Acting on Film or Video Takes Understatement

Acting on camera requires a subtle approach, underplaying and reacting rather than projecting. Normal stage projection will come across as overacting, while the powerful language of the stage is often too much for the screen. It seems forced and artificial—which, of course, it is. Different media require different conventions.

A Film or Video Is Shot Out of Sequence

The actors in a film may never all be in the same place at the same time. In fact, it's possible—though rarely desirable—to have a dialogue between two actors who actually never are on the same set, in front of the same camera, at the same time.

A Film or Video Is Always Shown After the Fact

The audience, while kept in mind from script to screen, comes to view the finished work long after the fact. Because of this, the director is the unifying force in film and video. To provide the integrity and direction that will sustain a work through all the phases of production, you must be clear about what you want, and work with crew and cast until you achieve it.

THE DOCUMENTARY
INTERVIEW

The lights are set. The Knowledgeable Person has taken his place comfortably behind his desk. You've checked the sound levels, checked your notes, and you're ready to do an on-camera interview.

CUT!

Let's freeze the scene and ask a Stanislavskian question usually thought more appropriate to actors in dramatic fiction than to documentarians doing an interview:

What's the motivation for this scene?

What part does the scene play in your documentary? Why are you doing an interview at all? Why are you talking with this particular person? Why is he sitting behind a desk? What is he going to say? Couldn't it be said quicker, easier, and cheaper by a voice-over narrator?

Presumably you have answers to all of these questions. If so: Roll sound! Roll camera! And . . . Action!

But if not, you may be on the verge of wasting an afternoon and a roll of film or videotape.
WHAT IS AN INTERVIEW?

An interview is a relatively spontaneous, more or less unrehearsed dialogue. On one side is the interviewer, who is in control of the form of the dialogue and who suggests topics, asks questions, and prompts responses. On the other side are one or more interviewees or speakers, who generally have control of the content and information value of the interview.

Why Not to Do an Interview

What disturbs me is the trend toward constructing a documentary out of interviews. PBS, which for twenty-five years has had too much money and too few ideas, has encouraged the documentary of talk—so that the documentarian has people telling the story rather than showing it to us. Every now and then the documentarian throws in a few visuals for relief. This kind of documentary treats visual evidence as a cutaway.

National Endowment grants provide welfare for academics by requiring the involvement of humanities professors and art historians in documentary projects. And I guess the documentarians feel that as long as they are paying the academics a fee, they might as well put them on camera—whether they have anything to contribute to the film or not.

Can this be the reason we find the biographer of a president talking about baseball?

... And Why You Might Do One

Interviews are done for a wide variety of reasons:

- You may just want to show the person on camera. Company presidents, politicians, and celebrities often fall into this category. Their physical presence in the documentary may be more important than anything they say.
- Sometimes the speaker is an expert on some topic or holds a strong opinion about it, and you want to hear what she has to say, in her own words.
- Sometimes an interview is used as a substitute for action. footage you don’t have and can’t get. When a ship sinks at sea, you interview the survivors. It’s the best evidence you have.
- You may want an on-camera interview to be able to prove that the speaker said whatever he said, especially if the statement is controversial or can be shown to be untrue. You may want to cross-question the speaker to probe his statement for flaws or inaccuracies or for the strength of his convictions.
- You hope that the person being interviewed will reveal her thoughts, hopes, dreams, and feelings as part of the texture of your documentary.
- Finally, you may want to use pieces from an interview to supplement or replace narration, in order to give your film a feel of spontaneity and a look of reality.

Whatever your reason for shooting an interview, remember that its use in the final version of the documentary has to be justified on the same basis as any other scene. That is, it presents evidence, provides information, or enhances the feel, mood, or flavor of the production, and it helps to move the documentary along toward its resolution and ending.

Otherwise it belongs on the cutting-room floor with the other shots that didn’t work.

PREPARATION

To do a successful interview, you have to prepare.

Every expert on interviewing says the same thing: Do your homework. So do it. Find out what you can about your subject ahead of time. Most important, find out what you don’t know. That’s the basis for your questions. Gather documents. No matter what the topic of the interview is, something has probably been written about it. Talk to your interviewee’s associates. They may
give you personal glimpses or a different slant that the speaker won’t provide.

Quite often you can have the interviewee prepare a list of suggested questions for your use. This is a common device of talk show hosts, and you may find it valuable. Just make it clear that you won’t be limiting the interview to the questions that are provided.

You may want to do a preinterview to find out what the person has to say and how she or he says it. But be careful this doesn’t lead to the situation, on camera, where the speaker begins each statement with, “As I told you before, . . .” The preinterview is a good time to get the correct spelling of the speaker’s name and the exact title. You’ll need this for subtitles on the screen.

Take time to explain to the interviewee your purpose, the purpose of the documentary, your slant, if any, who the documentary is being produced for if there is a sponsor, and the intended audience. If it’s a hostile situation, tell your subject what others have said, or are expected to say, and give him or her a chance to refute them.

Explain that it’s customary to overshot an interview. Be sure the person understands that you may shoot a half-hour interview, but you will probably use less than a minute of it in the documentary.

ON LOCATION

Do the interview in a place where the speaker is comfortable. Get everything—lights, camera, sound equipment, sound checks, extra tape, lens cleaning, and so on—taken care of ahead of time. Let the interviewee know in advance that you’ll need a half hour or so to set up.

Have your crew well briefed and well trained. This means starting the interview with a fresh magazine of film or a new roll of videotape and checking that everything is running properly. Don’t let the camera operator direct the scene or the sound recordist indulge his or her curiosity. You control the interview, and you ask the questions.
may come out a little disjointed, but it will make good footage on the screen.

Be sure to have each person say and spell his or her name on camera, including rank or title where appropriate. And it’s always a good idea to have the interviewee give you permission on camera to use the interview.

**SHOOTING OPTIONS**

Shoot the interview before you shoot other kinds of action with this person. This keeps the behavior of the interviewee fairly spontaneous and free of any bias toward acting you might introduce later on.

Try to do the interview in an interesting location that helps to build the visual evidence of your documentary. In general, the least interesting place you can shoot someone in is his or her office, with the subject sitting behind a desk. Can you get someone riding a golf cart around the plant? Shopping in a supermarket? At a little league game? Gardening?

While on location, go for documentary footage that provides visual evidence to go with the interview. You know what the speaker talked about, so you should have no problem planning what to shoot. For example, if the subject was discussing the operation of a new pollution-control device that has been installed, get your shots of it while you’re there at the location.

**Shooting to Edit**

If you plan to edit out the questions that are asked, have the camera operator change camera angle or focal length only while you are asking questions. This will give you more flexibility in editing the interview down to a short, on-camera sequence without any apparent jump cuts. It may also do away with the use of unmotivated cutaways. An unmotivated cutaway is purely an editing device. It is not used to show the audience something important, but merely to cover a sync-sound edit point and eliminate a jump cut.

If, however, you think you may want to keep the questions as part of the scene, then the reaction of the subject to the questions as they are asked may be as important as his or her answers. You’ll want to keep the camera changes to a minimum so that the audience can see the reactions as they happen. Therefore, you may have to cover edit points with cutaways.

If you, or someone, keeps track of the questions that have been asked, you can move the camera around to the subject’s point of view after the interview is over and reshoot the interviewer asking the questions on camera.

Shoot cutaways after you have completed the interview. This is the point at which you may be asking the interviewee to act, so it should come after you’ve gotten his or her spontaneous answers and reactions.

**Editing Options**

Enough has already been said about talking heads. You’ll know when the face of the speaker is the most exciting thing you can use, and you’ll know when it’s dull. Most of the time it is enough to establish the speaker on camera for twenty or thirty seconds and then cut away to something that shows what he or she is talking about. The less you show the person talking, the easier it is to edit the sound track. That’s why it’s important to shoot that other stuff and not just the moving mouth.

**Interview Audio**

Sound is the heart of an interview. Get the microphone close to the speaker and keep it there. If you’re in a grab situation and working with a handheld mike, get it in close to provide good separation between the speaker’s voice and the background noise.

But don’t hand the mike to the speaker. The person who has it controls the interview, and you may not be able to get it back without yelling, “Cut!” and stopping the entire process.
ASK THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

Your questions should be specific enough to point a direction for the speaker and vague enough that he or she has to fill in the details. Try to stay away from leading questions, to which the interviewee can answer "yes" or "no." Instead, ask questions such as:

"Tell me what happened."
"How would you explain this situation to people?"
"What would you like people to know about this?"
"What do you see in the future?"
"How did this come about?"

Don't show off your knowledge of the topic. You're asking questions in the name of your audience, and you want answers from the speaker that will inform them. Don't be embarrassed to say, "I don't know about that," or "I don't understand," even if you do. It's a good way to get more information.

Sometimes you have to play the devil's advocate and take a position that seems to oppose the speaker's views—or your own—in order to get good explanations and clarification.

Listen, Listen, Listen

After you've asked a question, listen to the answer. Let the speaker know you're interested. Follow up any interesting points your subject brings up. The only reason you have written questions is to have something to go back to if the interview slows down.

Don't rush to ask another question as soon as the speaker pauses. Wait a bit. A silence may prompt the interviewee to elaborate on what he or she is saying in important ways that would otherwise be missed. And that can often be better than the first answer given.

The Two Most Important Questions

When you come to the end of everything you've planned for the interview, you still have two questions to ask.

The first is: "Is there anything I should have asked you that I just didn't know enough to ask?" This gives your subject one last chance to show that he or she knows more than you do about the subject.

The second is: "Is there anything that you'd like to say that you haven't had a chance to?" Sometimes your subject has been thinking about the interview and rehearsing little speeches, but feels he or she should only answer the questions you ask.

Occasionally one of these questions may open the floodgates, and you'll get more than you ever dreamed of. But be sure to brief your crew that you're going to ask this. One crew shut down the camera and recorder as soon as they heard me ask the first of the questions, because they thought I was gathering information off the record. Keep the camera running. You only get one shot at the answer to these questions.

PRACTICE

Finally, if you want to be a good interviewer, practice. The hardest thing to learn to do is to listen. Try to think about what the speaker is saying and where it's leading, not about what you're going to ask next. Learn what kinds of questions prompt good answers and what kinds tend to shut off the response. See if you can't find ways to nudge the speaker into revealing more without asking a direct question. Interview your friends, your relatives, and people you meet at parties. Don't just talk to them, interview them.

And when the time comes to do it on camera, you'll be ready.