Story creation tips

Creating a video is a multistep process: planning, shooting, interviewing, writing, and editing. During each stage of the process, you develop your story to best reach your audience. The tips in this guide describe ways to plan, shoot, and capture moments to make your videos compelling. These are maxims from NBC-TV Today Show correspondent Bob Dotson.

Dotson regularly presents seminars on how to create stories on video. His principal themes are:

- Give viewers a reason to remember the story.
- When interviewing people, try not to ask questions. Merely make observations. Making observations puts people at ease so they reveal their emotional and human side.
- Be sure to get a closing shot. Most video producers look for dramatic opening shots or sequences (a good thing), but your viewers are more likely to remember the closing shot.

Bob Dotson's Storyteller's Checklist

Dotson prepared his Storyteller's Checklist with TV news reporters in mind, but his tips apply to students, professionals, corporations, and home video producers as well.

Video shooting and editing tips

- Create a strong close, something you build toward throughout the story. Ideally, the ending is also visual.
- Build your report around sequences: two or three shots of a guy buying basketball tickets, two or three shots of a couple drinking coffee at a kitchen table, and so on. Sequences demand matched action.
- Use strong natural sound to heighten realism, authenticity, and believability and to heighten the viewer's sense of vicarious participation in the events you're showing. Some reports merely let the audience watch what happened. The best reports make it possible to experience what happened.
- Short sound bites prove the story you are showing. Don't use sound bites as substitutes for your storytelling. Present the facts and let your interviewees present the feelings.

Writing tips

- Always remember that the reporter (or narrator) is not the story.
- Make sure you know what you want the audience to take away from the story. Formulate this theme to yourself to help guide the story creation. Then use your images to prove that theme visually. Very seldom will you state the theme verbally in any story.
- Write to your pictures first. Write a strong lead that instantly telegraphs the story to come.
- Keep the main body of the story to three to five main points, and prove them visually after you've identified them.
- Write loose. Avoid being too wordy. Be hard on yourself as a writer. Say nothing in the script that your viewers would already know or that the visuals say more eloquently.
- Allow for moments of silence. Stop writing occasionally and let two or three seconds or more of compelling action occur without a voiceover. For a writer, nothing is more difficult to write than silence. For viewers, sometimes nothing is more eloquent.
- Build in surprises to sustain viewer involvement. Surprises help viewers feel something about the story; they lure uninterested viewers to the screen. Surprises can be visuals, wild sounds, short bites, or poetic script. Always, surprises are little moments of drama.
- Tell your story through people. People sell your story. Try to find strong central characters engaged in compelling action that is visual or picturesque.

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- Address the larger issue. “A trailer home burned down” fails to meet the “so what?” test. “The trailer home burned down because the walls are full of flammable insulation” meets the “so what?” test because it describes the larger issue.
- Finally, make your story memorable. Can your viewers feel something about the story and its subjects? If feeling is present, the story will be memorable. It will stick in the viewers’ minds.

Bob Dotson—NBC-TV reporter

Bob Dotson is one of the nation’s top network-television feature reporters. He has received more than 100 awards for his work in broadcast journalism, including four National Emmys. The Society of Professional Journalists cited Dotson for the Best Network Feature Reporting of 2004, and the Radio and Television News Directors Association honored him for Best Network News Writing.

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