

## Video & Scriptwriting / Documentary Structure

Apply narrative arc to documentary storytelling — narrative architecture for compelling non-fiction films.

Difficulty: Advanced

Model: GPT-4 / Claude / Gemini

Use Case: Narrative Architecture, Story Structure

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Why This Prompt Exists

“Facts tell, stories sell.” Even documentaries need narrative structure. Chronological storytelling is boring; dramatic structure creates engagement. Most documentaries ignore act structure entirely.

You get:

- chronological, monotonous storytelling (predictable, boring)
- no dramatic tension (audience not engaged, no stakes)
- no turning points (same energy throughout, flat)
- weak opening (doesn't hook viewer)
- unsatisfying ending (no resolution, no emotional payoff)

But three-act structure works for documentaries:

- Act One (Setup): hook, introduce subject, stakes, central question (25%)
- Act Two (Confrontation): obstacles, complications, rising tension, midpoint (50%)

- Act Three (Resolution): climax, answer, emotional payoff, takeaway (25%)
- turning points: moments that shift direction or stakes
- central dramatic question: what the film asks and answers

Without structure, documentaries meander.

This prompt applies three-act structure to documentary storytelling.

The Prompt

Assume the role of a documentary narrative architect who structures non-fiction stories.

Your task is to apply three-act structure to documentary material.

Generate:

### 1. CENTRAL DRAMATIC QUESTION

- Question: [What the film asks]
- Stakes: [What happens if unanswered]
- Answer: [What the film reveals]

### 2. ACT ONE - SETUP (25% of runtime)

Element	Description	Duration	Content
Hook	Grab attention	1-3 min	[opening scene/quote/question]
Introduction	Subject, setting, character	3-5 min	[who, what, where]
Inciting incident	What starts the story	1-2 min	[event that

changes everything] |  
| Central question posed | What the film will answer | 0.5-1 min |  
[explicit or implicit question] |  
| Stakes established | Why it matters | 1-2 min | [consequences] |

### 3. ACT TWO - CONFRONTATION (50% of runtime)

Element	Description	Duration	Content
Rising action	Obstacles, complications	15-25%	[challenges, setbacks]
Midpoint	Major revelation or shift	2-5 min	[turning point that changes direction]
Escalating stakes	Higher risk, more tension	10-15%	[things get worse]
Darkest moment	All seems lost	2-4 min	[lowest point, crisis]
Turning point toward resolution	Glimpse of answer	1-3 min	[discovery, insight]

### 4. ACT THREE - RESOLUTION (25% of runtime)

Element	Description	Duration	Content
Climax	Central question answered	3-7 min	[the revelation, discovery, moment]
Falling action	Aftermath, implications	2-4 min	[what it means]
Emotional payoff	Audience feeling	1-2 min	[satisfaction, reflection, hope]

| Takeaway | What we learn | 1-2 min | [final thought, call to action]  
|

## 5. TIMING BY DOCUMENTARY LENGTH

Length	Act One	Act Two	Act Three	Climax Duration
10 min	2.5 min	5 min	2.5 min	1-2 min
30 min	7.5 min	15 min	7.5 min	3-4 min
60 min	15 min	30 min	15 min	5-7 min
90 min	22 min	45 min	22 min	7-10 min

## 6. TURNING POINT TYPES

Turning Point	Definition	Documentary Example
Inciting incident	What starts the journey	Discovery of a problem
Midpoint	Major revelation	New evidence found
All is lost	Darkest moment	Case seems impossible
Climax	Central question answered	Truth revealed

## 7. STRUCTURE TEMPLATE FOR DOCUMENTARY

### \*\*Act One (Setup)\*\*

- Hook: [Powerful opening scene or quote]
- Introduction: [Subject, character, location]
- Inciting incident: [Event that changes everything]
- Central question: [What we need to find out]

- Stakes: [Why it matters]

**\*\*Act Two (Confrontation)\*\***

- Rising action: [Obstacles, complications, setbacks]
- Midpoint: [Major revelation or shift]
- Escalating stakes: [Things get worse]
- Darkest moment: [All seems lost]
- Turning point: [Glimpse of answer]

**\*\*Act Three (Resolution)\*\***

- Climax: [Central question answered]
- Falling action: [Aftermath, implications]
- Emotional payoff: [How audience should feel]
- Takeaway: [Final thought, call to action]

**8. COMMON STRUCTURE MISTAKES**

Mistake	Why It Fails	Correct Approach
No central question	Film feels aimless	Establish clear question
Weak inciting incident	Starts too slow	Hook within first 3 minutes
No midpoint	Flat second act	Major revelation at halfway
All is lost too early	Then what?	Place at 75-80% mark
No emotional payoff	Unsatisfying ending	Address how audience should feel
Chronological only	Predictable, boring	Use dramatic structure

## INPUTS:

Documentary topic/subject:

[E.G., "A musician trying to make one last album after a stroke"]

Source material (interviews, footage, archival):

[E.G., "Studio footage, family interviews, medical records"]

Central question (if known):

[E.G., "Can he finish the album before losing his ability to play?"]

Key turning points identified:

[E.G., "Stroke, decision to record, first session back, relapse, final session"]

## RULES:

- Central dramatic question must be clear (what the film asks and answers)
- Hook in first 3 minutes (grab attention immediately)
- Inciting incident within first 10 minutes (what starts the journey)
- Midpoint at 50% mark (major revelation or shift)
- Darkest moment at 75-80% mark (all seems lost)
- Climax answers central question (emotional and intellectual payoff)
- Every scene should advance the central question (if not, cut it)
- End with emotional takeaway, not just information dump

## How To Use It

- Central dramatic question must be clear — what the film asks and answers.
- Hook in the first 3 minutes — grab attention immediately, or they're gone.

- Inciting incident within the first 10 minutes — what starts the journey.
- Midpoint at the 50% mark — major revelation or shift that changes direction.
- Darkest moment at the 75-80% mark — all seems lost, the low point.
- Climax answers the central question — emotional and intellectual payoff together.
- Every scene should advance the central question — if it doesn't, cut it.
- End with emotional takeaway, not just an information dump.

Example Input

**Documentary topic/subject:**

“A small-town newspaper fighting to survive against digital disruption”

**Source material:**

“Interviews with editor, reporters, community members; footage of newsroom; archival of newspaper’s history”

**Central question:**

“Can a local newspaper survive in the age of the internet?”

**Key turning points:**

“Declining subscriptions, layoffs, community fundraising campaign, digital pivot, final outcome”

Why It Works

Most documentaries are organized chronologically — first this happened, then this, then this — which is predictable, boring, and lacks dramatic tension.

This framework improves outcomes by forcing:

- central dramatic question (what the film asks and answers)
- three-act structure with timing (setup 25%, confrontation 50%, resolution 25%)
- turning point identification (inciting incident, midpoint, all is lost, climax)

- timing by documentary length (10 min to 90 min guidelines)
- structure template (ready-to-use outline for any documentary)

**Failure modes this prevents:**

- Chronological, monotonous storytelling (predictable, boring, no tension)
- No dramatic tension (audience not engaged, no stakes)
- No turning points (same energy throughout, flat)
- Weak opening (doesn't hook viewer)
- Unsatisfying ending (no resolution, no emotional payoff)

**This improves on:** Chronological storytelling. Dramatic structure creates engagement and emotional payoff.

**Related to:** DS-01 (Mode) for overall approach; DS-04 (Narration) for voiceover support.

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