

## Tips on writing a documentary treatment

A treatment is your opportunity to convince a third party that your documentary is worth making. More than a proposal, the treatment includes a description of the film itself and in the end will help keep your project focused. There is no one “right” way to write a treatment, but for the purposes of the Governor’s Cup Competition here are some guidelines.

Hint: The best documentaries are stories and require storytelling. For instance, a film about “The Environment” is a subject, and too broad for this competition. A film about ground water contamination on Navajo land is still an unwieldy concept, but a story about a family affected by ground water contamination on Navajo land will appeal to a wider audience.

I. Start with an Overview paragraph. Be sure to include a working title, the proposed length of the film, and a brief review of the story. This is an important paragraph: make sure the reader can grasp the importance of your story in two sentences. Think “TV Guide” – how can you make your story clear and appealing in as few words as possible?

II. Spend the next several paragraphs outlining how you expect your story to unfold. Outline the story from beginning to end and include the following:

- Your editorial approach: What is your point of view? What is the story and how do you plan to tell it?
- Who are the characters and what do the viewers see them doing?
- Your visual approach: Help the reader visualize your film. What kind of style will help you tell your story?

III. Close the treatment with a brief summary of your background, and your own reasons for choosing the story. Make the reader understand why the story is important to you – and what you want your audience to take away from their experience viewing your film.

### In general:

- The treatment should clearly state your idea, clarify your point of view, and convince the reader that you are organized, professional and imaginative.
- Make sure you have access to the people, places, and information necessary to complete the film **before** you propose it.
- Remember that in the beginning, a treatment is what you dream your film to be. In the end, it’s what you can deviate from when your material is actually in hand.

- Think in terms of reaching a meaningful audience, and why this audience will be interested in your film.
- Refrain from including all of the research you have on the subject at hand; focus on the story.
- A note on bios: These should be very brief. You may include a bio for yourself, your subject(s), and/or any team members you plan to have on board.

Short list of helpful books:

Directing the Documentary by Michael Rabiger

Writing, Directing and Producing Documentary Films and Videos by Alan Rosenthal

Documentary Storytelling for Video and Filmmakers by Sheila Curran Bernard