

Documentary/Storytelling Techniques

A **documentary film** is a film story concerning factual topics (i.e. someone or something). These films have a variety of aims, to record important events and ideas; to inform viewers; to convey opinions and to create public interest. A number of common techniques or conventions are used in documentaries to achieve these aims.

Narration – This is a traditional style of storytelling using a narrator who is off-camera and never seen. This generic “voice” is an objective storyteller. This style is often used in news type documentaries like PBS's Frontline.

Host – This is a style of storytelling where you learn the story through a guide or a host. You see this person on camera and they take you through the story in their own words. The host could be you, it could be a celebrity or a professional host or just a person who has some connection to the story. This is a great technique for a travel documentary. Some New York Times' Op-Docs use this technique.

No Narration – The story is pieced together using only clips of interviews, raw footage, on-screen text and graphics. These pieces are referred to as nat. sound (natural sound) pieces. Life After Serving is a compelling example of this style.

Recreations/Drama – This storytelling technique is often used in historical documentaries where important events have already taken place and there is no existing footage. Occasionally, dramatization will be used to fill in missing pieces to the story. Discovery Channel's Shark Week employs this strategy frequently to scare audiences. A great example of a documentary using this technique is Man on Wire.

Follow One Character – This is a style of storytelling where you choose one person to follow for your story. The filmmakers that made the documentary An Inconvenient Truth took this approach by following Al Gore to tell a big and complicated story. Waiting for Superman follows several characters as well.

Cartoon Animation – A lot of documentaries in recent years have been using this technique including Searching For Sugar Man and Blood Brother. The cartoon animation is used sparingly throughout the documentary to capture a

particular event or mood. For example in *Bowling for Columbine*, cartoon animation was used to tell a brief history of the United States.

Talking Heads – This is a technique where you interview a lot of people and edit their quotes together one right after the other. The documentary-short *So Where's Home? A Film About Third Culture Kid Identity* is a film that uses this technique.

Chronological Order (or not) – Directors may choose to tell a story in “real time” as it happened, or they can shake it up a bit by putting the “end” of the story first and then go back in time to explain what happened leading up to that event. This can be a great technique to keep the audience guessing or to play with their expectations. Directors could even choose to keep looking back in time throughout the film and then have it all come together at the end.

Personal Point of View – When one tells the story from their personal perspective, it is like an opinion piece. These types of films can be very compelling if done right. Michael Moore's documentaries, such as *Fahrenheit 9/11* are great examples of personal point of view. This style can be particularly effective when dealing with a very sensitive issue or personal story.

Observational – This is a technique where you just let the camera roll and let the action speak for itself. There is no narration, no “talking heads”, no interviews telling the story. The camera is basically a “fly on the wall.” There is still editing involved to set the tone and pacing, but the filmmakers allow the action and people in the situation reveal the story in their own timing. *Food Inc.* effectively demonstrates this strategy when they have under-cover footage.

Photo Slideshow – Photos can be a wonderful storytelling technique. As the saying goes, a photo is worth a thousand words. Photos can be put to music, narration or quotes for a sophisticated and compelling documentary. Although photos are certainly used throughout a documentary, they may be paired with “personal point of view” perspective.

Chapters – Directors may choose to cut up the documentary into “chapters” or segments, each with its own title. It keeps it simple for the filmmaker and the audience. This technique is used in numerous documentaries.

Participatory – This style or technique might be used in an educational or children's documentary. The filmmaker asks the audience to do certain tasks: “Okay, now stand up and do this..” or perhaps it's an instructional type documentary where the audience is shown how to do CPR or emergency procedures. This style is basically a show and tell.

Voiceover – The voice-over in a documentary is a commentary by the filmmaker, spoken while the camera is filming, or added to the soundtrack during the production.

Interview – The interview is a common documentary technique. It allows people to answer questions asked by the filmmaker. An interview may take place on screen, or off screen, on a different set. Interviews in a documentary give the viewer a sense of realism; that the documentary maker's views are mutually shared by another person or source, and thus more valid. To achieve this much detail from what may be a one-hour interview, clips of only a few minutes are shown. Interviews on opposing sides of an issue may be shown to give the viewer comprehensive information about a topic.

Archival – or stock footage, is material obtained from a film library or archive and inserted into a documentary to show historical events or to add detail without the need for additional filming.

Montage – A montage sequence conveys ideas visually by putting them in a specific order in the film. Narrative montages involve the planning of sequence of shots used to indicate changes in time and place within a film. Ideational montages lin montage containing a negative theme followed by a positive theme may give the viewer the idk actions with words, and are often used in documentaries. A different positioning of shots conveys different ideas to the viewer. Montages in documentaries are usually linked with words that characters say. This visual representation of the characters thoughts helps position the viewer in the story, and helps the viewer better understand what the character is saying. It visually presents a progression of ideas on a screen.

Exposition – The exposition occurs at the beginning and introduces the important themes of the film. It is important because it creates the viewer's first impression and introduces the viewer to the content.

Sources: [Link #1](#), [Link #2](#)