

# Documentary Conventions

Thursday, 22 October 2020 8:43 AM

## Documentary Conventions

As a type of film or television develops, filmmakers and directors find certain techniques that become useful or effective in creating texts. These techniques get used again and again, and eventually they are associated with and are used to define certain types of texts. The techniques then become known as conventions.

Below is a list of some conventions in documentary (Note that not all documentaries possess all of these conventions.)



### 1. Actuality

Actuality is the term for film footage of real life events, places and people. Unlike fictional films which use actors, scripted stories and artificial sets, actuality is a record of real events as they unfold.

### 2. Archival Footage and Photographs

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. Archival materials include old photographs, newsreel footage, and even shots from fiction films.

### 3. Exposition

In a documentary, 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.

Dramatic segments of the documentary are specially chosen in order to catch the viewer's attention. These shots are specifically positioned, such that the montage positions us to believe a certain theme presented by the documentary and this the documentary presents its view much more persuasively to the viewer.

### 4. Interviews

The interview is a common documentary technique. It allows people being filmed to speak directly about events, prompted by the 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. The interviewer will only ask questions that give a rationale that support the main theme presented within the documentary, and thus the viewer feels as though that this is the only view and the view they must believe correct. Interviews on opposing sides of an issue may be shown to give the viewer comprehensive information about a topic.

Talking heads are people interviewed to explain or comment on the text's subject. These people usually are shown in a setting that creates their 'expert' status; for example in their offices (sometimes with a wall of books behind them) or in their homes.

### 5. Jiggly Camera/Cinéma vérité

A wobbly camera is often still used in documentary to contribute to the atmosphere of real action, happening at the time. As cameras became more portable and more affordable, filmmakers did more on-location shooting, and keeping the camera steady was somewhat difficult when it came to following the action - sometimes at a run. Steadicam, a camera stabilizing system, aids in capturing what some perceive as a problem, but which others see as a useful technique. Another term used to describe the capture of live action as it happens is 'cinéma vérité'. The effect of this is to make the viewer feel that they are personally involved in the action.

### 6. Montage

A montage sequence conveys ideas visually by putting them in a specific order in the film. A different positioning of shots conveys different ideas to the viewer. For example, a montage containing a negative theme followed by a positive theme may give the viewer the idea that the positive theme is the main theme of the montage; and vice-versa.

Narrative montages involve the planning of sequences of shots used to indicate changes in time and place within a film. Ideational montages link actions with words, and are often used in documentaries. 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.

### 7. Real People

For the most part, the people we see in a documentary are real people. Keep that in mind whenever you see an interview.

### 8. Re-enactments

A re-enactment stages real events that already have occurred. Sometimes they include the people who experienced the events originally, but more often they incorporate actors playing parts. Most documentary filmmakers shoot events where they actually occur.

### 9. Reconstructions

Reconstructions are also often used in documentaries. They are artificial scenes of an event which has been reconstructed and acted out on film based on information of the event. Reconstructions generally provide factual information, and give

the viewer a sense of realism, as if the event really happened in front of them live. They often indicate that the footage is not real by using techniques such as blurring, distortion, lighting effects, changes in camera level, and colour enhancement within the footage.

## **10. Voice-over narration**

Voiceover narration occurs whenever a voice is heard on the soundtrack without a matching source in the image. In other words we hear the voice speak but we cannot see the speaker utter the words. The voice often explains or comments on the visuals. It is done by someone reading a script: a celebrity's voice is often used to add appeal to the documentary.

The Voice-over in a documentary can be a commentary by the filmmaker, spoken while the camera is filming, or added to the soundtrack during the production. Through this the filmmaker can speak directly to the viewer, offering information, explanations and opinions.