

## COMMENTARIES

### **A Gold Coast Video Camera Club Workshop October 2005**

Most people find putting a commentary on to a video a rather daunting task. Even in the professional world, there are very few who can “ad lib” a commentary straight on to a video.

To stand alone without commentary, a video must be something rather special. Certainly a story can be told with pictures, but very often someone will still want to know something about it. If questions are necessary, the video needs commentary

Most videos that are made by amateurs or professionals require the use of a voice over or a commentary, the exceptions being a drama, the “arty” video where just ambient sound and music is used to create an atmosphere, or occasionally an “interview” can stand alone

For many people starting out in video making, the most common way is generally when the camera goes along on a family outing or a holiday. You come home with lots of footage, some good, some not so good, and proceed to edit it all together in to a story. You cut out all the bad bits, you remember the old rule of having a beginning, middle and end, and you feel pretty satisfied with the result. Then comes the hard part! What do you say – how much do you say?

No matter who the video maker is, the content and the rhythm of the words needs preparation

#### Deciding What to Say and How Much to Say

One of the most important rules to remember when writing a commentary is not to state the obvious. Don't just describe what you can see on the screen. If Dad is pulling in a fish – resist the temptation to say “Here is Dad pulling in a fish” – that is quite obvious to the viewer – much more interesting to tell something about the type of fish he has caught. First and foremost your commentary must be interesting – two of the most overworked phrases in amateur video are “This is” or “Here is”. Always try to tell a story with your commentary, don't just state a series of facts.

You can interpret or explain the significance of what is on screen and what is not. You might state that you had holidayed at a particular hotel 20 years before, even though the viewer obviously does not see you holidaying at that time, but it is not a good idea to actually describe an action that you can't see on the screen. To say the kids are eating ice creams, when it is quite obvious that they are not, is confusing, even though you knew they were eating them five minutes ago.

#### How much information should you give?

It's easy to overdo the information – quoting miles of statistics can be very boring! Collect all the information you can on the subject – libraries are worth a visit, and the internet is always there to be used - but only use what you think will be interesting

Always make sure your information is correct, nothing is worse than being challenged and proved wrong on a piece of information in your video. It can be very helpful to pick up tourist brochures while you are on holiday, but don't fall into the trap of just quoting straight from them – pick out the things you think your audience will be interested in, and then put it into your own words. (Yes, you can pinch a few phrases out of them, as long as they are not too flowery!)

To find a balance between statistical information and casual chatter does not come naturally to anyone, you might find you have to re-write it several times before it sounds right. Read it out aloud – written words might look right, but when spoken, it may not always sound the way it should. Keep it fairly simple, the fewer words you use, the more likely it is to make an impact.

Don't get too concerned about absolutely correct grammar. The spoken word can be a lot more casual than if you were writing an English essay – “didn't “ can sound a lot more relaxed than “did not”, and every sentence does not have to have a subject, verb and predicate in that order, as you were taught at school.

Of course, the type of video you are making has a big bearing on the type of commentary you should try to write. If you are making, for instance, a nature documentary that will be shown to experts in the field, you naturally could use more technical language and perhaps a more formal style than if you were putting a holiday video together, where you should just try to imagine you are chatting to someone, telling them about your holiday.

One thing to remember, you should decide how events are to be presented, in the present tense or the past tense, and keep to that all the way through. Present tense can make a video seem more personal, even if shown in a few years' time. There are no hard and fast rules about this, just whatever feels right.

Similarly, thought should be given to using the same style of commentary throughout, if you start off in a light-hearted way, you should probably keep in that vein right through your video.

#### Timing of Commentary

Whether you decide that you will give a great deal of information in your commentary, or just the bare minimum, and let the pictures tell a lot of the story, it must have a rhythm and timing to it. Your voice does not have to start when the video starts, but be careful not to leave it too long to bring the voice in, as people will imagine there is going to be no commentary and will be startled by the intrusion. The voice should be spaced throughout the video – try not to talk at a great rate in some parts, and then have long, long silences.

It's good to put some humour into your commentaries if you can, but be careful, it is not an easy thing to do – it might read all right, but if you don't deliver it in just the right way, it can fall very flat. Also, what was funny at the time, might not be so funny when viewed a few years later.

#### More Advanced Commentary

As you gain more experience at video making, and perhaps want to produce an in-depth documentary or a more professional travelogue, the commentary becomes of greater importance. You have to capture the full concentration of the viewer, and to do this, an interesting and accurate story has to be told, with the words exactly matching and supporting the vision. Each scene has to be just the right length, too short and you do not have time to tell the story, too long and your viewer will become bored and lose interest.

A different approach has to be taken.

You get an idea for a video. Sometimes it can be just a broad outline, other times you have a very clear picture in your mind of what you want to create. You may already have some footage that you want to use. At this point you should write down a rough idea of the commentary that tells the story you want to tell. Try to write creatively. If the subject matter of a documentary calls for it, “make a statement” and then go about proving it. Be controversial if you like.

Then you can establish a shooting script, and, bearing in mind the footage you may have, go out and capture all the shots you think you will need.

If necessary, interview people with different views on the subject. You may find that you cannot get the right footage for some of your planned shots, and sometimes you will get unplanned shots that will fit in with your idea very well. Then the script can be altered to suit the vision you have captured.

In other words, you do not put together your vision until you have a complete draft of your commentary written, and then you can cut your vision to fit it. By doing this you will only use enough footage required to tell the story, thereby adding pace to your video. If you are missing just an odd shot, put a piece of black in until you can capture it.

Undoubtedly you will have to change your commentary around, sometimes you have to put more in, but mostly you’ll find you have to reword it slightly or cut some words out.

It is all too easy to write a great sounding commentary, and then realise that you do not have the footage to support it! In fact, it is a good idea to put the first draft of your commentary away for a couple of days and then come back to it – you generally find you can tidy it up and take out a lot of unnecessary words. Then try a couple of sentences with the vision as you start to edit, to see that it fits, before you go on. You will probably have to re-arrange some sentences so that the “punch-line” or word hits right on the spot. You can re-arrange scenes, lengthen them or shorten them with NLE editing. You may find too, you will need to shoot a bit more footage for cutaways.

Commentary can be used to create a transition from one scene to another, or to cover the passing of time - you can smooth over an abrupt jump by describing what is happening or going to happen.

After you have your vision all edited, try it out – reading the commentary all the way through. You may still need to change a phrase or a word here or there to make it flow better. Remember a good video tells a story, but the commentary with a balanced sound track holds the attention of the viewer and makes for a great video.

### **The Delivery**

Your video is edited, your commentary has been tried with the vision and appears to fit. Now comes the really challenging part – actually recording your voice! Very few of us are comfortable with the way we sound, and the sight of that microphone sitting in front of us seems to have a disastrous effect – we get tongue-tied and trip over the simplest of words!

Here’s a few tips and techniques which have been collected over the years which may help.

Don't rush it - – give your audience time to absorb the words. This is particularly so at the beginning and at the end of the video. Pauses are important, you can pause between phrases, not just at a full stop or comma. Don't go to the other extreme, however, and read each word too deliberately, just keep an easy pace.

Place your microphone about six inches away from your face and experiment whether you need to speak across it or into it, so your "p's" and "b's" do not "pop". It is best if you can have your script held up level with your face, so you do not have to drop your head to read it, as this restricts your voice.

Unless your commentary is about some terrible disaster, try smiling as you are reading – it lightens and lifts your voice. Also try using gestures as you read, if you are describing floating over the countryside in a balloon, actually float your hand around - it might look silly, but it can give a realism to your delivery.

Try to convey your enthusiasm to your audience if the scene warrants it, put a chuckle in your voice if there's something amusing going on.

Use a pencil to underline key words that need to be emphasized – put a couple of lines or dashes to indicate a pause.

Watch your diction, and make sure words are pronounced properly. Practice any unfamiliar or difficult words until you are happy with saying them, but if you continually trip over a word or phrase it is better to put in an alternative – sometimes some words just won't go together smoothly !

### **The all important final edit**

Keep in mind that the audience sees and hears your video as a complete story, so it is essential that the vision, music, sound effects and commentary all blend together to tell that story. It should not just be "vision" with sound added.

I find when all these elements are brought together and played for the first time, the result can be what you might say, a bit "rough". So leave it for a while and come back afresh.

Time is well spent "polishing" it on the time line. What I mean is to take a section at a time, play it over several times until it looks and sounds just right to you. .Even at this stage the vision can be easily moved, sound levels can be adjusted - and then exactly in the right place is your all important commentary, clearly audible over the other sounds.

The main thing is - Relax!!! It's supposed to be fun!!

**Garth Threlfall**