

# How to write for

Some stories are better told as documentaries rather than as feature films.

One of the greatest German writers, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, the author of *Faust*, said that it is easy to have an idea but that very few people find the right format in which to tell it. I agree. It is very difficult to find the right medium, the right artistic form and style for an idea. Many feature films I have seen would have made far better stage plays, radio dramas or documentaries.

One of the latest and most convincing examples of an inappropriate format was the visualisation of Muhammad Ali's life: whereas the Academy Award winning documentary *When We Were Kings* was absolutely captivating, Michael Mann's feature film *Ali* starring Will Smith, disappointed its audience and only achieved a low box office result.

So why would I choose to tell my story as a documentary rather than a feature film? The main reason lies in the difference between truth and believability. Is the essence of my story reality or fiction? Do I, as a film-maker, primarily want to educate my audience or entertain them?

Of course all fiction is based to a greater or lesser degree in reality. However, the building blocks of every documentary are reality. Once you start making documentaries, this will become blatantly obvious because the first question any commissioning editor will ask is: Do you have access to the information, person, location you are describing? In other words, does it exist and can you record it on tape without first having to create it?

Documentaries exist in a variety of genres and, as with feature films, there is always the exception to the rule. The latest BBC series on dinosaurs was a digital recreation of an otherwise wildlife documentary. However, if you and I want to make a documentary, we probably need to stick to the more classical approach.

Proposals and treatments are the infrastructure of the documentary industry and in many ways they do not differ from treatments written for feature films. The functions of a proposal are to clarify the idea in your own mind and to sell the idea to a commissioner, production company or film fund.

Experienced writers who have worked in



My teeth are whiter

Columbia Pictures

both genres confirm the similarities of the writing process. Bridget Terry co-wrote *The Power of Women in Hollywood*, which was nominated for the Writers' Guild Award for best documentary. In the article *Story in the Stone* first published in *Written By* in September 2001, Bridget explains: 'I was surprised, having jumped from dramatic writing to documentary writing, to find it was similar. I was sure that it was going to be totally backwards, but it was very similar to writing a screenplay in terms that you have to get a structure down, you have to get your material in some organisational form to make it, and you have to find a dramatic through-line. You still are writing for an audience, so you still have to have it very compelling and want them to stay tuned, so to speak, or stay in their seat.'

For documentary writers the principle challenge is the structure. They need to ask exactly the same questions as a fiction screenwriter. What is the story? Who are the central characters? What is the point of view? Where is the drama? Where is the tension? In other words, how can I create a strong narrative that dramatises my idea? Even if a film-maker does not do his or her homework, they will be confronted with exactly these questions in the process of shooting: How am I going to organise this material? Where does this scene go? Will this scene going to go in the beginning, the middle, or the end of the film? How am I going to make it accessible to audiences?

We all know that many cinema *vérité* films are made in the editing stage and that sometimes these films work but bad experience

has taught commissioners and film-makers to think about these questions beforehand so as to ensure that when in the editing room, there is a story which doesn't need to be constructed at that late stage.

If the process of writing for documentaries is as challenging as writing screenplays, why would anybody want to make documentaries when the status and payment of a feature-film writer is much higher? Before I answer this question I would like to quote another successful documentary writer, Mark Jonathan Harris, who wrote the two documentaries *A Long Way Home* and *In the Arms of Strangers* that won the Academy Award for best documentary. Mark has a wonderful way of explaining the art of documentary making, which has much to do with the attitude and personality of the film-maker.

'There is a misperception or an assumption that documentaries are objective truth. Documentaries are subjective truth. There were 10,000 children who were rescued by the Kindertransport. I'm sure there are 10,000 different stories. We picked, for the film, thirteen or fourteen, and we interviewed a few more. This is the Kindertransport as filtered by Deb Oppenheimer, the producer, Kate, the editor, and me. Everybody in this room would have made a different kind of story about that. Documentaries allow for more complexity. A lot of fiction films seem to veer away from complexity and move more toward formulaic, dramatic action. I happen to like *Hurricane*, but I think the reality is more interesting than some of the distortions. But this is a bigger budget

# documentaries

Martina Nagel suggests reasons for making the right choice.

film. It's made in Hollywood. People are leery of films with a lot of complexity and contradiction. There's more toleration for that complexity in documentary audiences. The truth is always in grays. It's never in black and white. (*Written By*, September 2001.)

Personally I believe that documentary making is a vitally important in maintaining a democratic society. Information is the currency of democracy and hence documentary makers, together with the press, authors, artists and the media in general make democracy healthier and stronger where it already exists and help to bring it about where it does not. I hope that this idealistic view of documentaries will inspire more people to consider writing for documentaries. The basic guidelines for any writer/director of documentaries to incorporate in most treatments are:

1. Programmes need to fit into slots that have budgets attached to them. Once you understand the schedules, you can start choosing the right slot for your idea. How you develop your idea and which narrative structure you use depends on where you are going to pitch it.

Below is a list of a number of commissioning editors in the UK and their strands:

**Jenny Abbott:** *Reputations*

Jenny.abbott@bbc.co.uk

**Nick Fraser:** *Storyville* storyville@bbc.co.uk

**John Lynch:** *Horizon* horizon@bbc.co.uk

**Laurence Rees:** *Timewatch* Phone: 020 8752 6255

**Ruth Pitt:** *Everyman* Ruth.pitt@bbc.co.uk

**Basil Comely:** *Omnibus* Phone: 020 8752 4273

**Anthony Wall:** *Arena* Phone: 020 8752 5172

**Mike Robinson:** *Panorama*

mike.robinson@bbc.co.uk

**Karen O'Connor:** *Correspondent* BBC White City

**Trevor Boden:** *Metroland* Phone: 020 7240 4000 (Carlton)

**Jess Search:** *Other Side*, Alt-TV Phone: 020 7306 6429 (Channel 4)

2. Ideas are easy to identify: you can find them as headlines in every newspaper. Your treatment is about how you are going to dramatise your idea. If you just have an idea and not a narrative, then your film ends with

the first scene. If your idea is too general, then you haven't identified what hooks you personally to that idea. So much of documentary making is about providing your individual insight to a subject.

3. Access is perhaps the most crucial part of documentary making. Access is the one element that makes your project valid and credible. How many people have suggested a documentary about David Beckham, Steven Spielberg or the Pope? Do you have access to these people? Commissioning editors are presented with hundreds of ideas a week. Just from looking at your proposal they can tell if you are worth talking to, not because of what you present, but because of what you can deliver. The strongest position from which to negotiate is if you are the only person who has access to a vital element of the proposed subject such as exclusive visual material, the agreement of an important person to give you an interview, or access to a private or secret location. Documentaries are about credibility and that is especially true for the film-maker. Do not become engrossed in a great idea that cannot be made because you do not have access to it. The industry will never take you seriously.

4. Interviews are an important element of most documentaries. Your writing very much depends on what people are actually willing to say on camera and in order to find that out, you need to talk to them before writing the script. Again it adds to your credibility as a filmmaker if you interview the widest possible range of people that you can. The most difficult people to interview are public figures or celebrities who can be very defensive and who rarely crack or expose a side that is less likeable and admirable than their image. Great documentary film-makers possess the courage to pull the plug on someone, even someone influential, if they compromise the integrity of the film. A good interview very much depends on your own openness. Only if you are straightforward with people and tell them what your documentary is really about, will you elicit the right lines. The best interviews are given by self-assured people, though over-confident

people can seem superficial. A person full of contradictions is often the most interesting contributor because you cannot foresee what will happen next. It is always helpful if you ask your contributor at the very beginning of your shoot what they hope to get out of this film. In the long and demanding process of filming, it is possible that you will fall out with your contributor and so you need to be able to remind to them why they should continue.

5. Visualisation is the final consideration when writing your treatment. It is important to know or visit locations that illustrate the idea and mood of the film. With the help of archive footage, authentic locations and the recreation of scenes the film-maker gives a visual representation of the story. 'Unfortunately, a lot of the lines of art are getting blurred in documentary. It's fine to use re-enactment as long as it's clear that it is re-enactment. When the lines are not clear, when it is blurred, it undermines your credibility as a filmmaker, especially in the area of Holocaust where there are people who are Holocaust deniers. Once the audiences begin to question one aspect of the film, then that question can carry throughout the whole viewing experience.' (Mark Jonathan Harris *Written By*, September 2001).

Writing for documentaries is hard work, particularly the legwork but as the famous French director Francois Truffaut said: 'I always start shooting convinced the film will be superb. Halfway through, I just hope to finish. At the end I am just happy to have got through it. But the better researched and prepared you are, the better and easier it is. Film-making is very, very hard work, but still we would say it is far better than working!'

Martina Nagel lectures at the Northern Film School and has frequently been invited to speak at ICVM, the independent film conference in LA and at BAFTA in London. She is currently completing her PhD on film genre at a German university. Martina is a co-founder with Bart Gavigan of script clinics that have attracted Hollywood film-makers and European writers. Tel: +44 1372 844484