

How to write a documentary *treatment* or *proposal*.....

Scripts are often not used in documentary films—because you cannot predict what will happen when the camera is rolling. In place of a script, filmmakers use treatments, proposals, or even outlines--to describe and help plan a documentary project. There is a lot of overlap between these concepts and different filmmakers use them in similar and often interchangeable ways.

A *treatment* is a short story narrative written in simple, non-technical language (ie. no camera angles, transitions, etc.).

A *proposal*, which frequently includes a treatment, is a thorough description of all aspects of a project. It is created in the pre-production stage of a documentary project to persuade funders, distributors and others to support the project.

Proposals

An effective proposal will:

- Tell a good story
- Make human truths emerge through images—not just verbal description.
- Present a personal, critical perspective on some aspect of the human condition.
- Inform and emotionally move an audience

Usually a proposal will contain the following information:

- Length of work, format.
- Who is the intended audience?
- Goal or intended purpose(s) of the film
- Has any media work already been produced on this subject? If so, what is new, different, interesting, engaging about your approach?
- Style (Any key stylistic elements in writing, shooting, audio, editing, etc.)
- What about the soundtrack? (Any music, narration, etc.—If so, who? what?)
- Who is working on the project? And what similar projects have they done in the past? (Credibility of production team)
- How will this work be distributed? (Which markets, any distributor on board already?)
- Project history or current status of project.
- Historical background or context of the story
- Who, what, where, when, how, why?

Depending on the situation, you may choose to include the following: How will the project be funded? An outline production schedule.

A proposal will usually be accompanied by a budget and a sample reel or work-in-progress edit.

The goal of a proposal is to communicate your idea to someone who may know nothing about either you, your previous work, or this project—don't make assumptions. Usually a proposal is a key element in securing resources to produce a project--so the credibility of the production team, and such factors as 'Why this film?' 'Why now?' and 'Why these producers?' are important.

Treatments

Whereas a proposal presents its argument rationally via categorized information, the treatment evokes how an audience will *experience* the film on the screen. Write in the active-voice in present tense. Tell the reader what they will see and hear on the screen.

Describe the story and introduce any characters. Write colorfully, so the reader visualizes what's in your mind's eye—but avoid splashy adjectives and hyperbole wherever possible (ie: Do not write: "This *spellbinding* story will be *magically* brought to life by the *remarkable* camera work of Jane Spriggs..." You have to show how the story is *spellbinding* and demonstrate that Ms. Spriggs work is *remarkable* by providing supporting information. A treatment is not necessarily brief! (usually 2-10 pages, double-spaced)

Be specific—don't use words like *may*, *might*, *possibly*—your film will do xyz. If you don't know exactly which music you will use—make your best guess—you can always change your mind later. It is not always possible to answer all these questions, in many cases you will write what you *expect* to occur.

Treatments and proposals are used to:

1. Describe a project so that people involved share an understanding of interpretation and approach.
2. Create a paper document that can help secure funding, distribution, and other resources.
3. Provide guidance in the structuring and editing of a documentary project.

You should only write a treatment or proposal after conducting the initial research that will answer as many of the questions listed above as possible. You might visit a library, scan a newspaper archive online, or contact institutions and individuals by phone or email to expand your knowledge of the subject at hand.

Be professional—not personal. Never make up partners or awards etc. (For example, Do not write that, "Disney is on board..." if you do not have such an agreement. Often letters are attached to a proposal to certify such relationships.

Write and re-write the proposal until it is fluid. Some funders and agents have their own format for proposals—they will not read documents that are not in the prescribed format. Check first.