera settings. Everything we needed, from practical reminders to sources for inspiration and precedent, was contained in that pad.

Pre-production is also the phase in which the realities of a shoot — including identifying key filming locations, transportation, costs, crew organisation, and so on — are organised: ideas must be turned into actionable milestones. Plan as much as you can. If you have a scripted segment, sketch out every shot and assemble a storyboard if required. If you wish to create a complicated, multi-camera sequence, plan out camera placement, calculate whether you will need assistance (a crew) to accomplish that task. Consider the time when you (and they) will be shooting. If necessary, organise transportation and meals accordingly. Build redundancies into your planning to accommodate unexpected calamity. The more in-depth the planning, the more effective your shoot is likely to be.

It is important that you regularly assess the achievability of your project (see chapter four). Documentaries are not necessarily more labour-intensive to produce than monographs or articles. If, however, you envision creating re-enactments or other complex set pieces, this may change and you will need to spend considerable time working out the nature of your collaboration with others (see chapter five) as well as the logistics which accompany such activities (food, safety, comfort, access to bathrooms, etc). Even a solo shoot, involving only the director (armed with a camera), requires such logistical consideration. You do not wish to find yourself capturing footage of an event only to discover

that you do not have access to a bathroom or food. The organization of such logistics is beyond the scope of this text, but it should be something you consider as you plan your project. By doing so, you can help to ensure that the actual production runs smoothly, allowing you to focus your energies on the task at hand. The more you plan for in pre-production, the more fruitful and enjoyable any on-location work will ultimately be.

By the end of your pre-production process you should have accomplished two things. Firstly, you should have a clear idea about the type of film you want to make — your vision. Secondly, you should have a plan in place for how you intend to realise that vision, including locations you must visit, any interviews you wish to carry out, and a detailed scenario to accomplish complicated sequences or shots. Your original vision will, at least implicitly, speak to your plan. If your planning suggests an over-complicated or unachievable production process, your vision may need to be revisited. Ask yourself a simple question — does your objective justify the resources and effort required to achieve it? Revisit and revise your production plan as many times as necessary to develop a schedule of activity with which you are comfortable — and whose milestones are demonstrably achievable.

Production

Following the planning phase of your project, production proper can begin. Production is the phase wherein you set out to capture the footage, interviews, and so on, which will form the backbone of your film; the plan from your pre-production phase will thus be set into motion. For a number of reasons, most of which are no doubt obvious to you, this is the most intimidating and, often, challenging part of the entire process. The theoretical becomes real and the pressures placed upon the filmmaker can be vast. It is one thing to conceptualise a film, it is another to bring it into being.

It is crucial, then, that you have faith in yourself and your project throughout production. Understand that some things will likely go wrong. Accept this as a reality and be prepared to be flexible should a setback occur. An intended sequence may need to be abandoned; an overly ambitious plan may need to be overhauled or simplified — in such situations, stress and worry will be the result. Should this occur

(and it almost certainly will) understand that it is simply part of the process. Deal with it as best you can and do not be afraid to take a step back and reassess. There is much to be said for taking a short break, sleeping on a crisis, and discovering new solutions to your production problems.

Successful production processes are about actioning your pre-production plans, and then rolling with the resultant punches. If you are a first-time filmmaker, or working with an inexperienced crew, you should certainly build redundancies into your schedule. This will give you time to finish sequences that overrun or allow you to compensate for unforeseen disasters that may affect your schedule. Interview subjects can cancel, trains can be delayed, and patience can wear thin. None of this is particularly pleasant, but neither is it easily avoidable. Build a schedule that recognises this.

However committed you are to realising your vision, never forget that the real world has as much say about the success of your production as you do. Inclement weather might disrupt your plans. A good pre-production plan will help to mitigate this, but in some situations the unforeseen will occur and leave you with few options. Rest assured, in the case of such an eventuality, you will overcome, so long as you are prepared to adapt and think on your feet. These challenges may seem daunting but remember that you are embarking on this undertaking for a reason. The intellectual and creative rewards are significant and by persevering through them and turning them to your advantage, your work will ultimately become stronger as a result. Shooting material for documentaries can be a challenge. But it also incredibly rewarding.

There is much to be said for taking time to reconsider your position: endeavour to achieve something valuable in the face of whatever challenges you encounter. Sudden changes in the weather might be frustrating, but they might also provide you with an opportunity to turn the camera on yourself and your crew. You may not have planned on a moment of introspection in your film, but the sudden change of conditions may well provide you with an unforeseen opportunity to improvise and add an extra dimension to your project. Perhaps the sudden downpour will allow you to add a moment of brief levity to your film, to break the fourth wall and to reflect upon the filmmaking process (and nature's ability to disrupt it). The unforeseen breeds creative opportunity.

If a sequence is rendered impossible by circumstance, reassess its importance. What was it meant to achieve? How might that same theme be explored in a different, more achievable way? It may be disappointing that your original vision could not be achieved, but something just as effective might be possible using the resources and conditions which are available to you. In other words, try not to get caught up in the disappointment of the moment. Accept the challenge that has been presented to you and adapt accordingly.²

When making *Looking for Charlie*, our original plan to shoot a moving conversation on Broadway was abandoned due to concerns that the sequence was a) too complicated and b) the desired location would be too busy. The result was a period of reassessment. Following some reflection, we agreed that some attempt at the sequence should be made but that the location should be altered to minimise pedestrian foot traffic. Whilst the original Broadway location would have provided visual beauty and symbolic significance, an alternative location (which was just as symbolic, albeit in a different way) was chosen. Though less visually beautiful, the new location allowed for multiple takes to be attempted whilst its proximity to the crew's hotel reduced many of the logistical issues.

Despite the complexity of the sequence, which featured no less than three moving cameras, two moving subjects, a roaming boom mic operator, and a support crew, all of whom needed to move in a coordinated, choreographed manner, we believed we had an achievable plan. Despite the difficulties in capturing the sequence, our crew rose admirably to the challenge. Reassessment, adjustment, and an unflinching desire to realise an achievable goal allowed us to capture a visually dynamic sequence in which we had a lot of faith.

Perhaps the sequence should never have been attempted — it was certainly ambitious. But ambition is no bad thing and, had the sequence not been successful, a simpler version could have been attempted at a later time. By thinking of camera positions and choreography in advance,

2 There is value in continually engaging with filmmaking literature throughout the production process. There are many works that can help to inspire you as they articulate the challenges (and solutions) that productions have had to deal with. Among some of the best examples are Mike Figgis, *Digital Filmmaking. Revised Edition* (London: Faber & Faber, 2014); Francis Ford Coppola, *Live Cinema and its Techniques* (New York and London: Liverlight, 2017); and David Mamet, *On Directing* (New York: Penguin, 1992).



Fig. 4. Walking through downtown Manhattan at night. This sequence in *Looking for Charlie* required three moving cameras to follow two moving subjects, both of which were wired for sound, whilst a boom mic operator recorded the city ambience. This was not an easy sequence to shoot, but the result was visually dynamic, taking advantage of the naturally high production values that New York offers. *Looking for Charlie* (0:30:58–0:32:37).

we were in a position to make a realistic effort to realise the sequence. The result was a kinetic, moving conversation through a bustling New York street in the dark of night. Ambition can pay off, but you will need to accept that it will not always do so. That is simply the nature of the process.³

When shooting *Aftermath: A Portrait of a Nation Divided* (2016), there was some discussion between ourselves as to whether or not it was worth shooting in the New York borough of Harlem. A prior attempt to do so had not gone according to plan due to inclement weather. Despite

3 There is also value to consulting works that offer cinematographic inspiration, illustrating interesting camera angles, shots, and camera movements which you might want to employ during a shoot. Some examples of such works include Gustavo Mercado, *The Filmmaker's Eye: Learning (and Breaking) the Rules of Cinematic Composition* (New York and London: Focal Press, 2010); Steve Katz, *Film Directing: Shot by Shot* (Michigan: Michael Wiese, 1991); and Jennifer Van Sijll, *Cinematic Storytelling: The 100 Most Powerful Film Conventions Every Filmmaker Must Know* (Michigan: Michael Wiese, 2005).

some reluctance to repeat the experience, we nonetheless recommitted to the locale in the hope that it would produce dynamic and arresting interview material. Harlem did not disappoint and, in our afternoon there, we were able to collect a wide array of interviews, each of which made it into the final cut of that project. It is impossible to imagine the project being a success had we not taken the opportunity to shoot there.

On the other hand, if you can capture your vision in a reasonable timeframe, using the resources you have to hand, consider taking a more ambitious path. It will likely take a significant investment of time in order to achieve a more ambitious goal, but if you have time and patience to spare, the results, though more exhausting, can add significant value to your project. Do not give up on an ambitious idea straight away, but at the same time, do not invest more resources in something unlikely to provide a significant intellectual or creative return. Do invest in those moments that you believe are achievable and that will add significant aesthetic or intellectual value to your project.

It is also worth mentioning that you should develop a rigorous end-of-day process, which will include time to care for your equipment, recharge batteries, and back up data. Every night you should ensure that all camera batteries are recharged. Memory cards should be downloaded on to at least two separate hard drives (in case one fails), and your footage should be reviewed to ensure that the material you captured meets your requirements (all your shots should be in focus, etc). This part of the daily process is non-negotiable. It is easy to lose footage and potentially very difficult, if not impossible, to capture it again. The footage you capture is the currency of your shoot and should be treated as such.

Post-Production

Considering the amount of effort expended on planning and, then, shooting your film, one might imagine that post-production would be comparatively straightforward: the assembly of your pre-made filmic pieces into a pre-determined order. In many ways, however, the commencement of post-production signals the start of a new creative phase, which is as involved as anything which has come before. A tightly scripted project might result in a fairly straightforward assembly but,

in many cases, documentaries are created, or discovered, during post-production. The editing process provides opportunities to completely reimagine or reconstruct a film, to achieve new creative or intellectual visions not evident before.

Post-production is a period of practically unbridled creative and intellectual opportunities. Editing your footage together will, for better or for worse, show you the reality of your original vision. It will confirm your original genius or, particularly for first-time filmmakers, show the weaknesses and limitations present in your original plan. Like the unexpected setbacks that will have marked the production phase, this is nothing that cannot be overcome with some creative thinking and a willingness to reassess and rework your project.

Scripts can be rewritten in post-production. Shots not meant to go together can suddenly be used to create an entirely new or unexpected intellectual point. The rhythm of the finished film, which before post-production was only ever imagined, might turn out to be very different to that which you originally envisioned. In other words, you should expect your film to reveal itself to you throughout post-production — and you should expect the project to grow, change, and evolve.

Allow yourself to be responsive to your project's needs. By all means, focus upon achieving your original vision, if that continues to promise the best results, but be prepared to accept new possibilities in the editing bay.⁴

Editing occurs in roughly three phases: rough cut, fine cut, and finishing cut. The rough cut is the first version of the film that you will edit together and it should serve to give you a broad sense of what your finished film will look like, though it will likely have significant pacing issues, unfinished sequences, and a generally unpolished feel which will make it inappropriate to show outsiders. This is perfectly natural and you should not worry about producing a rough cut that does not yet feel like a film. The important thing is that you have a version of your film that you can assess and, with a little imagination, refine into a more satisfying state.

4 An excellent introduction to the post-production mindset was written by Walter Murch, the editor of *Apocalypse Now* (1979). Whilst some of the technical information, even in the updated edition of Murch's book, is now out of date, the theory and ideology that he discusses certainly is not. See Walter Murch, *In the Blink of an Eye. Second Edition* (Los Angeles: Simlan-James, 2001).

That is not to say that disaster will not strike. Rough cuts are not always successful and may well demonstrate significant structural failings in your project, which you will need to address. If this occurs, know that you are in good company. The rough cut of George Lucas's *Star Wars* (1977) was a disaster — and its 2016 prequel, *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story* likewise required significant reshoots to reconstitute it into a form that pleased its studio and distributor.⁵ Despite the setbacks, both of these films ultimately recovered and, at least in the case of *Star Wars*, resulted in a piece of era-defining cinema.

If a rough-cut of your film reveals serious issues, reassess and rebuild. Significant rewrites may be required and, possibly, the collection of new material (re-entering production, essentially), all of which might prove disheartening. If the result is an intellectually deep and effective film, however, it will be worth the additional effort.

Post-production can require bold decisions not envisioned during the pre-production or production stages. To that end, be prepared to edit around the material that works most effectively. Filmmakers should not be afraid of cutting material that does not add intellectual weight to the final project. Heart-breaking though it may be to remove a cherished sequence, it may be necessary for the good of the production. Filmmakers should thus be ruthless in the post-production process — ruthless with their emerging edit, with their pre-existing vision, and with the footage they have collected.

Once you have created a rough cut of your film with which you are broadly happy, you can begin working on your fine cut. At this stage in the process, you should pay particular attention to the timing of individual edits and the overall rhythm of your film. You should aim to ensure that your audience forgets that it is watching a film. Cuts should not draw attention to themselves and the audience should be engaged throughout. During this stage of the editing process, you should pay particular attention to the feel of your final film: does the audience receive all of the information they require at the right time and in the

5 *Empire of Dreams*. Directed by Kevin Burns and Edith Becker. Los Angeles: 20th Century Fox, 2004; and Aaron Couch. "Tony Gilroy on 'Rogue One' Reshoots: They were in 'Terrible Trouble'", *The Hollywood Reporter*, 5 April 2018, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/heat-vision/star-wars-rogue-one-writer-tony-gilroy-opens-up-reshoots-1100060>

correct sequence; are there lulls wherein their interest may wander; could sequences be improved with sharper editing?⁶

The introduction of your final music choices and a well-developed soundscape should start to give your film a close-to-finished feel (see chapter twenty-three). Music should be present in both the rough and fine cuts, but in the latter stage it should be presented as it will ultimately appear in your final film. Depending upon the type of film you are creating, the music you use may well add significant depth to your work. If this is the case, it should be fully evident in the fine cut of your film.⁷

The final stage of the post-production process, the finishing cut, will see you adding the final polish which will complete your project. Any place-holders will all need to be removed and replaced with their final elements. Cuts will need to be finalised and any problematic moments or sequences will need be resolved or removed. Audio will need to be balanced and tweaked, to ensure that spoken-word sections are clear and audible; the music should complement your work, but it should not overwhelm it. The rough edges, in other words, should be removed in this final editing phase. The journey you commenced at the start of pre-production will now have reached its conclusion.

Your film will now be complete.

6 Ken Dancyger, *The Technique of Film and Video Editing: History, Theory, Practice* (New York and London: Focal Press, 2011), pp. 327–40.

7 Steve Saltzman, *Music Editing for Film and Television: The Art and the Process* (Burlington: Focal Press, 2015).