

FIFTH EDITION



DIRECTING the Documentary

MICHAEL RABIGER



DIRECTING THE DOCUMENTARY

Fifth Edition

Michael Rabiger



AMSTERDAM • BOSTON • HEIDELBERG • LONDON • OXFORD • NEW YORK
PARIS • SAN DIEGO • SAN FRANCISCO • SINGAPORE • SYDNEY • TOKYO
Focal Press is an imprint of Elsevier



Focal Press is an imprint of Elsevier
30 Corporate Drive, Suite 400, Burlington, MA 01803, USA
Linacre House, Jordan Hill, Oxford OX2 8DP, UK

© 2009 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Permissions may be sought directly from Elsevier's Science & Technology Rights Department in Oxford, UK: phone: (+44) 1865 843830, fax: (+44) 1865 853333, E-mail: permissions@elsevier.com. You may also complete your request on-line via the Elsevier homepage (<http://www.elsevier.com>), by selecting "Support & Contact" then "Copyright and Permission" and then "Obtaining Permissions."

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Rabiger, Michael.

Directing the documentary / Michael Rabiger.—5th ed.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-240-81089-8 (pbk.: alk. paper) 1. Documentary films—Production and direction. I. Title. PN1995.9.D6R33 2009
070.1'8—dc22

2008044539

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 978-0-240-81089-8

For information on all Focal Press publications
visit our website at www.elsevierdirect.com

09 10 11 12 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in the United States of America

Working together to grow
libraries in developing countries

www.elsevier.com | www.bookaid.org | www.sabre.org

ELSEVIER

BOOK AID
International

Sabre Foundation

DIRECTING

THE DOCUMENTARY

Fifth Edition

For all my students.
Thank you for teaching me so much.

PREFACE TO THE FIFTH EDITION

You want to make documentary films? Most of what you'll need is here to encourage you. Using a hands-on, project-oriented approach and talking to you as an artist and colleague, the book guides you from beginning to advanced levels of competency. Many people are experiential learners and unsuited to absorbing masses of untried information, so the book accommodates several different kinds of learner. See if your profile is here:

- *I learn best from doing, not from a lot of intellectual preparation.* Jump in, do the projects, and use the text for problem-solving when solid issues take shape.
- *I like to feel prepared before I undertake practical work.* Each phase of production includes an introduction, practical hands-on information, and analogies from everyday life to help you adopt a documentarian's procedures and mindset.
- *I really want to direct fiction but think documentary skills might be useful.* Indeed they are. In Chapter 36, From Film School to Film Industry, you'll see how documentary experience develops the confidence to improvise, experiment, and capitalize on spontaneity.
- *I'm doing routine media craft work for a living and wonder whether I can direct documentaries.* Working on the technical side often saps people's confidence to direct, but this is an accessible manual that believes you can make the leap.
- *I have neither time nor money for schooling. Can I still learn to make documentaries?* Emphatically, yes! Many self-starters have used earlier editions of this book to get on their feet. This one should be better still.

This, the fifth edition, has been thoroughly revised and expanded to reflect changing technology and the torrent of fascinating new work. Its changes respond to developments in the learning style, knowledge, and enthusiasm that the Internet generation brings to the genre. It is now two complementary books, each designed to empower a different level of experience and learning. You will now start shooting with less prior reading, and its juxtapositional layout—illustrations, diagrams, boxes containing definitions and project suggestions—reflects today's preference for multilayered information. Bibliographic or Web site information appears where you need it in the text. Suggestions for practical projects appear wherever they are useful. A detailed table of contents precedes each part.

BOOK I: FUNDAMENTALS

For the beginner needing concise, practical information who wants to start getting films up on the screen without delay. Filmmaking is something you must do anyway before theoretical issues gain substance.

Part 1: You and Your Ideas. Recognizes the ambitions you bring to beginning documentary making; introduces what the life is like and helps you recognize formative experiences underlying your artistic identity (yes, it will show you that you already have one).

Part 2: Documentaries and Film Language. How documentaries, technology, and documentary language evolved symbiotically. At each stage, there is a project with which you can explore and internalize the particular language it offers.

Part 3: Preproduction. Creating a brief proposal; turning it into a shooting plan; basic budgeting; getting permissions to shoot; developing a crew.

Part 4: Production. Choosing equipment; camera controls and handling; two-person shooting; basic lighting; essential location sound; directing participants and crew; basic interviewing.

Part 5: Postproduction. Editorial housekeeping; viewings; getting the most from each editing stage; refining your cut; trying it out on trial audiences; preparing and mixing sound; titling; press kit; Web site; shopping your film around festivals where recognition awaits if your work is good enough.

Signposting at salient points in Book I directs you to Book II's information in greater depth, while Book II directs you back to missed or forgotten fundamentals in Book I.

BOOK II: ADVANCED ISSUES

For those ready for professional-level concepts and practices.

Part 6: Documentary Aesthetics. Introduces the notion of the documentary storyteller and what it takes to achieve an individual "voice" in your work. Explores point of view, reflexivity, types of discourse, plot and the three-act structure, the dramatic arc, structuring narrative time. Also, form and style, setting creative limits, using mixed forms such as the docudrama or reconstruction. Questionnaires help you find aesthetic options for any project.

Part 7: Advanced Production Issues. Addresses advanced challenges and difficulties that typically surface during the production cycle. Highlights are:

Part 7A: Advanced Preproduction. Types of research; evidence and exposition; representation and speaking for others; mission and identity issues of the filmmaker; proposing advanced documentaries; the treatment; budget planning; the prospectus. Also, making a directing plan; ensuring dialectics; developing a storyteller's angle; scouting locations; scheduling; solving permission and legal issues.

Part 7B: Advanced Production. Lens optics: space and perception; choosing lens types; perspective and image texture; controlling the look of the film. Drawing up the equipment list; camera settings; options; aesthetics. Advanced location sound: single or double systems; recorders; mixers; microphone types and handling. Organization

of the larger crew; procedures; social and formal issues. Advanced directing: psychology of actors in relation to documentary participants; how the camera changes people; camera coverage options. Also, conducting interviews; camera placement and directing; strategies for interviewing in depth; inward journey monologues.

Part 7C: Advanced Postproduction. Making a script from transcripts; creating narration; improvising for spontaneity. Library music; working with a composer. Editing refinements and structural problems; rhythm and flow; subtexts; diagnostic methods for identifying further problems and solutions.

Part 8: Education and Starting Your Career. Planning a career; choosing a film school and type of degree; internships and creating contacts for life beyond graduation; finding or making a job; creating an identity in the film industry; searching for subjects and markets; applying to funds and foundations; job information and journals; documentary as a prelude to directing fiction.

Appendix. Thirty-two hands-on discovery projects in a common checklist format: Analysis Projects (8), Development Projects (6), Budgeting Projects (2), Shooting Projects (14), and Postproduction Projects (2).

THANKS

Over the last two decades many have contributed help and ideas to this book. My thanks to Peter Attipetty, Camilla Calamandrei, Dr. Judd Chesler, Michael Ciesla, Dan Dinello, Dennis Keeling, Tod Lending, Cezar Pawlowski, Barb Roos, Paul Ruddock, and Bill Yancey. For pictures and pictorial sources, my gratitude to Dirk Matthews and Milos Stehlik of Facets Multimedia.

Thanks to my esteemed teaching colleagues Chap Freeman, Madeleine Bergh, Rolf Orthel, and Otto Schuurman; to CILECT; and to all the teachers and students who made the VISIONS European documentary workshops the undertaking of a lifetime.

At New York University, thanks to Dean Mary Schmidt Campbell, Ken Dancyger, and George Stoney (doyen of the American documentary), as well as the film faculty and students at the Tisch School, for the rare privilege of working with them.

Most of the information for the music chapter came from Paul Rabiger, a composer for film and television. Joanna Rabiger, a documentary editor and researcher, helps keep me current in documentary development. Penelope Rabiger-Hakak, a teacher expert in learning styles, made me understand my early difficulties with traditional education and why I opted for other paths.

Thanks to Doe Mayer, Jed Dannenbaum, and Carroll Hodge for the inspiring exchanges, formal and informal, preceding the publication of their work *Creative Filmmaking from the Inside Out* (2003, Simon & Schuster). My thanks for their permission to summarize some of its ideas.

My greatest debt of gratitude is to Columbia College Chicago, which over three decades encouraged me to implement so many of my ideas. Through the support and vision of Bert Gall and Caroline Latta, the Film/Video Department was radically rethought, expanded, and rehoused during my tenure as chair. Over the years, the college and its Film/Video Department, now under the able leadership of Bruce Sheridan, have shown me great affection and trust.

This edition benefited particularly from generous criticism and suggestions by Ken Dancyger of New York University; Valerie Brown, University of Central Lancashire, U.K.; Michael C. Donaldson; Michael Farrell, University of Nebraska–Lincoln; Tom Fletcher of Fletcher Chicago; Daniel Gaucher, Emerson College; Susan Hogue, University of South Carolina; Mary Healey Jamiel, University of Rhode Island; Laura Kissell, University of South Carolina; Jan Kravitz, Stanford University; David Krupp; Andy Opel, Florida State University; Geoffrey Poister, Boston University; Jennifer Proctor, Grand Valley State University; Linda Sever, University of Central Lancashire, U.K.; Heidi Solbrig, Bentley College; and Shannon Silva, University of North Carolina at Wilmington. If only I was equal to implementing all their suggestions!

Warm thanks to filmmakers Tod Lending, Monica Ahlstrom, Melinda Binks, Evan Briggs, and Orna Shavitt, as well as to the Maine Media Workshops for permission to show Maine work on this book's Web site.

The Focal Press staff has always been a pleasure to know and work with. In particular I want to thank Elinor Actipis, Acquisitions Editor, and Michele Cronin, Associate Acquisitions Editor, for their outstanding encouragement, good humor, and professionalism.

Lastly, heartfelt thanks to my wife Nancy Mattei for her help, patience, and unfailingly kind and astute encouragement. With so much help from so many people, all errors and omissions are mine alone. I should perhaps add that I have no relationship of gain with any of the manufacturers, services, or institutions named in this book and that uncredited images are from my photographic or film work.

Michael Rabiger
Chicago, 2008

CONTENTS

Preface to the Fifth Edition vii

BOOK I: FUNDAMENTALS 1

PART 1: YOU AND YOUR IDEAS 5

- 1 The Director's Role 7
- 2 Defining Your Artistic Identity 27
- 3 Developing Your Story Ideas 36
- 4 Proposing and Pitching a Short Documentary 51

PART 2: DOCUMENTARIES AND FILM LANGUAGE 65

- 5 Documentary Language 67
- 6 Elements and Grammar 99

PART 3: PREPRODUCTION 119

- 7 Research 121
- 8 Developing a Crew 132

PART 4: PRODUCTION 139

- 9 Camera Equipment 141
- 10 Lighting 161
- 11 Location Sound 174
- 12 Directing 195

PART 5: POSTPRODUCTION 205

- 13 Editing: From Start to Viewing the First Assembly 207
- 14 Editing: The Process of Refinement 226
- 15 Editing: From Fine Cut to Sound Mix 238
- 16 Titles and Acknowledgments 250

BOOK II: ADVANCED ISSUES 255

PART 6: DOCUMENTARY AESTHETICS 257

- 17 Point of View and the Storyteller 259
- 18 Dramatic Development, Time, and Story Structure 283

19 Form, Control, and Style 318
20 Reenactment, Reconstruction, and Docudrama 327

PART 7: ADVANCED PRODUCTION ISSUES 335

PART 7A. ADVANCED PREPRODUCTION 337

21 Advanced Research 339
22 Values, Ethics, and Choices 351
23 Proposing an Advanced Documentary 361
24 Preparing to Direct 370

PART 7B. ADVANCED PRODUCTION 383

25 Optics 387
26 Advanced Cameras and Equipment 398
27 Advanced Location Sound 421
28 Organization, Crew, and Procedures 438
29 Advanced Directing 449
30 Conducting and Shooting Interviews 462

PART 7C. ADVANCED POSTPRODUCTION 483

31 Transcript to Film Script 485
32 Creating Narration 492
33 Using Music and Working with a Composer 504
34 Editing: Refinements and Structural Problems 513

PART 8: EDUCATION AND STARTING YOUR CAREER 523

35 Education 525
36 From School to Film Industry 540

Appendix 553
Glossary 631
Index 647

BOOK I

FUNDAMENTALS

Obtaining Films	2	CHAPTER 8	
Of Books, Boxes, Bullets, and		DEVELOPING A CREW	131
Bibliographies	2		
Getting Information via the Internet	3	PART 4:	
		PRODUCTION	139
PART 1:		CHAPTER 9	
YOU AND YOUR IDEAS	5	CAMERA EQUIPMENT	141
CHAPTER 1		CHAPTER 10	
THE DIRECTOR'S ROLE	7	LIGHTING	161
CHAPTER 2		CHAPTER 11	
DEFINING YOUR ARTISTIC		LOCATION SOUND	174
IDENTITY	27	CHAPTER 12	
CHAPTER 3		DIRECTING	195
DEVELOPING YOUR STORY IDEAS	36		
CHAPTER 4		PART 5:	
PROPOSING AND PITCHING		POSTPRODUCTION	205
A SHORT DOCUMENTARY	51	CHAPTER 13	
		EDITING: FROM START TO	
PART 2:		VIEWING THE FIRST ASSEMBLY	207
DOCUMENTARIES AND FILM		CHAPTER 14	
LANGUAGE	65	EDITING: THE PROCESS OF	
CHAPTER 5		REFINEMENT	226
DOCUMENTARY LANGUAGE	67	CHAPTER 15	
CHAPTER 6		EDITING: FROM FINE CUT	
ELEMENTS AND GRAMMAR	99	TO SOUND MIX	238
		CHAPTER 16	
PART 3:		TITLES AND	
PREPRODUCTION	119	ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	250
CHAPTER 7			
RESEARCH	121		

Just think: You can collect little bits of reality—voices, actions, landscapes, images, people talking—weave them artfully into a story, and audiences will watch and wonder. If you are really skillful, they will laugh, be spellbound, or even weep. Your reward? Moving hearts and minds.

This book concentrates on what a documentary maker must think about, feel, do, and know at every stage. Film about actuality is now being used everywhere—on the Internet (most prominently on YouTube™), between friends via cell phone, and at special-interest Web sites, as well as in cinemas and on television via cable, satellite, and the airwaves. Today, anyone can aim to make actuality into cinema-quality documentaries because the equipment and resources are within the common person's reach. What you'll mostly need is a reservoir of ideas, the courage to go where angels fear to tread, and inventive ways of using the medium to tell gripping stories.

OBTAINING FILMS

Many documentaries are cited in this book. You can rent most of them from www.netflix.com, or purchase them from www.amazon.com or from other sources supplying new and used copies. The best-stocked supplier in America is the videothéque Facets Multimedia at www.facets.org, which holds copies of many obscure or international films. Occasionally a film is only available by tracking down its maker via the Internet.

Before you order a film, check that your equipment can play disks of its designated region. Computers generally play any DVD, but manufacturers of dedicated DVD players lock them to a particular region. Look for your player's unlock code via www.dvdxploder.com or by Googling "region free."

OF BOOKS, BOXES, BULLETS, AND BIBLIOGRAPHIES

Books: This, the fifth edition, contains much that is new, and it is now divided into two levels:

- *Book I: Fundamentals* supplies what you need to get into action and learn from actual filmmaking. Each subject area suggests chapters where more advanced information is available.
- *Book II: Advanced Issues* contains information in depth that would only impede beginners. Chapter references refer you back to the fundamentals in Book I, should you need them.

Boxes: Embedded in the text are "Remember Boxes" containing important ideas or definitions. These keep bedrock truths in sight while you work through the details. At salient points you will also find "Project Boxes" suggesting you try a particular hands-on project—always the best way to learn. Most of the projects are in the Appendix with any notes and illustrations, but a few are necessarily embedded in chapters. For simplicity, project descriptions tend to be brief, in a common checkbox format, and gathered under five headings:

- 1-AP Analysis Projects (8)
- 2-DP Development Projects (6)
- 3-BP Budget Projects (2)

- 4-SP Shooting Projects (14)
- 5-PP Postproduction Projects (2)

Bullets and icons: In the text you'll encounter bullet points and icons, each with a function that makes the book easier to navigate:



Important fact or idea.



Actions to take or questions to ask.



Key concept to remember.



Hands-on discovery project for you to make or do.



Resource for greater information.

Bibliographies: Book and Internet sources are either embedded in the relevant text or under "Going Further" at the ends of chapters.

GETTING INFORMATION VIA THE INTERNET

This book's Web site: Go to this book's Web site (<http://directingthedocumentary.com>) for downloadable information such as documentary film examples, production cycle "don't forget" checklists, projects and useful forms, bibliography, list of films cited, etc.

If you are a teacher: See teachers' notes for using this book at the book's Web site. Consider downloading projects, forms, and project assessments so you can customize them for your own teaching purposes.

General information via the Internet: Here are some good resources:

- For *biographies, definitions, or working principles*, try starting with Wikipedia® at www.wikipedia.com.
- For *film information* such as personnel, year, medium, genre etc., try the International Film Database at www.imdb.com.
- For a film and video *resource directory*, links to *equipment providers, materials, software, facilities*, and *services* go to the nonprofit University Film and Video Association (UFVA) at www.ufva.org. Also an excellent source for up-to-date festival, conference, and workshop information too.
- Find *rare film copies or information* by entering the title and director's name in Google. This often leads to the film's Web site, either put up by its distributor or its maker.
- *See portions of films* by entering the title in www.YouTube.com, though the quality may be poor. Watch out that someone hasn't recycled a film's material to make his own statement. Usually it's evident when you're not seeing the genuine article.
- For *reviews and opinions* try Rotten Tomatoes at www.rottentomatoes.com or simply Google the title of a film in quotation marks plus the word "review."

Since Web users freely copy and exchange information, don't bet the farm on anything that could cost you in time and money without first cross-checking that you've got the straight dope.

Technical information:

- Manufacturer Web sites offer FAQ (frequently asked questions) sections.
- Large supply houses are often a mine of good explanatory information.
- At user groups, those freewill areas in which people exchange problems and solutions, you can enter key words associated with your equipment or problem in “Groups” at the Google menu.
- For video and digital technical information of all kinds, try <http://video.thedvshow.com> where you can also find video tutorials and links.

Production information: There are many documentary interest sites, but especially helpful is the one founded by Doug Block and Ben Kempas called The D-Word at www.d-word.com (Figure 0-1). Its archives are a mine; discussions include every level of maker and cover every aspect of production and postproduction. It’s a work of enthusiasts—free, interactive, and with participants from all over the world.

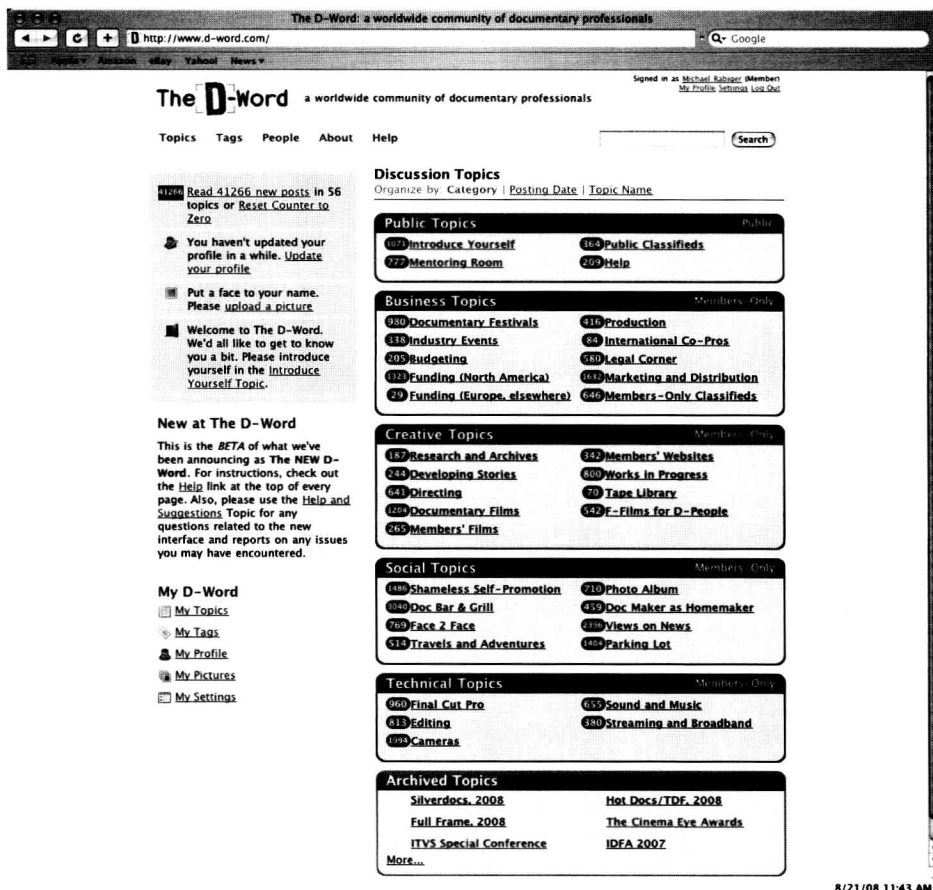


FIGURE 1

The D-Word portal of entry—a helpful, multifaceted, and free Web site for production enthusiasts.

PART 1

YOU AND YOUR IDEAS

CHAPTER 1		CHAPTER 2	
THE DIRECTOR'S ROLE	7	DEFINING YOUR ARTISTIC IDENTITY	27
Who Makes Documentary and Why	7	Quest	27
Making a Living	9	Project 2-1: Values Quiz	28
Documentary Is...	11	Active and Passive	29
An Organized Story with a Meaning	12	"Character Is Fate"	29
Characters Trying to Get, Do,		Creativity	29
or Accomplish	13	Selecting Subjects	29
A Story That Means to Act on		How Has Your Life Marked You?	30
Its Audience	13	Project 2-2: The Self-Inventory	31
Socially Critical	13	Project 2-3: Using Dreams to Find	
Documentary Intentions and Ingredients	14	Your Preoccupations	32
The Work Documentary Does	14	Project 2-4: Alter Egos	32
Actuality	14	Project 2-5: What Is the Family Drama?	33
Unfolding Evidence	15	Project 2-6: Summarizing Your Goals	34
Taking Many Forms	17	Finding Your Artistic Identity	34
Hope	17	If You Lose Your Way	34
The Objectivity Myth and Fairness	17	Progress and the Artistic Process	34
Subjective/Objective	17	Privacy and Competition Issues	35
Documentary Is a Subjective Construct	18	Hostile Environments	35
Fairness	18	Going Further	35
Clarification, Not Simplification	19		
The Director's Journey	19	CHAPTER 3	
The "Contract," Film Openings,		DEVELOPING YOUR STORY IDEAS	36
and Talking to Your Audience	20	Ideation	36
The Filmmaker and the Media	21	Collecting Raw Materials	37
Bearing Witness	23	Journals	37
Documentary as Art	24	Newspapers and Magazines	38
Collaboration	24	Internet	38
Art, Individuality, and Point of View	24		
Going Further	26		

History	38	Subjects to Avoid	49
Myths and Legends	39	Displace and Transform	49
Family Stories	40	Going Further	50
Childhood Stories	41		
Social Science and Social History	42	CHAPTER 4	
Fiction	42	PROPOSING AND PITCHING	
Testing a Subject	42	A SHORT DOCUMENTARY	51
Self-Questioning	42		
Narrowing and Intensifying	43	Why You Need a Proposal	51
Locating the Story Pressures and Raising the Stakes	44	Film Writing Is Different	52
Using the Medium to Stir Feelings	46	Project 4-1: Developing a Brief Working Hypothesis	52
The Shock of Recognition	46	One Conviction, Many Films	55
Primary Evidence	47	Project 4-2: Pitching a Subject	55
B-Roll Blues	47	A Typical Pitch	56
Lecturing Lacks Impact	47	Expanding the Pitch to a Proposal	58
Testing for Cinematic Qualities	48	Proposals for Some Actual Films	59
Mood Matters	48	My Commentary	62
Local Can Be Large	48		
Subject-Driven Versus Character-Driven Films	48		

Part 1 deals with the director's role as prime mover and source of film ideas, with the need for the self-knowledge to know what truly energizes you for the long haul, and with developing a plan for a short film.