

CHAPTER 3

Finding the Story

Armed with an understanding of story, how do you find one within a chosen *subject* for a documentary? Suppose, for example, that you're thinking of doing a film about Elvis Presley, a bakery in your home town, or something about labor in the high-tech industry. Something about the topic has caught your interest, and you think you want to take it to the next level.

First, ask yourself what it is about the topic that grabs you. As the initial audience for your film, your gut reaction to the subject is important. Chances are it wasn't a sweeping notion of Elvis Presley that caught your attention, but an account, perhaps, of his time in the military. It's not the fact that there's a bakery in your home town, but that rising taxes and a dwindling customer base have left the owners open to offers from developers looking to build a mall despite significant local opposition. Your interest in the high-tech industry comes from stories you've read about global labor, worker exploitation, or the industry's impact on the environment.

We're surrounded by subjects that offer potential for documentary storytelling. Current events may trigger ideas, or an afternoon spent browsing the shelves at a local library or bookstore. Some filmmakers find stories within their own families. Alan Berliner made *Nobody's Business* about his father, Oscar; Deborah Hoffman made *Confessions of a Dutiful Daughter* about her mother's battle with Alzheimer's. Even when you're very close to a subject, however, you'll need to take an impartial view as you determine whether or not it would make a film that audiences will want to see. This is also true when you adapt documentaries from printed sources. In making the series *Cadillac Desert*, drawn from Marc Reisner's book of the same name, producer Jon Else chose three of the roughly 40 stories in Reisner's book; Else and his team then conducted their own research and determined the best way to tell those stories on film.

STORY RIGHTS

In general, if you're using a range of books and magazines solely for research purposes, you don't need to obtain any of the underlying rights. When the film is indelibly linked to a book, however, as was the case with *Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room* (directed by Alex Gibney, based on the book by Bethany McLean and Peter Elkind), *A Brief History of Time* (directed by Errol Morris, based on the book by Stephen Hawking), or *Slavery by Another Name* (directed by Sam Pollard, based on the book by Douglas A. Blackmon), you will need to come to a legal arrangement with the author or copyright holder. (Don't confuse this with companion books that are written during or after production, such as the companion book to the first season of *Eyes on the Prize*. This book was written by the Blackside publishing staff and journalist Juan Williams during postproduction, and drew on the production teams' research and interviews. In other words, companion books are based on the documentaries, rather than vice versa.)

Note that when you are negotiating for the rights to a story, you will want to retain creative control over your film. The author may be an expert on the subject, but you are an expert on translating it on film to a general audience. You don't need a degree in science to make an extraordinary science documentary or a degree in social work to create a compelling portrait of runaway teens. What you need are intelligence, curiosity, an ability to learn fast, and a readiness to consult with people who *are* experts in those fields. Ideally, there is a positive collaboration between expert and filmmaker that serves to enrich the film.

"FINDING" THE STORY DURING PRODUCTION

One of the biggest misconceptions about documentary filmmaking is that it happens spontaneously. In fact, it's fairly common to hear filmmakers talk about the story revealing itself over the course of the production or even in the editing room. With experienced filmmakers, however, this tends *not* to mean that a filmmaker has simply shot material without any story in mind, but instead that he or she adjusts the story's focus or, more likely, its *structure* during production and postproduction. Even *vérité* projects, which are significantly crafted in the editing room, are generally not shot until filmmakers have some confidence that a story will unfold over the course of filming. You can't know where real life will take you, but you can anticipate a range of outcomes and determine whether or not a subject holds sufficient promise.

Sometimes an opportunity comes along that precludes extensive planning. Filmmakers Gail Dolgin and Vicente Franco had just days to decide whether or not to travel to Vietnam after they learned about an upcoming reunion between Heidi Bub and the birth mother who'd given her up years earlier, during "Operation Babylift" in 1975. Dolgin says:

We all really believed that we were going into a happy reunion, and we had no idea whether we would come back with anything more than that. It just grabbed us with the possibilities of raw emotion and passion, and those are great elements for a documentary. And we're also drawn to films where we don't know what's going to happen—we have a concept and we go with it.

At a minimum, the filmmakers had a basic, straightforward narrative of an adoptee returning to her homeland, although whether or not that could be turned into a documentary remained to be seen. Dolgin says:

Maybe there would be a film that would explore what happens when you lose your birthplace identity. Heidi grew up in southern Tennessee, and we imagined going back with her and having her rediscover her roots in some way. But we had no idea, truly. We just went. And of course as soon as we got there it became clear that what we had anticipated was going to go in a different direction.

In Vietnam, the filmmakers found themselves immersed in the complex story they told in *Daughter from Danang*. Similarly, New York-based filmmaker Kazuhiro Soda was surprised to learn that a college friend was running to fill a vacant political seat, and hurried to Japan to start shooting the film that became *Campaign*, as he describes in Chapter 21.

Frederick Wiseman, renowned for his exploration of American institutions (*Hospital, Basic Training, Welfare, Public Housing, Domestic Violence*), has told interviewers that once he is given permission to film, he moves quickly, spending weeks shooting and then finding his themes and point of view over the course of several months of editing. But note that there is an inherent structure to Wiseman's work—the rhythms of daily life and of the individual stories he picks up over the course of filming—and a distinctive style that he brings to his films. For an interview (published in *The Boston Phoenix*) about the film *Public Housing*, writer and filmmaker Gerald Peary asked Wiseman if he looked for "drama" while shooting. "The first thought: I'm trying to make a movie," Wiseman responded. "A movie has to have dramatic

sequences and structure. . . . So yes, I am looking for drama, though I'm not necessarily looking for people beating each other up, shooting each other. There's a lot of drama in ordinary experiences." It's also worth noting that Wiseman's style of shooting almost invariably necessitates a high shooting ratio (footage filmed versus footage that ends up on screen) and a lengthy editing period.



Kazuhiko "Yama-san" Yamauchi, in *Campaign*.
Photo courtesy of the filmmaker.

SERENDIPITY

It's not unusual for filmmakers to begin one project, only to be drawn by the characters and situations they encounter toward a film that is both different and stronger than they anticipated. In publicity material for the film *Sound and Fury*, director Josh Aronson says that he initially intended to film five deaf individuals whose experience covered a range of viewpoints on deafness. But in his research, he discovered the Artinians, a family in which two brothers—one hearing, one not—each had a deaf child. This created an opportunity to explore conflict within an extended family over how to raise deaf children. More recently, British filmmaker Orlando von Einsiedel went to Virunga National Park in Congo to tell a "positive story about the rebirth of the region," he says, in Chapter 22, only to be confronted by a much more complex narrative, which he and his team wove together as *Virunga*.

Knowing that the story may change, or is even *likely* to change, doesn't mean that you shouldn't approach a general idea by looking first for the best story you can, given the subject as you then understand it. Knowing at least your baseline story helps you to anticipate, at minimum, what you'll need to make the film, including characters and location setups. When he worked with emerging documentary filmmakers at the University of California, Berkeley, Jon Else said he would require that they head out "with some bomb-proof fallback plan," so that even if everything on the shoot went wrong, they would still come back with something.

EVALUATING STORY IDEAS

Beyond the conviction that a story you're developing will work well as a film, the following important practical considerations may be helpful to consider.

Access and Feasibility

Does your film provide an entrée into new or interesting worlds, and can you obtain access to those worlds? Over the years, documentary filmmakers have taken audiences behind the scenes with Cuban immigrants as they arrive and settle in the United States (*Balseros*); with high school basketball stars as they follow their dreams of professional sports careers amid hardship in Chicago (*Hoop Dreams*); with a billionaire couple whose dream of constructing the largest privately-owned home in the United States is interrupted by economic crisis (*The Queen of Versailles*); with workers engaged in hazardous labor—as coal miners, sulfur carriers, welders, and more—in Ukraine, Indonesia, China, Pakistan, and Norway (*Workingman's Death*).

Aside from exclusive or extraordinary access, any film, even one shot in your grandparents' home, depends on some kind of access being granted, whether it be personal (your grandparents), location (permission to bring your equipment into their home), or archival (access to family photo albums, personal letters and such). Sometimes, *lack* of access may be part of the story, as with Michael Moore's pursuit of General Motors chairman Roger Smith, in *Roger & Me*.

As you develop your idea, you need to determine whether the elements needed for production are really available to you. Can you get inside a cyclotron to film? Will that Pulitzer Prize-winning author grant you an interview? Will you be allowed to follow a third-grade student during that spelling bee? Several years ago, I worked on a science

documentary for which we wanted to film cyclists in the Tour de France to illustrate the conservation of mass and energy. The success of a good portion of that film depended on access to the Tour and to exclusive CBS Sports coverage of it. Had we not been able to arrange these, we would have had to find a different illustration.

As an additional note, gaining access usually means establishing a relationship and building trust with the people who can grant it. This is a professional relationship, although filmmakers often grow very close to their subjects. It's important to respect that trust, so be truthful about yourself and your project from the start. You can generally get people to talk to you even if they know that you don't agree with their position, as long as you make it very clear that they will be given a fair hearing and that you value their point of view. (There are exceptions. Filmmakers such as Nick Broomfield [*Kurt & Courtney*] and Michael Moore may push the boundaries of access as a matter of style; they may show up with the cameras rolling deliberately to put their subjects on edge.)

Affordability

In terms of budget and schedule, is it realistic to think that you can afford to tell the story you want to tell, in the way you want to tell it? Even if digital technology can put a relatively inexpensive camera into your hands, getting your film shot, edited, and technically ready for broadcast or theatrical release will still be very expensive. Even celebrated filmmakers have trouble raising money these days. Have you set your sights too high? Don't think small, just realistically. Know that some types of documentaries are costlier to produce than others, and that "extras," such as the rights to use a clip of archival film from a private collection or a short piece of music from your favorite album, can set you back thousands of dollars.

Passion and Curiosity

Do you care deeply about the subject? Passion is going to be your best weapon against discouragement, boredom, frustration, and confusion. Passion is not the unwavering conviction that you are right and the whole world must be made to agree with you. Instead, it is a commitment to the notion that this idea is exciting, relevant, and meaningful, and perhaps more importantly, that it's something you can look forward to exploring in the months or even years to come.

Passion is also an ingredient that commissioning editors and funders want to see when filmmakers approach them for support.

Filmmaker Hans Otto Nicolaysen used to review proposals for short and documentary films on behalf of Filmkontakt Nord (FkN) in Norway, which he helped to found. His first criteria for making a grant? "Passion," he says. "I always start with the question, 'Why are you telling me this story now?'" Nicolaysen says a proposal should convey not only the filmmaker's skill but also his or her connection to the material.

Passion must come with curiosity, or you risk creating a one-sided diatribe. Few people like being lectured at or told what to think, which is what may happen if you start a project with the conclusion, such as: "I want to show that animal testing is bad." Furthermore, if you already know what you think, why devote months or even years of your life to the film? As you think about issues that you feel strongly about, can you find questions that you'd like to explore? For example, you may think that you can't imagine a single scenario in which animal testing is justified. Are you willing to test that conviction by seeking out, and genuinely listening to, a range of people (scientists, patients, animal rights advocates, and others) who may share your point of view, strongly disagree with it, or more likely fall somewhere in between? If you find the debate of interest, or you come across stories in your research that merit digging deeper, your passion might lead to a viable project. You don't necessarily need to include all or even most of the research you've done on screen. You just need to do your homework, so that whatever story you end up telling contains the complexity it demands and draws viewers in, allowing them to reach their own conclusions based on honestly presented evidence.

Audience

Who is your intended audience? Many documentaries, whether produced independently or in-house, are created with an audience in mind. Even though you may end up reaching a different audience than expected—maybe the project you thought would only play regionally winds up being a national success—it can help to start with some idea of whom you're targeting: age, geographic area, educational level and so on. Are you creating science programming for grade schoolers, or an older audience? Are you hoping your political documentary catches the attention of HBO, or the executives at the PBS series *Frontline*, or audiences at independent art houses? Is your film intended not for broadcast but for use by community or educational groups? Do you hope to release your film theatrically? These questions are worth thinking about early on, because they may affect not only how you research and craft the film but also how and from where you might fund it.

It's also true that some filmmakers begin to work before worrying too much about these questions—the topic is too urgent or the opportunity too fleeting. This was the case with *The Kidnapping of Ingrid Betancourt*, produced and directed by Victoria Bruce and Karin Hayes. In January 2002, they were finalizing plans to film Colombian senator Ingrid Betancourt while she campaigned for the presidency, when they saw on CNN that she'd been kidnapped by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). "When she was kidnapped, we just went into Plan B," remembers Bruce, who headed to Colombia almost immediately. That first shoot lasted 16 days, and two months later, a second shoot lasted 10 days.

"In between that time, we thought, okay, March/April, we're going to cut a trailer together, and we're going to get funding, we're going to get grants," Hayes says—but that didn't happen. Bruce's former boyfriend lent them \$15,000, and the pair paid for the rest with their own savings and with credit cards. They taught themselves to edit, still without funding or any guarantee of an audience. But, Hayes notes, "From the very beginning, when I was imagining where did I want my film to be, and what style did it need to be, I was thinking HBO." That fall, their hopes were realized. At an industry gathering featuring commissioning editors, including one from HBO, Bruce pitched the film, motivating the HBO editor to follow up, attend a screening at Slamdance, and acquire the film [then called *Missing Peace*], with a caveat: It still wasn't ready for HBO.

"They wanted to do some re-editing, and we worked on it for another two months with their editor, Geof Bartz," explains Bruce. "The most important thing they changed was that they wanted you to know that Ingrid was kidnapped up front. We had a slow build of getting to know this woman. And Sheila Nevins [President of HBO Documentaries] said that you will care so much more about her time with her kids in the home video if you know she's going to be gone soon. It's brilliant."

There is no single road from idea to audience. Sometimes events and opportunities necessitate working quickly, before too much is known. Sometimes the subject may seem too obscure or too personal to seek sponsorship early on. In some cases, filmmakers nearly complete their films before submitting them to "open calls" for program slots or festival competition, and in that way they gradually find an audience and possibly funds for completion. But as all of these examples illustrate, at some point in the process, you need to identify whom you're trying to reach, and may want to adjust the storytelling accordingly.



Juan Carlos Lecompte and cardboard figure of his wife, from *The Kidnapping of Ingrid Betancourt*.
Photo by Ana Maria Garcia Rojas, courtesy of the filmmakers.

Relevance

Will anybody care about your film, or can you make them care? This can be a tough one. You may be passionate about fourteenth-century Chinese art or the use of mushrooms in gourmet cuisine, but can you find a compelling story that will be worth others not only funding but watching? It's possible to make people care about all sorts of things, but it usually takes the right approach. For more on this, see Chapter 6.

Timeliness

One aspect of relevance, though not always the most important one, is timeliness, which is not to be confused with the timeline of news reporting. In this context, it means that television executives, for example, may hope to plan documentary programming to coincide with an

event, such as a historical anniversary or a high-profile motion-picture release on a related topic. The fact that a subject is or may become topical, however, is not by itself a reason to pursue it, because by the time you finish the film, interest in that issue may have passed. In fact, the quality of being “evergreen,” meaning the film will have a shelf-life of many years as opposed to many months, can be a positive selling point. A film on elephant behavior or the American electoral process in general may be evergreen, whereas a film that specifically explores a particular environmental campaign or issues in the American presidential campaign of 2016 may not be.

Visualization

Is the story visual, and if not, can you make it visual? This is an important question whether you’re telling a modern-day story that involves a lot of technology or bureaucracy, or you’re drawn to a historical story that predates the invention of still or motion picture photography. A film subject that doesn’t have obvious visuals requires additional foresight on the part of the filmmaker; you’ll need to anticipate exactly *how* you plan to tell the story on film. The opposite may also be true: a subject can be inherently visual—it takes place in a spectacular location or involves state-of-the-art microscopic photography, for example—but you’ll still need to find a narrative thread, if that’s the style of film you’re choosing to make.

Hook

Another question to ask as you evaluate the story is, does it have a hook? In its simplest form, the hook is what got you interested in the subject in the first place. It’s that bit of information that reveals the essence of the story and its characters, encapsulating the drama that’s about to unfold. *Sound and Fury*, for example, is the story of a little girl who wants a cochlear implant. The hook is not that she wants this operation, nor that the implant is a major feat of medical technology. The hook is that the little girl’s parents, contrary to what many in the audience might expect, aren’t sure they want her to have the operation. It’s the part of the story that makes people want to know more.

Jonestown: The Life and Death of Peoples Temple, does not hook audiences with the horror of a mass suicide/murder that took place in 1978, even though the film opens with text on screen announcing the event. Instead, the film’s hook is that it promises viewers an insider’s look at what it means to join a community, only to be drawn inexorably into a terrifying, downward spiral. As discussed especially in

Chapter 7, the hook is often the last piece of the film to come together, as the themes, characters, and story come more clearly into focus and are distilled into the promise you make to the viewers: *This* is what this movie is; *this* is why it's worth your time; *this* is why this story needs to be told and demands your attention.

Existing Projects

What other films or series have been done on the topic, and when? This is useful to know, in part because it may simply inform your own storytelling. What worked or didn't work about what a previous filmmaker did? How will your project be different and/or add to the subject? It's not that you can't tackle a subject that's been covered; look at the range of projects on the American civil rights movement, the threat of nuclear war, or dinosaurs. But knowing as much as you can about your subject also means knowing how else it's been treated on film, not only for the sake of the film but also to bolster your ability to defend the idea to potential funders and distributors.

Is This a Film You'd Want to See?

Given an assignment to research, write, or even make a short documentary on a subject of their choosing, students often seem to go first to "important" topics and the kinds of films that mimic the stereotype of what documentaries are. The initial pitches tend to be for films that are dutiful, critical of the injustice in the world, and in all likelihood nothing like the films they would seek out for entertainment.

Why not think backward? First, it's important to consider what's possible on a fixed schedule and budget (including a time budget); this will likely mean a simpler approach even to a relatively complex issue. But thinking backward also means putting yourself in the position of both filmmaker and audience, and thinking in terms of choice and enjoyment: What sort of film would you enjoy making and, perhaps more importantly, watching? Which filmmakers, films, and subjects are you most drawn to?

DEVELOPING THE STORY

Once you've decided that your idea is worth pursuing, you'll need to start refining the story and planning how you'll tell it. There's no single way to do this, and furthermore, it's a process that tends to continue from the moment an idea strikes you until the final days of postproduction. In general, though, depending on the needs of the project,

the budget, and the schedule, you are likely to at least write some form of outline or treatment, so that you know—before you spend a lot of time and money shooting—that you have a story that works, and can plan not only what you need to shoot but also why.

IF YOU ALREADY KNOW THE STORY, HOW CAN THE FILM NOT BE BIASED OR DIDACTIC?

Knowing your story (or at least the germ of it) at the start of a project is not the same thing as knowing exactly what you want to say and how. It simply means having an idea of the narrative spine on which you could hang your subject and having at least some idea of themes you want to explore. From there, you need to research, develop, and shoot your story with questions and an open mind. Building on an earlier example, as sympathetic to the bakery owners as you may feel at the start of your project, you might come to find yourself sympathizing with developers, or discovering that a third solution, while meaning the end of the bakery, is best for the town.

Every film is different. With a historical film, you know the event itself, and finding the story means figuring out which part of the event you want to explore and what the parameters of that story are—in other words, where you enter and where you exit, which is determined to a large degree by what *story* you're choosing to tell. "You have to draw limits on when the story begins and ends," filmmaker Stanley Nelson explains (Chapter 19). "Sometimes it happens on paper before we start. Sometimes it happens in the edit room, and those are sometimes the hardest decisions to make."

For example, imagine a commission to make a film about Prince Charles and Lady Diana. Well, what about them, what piece of their lives together (or apart) are you choosing to tell? Is it a story of their courtship, marriage, and divorce? Is it a critique of the economics of twentieth-century monarchy? Is it about Diana's activism on behalf of HIV/AIDS, and how that may or may not have affected her standing at home? As noted, your story may shift over the course of making the film, but think about how different your production will be if your narrative spine is their wedding rather than a story of Diana's activism.

As noted, even films that end up advocating a position or idea—that these chemicals shouldn't have been dumped, that law enforcement used too much force, that laws are being broken—will be stronger if those creating them remain open to new and even conflicting

information. The more effectively and truthfully you can present your case and trust your audience's intelligence, the more likely it is that the resulting film will stand up to scrutiny.

TELLING AN ACTIVE STORY

A significant percentage of the documentaries on television these days are about events that are over and done with. You still generally want to craft a narrative that unfolds over the course of the film, so that the outcome appears to be uncertain. One way of doing this is to keep the storytelling (and interviews) in the moment. This means, for example, that witnesses who are interviewed don't say: "I found out later he was fine, but at this point I got a call from somebody, Andy I think it was, he later became mayor, and Andy told me that my boy Jimmy was down the well." Instead, ask your storytellers to stick to what is known at this point in your narrative, moment to moment, such as, "I got a call that Jimmy was in the well. I ran screaming for help."

Telling an active story allows the viewer to come with you through an experience. It builds tension and leaves the ending a surprise. (This works even when the outcome is already known. A good storyteller can get an audience to suspend disbelief and somehow hope with their hearts for an outcome that their heads know is not possible.) If you or an interviewee begin a story by telling us the outcome, you've let all of the suspense out of your story. Surprisingly, this is a common mistake, not only in interviews but in scripted narration. People will write, "Although he wasn't badly hurt, Jimmy had fallen down a deep well."

Does staying in the moment mean that you can't offer interpretations of the past? No. For example, an expert witness might be interviewed saying, "People complain about over-regulation, that there's too much of it. But there are laws that should have made the contractors responsible for sealing that well up. Instead, they left it open, and a little boy fell in." The expert hasn't yet said when or how the boy got out, but he has put this accident into a broader context.

Sometimes, it will seem that a film's subject just doesn't lend itself to a forward-moving story. For example, suppose that members of the local historical society want you to make a film about their town's founding in 1727, and they want to fold in some material about the origins of some of the wonderful old architecture that still survives. They're excited by the fact that many of the local families are descended from early residents, so they have access to a decent collection of old oil portraits as well as photographs and even some letters. What does

it add up to? Not much that will interest anyone who's not a direct relative of the folks on camera, because there's no story being told on screen—yet. When Ken Burns, Ric Burns, and Geoffrey Ward used artifacts and images from the nineteenth century in *The Civil War*, they used them in the service of a powerful story—the North against the South. What's the *story* of this town's history?

In the search for narrative, some filmmakers find a "guide" to the past, such as the town's mayor, who might say, "Let's set out to see where this great city came from," and off he or she goes. But there are often more creative devices, and it can be useful to find a present-day story that would motivate a look back. For example, what if students from a local middle school are researching the town's history in order to write a play that they will perform later that year? That's a possible framework. What if a local builder is trying to restore the town's oldest house, which has been renovated repeatedly over the years? In order to do so he's got to peel back the layers one by one, offering a reason to explore the town's architectural history while also giving us a chance to follow the kind of home building renovation that audiences enjoy. These aren't earth-shattering ideas, but they demonstrate ways to consider a subject that might not seem, at first glance, to have much potential as a film.

"When approaching a film, I always try to find at least two stories that unfold simultaneously," says filmmaker Jon Else. "One of them almost always is a very simple, straight-ahead, forward motion through



Ken "Spike" Kirkland, in *Sing Faster: The Stagehands' Ring Cycle*.
Photo courtesy of Jon Else.

time. For instance, in *Sing Faster*, the forward motion is just the simple story that is told in Wagner's *Ring* cycle, in the operas. It's this crazy soap opera about the gods fighting, a giant Aristotelian drama with characters and rising conflict and resolution and all that. And then parallel to that is the much less linear story of the stagehands preparing this production for opening night."

WORK BACKWARD, EMBRACE LIMITS

This one piece of advice touches on everything else in this chapter, but goes a step farther. First, understand that limitations can be enormously helpful in sparking creativity, while too much freedom can have the opposite effect. Second, be honest about what your limitations are, in terms of experience, access to equipment or personnel, and the level of resources available to you (including not only money but also time). Without substantial resources, you cannot create a comprehensive film history of World War II. Instead, play to your strengths. Find one local World War II veteran, or a group of them who meet weekly to play darts, that sort of thing.

Think about what your end product is going to be and what it will take to get there in terms of your schedule and budget. Be sure to factor in all the costs of finishing the film, especially if you'll need to produce masters and clear rights. Especially, consider your time frame. If you don't have a lot of time to edit, you don't want to go overboard in shooting—you want to shoot less and shoot smarter. And if the overall length of the finished film is limited—in other words, you don't have a lot of *screen time*—that also presents limits, and working backward to incorporate that limit can be useful. Here's an example of this, from Boston-based filmmaker Tracy Heather Strain, whose credits include commissioned films for the PBS series *American Masters* and *Race: The Power of an Illusion*. Earlier in her career, she was talking to a series producer about everything she wanted to include in an hour-long film she was making and where she wanted the story to go. The series producer reminded her that with credits, her film would only run about 55 minutes. Strain says:

It hit me to think about it. All the things I want to say are not going to fit in a 55-minute film. And so one of the first things I do now is look at how long I have [on screen] and I sketch out a little three-act, minute breakdown.

With classic three-act structure (Chapter 4), for example, the first and third acts are roughly a quarter of the film, with the second act roughly

half. A 20-minute film, therefore, needs to get a story going within five or six minutes, with the tension ratcheting up through the second and third acts—a total of maybe 10 to 12 minutes—before reaching a quick resolution. The more focused the story, the better the chances of accomplishing this.

SUMMARY

Going into production with the story in mind, even knowing that the focus is likely to shift, is generally far more effective than just heading out to cover a vaguely defined subject. Jon Else says:

Films don't go over budget because you paid a sound guy too much and put the crew in a hotel for an extra day. They go over budget because people waste two months of editorial time figuring out what the story is. If you're talking about doing inexpensive work, that's the single most important thing, finding a story that comes with a ready-made through line. It's much more cost-efficient to figure out the story beforehand.

The downside, Else notes, is that "it's very, very tough to do any kind of cinema vérité film—which involves really discovering the story—inexpensively." Even when filmmakers carefully select a subject for the strength of its characters and the potential of a strong narrative line, the films, such as *Salesman* or *Control Room*, are built on an observational approach that takes considerable time to shape in an editing room.

SOURCES AND NOTES

Transcripts and additional information about *Daughter from Danang* can be found at the *American Experience* website, www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/daughter/filmmore/pt.html; also see the film website, www.daughterfromdanang.com. Gerald Peary's interview with Frederick Wiseman (*Boston Phoenix*, March 1998) can be found at www.geraldpeary.com/interviews/wxyz/wiseman.html. Additional information on Frederick Wiseman and his films can be found at his website, www.zipporah.com. Information on *Sound and Fury* available at www.nextwavefilms.com/sf/joshnotes.html.