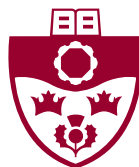


# DOCUMENTING WITH VIDEO



Community Conservation  
Research Network



SAINT MARY'S  
UNIVERSITY

# Documenting with Video

**A Handbook for Non-professional Video Producers**

**Community Conservation Research Network**

**Written by Don Duchene, Nexus Media**

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**2019**

This publication and accompanying training videos are available online at:

**[www.communityconservation.net](http://www.communityconservation.net)**

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## INTRODUCTION – WHY DOCUMENT THINGS?

Some time ago, the Community Conservation Research Network (CCRN) began gathering stories from the field. These come from a variety of sources, sometimes from professional researchers and sometimes from members of communities who are engaged, one way or another, with the struggle for community, environmental conservation and livelihood security. Many of these stories from around the world are provided on the CCRN's website [communityconservation.net](http://communityconservation.net). These stories are reaching more and more people, providing positive examples for communities engaged in shaping their own destinies.

A desire to support that process of storytelling, by those engaged in community-focused research, has been the impetus for this document, and three accompanying videos.

We hope you will find many useful tips and a range of information here, but its single most important purpose is to support you in your storytelling efforts, so that other individuals and communities can benefit from those experiences. Our challenge is to provide enough practical advice to help you get better results as a video story-teller, but to not bog you down with too much information.

A chapter in Robert Cole's book, *Doing Documentary Work*, called "Fact or Fiction", explores the question of how faithful to the truth a documentary can be. It points out that, in spite of our best intentions to be objective,

in reality, everything we choose to say with an audio recording, a photo, or a video will always leave much more behind, unchosen and unsaid, than what has been selected. What we shoot or record will always be an imperfect and incomplete approximation of all that is there.

So, is it worth doing? Of course, yes. You are a documentarian, one of millions of recordists who, with their various portable devices, are recording our times. Turning this work into storytelling amplifies that value and invites you to an ancient club, for story tellers have been propagating knowledge, probably since the beginning of language.

As a researcher or someone involved in your community, likely your stories will be factual. But many of the tools of story-telling will be the same whether applied to a work based on fact, or a work of fiction. Your stories will add to this, turning the wheels of positive change in the process.

This document, and the videos that go with it, will help the researcher and/or the community, to tell their stories with more impact.

The focus is on three elements of video production; story, sound and video recording.

Don Duchene





## STORY

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A narrative or story in its broadest sense is anything told or recounted; more narrowly, and more usually, something told or recounted in the form of a causally-linked set of events; account; tale; the telling of a happening or connected series of happenings, whether true or fictitious.

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In the modern research world, the importance of “knowledge mobilization”, and the role that story can play in that process, are well accepted. Done well, story can help to mediate the distance between research and research goals, and the public who are served by the research. Stories can bring the public into the conversation.

Is it trying to put square pegs into round holes?

It does not have to be. For example, case studies often hold many of the elements of story. With some tweaking, a case study can become a story that will engage and inform an audience at the same time.

In fact, long before the written or the printed word, oral stories moved ideas from generation to generation, and even from culture to culture. Now that we have other ways to store information, is it still necessary for us to hone our skills as story-tellers? Yes.

Web-designers, gamers, TV writers, novelists still need to be thinking about causal links and how to use these links to hold an audience’s attention. And for those not in the creative arts, the problem still exists; how does one hold an audience and accurately communicate important messages. How does one move knowledge out into the community, or from community to community, where it can be useful?

Story-telling has worked for thousands of years and it still does.

*A gorilla walks into a bar and orders a martini. The bartender is taken aback: she has never served a gorilla before. She excuses herself and goes to ask the manager what she should do. The manager says, “Serve him. But overcharge him; he is probably not that bright.” So the bartender returns, serves the*

*gorilla, and says, that will be twenty-five dollars please.” The gorilla pays her and orders another.*

*The bar is idle and there is no one else to serve. The bar tender decides to make small talk.*

*She says “We don’t get many gorillas in this bar.”*

*The gorilla, after a brief pause and a sip of his martini, says “At these prices, you’re not likely to.”*

While this classic joke is a long way from Stephen Hawking’s “Story of Everything”, as we shall see they bear similarities, elements that appear to be present in all stories. As we go forward, we will help you to identify some key building blocks of story, perhaps enabling you to embark on your own journey to bring your research to a broader audience. The first of these is a sense of place.

In the gorilla story, it is the bar. For Hawking, it is the universe. Here, we are most interested in the community where your story takes place.

Even if there are substantial peculiarities to the “place” of story, taking the time to set it up at the outset will invest your audience in your story. It will let them settle into the world within which your characters function. Their normal will almost certainly not be your normal. If everyone wears a pink hat, that becomes the new normal for your characters, the normal against which all their actions will be measured and will make sense. If someone chooses to wear a yellow hat, it becomes a statement.

If you can get a good handle on this “sense of place” and can find a way to convey it to your audience, you are nicely underway. But how to do it? Begin with the simple question, is my story specific to this place? Why did it happen here?

This is useful because many of the other elements of your story may automatically be handed to you by the particularities of a place and what they cause to happen. For example, in a war-torn country, special hardships can shape behaviours.

Or, in a single-industry town, a narrow set of options can lead to conflicts (e.g. a higher than normal cost of groceries). But in a community with a diverse economy, with long-standing traditions, or rituals,

the identity of the community may be less obvious and harder to see.

Even a basic understanding of the place of your story helps you relate to the community itself. That relationship will impact what you get to hear and see from members of the community. Whatever effort you make to appreciate the sense of place will be appreciated. Try the language. Try the food. Do your best to be open to see how the community sees itself, to its norms and rituals.

It is wise to remember, as you record and propagate images of the community, your video will be a form of ‘ambassador’ for the community. Your sensors need to be working on all cylinders.

It is not easy. In a recent situation of my own, I interviewed several individuals in a set of neighbouring communities in a region of Canada. The interviews were exploratory, with the intention of a possible documentary, comparing the experience of those communities, in resource management, to communities in other locations in Canada. With only two days available, our goals were lofty but clearly, even with the time available, I had missed a proper appreciation of the deep sense of place in those communities. But that became very clear when we went over the interviews in detail, once we were home. There it was. Language. Community pride. Ancient ties to the sea, and to the land. History. All the touchstones of a sense of place.

It strikes me that this is a problem often faced by the field researcher. How can one quickly get a sense of place? Unfortunately, I don’t have an answer, but it is useful, and important, to try. I suggest that you have a slow look around upon arrival. Are there monuments, or statues, perhaps religious icons? Is there an obvious central location where people gather? How do they get there? What about the architecture: is it distinctive in a certain way?

Often you must rely on a guide or an interpreter to connect to the community. As your eyes and ears, remember to remind the guide that the ordinary is of interest to you, not just the extraordinary. Chances are, your guide/interpreter will be acquainted with the nuances of the language, its idioms. Ask. They will give you clues to the place.

A story will improve if it takes the trouble to convey a sense of place. Where is your story happening? What are the relevant demographics? What is the basis of its economy? Is the season a factor in the story, or is it time sensitive in some way? What do people eat and drink? What do they do for fun? Listen hard, and look hard. The clues are there.

Brazil. A river estuary provides a living for a community that has been there for many years but the port wants to expand. Doing so will harm the estuary and the life it contains and supports, so the community is struggling for its existence. Establishing the setting is important to the story. Where is it? How many people are in the community at risk and the community as a whole? Who has legal claim to the water bodies and local resources? You might use the stories of generational fishers to tell this story and to establish the rights they have to harvest in the estuary. By reporting the damages of industrial pollution to the environment, the community is able to assert their livelihood. Many of the industries in the region 'hide' pollution sites, which affects the quality and quantity of fish and shellfish harvested in the area.





## Character

Character is a very important element in story; character helps your viewer put the story in her/his own terms, essential if the story is to be “felt” as well as understood. True, lots of characters in a story are “bigger than life”, or “otherworldly”, but even everyday characters create interest and invite comparisons and will help a reader to become invested in the story.

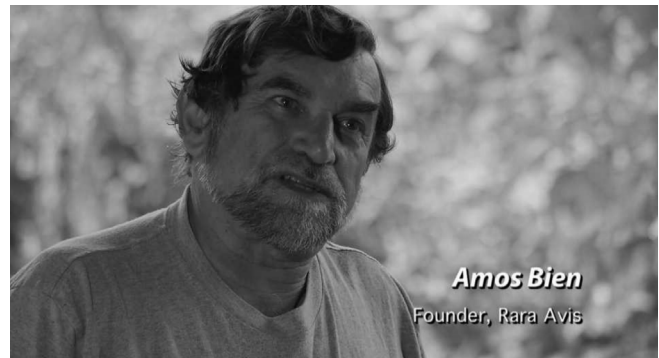


Of course, often the researcher does not have many choices of character and it can be challenging to give this quality to your story. I would argue that even if it is not perfect, you should do your best to connect your audience to your story with a character whose life will be (or has been) impacted by the circumstances described in your story.

Likely the character will be a person (i.e. human), but occasionally it won't be. A story might be based on a coral reef, a mosquito that carries Dengue fever, a talisman that fishers carry in their boat. In my view, these surrogate characters are not as satisfying as real-life characters and if you can find real people to inhabit your story, they will be worth whatever effort that takes. But sometimes you will need an imaginative approach to give character to your story. It is good to know that you have creative options, even if they are not perfect.

How to show character? The most common way is to interview the character (the person) and in the process the character will reveal herself and her relation to the story. [There are some interview tips later on in the document.]

You are looking for characters who represent the struggle that is evident in your story. From my own experience a couple of characters particularly stand out. In the production of *The Rainforest, a Report from Costa Rica* we met with Amos Bien.



We had set out with the film to make a statement about the destruction of rainforests. Put simply, there were economic reasons why the forests were disappearing and the solutions had to keep this in mind. Amos, a biology student studying tropical science in Costa Rica, had built a lodge, from scratch, in the middle of a rainforest, as one of the pioneers of ecotourism. His passion was infectious, his speech practiced and clear. On top of that, he had a theatrical manner. In short, he was everything I wanted in an interview candidate. And he was everything I wanted as a character to drive my story.

In another example, from a different film, *Exporting Democracy?*, John Cheyo was the Chair for the Tanzanian Centre for Democracy. Our research had told us that he was likely to be a good interview candidate, articulate and straightforward. He was marvellous to talk to, but was he right for the film? Absolutely.



Neither of these two characters, as it turned out, would function as our “story-teller” in the finished film, but both were good examples of our concept. In the case of Amos, he was offering an economic option to reduce rainforest destruction. In the case of John Cheyo, he was a very strong advocate for ground-up democracy. So this begs a few questions for the researcher.

Is this a chicken-and-egg situation? Which comes first, the story or the character?

In documentary work, I think you should be open to either. In research-oriented documentary work, you are likely to be working with a well-defined concept, or proposition, going into a project. And you must protect this or you could easily head down an endless road. Characters can confirm your points, or contradict them, but it is unlikely they will drive the story, on their own. But, what they will do, if they are carefully chosen, is humanize your ideas. They will give your ideas a vital context, an emotional logic. You will want to do detailed interviews with your main characters, but even more important to your story, are your characters actions, showing how your story (‘thesis’) plays out.

Ideally, a character in a story causes something to happen, or has a wish or a need for something to happen.

As a researcher, or as a story-teller you will need to carefully consider how your presence will impact the subject(s). Ethical issues such as these are most often distilled into a document called a “release form”, an agreement between you and an interviewee (for example) that spells out the terms of use (for the photo, video or audio). This might seem to be overly cautious but once in place, the release form can liberate the producer and comfort the subject who will feel fairly treated. It may be necessary as well for researchers to obtain approval from their institution’s research ethics board, and this typically involves approval specifically for the ‘consent form’ (related to a ‘release form’) that individuals you wish to interview receive, review and (if they agree to participate) then sign.

## Conflict

Once you have established your “place” and your “characters” you have a great beginning to your story. Next, you need to identify the problem or the conflict that will drive your story forward. Likely, even if you are following a case study step by step, there will be several types of conflict, each of which might drive your story.

Your first consideration is how well a choice lines up with what you want to say.

An example...In a small Filipino community, divers eked out a living catching and selling coral reef fish for export. The problem was that they were using cyanide to capture the fish and it was destroying the reef and diminishing the quality of the fish exported – the fish died within months of reaching market. While this was an old way of doing things and (so far at least) had earned them a living, it was destroying the reef, and had to change. The answer was for the fishers to use small nets, instead of cyanide, to capture the fish but they were reluctant to change. Why?

Research showed that members of the community were quite conflicted about what to do. Change would involve new training and new equipment but the fishers were poor and had neither the time nor the money to make it happen. Moreover, they were not necessarily convinced it would improve their situation. Even the mayor of the village, who was charged with the responsibility of protecting the reef, had difficulty enforcing the law; fishers were given minimal penalties.

In this example, you might have several good choices of a conflicted character.

- a fisher who controlled the supply of cyanide and liked things just as they are. He argued against change.
- The mayor of the village who could see that net-caught fish was the future. He argued for change, but could not see how to make it happen.
- The reef itself could be a potential character.

From among your choices of conflicts and of characters, you might ask yourself, which is the most practical? And go from there.

If you can manage to convey a sense of place and to find characters who, by their actions and opinions, will reveal opposing views, you will probably have the basics of your story in place.

Time to start writing.

### Concept Document – your first thing to write

In the process of producing a documentary, writing down your ideas provides you with a ‘map’, or more realistically, several maps, for it is rare for a single map to get you to your final destination, your completed video. Your map, like your production, will be tweaked as you go, according the realities that appear when you are in production.

Why bother with a map if it is not much more than a guess? A reasonable question with an easy answer. A map, even a rough one, will give you some kind of direction and that will give you a way to make decisions. It will help you to be deliberate, intentional and focused.

Your first map is a short concept document. In this document, in a few paragraphs you will draw on your analysis of story elements to figure out the idea behind the film you want to make; i.e. what you want to say.

An example of a concept document.

*We want to look at a variety of human interactions with coral reefs in Indonesia, once home to some of the finest coral reefs on the planet. Our concept is to begin with beautiful, pristine reefs, that are protected by the communities nearby and to go from there to worse and worse situations. As we do, the picture gets bleaker and bleaker. Finally, in Jakarta, the sea and its reefs are mostly dead.*

*But not wanting to end on this note, we find hope in a group of young people who have taken up the cause of protecting the country’s reefs, mainly through education. [This eventually became a one-hour TV documentary, *People of the Reefs*]*

Notice a few things about this concept description.

1. It is only about a hundred words long
2. It is written in the first person
3. It gives a direction to the research that will be needed for the film
4. It suggests a dramatic line.

Applying the above story elements will hopefully push your concept into some unique territory. You will not want your story to be like everyone else’s. Find a way to make it even a little different. Make it your concept, not anyone else’s. Many times what you read in a TV guide description of a documentary is exactly what the filmmaker wrote as an original concept description.

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### Supersize Me

While examining the influence of the fast food industry, Morgan Spurlock personally explores the consequences on his health of a diet of solely McDonald’s food for one month.

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### Treatment – Moving beyond the concept document

With a strong concept document, many documentaries dive right into production.

However, more often than not, you may need to have a more detailed map. One of your best choices for this next stage of writing is a treatment. This is one of those film terms that seems to mean something different to everyone. I think of a treatment as pragmatic document – it should move you along.

A treatment will take your concept further. In it you will give consideration to what your film will actually look like on the screen. Will it use a narrator? Dramatic recreations? Archival photos or audio? Graphics or animations? How will the project flow from one scene to another, keeping the audience’s attention along the way?

A treatment can be a tall order. But, like the concept document, it is probably time well-invested. For as you work on the treatment, you will be identifying potential problems and opportunities. Even with small projects, under ten minutes long, it is wise

to try your best to anticipate what will go onto the screen, and to prepare for that to happen (and what you might do, if it does not happen, to still tell your story). Just how detailed a treatment you want to write will be up to you and your way of working.

My preferred strategy for writing a treatment is to describe the film as it might appear, scene by scene on the screen. This involves a considerable amount of guesswork but it is, at its worst, a very useful exercise. In the end, you might end up with a three-page document or a thirty-page document – that is a matter of style. But the bottom line is, whoever reads the document should be able to “see” the film as it might appear on the screen.

To develop your treatment, you might want to try using something like recipe cards, creating a card for each scene you have shot, or want to shoot, for your film. Play around with different arrangements of the cards until you feel that you have a sequence that tells your story. Then write it down as a narrative.

Another technique is to use a three-column format. One column each, for video, audio and approximate run times.

Video	Audio	Run time
Open on wide of shift change at a garment factory	A whistle blows. Ambient sounds of the yard.	0 to 5 seconds
A man and his son are both heading for the factory – they punch the time clock.	Ambient	6 to 10 seconds

The key to this process is remembering that at all times there will be something on the screen and sounds to go with it. All the spaces need to have content or your film will have silences and black holes.

Take this process as far as you can, working, ideally, back to front. Decide where you want to end up and build a logical way to get there.

Even in short form work, you will benefit from this process. Done properly, it will become your planning document, a way for you to identify and plan what you need to shoot to tell your story.

## Narration – the final script

The final writing job is usually your narration. You probably have your scenes all shot. Your interviews are done. You have your facts straight. Now you assemble it all in the approximate order you envisioned and you take stock. What works? What is missing? You are defining the job for your narration. You have a lot of decisions to make. Here are a few tips.

Narration itself has inherent problems. Particularly, third person narration, can sound condescending. Second person, on the other hand, is more engaging for the audience but it has its limitations as well. It can feel “pushy” and a bit contrived, perhaps because of its less formal tone. A first person voice is the most intimate of your choices but unless you intend to do the voice recording yourself, it too may sound artificial.

This document is concerned with two basic situations; that of the researcher who wishes to produce a video of some aspect of her work, or that of a community member telling a community story. The researcher is probably best off with a third person approach. But the community producer should feel free to choose whatever voice seems appropriate to the situation.

Likely your film will include interviews. If this is the case, you may decide that the narration’s job will be to impart the facts and the interviews will be focused on the feelings and opinions associate with the facts.

There are conventional do’s and don’ts with narration.

- Do provide explanations when what is happening on screen is not clear.

Don’t say the obvious. If Martha is eating a chocolate bar on screen we don’t need “That day Martha ate a chocolate bar.” But if the bar has some other kind of significance, narration is a way to point it out. “For three weeks Martha held onto the chocolate bar, but today is the day.”

- Do keep your sentences short and avoid jargon.



- Do write in an active voice. I refer you to Strunk and White's *Elements of Style* but the basic idea is to avoid

Birds could be heard singing

...in favour of

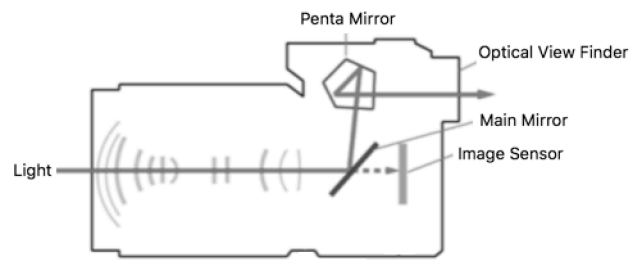
Bird songs filled the air.

- Write with economy, that is, speak your piece with as few words as possible. The technical reason for this is that people read at different speeds (and presumably hear things differently as well) and the less said to make a point, the better the chance your narration will sound natural. If your reader has to hurry to get to the timing you have envisioned for the read, your narration will not be effective.
- Don't list things in your narration.
- Do keep your narration focused on your target audience.

Finally, make every effort you can to be creative in your narration. Of the various elements of expression available to you as a film-maker, narration is as useful a tool as any of them, and should not be short-changed. It can add clarity and direction.

## THE CAMERA

The basic idea. What you are filming is reflected light (or you would not see it). That light passes through the lens on your camera to reach a recording plane, either film or some other kind of light-sensitive surface. Between the lens and the recording surface, a shutter opens and closes to allow the light to pass for a controlled amount of time. Too much light and everything will wash out. Too little light and you will not see anything. Most cameras automate the majority of this process, so with very little knowledge, you are able to get a reasonable, if average, picture. Getting beyond "average" takes some effort.



SLR Diagram

In its most primitive form, a pinhole camera, there is no lens. Light passes through a hole in a black box and travels to a flat surface opposite to where the hole is. Only a small amount of light passes through the small aperture and it takes a long time to record the image. From this beginning, other features were added to the camera to enhance its power. The addition of a lens to control light put the modern art of photography into motion. Films were developed that could record with less light. Shutters that opened and closed with great accuracy were another enhancement. All of these features continue to be objects of the design of new cameras.

Today, you have many choices to make in the purchase of a camera. Cost, of course, is a factor but what are some of the others? That may very well depend on what you are most likely to be shooting. For example, if you are shooting anywhere that salt water is an issue, you will want a camera that is sealed well enough so that an unwanted splash does not damage your camera and shut you down. If you are likely to be shooting in low light conditions, some cameras are better at recording in low light than others. [ In general, the more light that is available to you, the more likely you are to have good pictures. And the converse is true. Low light is problematic for cameras but not insurmountable by any means.] What does the camera weigh? If you need portability, every ounce can count: make sure you consider weight. Because many of us already have some kind of camera on hand, you might assess what you already have and focus on enhancements.

Finally, it is a good idea to check out the automatic features on the camera. Often, especially in field recording, you will be in a situation that does not allow you much set up time; it would be good to



know that you will still get a reasonable shot by just switching the camera to auto everything.

Let's start with a few terms.

#### 1. Shot

This describes the video your camera records from the moment you press the record button to when you press it again to stop recording.

#### 2. Scene

This is an ordered collection of shots.

#### 3. Establishment shot

An establishment shot, usually at the beginning of a scene, sets up the context for what follows in the scene. Like setting up the sense of place, mentioned above, it will allow your viewer to settle in and it helps in the process of convincing your audience to believe the narrative. It is often a wide shot of a location, held long enough to anchor the viewer in the location.

In our film, *People of the Reefs*, we filmed a fisher leaving the dock alone in his boat, going out for his day's fishing. We established that he came from a poor community by filming his departure from the

dock: the dock was filled with boats in poor repair and other fishers preparing for their day's work.

A scene at a racetrack might start with a close shot of a mechanic fine-tuning an engine, especially if the focus of the scene is the precision and the high tech behind car racing.

While you could simply shoot a road sign that ID's a community, it would be much more interesting to think about a special image that sets up your story and makes a contribution to setting up that vital sense of place. You may want to take several shots to get established – time well spent in support of your narrative.



#### 4. Wide, medium and close shots

Because your video will likely be edited, you will want to give your editor a choice of shots so she/he can give a flow to the action. These three shots are fundamental building blocks of a scene and they should be kept in mind whenever you are filming. It takes practice.



WIDE



MEDIUM



CLOSE

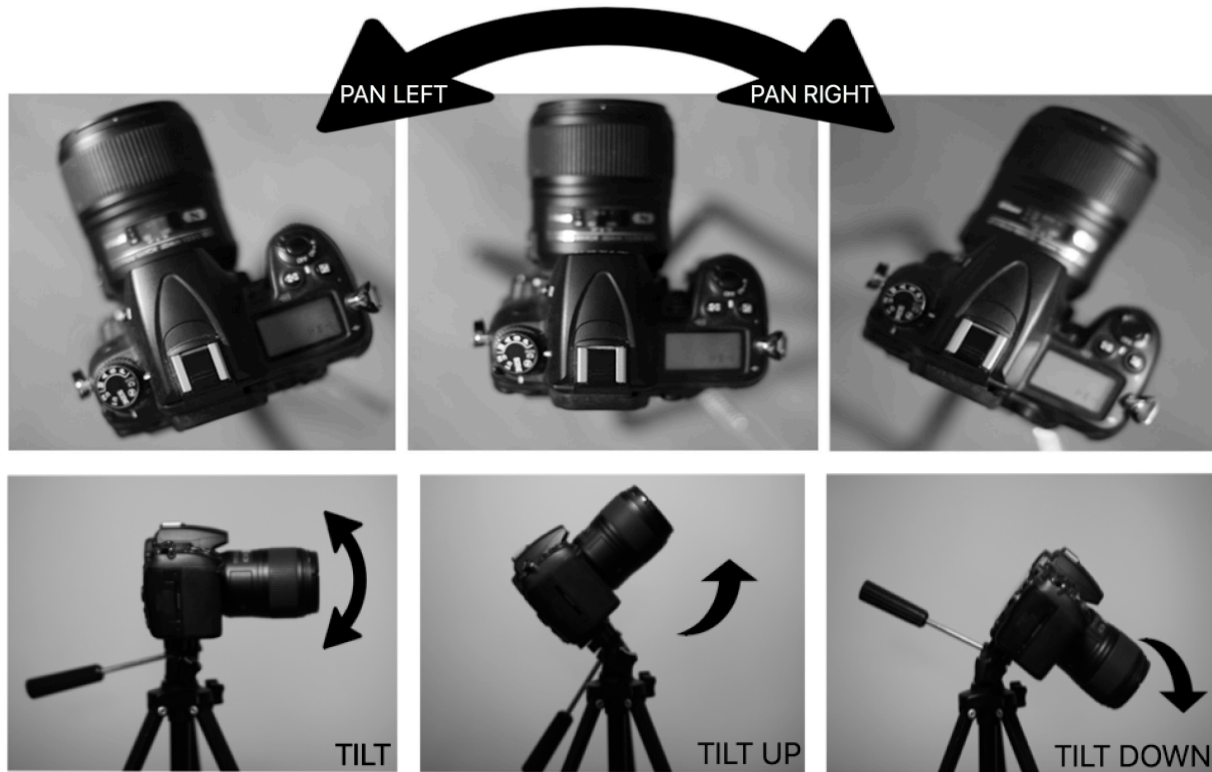
#### 5. Pans, Zooms and Tilts

These moving shots are difficult and you should use them sparingly. A pan is simply a camera movement from left to right, or from right to left. Properly done, you hold your first camera position for at least five seconds and do the same for your end position of the shot. In between, as you move the camera, you do so as evenly

and as slowly as you can. Therein is the problem, for unless you have a very steady hand or a very good head on your tripod, it is hard to get that smooth effect and anything less will be a distraction.

The same advice holds for zooms. Where a zoom lens is a handy feature that allows you to change the focal length of your lens quickly, if it is improperly used, or used too much, it can be very distracting for the viewer.

A tilt is just a vertical pan.



## 6. Focal Length

A lens' focal length is defined as the distance between the lens' optical center and the camera's image sensor (or film plane) when focused at infinity. The shorter the focal length, the wider the angle seen by the lens. A long focal length lens has a narrow view and is sometimes called a telephoto lens.



**50mm**

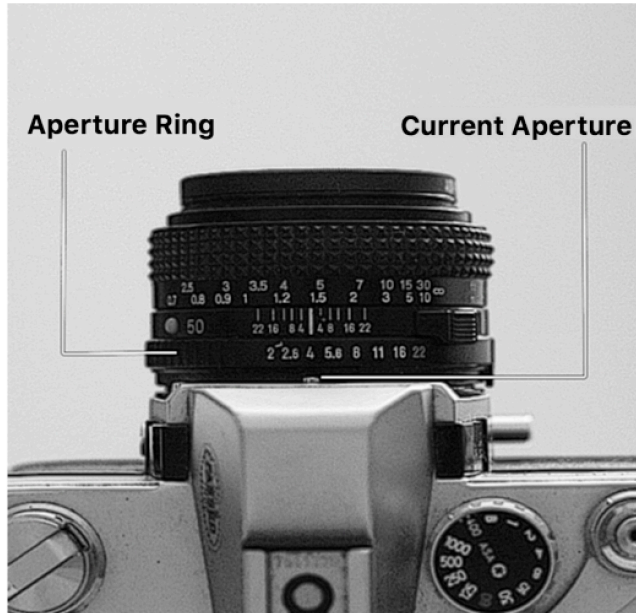


**25mm**

A prime lens has one focal length. A zoom lens has a variable focal length.

## 7. F stop

Professional lenses will let you control the amount of light passing through the lens. You do this by opening or closing the aperture on the lens which is measured in F stops. Without knowing why an F stop is what it is, the simplest thing to remember is that the lower the f stop, the more light will pass through the lens. An F stop of F1.4 will allow a lot of light to pass through the lens. An F stop of F16 will not allow much light to pass through the lens.



How do you decide what kind of a shot to take?

1. Consider a scene where a child buys a chocolate bar. If you break it down... He peruses the choices of chocolate bars and makes his selection
2. The bar is taken to the checkout and there is a cash exchange, maybe with change.
3. He leaves the store with the bar maybe taking a bite as he goes.

This might be covered in one wide shot or it may be shot as follows...

- Wide shot of the store with the storekeeper in the foreground and the door to the store in the background. The door opens.

- Med wide shot from a different angle as the boy walks to the rack full of bars. He looks down.
- Close shot of the bars
- Close shot of his face full of anticipation of having one
- Medium close shot of the shopkeeper who looks on with some suspicion
- Medium shot of the boy making his selection and walking to the storekeeper
- Exterior shot of the boy leaving the store munching on the bar.

So the question is, "Isn't this overkill?" It could all be covered in one shot, either from the boy's point of view or from the shopkeeper's.

The answer is "yes" but unless you have sequences in your video, you will never really tap into a video's power of expression. [Moreover, a sequence of shots will sometimes allow you an opportunity to shape the story or to explore nuance. Perhaps the boy had saved for a month to buy the bar. That would change the meaning of the scene and affect your choice of shots.]

In drama, great pains are taken to break a scene down into an expressive series of shots. But with docs, you rarely have the opportunity to do that – you are an observer of the action, not the controller.

Picture a possible situation for a researcher. You have been invited to accompany a fisher in his boat. It is a small boat so he cannot go too far ashore. Fishing is poor and you want to show hardship. There is no room on the boat except in the bow – just enough for you and your cameraperson, or just you, the cameraperson. How do you break the scene down?

- A medium wide shot shows the fisher steering the outboard motor
- Close up of his face
- Point of view shot showing us what the fisher sees [ You will need to get the fisher's permission to take over his position.]
- He sees a trawler in the distance, men on board heading out to sea, out to fertile fishing grounds [ Shoot what he sees]
- Close up – he rolls a cigarette



- Medium close up of his face
- Medium wide shot as he casts his net.
- Medium close shot of the empty net as he pulls it into the boat.

Shot this way, you are telling a story. You are showing a human being with an emotional investment in what he is doing.

In documentary work, it is useful to find situations where the action is being repeated. These are an opportunity for a series of shots, instead of just one.

### Tips for more satisfying video images.

- Try to make sure whatever light you have (the sun, for example) is falling on your subject. If you shoot into the sun, your subject will be backlit and you will end up with a silhouette.

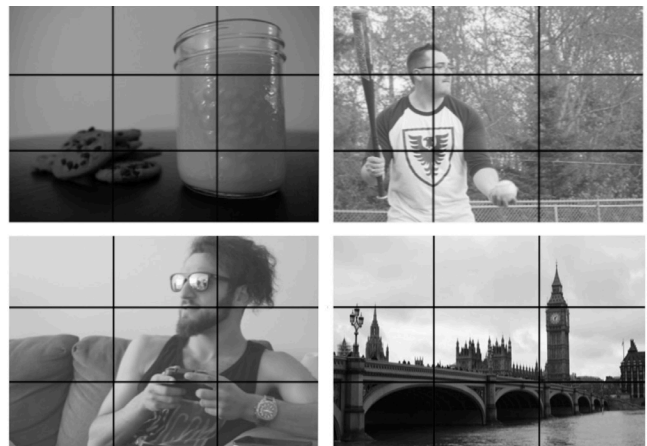


- Try to have a consistent source of light. A windy day with clouds that block and unblock the sun is a poor light source for video recording.
- Light has colour. Daylight is a different “colour temperature” than incandescent

light, or florescent light. Mixing the light source will throw your colours off and make your skin tones look sickly. Most mid- range cameras will allow you to adjust for different sources of light by using the “white balance” feature in the camera. Use a white card that is reflecting the same sources of light as your photo subject and take a white balance (usually a button on the camera). This will allow the camera to calibrate for the different colours and make the necessary corrections.



Frame the shot for your own satisfaction. There are guidelines for this and feel free to explore them...but they are guidelines, not rules, in spite of their claims.



- Camera angles will affect the interpretation of your work. Shooting up at a subject implies that the subject is superior to you, shooting down, inferior.

If the camera is at eye level, the affect is neutral.

- If at all possible, use a tripod. This is particularly important when shooting motion pictures. A jerky shot will distract attention from you content and is irritating to watch.
- If you are interviewing, sit beside the camera so that when the interviewee looks at you, he will be looking almost directly into the lens.



- If a tripod is not available, you must still find a way to get a steady shot. See the illustrations for suggestions but you may need to be creative. Your particular situation may not be covered in these suggestions.



- Overall, you want to avoid camera movement of all kinds. Zooming is rarely a good idea, though a zoom lens is a quick way to change focal length. Ditto for pans and tilts. They need to be motivated and as already mentioned, it is a good practice in all of these camera movements to hold the start points and the end points of the shots for at least 5 seconds. It will feel a bit strange at first but your editor will appreciate it very much.

## LIGHTING

We mentioned above that more light is generally a good thing. But in practice you will want to be ready to record no matter what the light conditions are. You might decide to carry a single source of light to give yourself a few options. A small LED light will cost less than 100\$. Used with a reflective surface to fill in shadows, it will allow you to shoot an interview almost anywhere.



## SOUND

Good sound is an essential part of your ability to communicate your stories. But it is vastly underrated until you get right down to things and realize that you don't have what you need. Most documentary filmmakers will tell you that if you have to make a choice between sound and picture, go with sound – it will probably be more useful to you. So here is a primer on sound.

Before you can begin effectively using your audio recording equipment, you must understand the properties of sound. Understanding the characteristics of sound reacting with its surroundings will allow you to anticipate problems you may face recording a subject in the field.



### **Movement of sound:**

To visualize sound, imagine dropping a single rock into a placid lake and the ripples radiating outward in a circular pattern. The ripples travel in a straight line away from the point of impact, in every direction across the surface of the water. Sound, travelling through air, shares a similar pattern. As the sound waves move farther and farther away from the sound source, the amplitude (volume) of the sound becomes drastically reduced. In fact, the sound intensity decreases inversely proportional to the squared distance, so that doubling of the distance decreases the sound intensity to a quarter of its initial value! So, the closer you have a microphone positioned relative to the sound source (such as an interview subject's mouth), the louder and clearer the sound will be recorded, which is what you really need to know.

### **Sound reflections:**

Just like a cue-ball bouncing off the side of a pool table, a sound-wave reflects off a surface at the same angle of incidence. If a wavefront strikes a surface at a 45 degree angle, it will be reflected away from the surface at the same angle (45 degrees) in the opposite direction.

If a wavefront strikes a surface at a 90 degree angle, it will be reflected directly

back onto itself resulting in a delayed copy of the wave returning to the sound-source. This characteristic is referred to as an echo.

It is important to recognise when a room you are recording in is having a negative effect on the quality of your recording. If possible, avoid recording in small rooms comprised of very hard surfaces, like bathrooms. The hard surfaces will create an echo that will be heard in your recording; this will make dialog recordings unclear and muddy.

An ideal room for recording will contain many soft objects, such as couches, carpets and curtains; these surfaces will absorb most interfering frequencies before they can reflect back to the microphone. Check how reflective a room is before recording by clapping your hands loudly. Do you hear an echo or reverberation? If so, it may be best to change recording locations.

### **When recording in a reflective room cannot be avoided:**

1. Place the microphone within 30cm (1 foot) of the speaker's mouth (If a concealable microphone is not available, a handheld mic will do the trick).
2. Test different positions within the room to determine the best recording location. It is generally best to avoid recording near the corners of a room.
3. If possible, place a soft object in the room. Hanging a blanket on the wall will significantly reduce room reflections.

### **Commit the following rules of recording to memory:**

In the context of location dialog recording, the sound recordist **MUST** do everything in his/her power to capture sound that is free of distracting background noises such as echoes, hum, hiss, crackles, clipping, wind, and music.

The same rules apply to every recording scenario and should be carefully considered to avoid problems:

1. Place the microphone as close to the subject as possible. lapel microphones should be placed in the centre of the body, approximately 30cm (1 foot) from the speaker's mouth.
2. Make the environment as quiet as possible for recording (turn off all unnecessary electronics including: fans, fridges, computers and cellular telephones) Pro-Tip: If you are un-plugging someone's refrigerator, don't forget to plug it back in at the end of the shoot! A good way to remember is by placing an important object near the fridge (such as your keys or phone).
3. If the subject is wearing noisy clothing or accessories (like bangles and bracelets), ask them to remove them. Sometimes a subject will have a nervous habit like tapping their pencil on a desk. Hard to do, but you have to ask them to stop, or you will have no usable sound.
4. Test audio levels before recording to check equipment and avoid clipping and distortion.

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\***Clipping** is a type of audio distortion caused by input recording levels that are set too high. The naturally rounded and/or pointed peaks and valleys of the recorded sound waves will be flattened as a result of an overloaded recording level. The once-rounded waveform will look (and sound) more like a square-wave than the original subject!

\*\***Distortion** is a term used to describe a change made to the audio source as it is recorded. Distortion will affect the tone of the recording and in many cases make words difficult to understand.

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### Tips for purchasing a small field recorder

Many thanks to the internet for creating such an amazing and connected world market. Without the convenience of the internet, our options for purchasing affordable, high-quality field recorders would be limited (to say the least). But having SO MANY options can also make the purchasing process difficult. This is why it is good to know the answers to the following questions:

1. What is your budget? It is possible to spend anywhere from \$50 – \$500 on a field recorder.
2. What are you recording? If you are recording one or two subjects (like a speaker during an interview) you can get away with using a single handheld microphone/recording device. Sound recordings of ambience (like a river, cars, and nature) are best recorded using a recorder utilizing two microphones in a stereo configuration (such as the [Zoom H4N](#), [H2N](#) or [H1](#))

Some excellent options for recording an interview include:

- a. [Irig Mic HD2](#) – A handheld microphone that can plug directly into your phone (Approx. \$130)
- b. [Zoom H1](#) – A rugged handheld microphone that records stereo audio onto an SD card. This microphone is small enough to conceal but large enough that you won't lose it (Approx. \$130)

- c. [Zoom H4N Pro](#) – A very popular handheld microphone/recording device that records stereo audio onto an SD card. This portable device is capable of recording external microphones via two ¼”/XLR plugs in its body. If you are investing in a small field recorder, this unit is your most flexible option (Approx. \$200)

\*The technical stuff: Your best choice should be capable of recording and storing the audio as files on a storage medium, such as an SD card. The minimum sample rate your recorder should be capable of is 44.1kHz (44,100 samples per second [This is CD quality]). The minimum bit-depth should be 16 bits or greater.

For the avid researcher, some great resources for comparing recording techniques and audio equipment are:

1. [Sweetwater Sound](#)
2. [Gear Slutz](#)
3. [Sound on Sound](#)

### Audio Files and File Storage

Field recording devices usually allow you to choose the recorded audio file-type. Knowing a bit about the most common file-types will allow you to make informed decisions on the best format for your purposes.

Here is a quick descriptive reference for the types of audio files you will encounter:

.WAV/.WAVE/.wav – This is a lossless audio format which means that there has been no attempt made to reduce the size of the file. This audio format will preserve the audio content at the HIGHEST quality but the files will be significantly larger than a compressed format. \*This is the preferred audio format for pro audio.

.mp3 – We know this familiar file type through its popularization from the Ipod and other music devices. This is a compressed file format which means that much of the audio information in your recording has been removed to make the file smaller. If you have the option, try to avoid recording using any compressed file-type. The mp3 format was originally

designed to send recordings of the human voice over telephone lines.

**MPEG-4/.M4A** – This audio codec is another lossless format that is created when using Apple’s voice memo application. The M4A file type is accessible by several mainstream audio players, including iTunes, QuickTime Player and Windows Media Player 12.

**.WMA** – Windows Media Audio is an audio format created by Windows to compete against the .mp3. Similar to the mp3, this is a Lossy format that removes audio data for the purpose of creating a smaller file.

**.AAC** – Advanced Audio Coding is another lossy audio format that offers slightly better audio quality than an mp3 but with a file-size that is much smaller than a .wav. This is the standard format used in Apple’s iTunes and iPods.

## File Management

Unless you have captured audio using your cellular telephone, you will likely have recorded onto an SD card. This slim digital storage device is generally very rugged, however data corruption strikes when you least expect it. This is why it is important to establish an effective file-management routine and to **STICK WITH IT!** Below are some suggested methods of organizing and maintaining your audio files so you can reduce the possibility of file loss, corruption or general confusion.

1. When you are recording, speak into the microphone at the beginning or end of the take, to describe what you are recording (this is called a slate). This short description will help you remember what you were recording!
2. After you have finished recording your first take, have a quick listen to the file you just created. How does it sound? Did you actually press the record button? Is the recording clear and free of annoying background noise or distortion?
3. After you have finished the entire recording session (you can call it a “wrap”), **IMMEDIATELY** transfer your audio recordings to a folder on your computer labeled “Project Name\_Date\_

AUDIO” (ex. Whale Doc\_07-07-2017\_AUDIO). If you can’t upload the files to your computer immediately after the shoot, keep all used SD cards in a labeled zip-lock bag, ready for transfer at your earliest convenience.

4. Duplicate all of your files from the shoot (including video files) to a second storage location such as an external hard drive or cloud storage service. This backup will save you if something happens to your computer (Believe me, the weirdest problems happen during the most crucial projects – **BACK UP EVERYTHING.**)
5. Rename the audio files on your local drive (don’t worry about changing file-names in your back-up). A good file-name format is as follows: PROJECT NAME/Subject\_DATE\_# (Aaron Interview\_07072017\_01.wav). It is not unusual to listen to each audio file to determine the content of the recording before giving it a name (this is why we record slates).
6. Place your “AUDIO” folder inside of the folder containing all other assets for your video project.

## When To Call In The Professionals

Sometimes you are going to need some help. Managing a camera and a bunch of audio equipment can be a lot to handle. If you aren’t able to monitor the audio while also recording video, you may be gambling with losing everything! The best time to employ the assistance of a sound person is when you:

1. Are dealing with a high-pressure recording situation. Don’t gamble with recording a low-quality product, especially if a client is depending on you! You’ll be much happier with the results!
2. Are recording more than one subject at the same time and require the ability to adjust recorded volumes independently. If you have two or more speakers who each need their own microphone, your recording session is going to require some expensive equipment and know-how.

3. Are recording audio in a challenging location, such as being exposed to extreme weather or during a sporting event.
4. Don't feel comfortable using the audio equipment you have, in which case you may benefit from asking a professional for some 1-on-1 assistance. Most audio engineers would be happy to offer you some guidance so you can manage your recordings on your own.

## THE INTERVIEW

The interview has such a special place in documentary work, we want to give it special attention here. It is well and good to follow the rules of preparation prior to conducting an interview... if you can.

1. You will have briefed your interviewee on the goals of the interview and the kinds of questions you intend to ask.
2. You will have asked your interviewee to avoid wearing reds, checkered or striped clothing.
3. You will have picked a location that is quiet and where you will not be interrupted.
4. You will have done everything you can to help your interviewee to be comfortable.
5. You will have pre-lit the interview with a stand-in.
6. Your equipment will be checked and ready to go.

But....sometimes (more often than not it seems), you are thrown into a situation that dictates what you can do and what you cannot do.

Technically, if you have to make hard choices, protect your sound as much as you can.

And there is the interview itself and what you want out of it.

As we mentioned above, your narration is the typical place for facts you wish to convey (along with visuals of course) and interviews usually have a different job to do. They can engage your audience, human to human. Interviews add mood and emotion to

your story. They can add depth and believability. But they take practice and skill to be a really useful addition to your tool kit. In particular, an interview in a language that is not your own, can present special challenges.

An interview, at its best, is a conversation. You go to the interview with your wish list (of questions, and ideal answers), and the hope that the interviewee will respond to your questions with full, eloquent answers. But unless you can create an atmosphere that is cordial and supportive, what actually happens may not be what you expect. You need to be ready to listen hard to what is being said and to lead the conversation into the territory that is pertinent to your story. That can mean going off script (it usually does). Being willing to do this may be essential to a good interview but you need to be aware that off-script material is more work for your editor and your crew will sometimes roll their eyes as the "interview / conversation" goes on and on.

It is particularly hard to connect with an interviewee in a language that is foreign to you. Working with a translator means your interviewee and you will not have consistent eye contact. Meaningful eye contact will be with the translator and so it makes sense for the camera to be placed behind the translator. In this case be sure to ask your interviewee to ignore the fact that you are there and to focus attention on the translator. Alternatively, you can film all three of you with a moving camera and have a second, fixed camera on the interviewee (head and shoulders).

The advantage of working with an interpreter while you are filming is that it will save you time when you return home with your footage. There may not be a local interpreter available to you who knows both the language and the dialect.

Finally, these sessions can be hit or miss. Especially on long shoots, the temptation is to zero in on those people you can find who have some capability with English. But if you go to that solution, you will likely stamp your story with an inauthentic look: that will not necessarily serve your interests. Try to take the trouble to cross the language bridge.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

At the beginning of this document, I made reference to the Robert Coles book *Doing Documentary Work*. In it, he frames his work as a child psychiatrist much as though he is a documentary filmmaker. He is as close observer of reality and an accurate recorder of what he sees and experiences. What resonates most in his book is his passion for what he does.

All of us, whether a professional researcher or an active community advocate, have stories to tell and probably some means to tell them. All of us have potential audiences, people who will seek out our stories, bearing witness with us, to the particular realities we have recorded.

It can be a wonderful thrill when images, characters and sounds all connect just as you want them, to bring the power of expression to your stories. There are audiences waiting for you.

Good luck and Enjoy the process.

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