

Shooting techniques

10 important points that you need to keep in mind

Tackling a documentary story with narrative filmmaking techniques requires a different mindset. In a sentence, it means being less reactive, and more proactive. Here are 10 tips that will help shift your thinking.

Story is king but casting is queen. If you're doing recreations, your character must be able to act. The good news is you're asking them to play someone they know very well – themselves! But don't make any assumptions about their abilities. Make picking the right character an integral part of picking the right story: and don't choose one without the other. Sometimes just interviewing the talent (your story's character) is enough for you to get a sense of it. Other times you'll want to ask them to relive a scene for you in advance. If your gut tells you they aren't up to it, get used to politely saying no. Otherwise, story will suffer. And you never want to disappoint the king!

Make shot lists. I do this for documentary shoots too, but it's even more important when going narrative. Just a simple Google docs shotlist template works fine. The stress of getting everything you need during a narrative style production makes it very easy to forget something if you don't have it on paper. On every shoot, I reach a point where I can't think any more. So I reach for my shot list and keep going until everything is crossed out.

Scout the location. Seeing a location will give you a lot of ideas. And, it'll help you plan what equipment you'll need on the day. Think about the light – where is it coming from? Will it be the same or different? Take advantage of natural light in the same way you would on a documentary shoot: use windows, skylights, and practical lights to the fullest. Think as much about where should take light away as where you should add it.

Ask for permission. In documentary, we have a saying: it's better to ask for forgiveness than for permission. But when you're upping your game to narrative-style production, even small-scale stuff, a little permission can go a long way. In this film, we probably could have grabbed the grocery store scene with Megan without permission. But I wanted to dolly down the aisle, so that she seemed to be getting smaller in the shot, with the shelves closing in on her. So guerrilla tactics were out. Getting a yes from a large grocery would be tough, but I figured asking an

independently owned neighborhood grocery would be much easier. It was. My neighborhood grocery, Markettime, let us shoot at 6pm even though it was a busy time for them. We told them we'd be in and out in 15 minutes, and we were.

Previsualize your shots. Story boards aren't my thing. But I definitely spend the time to have every shot loaded into my head BEFORE I get on set. On the day, everyone around you will have an opinion about what you're doing. The only way you'll know whether those opinions are valuable or distracting is if you already have a clear idea of what you want to achieve. In practice, I almost always end up doing something different than I imagined. But under the narrative pressures of time, talent and location, if a shot doesn't start in your head, you're dead.

Keep it simple. If you're coming from a documentary background, narrative filmmaking can get overwhelming very fast. Don't let it. Keep your crew small, and your gear minimal. Not sure whether you'll need a jib? Skip it. I used a crew of just two people for many of the scenes in this film – one assistant and myself. I direct, and operate the camera, while my assistant carries gear, pushes a makeshift dolly, and even acts as an extra when needed. But there's one thing you should never scrimp on...

Dedicate to sound. On scenes with audio, bring a sound recordist. Your on-camera mic may squeak by in the documentary world, but it won't cut it for narrative. You don't necessarily need a professional sound recordist (though I recommend it). But you do need someone whose sole job is getting the mic close to your talent as possible, and monitoring the results. Otherwise, don't be surprised when it comes time for the painstaking ADR (auto dialog replacement).

Bring clothing changes. As documentarians we're used to shooting people wearing just about anything (or nothing). But with narrative, if you're staging more than once scene, your talent will almost certainly need more than one set of clothing. It's easy to overlook this one, as you fuss over shot lists, lighting, etc. But remember that a fresh set of clothes is as essential as a fresh SD card when you're shooting narrative.

Be thoughtful. If it's raining, would you want to lay down on the hood of a car for that shot you've been planning? Your talent probably doesn't want to, either. Also, for difficult shots, trust that you got the shot on the first take (but don't move on until you do). Be respectful. Don't work them too hard. Take time for lunch. Better yet, buy them lunch.

Be clear. Clarity builds trust. Tell your talent specifically what you want them to do, to the best of your ability. If they don't succeed after a few takes, suggest something else, rather than repeating something that's not working over and over again. For the scene in which Megan is contemplating suicide, I asked her to relive that moment, and asked her to cry. It was so dark filming that scene that I couldn't see whether she had shed any tears until I saw them in the edit. But I could feel the emotion. So we only shot it once. See item #1.

Overlap the action. If you're wondering whether two shots will cut together, direct your talent to perform an action: sitting down, for example. Near the end of this film, for example, Megan walks to her desk and sits. Notice how I cut on her sitting. That's the trick to believable edits: cut on the action. Film until the action is complete, and then pick up the shot with the next angle just before the action, allowing it to play out and continue.

Watch your talent's eyeline. Where your talent is looking gets very important in narrative cutting. So, pay close attention to which direction your talent is looking in shot A, and direct them to look the same direction in shot B, in order for it to cut. In the grocery store scene, notice how Megan is looking camera-right in her shot A closeup, and the same direction in the shot B wide that follows it. Bonus: direct your talent to change where they are looking in both shot A and shot B, and overlap the shots. The moment your talent changes her look becomes your cut point.

When in doubt, shorten. If your talent sounds like she's reading her lines, try breaking them apart. Break paragraphs into sentences. Break sentences into smaller sentences. This works especially well for voiceover. Megan's first line in this film was broken down this way.

Reference : <http://www.danmccomb.com>