

into account the different circumstances (such as the absence of one member) likely to occur. For instance, in the absence of the director, or when the director is occupied, the camera operator leads the crew and makes necessary decisions. Crew members should in any case be discouraged from taking any and every query to the director, when perhaps the camera operator could take the load from your shoulders. A director has enough of a burden without having to decide if someone should put another coin in the parking meter.

When first working together, stick to a formal working structure in which everyone takes care of his own responsibilities, and refrains from comment or action in all other areas. As people come to know and trust each other, the formality can be relaxed. If on the other hand you start out informal and discover after all that you need a tight ship, the changes will be mightily resented.

You might say that a small film crew—director, camera operator, sound recordist, grip, and production manager—also consists of prophet, visionary, scribe, strong man, and fixer. Someone will always assume the role of jester or clown, for each crew develops its own set of roles and its own special dynamic. The pleasure that comes from working effectively as a group is the best intoxicant you can imagine, and seems to be especially strong during times of greatest pressure. And there's no hangover the morning after. Careful selection of partners makes anything possible. A team of determined friends is unstoppable.



## CREW ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

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I will try to assign desirable personality types and backgrounds to the different crew positions. Of course, in real life many of the best practitioners are the exceptions, but here anyway is an outline of each crew member's responsibilities and the strengths and weaknesses you can expect to find. To make the list complete, I have included a summary of the director's role as well.

### DIRECTOR

The director's responsibility is for nothing less than the quality and meaning of the final film. This means that he must conduct or supervise research, assemble a crew, decide on content, schedule shooting, lead the crew and direct participants during shooting, as well as supervise the editing and finalization of the project. Frequently, because there are no fat profits in view, the documentary has no producer, so the director must additionally assemble funding before the making of the film, and hustle distribution afterwards.

A good director will have a lively, inquiring mind fascinated by the causes and effects underlying the way people live, a mind that tries to find hypothetical links and explanations. She likes people and enjoys delving into ordinary people's stories. Outwardly informal and easygoing, she is actually very methodical and organized, though able to throw away prior work if she finds her assumptions have become obsolete. A good director has endless patience in stalking the truth and in doing the truth justice in cinematic terms. A director needs to be articulate and succinct, and to know her own mind without being in any way dictatorial. She should know enough about each

craft to speak on terms of respectful equality with any of her technicians, and thus be able to understand their problems and co-opt their efforts into realizing her intentions.

If this sounds impossibly idealistic, here are some of the negative traits that make even good directors all too human. Many are obstinate, private, awkward beings who do not explain themselves very well, who change their mind, and who are disorganized and visceral. Most can be intimidated by bellicose technicians. They find difficulty in giving appropriate time and attention to both the crew and the participants, and often tend to desert one for the other. During shooting, sensory overload catapults many into a Woody Allen condition of acute doubt and anxiety in which all choice becomes a painful effort. Some cannot bear to deflect from their original intentions, and appear to crew members like an obsessive captain who insists on sinking at the wheel of an imaginary ship.

Directing frequently changes perfectly normal people into manic-depressives who suffer extremes of hope and despair in pursuit of the Holy Grail. If that isn't enough of a puzzle to crew members, the director's mental state often generates superhuman energy and endurance that test crew members' patience to the limit.

The truth is, I suppose, that directing an improvisation from life, which must then crystallize life itself, is a heady business. The person responsible for coordinating the efforts that go into doing this successfully is living existentially; that is, fully and completely in the moment. Living existentially has also been defined as living each moment as if it were your last, and directing a movie usually ensures that this happens whether you like it or not. This is especially true after an initial success: thereafter you face failure and artistic/professional death every step of the way. Just as mountaineers say they truly feel the value of life only when they are dangling over a precipice, so the film director feels completely alive as he experiences the dread and exhilaration of the cinematic chase. Like stage fright for actors, this is a devil that never really goes away.

But, then, isn't the portent of any worthwhile experience that it makes you rather afraid?

### CAMERA OPERATOR

In the minimal crew the camera operator is responsible for ordering the camera equipment and videotape recorder, for testing and adjusting that equipment where necessary and for being thoroughly conversant with its working principles. No important work should ever be done without running tests as early as possible in order to forestall Murphy's Law ("Anything that can go wrong will go wrong"). The camera operator is also responsible for lighting arrangements, for scouting locations to confirm electricity supplies, and for supervising the setting up of the lighting instruments.

The camera operator is also responsible for the handling of the camera, which means she takes an active role in deciding camera positioning (in collaboration with the director), and physically controls the camera movements such as panning, tilting, zooming in/out, and dollying. (Technical terms are explained in the glossary.)

The camera operator should of course be image-conscious, preferably with a track record in photography and fine art. Out of this you should hope for a

sense of composition and design, and an eye for the sociologically telling details found in people's surroundings. It is also an advantage if your candidate picks up on the kind of behavioral nuances that tell so much about character.

In documentary camerawork, which is sometimes "grab-shooting," it must often be the camera operator who decides, moment to moment, what to shoot. While the director sees *content* happening in front of (sometimes behind) the camera, the operator sees the action in its framed, cinematic form. The director may redirect the camera to a different area, but much of the time only the operator knows exactly what is being recorded, so the director must be able to place considerable reliance upon the operator's discrimination.

For this reason a camera operator needs to be decisive and dexterous. Depending on the weight of the equipment, he may also need to be robust. Keeping a 20-pound camera up on your shoulder for an eight-hour day isn't for the delicate, nor is loading equipment boxes in and out of vehicles. The job is dirty, grueling, and at times intoxicatingly wonderful. The best camera people seem to be low-key individuals who don't ruffle easily in crises. They are practical and inventive, and like improvising solutions to intransigent logistical, lighting, or electrical problems. What you hope to find is a perfectionist who will still try to get the best and simplest solution when time is short.

Rather alarmingly, quite a number of experienced camera personnel will isolate themselves in the mechanics of their craft at the expense of the director's deeper quest for themes and meanings. One such replied to a question of mine with: "I'm just here to make pretty pictures." He might have added, "and not get involved."

While it can be troublesome to have frustrated directors in one's crew, it can be disastrous to find you have a crew of isolated operatives. The best crew members comprehend both the details and the totality of a project and can see how to make the best contribution to it. This is why a narrow "tech" education is simply not good enough.

### GAFFER

The gaffer is an expert in rigging and maintaining lighting equipment, and who knows how to split lighting loads in order to make them run off light-duty household supplies without starting fires or plunging the whole street into darkness. Good gaffers carry a bewildering assortment of clamps, gadgets, and small tools. Resourceful by nature, they sometimes emerge as the mainstay of the unit when others get discouraged or defeated. During a night shooting sequence in England, I once saw a boy stumble behind the lights and hurt his knee. Because he had been told he must be silent while we were shooting, he doubled over and clutched his knee in mute agony. The kindly electrician (as the gaffer is called in Britain), swooped silently out of the gloom and cradled him in his arms until the shot was finished.

Because the gaffer is usually the only person unemployed when the camera is running, he may be the only person with a whole and unobstructed view of the action. Directors in doubt therefore sometimes find themselves discreetly asking how the gaffer felt about a certain piece of action.

Gaffers are usually chosen by the person responsible for lighting (cinematographer or videographer), and the two will often work together regularly.

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An experienced gaffer gets to know a cinematographer's lighting style and preferences, and can even arrive ahead of a unit doing exteriors to pre-light. Teams who have worked together for a long time even dispense with a need for much spoken language.

### SOUND RECORDIST

In an inexperienced crew the unfailing casualty seems to be sound quality. It would appear that capturing clear, clean, and consistent sound is either deceptively demanding, or sound recording lacks the glamour to induce people to try. Probably both are true. Another obstacle is that even quite expensive video recorders have a propensity for picking up every known electrical interference, allied to a sound quality that would disgrace even one of the humbler cassette recorders. Improvements are in the pipeline, but many older machines will survive to bring hot tears of rage to the low-budget filmmaker.

It is the sound recordist's responsibility to check equipment in advance, and to solve malfunction problems as they arise. The sound recordist therefore needs to have patience, a good ear, and the maturity to be low man on the totem pole. For in an interior setup, lighting and camera position are determined first, and the sound recordist is expected to somehow position his mikes without them being seen, without causing shadows, and still achieve first-rate sound quality. A shoot therefore turns into a series of aggravating compromises that the sound person is all too inclined to take personally. A significant number of professionals turn into frustrated people inhabiting a world in which "good standards" are routinely trampled. Again, it is the disconnected craftsman rather than the whole filmmaker who cannot see the necessity and priority of compromise.

Because the sound recordist should listen not to words but to *sound quality*, it is immensely useful to have someone who has specialized in music, and who can listen analytically to a track and actually hear the kind of buzz, rumble, or edginess that the novice will unconsciously screen out. The art of recording has very little to do with recorders, and everything to do with the selection and placement of mikes, and *being able to hear the difference*. There is no independent assessment possible apart from the discerning ear. Only musical interests and, better still, a musical training seem to instill this critical faculty. Sound recording is considered easy and unglamorous among the uninitiated, and is often left uncritically to anyone who says he can do it. But badly recorded sound disconnects the audience even more fatally than a poor story. Most student films, if you close your eyes, sound like studies of characters talking through mashed potato in a labyrinth of echo-y bathrooms.

The sound recordist is often kept inactive for long periods and then suddenly expected to "fix up the mike" in short order. It helps to have the kind of mind that habitually makes contingency plans. The less satisfactory recordist is the one who only begins to think when her setup time comes, and who then, and only then, asks for a lighting change.

A lot of documentary work is done with a mobile unit. The recordist has to keep the mike on the edge of the camera's field of view, and as close to the sound source as possible, without casting shadows or letting the mike creep into frame. With a camera handheld and on the move, this takes quite a bit of skill and agile, quiet footwork.

### GRIP

A grip's responsibility is to fetch and carry. He or she also has the highly skilled and coordinated job of moving the camera support to precisely worked out positions when the camera takes mobile shots. It follows that grips should be strong, practical, organized, and willing. On the minimal crew they will help to rig lighting or sound equipment. They will probably turn on and off the videotape deck, and they may leave the crew to fetch or deliver while shooting is in progress. A skilled grip knows something about everyone's job and in an emergency can do limited duty for another crew member.

### PRODUCTION MANAGER

The "PM" is probably a luxury on a minimal crew, but there are many people whose business background equips them to do this job surpassingly well. The PM takes care of all the arrangements for the shoot. These might include finding overnight accommodations, booking rented equipment to the specifications of camera and sound people, making up a shooting schedule (with the director), making travel arrangements and locating restaurants near the shoot. The PM will watch cash flow (if there is one!) and have contingency plans in case bad weather stymies exterior shooting. He or she will progress-chase and prepare the way in advance. All of this lightens the load on the director, for whom these things are an unnecessary and counterproductive burden.

It is hardly necessary to say that the good PM is organized, a compulsive list-keeper, socially adept and businesslike, and able to scan and correlate a number of activities. He must be able to juggle priorities, make decisions involving time, effort, and money, and be the kind of person who is unintimidated by officialdom.



### EQUIPMENT SELECTION: DRAWING UP A WANT LIST

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In a book of this kind it is not possible to give many details about what equipment is desirable. If you own or are borrowing equipment, you will in any case have to work within its capacities. However, there are some broad recommendations.

When you shoot to test personnel and basic control over the medium, use the cheapest analogous medium that will give you talking pictures—1/2-inch (Beta or VHS) for videotape and Super-8 if you are eventually going to be shooting on film.

Sit down as a group and brainstorm over what you think you need. Make lists and don't forget to take basic tools with you. It is very rare that some piece of equipment doesn't need corrective surgery on the job.

Plan to shoot as simply as possible, aiming for straightforward solutions rather than elaborate ones. Any decisions about the style of the movie—how it looks, how it's shot, how it conveys its content to the audience—are best developed organically from the nature of the subject. The best solutions to problems are usually elegantly simple. Insecure technicians sometimes try to forestall problems by insisting on a need for the "proper" equipment, which usually means the best and most expensive. This can be a costly gesture to

neurosis, because initially you will be trying to conquer basic conceptual and control difficulties, and will have little use for the sophistication of advanced equipment. You should make it your business to learn as much as you can about all the technical functions in the shoot so you and your PM can decide what outlay is truly justified. Some extra items turn out to be life savers, but many more cost money and are never used.

Remember, it is human ingenuity, not just equipment, that makes good films.

Read all equipment manuals carefully; there is always vital and overlooked information there. At the end of this book there is a bibliography that can lead you to much more detailed information on the techniques of lighting, sound recording, and so on.

Do not be discouraged if your camera has every known design defect. There is no camera without handicaps, and no film ever made without equipment problems. Indeed, the first chapter of film history, so rich in creative advances in the medium, was after all shot with hand-cranked cameras made out of wood and brass.



## PREPRODUCTION SUMMARY

### During Preproduction, remember that:

- Preparation is the key to coherent moviemaking.
- Documentary making is long and slow: be ready for enthusiasm to dim.
- You need to find subjects in which you can make a personal, emotional, long-term investment.
- Behavior, action, and interaction best show how people live.
- Documentaries are only as good as the relationships that permit them to be made (this applies to crew as well as participants).
- Most people blossom when given lights, camera, and a sympathetic hearing.
- You must act responsibly and treat the lives you enter with care.
- You'll face moral dilemmas in which the greater good is often pitted against a sense of obligation to an individual.
- You should avoid situations where you may be expected to give up editorial control.
- You must know in advance of shooting what you want to say through the film.
- It's not a documentary unless it makes the audience want to weigh evidence and make judgments about human values.
- A documentary shares a way of seeing and evokes feelings.
- You must be ready to supplement or modify your original vision.

- No plans lead to no film: the pressures of shooting will prevent radical inquiry.
- Research is useless unless focused into specific plans for shots, sequences, or questions. Generalization is the enemy of art!
- Good documentary, like any good drama, shows people in some kind of struggle, and shows change and development. Development is often missing in documentaries, and this makes them feel static and pointless.
- You need to find ways to bring conflicting values into on-screen confrontation with each other.

**In Preproduction, don't:**

- Bite off more than you can chew.
- Set out to make a film that merely confirms what anyone would expect of the subject.
- Stretch your resources too thin or your subject too wide.
- Be put off by participants' initial reservations and hesitancy. Keep explaining and see what happens.
- Force people into situations or attitudes that aren't theirs.
- Tell anyone you are filming anything until it is 100 percent sure.
- Promise to show footage if by doing so you lose editorial freedom.
- Allow yourself to act as if you are begging favors, especially with officials. Make requests sound natural and rightful, and you'll often get the moon.

**When searching for a subject:**

- Make a habit of maintaining several project ideas on the back burner.
- Read avidly about what's going on, and keep a subject notebook and clipping file
- Reject the obvious subject and the obvious treatment.
- Only take on something that matches your capabilities and budget.
- Make a conscious effort to discover and reveal the unexpected.
- Define what you want to avoid as well as what you want to show.
- Think small, think local, think short. Do something contained and in-depth.

**When researching a particular subject:**

- Expect researcher's stage fright.
- Take a research partner with you, and exchange impressions afterwards.
- Be purposely tentative and general when you explain your project.
- Be friendly and respectful, and signify that you are there to learn.
- Make a prioritized shopping list of possible participants.
- Make a shopping list of sequences and define what each might contribute.
- Keep your options open and make no impulsive commitments.

**When you've found a subject, ask yourself:**

- Do I *really* want to make a film about this subject?
- In what other subjects am I already knowledgeable and opinionated?
- Do I feel a strong and emotional connection to this subject, more so than any other practicable one?
- Am I equipped to do justice to this subject?
- Do I have a drive to learn more about this subject?
- What is this subject's *real* significance to *me*?
- What is unusual and interesting about it?
- Where is its specialness really visible?
- How narrowly and deeply can I focus my film's attention?
- What can I *show*?
- What recent films am I competing with?
- What can I reveal that will be novel to most of the audience?
- What are my prejudices that I must be careful to examine?
- What are the facts an audience must know in order to follow my film?
- Who is in possession of those facts? How can I get more than one version?
- What change and development can my film expect to show?

**When talking with possible participants:**

- Assume the right to be uncommonly curious and questioning.
- If they ask about your ideas, try to turn the conversation so you learn theirs.
- Go at the participant's speed, or you'll damage trust and spontaneity.
- Use a "student of life" attitude to encourage the participant to see himself in an instructional role.
- Use the "devil's advocate" role to tread in risky areas without implicating yourself.
- Watch, listen, and correlate what you take in with what else you know.
- Use networking: ask to be passed on to the next person. It always helps to have been personally referred.
- Evoke each person's private view of the others as a cross-check.
- Do some informal, nonaggressive audio interviews to see if being "on record" hinders participants' spontaneity.

**When deciding what and how to shoot:**

- Define what each participant's function is in life.
- Define what each might represent or contribute as a character in your film.
- Give each character and situation a metaphorical role.
- Define what each sequence should contribute to the whole.
- Define what microcosm your subject is, and what macrocosm it represents.

- Define what conflicts are at the heart of your drama and how to show them in confrontation on the screen.

**When defining the working hypothesis:**

- What is the minimum your film absolutely must be able to say?
- What are the conflicts you want to show?
- What are the contradictions in the people and their situations?
- What is each person's "unfinished business"?

**When scheduling:**

- Schedule loosely, especially to begin with. Other people need food and rest!
- Place least demanding work first.
- Discuss scheduling in advance with those affected.
- List special equipment or special requirements on the schedule.
- Take into account travel time.
- Make sure there are phone contact numbers in case anyone gets lost or delayed.
- Give a typed schedule to crew and participants ahead of time.
- Give clear navigational directions, plus map photocopies to drivers.
- Obtain location clearances well in advance.
- Have personal release forms and fees ready for shoot.