

FACT CHECKING

Fact checking means being able to footnote your film. Any fact stated, whether by you as the filmmaker or by someone on camera, needs to be verified through not one but at least two credible sources. Even authors of highly reputable sources make mistakes, and bias (information that is unfairly skewed) and inaccuracy can be found in both primary and secondary sources. Have you ever been at a rally that seemed packed, only to hear it described on the news as a "small number" of protesters? Or sat through an afternoon in which the majority of speeches were credible and coherent, and the radio coverage featured a couple of speakers who clearly had no grasp of the issues? The reports may be factual, but they don't accurately represent the events.

Another example: A writer profiling an anti-poverty activist might point out that the activist grew up in a town that, she notes, is "a wealthy suburb of New York." The fact may be true, but 50 years earlier, the town was still quite rural and had not yet become a bedroom community for the city. And even then, the activist was from a family living well below the means of other townspeople. Yet the reporter has used factual material to create a false impression, whether intentionally or not, that the activist grew up wealthy—an impression that has a direct bearing on the portrayal of the activist's current work.

Suppose you're making a film about this activist's life. Because you're using multiple sources, you should realize that the picture being painted by this reporter doesn't match others that you're seeing. You should also be doing your own reality checks: Is it really possible that the description of a town in 2016 also applies to the same town in 1976? Furthermore, even if the majority of townspeople were mega-wealthy back in 1976, do you know that the activist's family was also wealthy?

Suppose you've pushed ahead without considering this, however, and have become attached to the idea of using the man's childhood in a wealthy town as a motivating factor behind his work on behalf of the poor. Maybe you've even talked to experts (unfamiliar with the activist in question) who explain that growing up wealthy can have this type of impact on children. So the information and motivation end up in your narration, whether they are accurate or not. This is a situation in which having advisors on your side can be invaluable. A biographer of the activist, if given a chance to read a treatment of your film or screen a rough cut, will respond to narration such as "He grew up in the wealthy community of X," and cry foul. This doesn't mean that you have to remove the fact; it does mean that you will need to put it into a more accurate context.

THE TELLING DETAIL

Facts are not just something to ensure accuracy; they can also be the lifeblood of the "telling detail" that will enrich and inform your storytelling. Facts can be a source of humor and irony; they can illuminate character, heighten tension, and underscore themes. As you do your research, begin to keep track of the details and tidbits that strike your fancy, as well as the ones that answer questions essential to your storytelling. Make sure to note the source material as completely as possible, so that you don't have to track it down again, *or* so that you could track it down again if necessary.

STATISTICS AND OTHER FORMS OF DATA

Statistics must be scrutinized and put into context. It's always a good idea, when you come across a statistic you want to use, to trace it back to its source. Suppose you find an article in a magazine that says that a certain percentage of teenagers smoked in the 1950s. Somewhere in the article you may be able to find the source of that information, such as "according to the National Institutes of Health." You should always question someone else's interpretation of raw data, meaning that if you really want to use this statistic, you need to go back to the NIH data yourself. Maybe it was *x* percent of all 17-year-olds who smoked, or maybe it was *x* percent of 17- and 18-year-olds in Philadelphia. People often misinterpret statistical information, whether intentionally or not. The interpretation may satisfy your story, but don't trust it until you can get it corroborated by someone with sufficient expertise.

CHRONOLOGIES

Chronologies are one of most helpful and least utilized tools of storytelling. A good and careful chronology, started early on, can be of tremendous benefit throughout preproduction, production, and editing. It can help you "see" your story in new and unexpected ways, and can open up possibilities for nonlinear structure while providing a key tool for ensuring that you remain honest. The level of detail and the range of information needed depend on the type of film you're creating. For a historical film, a good side-by-side chart that looks at your specific story in the context of its times can be handy. They can be created as a table in Microsoft Word, with a header row that repeats on each page. Take care as you input information; if you develop a habit of accuracy when you first note names, places, dates, statistics, and such, fact checking will be that much less onerous. It can also be useful

to annotate your notes, even roughly: "Bennett p. 44," for example, so that you can return to the original source either to get more details or to check facts.

Chronology Format

There is no one format for a chronology. We did several for the six-hour PBS series *I'll Make Me a World: A Century of African-American Arts*. The initial chronology was a grid, containing 10 columns, left to right (one for each decade of the century), and then six rows down (one each for literature, theater and dance, music, the visual arts, African-American political history, and American social and cultural events). As the series developed, separate chronologies were made for each story. The lives and vaudeville careers of Bert Williams and George Walker, for example, were charted by month and year alongside events in American history.

The example shown is an excerpt from a research chronology (one page out of about 10) that puts the Miss America competition into context, at roughly a page per decade. For some projects, a more detailed breakdown is needed. To keep track of the many complicated strands of the history conveyed in Douglas A. Blackmon's *Slavery by Another Name* during its development as a documentary, I created an extensive chronology with seven headers: Date; Story; Trials; Letters/Documents; Photos; State Law and Action; US Law and Action. The rows were broken down by year, and in some cases by months and even (during the peonage trials of 1903) by days.

As mentioned, within chronologies it's a good idea to keep track of where the information is from, even if it's in a shorthand you'll understand (e.g., "Blight p. 32") in case you need to go back for clarification or more details. But these can be rough; they're for in-house use, and are not shared with outside readers.

Why Bother with Chronologies?

A chronology helps you to keep track of a story, look for a structure within it, and find some telling details that might enrich it and prevent mistakes. A song commonly believed to have been popular among soldiers during World War I may, in fact, have been written in 1919—which a good chronology will show you is after the war's end. By listing the major events in your story in chronological sequence, you can sometimes see possible points of attack—places to begin the story—that come late in the chronology but are the strongest focus for your film. From there, you can think about what else the audience needs to know from the overall timeline and when they need to know it.

Table 8.1 This research chronology (which covered a century) puts the Miss America competition into general context, at roughly a page per decade. From *Miss America: A Documentary Film*, courtesy the filmmakers.

	U.S. History	Women's History	Social/Cultural	Miss America (story)
1920-1929	Jan 1920: 18th Amendment (Prohibition) goes into effect	August 1920: The 19th Amendment is ratified (women's suffrage) 1920: National League of Women Voters is organized 1921: American Birth Control League is incorporated, with Margaret Sanger as president 1928: Amelia Earhart is first woman to fly across the Atlantic	Post-war spirit and disaffection characterizes era that will be known as "The Jazz Age" "Bobbed" hair on women, symbol of political and social emancipation, popularized by film stars—Garbo's "page boy," Veronica Lake's "peek-a-boo," Louise Brooks' "Prince Valiant" 1922: Emily Post's "Etiquette" column debuts 1923-28: The era of blueswomen—Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, etc. 1926: The "permanent wave" (hair care) is invented by Antonio Buzzacchino 1927: Al Jolson stars in first "talkie," <i>The Jazz Singer</i>	September 1920: The Fall Frolic—which will become the Miss America pageant—is conceived by businessmen in Atlantic City. No beauty contest, but a Rolling Chair Parade and a masked ball. September 1921: The 2nd Fall Frolic includes 2-day "Inter-city Beauty Contest" in Atlantic City—16-yearold Margaret Gorman wins 1921: A number of children participate in the Bather's Revue—including a professional child actor named Milton Berle 1923-24: Women's and religious groups protest the pageant 1927: The powerful Federation of Women's Clubs demands that the Pageant cease 1928: Largest pageant to date, 80 contestants, but ongoing protest over scandal, loose morals, etc. Atlantic City Hotel owners withdraw support, and the Pageant is discontinued.
	1929: Stock market crash and subsequent economic Depression			

The other thing a chronology gives you is an opportunity to see the bigger picture, allowing you to offer your audience points of reference ("the Berlin Wall would come down the following month"), and a sense of the world surrounding your characters. For example, the first Miss America competition was held in 1921. Prior to that, according to scholars, beauty contests were held in the pages of America's newspapers. But this wasn't possible until the photographic halftone was invented—in 1880, I find out when I look that up. What else was happening between then and 1921? A flood of immigration and migration was increasing the ethnic and racial diversity in America's growing cities, sparking differences of opinion about what constituted an American feminine "ideal." Add to all of this the emergence of mass media and a consumer culture, and the stage is set for the first official Miss America pageant in 1921. But note the date. A year earlier, in 1920, American women had finally won the right to vote. Is this relevant? The truthful answer is, "Not necessarily." So while you can note the interesting dateline, you can't draw any conclusions about it. Cause and effect is a slippery slope; the fact that two things happen in succession does not mean there is a link. This is an excellent example of the kind of question you explore with your advisors, which is just what the production team of *Miss America: A Documentary Film* did.

Chronologies for Present-Day Films

Not every film is historical, but even a personal or diary film may benefit from some sorting through of what happened when. For example, the table shown is a fictional chronology in progress. Imagine a film in which a young man, Jeff, decides to document himself as he tracks down and perhaps reunites with a father he last saw when he was 11 years old. By the time this chronology is coming together, Jeff has begun to piece together some of his father's life after he left.

Note that not every detail is tracked, just a few key ones. Putting them in order on the page can be revealing: Lucy left Jeff's dad the same day his mom got remarried, for example. It can suggest ways of establishing time and the passage of time. Most importantly, it can help suggest nonlinear ways to tell this story. In this case, having located his dad and begun to communicate with him, Jeff decides he wants to see if he might be a match to donate a kidney. That suggests a stronger potential train than simply, "I want to reunite." Will Jeff's father accept his son's offer of a kidney? Will the son even be a match? Will his mother or someone else in Jeff's life talk him out

Table 8.2 Personal film, vérité (example; not from an actual film).

Date	Jeff/Filmmaker (son)	Father	Other
1987		Father and mother meet—first date, mother thinks it was <i>Moonstruck</i> ; dad thinks it was <i>The Untouchables</i>	Microsoft releases Windows 2.0; Prozac is put on the market
January 2, 2000	11 years old; parents sit him down, dad is moving out		Y2K proved to be a lot of nothing
May 2002	Unaware that his father is remarrying	Marries Lucy	
		Began driving trucks long distance	
Fall 2003	Mom remarries	Lucy leaves Dad	
March 2005		Begins treatment for kidney disorder; loses his job soon after	
Sept 2006	Starts college		
Sept 2009	Decides to make a film about his father for a senior project		
November 2009	Tracks his father down	Father needs a kidney	

of it? In answering those questions, the film might go back through the course of these relationships, and the chronology will be a useful reference.

Take the Time to Do It Right

I've seen many filmmakers, including student filmmakers, try to rush through (or avoid) making chronologies. They'll jot down a few details that are so vague they're essentially useless: *Nineteenth century*, *Ellis Island opens, thousands of immigrants*. This is usually a big mistake: If

you don't take a little bit of time to be more specific in the beginning, it's almost certain that you'll be taking a *lot* of time to figure it out later, going back to those same sources over and over and adding to your chronology in bits and pieces. But beyond fact checking, the chronology can be an important tool for finding, shaping, and sharing your *story* from preproduction through post.

PRINT AND INTERNET RESEARCH

The internet puts unbelievable amounts of information into your hands, but use it carefully. Keyword and subject searches on the internet are limited by your ability to come up with the right combination of words, spelled correctly (or the way they were misspelled by someone else), to find what you want, and if you don't come up with those words, you'll wind up empty-handed. Perhaps even more frustrating, web searches can—and often do—land you at sites that are not sufficiently credible. Wikipedia may be a place to start—*Waterloo, what was that referring to?*—but as a crowd-sourced site, it's not a place to stop.

Whether web-based or print, it's important that you know who wrote the material, based on what research, for what purpose and audience. Either online or at a library, you can get access to refereed journals, which are publications to which scholars must submit their work to other scholars for content review before they're accepted for publication. Even those articles, though, should be vetted and double-checked. Who is the author of that article about the effect of oil spills? Where does the author work? What other works does the author cite in the article or in the bibliography? Obviously, scholarly journals are not the same as brief blurbs in a popular magazine. Articles written for young readers are not the same as articles written for other scientists. Print material with no byline should be regarded with skepticism.

On the web, too, you want to know what person or agency is responsible for the specific information on which you're relying. Are you exploring the official site of U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, or a site hosted by a group that's politically opposed to the science of climate change? If you're not sure about a site, try to see if you can find out who created the site, who hosts it, and/or who funds it. Don't let official sounding names fool you; plenty of groups hoping to misinform you sound legitimate. You should know if the site is funded by a political action group or a progressive think tank, or if the information on which you're relying was the result of a third-grade science class or a college student's senior research seminar.

Don't underestimate the value of going to a bookstore or library for yourself. Browsing online has its benefits, but in person can be useful as well. For example, suppose you know you're interested in making a film about music, a musician, something along those lines. But what? Wander through the stacks of a library or bookstore and see what catches your eye.

Another obvious argument for library research is that you can find material, such as magazines and newspapers, that hasn't yet been digitized or uploaded to the web. And whether you're working online or in person, it's always useful not just to see the content of an old article but also the context—to see the article as it looked on the page back then. Along with your article on early twentieth-century performer Bert Williams, for example, you might see the price of shoes and mattresses at the time, read reviews of that week's popular entertainment, and look at how a mainstream paper discussed issues such as race, immigration, and gender. Best of all, not only do you get a better sense of the period, you also get ideas for visual storytelling and narrative context.

Be Organized

You'll need to keep track of the material you're citing. If you are taking notes on published text, make it clear in your notes that you are copying someone else's work. Note the source, put it in quotes, make the font purple—do whatever it takes to make sure that six months from now, you don't go back to this material, think that you've written it yourself, and incorporate it into narration, only to find out that you've lifted entire sentences from someone else. This is also true of material you cut and paste from the web. It is never permissible to use it without attribution.

A few other tips:

- *Note the source.* An article or web page that's not referenced is a waste of everyone's time. On the copy of the document itself, note the bibliographic data. It's also useful to note which library you found it in and even write down the call numbers, or the specific page as well as the website. Otherwise, you may very well find yourself having to look it up again.
- *Be sure you've got the whole article.* If you're downloading an article, photocopying it, or printing it off a microfilm reader, check to be sure that the entire piece is actually readable. If an article is footnoted, be sure you have a record of those footnotes. Often

the best research is in the footnotes, and no producer wants to ask a researcher to retrace steps.

- *Don't editorialize.* Do not, as the researcher, take it upon yourself to annotate the research you're compiling, unless you're asked to do so. Pages and pages of underlined and highlighted material can be annoying. Steer the production team to relevant passages, but let them form their own impressions.
- *Alphabetize.* Do your best to keep bibliographies in alphabetical order by *last* name; it will save you from looking up the same source more than once, by mistake, as you go down the list. In fact, alphabetical order is useful for all kinds of lists, and/or order by date, etc. (If you're alphabetizing by title, it's helpful not to include "A" or "The." As in, *Thin Blue Line, The.*)
- *Make use of file folders,* whether on the computer or on the desk, so that you don't end up with a massive stack of unsorted information. Things get messy enough quickly enough. Come up with a system, be clear about it, and keep on top of it. It will save you and your team sorting through data over and over again.
- *Give computer files relevant names.* There is nothing as useless as "France.docx," even if you think you'll remember what it is. "France_locations_scoutJan2015.docx" will tell you, six months from now, what's in that file and that it's different from "France_transcript_Henry5-17-15." A good file name is also essential if you're going to search for the file on the computer.
- *Neatness counts.* Research is a lot of work, and everybody gets tired. But you must take the time to write legibly, or at least to copy any scribbled notes within a short period of time, before you can no longer decipher them. And if you're keeping a research notebook, keep it current.
- A plea on behalf of libraries: *Never mark up a library-owned book or magazine.* Never bend the pages down, and if you must spread the book face down to photocopy or scan, do it gently.
- *Go a step further.* If you're doing research for someone else, get the material you've been asked to retrieve and then look through it. As mentioned, keep a record of footnotes if they accompany an article. But then look through those footnotes to see if there's additional material you could pick up while you're at the library. Does a more current book by the same author come to your attention? If there's a reference to a primary source within a secondary source, can you dig up the original material? Come back with these unexpected treasures and you will make the

producers very happy. Primary sources, especially, tend to be wonderful finds that take more than internet digging.

- *Be skeptical of sources, internet and otherwise.* An impressive-looking history of the civil rights movement might turn out to have been produced by Mr. Crabtree's eighth-grade social studies class; a scientific-looking report on the "myths" of global warming might have been produced both by and for the oil industry. Read everything with a skeptical eye.

VISUAL ARCHIVES

Depending on the story you're telling, you may or may not need to explore what's available in terms of stills or motion picture footage in the archives, whether public (such as the National Archives in Washington, D.C.) or private (such as Corbis). Extensive visual research is most commonly done once a film is at least partially funded; the visual research becomes part of the overall research and development leading to a shooting treatment, and often continues as needed (or begins again) as the story takes further shape in the editing room. As with the print material, organization of your visual research is everything. Also remember that archival stills and motion picture footage, no less than print materials, should be subject to scrutiny in terms of its veracity and completeness. Even newsreels, which are often used by filmmakers as historical evidence, were at times heavily propagandized and even staged.

MOVING FORWARD

Research of every sort will be ongoing for most of the film's production, but there comes a point when the filmmaker has to decide that it's time to move to the next stage—production. This can be difficult: There's always more to learn, and the more you learn, the more you want everybody to know what you've found out. As Alan Berliner said about working on *The Sweetest Sound* (in the same interview that started this chapter), "one of the hardest things I had to do was let go of everything I knew—to accept that the film could not possibly contain everything I had learned about names."

SOURCES AND NOTES

Jason Silverman's interview with Alan Berliner can be read at www.pbs.org/pov/thesweetestsound/interview.php; see also www.alanber

liner.com. The Jay Rosenblatt press material and other information about the filmmaker can be found at www.jayrosenblattfilms.com. The discussion of *Miss America* comes from my own involvement with the film's development. The U.C. Berkeley Library offers some guidelines for evaluating web pages; see www.lib.berkeley.edu/TeachingLib/Guides/Internet/Evaluate.html.