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**Documentary Storytelling Techniques**Creative ideas to help tell your story

The key to choosing the right storytelling techniques for your documentary is to know who your primary audience will be and where/how it will be viewed.

If your audience is a group of third graders, you may choose a very different technique than you would for a group of college fraternity brothers or for a group of senior citizens.

Another way to choose your storytelling technique is to think about your subject matter.

If your documentary is about war, you might choose a very different storytelling style than if your documentary is about adopting puppies.

The idea is that you want to create the proper setting and tone to create an experience for your audience. You want to build the story in such a way to keep the audience engaged and following the story.

**Storytelling Techniques**

**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](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/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.

**No Narration** – Without narration, the story is pieced together using only clips of interviews, raw footage, on-screen text and graphics.

One specific type is known as **Observational Mode** – 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 to reveal the story in their own timing.

Also known as direct cinema or [cinéma vérité](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cin%C3%A9ma_v%C3%A9rit%C3%A9). Frederick Wiseman’s works are great examples here.

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frederick_Wiseman>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H7CjJuEBats>

**Recreations/Drama** – This storytelling technique is often used in historical documentaries where important events have already taken place and there is no existing footage. Or there are pieces of the story missing that need to be dramatized. A great example of a documentary using this technique is [*Man on Wire*](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B001OSIV62/ref%3Das_li_ss_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=390957&creativeASIN=B001OSIV62&linkCode=as2&tag=desktopdocume-20).

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qmbNdDEo3BE>

While recreations are respected by critics, re-enactments (The Jinx, The Thin Blue Line) are not.

<http://www.newyorker.com/culture/richard-brody/just-say-no-to-reenactments-jinx-robert-durst>

Your professor would prefer that you not use recreations, either. He likes to save fiction for the drama/comedy unit of this course.

**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*](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B000ME5B30/ref%3Das_li_ss_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=390957&creativeASIN=B000ME5B30&linkCode=as2&tag=desktopdocume-20) took this approach by following Al Gore to tell a big and complicated story.

**Cartoon Animation** – A lot of documentaries in recent years have been using this technique including [*Searching For Sugar Man*](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B008JFUTT0/ref%3Das_li_ss_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=390957&creativeASIN=B008JFUTT0&linkCode=as2&tag=desktopdocume-20) and [*Blood Brother*](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B00H8ZODXA/ref%3Das_li_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=390957&creativeASIN=B00H8ZODXA&linkCode=as2&tag=filmmaking-gear-20&linkId=5EQLTYG5GNYF4INC). The cartoon animation is used sparingly throughout the documentary to capture a particular event or mood. For example in *Blood Brother*, cartoon animation was used to tell the story of how the lead character dealt with a dying cat.

**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*](http://vimeo.com/41264088) is an example.

**Chronological Order (or not)** – You may choose to tell a story in “real time” as it happened, or you 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. You 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** – Your voice narrates and tells the story from your personal perspective, like an opinion piece. These types of films can be very compelling if done right. Michael Moore's documentaries, such as [*Fahrenheit 9/11*](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B00005JNEI/ref%3Das_li_ss_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=390957&creativeASIN=B00005JNEI&linkCode=as2&tag=desktopdocume-20) are great examples. This style can be particularly effective when dealing with a very sensitive issue or personal story.

**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. [*War Photographer*](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B0000C825I/ref%3Das_li_ss_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=390957&creativeASIN=B0000C825I&linkCode=as2&tag=desktopdocume-20) is a documentary I highly recommend. Although photos are certainly used throughout the documentary, notice the technique the filmmakers used with tiny video cameras attached to the photographer's camera creating a fascinating “personal point of view” perspective.

**Drawings/Animation** – This is another creative way to tell your story. Say you have a young girl who was abused and you don't want to show her face as she's talking. What about getting an artist to draw a childlike sketch of a young girl and have her walking along the street. It's the same idea as when you flip the pages of a book fast and it reveals a “moving” scene even though each image is a drawing. A compelling documentary that used drawings in the most amazing way is [*Operation Homecoming - Writing the Wartime Experience*](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B000WOSB0U/ref%3Das_li_ss_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=390957&creativeASIN=B000WOSB0U&linkCode=as2&tag=desktopdocume-20).

**Chapters** – Divide the documentary into “chapters” or segments, each with its own title. It keeps it simple for you and simple for your audience. I used this technique in the documentary [*Briars in the Cotton Patch*](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B00FXBL1R2/ref%3Das_li_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=390957&creativeASIN=B00FXBL1R2&linkCode=as2&tag=desktopdocume-20).

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