

## CHAPTER 7

# RESEARCH

Conducting research for initial ideas means immersing yourself, keeping notes, and thinking creatively. This can be slow and uncertain of outcome, so the wise keep more than one documentary pot on the stove. Not only do ideas seem to cross-pollinate, but having back-ups can get you out of a jam. I once had a subject set in Paris collapse a week before the crew arrived. Instead, I hastily developed a topic I noted in a magazine I had read on the plane.

### DEVELOPING A PROPOSAL

On finding a subject, novices often feel they must start shooting *immediately*. And so, without preparation or planning, they shoot... and shoot, and shoot. The problem is that when you run the camera, everything looks equally significant, so you shoot everything that moves. Later, sitting at the computer and facing hours of random footage, you are dismayed to find neither common denominators nor viewpoint.

To direct, rather than merely shoot a film, you must *focus your ideas ahead of time, so you shoot with a set of intentions*. But, you protest, this is documentary! Don't I shoot with an open mind, rather than decide what's going to happen?

Yes, and no. What you need is a plan to narrow and deepen your quest. Then as you shoot you'll either see what you logically expected, or you'll see new aspects developing that alter your idea's center of gravity. With a plan in hand, you can decide whether to incorporate the new, discard it, or change the plan.

The major preparation steps are:

1. Write a *working hypothesis* (a statement that crystallizes your intentions for the filming but which remains flexible so that you can amend and develop it as you go).
2. Make a *pitch*, a brief oral presentation of your film to an individual, or to a small audience, so you get feedback that can help you go farther.
3. Develop a *proposal* (a written description of what you expect to film, to help raise the financial or material support you need, and even to start filming).

### A NOTE ON FILM WRITING

To produce writing with the immediacy of the viewing experience, filmmakers write in a particular way. While literature or journalism usually speaks in the past tense, writing for film is in the present tense, active voice. This is because we experience film in the here and now.

At first you'll probably write, "He will be shown digging his garden." Then, realizing this is in the future tense, passive voice, you change it to the present tense, active voice: "He is digging his garden." Better yet would be, "He digs his garden." The original seven words have come down to four compact, purposeful ones. To write like this means fighting the habits of a lifetime and Microsoft Word can be set to help you by underlining passive sentence constructions.<sup>1</sup>

### RESEARCH OVERVIEW

Below are common steps during research, but don't fret if you have to take them out of order. Real life is messy and circular while proposals have to present ideas in logical sequence. "Art exists," said T. S. Eliot, "to give us some perception of an order in life, by imposing an order upon it."

Remember, you are looking for *visual evidence* so that your camera shoots material with shape, atmosphere, progression, and meaning. The research phase usually goes like this:

1. *Test your documentary idea* by developing a working hypothesis
2. *Meet people*, do a lot of watching and listening, and
  - a. *Explain your interests*, so you become known and trusted
  - b. *Decide provisionally whom you might film*
  - c. *Decide what roles* people have adopted
  - d. *Decide who represents what* in the scenario you can see developing
3. *Note characteristic activities* so you can,
  - a. Shoot each one comprehensively, briefly, and with visual panache
  - b. Recognize when something unusual or dramatic starts happening
4. *Break shooting into scenes* and,
  - a. *Assign a functional purpose for each in your narrative*
  - b. *Analyze how best to film them*
  - c. *List basic information* (exposition) that you must establish for each
  - d. *Consider possible outcomes* so you are ready for changes and upsets

### MAKE A WORKING HYPOTHESIS

A director's point of view does not materialize with time; it is something you must actively seek and decide, and what helps is to start making a working hypothesis straight away. Probably you are thinking, "But I haven't done any research! I don't know anything yet!" Ah, but you do. No matter how provisional your ideas, the working hypothesis begins to expand and arrange them along the through-line spine of a narrative. Invariably it shows that you *do* know quite a bit already. To do this, take any film idea, no matter how preliminary, and complete the prompts in Table 7-1. Ignore those italicized—we shall use them in Book II.

The working hypothesis in fact functions like a delivery system. It begins from your conviction in relation to the subject (Prompt 1), and delivers the particular thoughts and feelings of a total experience to your audience (Prompts 13 and 14). In between come the body of ideas, purposes, and concepts that make your film dynamic, dramatic, and persuasive.

TABLE 7-1 Prompts for directing the documentary

#### DP-3 BRIEF WORKING HYPOTHESIS

(The italicized prompts are the ones you will use in your working hypothesis.)

##### Steps

1. In life I believe...
2. My film will...
3. My central character is...
4. What he/she/it does is...
5. The main conflict is...
6. *My film's purpose is...*
7. I expect my audience to...
8. *The subject is...*
9. The theme is...
10. *The premise is...*
11. *The Storytelling is...*
12. Possible resolutions are...
13. Ultimately I expect...
14. ... and to understand...

#### PROJECT 7: RESEARCH

If prompts in Table 7-1 are used in your working hypothesis, the prompts in this project will be used in your research.

1. In life I believe...
  - a) Your central character is...
  - b) Any other characters...
2. My film will...
  - a) Briefly describe the event...
  - b) Describe the event in detail...
  - c) Describe the event in detail...
  - d) Describe the event in detail...
3. My central character is...
  - a) This character is...
  - b) This character is...
  - c) This character is...
  - d) This character is...
4. What he/she/it does is...
  - a) You describe the event...
  - b) Show the event...
  - c) Show the event...
  - d) You describe the event...
5. My film's purpose is...
  - a) This is the purpose...
  - b) This is the purpose...
  - c) This is the purpose...
  - d) This is the purpose...

TABLE 7-1 Prompts for a Brief Working Hypothesis (Project DP-3 on the book's website, [www.directingthedoocumentary.com](http://www.directingthedoocumentary.com))

### DP-3 BRIEF WORKING HYPOTHESIS

(The italicized prompts will be explored in Book II)

#### Steps

1. In life I believe that ... (your life-principle concerning this subject)
2. My film will show this in action by exploring ... (situations)
3. My central character is ... (name, role, characteristics, etc.)
4. What he/she/they are trying to get, do, or accomplish is ...
5. The main conflict in my film is between ... and ...
6. *My film's point of view, or its POV character, will be ...*
7. I expect my film's structure will be determined by ...
8. *The subject and POV suggest a style that is ...*
9. The theme my film explores is ...
10. *The premise of my film is ...*
11. *The Storyteller's characteristics are ...*
12. Possible resolutions to my film are ...
13. Ultimately I want my audience to feel ...
14. ...and to understand that ...

### PROJECT 7-1: DEVELOPING A BRIEF WORKING HYPOTHESIS

If prompts in Table 7-1 are a little cryptic, here is some guidance:

1. In life I believe that ...
  - a) Your convictions that make this topic so attractive.
  - b) Any truths or "laws of the universe" that affect your central person or subject.
2. My film will show this in action by exploring ...
  - a) Brief description of the "corner of nature" in which your conviction will come to life and the events we shall see. Your film's exposition must establish basic facts and situations so we can follow the story.
3. My central character is ...
  - a) This can be a person, creature, or thing. Some films portray multiple central characters or a group, which is more complicated.
4. What he/she/they are trying to get, do, or accomplish is ...
  - a) You must decide to your own satisfaction what he/she is trying to accomplish, in each sequence, and also long-term, possibly lifelong. This is the key to showing an active character developing through time.
  - b) Show the obstacles that stand in your main character's way, and adaptations he/she makes.
  - c) Show whether he/she overcomes (or fails to overcome) the impediments.
  - d) Your main character usually cannot tell you more than a fraction of his/her goals: you must use your intuition and confirm it through your powers of observation.
5. My film's main conflict is between ... and ...
  - a) This refers to the main competing forces that your film wants us to consider. Usually these involve the main characters and are highly related to your answers in #4.

- b) Be really careful; it's easy to designate conflict superficially and then to discover that deeper levels exist when it is too late.
6. Ignore (Prompts 6, 8, 10, and 11 will be explored later in Book II *Storytelling, Chapter 22: Advanced Research*).
7. I expect my film's structure will be determined by...
- To generate a strong storytelling momentum, decide what is organic to the story that can help its development through time. Is it a journey or an event? A process that someone must go through? A rite, ritual, or test of stamina or skills?
8. Ignore
9. The theme my film explores is...
- A theme is an idea or concept central to the story, such as rebirth, nostalgia, family conflict, identity conflict, and so on.
  - You should be able to express it in one or two words only.
10. Ignore
11. Ignore
12. Possible resolutions to my film are...
- Documentaries are improvisations that often conclude in unexpected ways—a chance filmmakers and their audiences take. Try to anticipate different outcomes (resolutions) and assign whatever different meanings they may yield, so that you can have different shooting strategies ready.
13. Ultimately I want my audience to feel...
- This is the prevailing mood (or succession of moods) that you want your audience to experience since hearts and minds change because of feelings, not facts.
14. ... and to understand that...
- Here you define what you want your audience to realize during and after your film.

Sharpen and compress your hypothesis statements until each is brief but comprehensive. If anything appears twice under different headings, sort out the confusion. Do discuss your ideas with collaborators, but do not share your conceptual infrastructure with participants. They will probably find such ideas alien and even manipulative.

The working hypothesis is of long-term usefulness, since it hands you a work-in-progress checklist to periodically update. As such, it becomes a navigator's compass all through research, shooting, and editing.

Table 7-2 Is a typical working hypothesis (see next page).

## FIELD RESEARCH

Everyone fears rejection or the stinging rebuke, so beginning to research means facing one's inbuilt barriers of shyness. You can limber up wherever you find yourself by opening a conversation to find what makes people tick. Such encounters are the documentarian's push-ups, and Al Maysles, the doyen of American documentary, was still doing them in his 80s when we traveled on a Mexican bus together.

Research usually brings home how welcoming and helpful most people are. After all, you and your camera do bring a little glamour, a little immortality. Don't be afraid to exploit it.

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## TAKING NOTE

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TABLE 7-2 Specimen Brief Working Hypothesis for *The Foreign Boy*

## WORKING HYPOTHESIS THE FOREIGN BOY

1. In life I believe *that you can avoid failure by not trying, but life keeps facing you with tests. Overcome even something minor, and you feel great.*
2. My film will show this in action by exploring *a grade school swimming lesson full of alienating noise, activity, and boisterous kids.*
3. My central character is *a timid Iranian boy still learning the language and culture of his American peers.*
4. What he is trying to get, do, or accomplish is *to learn to swim like the other kids, and gain their approval and acceptance.*
5. The film's main conflict is *between the struggling individual and the incipient tribal cruelty of young children.*
- 6.
7. I expect my film's structure will be determined by *the events in preparation for the process of a school swimming lesson, and its aftermath—all mostly seen from the frightened child's perspective.*
- 8.
9. The theme my film explores is *that courage usually finds helpers (the caring swimming instructor)*
- 10.
- 11.
12. Possible resolutions *are that, (a) the boy has a bad time and can't swim, (b) he manages a little swimming and feels hopeful about it, or (c) he does poorly but someone (a friend or teacher?) encourages him to continue.*
13. Ultimately I want my audience to feel *the boy's relief at being recognized or accepted after his heightened fear and loneliness.*
14. ... and to understand that *... the boy's ordeal epitomizes the immigrant experience; and that everybody faces trials like it one time or other.*

## NARROWING THE FRAME

You research not only to decide on people and situations to film, but to decide the restrictions you want to apply. To say "I want to shoot an intimate observational character portrait, not a talking head interview film" is part of deciding the aspects you like, and the strategies that will do them justice. The clay on the potter's wheel is a shapeless lump until the potter's hands begin containing and squeezing it.

## TAKING NOTES

It seldom feels right to use a camera or sound recorder on first meeting people. Better is to ask questions and take notes of what you see and hear. Writing serves multiple purposes: it relieves you from having to maintain eye contact, allows you to listen for *subtexts* (underlying meanings),

and lets you keep a record that will be vital for crosschecking if you wind up seeing many people. For some reason the act of writing also helps one better absorb and remember.

### RESEARCH METHODS ARE SUBJECT-DRIVEN

The subject and type of documentary you intend making naturally determine how you should research. Good films usually require exploring blind alleys as well as those more fruitful, in order to be sure what you need.

**Example 1.** You want to make an observational film about a street gang, so you use *networking* to make contact, to convey your interests to those who are suspicious, and to clear you to make your first visit. It will be easier to approach the gang through the recommendation of someone they know, and this applies in every walk of life. A London journalist friend used to say, "Anyone can get to anyone else in the world in five or less phone calls."

Once the gang shows interest you may need to hang out with them over a period of weeks or even months until they come to thoroughly know your motives and trust them. This is how the modest, kindly Hubert Sauper made *Darwin's Nightmare* (2004, Austria, Figure 7-1), a grimly absurd tale about sick, starving Tanzanians trapped in a toxic ring of exploitative commerce. Lake Victoria's fishermen catch a predatory fish, then foreign merchants and middle-men sell it to European gastronomes. The local people get the rotting heads. Guess what the Russian transport planes bring in unmarked boxes on their way back to Africa? Guns. Sauper stayed around for months and local people came to accept that he truly wanted to know them. The result is a series of amazingly candid, inwardly searching conversations that he held with street urchins, weary Russian pilots, prostitutes who dream of education and a good job, and the security guard of a research facility whose only weapon is a bow and poisoned arrows. Their frankness makes this occasionally funny, often shocking film very special.



FIGURE 7-1

*Darwin's Nightmare*, Hubert Sauper's ghoulish tale of starving Tanzanians trapped in a toxic ring of exploitative commerce.

**Example 2.** You research using both cause and effect science wrong. You so they come off as they fear, and with

**Example 3.** You out, ask questions Wittily and eccentric stink when they gaggles of boys your audience s

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### MAKING AN IN

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- Garage
- School
- Clinic
- Home

**Example 2.** You want to make a tightly argued film about a group of scientists, so you must research using books, libraries, interviews, and the Internet to master intricate patterns of scientific cause and effect. Choose someone knowledgeable as an adviser and mentor, so you don't get the science wrong. You'll want to profile the personalities and workplaces of the scientists themselves so they come off as full human beings. Find out how they relax, what their family life is like, what they fear, and what they hope for.

**Example 3.** You want to make a film about how children visit a zoo. Again, you must hang out, ask questions, and observe the regular, cyclical patterns by which each day follows the last. Wittily and economically your film should establish how everyone catches their breath at the stink when they enter the lion-house, how grandparents and babies doze off after lunch, or how gaggles of boys taunt the unfortunate chimpanzees. These are obligatory scenes that will make your audience smile in recognition.

By the time you are ready to shoot, you need to know everything typical (so you can film necessary steps), and everything unusual. There's that kid lying on his side so he can look the armadillo in its beady black eye! There's that depressed man in a raincoat and red woolen hat sitting with his back to a depressed baboon. Quick, shoot it!

### FINDING THE PARADIGM

Directors often fail to define the *paradigm* for their film—that is, the central and irreducible purpose of their story. Your most potent skill will be learning to analyze an idea, locate its true purpose, and construct your shooting plans around this center. With the paradigm undefined, a story will stay unfocussed and blurred. To complicate the task, the paradigm will keep shifting or dissolving, each time challenging you to nail it again.

### SHOOTABLE EVIDENCE

Human situations may involve learning, dependency, humor, control, imitation, power relationships, obedience, revolt—anything in the vast spectrum of human aspiration. You will need to develop a good eye for what is major in people's lives. To prepare for shooting, note evidence of whatever meaning you intend to highlight, and note exactly *how* your mind was persuaded by it. If your character is "comfortably placed in life," note the fine objects and tasteful layout of their dining room, say, because these can be filmed. Stop yourself from jumping directly to ideas and conclusions, because a camera can only record what is concrete and tangible, it cannot record abstractions. Look for meaningful objects, words, actions, and behavior that you can shoot.

### MAKING AN INVENTORY

From research and forming a film in your head, make an inventory of materials you'll need to shoot. Your shopping list might look like this:

#### "Immigrants" (10 minutes)

##### Action Sequences

- Garage Sequence - Kenny at work
- School Sequence - Jean in the gym
- Clinic - Maria getting an X-ray
- Home - Family dinner, Jean doing homework

- Letter carrier on rounds, delivers envelope to McPhersons
- Maria interviewing for the new job

#### Archive

- Parents' 8mm film of Maria as child (beach, Christmas, Easter)
- Parents' tape of Jean as a child (beach, soccer, birthday parties)
- Maria's tape of her parents Jorge and Ana visiting from Mexico

#### Interviews

- Jean re mother's ambitions
- Kenny re money troubles
- Maria concerning low expectations of her parents, and changes she's trying to make in her own outlook

#### Sound only

- Chihuahua folksong sung by Jorge
- Playground atmosphere
- Hospital atmosphere with announcements
- Repair shop atmosphere
- Christmas carols at local church

## PROJECT 7-2: DRAMATIC CONTENT WORKSHEET

Drama takes particular people and events, and arranges their doings to suggest an underlying meaning. For any film idea you have in mind, the Dramatic Content Worksheet in Table 7-3 will help you dig out what is humanly significant. You may not be able to answer all its questions, but trying will stimulate your imagination and creativity.

### HOW TO FILM IT: STYLE AND CONTENT

You can lay out your ideas for shooting style by using a simple Style and Content Worksheet as in Table 7-4. Aim to name each sequence and give it a distinct mood, purpose, and meaning. Aim also to accentuate the intrinsic identities and contributions of each part of the material, and keep in mind that even a simple interview will benefit from a deliberate setting and mood.

Don't worry about the material's order since that will be dictated by the logistics of shooting, and won't be settled until you finish editing. Remember to include archive footage. Even though its style and content are largely given, its pictorial quality can be somewhat altered in postproduction (hue, contrast, color saturation and balance, etc.).

If this resembles a fictional approach, remember that film proposals are works of imagination, to communicate your authorial ideas to a producer, fund, or other interested party they have to be idealistic and visionary. The imaginative proposal helps you find material that you will only properly encounter once you start organizing it for editing.

### HANDS-ON LEARNING

For any documentary idea you have in hand, try using DP-1 Dramatic Content Helper. Its purpose is to help you turn a probably static-seeming life situation into something that is essentially dynamic and where something significant is at stake. The aim is not to falsify, but to release the underlying principles and make them visible.

## 7: RESEARCH

TABLE 7-3 Dramatic Content Worksheet for directing the document

### DP-1 Dramatic Content Worksheet

For each intended scene

#### 1. Who/What/When

- Who are the main characters?
- What is their situation?
- When is this happening?
- Where is this taking place?

#### 2.

- What is routine or characteristic?
- What is surprising?
- What patterns or situations are recurring?

#### 3. Will and Conflict

- Volition: What is the character trying to get, or what is the goal?
- Obstructions: What is stopping him/her?
- Conflict: What is the main conflict?
- Strategies: How is the character dealing with each situation?
- Resolution: How is the conflict resolved?

For the film as a whole

#### 4. Structure (A well-structured film)

- The hook: How do you engage your audience?



TABLE 7-3 Dramatic Content Helper (Project DP-1 on the book's website, www.directingthedocumentary.com)

DP-1 Dramatic Content Worksheet

For each intended scene...

1. Who/What/When/Where/Why (Exposition)

- a) Who are the main characters? Their types, personalities, and backgrounds? Which is the main character and why?
- b) What is their situation? What is it, what led to it, where will it go next?
- c) When is this happening? Era, season, month, time of day or night?
- d) Where is this taking place? War-torn Sierra Leone or sleepy Nebraska; city or village; in a train, car, mansion or slum; kitchen or bedroom; upstairs or down?

2.

- a) What is routine and characteristic? What's necessary and normal in this activity? How little can I show to establish what is happening? What's especially revealing in each main character's actions or temperament?
- b) What is surprising or special? What's beneath the surface and goes unnoticed by the casual onlooker?
- c) What patterns lie in the situation? What characteristic movement and cycles of repetition does the place or situation have (by people, traffic, machines, animals, natural phenomena, etc.)? What obstructs or conflicts with these patterns?

3. Will and Conflict (Worthwhile drama depends on active, aspiring characters)

- a) Volition What's the main character trying to get, do, or accomplish? In life generally? In this scene?
- b) Obstructions. What in general stops him/her/it? Overall? In this scene?
- c) Conflict What conflicts will occur in the film? What's the single, central conflict in my film? By reflex and without thought? Creatively? In panic, surprise, disbelief (you name it)? What do you see as possible outcomes for the scene? Which is most likely? How will you go forward with shooting if a change becomes necessary?
- d) Strategies. How might he/she/it deal with each new obstruction?
- e) Resolution

For the film as a whole...

4. Structure (A well-structured story gives a sense of movement and purpose)

- a) The hook: How will you engage your audience? How will you seize your audience's attention? How to signify the "contract" (what your film is going to deal with and how it will do this)?

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TABLE 7-3 (Continued)

## DP-1 Dramatic Content Worksheet

b) Momentum. What will structure your sequences and drive your film forward from beginning to its end?	The steps of a process, event, or journey? The emotional order of memory (in retrospect)? The needs of a character (character-driven movies)? A series of orchestrated contrasts? A series of graduated moods? Other _____?
c) Time. How will you order it?	According to the chronology of the original events? As someone remembers the events? According to a storytelling logic for telling the events (for instance showing a court case conclusion before reconstructing all the steps to get there)? Other _____?
d) Apex or Crisis.	What is the pivotal event, moment, scene, or situation that makes your film's likely high point? (You may not know yet.)
5. Change, growth, and resolution (A satisfying story reflects change and growth)	Who or what is under pressure? Who is taking risks? Who or what needs to change? What is really stopping that change? How will your audience see the main, conflicting forces the film deals with meet and collide? How to ensure this happens onscreen? Who or what might grow? Can you legitimately help that growth (by positive intercession)? What mistakes must you avoid if you intercede? What outcomes to the film seem possible? Which is most likely? How to handle each so your film can end meaningfully?
b) Confrontation	
c) Growth	
d) Resolution	
6. Audience, Impact, and Theme	A type of person shown in the film? An authority or institution? A section of the public, and if so, which? Other _____?
a) Target audience. Who in particular are you addressing? (Don't say "Everyone!")	
b) My audience must feel ...	What emotions must you awaken in your audience?
c) My audience must think about ...	What issue, idea, contradiction, conflict, etc. should your audience be left thinking about?
d) The theme of my film will be ...	Recall your "In life I believe that..." statement and restate the theme your film will establish.

## 7: RESEARCH

TABLE 7-4 Specimen documentary about directing the documen

## DP-2 Style and Conte

## Sequence name &amp; co

Bus station: Parents on bus and wave go

Small town bus-stop  
Ellen gets off, looks  
grandparents. She is  
to find only Grandp  
She asks where Gra  
Hospital. Grandma  
after a stroke; aslee  
be dead. Ellen is sc  
Grandma awakes a  
her. She seems tired  
alright.

## NOTE

1. Click the Office Grammar > Gram

TABLE 7-4 Specimen Style and Content Questionnaire for three sequences of a documentary about a child visiting grandparents (Project DP-2 on the book's website, [www.directingthedocumentary.com](http://www.directingthedocumentary.com))

DP-2 Style and Content Worksheet

Sequence name & content	What it should convey	Coverage style
Bus station: Parents put Ellen on bus and wave goodbye.	Ellen is fearful about traveling alone. The experience is troubling.	Handheld camera, emphasizing movement, instability, weird faces, disconnection, noise.
Small town bus-stop: Ellen gets off, looks for grandparents. She is surprised to find only Grandpa there. She asks where Grandma is.	Small figure in a big world; anxiety, then relief at arriving. But where is Grandma?	Tripod and long lens as bus arrives and a small Ellen gets off. Then handheld as she searches for her grandparents and finds only Grandpa.
Hospital. Grandma is in bed after a stroke; asleep but could be dead. Ellen is scared until Grandma awakes and greets her. She seems tired but alright.	The hospital room has scary equipment, plastic tubes, electronic metering. Grandma looks very vulnerable until she awakes and smiles. By intercutting Ellen we get a strong sense of her concern, then of her relief.	Tripod-mounted camera, wide-angle shots to give unpleasant distortion. Perspectives stabilize as Ellen realizes that Grandma is going to be OK. Do POV close shots of the dials, read-outs, tube clamps as well as record all the sounds, especially Grandma's labored breathing.

NOTE

1. Click the Office Button in the document top left-hand corner > Word Options > Proofing > Spelling & Grammar > Grammar Settings, and under Style, check Passive Sentences.