VIDEOMAKING: IT STARTS WITH A PENCIL

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Nonfiction Video

First there was the word. The act of creation starts with an idea, a concept or at least a clue. Video is primarily a visual medium, and a (potentially) powerful communication tool. A well constructed script is the most important -- and the most cost-effective-- element in the production of informational videos. These are reality based programs. The story of your family reunion, an industrial training tape, or an investigation of pollution in your children's school yard: these are programs designed to inform, motivate, instruct or otherwise enlighten viewers. They are designed with specific communication objectives in mind. All the techniques and craft of videomaking ---camerawork and sound, lighting and set design, graphics and editing -- are at the service of the script. Nothing can compensate for a script that is overwritten, unclear, disorganized, confused or unfocused. But many a production snafu is resolved with just the right word in the right place.

Pre-production

Some producers are writers too. Some are not. What's essential is that a competent scriptwriter become involved in your production at the earliest stages of development. A scriptwriter is a strange hybrid. She or he must combine a thorough understanding of the technique and craft of videomaking with the practiced skills of effective writing. The scriptwriter must walk a fine line. On one side lies the bottomless pit of meaningless (and often expensive) video tricks; on the the other --undisciplined, unskilled writing ---- a confusing whirlpool, impossible to navigate. A good script is a reliable map across an uncharted sea. Often the writer's first assignment is a proposal. What is the program about? How will it be used? What is the intended audience? Why should this program be produced at this time? Whether it's an in-house production or a sponsored program, a cogent proposal is vital.

Research is the key. Throughout pre-production and development, the writer/researcher works like a journalist. What type of information is required? Where can it be found? Read widely. Interview effectively. It's the writer's job to understand the material in depth and determine how to present and "translate" it for an audience. This is a three-step process: Analyze. Simplify. Visualize. These three steps are the

essence of scriptwriting. It doesn't matter if the production has yet to be shot or if 50 hours of documentary footage are in the can. It's the same process regardless of the stage of production. The writer is an information processor. Information is the raw material. And it must first be sorted and analyzed.

Analysis

Analysis proceeds along several axes simultaneously. The first is Importance. Rank the elements (i.e. interviews, factual information, locations, effects etc.) in order of relative importance. This gives a clue to the relative proportions of each "ingredient" in the final "recipe" (script). Group the elements. For example everything shot in a certain location might be contained in a single sequence; or pairs of opposites might provide an organizing principle. Does the video include a process? A sequential structure might be required in order to understand the procedure. A thorough analysis of the elements of the story gives the writer the ability and the freedom to creatively arrange and re-arrange them. Before a coherent structure can be created, the writer must have a thorough understanding of the components of the video "under construction."

Simplify

Video is a linear, time bound medium. Most people look at a tape once in strict sequence. They have limited attention spans, and they don't return to a tape to check facts or confirm instructions. 30 seconds or 30 minutes: You always have more information than your audience has time. Make each word, each frame, each scene count.

Respect the needs of your audience. They expect to be entertained and informed. It's counterproductive to squander viewer attention and interest on information that is too complex, unclear, unnecessary, or better presented in another format and context. Only by ruthlessly paring down information to its essence do you have a chance of capturing an audience and holding their attention. In video scriptwriting "less is (almost) always more." The more straigtforward the script, the more streamlined the production. (Not an inconsequential consideration --no matter what the budget.) Short simple scripts are more cost effective, easier to shoot, and given limited time and resources, more likely to have greater viewer impact.

Visualize

A video production has to start with images. It's the effective use of images that deliver your message on a visceral level. Although this is very obvious, its importance cannot be overestimated. Movement and action are much more compelling than yet another "talking head." Information that doesn't have a compelling visual counterpart usually doesn't belong in a tape. Manuals, charts, lists of instruction, and precise legal technicalities probably are better dealt with in print.

Pictures, music, and sound do more than support the words of a script. They convey information and shape feelings and attitudes in a way difficult to ignore. It's pacing and rhythm which make these elements most effective.

The writer gives life to cold concepts and ideas. The scriptwriter must be able to imagine the transformation from ideas and words to concrete images. Allow the images to take on a life of their own and the script will become a dynamic, organic creation. Remember that excitement and energy are often created at the edges --in the juxtaposition of shots and images, in the transition from scene to scene, in the push and pull of the rising action. A good writer develops an intuitive sense about this energy -- like a surfer on the wave.

Style and Approach

After completing the essentials ---analyzing, simplifying, visualizing--
a writer knows what the program is about, and knows what information is
critical. The next step is to determine how best to tell the story. The
tone of the tape must be appropriate for the content and for the
intended audience. Humor, exaggeration, outrage, earnestness -- the
writer creates the emotional tone and point-of-view which best represent
the intent of the program.

Don't shortcut the importance of ethics and fairness. The urge to
create a dramatic program within the time and budget available is
formidable. All scriptwriting depends upon creating a condensed,
heightened reality. In choosing the style and approach for your program
It's essential to consider your responsibility to the subjects

of the tape. Cheap shots and distortions have a way of backfiring and undermining the credibility of the program you've worked so diligently to create.

Outlines. Treatments. Storyboards. Scripts.

Scriptwriting like all creative enterprises is a process. It unfolds in increments. All writers are familiar with the steps. The most basic is an outline. Sometimes outlines are only implicit. Almost all writing benefits from the process of committing an outline to paper. Fuzzy connections and unsupported transitions should be mercilessly exposed. The outline is a blueprint for the script to come. It's incomplete unless it clearly indicates a motivated beginning, middle and end. Your outline is crucial to the construction of a coherent script.

Once the outline is completed and approved, the Treatment follows. This is a summary, based on the outline. If each talking point in the outline becomes a short paragraph, the treatment for a half hour program might run about 3 pages. Often the treatment is incorporated into a proposal for a potential client or financial backer. In this case the treatment is also a selling tool. It should present the description of

the proposed program dynamically -- giving a sense of color as well as content. By all means avoid distancing the reader of a treatment. Avoid constructions such as: "....and then we see....." or "...next the camera shows/pans/zooms...." Straightforward descriptive exposition is much more effective.

The Storyboard is an illustrated version of the script. A storyboard resembles a vertical comic book. Line drawings are made for each camera set-up on the left half of the page. Audio descriptions and dialogue accompany each drawing on the right side of the page. This can be a time consuming and expensive proposition. A storyboard is a not essential for most productions. It's particularly useful in illustrating the look and camera angles of difficult or unusual shooting situations. And storyboards are confidence builders for skittish clients --assuring them that the script will produce a visual product meeting their specifications.

There are a variety of script formats. The formal, elaborate, full-page

script with camera and scene directions included is best left for feature films. The extra wide margins of a live action television scripts aren't often necessary. The simplest, most common, and most useful script format for a nonfiction video production is two parallel columns--the AV Script. The left side describes the Video; the right the Audio. Reading down the page it's possible to get a sense of the development of the story. It's not necessary and often counter-productive to specify particular camera angle or set-ups. Leave this to the director. A good rule of thumb: one page of script equals about one minute of completed video.

After the script is finally approved, it's a simple matter to rearrange this sequential presentation into a Shooting Script. The shooting script groups set-ups by location and personnel to be taped. It's much more efficient to shoot all the action taking place in one location before moving to another.

Writing Narration

Scriptwriting demands more than a command of basic writing skills. Good

grammar, an active voice and sensitive ears are all required. The best scripts are Concise. Punchy. Specific. Sentence fragments have their place. Each word counts. And must be chosen for both content and tone. Jargon, cliches, buzzwords and unnecessary technical language burden a script. Nothing dates a program more surely than yesterday's fashion: "Read my lips." Parallelism, symmetry and in some cases repetition are often successful structural devices. Audiences tend to be insecure and inattentive. A false step in narrative structure too often leads to sudden death by terminal confusion or asphyxiation by boredom. Narration is often the tape's primary voice. It guides viewers and reassures them that there is indeed a point to the story they're being told. A narrator adds authority to a presentation. It's vital that narration be written for a particular person. Envision the narrator as a character of a certain age, race, sex, and economic level. A narrator who brings a sense of personality to a reading is more believable than a faceless, colorless disembodied voice. A "voice-of-god" narration is rarely, if ever, effective.

The narrator's credibility can come from a variety of sources. A celebrity narrator can bring fame and a reputation for excellence to a

production. A CEO has certain kind of authority. (An authority who's also a celebrity ---Lee Iacocca for example--might be appropriate for a certain kind of program.) Often it's the "voice-of-experience;" sometimes the "voice-of-reason" which supplies the necessary credibility. More than anything else, it's the narrator's voice that draws the viewer into your program. Choose carefully.

Editing

Writers are often called upon to work closely with video editors. A good editor appreciates well-written transitions, and understands how a a judicious explanation can save valuable minutes of screen time. Likewise writers need to appreciate the power of a wordless montage, the utility of (visual) symbols and the tools and craft of editing. Flexibility and imagination are the keys to successful rewrites in post production. Writers need to let go of words that slow down the pace and rhythm of a program. Breathing space, music and sound effects all can speak eloquently. These are tools that an accomplished scriptwriter learns to appreciate.

An accomplished scriptwriter is able to "write to picture." Language

sometimes must conform to a particular pictorial order and duration. Writing must be made to measure. Careful honing and pruning usually yield the required effect.

Tips

To paraphrase a favorite writer (Dorothy Parker) --"Writing well is the best revenge." Practice, as always, is what's most required. Let me suggest a couple of exercises. Get a tape of a program similar to one you'd like to write a script for. Ask a friend to briefly summarize the program. You need a good general sense of what the show is about. Now watch the program with the sound turned off. Make a shot list describing the visuals in a 5 or 10 minute section that seems particularly effective. Working from the shot list, write an accompanying narration. See if you can stimulate interest in the material, create appropriate transitions, and stay within existing shot lengths. When you're finished with your script, review the program with the audio turned up. This time transcribe the audio from the program to your script/shot list. See if you can identify the devices used in the script. Are they effective? Could this material be organized

differently? What captures your interest? How do the visuals advance the action? How does your imagined narration compare with the actual script? You'll soon see that there are many effective ways to organize visual materials.

In the final analysis it's usually a familiar dramatic structure that makes a program work. Fiction or nonfiction, video or print, it's the human story that audiences are interested in most. Some facts, a personal point-of-view, and a sense of humor out perform expensive technology. "The writer is the wizard; the pencil, a magic wand."