ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF DOCUMENTARY FILMMAKING
by Clifton Raphael, Jenks High School film teacher

Planning

- Choose a subject with visual variety and the opportunity to obtain a large amount of b-roll (supplemental footage) and different kinds of b-roll shots.

- Make sure that the main story of your piece is unique in some way. Also ask yourself, “Why would a viewer want to watch this piece? What will make the viewer care about what’s going on in this piece?”

- Make sure that the main people you will be interviewing in your piece are articulate, personable, and enthusiastic about being featured in your film.

- Look at the pieces appearing on jpscinema.com, especially the ones at the top of the “Cinema Plus” playlist. Ask yourself if the piece you’re considering will be similar in quality and interest-level to the pieces appearing on our web site or on the OETA program “Behind the Lens with Oklahoma’s Future Filmmakers.”

Interviewing

- Avoid yes-or-no questions. Ask open-ended questions instead. For instance, instead of asking “Do you like sports?” ask “What sports do you like and why?”

- Ask follow-up questions. A follow-up question is a question based on the answer that your interview subject gave to your last question. Example: Interviewer: “What do you do for fun after school?” Interview subject: “I play piano.” Possible interviewer follow-up questions: “Why do you like playing piano?” “How long have you played piano?” “Why is piano more fun for you than, say, playing video games or surfing the Internet?”

- Ask questions that focus on these three things: the reasons why people do things, the implications of the things people do (example: “How has your involvement in sports affected your friendships?”), and how their lives have been changed by a particular activity or experience.

- Focus on what makes the person profiled in your piece unique. What sets this person apart from other people?

- Always ask yourself the question “Why should anyone care about this piece? What can I shoot in this piece and what interview questions can I ask that will make people care about this piece?”
Production values and shot composition

- How you frame or “compose” your shot (position your interview subjects and the important people and objects in your scenes) is a “production value.”
- Other production values include lighting, focus, choice of shots, shot angles (for instance, low-angle or high-angle), and shot steadiness.
- Strong production values encourage viewers to feel that they’re in the hands of a professional filmmaker.

Headroom

The amount of space between the top of a person’s head and the top of the video frame is called “headroom.” The amount here is nearly ideal (there’s just a smidgen too much). Don’t include much more than this—it’s the mark of an amateur!

- It’s important to include only the minimal amount of headroom in an interview shot. The tighter a shot of a person is, the less headroom you need.
- In close-up shots (and extreme close-ups), the shot usually looks better with no headroom at all. In a close-up, you generally cut off the top of the shot at or near the top of the person’s forehead and the bottom of the shot at or near the person’s chin. That way, the viewer can concentrate on the interview subject’s expression and emotions—since the shot is highlighting the person’s eyes and mouth.

Close-up
(film term)

or

Tight shot
(TV term)

When framing a shot this tight, it’s preferable to completely lose the headroom.

Note: All photo illustrations are direct frame captures from Jenks High School student documentary films.
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When shooting an interview, tighten or widen your shot from one question to another. That way, when you’re editing interview shots into your piece, you’ll have visual variety from one shot to another.

For example, start with:

Then, while the person conducting the interview is asking the next question, the camera operator re-frames tighter (or vice-versa—start tight, then go wider):

**Lead (pronounced LEED) room**

- Lead room is the space to the side of the interviewee’s face.
- If a person is looking to the left (from the viewer or camera perspective), then there should be more space on the left of the screen than there is on the right.
- If the person being interviewed is looking to the right (from the viewer’s perspective), then there should be more space on the right side of the screen than on the left.
Lead room
In this example (from a short documentary featuring the deadCenter Film Festival’s Lance McDaniel), since he’s facing right, the camera operator has correctly included more room on the right side of the frame (though it’s just a tiny bit too much).

Eye level and eye direction

- The interview subject should be looking slightly to the side of the camera.
- The interview subject’s eyes should be at the same level as the camera lens.
- In order to make sure that eye level and direction are correct, the member of your team conducting the interview should stand approximately one foot to the side of the camera; this interviewer should crouch or sit so that his or her eyes are exactly at the level of the camera’s lens.

Eye level & eye direction
Good eye direction and eye level in this interview shot of deadCenter’s Kim Haywood, but…there’s too much headroom and not enough lead room.
Interview backgrounds

- Try to make your interview background interesting, without distracting too much from the person being interviewed. One way to accomplish this is to position the interview subject’s chair at a distance from the background, so that the background will be a little bit out-of-focus. You can have activity going on behind the person being interviewed—just make sure that it relates in some way to what they’re being interviewed about. For instance, if you’re interviewing the quarterback of the football team, you wouldn’t want to see soccer players on a field in the background.
- Avoid placing your interview subject against a dull or ugly background.

So…
Good background (from a piece about girls’ volleyball):

And…
Bad—no, make that terrible!—background:

To add insult to injury, there’s also too much headroom here, not enough lead room (he’s too centered; there should be more room on the left side of the frame), and he’s looking too far away from the camera.
Another example of a good background—and it’s relevant to the subject, a short documentary about water levels in the Arkansas River. The headroom, lead room, eye direction and eye level are all pretty good here too:

Focus

- Focus is used to direct the viewer’s attention to a particular person or thing in your shot.
- Editing programs will often allow you to fix, or at least lessen, problems with your shot. For example, if you didn’t light your shot properly or use your camera’s iris correctly, your shot may be too dark. The higher-end programs—such as Avid, Final Cut, or Adobe Premiere—have video effects (usually contained within a filter or filter set called “Color Correction”) that will help brighten the shot. However, especially when shooting high-definition (HD) video, it’s tougher to fix focus problems in post (short for post production, which essentially means the work that’s done after all of the shooting—often referred to as “principal photography”—for a film has been completed).
- It’s especially important to make sure that your interview subject is in focus when filming your interview shots.

Manual focus on interviews

Some cameras you may have used—such as DSLRs or smart-phone cameras—have the ability to find the face in a shot and automatically focus on it. Many high-end video cameras, such as the Panasonic AG-AC90 and Sony EX-1, do not. For cameras such as these, be sure to switch to manual focus, then zoom in as far as you can on your subject’s face, being sure to include the person’s eye (since that’s usually the part of the face of greatest visual interest).
**Racking focus**
After switching to manual focus and zooming in as far as you can on the person’s face, grab the focus ring (usually the largest ring located closest to the lens itself) and move the ring to the left until the image is out of focus then to the right through the point where the image is in focus until it’s out of focus again to the right. This process of changing focus is called “racking focus.”

**Achieving sharp focus**
Continue moving the ring left and right in smaller increments until you find the “sweet spot” in the middle where the image is perfectly in focus.
(Turning on a camera feature called “peaking” or “focus assist” can be helpful. This feature will highlight in color the edges of what’s in focus.)

Then pull out to frame your shot properly:

But be careful! Don’t switch back to automatic focus. If you do, then the video camera’s focus sensor may refocus on the background—since for cameras without “floating” sensors, this sensor is often located in the center of the frame. The result can be a shot where the background is in focus instead:
B-roll

- B-roll is the supporting footage that’s not your a-roll (a-roll consists of your interview shots).
- Generally, it’s more visually interesting for a viewer to watch b-roll than to watch an a-roll shot (sometimes called a “head shot”) of an interview subject talking. Exceptions to this “rule” include when the interview subject shows emotion—which can include sadness, excitement, joy, or even just passion for what he or she is talking about.
- Generally (there are some interesting professionally produced exceptions to this), b-roll should contain a mix of wide (a.k.a. “long”) shots, medium shots, tight shots (a.k.a. “close-ups”) and OTS (over-the-shoulder) shots.

A close-up
Instead of using a medium shot of the makeup artist’s face, the filmmaker chose the close-up to force our attention on the “burn wound” she’s creating.

Another close-up
By positioning the elf at a distance from its background, and the video camera at a distance from the elf—then zooming in to obtain the tight shot—the filmmaker here has also produced a nice soft-focus background, an effect known as “shallow depth of field.”

An interior establishing shot
The shot “establishes” where we are—a school hallway.
The “glance-object” pair

- Whenever you show a person looking at someone or something—the “glance” shot—be sure to either precede it or follow it with the “object” shot, which shows what the person is looking at.
- The “glance” can be tight, medium, or (rarely) wide—as long as the viewer’s attention is clearly drawn to the fact that the main person in the shot is looking at something or someone.
- The “object” shot can be tight, medium, or wide—and if medium or wide, can include the person whose tight glance we saw in the glance shot of the pair of shots.
The “rack focus” shot

- In the section on focusing an interview shot, we discussed “racking focus” by moving the focus ring manually (by hand).
- A filmmaker can deliberately include a rack focus in the edited piece to draw the viewer’s attention from one important person or object in a b-roll shot to another.

Here the filmmaker racks focus to draw our attention from the young man in the foreground…

…to the young woman in the background.

Steady shots

- Whenever possible, use a tripod when filming b-roll to make your shots steadier.
- If filming on tripod just isn’t feasible—for instance, when you need to move from place to place or change angles quickly—be sure to observe proper handheld technique.

Proper technique
Close the LCD monitor and use the viewfinder instead. Then become a “human tripod” by cradling the camera in your hands while bracing your elbows against your chest or stomach.

Wrong technique
This is how your grandmother filmed your school play, by looking through the LCD monitor rather than the viewfinder. And how many Emmys or Oscars did she win?
**REVIEW**
What are the strengths and weaknesses of the shot composition for the three interview shots below? (answers on the next page):
Good headroom.
Good lead room.
Good background (the vintage film camera, relevant to the subject).
Good eye level, but he’s looking too far away from the camera, so the interviewer should have positioned himself closer to the side of the camera lens.

Pretty much ideal:
Good headroom.
Good lead room.
Excellent background (for a profile piece on an elementary school teacher).
Good eye level and eye direction.

Too much headroom.
Not quite enough lead room.
A pretty drab background—the plant helps break it up, though be careful to frame background objects so that they don’t look like they’re either sticking out of or growing from the back of the interview subject’s head. Fortunately, that’s not really the case here.
Regarding eye direction and eye level, the filmmaker has the senator looking a little too far from the camera, and a little too low.