

FREE
INSTRUCTOR
& STUDENT
RESOURCES

Second Edition

ROUTLEDGE

Video Journalism

Multimedia
Storytelling for
Online, Broadcast
and Documentary
Journalists

A Focal Press Book

Kenneth Kobre

Videojournalism

Videojournalism: Multimedia Storytelling for Online, Broadcast and Documentary Journalists is an essential guide for solo video storytellers—from “backpack” videojournalists to short-form documentary makers to do-it-all broadcast reporters.

Based on interviews with award-winning professionals sharing their unique experiences and knowledge, *Videojournalism* covers topics such as crafting and editing eye-catching short stories, recording high-quality sound, and understanding the laws and ethics of filming in public and private places. Other topics include:

- understanding the difference between a story and a report
- finding a theme and telling a story in a compact time frame
- learning to use different cameras and lenses—from smart phones to mirrorless and digital cinema cameras
- using light, both natural and artificial
- understanding color and exposure

The second edition of this best-selling text has been completely revised and updated. Heavily illustrated with more than 550 photographs, the book also includes more than 200 links to outstanding examples of short-form video stories. *Anatomy of a News Story*, a short documentary made for the book, follows a day in the life of a solo TV videojournalist on an assignment (with a surprise ending), and helps readers translate theory to practice.

► For a short documentary, Ken Kobre films a palliative care nurse explaining to a long-term patient how to administer morphine in tiny doses to reduce chronic pain. The nurse, who is sitting off camera to the left, works for Ndi Moyo, the first palliative care organization in Malawi, Africa. She helps patients that are dying of an incurable illness but cannot stay in the hospital. The man died a month after the video was recorded. (Photo by Lino Chilongo)

This book is for anyone learning how to master the art and craft of telling real, short-form stories with words, sound, and pictures for the Web or television.

A supporting companion website links to documentaries and videos, and includes additional recommendations from the field’s most prominent educators.

Ken Kobre is Professor Emeritus at San Francisco State University where he headed the photojournalism/videojournalism program for 30 years. Kobre has been producing documentaries for broadcast outlets and NGOs for 23 years. His documentaries have been shown on PBS, France 5, and other international outlets. His textbook *Photojournalism: The Professionals’ Approach*, published by Focal Press-Routledge, has been the widest-selling text on photojournalism in the world since 1980.





▲ A large drone is used to carry a heavy video camera.

Video

Second Edition

Journalism

Multimedia
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and Documentary
Journalists

Ken Kobré

Designed cover image: © 2019 World Vision/photo by Jon Warren

Caption: Pursuing a story about stateless Rohingya refugees crowded into Kutupalong camp in Cox's Bazaar in Bangladesh, Lisa Berglund stopped to video traditional fishing boats moored along the shore of the Bay of Bengal. The Rohingya now living in the world's largest and most densely populated refugee camp had fled Myanmar in boats like these. Berglund is a former National Press Photographers Association (NPPA) Video Photographer of the Year.

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Access the Instructor and Student Resources: www.routledge.com/cw/kobre

Dedication

*This book is dedicated to my lovely wife, Betsy Brill.
Without her encouragement and support, I would
never have finished this book.*



▲ Kevin Painchaud always uses two cameras to shoot an interview. When he edits the interview he will have a wide shot and a close-up shot to choose from.



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◀ The photographer stands before a three-story-tall poster of a young man holding a video camera like a gun. The poster was part of a project by two French photographers to paper walls with oversized images. (Photo by Ken Kobré)

Contributors

FIRST EDITION

CHAPTER 1

Regina McCombs, Faculty for Multimedia and Mobile, The Poynter Institute

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CHAPTER 3

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Jerry Lazar, Interviewer, E! channel

CHAPTER 12

Stanley Heist, Lecturer, Philip Merrill College of Journalism, University of Maryland

CHAPTER 13

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CHAPTER 14

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Mary Thorsby, independent business writer, Thorsby and Associates

SECOND EDITION

The second edition of this book has been based on extensive in-depth, two-to-three-hour interviews with video professionals, directors, producers, and educators. Many of the interviewees work producing for online media outlets, broadcast networks, producing documentaries, and teaching at universities.

Staci Baird, University of La Verne; San Francisco State University; Engagement Editor, *Global Press Journal*

Tamara Baluja, CBC, British Columbia

Josh Birnbaum, Ohio University; *Oakland Tribune*, *The Pittsburgh Tribune-Review*, *The Omaha World-Herald*

Bo Bogatin, Bogatin, Corman and Gold at Law; California Lawyers for the Arts; National Lawyers Guild member; Co-author of the *Legal Guide for the Visual Artist*

Malcolm Brabant, PBS correspondent; BBC; UNICEF

Curt Chandler, College of Communication, Pennsylvania State

Ben de la Cruz, senior visuals editor, NPR

Josh Davis, San Francisco State University; VICE News; NPR

Aaron Day, news producer, KCPQ-TV, Tacoma Washington; Adjunct Professor of Journalism, Green River College

Craig Duff, Medill School of Journalism, Northwestern University; CNN, NYT.com, *Time*

McKenna Ewen, CNN Digital, *Washington Post*, *Minneapolis Star Tribune*

Travis Fox, Director of Visual Journalism, Craig Newmark Graduate School Journalism, City University of New York; *Washington Post*; PBS *FRONTLINE*

Alexandra Garcia, director/producer *New York Times*; video/multimedia journalist, *Washington Post*

Anne Herbst, Director of Visual Journalism, 9News, Colorado

Da Lin, KPIX 5 News, San Francisco; KRON 4 News, San Francisco

Regina McCombs, Hubbard School of Journalism and Mass Communications, University of Minnesota; Visual News, Minnesota Public Radio; The Poynter Institute; producer StarTribune.com, Minneapolis; producer, KARE-TV in Minneapolis.

Colin Mulvany, *The Spokesman-Review*, Washington

Erik Olsen, freelance filmmaker; West Coast video correspondent, *Quartz*; senior videojournalist, *New York Times*

Ed Robbins, Columbia University, Graduate School of Journalism; nonfiction TV writer-producer for ABC, BBC2, CBS, FOX, NBC

Bob Sacha, Video Storytelling at the Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism, City University of New York; freelance for *Guardian*, *New York Times*, *National Geographic*

Whitney Shefte, senior videojournalist, *Washington Post*; president, White House News Photographers Association (WHNPA)

Jacob Templin, former executive producer, *Quartz*; Senior producer, *Time*

Will Yurman, Department of the School of Communications, Pennsylvania State; *Rochester Democrat & Chronicle*

Preface

Solid videojournalism demands a broad set of technical skills to collect the audio and video that stories require. But the art of storytelling is the most crucial skill of all for great videojournalism. With practice and knowledge, the art of videojournalism storytelling can be learned. That is what this book is about.

Videojournalism is a new field that has grown out of print photojournalism, slideshows that combine sound and pictures, public radio, documentary filmmaking, and the best of television news features. This amalgam of traditions is merging to serve the Internet's voracious appetite for nonfiction video stories.

Mastering this new form of storytelling and its requisite skills is as challenging to veteran visual reporters as it is to newbies to the field. Yes, most anyone can do it. But not everyone can do it well.

The term "videojournalist" was invented to describe a jack-of-all-trades journalist who can and will "go it alone." Yet the very concept of videojournalism is so new that the word "videojournalist" is not yet in all dictionaries. This book is targeted for those who would like to research, produce, shoot, interview, voice over, and edit their own nonfiction news or feature story.

Those who do this kind of work are called many things: a one-man/woman/person band, a multimedia journalist (MMJ), a backpack journalist (BPJ), a news photojournalist, a solo journalist, and perhaps—out of earshot—a lot of other things we can't name here. Whatever the title, the job is the same: Tell a story with sound and pictures that will hold a viewer's attention past the opening title and—keep them watching until the closing credits.

THE ORIGINAL EDITION

I wrote the first edition of this book with the collaboration of eight contributors—a group that represents the merger of traditions that has given birth to videojournalism. I called the original book *Videojournalism: Multimedia Storytelling* because I sincerely wanted to assist those interested in learning how to master the art and craft of telling short-form stories with words, sound, and pictures for online, broadcast, and documentary audiences.

THE SECOND EDITION

Today the three distinct disciplines including online, broadcast, and documentary visual storytelling have merged. All three now use the same equipment to shoot, the same software to edit, and, for the most part, share the Internet to transmit their stories. Just about all print media outlets have websites that feature videos. Broadcast and cable television outlets also pump out video news stories on their websites. Online streaming services like Netflix and Hulu feature an array of long-form documentary options. Some observers say we are in the Golden Age of documentary storytelling.

While this might be the Golden Age of storytelling, all that gold is not reaching the producers, reporters, videographers, and editors of visual stories. Producers still find it hard to fund long-term documentary projects. Broadcast videographers complain that their stories must be told in uncomfortably short 90-second segments, and online storytellers have to work within constrained budgets if their stories don't attract enough clicks (advertising).

Despite the challenges, viewership for nonfiction video stories grows steadily. Yes, fewer people watch the evening news on a television. However, these same people are checking their smart phones multiple times a day for video

of the latest political development, war news, scenes from a flood halfway around the world, or a home run by the home team.

Media companies, whether print or broadcast, keep their stories available for months online after their video packages first air. Viewers continue to find these stories worth their time. These stories are sometimes called the long tail of the viewing curve. Even if their viewership is not high when they are first released, many are seen by a wide audience over time. Documentary filmmakers who had a difficult time getting a distributor to feature their film in theaters now have online outlets on which to share their work. As a result, viewership for documentaries is skyrocketing.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

This book can be read in the order in which chapters are presented. Or it can be sampled corresponding to the reader's level of knowledge about a subject. For those who already know how to operate a video camera, the chapters on camera basics and exposure may be superfluous. Readers with a good foundation in media law need not spend much time with that chapter. The ethics chapter will probably contain some issues that are not familiar to even experienced video practitioners. For those just starting out in videojournalism storytelling, I hope that reading the foundation chapters will point you in a clear direction and perhaps help lead you to a career in this exciting, rapidly changing field.

PRINT VERSION

Whenever you see a title of a video in red and a thumbnail-sized picture on the outer column of the page, you will also find a unique QR code. With your smart phone on camera mode, frame up the QR code. Follow the prompt to see a featured story or an explanatory video.



Anatomy of a News Story.
<https://vimeo.com/527589206>

ELECTRONIC VERSION

Scan the QR code or use the URL next to the video title to view the video related to the text.

WEBSITE

This book has its own website. www.routledge.com/cw/kobre leads to links to all stories discussed in the book. "How-to" videos are also linked to this site. Bookmark this page, and you're all set to go: www.routledge.com/cw/kobre



Routledge.
www.routledge.com/cw/kobre



◀ The ranch manager is interviewed for the *Regenerating the Ranch* docuseries by videographer Shaun Smith (right). (Photo by Rob Mattson/Noble Research Institute)

Acknowledgments

SPECIAL THANKS TO DA LIN

Da Lin is a well-known, hard-hitting, and imaginative one-man-band TV reporter for KPIX 5 San Francisco. I wanted to make a short documentary about how one person doing it all covers a news story on deadline. He gave me complete access to follow him on one day's assignment. He explained every step of his process.

Da Lin's story that day was about a missing person. The assignment seemed routine when the day started. However, a real mystery—possibly a murder—was unveiled.

I hope those watching *Anatomy of a News Story* can observe and absorb some of the methods deployed by an award-winning multimedia journalist to cover a breaking story on a one-day turn-around deadline.

SPECIAL THANKS TO DARIA BRILL

As the book neared completion, I needed organizational help. My daughter, Daria Brill, stepped up. She managed the massive task of cataloging nearly 700 pictures and graphs in 18 chapters. She confirmed that every Internet link was live and that every caption matched its image. Without her help, I have no idea how this project would have gotten out the door on deadline.

FOREVER THANKFUL TO JOHN HEWITT

First, I must thank John Hewitt, Professor Emeritus in the Department of Broadcast and Electronic Communication Arts at San Francisco State University, and author of *Sequences: Strategies for Shooting News in the Real World* (Mayfield) and *Documentary Filmmaking* (Oxford University Press), written with Gustavo Vazquez.

More than 20 years ago, I branched out from my career in photojournalism to start shooting video documentaries. John Hewitt was my mentor.

John became my collaborator on many projects; my video editor; and my co-producer for

Deadline Every Second: On Assignment with 12 Associated Press Photographers.

I have learned most of what I know about videojournalism working with John. To this day he carefully reviews and critiques—minute-by-minute—almost every video project I shoot and produce. Always the great teacher, John never chastises me for the shots I missed. He looks at the footage and advises me on how to better edit those shots I recorded.

CHAPTER REVIEWERS/ PROFESSIONALS

They say it “takes a village to raise a child.” I don't know what the equivalent expression would be for writing a book, but I needed several villages to produce this edition of my textbook. I called on some of the most outstanding experts in the field to read practically every chapter in the book to identify missing elements, poorly explained techniques, technical mistakes, etc. These experts pointed out the strengths and weaknesses of each chapter—and sent me back for yet more editing. The contribution of the reviewers listed below is beyond measure.

Reviewers by Chapter

Chapter 1: Bob Sacha, Craig Duff; Chapter 2: Ed Robbins; Chapter 4: Bob Sacha; Chapter 5: Erik Olsen; Chapter 6: Jacob Timplin; Chapter 8: Will Yurman; Chapter 10: Josh Birnbaum; Chapter 11: Josh Birnbaum, John Hewitt, Craig Duff; Chapter 12: Craig Duff, John Hewitt; Chapter 13: Jerry Lazar; Chapter 15: Brian Kaufman, Ed Robbins; Chapter 16: Brian Kaufman, Ed Robbins; Chapter 17: Craig Duff, John Hewitt, Regina McCombs, Bob Sacha; Chapter 18: Bo Bogatin, Micky Osterreicher.

VIDEOGRAPHERS AND ACADEMICS

I also wish to thank all the videographers and photographers who contributed their powerful images to this book. Each of their names is listed under their pictures. Their pictures gave this book its visual impact.



Anatomy of a News Story.
<https://vimeo.com/527589206>



KEY CONTRIBUTORS

Ben Barbante, with whom I have worked for many years on other book projects, came through with clear and informative line illustrations.

Sibylla Herbrich and Dave Hall shot the lighting demonstration pictures.

PRE-PRODUCTION EDITORS

I want to thank the people who read every chapter, every page, and every word with an eye for clarity and consistency.

John Knowlton, head of the journalism program at Green River College in Washington state, brought his copy-editing skills to bear on the early manuscript of the first edition of this book. He took on the same role for the second edition. He relied on his 18 years of professional journalism experience as a reporter and editor to get the job done.

Michael Maher read several chapters with an eye toward improving their grammar but especially their clarity. Michael is a former newspaper photographer at the *Lowell Sun* and now Career Advisor at Cornell University's Johnson Graduate School of Management.

Emmanuel Serriere loves to copy edit. Although French is his native language, he has caught more spelling, grammar, and punctuation errors than others that have spoken English from birth. I am lucky to have found someone that copy edits for fun.

MY EDITORS AT ROUTLEDGE/ TAYLOR & FRANCIS/FOCAL PRESS

Elizabeth Cox, editor, recognized the need for this book and shepherded it through all its publishing stages.

Hannah McKeating, editorial assistant, exhibited consistent patience with all the changes the book has undergone.

Neil Dowden, copy editor, snagged final errors that had eluded other eyes, and formatted the typography for consistency. His careful review of the manuscript added clarity to the final text.

Alex Lazarou, production coordinator, worked with me patiently to assure text and pictures flowed together logically and aesthetically.

▲ Sometimes a crew is needed to help a videographer make a film.
(Photo by Warren DeFranco Hsu)



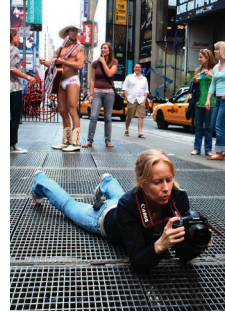
Chapter 1



Chapter 2



Chapter 3



Chapter 4



Chapter 5



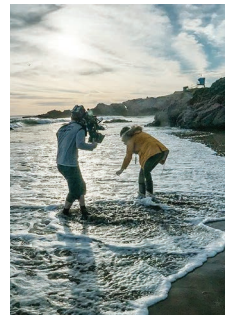
Chapter 6



Chapter 7



Chapter 8



Chapter 9



Chapter 10



Chapter 11



Chapter 12



Chapter 13



Chapter 14



Chapter 15



Chapter 16



Chapter 17



Chapter 18

Video Second Edition **Journalism**

Multimedia
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and Documentary
Journalists

Ken Kobre



▲ Lisa Berglund films a celebration for a new vocational school built to benefit teenagers in a community still recovering from the Rwandan genocide. Berglund won the National Press Photographers Association (NPPA) Video Photographer of the Year. (Photo by World Vision/Kari Costanza)

Telling Stories

Regina McCombs, University of Minnesota

Ken Kobre, San Francisco State University

Additional material provided by **Stanley Heist, Kathy Kieliszewski, Josh Meltzer, David Weintraub, Suzanne White, Bob Sacha, Craig Duff, and John Knowlton**

- W**hat this book is *not* about?
- Cats falling backwards into the toilet
(sometimes funny but mostly irrelevant)
 - Your best dance moves (also sometimes funny)
 - Tips for using your smart phone you didn't know (good advice but you don't need to read this book to make that video)
 - How to build your biceps (recommended)
 - Love advice (depends on your present romantic state)

- How to fix a tire (bookmark it for later)
- Daredevil moments (diving off a cliff but don't do this with or without the book)

So what is this book about?

This book will show you how to create and tell true stories using video.

This book is targeted at those who want to create video stories without depending on a film crew, including a sound technician, a lighting technician, a producer, or even a reporter.

The book will show you how to produce a 1:30 (one min. 30 sec.) piece for the evening news short, a five-minute feature story for the Internet, or a full 60-minute feature documentary for a television streaming service.

As a new breed of videojournalists you might be called everything from a one-man/woman/person band, a backpack journalist, a multimedia journalist (MMJ), or just a simple straight forward videojournalist But, then, what's in a name?

Bottom line, whatever you are called you are a person who wants to be completely independent. With this book you will learn to find a story, film it, write a script, voice the script, edit the clips, and finally send the story to the web or broadcast on the evening news.

The book is full of up-to-date links to stories on the Internet that illustrate many of the points in each of the chapters. In the printed edition of the book you will find a small QR code next to a section of text. Point your smart-phone camera at the QR code and your phone will go directly to the video story on the Internet. In the e-book edition, just click on the highlighted link.

► Watch *Anatomy of a TV News Story*. This documentary is about how a 90-second news story was constructed. You will see how a news story for the evening news was produced. The news package uses video clips, voice-over, and the reporter talking to the camera. You will also notice how the making of the news story was transformed into a documentary.



Anatomy of a News Story.
<https://vimeo.com/527589206>

This first chapter explains what makes a story. The word “story” means many different things ... including a floor in a building, a lie, an account/report/statement, a tale, a yarn, a narrative, an article/piece/feature, etc. Wow ... that's a lot of uses for one five-letter word.

Chapter 1 in the book will use the word “story” to mean nonfiction narrative. The chapter will distinguish between a broad topic, a report of an event—and an authentic, sharply focused story that grabs the reader from the opening shot and holds them through the final credits. The chapter will explain how a lead character can help hold your story together from beginning to end. It will review the underlying elements of storytelling from original Greek tragedies to modern *New York Times* op-ed videos. By the end of the chapter you will learn how to transform a vague idea or boring (here's that word again) report into a nail-biting nonfiction video story, ready for any smart phone or wall-sized 72-inch screen. Also check out the link to a special documentary video, *Anatomy of a TV News Story*, produced especially for this edition of the book.

DOCUMENTARY, ONLINE, BROADCAST—THREE DISCIPLINES INTO ONE

In the past, if you went to a college or university to study visual storytelling you might have difficulty deciding which department to choose. Do you want to be an online visual reporter, a documentary filmmaker, or a broadcast news person? If you wanted to put your visual stories online then you usually took classes in the journalism department. However, if you hoped to shoot and report for television you attended classes in the broadcast department. If you dreamed of seeing your documentary stories on a movie screen at your local theater you would have found your way to your school's film department. At some schools these three academic departments were completely separate.

Today, colleges and universities often fold all three disciplines in one department. Why? The



potential viewer of nonfiction news stories now sees a four-hour documentary series, a five-minute video story, or a 1:30 story on the 6 o'clock news report on their tiny, 4x6-inch, portable smart phone ... or, just as easily, on their gigantic 40x70-inch flat home-screen. The stories for a broadcast news report, the in-depth documentary, and the news websites were probably shot with the same or similar digital camera, lens, and audio gear. For all three pieces, the editors assembled the stories on a computer using similar editing programs like Final Cut Pro or Adobe's Premiere Pro. The point is that all three visual storytelling categories have now melded

together in the way videographers produce the stories, editors edit the stories, and ultimately how viewers, waiting in line at the drug store or sitting on their recliners in their living rooms, view the stories.

MANY WAYS TO TELL A STORY

This chapter lays out the many ways to tell a cinematic story and serves as an introduction to online, documentary, and broadcast storytelling. In videojournalism, the characters and content are real. The secret to good videojournalism lies in finding and telling well-shaped, powerful stories using sound and images.

▲ **Car Accident.** Police officers hold up a white sheet as paramedics remove a victim from a Honda Civic that crashed on Robeson Street in Fayetteville, North Carolina. The victim died in the one-car accident. A standard news story puts the most important facts first. (Photo by Andrew Craft, Fayetteville Observer)

You may have tons of keen ideas that are good topics for stories. But don't confuse a broad topic with a sharply focused story. A topic is a broad area of interest like climate change or inflation. A story, on the other hand, usually has a character facing a challenge. The challenge might be related to climate change or inflation, but the true story has an individual person facing some kind of opposition or trial.

Steve Kelley and Maisie Crow of Maryland's *Howard County Times*, for example, had the idea to document the effects of an incurable genetic disorder whose symptoms include insatiable hunger, low IQ, and behavioral problems. Although the disease is unusual, merely documenting Prader-Willi syndrome would only have yielded, perhaps, a well-done piece for medical students. The piece might have explained the existence of this rare disease but such a piece would not have told a story.

Instead of doing a mere report, Kelley and Crow explored the relationship between a teenage boy with the unusual disorder and his father, the boy's caregiver. The effects of the disease are shown in the five-minute multimedia video—*Hungry: Living with Prader-Willi Syndrome*—through the eyes of the father and his struggles to help his son.



Living on the Brink.

https://www.washingtonpost.com/video/national/living-on-the-brink-one-familys-struggle-to-survive-the-pandemic/2020/12/20/e5afab7a-c696-468a-886d-cd542c3f4deb_video.html



▲ **Hungry: Living with Prader-Willi Syndrome.** The story shows not only the disease but also reveals how that disease has affected the father-son relationship. Note how in this video the sound track including the ticking clock adds depth to the story.



Hungry: Living with Prader-Willi Syndrome.

<https://vimeo.com/50764576>

The story reveals how father and son deal with the toll the syndrome takes on their relationship, and the strength they find to survive.

Your first goal, then, is to find the story in your bright idea: how to turn a broad topic—*Living with Prader-Willi Syndrome*, for example—into a sharply focused story. The topic is the disease. The story is the relationship between the dad and the son who is afflicted with the disease. Once you have found the right story and a compelling character, your next goal will be shooting and recording it, writing a narration or script, and assembling the pieces during the editing process. It is crucial to tell that story in a way that engages viewers emotionally.

Whitney Shefte of the *Washington Post* pitched a story to her editors about the economic impact of the COVID pandemic. She had a solid topic of interest but no focused story yet:

"I reached out on Facebook and searched on Nextdoor, the neighborhood listserv, and just started to look for people who were immediately impacted by the virus from an economic perspective. A family responded. I did a quick interview but then, about a month later, I wrote and said, 'Hey, how are things going with you guys?' And she said, 'Well, we actually decided that we have to move away.' And so I thought this is a bigger story. Let's keep following these people."

The Silvester family lost their entire income when the pandemic took hold in the United States. They lived in Arlington, VA.

Nine months later they are desperate for government aid, still struggling to get back on their feet.

Now Shefte had a real, focused story with a compelling character to report. To survive they decided they must move halfway across the country to the Midwest to be near their relatives.

"In some of the very best video stories you're seeing change take place over time," says Shefte, Pictures of the Year International (POYi) award-winning senior videojournalist at the *Washington Post*.

"You're following someone through a journey and these people were going on a journey. They were moving to a new place. And so it had a very clear narrative arc to me once I knew that this was happening. And so we were able to be there literally the day that they moved out." Here was a great example of "seeing" a story unfold rather than having the characters tell us what happened.

Shefte took five trips from Washington to Illinois to complete the project titled *Living on the Brink*.

There are many ways to organize a story:

- You can do it chronologically—start at the beginning and end at the end.
- You can disclose the most important piece of information first, and then reveal the rest of the story, bit by bit, and save the pay-off for last.
- You can start in the middle of the story and then help the viewer understand where they are at and then tell them what they need to know to go forward.

Sometimes you can tell the story through the eyes of your main characters. Other times you can show what is happening from the viewpoint of an outsider. As a videojournalist, you get to decide how you will tell your story—in a way that will compel your audience to stop, look, and listen.

Will Yurman, professor at Penn State University, used the election night as the framework to build suspense for his story about a state assemblyman who was running for his fourth term. Watch the story titled *This Time Would Be Different*. He had won the first term in a close race. The next two times he had run unopposed as a Republican in a pretty conservative, semi-rural Pennsylvania town. And then shortly before the primary he came out as gay. In his documentary about the politician, Yurman started and ended with the election. He opened the piece with the sounds of someone giving the vote count and ended it with a speech by the candidate after the votes were in. The viewer does not know until almost the end of the story if the protagonist won or lost. This is a very cleverly edited opening, where we hear one thing but see another.

In a standard news story, the lead or most newsworthy element is always placed at the beginning. If the gay state assemblyman was reported on the evening news, the 90-second would have begun with the election results.

Jacob Templin, formerly executive producer at *Quartz* and senior producer at *Time*, produced a video story about a drought in Texas and its impact of cattle prices. The story was titled *Texas' Droughts and the Cost of Cattle*. Templin could have started the story with a shot of a cow on the dusty dry, windswept range and followed



the animal's journey. Instead, Templin opened his story directly in the middle of the action as the cows are herded through the pens of the auction house while the auctioneer calls out the bids. "I think under ordinary circumstances I would have opened with the lead character on the ranch, for sure," said Templin, whose work has been presented in the *New York Times*, *Retro Report*, and *PBS*. "I think the reason I opened with that cattle auction was it was just so unusual. It was just so visually stimulating. And for me, a kid from Toronto, that auction caught my eye." Templin starts to reveal the story about 30 seconds into the six-minute documentary. By then, the viewer is engaged wanting to find out what happens next.

NARRATIVE ARC

You Tell Stories All the Time

"Storytelling doesn't change. We've been doing it the same way since Aristotle," says Craig Duff, former editor with *Time* magazine who now teaches at Northwestern University.

You already know how to tell stories. Don't you do it all the time? When your car breaks down on the way to the hospital? Or your girlfriend or boyfriend leaves you? Or simply when your dog eats your homework? Then, quite naturally, you tell the tale to a friend.

The **narrative arc** first introduces us, the viewers, to the players in the story. Then we start to find out the conflict or challenge faced by the protagonist. Next we see how the primary character will overcome the conflict, obstacle, fear, or other impediment. And finally the story is resolved so that we get a sense of relief and look at the central character's future.

▲ **Texas' Droughts and the Cost of Cattle.** For the producer, Jacob Templin, seeing a cattle auction for the first time helped him decide how to open his story about drought in Texas.



Texas' Droughts and the Cost of Cattle.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YB-2x5s81BQ009>.



This Time Would Be Different.

<https://www.willyurman.com/stories/this-time-would-be-different/>

CBS ORIGINAL

The Amazing Race

NOW STREAMING

S33 E1 We're Back!

The Amazing Race begins its historic 33rd trip around the world when 11 new teams take off from their homes and travel to their first destination, London, England.

▶ WATCH NOW

▶ **The Amazing Race.** *The Amazing Race*, like many other “reality” TV shows, is unscripted but does not document a true story that evolves on its own without a producer to guide it.

Reality TV versus Real Stories

How is your story different from the story in a novel or a movie?

First and foremost, of course, your story is real. The events actually happened. They were not figments of your imagination or the invention of a writer or producer. You did not create the characters or the plot. Your story is nonfiction.

In this book, we will be dealing solely with nonfiction stories—with events that actually happened in the past, are taking place right now, or might occur in the future. We deal exclusively with actual actions that happen to real people—not to paid actors, or contestants who volunteered. Again, this book deals only with reality.

TV shows like *Big Brother* or *Survivors* are loosely referred to as “reality shows.” But is reality TV ... real?

Not quite.

Reality TV shows, whether first run or rerun, such as *The Apprentice*, *Fear Factor*, and *The Amazing Race*, are highly orchestrated and often partially fictionalized pieces of entertainment. They would not occur without a producer, multiple camera crews, willing participants, hours and hours of footage, and a team of editors to shape a narrative and bundles of money. Don't forget the catering service. These shows are contrived contests, not real stories. They would never have taken place without the creative energy of a writer, a producer, and a director. The outcome of such shows may be unknown at the beginning. But the setup is cleverly engineered to produce guaranteed emotional reaction for the viewer.

Real stories, on the other hand—those you see on television news programs such as *60 Minutes*, on the 6 o'clock news, or the documentaries available on *Netflix*—reveal actual people living through the thrills and pitfalls of unadulterated events in their lives without the interference of a script doctor.

Narrative Story or News Report

So, even if your story is not contrived like an episode of *The Bachelor*, how are stories you tell your friend different from reports broadcast nightly on CBS, NBC, or ABC networks or their local affiliates?

Traditional news stories required starting with the most important fact—a form of news reporting called the inverted pyramid. All university courses in writing for print or broadcast journalism teach this formula.

“A fire burned 30 homes in San Bruno today.” Or, “The San Francisco Giants won the World Series yesterday.”

Sometimes these broadcast news reports are just headlines. Sometimes they have more supporting facts. These reports relate what happened today but don't engage viewers with a character or plot. Reports rarely introduce viewers to a person, follow that person from one state of emotion to another, see the challenge the person is facing, or reveal how the person resolves the problem. News articles are written to provide content to inform viewers as quickly as possible ... readers on the run ... viewers on the go. Visual storytelling, however, not only informs viewers but engages them emotionally. Of course, it often takes more than 90 seconds to tell that story.

HUPPERT EXPLAINS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A TRUE STORY AND BASIC REPORT

(BOYD HUPPERT, *LAND OF 10,000 STORIES*)

Boyd Huppert, KARE 11 Minneapolis producer/reporter for *Land of 10,000 stories*, remembers this incident.

Somebody pitched Huppert a story about four sisters who play on the same high school basketball team for a special features segment on KARE 11 TV. For the first time all four were on the court at the same time. And because they haven't lost a game all season they're probably going to go to state championships.

He was just going to set up a Zoom call on the computer screen for an interview with the four girls.

At this point, Huppert only had a quirky fact ... four sisters playing basketball simultaneously in the same game. For Huppert this just deserved a simple report for the 6 o'clock news. Huppert made another phone call.

Huppert talked to the girl's dad because he wanted to get the dad and his wife on the call, too.

The dad said, "Having the four girls play on the team means a lot to me because of my relationship with the coach."

Huppert asked, "Oh, what's your relationship with the coach?"

The dad replied, "The coach was my foster dad."

Wow!

Now the same man is coaching his four daughters. "That's a way better story than the report of four daughters playing in the game at the same time ... but combine the two threads, four girls on the court and their father raised by the coach ... So that's a pretty deep story."

Huppert adds, he is trying to tell a story, not produce a report. A report is facts. In a story the facts are connected and have something that ties them together. The story has a storyline ... a point it is making. In a news report he would try to compress all the interesting important things in the first lead sentence.

In the example above, four sisters playing basketball on the same court at the same time is a news peg, but not the real story.

"The story is going to be about this coach who took in this young man who needed a home 25 years ago," pointed out Huppert. "The old coach is teaching these beautiful girls, daughters of the man he helped a quarter century ago, how to play basketball."

Now that is a story a lot of viewers would like to see.

Bob Sacha, who now teaches at Newmark Graduate School of Journalism @CUNY, puts the report vs. story dichotomy another way. "A report tells you what's happening. The story takes you there."

In the example of the basketball playing sisters, the **report** tells you that the sisters are going to play on the same court. The **story** tells you how and why they got to the same court and what that means.



▲ Boyd Huppert, of KARE 11 Minneapolis, carrying the tripod and Chad Nelson with the camera film Mickey Nelson, a WWII veteran who was walking 100 miles over the course of the summer to mark his 100th birthday – while raising money for the Salvation Army. (Photo by Craig Dirkes, The Salvation Army)



◀ *Four Sisters on Top-Ranked Basketball Team, and That's Not the Best Part of the Story.* Boyd Huppert finds the theme of his stories by digging deeper.



Four Sisters on Top-Ranked Basketball Team, and That's Not the Best Part of the Story.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hLgXtmVqKeg&t=18s>

Personal Story

Let's go back to your original story about the calamity of getting to the hospital despite your malfunctioning car, tragically breaking up with your sweetheart, or losing your homework to your rambunctious dog.

When you tell your interesting story, why doesn't your tale sound like a standard article ripped from the newspaper or nightly news show?

Part of what transforms your tale into a story is your use of the narrative format. The classic inverted pyramid news report simply presents the facts with the most important one at the beginning. Your narrative story has a hook to entice your viewers, a conflict, suspense, and a resolution if it follows the narrative arc. And, of course, your particular story has a sympathetic character—you!

Your story evokes the problems you faced with a car breakdown, a relationship breakup, or mangled homework.

You might begin by explaining the problem: "Oh boy, my car broke down on the way to the hospital." Then you might go on to describe what you did to overcome the problem—how you had to call AAA and get a ride to the hospital in a tow truck.

In the case of the relationship breakup, you might explain how many phone calls, gifts, cards, and letters it took to make up with your boyfriend or girlfriend.

In the case of the homework-chewing canine, you might explain how you had to reprint the brilliant 200-page term paper and turn it in just before deadline.

Your tales feature a sensitive character (you!) facing an obstacle to overcome. Each of your stories has an arc—an opener that explains the challenge, a development that shows how you approached the problem and a resolution to the calamity. Along that arc, you interject drama, humor, or insight as you reveal how you overcame the obstacle and what finally happened. In sharing your tale, you are—in the classic sense—a storyteller.

SHAPING A STORY

Good Storyteller or Bore?

Let's face it. Some people are better storytellers than others. Some start a story in the middle and have their audience nodding off within minutes. Others tell the story starting with the dawn of creation and include every detail until the present moment. Still others meander into tangential events on their way to the climax. And then there are those who tell a story by giving a recitation of facts leaving out all the drama.

But then, I know you have friends who capture their audience from the opening words of "You won't believe this, but when I ..." to the final words "and then I got out safely."

What makes a short video documentary that grabs viewers by their eyeballs? How do you edit a story so that it doesn't let go the viewer until the final credits?

How does story differ from a dull, "eat your spinach" documentary which inspires the viewer to click "next" after 10 seconds?

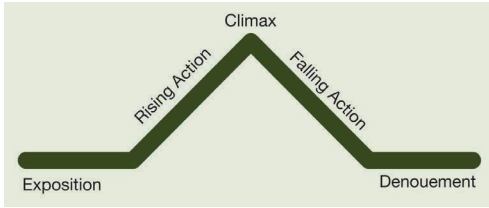
Good videojournalists do not just report facts. They employ classic storytelling techniques to present accounts about real people. They share their stories in the form of short or long video documentaries, usually shown on the Internet, but also on streaming services, on television, and sometimes even in theaters. Videojournalism applies the fictional storyteller's techniques of character development and story arc to relate real-life tales of happiness, achievement, struggle, success, failure, and woe.

The secret lies in finding and telling powerful stories.

Sacha, of Newmark Graduate School of Journalism @CUNY, notes, "You're looking at sort of the same techniques people use for plays, for books, for movies, for graphic novels, maybe even for some country songs."

This is your challenge: how to shape your story and design the story's structure.

Sometimes—rarely—you'll know how to shape the story before you even start the reporting. Most times, however, the story structure develops while you're working in the field. Sometimes it doesn't even develop until editing begins.



◀ **Freytag's Pyramid.** Classic storytelling structure.

FREYTAG VS. INVERTED PYRAMID

Freytag's Pyramid

Inverted Pyramid

Though both **Freytag's** storytelling approach and the **inverted** pyramid approach communicate the news of the day (the resolution), the narrative approach (on the left) allows the audience to relate to the conflict before getting to the resolution. The inverted pyramid (on the right) gives the important information first but does not provide the audience with an emotional incentive to stick around for the entire story.

Three-Act Play

Many storytellers think of structure as a three-act play.

Act One. Introduce your characters. Let us meet them; give us a reason to care about them and introduce the key layers of conflict.

Act Two. Reveal the complication. This is usually the longest part of the story. This act reveals how the layered complications intensify until the final showdown: the crisis in Act Three.

Act Three. Outcome or resolution of the conflict/crisis, and finish the story in a satisfying way. This act reveals the choices made in the crisis and how the outcome of these choices.

The three-act play design is as old as ancient Greece and as modern as the most recent Hollywood release. Watch movies, TV shows, and even some commercials closely for structure and you will see the three-act construct used over and over again.

The Rise and Fall of Freytag's Pyramid

Freytag's Pyramid, originally developed to analyze ancient Greek and Roman plays as well as those of Shakespeare, applies to documentary-style visual storytelling as well. You need to set up your story—characters, issues, location—in a way that allows events to unfold so that viewers learn more and more about the topic, the ways your characters are affected by it, how they develop a solution (or not), and, finally, where they go from here. At the end of your story, real characters go on with their lives.



Hungry: Living with Prader-Willi Syndrome.
<https://vimeo.com/50764576>

In *Hungry: Living with Prader-Willi Syndrome*, mentioned earlier, the first act introduces you to the father and son. The second act explains the disease. And the third act shows how the disease brings the father and son closer.

Walk Walk Walk: The Story of StandProud also follows a narrative story arc. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, hundreds of children with malformed legs, unable to walk upright, are destined not only to crawl or be carried, are also often shunned by their own families.

Walk Walk Walk, a short 16-minute documentary, showcases the revolutionary work of Dr. Jay Nash and his nonprofit organization StandProud, which provides free plaster casts, braces, crutches, physical therapy, and medical assistance to a generation of formerly crippled children.

Walk Walk Walk, opens with a scene of a crippled young man crawling on the dusty ground. A gang of children follow him with some of them awkwardly imitating the way he moves. The young person was struck with polio before the vaccine was readily available everywhere.

The story arc has set up the problem. Then the audience watches interviews with children

as they tell their heart-breaking stories of what it has been like to be crippled all their lives. They describe how they have been mocked and ostracized by other kids. Their parents view them as a bad omen and neglected them.

This first segment of the documentary is setting up the problem or complication ... what it is like if you can't walk on your own.

The documentary has introduced the characters. Each has told their tearful stories. Then the documentary introduces the hero of the story, Dr. Nash.

Now the documentary moves into resolution mode by showing how Dr. Nash developed a way to reset the bones on the children's legs using a series of plaster casts. Along the way the viewer witnesses the pain the children suffer as the successive casts force the leg bones to straighten. Then the brace makers construct from local scrap-steel and leather, tailor-made, leg braces. The audience is watching the resolution of problem.

Now for the climax ...

The actual story climax comes when a young man, wearing his braces, is helped to stand upright. He then walks a few tentative steps for the first time in his life. His smile says it all.

The narrative continues showing the individual challenges the young polio victims face as they learn to use their braces. Eventually, with repeated practice on the parallel bars, the young people are able to walk to school.

The resolution of the story starts to unfold. After months of living at the center, wearing their braces and using crutches, the kids start playing soccer. From a life of crawling on the ground to a life where you can play soccer, the

► *Walk Walk Walk*. When a child has had polio and cannot walk the StandProud organization puts a cast on the child's leg to help straighten it out. Eventually the cast is removed and replaced by a metal brace.



► *Walk Walk Walk*. After the children receive braces they learn to walk for the first time and even line dance to the tune of "Walk Like a Man."



Walk Walk Walk: The Story of StandProud.
<https://vimeo.com/manage/videos/258099133>



documentary carries the viewer on a fulfilling trip.

Finally, for an ending to the conflict and a satisfying solution, the documentary repetitive ... you note the length higher up ... the children line-dance to the Four Seasons' song "Walk like a man."

Of course, there are many other ways this story could have been told.

In the *Walk Walk Walk* narrative, different children exemplified each stage of the recovery process. The child crawling on the ground at the beginning of the documentary is not seen again in the film. The viewer sees one child who gets a leg cast and then watches another child being fitted for a steel brace. The viewer is shown each step of the process through the experiences of a different child who is at his or her own level of recovery.

Another way to tell the story would have been to follow one child through the whole process from crawling on the ground to line-dancing. This approach would have required the filmmaker to follow just this one child over the course of several years. The subject might have gotten tired of being photographed and asked the videographer to stop midway through the treatment, leaving the producer with an unfinished film.

The *Walk Walk Walk* documentary coincides with the story arc of a fictional film. It introduces the characters, presents the conflict/complication, and reveals a resolution of the problem. It ends with a satisfying conclusion.

Now if Hollywood wanted to tell this story they would just hire an actor to play the part of the polio victim and shoot the story on the studio's back lot.

As documentary filmmakers, however, you need to record reality. A fictional film never has the same power as an actual true documentary. While both the fictional film and documentary might use the same story arc, the power of the documentary film lies in the fact that the audience gets to hear, for themselves, real polio victims talk about how their "friends" treated them. They get to witness the reaction of an actual person taking an independent step, all by himself, for the first time. Finally, viewers get to see kids who could only crawl on the ground before now actually playing competitive soccer and line-dancing. The audience gets the vicarious pleasure of watching someone walk upright for the first time. Even Hollywood can't beat that.

COMPLICATION AND RESOLUTION

In his book *Writing for Story*, Pulitzer Prize-winning author Jon Franklin says that nonfiction stories share a common structure but are a bit different than the three-act play. Franklin, who twice won the prestigious Pulitzer award for feature writing, says stories revolve around a complication and its resolution. Good stories typically contain layers of complications.

Complications can be good or bad. Franklin defines a complication as any problem that a person encounters. Being threatened by a bully is a complication. Having a car stolen or being diagnosed with cancer is a complication.

Certainly, having polio and then being unable to walk the rest of your life is a clear complication.

Complications are not all bad, Franklin says. Falling in love is a complication because you may not know whether the other person is in love too. Winning the lottery means you get to figure out how to spend the money—but still you must pay the taxes.

Significant Problem

Complications that lend themselves to video-journalism must tap into a problem basic enough and significant enough that most people can relate to it. When a mosquito bites you, you have a complication. But it neither reflects a basic human dilemma nor a significant universal problem.

Discovering you have malaria and might die, on the other hand, is a fundamental complication that would be significant to most readers.

Coming to a Resolution

The second part of a good story involves a resolution, which Franklin says in his book "is any change in the character or situation that resolves the complication."

Whether you are cured of malaria or die from the disease, the complication is resolved. For stories with complications and resolutions, Franklin points out that most daily problems don't have resolutions and, therefore, don't lend themselves to creating terrific stories.

External and Internal Conflict

Although Franklin is talking to writers, his central idea is applicable to many other story forms. Let's dissect his central thesis and see how it applies to video.

"To be of literary value," he says, "a complication must not only be basic but also significant



Story Structure Lecture.
<https://vimeo.com/67685986>

to the human condition.” So complication—sometimes called “conflict” or “tension”—is an essential story element. Just introducing a character is not enough to tell a compelling story. Adding a complication—an obstacle to the character’s progress—enables us to relate to the person facing it.

In the documentary on children with polio, *Walk Walk Walk*, just meeting the victims would not be sufficient for a story. The complication was apparent when you saw that these children could only move from place to place by crawling on the ground.

In many hard news stories, the tension is obvious: man against fire; woman fighting discrimination; child triumphing over a bully; police solving a mystery; neighbors battling over property lines; and so on. These all originate as external conflicts. Hence, they are easy to visualize, and the viewer can relate to their story.

“Any good story is going to have something at stake,” says Craig Duff who teaches at the Medill School, Northwestern University. “You know, whether it’s a conflict of the human vs. human, human vs. nature or human vs. himself. What is this person up against?”

Feature or in-depth stories can be much more subtle, as they may involve internal conflicts or reveal understated complications. Overcoming depression after a divorce, for example, involves an internal change in the person. The challenge to the person is just as big as if they had fought a fire or triumphed over a bully, but the changes take place internally. While perhaps more difficult to show visually, these stories of internal change are just as rewarding to the viewer.

When watching *Hungry: Living with Prader-Willi Syndrome*, you don’t notice that the child has any outward physical deformity. The short documentary is able to reveal the internal craving for food by witnessing the interaction between the father and son. The real resolution of the story is revealed by the gradual changing relationship between the parent and child.

STORY STRUCTURE LECTURE

Check out Kurt Lancaster’s video which is based on a short documentary produced by Travis Fox. The story begins with a family in China. Follow the story from the opening hook, through the conflict, climax, and ultimately the resolution. Lancaster dissects each step of plot to reveal the underlying structure.

What Motivates the Character?

How do we identify and use this tension? When searching for tension in a story, it helps to start with one simple question: why?

What is motivating the character or characters? Motives frequently reveal tense inner conflicts and help us to answer the “Why” question. Merely showing someone creating a sculpture is not a story. It’s a demonstration of a process. To get to the complication within the sculpting process, we want to ask an artist, “Why do you create these sculptures in this way?” Using this tactic, we are likely to uncover some intriguing surprises. The sculptor might have a burning desire to form some image from his dreams or might want to experiment with how a particular shape looks when it is constructed from a unique material.

People’s motives may include wanting to please someone else. For example, a politician might say, “I ran for office because my wife wanted me to be a senator.” Or the politician may possess an inner compulsion they feel must be obeyed such as, “I have always known I wanted to be an actor since I starred in my third-grade play.”

Subtle motives such as these constitute complicating factors that help make up a more compelling story.

Central Character Wants Change

Stories begin when protagonists want to change their lives, their environments, or something or someone else. In *Hungry: Living with Prader-Willi Syndrome*, the father, who serves as the protagonist, wants to help his son. The boy is living with a burning desire to eat all the time. Protagonists may know they want to change consciously or unconsciously, but when an event throws their lives out of balance (sometimes called an inciting incident) protagonists decide to act. In any story you produce, look for the inciting incident that tips the balance.

Ethan Brooks' short documentary *Ghost Bikes* is the story of Brooklyn resident Mirza



▲ *Ghost Bikes*. A white bike is left in the spot where a cyclist was killed while riding.



Molberg, who began volunteering with his local ghost bike project in 2011. In 2016, his girlfriend, Lauren Davis, was fatally struck by a car on her bicycle en route to work. Hours after the accident, Molberg stopped at the site of Davis' death. "There was no evidence [of the accident]," he said. "I created Lauren's ghost bike the following

week." The inciting incident for the film, in this situation, was the death of Molberg's girlfriend.

So now we can see that a complication is established once the audience can identify a drive, or a pressing need, in a character. The protagonist wants to change.

▲ *Ghost Bikes*. The story of making memorials to lost riders started when the documentary producer's girlfriend was killed while riding her bike by a passing motorist.



Ghost Bikes.

<https://vimeo.com/243579287>

CHARACTER-DRIVEN STORIES

Although every story does not need a main character, most successful stories do. Finding a compelling central character or group of characters can mean the difference between a lifeless story and an outstanding one. The young man with Prader–Willi syndrome is a sympathetic character who lets you feel his pain. The children with polio in *Walk Walk Walk* tell their personal stories and there is not a dry eye in the audience. In *Ghost Bikes* you feel sympathy for the central character who has lost his girlfriend to a bike accident.

The main character might simply be someone who has an intriguing tale to tell, or a person with a unique talent, an unusual achievement, or a quirky personality. Or your central character may be someone who can personalize a complex issue such as health care or environmental pollution.

Unique Talent

Here is a story based on a unique talent. In *Collin Rocks*, by Boyd Huppert and Jonathan Malat of KARE-TV in Minneapolis, our “hero” is Collin Johnson, a 10-year-old with a unique talent. He can play heavy metal guitar like Led Zeppelin. As the story develops, we find out that he has a medical history and a personality that makes him special. He’s a character worth knowing. Along the way, we meet a supporting cast, as well—his parents, sister, teachers—each of whom helps develop important elements of Collin’s story.

Use a Character to Personalize an Issue

The second possibility for a central character is someone who personally illustrates an important issue or problem.

Profile Approaches

“Broadly speaking, there are two kinds of profiles, the general and the microcosm,” says John Knowlton, former business journalist and now journalism instructor at Green River College. He explains the differences:

General Profile: “The subject of this profile is chosen for its inherent interest, which usually depends on qualities that make it unique or unusual. So it makes sense in this kind of a piece to pour most effort into detailing these qualities of ‘differentness.’”

Microcosm Profile: “The subject of this profile is picked because of its ‘typicalness,’ its similarity to others in its class. We use the subject as a vehicle to tell a wider tale, as representative of other subjects that are going through the same experiences and having the same reactions to them. A story about one airline worker’s family during a Boeing strike, for example, would stress that family’s similarities to others, not its differences.

“In the microcosm profile the character becomes Everyman or Everywoman. The subject of the piece helps viewers relate to what otherwise might be a dry, tedious, fact-filled story. These characters’ individual situations, which are similar to many others facing the same problem, can clearly illustrate such issues as government funding, health insurance, or the complexities of the legal system. By meeting so directly with someone struggling against an unyielding obstacle, viewers can both sympathize and even identify with the person. In this way, the viewer experiences a clearer, more emotional impact of how laws and regulations can really affect a single human being.”

For an example of someone personifying a national issue, remember the story of Pennsylvania State Representative Mike Fleck?

This Time Would Be Different follows one state assemblyman coming out of the closet as he runs for re-election. The story really represents the tale of all gays and their challenges as they reveal their sexual identity. In fact, the coming-out struggle of this gay politician is not so different from every member of any group who has suffered discrimination for sexual identity, race, or religion, or just being different.



Collin Rocks.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VQW48XiOHFg&t=7s>



This Time Would Be Different.

<https://www.willyurman.com/stories/this-time-would-be-different/>



In *Denied*, directed and produced by Julie Winokur and Sheila Wessenberg, the central subject represents Everywoman and Everyman caught in the tangled web of the American health-care system. Unable to afford escalating insurance premiums, the central character had to stop chemotherapy for breast cancer. She died the day before she would have been eligible for Medicare, the government-supported health-care program.

Strong, Nuanced Personality

Strong characters often are obvious—they have vivid personalities, the ability to speak clearly, and are personally compelling. They should be like a friend everyone wants to hang with. They entertain us, enlighten us, and stay focused on the story they're telling us. Wanting to hear more about someone when meeting him for the first time is a good sign.

▲ *Denied*. In *Denied*, the photographer and videographer tell the story of health care through the experiences of one woman who had to ask for help on the roadside to pay her medical bills. (Photo by Ed Kashi)



Denied.

<https://vimeo.com/showcase/5303127/video/128908409>

Note: On the website the story is located in the Vault

An Unforgettable Character

David Stephenson of the *Lexington Herald Leader* found a great character in Ernie Brown, Jr., a snapping-turtle catcher in Kentucky. In Stephenson's piece, *The Turtle Man*, Brown pops off one-liners in his thick Kentuckian accent and behaves in the most extraordinary ways.

He dives into muddy water and pulls up a large snapping turtle with his bare hands, all the while giving an ear-splitting whoop of success. Brown's is a story of the odd and the extreme, which is one reason this character appeals to such a wide audience.

"Ernie is entertaining, and, in fact, he wants to be an entertainer. That is actually a big part of the story," Stephenson says in an interview for this book. "In fact, Ernie tries too hard to be an entertainer, which ends up being funny. He's odd and unusual, but simply put he makes funny sounds—much beyond his dialect and accent—and he whoops and he hollers."

Stephenson said many journalists had done stories on the Turtle Man. So, he and writer/narrator Amy Wilson decided to take the story a bit deeper. "We wanted to examine more about why Ernie Brown wants to become famous. Basically,



Turtle Man.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a8BOtEpUcX8>



▲ *The Turtle Man*. Ernie Brown, Jr., pulled two snapping turtles from a Lincoln County farm pond near Stanford, Kentucky. Though catching snapping turtles is a unique occupation, Brown's personality is what gives the piece its character. (Photo by David Stephenson/Lexington Herald Leader)



▲ *The Turtle Man*. An angry snapping turtle approached the camera after Ernie Brown, Jr., yanked it out of the mud from a Lincoln County farm pond.



▲ *David Stephenson*. David Stephenson, now an assistant professor at University of Kentucky, poses with his subject.

he doesn't have what it takes to make it big nationally or internationally. He's not sophisticated enough. But he does well at the kitschy, campy level, which will probably be fine for him. He'll make money at it, and as he says, 'I'm the poorest famous guy around.'" So Ernie's tale, which on its base level is just funny and fun, was taken to a higher level of storytelling because the creators of the piece went one step further and looked into Ernie's quest to become famous, albeit in his own weird and unique way. Wilson and Stephenson sought to engage viewers emotionally. And they succeeded.

Though Stephenson sometimes works with a writer who will narrate parts of his stories, he prefers to let his subjects narrate their own stories. "Whenever we can let our subjects have a voice," he says, "if they have the power to articulate, then all the better."

Strong characters, though, don't often make themselves as obvious as the Turtle Man. You must seek them out by opening your eyes and ears and sometimes holding dozens of mini pre-interviews while scouring your scene for just the substantial character whose presence will place a gentle five-minute hook into your audience's attention span (see Chapters 5, 15, and 16).

Find Subjects to Tell All Sides of the Story

If your story centers on a public conflict, remember that one character is hardly ever enough.

Each side of an issue needs to be represented by equally well-spoken and authentic voices.

In Jake Sumner's story *Bob of the Park Knows New York City Birds Best* the director has told the tale of the enthusiastic birder with his recorded bird sounds but also the intense opposition to Bob by those who think he is disturbing the birds.

If you visit New York's Central Park, along with the local flowers and plants you may find Robert DeCandido, also known as "Birding Bob." If you don't bump into him on the trails, you'll hear him. Among dedicated birders including professional ornithologists, some consider his use of recorded bird calls a disturbance to birds and birdwatchers alike. Others see him as an enthusiastic advocate for the world of birds. Sumner, director of the short documentary, went to spokesmen for both sides of the controversy to produce this very amusing *New York Times* op-doc.



Bob of the Park Knows New York City Birds Best.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GLQUC7_wtFg



▲ Ed Robbins, on patrol to film *Warriors*, a PBS documentary profiling the day-to-day life of US Army soldiers during the Iraq Civil War in an area called the Triangle of Death. Robbins, principal videographer and director, was embedded as a “one-man-band” with soldiers for a few months. To read more about Ed Robbins’ war story see page 22.

Teasing Out a Theme

Regina McCombs, University of Minnesota

Ken Kobre, San Francisco State University

Additional material provided by **Stanley Heist, Kathy Kieliszewski, Josh Meltzer, David Weintraub, Suzanne White, Bob Sacha, Craig Duff, and John Knowlton**

FINDING A UNIVERSAL THEME AND CONSISTENT VOICE

Bob Sacha, Emmy and Pulitzer Prize-winning videographer, notes that if you have an idea for your story but don't have a theme you can waste a lot of time.

“When you go filming without a theme, the result can be described as ‘spray and pray,’” says Sacha, who now teaches at Newmark Graduate School of Journalism @CUNY. “You just film

everything and you come back with a big pile of stuff and you say, 'Oh please, God, I hope I have a story here.'"

A good way to avoid that feeling is by ensuring your story has an enduring theme. What are some universal themes? All humans share certain common experiences and feelings such as birth, death, love, fear, joy, and, for many, a sense of adventure or competition.

ED ROBBINS ON PATROL

Ed Robbins (see picture and caption on page 20) profiled average U.S. soldiers for *Warriors*, a PBS documentary about the Iraq War. Robbins was the primary video-journalist and director.

My closest call came on one of the most boring days. I was in the city of Baghdad, my soldiers were pulled in for patrols during the big election. Then, so fast it didn't even register, an improvised explosive device (IED) exploded on my side of the vehicle. Luckily it was set off a hair too early. It blew up the front of our Humvee truck, leaving us dust covered but unhurt.

The soldiers in the remaining five vehicles spread out on foot to inspect the crater of the explosion and hunt for suspects. But then, while on the street, hundreds of yards from any of the vehicles, I heard an explosion behind me. Still filming, I turned to screams of "medic," "medic" from inside a mushroom cloud of smoke where one of the Humvees was parked. It had been hit by a shoulder-launched explosive. Seconds later their strafing raked the street. It was so loud I didn't even know where the fire was coming from. My only thought was surprisingly not fear, it was, "Do your job, slow down, don't screw this up." I made it back to the vehicle for shelter and after returning fire, we hightailed it back to base. The soldiers soon returned to the streets, enraged and pumped for revenge. But there was no one to be found. The perpetrators had long slipped back into their houses, and were probably relaxing and watching television, looking like everyone else.

I was able to film both those explosions and the ambush. Later, after it aired, I am proud to say David Chase, creator of *The Sopranos*, saw the documentary on TV and asked to include the attack footage in the show.



The Schools Are Tiny.

The Game Is Huge.

<https://photoblog.statesman.com/the-schools-are-tiny-the-game-is-huge>

Universal themes might include: what it means to be a hero, finding love, redemption, recognizing evil, defining personal success, or rivalry between competitors. If you are lucky enough to hit on a story that touches on universal themes, chances are your audience's interest will be aroused.

Stories That Have a Clear Theme

Rivalry



▲ *The Schools Are Tiny; the Game Is Huge.* The story reveals the history of the rivalry between two small high schools in Texas and then builds in anticipation as it follows the teams on the night of their highly anticipated annual showdown.



▲ *The Schools Are Tiny; the Game Is Huge.* The Texas towns of Gordon and Strawn are only eight miles apart and the high schools play six-man football because they're so small that they don't have enough boys to field regular 11-man teams.

Rivalry is a universal theme dating before the time of Cain and Abel. The Texas towns of Gordon and Strawn are only eight miles apart and the high schools play six-man football because the schools are so small they can't field regular 11-man teams but their rivalry is no less intense as a game between Army and Navy.

The narrated audio slideshow *The Schools Are Tiny; the Game Is Huge*, produced by Jay Janner of the *Austin American-Statesman*, is a well-crafted combination of stills, natural sound, music, and interviews. It reveals the history of the rivalry in the town and then builds suspense as it follows the teams on the night of their highly anticipated annual showdown.

Although not everyone has gone to a tiny high school in Texas, most people have

experienced some form of rivalry or competition—for a job, for a scholarship, or for a touchdown.

Dealing with Death

Ghost Bikes, discussed in Chapter 1, page 15, shows bicycles painted white and left at spots where cyclists have died around New York City. It explores the universal theme of how to remember the dead. The girlfriend of producer Mirza Molberg died in a bike accident. His short movie is a remembrance of her and all the others who have died tragically from bike accidents.

Overcoming Adversity

On the surface, the story *Walk Walk Walk*, discussed in Chapter 1, page 12, is a story about making crutches for children who having had polio have never walked upright. The real theme of the story, however, is about overcoming obstacles.

Being an Outcast

Before 1900, the government of Istanbul tried to kill every stray dog that was on the street. There was such an uproar and pushback from the population that it's now illegal to capture strays on the street and euthanize them. Elizabeth Lo, the producer of *Stray*, explains this setup in white type on a black background to the viewer of the film. The film has no voice-over and, of course, the dogs don't talk. As the film progresses, the strays' lives intersect when they each form intimate bonds with a group of young Syrians with whom they share the streets. It is not hard to see the similarity in situations between the street kids and the stray dogs.

So the film is a story about dogs on the street. But, in a way, it's also a story about refugees or outcasts. It's a story about trying to find

connection. It's a story about being homeless, and ... by the way, it's also a story about dogs too.

Since the film has no interviews, it lets the viewers draw their own conclusions from what they see on the screen. This is called the “direct cinema” style (see pages 28, 29, 195 and 196).

Testing a Theme ...

Concise Description Approach

A handy measure of whether you have a decent story is to try to describe it in two or three sentences to another person. With a little practice, you should be able to concisely introduce the characters, set up their conflicts, and evoke their challenges.

“What is the bigger idea of this story?” asks Sacha. “What is this story about? Is this a story about family? Is this a story about security? Is this story about safety? Even before you start, if you can get to this bigger idea of what it is, if it's in one or two words, then I find it really helps inform a story and inform where it's going to go.”

If you can reduce your tale to a few concise lines and make it worthwhile for someone to listen to, chances are you've got yourself a terrific story.

Ed Robbins, who teaches at the Columbia School of Journalism, asks his students, “What is your film about?” Not what's the storyline, or what happens, or the topic. “What's it about?” He points out that this is often a tough question to answer, but critical in giving the story its magnetic core. He finds that pressing students on this question has been a great tool because, “The answer influences how you shoot scenes, what questions to ask, and how you edit the story structure.”



Ghost Bikes.
<https://vimeo.com/243579287>



Walk Walk Walk.
<https://vimeo.com/258099133>



◀ **Stray.** The underlying theme of the documentary is not just about dogs of Istanbul. It is really about a dog, a child, or an immigrant that is left out of society.



Stray.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uC38BqP2_fl&t=2s

Audience Must Care

So now you know much more about stories. All kinds of tales of human experience: adventure, escape, loss, rebirth, rivalry, revenge, sorrow—and then some—all of these can be foundations for stories.

HIGHLIGHTING ONE ASPECT OF A PLACE

► **Sideshow Tent.** With the purchase of most of Coney Island's six-block area by a commercial developer, Travis Fox's short documentary captures the last of its pre-Disney past. (Travis Fox, Washington Post)



► **Barker with a screwdriver.**



► **"Shoot the Freak" paintball.**



Portrait of Coney Island.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oETS016dgKA>

In Travis Fox's short video documentary *Portrait of Coney Island*, the videojournalist presents a slice-of-life portrayal of this soon-to-be demolished amusement park. Without the aid of any voice-over to explain what the viewer is seeing, he lays out some special aspects of this nostalgic, pre-Disney entertainment spot. Fox's point of view comes across clearly in his subject choice. For a theme Fox has zeroed in on the more bizarre aspects of the boardwalk.

DAY-IN-THE-LIFE

A day-in-the-life story records the activities of someone through a period of time—such as the length of a day. The videojournalist shoots everything in hopes of capturing revealing details. But most people's daily lives are not actual stories. See if you can remember any of the individuals or the stories featured in the many beautiful picture books with the title "A Day in the Life of ... America, Japan, China, etc." You can't? Why?

Because the "Day in the Life" books consist of beautiful images, but the individual pictures are vignettes. They highlight aspects of a country but don't add up to tell a coherent story.

There are other differences, too, between a day-in-the-life and a true story approach. A day-in-the-life video has no central theme or point of view.

A day-in-the-life video has limitations and constraints. It usually doesn't have a central theme. Some day-in-the-life essays have a point of view. Sometimes that point of view is simply "this job is hard."

Even if you follow someone from morning to night, in a day-in-the-life documentary, no one faces and/or resolves a conflict. No one reaches a resolution of a problem. A day-in-the-life video is merely documentation of what happens over a period of time.

When possible, look for a better story plot than a day-in-the-life of your subject. Day-in-the-life projects make nice coffee-table books, where there is little competition for attention. But they do not work as stories told for the Internet or broadcast medium.

From Day-in-Life Idea to a Themed Story: A Case Study

Seasoned photojournalist Eileen Blass, a staff photographer at *USA Today*, was attending a Western Kentucky University Mountain Workshop on multimedia storytelling when she selected as a story *idea* "a Kentucky family who runs an organic farm."

Bob Sacha, a well-known multimedia journalist and now professor at Newmark Graduate School of Journalism @CUNY, was Blass's coach at the workshop. He asked her to explain in two minutes or less what the story (not the idea!) was going to be about. She replied that her plan was to make a story about how this farmer had to work a second job as a conservation officer in order to maintain the family farm—basically a look at a day-in-the-life of a man struggling to maintain his farm.



▲ *Tethered to Tradition*. Brad Lowe feeds his chickens and turkeys on his family's farm, Hillyard Field Organics in Murray, Kentucky. The video became more than just a day in the life of this farmer because the videographer looked for universal themes.

"But I didn't have a focus beyond that," Blass admits.

Her plan, Blass told her workshop mentor, was to hang out for a couple of days and hope that the story would sort itself out. Sometimes just trailing someone can provide research for a potential story idea but this is not a good approach if your time is limited. "Without an interview, I really didn't know what the story would be. So for the first day or so, I shot everything in sight—a few hours of tape," Blass recalls.

"I'm actually personally interested in organic farming and healthy eating," she says, "but even I had no real interest in the story so far. For me—and for a general audience—I still wondered why

we were going to connect to the story. I knew that a broad audience wasn't going to connect because of healthy eating or organic farming. I needed some other, more universal and emotional draw. Frankly, at that point my story sounded pretty boring," she said in an interview after the workshop.

Blass says she was pretty lost on the first day, so she was shooting everything in sight. She did conduct interviews, trying to make some kind of story pan out of her original idea. But it still didn't have the necessary emotional attraction that Sacha wanted.



Tethered to Tradition.
<https://vimeo.com/7368035>



▲ **Bob Sacha**. Bob Sacha, Newmark Graduate School of Journalism @ CUNY.