

Video & Scriptwriting / Documentary Structure

Determine ratio of voiceover narration to observational footage — narrative balance optimization for documentary storytelling.

Difficulty: Advanced

Model: GPT-4 / Claude / Gemini

Use Case: Narrative Balance, Voiceover Planning

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Why This Prompt Exists

Voiceover narration explains; verité footage shows. Too much narration feels like a lecture. Too much verité leaves viewers confused. Balance is everything.

You get:

- all narration, no verité (feels like a slideshow, boring)
- all verité, no narration (confusing, no context, no direction)
- narration that tells what verité already shows (redundant, insulting)
- verité that doesn't illustrate narration (disconnected, confusing)
- no strategic placement of narration (random, ineffective)

But narration has specific functions:

- exposition: provide context, background, facts (information)
- transition: bridge scenes, cover time jumps (structure)
- theme: state the film's thesis or question (meaning)

- insight: reveal what subject can't or won't say (depth)
- poetry: lyrical, emotional, reflective (tone)

Without balance, documentaries feel off.

This prompt balances narration and vérité footage.

The Prompt

Assume the role of a documentary narrative designer who balances narration and vérité.

Your task is to determine narration-to-vérité ratio and placement.

Generate:

1. MODE-TO-RATIO MAP

Documentary Mode	Narration %	Verité %	Archival %	Typical Balance
Expository	40-60%	30-40%	10-20%	Narration heavy
Observational	0-10%	80-95%	0-10%	Verité heavy
Participatory	20-35%	50-60%	10-20%	Balanced
Verité	0-5%	90-100%	0-5%	Almost all vérité
Poetic	10-30%	40-60%	10-30%	Varies by subject
Reflexive	30-50%	30-50%	10-20%	Balanced

2. NARRATION FUNCTION PLACEMENT

Function	Placement	Duration	Example
Exposition (context)	Opening of film or segment	30-90s	"In 1985, a small town faced..."
Transition (bridge)	Between scenes	10-20s	"Months passed. The factory sat empty."
Theme (meaning)	Middle or closing	15-30s	"What they didn't know was..."
Insight (depth)	After verité scene	20-40s	"She never admitted it, but..."
Poetry (tone)	Scattered, short	5-15s	"The light faded. So did hope."

3. NARRATION TO VERITÉ PATTERNS

Pattern	Sequence	Effect	Best For
Narration → Verité	Narrate context, then show	Set up, then illustrate	Expository docs
Verité → Narration	Show action, then explain	Mystery, then reveal	Investigative docs
Verité with underlay	Narration under verité	Dual information	Observational docs
Narration only	Voiceover over black or B-roll	Transition, theme	All modes
No narration	Pure verité	Immersion, authenticity	Observational, verité

4. NARRATION SCRIPT TEMPLATES

****Exposition (context):****

`[NARRATION] In [year/location], [subject] faced [problem]. [2-3 sentences of background]. What happened next would change everything.`

****Transition (bridge):****

`[NARRATION] [Time period] passed. [Subject] tried to [action]. But [obstacle] remained.`

****Theme (meaning):****

`[NARRATION] Looking back, [subject] realized [insight]. The [event] wasn't just about [surface]. It was about [deeper meaning].`

****Insight (depth):****

`[NARRATION] [Subject] would never say this aloud. But the [evidence] tells a different story.`

5. NARRATION DENSITY BY DOCUMENTARY LENGTH

Length	Narration Segments	Average Length	Total Narration	Verité Time
10 min	3-5	30-60s	2-4 min	6-8 min
30 min	8-12	30-60s	5-8 min	22-25 min
60 min	15-20	30-60s	10-15 min	45-50 min
90 min	20-25	30-60s	15-20 min	70-75 min

6. AVOIDING REDUNDANCY TEST

Before writing narration, ask:

- Does the verité already show this? (if yes, cut narration)
- Can the interview subject say this? (if yes, use them instead)
- Is this information essential? (if no, cut)
- Does this advance the story? (if no, cut)

7. COMMON BALANCE MISTAKES

Mistake	Why It Fails	Correct Balance
Narrating what verité shows	Redundant, insulting	Let verité speak
No narration for complex topics	Viewer confused	Add exposition
Narration throughout	Feels like lecture	Let scenes breathe
Verité without context	Disconnected, confusing	Brief narration setup
All narration, no verité	Boring, static	Show, don't just tell

INPUTS:

Documentary mode (from DS-01):

[E.G., "Expository", "Observational", "Participatory"]

Subject complexity:

[LOW (easy to understand) / MEDIUM / HIGH (needs explanation)]

Audience familiarity with topic:

[EXPERT / GENERAL / BEGINNER]

Available interview footage:

[E.G., "3 hours of expert interviews, 1 hour of witness accounts"]

RULES:

- Expository docs: 40-60% narration (explain complex topics)
- Observational docs: 0-10% narration (let scenes speak)
- Participatory docs: 20-35% narration (balance of engagement and explanation)
- Verité docs: 0-5% narration (raw, immediate, real)
- Never narrate what verité already shows (redundant)
- Use narration for what can't be shown (past events, internal thoughts)
- Transition narration should be brief (10-20 seconds)
- Theme narration at emotional peaks (middle or end)
- Test without narration: is the film still understandable?

How To Use It

- Expository docs: 40-60% narration — explain complex topics, provide context.
- Observational docs: 0-10% narration — let scenes speak for themselves.
- Participatory docs: 20-35% narration — balance engagement with explanation.
- Verité docs: 0-5% narration — raw, immediate, real-time feel.
- Never narrate what the verité already shows — redundant and insulting to the viewer.
- Use narration for what can't be shown — past events, internal thoughts, future implications.
- Transition narration should be brief — 10-20 seconds between scenes.
- Theme narration at emotional peaks — middle or end for reflection.
- Test the film without narration — is it still understandable? If not, add narration strategically.

Example Input

Documentary mode:

“Expository documentary about climate change”

Subject complexity:

“HIGH — scientific concepts need explanation”

Audience familiarity:

“GENERAL — broad audience, not experts”

Available interview footage:

“5 hours of scientist interviews, 2 hours of archival news footage”

Why It Works

Most documentaries default to either wall-to-wall narration (boring) or pure vérité (confusing) — missing the strategic balance that serves the subject.

This framework improves outcomes by forcing:

- mode-to-ratio mapping (narration percentage by documentary mode)
- narration function placement (exposition, transition, theme, insight, poetry)
- narration-to-vérité patterns (sequence and effect)
- narration density by length (how many segments, how long)
- redundancy test (avoiding narration that repeats vérité)

Failure modes this prevents:

- All narration, no vérité (feels like a lecture, boring, static)
- All vérité, no narration (confusing, no context, no direction)
- Narration that tells what vérité already shows (redundant, insulting)
- Vérité that doesn't illustrate narration (disconnected, confusing)

This improves on: All-narration or all-verité extremes. Strategic balance serves the subject and audience.

Related to: DS-01 (Mode) for overall approach; DS-06 (Three-Act) for narrative arc.

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