STORYTELLING TOOLKIT



Scripting

Smithsonian Institution

MUSEWEB FOUNDATION

This handbook will guide you through the process of scripting your audio, video, and tour projects. Remember, when creating a video project, you also have to have a deep understanding of all the elements of audio. And your tour can be either audio or video, so be sure to pay attention to all the aspects of scripting a project.

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Scripting Basics

A script is a document that outlines every aural, visual, behavioral, and lingual element required to tell a story. It contains the words that will be spoken in the finished piece, as well as instructions for the elements of audio and video that should be captured as the piece is recorded. It is a production document. There are three main steps to creating a script.

The Brief. Creating a brief allows you to document the answers to really important project questions. Explain your goals, target audience, topic, and intended takeaways when developing your brief. This is the document you will use to ensure all your future decisions match your intended goals.

The Outline. An outline should be the second step to creating your script. You need to know your story's beginning, middle, and end before you get started. Once you have the basic skeleton of your project written out, you can make sure the story makes sense and fill in the details of the assets you need to gather (images, audio, video).

The Script. This doesn't have to be fancy. It's purpose is strictly functional. It's a set of directions for you to follow when creating the final product. Like a blueprint. As you map out what you want your final product to sound and/or look like, write in instructions on how many camera angles you need on different shots, and what kind of audio and/or video you need to record at each location.

Write in plain, conversational English

When writing the narrative elements of your script, you want to write how the narrator/voice over should speak, not how you would write a formal paper. Practice speaking it out loud to see if it sounds too formal.

Make it thorough

A script doesn't just include dialogue or voice over scripting. If your finished product will require multiple shots, people, or scenes, include these details. For video, be sure to include any necessary information about the location, actions that should be taken on camera, and visual elements – including clothing choices.

Format for easy reading

Format the elements like b-roll, sound effects, text overlays, and voiceover, background sounds, and other audio recordings by using different colors, fonts or callouts to visually differentiate the elements of your script.

Script every word

For any voice over or narration, script *every* word. Ad-libbing never works. You will have to do multiple takes and you want each take to be as similar to the last one as possible. You also want to ensure the timing is exactly right. Scripting will save you a lot of time and frustration.

Make it short

For both audio and video, shorter is better than long. Cut out any unnecessary aspects of your script. Attentions spans are short. Make sure you get to your point before you lose your audience's interest.

For a tour, remember that people will be standing while listening to your tour. Be respectful of their feet and make it short. Entertaining, but brief.

Audio Elements

There are eight elements to audio. Your job is to decide which elements will appear at which points in the final piece, whether in combination or solo. Learn more about the elements of audio recording from B-side Radio: **http://bsideradio.org/learn/recording-audio-in-the-public-radio-style**.

Actualities

These are audio recordings gathered during interviews. In video recordings, this element is often called “talking heads.”

Voice over

These are the recordings created by you or someone you recruit that links all the elements together and tells the story. It can feature one or more people.

Ambience

These are natural sound effects from the world that help set a scene. If you were at a dairy, this would be the sound of a cow mooing. At a construction site, it would be the sound of a saw or a hammer. Get your microphone right up next to the source of the sound you’re trying to capture. Try to record a minute of this, though often only 5-10 seconds of it will used.

Background sound

This is the sound of a place (often also called ambience). Not a singular easily discernable sound but rather the full spectrum of sounds. For this, you don’t want to point your microphone at anything in particular, just stand in a location and record. You should record at least a minute of this in every place.

Room Tone

This is the sound of a room - the lights, the hum of the air conditioner, cars outside, etc. When you record an interview in a room, the sound of the room is always there behind the voice of your interviewee. This sound will differ as you edit in interviews from different rooms, places, and your own narration. Moving between the different audio clips can sometimes be jarring depending on how present the room tone is. You can smooth this transition by mixing in room tone behind your voice. You need to gather at least 45 seconds to a minute of room tone in each room where you do an interview, more if there are distinct sounds happening, like cars going by.

Sound effects

This is any sound that is artificially injected into the soundtrack to enhance it. This could be a natural sound like the ambience you recorded to a digitally created sound.

Silence

This is the lack of any sound over a particular moment in a finished piece. In audio-only pieces, silence should almost never be used unless you need it to make a dramatic point.

Music

Background music appeals on an emotional level with the audience. It can be used to establish a particular time period, geographical location, or identify a particular community. *See the Appendix to learn more about music rights and permissions.*

Writing for Audio

Writing for audio is different than most types of writing. Unlike the reader, the listener often has no opportunity to reread what has been said if they miss something or need clarification. As such, preparing material that will be read aloud requires a slightly different approach than preparing written material. Below are ten tips on how to write for the ear:

1 **Embrace a conversational tone.** Remember that storytelling is a dialogue, not a monologue, and that you want to be engaging and natural in your speech.

2 **Keep your sentences short and simple.** Avoid compound or complex sentences, and abide by the basic subject-verb-object structure.

3 **Use a simple vocabulary.** Big words sound impressive, but they can cause your listener to get lost. Remember that you are speaking to a general audience, and write your story accordingly. If you need to use complicated words or concepts, consider defining the terms as you read.

4 **Avoid passive voice.** Use active verbs and be direct. This will give your statements more impact. Ex. passive: “she was walking toward the house” vs. active: “she walked toward the house.”

5 **Use contractions.** Remember that you want the conversation to flow naturally. For a more seamless delivery use “can’t” instead of “cannot.”

6 **Punctuate for rhythm.** Consider the way your story will sound when spoken out loud and use punctuation to mark pauses and place emphasis. Remember to pace yourself and allow time for your audience to absorb what has been said.

7 **Round your numbers.** Unless there is a reason for you to use the exact number, simplify your story by rounding figures to the nearest whole.

8 **Use a straightforward, linear narrative.** With audio recordings, there is virtue in clarity. Remember that a listener cannot always rewind if they get lost, so make sure that the structure of your story follows a chronological order with a beginning, middle and end.

9 **Read it out loud.** When you have finished drafting your story, read it aloud. What sounds good in your head might not sound natural when read out loud. Reading your story aloud will help you identify problems with rhythm and sentence structure.

10 **Use dialogue (if possible).** For a listener, it is easier and more interesting to jump into the story when they can be the third (or more) member of a conversation, rather than being talked to.

Video Elements

There are five main elements to video. Your job is to decide which elements (and their sub-elements) will appear at which points in the video, whether in combination or solo. Learn more from UNESCO's *How to Write a Documentary Script*: **http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/CI/CI/pdf/programme_doc_documentary_script.pdf**.

Visual Images

Single Shot. A shot is a single "take" on an action. Something needs to be "happening" in a shot for the audience to see. The images, the action, the events should not be random. They have to be meaningful.

Sequence. A sequence is a collection of shots put together that tell a story continuously – like a series of close-up and wide-angle views of someone driving to work. Putting several action shots like this together creates events.

Montage. A montage is a sequence of sorts. It's a process of combining a number of small shots and weaving them together to communicate a large amount of information in a short time - like time passing in a person's life.

Talking heads. This includes interviews of people on camera or people talking directly to the audience on camera or both.

Colors, textures and Lines. Elements of line, texture and color all carry their own weights in a film. Color and its presence or absence from a film can make a significant difference to the film's message and mood.

Print and other graphics

This can be identification of the talking heads, orienting text like dates and places over a location, or newspaper clippings and headings to emphasize a point being made by the narration. Video is about showing, not telling, so use print and graphics sparingly and purposefully.

Speech

Narrative commentary / Voice over. Narration is the commentary that sometimes accompanies a visual image in a documentary. It's also often called a 'voice-over' and it can be spoken by one or more off-screen commentators.

Talking heads or interviews. An effective way to communicate information.

Music

Background music appeals on an emotional level with the audience. Music is also used to establish a particular geographical location or identify a particular community. *See the Appendix to learn more about music rights and permissions.*

Noise

Ambiant sound. The sound that is naturally present and is recorded simultaneously with it is essential to the creation of a location atmosphere.

Sound effects. Any sound that is artificially injected into the soundtrack to enhance it – natural or digitally created.

Silence. The lack of any sound over a particular moment in a film forces the audience to focus on the visual. Silence should be used sparingly.

Writing for Video

Writing for video is different than writing for audio. Though audio is an important factor in video, most of the story should be brought to life through visual elements. Learn more from UNESCO's *How to Write a Documentary Script*: **http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/CI/CI/pdf/programme_doc_documentary_script.pdf**.

Show, don't tell. Video is a visual medium. Unlike a novel, a video script is never 'read' literally by the audience and therefore you should try and incorporate most of the information you have to give into a visual format. For example, rather than telling the audience that a man is a farmer, you should show the man working in his fields. It always helps to show character and event action rather than talk about it or include it in narration because the audience is then able to experience it themselves, making it more real for them.

Show through action and movement. There is a reason we call them "moving images" and you should keep that in mind. The visual must be kept moving; the characters must be 'doing' something. The audience will react to movement on screen with interest and to static images with boredom.

Visual pertinence. Simply put, visual pertinence is keeping the visuals relevant to the subject and sustaining the flow of action. Don't show a farmer working behind a desk in a bank unless he works there part-time.

It is important for you to structure sequences according to the point in time they appear in the video. If a character has just suffered a major loss, then don't show a sequence where they go to a party unless that's what they would do naturally in that situation.

Emotional pertinence. Emotional pertinence is controlling the emotional reaction of the audience and making it relevant to the story at that point in the video. This can be done by emphasizing emotional details or triggers which will provide the desired emotional response from the audience.

Moods and Metaphors. You have many visual tools at your disposal including the control of visual mood and visual metaphors to represent an idea that would be otherwise difficult to portray visually. For example, a sequence which features a man working late into the night in his office could be full of shadows to add to the perception of time.

Special effects. Sometimes, special effects like slow motion, where a visual is slowed down in time, help create and regulate tempo and rhythm in a video as well as enhance emotional value at certain points. Dissolving from one shot to another helps create smoother visual flow. Special effects may or may not be incorporated into the script in great detail. It is not advisable to use too many special effects in a non-fiction video because they alter the nature of reality.

Writing Video Narrative/Commentary

Sound is crutial to video, but remember that the visual always comes first. Narration is part of the overall narrative, but does not lead the narrative. Learn more from UNESCO's *How to Write a Documentary Script*: **http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/CI/CI/pdf/programme_doc_documentary_script.pdf**.

When deciding who the narrator(s) will be, remember, this choice has to be made both on a narrative-relevance level and an artistic level. The narrator needs to be someone who adds value and drives the video's narrative forward.

First-person narration

The person whose point of view (POV) is currently being represented visually and story-wise is the narrator. This narrator talks in terms of 'I' and brings their limited POV across to the audience via the spoken word. This narrator is a character in the video and may or may not be shown visually at the time their voice is speaking. First-person narration should follow the rules of first-person narrative, which is that only one character's POV can be shown at a time, despite the fact that multiple characters may be narrators in the video.

Second-person narration

The person or people narrating the video directly address the audience as "you" and force the audience into the story. This is common in vlog-style videos you might see on YouTube – like in VlogBrothers or Vsauce videos.

Third-person narration

A popular choice is when an all-knowing, omnipresent entity narrates the story, referring to all the characters within the video as 'he' or 'she.' This narrator's POV is all-pervasive even though it is less personal.

Rules to writing video narration:

1 **Narration should back up a visual, not overpower it.** Also, if something is being shown visually, then there is no need for the narration to mention it as well. The narration should say what the visual doesn't say and should be in tune with the actions taking place at that point in the video.

2 **Keep narration relevant.** Many scriptwriters use the narration for information-shoving at the audience. The narration should be as focused, clear-cut, short and relevant as possible. Information should be given on a need basis only and when the particular subject has been sufficiently covered, it should stop.

3 **Keep narration simple.** Big words and fancy sentences are lost on an audience that has to keep track of multiple elements coming toward them at the same time. In fact, a verbose narration only makes the story harder for them to follow. A good narration is precise and simple and works in tune with the other elements of the video without trying to be grandiose.

4 **Practice speaking the narration as you write it.** The narration will ultimately be spoken. Reading it out aloud will reveal how it sounds and allow you to correct and replace words or sentences that don't flow. It also gives an indication of how much time the narration will take to speak out aloud and will allow you to time it to the visual elements.

Creating a Mobile Tour

The main goal of the *Be Here: Main Street* project is to cover your community in stories of its history and culture. These stories are sometimes stand-alone stories on a map, but often they are connected stories that follow a specific theme, like a tour of local historic buildings, a scenic byway, or popular tourist spot. If you create a mobile tour, here are a few things to keep in mind.

1 **Have a clear theme and objectives.** A tour consists of stops that are connected in some way. What topic or story connects your tour? Even if that theme is simply "highlights of the community." What should people to take away from the tour? Should they learn about a time period they didn't know about? Understand how your town fits into a national narrative?

2 **Know your audience.** Are you creating a children/family tour or a tour for adults, an enthusiast's tour or an amateur's tour, a tour for locals or a tour for tourists? Then you'll know how to approach your topic – what vocabulary to use, what features to point out, how in-depth you should be, etc.

3 **Tell a story.** Each stop on its own has a story that should be told in an engaging way, but the entire tour overall should also tell a story. Arrange the stops in a logical order, so each stop builds on the last one. And make sure your enthusiasm for the topic comes through. Take your users back in time, bring the story to life for them.

4 **Highlight the unique.** Why are the stops you chose important? What makes them unique or important to the overaraching story of your tour? When people take tours, they want to see something special. Make sure each of your stops is important to the story and interesting to the audience.

5 **Have discipline.** You have chosen a topic and objectives for your tour. Now comes the hard part. Sticking to them. You may run across some amazing information about a stop on your tour, but if it doesn't match your theme, it doesn't belong in your tour. Perhaps you can create a future tour or standalone stop with that information, but for the purposes of a cohesive tour, stick to the theme.

6 **Ensure the locations are accessible.** This requires visiting the stops on the tour to discover any potential barriers to users visiting the location or seeing the elements you are referencing in your tour. For instance, if you talk about the back of a house, make sure the visitors can see it. If not, include a picture of it in the tour and point them to that image.

7 **Consider customizing the tour.** This is a mobile tour, but that doesn't mean you can't gain inspiration from a human tour guide. What if someone wants to take your tour, but can't dedicate the time for the entire tour. Are there stops in your tour that can be skipped for those with less time? You can create an indicating marker on those stops - perhaps in the directions.

8 **Create a brief overview of the tour.** When writing the script, don't forget to create an overview, along with some of the major highlights users can expect to see. Tell them how long the tour will run, and let them know if there are any special considerations to make - like whether the stops are far apart, whether the tour is aimed at a specific audience, or if any of the stops on the tour are difficult to reach.

Universal Design

As you are planning your project, make sure you make it accessible to people with differing abilities. If you are creating a video, be sure to include captions. For an audio project, include a transcript. For tours, pay attention to the route. Are there a lot of stairs? Is the route wheelchair accessible?

The intent of inclusive or universal design is to simplify life for everyone by making products, communications, and environments more usable by as many people as possible. This benefits people of all ages and abilities.

In 1997, the Center for Universal Design at North Carolina State University, Raleigh, published seven principles of universal design for buildings, outdoor environments, and products: **https://www.ncsu.edu/ncsu/design/cud/about_ud/udprinciples.htm**.

1 **Equitable use.** The design is useful and marketable to people with diverse abilities. Avoid segregating or stigmatizing any users by providing the same means of use for all users: identical whenever possible; equivalent when not. Ask yourself how people with different abilities can access and enjoy your project.

2 **Flexibility in use.** The design accommodates a wide range of individual preferences and abilities**.** Provide choice in methods of use (add captions to your video and transcripts to your audio), and if you are directing someone in an action (like walking to the next tour stop), make your instructions very clear to aid the user's accuracy and precision.

3 **Simple and intuitive use.** Use of the design is easy to understand, regardless of the user's experience, knowledge, language skills, or current concentration level. If creating a tour, provide effective prompting and feedback during and after a stop to direct their attention to an appropriate focal point and let them know when it's time to move on to the next stop.

4 **Perceptible information.** The design communicates necessary information effectively to the user, regardless of ambient conditions or the user's sensory abilities. Use different modes (verbal and visual) for redundant presentation of essential information.

5 **Tolerance for error.** The design minimizes hazards and the adverse consequences of accidental or unintended actions. Provide warnings of hazards and errors when directing someone to the different tour stops, if a stop is in a dangerous area, remind the user to be pay attention to their surroundings.

6 **Low physical effort.** The design can be used efficiently and comfortably and with a minimum of fatigue. Try to avoid steps or awkward locations that only someone in peak physical shape can reach.

7 **Size and space for approach and use.** Appropriate size and space is provided for approach, reach, manipulation, and use regardless of user's body size, posture, or mobility. Ensure the locations for the tours have enough space for wheelchairs and other assistive devices. If they don't, offer an alternative way for people to experience the content of that stop - perhaps a video tour of that location.

Adding Your Project to the Community

At the end of your audio piece, your video, or your tour, please include a way for others to connect your stories to many others that are part of a larger storytelling initiative.

The following line can be read or written into your content:

This [tour, video, or whichever format] was made for Be Here: Main Street, a program created by the MuseWeb Foundation, in collaboration with the Smithonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service (SITES).

It's also a great idea to include the hashtag, **#bHereMainSt** in your description, keywords, or tags. This is a way for anyone to explore the richness of the stories submitted on various platforms, whether they are on YouTube, SoundCloud, Facebook, or izi.Travel. Please add the hashtag (**#bHereMainSt**) in your content, perhaps as the last frame in your video and in the textual description. From a practical point of view, including the hashtag is an important way for you to track your own content, related content, and to respond to what others may be saying about your story on social media.

If you'd like to alert Museum on Main Street and MuseWeb about your fantastic, newly posted content, please add our handles to your social media content, and be sure to use the **#bHereMainSt** hashtag.

Facebook

https://www.facebook.com/museumonmainstreet
https://www.facebook.com/museweb

Twitter

@museumonmainst
@museweb

Script Example 1

VIDEO	AUDIO
On Camera Med	How your video sounds will make or break your story. Most videos involve a person speaking, so you need to pay attention to the conditions around you. Especially when you are indoors, like your office. For the best audio stop and really listen to your surroundings. You may discover the "silence" is full of background noise. Noise that can ruin your story.
Cut in to guy on phone, hallway conversation, Windows media player, CU turn off computer	Can you hear the guy in the next office? A hallway conversation? The fan on your computer? What about music? If it is noisy, move, ask people to be quiet and turn off everything you don't need.
Holding up lav, shotgun, hand-help, camera	So how do you know what microphone you should use? They come in all shapes and sizes.
CU mics on cameras	This is the camera mic. You'll find it behind a metal screen somewhere on the front of your camera. These omnidirectional microphones pick up sound from all around.
Med shot	If you are recording something you want your audience to hear and understand, and you are using the camera mic, you have to be close.
XCU face	Really close.
Wide shot in conference room or office first line with camera mic, second with lav	Otherwise your voice is just going to get lost in the background sound. I said, "Otherwise your voice is just going to get lost in the background sound."

VIDEO	AUDIO
Med office or hallway	So if you're shooting something in which audio is crucial to telling your story you'll achieve far better results with an external mic.
Holding up a Flip and a Zi8	What should you look for? First, make sure your camera has an audio input--not all do. This one does, this one doesn't. A mic jack should be criteria for what camera to use.
CU lavaliere Clip on shirt	For interviews and presentations, choose a lavaliere--also known as a lav, or lapel mike. A lavaliere microphone is a small microphone that clips onto clothing. Because this is a better quality mic and because it is close to the sound source, your audio will sound better.
Med on camera Hold up shotgun and fishpole	They range in price from $20 to $200, and even a cheap one is better than your camera mic. Another option is a shotgun mic. These can get expensive, and they don't amplify the sound as much as they cut down on the ambient noise. For this mic, you still want to be close to the sound source.
Paolo on headset talking to screen	Finally, for a podcast, software demonstration or voice over, a headset is a great cost-effective solution. They come with either a USB plug or a plug for the mic input on your computer.
Med on camera	Remember that nothing ruins a video like bad audio. If your audience has to work to understand what is being said they will leave. It is that simple. Give them audio that doesn't get in the way of your story.
Audio for the Office v1 **http://youtu.be/iFdhxzvhG3U** **www.storyguide.net**	

Script Example 2

VIDEO	AUDIO
On camera on the beach	Sound is a critical part of your video. If your audience can't understand your message they won't stick around. That seems pretty obvious.
Hawaii footage	But music is also a critical component to creating successful videos. It gives your video texture, ambiance and sets the emotional tone of your message.
On camera – riding bikes	But not just any song will do under your video.
Hawaii footage underwater	First, what is the relationship between the subject and the tempo and style of the music? It has to match. If your story is serious, and the cadence of the voice is slow, you can't have a jarring heavy metal song or silly tune in the background. It confuses the audience.
Hawaii bike footage	The opposite is true, too. If the scene is full of fast edits and quick activity, a slow melodic music will change the entire atmosphere of your video.
On camera in park	The audience gets emotional cues from your music choices. Your music tells them how to feel throughout your story.
On camera in park	That means you need to determine the tone and emotional destination BEFORE you choose your music. It will make your song choice easy.
On camera on beach	And if you are putting music behind a voice, be it narration or on camera, it can't fight for the viewer's attention. If it is too loud....The result is a mess. It has to be soft enough to complement, but not so quiet it sounds like someone left the radio on 20 feet away. And if there is a pause in the narration... Just make the music a little louder for a moment and bring it back down. It can emphasize a point in your message.

VIDEO	AUDIO
Edit timeline demo music	One other technique for using music in a video is called back-timing. Back-timing is when your song ends when your video ends. To work you need to choose a song that has a clean ending. In other words it resolves with a last note like this:
Edit timeline demo music	Not just fading out like this:
Edit timeline demo music	To back-time my music I find the end of the song, align it with the end of my video, and extend the song backwards so it starts earlier in my story. Now when the story ends, the song comes to a close.
On camera beach	One last note, be careful to find royalty-free music. It's illegal to use copy written music without paying for rights. Don't just grab a CD, or download something from iTunes and put it in your video. You are breaking the law.
Web sites / Graphic	There are plenty of sources on the web where you can download free or inexpensive music you can license. It can be frustrating to sift through many of the selections. But take the time to do it because theft can be a career ending move.
On camera beach	Music in your video is a really powerful tool. Use it to set the tone of your story. And frame your message.
Music in Your Video Script 1.2 **http://youtu.be/Opp_CnnwXDY** **www.storyguide.net**	