

# Taking Digital Stories to Another Level: Making Documentaries

GILDA MARTINEZ-ALBA

Towson University

Using digital stories to have students tell about themselves, share their culture with the class, and learn from each other can help with establishing rapport, shows respect for different cultures, and can be motivating for students and their language teachers. However, what happens after that? After making their first video, students have some basic background knowledge about making a video; therefore, it would be advantageous to use this new knowledge and build on it by taking video making to the next step to make documentaries. Teachers and students could use the structure of a documentary to build language skills while improving their video editing skills to create interesting short documentaries, which can teach about the course content, history, science, health, citizenship, and so on. This article will cover the steps and structure involved in making a documentary, tips for making it look and sound good, and ideas for free editing software for the computer as well as the phone and iPad.

*doi: 10.1002/tesj.169*

A digital story is usually provided by a first person and the focus is on the process of making it rather than on the product or the film itself. It can be thought of as an emerging documentary form, because it provides facts and perhaps even wants to make people think differently about a topic, whereas, in a documentary, multiple viewpoints bring together a topic, and the product is as important as the process of making it (Sanchez-Laws, 2010). Documentaries are also more structured than digital stories. Renov (1993) stated that there are four aspects to a documentary: to uncover, influence, examine, and explain. Digital stories may

include some or all of these areas, but tend to be more personal in nature and are not bound to including these.

Fehn and Schul (2011) researched what aspects of documentaries students submitting to the National History Day contest had, and they found that students found images and made video recordings, edited their films, narrated them, included a soundtrack such as music and sound effects, interviewed experts, and provided citations. They concluded that “new technologies can work powerfully to engage the cognitive and affective skills of teachers and students” (p. 40). They can also be used to develop the language domains of reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Another study conducted in an eighth grade history class of students making documentaries showed that students were interested in the process, were motivated, and demonstrated creativity in making the films (Swan & Hofer, 2013). It appears that making documentaries can be a useful method to get students actively learning, and future research will hopefully provide more insight into its uses in the classroom (Fehn & Schul, 2011).

## **STEP ONE: THE TOPIC**

The story is the number one thing to keep in mind when making a documentary. What is the story going to be about? Is it compelling? It has to be something that would be of interest to a certain audience (West, 2010), and that the student making it is passionate about in order for it to unfold into an interesting film. Brainstorming potential topics in class to get students thinking about different ideas would help to get the process started. It might be the case that the teacher wants students to focus in certain areas, such as a specific unit in science or history. On the other hand, the teacher might be more focused on using this as a language method, making the topic not as important to the teacher, which would allow the students more options. The story also needs to have a beginning, middle, and an end, with an “emotional center. The audience needs someone or a group of ‘someones’ to care about. A message or idea is not enough” (West, 2006, p. 2). Regardless, the fact that the students would have to think through the parts of their movie, discuss it, write out an outline, and so forth provides much room to build the language

domains of reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills in a more motivating way than writing a research report and sharing it with the class.

## STEP TWO: THE STORYBOARD

Once an idea or topic has been selected, creating a storyboard or using this type of graphic organizer to roughly sketch and outline the parts of the movie helps organize the sequence of the movie. A basic storyboard provides a place to draw a picture and a place to explain what should take place in the scene. For example, who will be in the scene, what questions will be asked, the placement of the people and props in the room, and any effects needed, such as special lighting. The following website provides various templates to choose from: <http://www.printablepaper.net/category/storyboard>

As part of the planning in the storyboard, what is going to be said should be included. For a documentary the script would not have to be written out because people would be sharing information in their own words. However, the narrator needs to know what to say and when to say it. The storyboard would explain that. For example, it might be that the person filming will decide to be the type of narrator that you hear asking questions, and they might even decide to sit next to the person they are interviewing. On the other hand, they might decide to be the type of narrator where they ask the questions before the camera is filming so rather than it appearing like an interview it comes out like the experts are explaining something and the prompt or question is understood without having to hear it. These two approaches might vary from scene to scene, or be consistent throughout the film. It really is a matter of style, which different documentarians choose depending on theirs, and also depending on what would make the most impact when delivering the message to the audience. Interview questions should be open-ended to provide an open door where the interviewee feels free to discuss and share without being constrained to a yes or no answer.

Another step to think about while making the storyboard is who will be in the film. Who is available? Who would best answer

the questions to get a clear picture about the topic selected? Depending on who is being interviewed and their expertise would then determine the types of questions that would be asked.

For example, if someone wanted to make a documentary about a reading clinic for struggling readers of all ages, they might want to talk to the stakeholders involved, such as the director, the professors, the parents, and the students. The director can be asked to give an overview of the clinic, the professors can be asked to share what they emphasize in their instruction and how they assess students, the parents can be asked what they expect from the reading clinic, and the students can be asked what they learned in the reading clinic. Having a plan before meeting with the people that will be interviewed will help the video process to run more smoothly and will create a well-rounded movie because all of the parts that need to be included to show the whole picture have been thought out and written into the storyboard.

Interviewing various people also provides different perspectives about the same topic. Furthermore, when people are in front of a camera, many times they share things they might not have in a regular interview, which is helpful in building the story and making an interesting film viewers will find appealing (Ferrari, 2008). “Remember, make them laugh and make them cry” (Paar, 2010a, p. 41).

By developing the characters in the documentary through their introduction, talking about their needs, their difficulties, how they are trying to overcome the obstacles to fulfill their needs, and how their story ends helps the audience feel connected to the story. This leads back to the sequencing of the story, the people that will be in it, and the way the narrator will be a part of the story to create a tone (Paar, 2010a), which is why making a storyboard can truly help organize the structure of the film.

### **STEP THREE: FILMING**

Once the storyboard is complete it is time to set some dates to start filming. The kind of camera used can vary, from an iPad video camera, to a phone video camera, to a flip video camera, to a professional camera, and so on. The key is to make sure the camera selected is capable of downloading the film onto a

computer so it can be easily edited. (Not all cameras can download video to be edited immediately.) To find out if the camera selected can be used for editing, the answer can be Googled or tested by making a quick film of nothing important, then trying to download it onto a computer and editing it. If it cannot be edited, a message will come up stating this fact. Sometimes the downloaded movie can be converted into another format so it can be edited, but this can be tricky.

Another thought is to have microphones if possible. A film that cannot be heard clearly can be difficult to sit through. A microphone would definitely help make the sound clearer, especially if the person speaks softly or is competing with other sounds in the environment.

The person being interviewed should also look at an angle, to the right or left corner of the room while answering questions so that it appears they are looking at the interviewer, unless they are speaking directly to the audience (Paar, 2010b). Moreover, having a light shine toward the interviewee can help to get rid of shadows on their face that come from the usual lighting on ceilings in rooms.

## STEP FOUR: EDITING

Using Windows Movie Maker or iMovie for a Mac are free options that allow the student to insert a title page, write in captions, add in music, record their voice into it as narrator, provide neat transitions between clips, and have credits at the end. The files can be saved onto the computer, emailed, uploaded to YouTube, Facebook, and/or burned onto a disc to be played on a television. Windows Movie Maker can be downloaded for free at <http://windows.microsoft.com/en-us/windows-live/movie-maker#t1=overview> and provides a clear explanation about how to use it. iMovie comes already installed on Macs, but to get more information about it you can view <http://www.apple.com/ilife/imovie/>

There are also free apps to use on a phone to edit, such as Cute CUT, Vyclone, and Montaj. See this article for these and other ideas, including the place to download them: <http://www.practicalecommerce.com/articles/4072-14-Video-Editing-Apps-for-Smartphones>. For the iPad, iPod, and iPhone there are free apps

such as Vimeo and Splice, which have been found to be useful. (See <http://www.wondershare.com/video-editing-tips/ipad-video-editor.html>.)

Regardless of how the video is made or how it is edited, going through this process will make it more professional-looking and fun to share. The goal is to ensure students build their language skills while staying focused and interested in the process of learning as well as acquiring reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills.

## CONCLUSION

“Remember, practice makes perfect. Get out there and produce” (Paar, 2010b, p. 43). Hopefully the tips, ideas, and websites provided will inspire teachers to create documentary projects for their students. Likewise, by allowing students to select a topic of interest, create a storyboard, film, and edit their film, language skills will be developed in a motivating way. Perhaps teachers should even consider analyzing their students’ progress, outcomes, motivation, and/or engagement and write an article for this emerging idea, which needs more research.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am thankful for the France-Merrick award I received at Towson University to purchase a professional camera and microphone to make documentaries.

## THE AUTHOR

Gilda Martinez-Alba is the Reading Clinic Director at Towson University, Towson, Maryland, United States. She recently began making short documentaries. Some of them are on her YouTube channel (<http://www.youtube.com/user/gildamart>). This year she will be taking a sabbatical to make a longer documentary about the reading clinic.

## REFERENCES

Fehn, B. R., & Schul, J. E. (2011). Teaching and learning competent historical documentary making: Lessons from National History Day winners. *History Teacher*, 45(1), 25–42.

- Ferrari, P. (2008). *Capturing reality: The art of documentary*. Montreal, Canada: National Film Board of Canada.
- Paar, M. (2010a). How to make a documentary: Story development. Retrieved from <http://www.videomaker.com/article/14803-how-to-make-a-documentary-part-1-story-development>
- Paar, M. (2010b). How to make a documentary: Shooting and editing. Retrieved from <http://www.videomaker.com/article/14853-how-to-make-a-documentary-part-3-shooting-and-editing>
- Renov, M. (1993). *Theorizing documentary*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Sanchez-Laws, A. (2010). Digital storytelling as an emerging documentary form. *Media, Technology and Life-Long Learning*, 6(3), 359–366.
- Swan, K., & Hofer, M. (2013). Examining student-created documentaries as a mechanism for engaging students in authentic intellectual work. *Theory and Research in Social Education*, 41(1), 133–175. doi:10.1080/00933104.2013.758018
- West, K. (2010). How to make a documentary—Part 1: Finding the story. Retrieved from <http://www.videomaker.com/article/12546-how-to-make-a-documentary-part-1-finding-the-story>