

## CHAPTER 7

# RESEARCH

Research means immersing yourself in your subject so you can decide who and what you might film. Growing familiarity and analysis reveal which people, situations, and materials you'd really like for your documentary. Then you can direct a film with shape and purpose.



Direct intelligently by reaching preliminary conclusions before shooting.

If you don't, everything will look equally useful. Afterwards your material will look like surveillance camera material—no weight, purpose, or inherent story.

## CREATING RESTRICTIONS

You research not just to discover people and situations but also to decide the restrictions that will narrow and deepen what you shoot. The clay on the potter's wheel is a shapeless lump until the potter's hands begin containing and squeezing it. These constraints make the clay rise and take shape. Saying "I don't want to make a talking head film or shoot everything handheld" is already to apply creative pressure. Know what aspects of the subject you are *not* interested in, what coverage you *don't* want to shoot, and you can better decide what aspects you *do* want to concentrate on and what strategies you'll use to do them justice. In Chapter 19, *Form, Control, and Style*, you'll find more on setting limits for creative purposes.

## RESEARCH METHODS ARE SUBJECT DRIVEN

The subject and type of documentary determine the kind of research you should do.

*Example 1.* You want to make an observational film about a street gang, so you use *networking* to make contact, declare your interests to them, and get them to accept your first visit. The idea behind networking is that everyone knows someone who knows someone else. A London journalist friend used to say, "Anyone can get to anyone else in the world in five or less phone calls."

Once you are preliminarily accepted by the gang—who are as curious to see themselves on the screen as anyone else—you may need to hang out with them over a period of weeks or months until they come to know you and thoroughly trust your motives. This is how the modest, kindly Hubert Sauper made *Darwin's Nightmare* (2004, Austria). The story concerns 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 and local people get the rotting heads. Guess what the Russian transport planes bring in unmarked boxes on the return trip to Africa? Guns.

People saw that Sauper truly wanted to know them because he stayed around for months. The result is a series of amazingly candid, inwardly searching conversations with street urchins, weary Russian pilots, prostitutes who dream of education and a good job, and the guard of a research facility whose only weapon is a bow and poisoned arrows. Their inward-looking frankness makes this occasionally funny, often shocking film very special.

*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. You'll also want to get well acquainted so you can profile the personalities and workplaces of the scientists themselves. You'll want to know 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 innumerable questions, and learn 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 gaggle of boys taunt the unfortunate chimpanzees. These are obligatory scenes at which your audience will smile in recognition. By the time you are ready to shoot, you need to know what's typical and also what's unusual—and thus be ready to film it. 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!

## COURAGE AND PUSH-UPS

The Chinese say that a long journey begins with a single step. It's hard when you start to break the innate barriers of modesty and reserve. You have to force yourself



Your major concern is always whether you have a viable film. You can't make a film from ambitions or ideas, only from what you can capture with a camera.



to keep taking steps because we're all afraid of rejection, of the stinging or sarcastic rebuke. Yet take that step, and you'll find how welcoming and helpful most people are. You and your camera, after all, bring a little glamour. Taking those steps gets easier if you practice by walking up to a couple of new people each day and finding out about their lives. These encounters are the documentarian's push-ups.



As you research, sketch any important physical circumstances using

**Project 1-AP-2 Make a Floor Plan** and then develop a working hypothesis using **Project 2-DP-3 Basic Working Hypothesis Helper** (both in the Appendix).



## THE WORKING HYPOTHESIS

A vital first step, when you first have an idea for a film, is to make a working hypothesis. This helps fashion a through line of logic to connect your initial convictions, your characters and their main issue, and the realizations, thoughts, and feelings that you want to engender in your audience. Project 2-DP-3 Basic Working Hypothesis Helper (in the Appendix) poses a series of prompts for you to fill in, so it ends up looking something like this:

1. In life I believe that [your life principle concerning this subject] sometimes you have to trust other people's authority and judgment in order to grow.
2. My film will show this in action by exploring [situations] the circumstances leading up to a young marine's first parachute jump, of which he is very afraid.
3. My central characters are [their characteristics] Louis, a rather sheltered young man; his protective mother, Zelda; and his sergeant, who drives the marine beyond what he feels capable of doing.
4. What each wants to get, do, or accomplish: Louis wants to prove himself but is afraid, his mother wants to save him from fear and danger, and his sergeant wants to show him he can do more than he thinks.
5. The main conflict in my film is between Louis' love and loyalty to his mother and his need to prove his manly independence.
6. I expect my film's structure to be determined by the pace and sequencing of marine training that leads up to the parachute jump.
7. Ultimately I want my audience to feel Louis' inner struggle to master his terror and his joy at overcoming it by floating like a bird in the air.
8. . . . and to realize that everyone has tests they must pass in life in order to gain self-respect.

As you research, as you shoot, and even as you edit, you will need to revise your hypothesis as a way to keep control over the meaning and direction of your evolving film. This is a fascinating exercise.

## RESEARCH OVERVIEW

Your object during research is to assemble a shooting plan, budget, and rough schedule. Below are the common steps. Don't fret if you are forced to take them out of order or must tackle several at once. Explanations like mine must arrange things logically, but life is often messy and circular. During research consider the overall film and:

- Test the viability of your original idea by making a new hypothesis.
- Designate a purpose for each scene in the film's likely narrative.
- Imagine the different possible outcomes once you start filming.
- Think and rethink the possible meanings your film could deliver.
- Develop a detailed proposal that outlines your intended content, theme, style, and outcomes.
- Pitch your film to gauge its impact on an audience, raise funds, or otherwise gather support.
- Assemble all the human and material resources you need to begin shooting.

During research for particular scenes or situations:

- Analyze each situation for its significance and filmability.
- List the exposition (basic information) each scene must convey. Without this, your audience can't attain your level of understanding.
- Observe characteristic activity so you can:
  - Figure out shooting that is characteristic, telling, and brief.
  - Know when anything abnormal or potentially dramatic starts happening.
  - Get to know participants.
  - Explain your motivation and purposes for making the film.
  - Become known and trusted.
  - Understand roles people have adopted.
  - Decide who represents what and narrow your choices.
  - Decide who will be communicative and effective.

## INVENTORY

From research and forming a film in your head, now make an inventory of materials you'll need to shoot. Use the list of sound and picture materials at the beginning



of Chapter 6, *Elements and Grammar*, as a reminder. Your inventory—really a shopping list—for a short film might look something like this:



#### “Getting ahead” 10 minutes

##### Sequences

1. Garage Sequence—Kenny at work
2. School Sequence—Jean in the gym
3. Clinic—Maria getting an x-ray
4. Home—Family dinner, Jean doing homework
5. Letter carrier on rounds, delivers envelope to McPhersons
6. Maria interviewing for the new job

##### Archive

1. Parents’ 8 mm film of Maria as child (beach, Christmas, Easter)
2. Parents’ VHS of Jean as a child (beach, soccer, birthday parties)
3. Maria’s VHS of her parents Jorge and Ana visiting from Mexico

##### Interviews

1. Jean regarding her mother’s ambitions
2. Kenny regarding his money troubles
3. Maria concerning the low expectations of her parents and changes she’s trying to make in her own outlook

##### Sound

1. Chihuahua folk song sung by Jorge
2. Playground atmosphere
3. Hospital atmosphere with announcements
4. Repair shop atmosphere
5. Christmas carols at local church

## DRAMATIC CONTENT HELPER

Now try using **Project 2-DP-1 Dramatic Content Helper** (in the Appendix). It will help you locate the dramatic ingredients that all stories need and set you up to direct them well. There’s no set formula for making good documentary, but successful ones often contain the elements of drama (characters, situation, conflict, confrontation, and resolution).

The Helper’s questions help you dig out those hiding in any film idea you have under consideration. You won’t be able to answer all the questions, but merely trying will prod your imagination.



Find and then direct the dramatic ingredients that all stories need using **Project 2-DP-1 Dramatic Content Helper** (in the Appendix).

