Regardless of the modes they recruit, every documentary maker selects and organizes information for audiences, engaging us and leading us to deeper understanding of a central question, story, or truth claim. This chapter critically and practically explores the organizational and narrative strategies of documentary by examining the following registers:

- **Content**: What is your documentary really about? Who is your target audience? What do you want viewers to come away thinking, feeling, or doing?
- **Rhetoric**: What forms of evidence will you use in communicating your central question, aim, or claim? Will your documentary take a stance on an issue? If so, how can you acknowledge and address dissenting views in order to strengthen your claim?
- **Structure**: How will you organize your material to achieve maximum clarity, engagement, and impact? How can you make sure your structural choices make fullest use of the distinctive potentials of documentary?

By the end of the chapter, you will be well versed in these three realms of development and organization, equipped with supporting examples from existing media, and ready to either analyze documentary media more deeply or develop specific strategies for your own project.

**Content: What’s It Really About?**

There are certain questions all documentary makers should be able to answer before going into production, precisely so that any adjustments and recalibrations can be made in relation to a clear initial plan:

- *What is your subject matter and why have you chosen it?*
- *What is the driving question you are seeking to explore?*

Ask audience members what *Hoop Dreams* (1994) is about and they might say it’s about high school basketball, or more specifically, about two talented athletes dreaming of making it to the professional level. Audiences might describe *Trouble the Water* (2008) as being about Hurricane Katrina, or more particularly, a couple’s struggle to rebuild their lives after the waters subside. But both documentaries, despite the fifteen years between them and their different locations (Chicago’s inner city and New Orleans’s Ninth Ward, respectively), reveal sobering parallels in the cycles of poverty, racial prejudice, and the failure of the American dream they chronicle.

The filmmakers behind *Hoop Dreams* and *Trouble the Water* had done their homework before picking up cameras. Even then, both teams’ initial plans changed dramatically not only because of inevitable setbacks but also because of unforeseen opportunities presented...
in the field. Such shifts did not obviate prior preparation, however. Once attracted to a topic, makers need to explore where this interest comes from and honestly answer whether they have the knowledge and ability to carry out a documentary project with the depth, passion, and ethical rigor required. These answers then need to be distilled down to a clear central question for a documentary.

**The Central Question**

Director Steve James and co-producers Frederick Marx and Peter Gilbert set out to make a short PBS program about street basketball and its role in the largely African American communities of inner-city Chicago. James was himself a longtime basketball player, and all three men were Chicago-based, with long-standing commitments to socially conscious, community-driven documentary practice, but none of them is African American, so they collaborated with Earl Smith, a local talent scout and community liaison, to connect them with aspiring teen ball players. They soon realized that the central question of their documentary was as simple as: Can basketball serve as a means to a better life?

The theatrical trailer and poster for *Trouble the Water* tell us “It’s not about a storm. It’s about America.” Carl Deal and Tia Lessin, seasoned producers of controversial Michael Moore documentaries such as *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004), arrived in New Orleans in the early hours after Hurricane Katrina to explore why the city had not been evacuated before the storm and why aid efforts afterward were so deplorably lacking. Their experience as producers of contentious work containing on-location shooting afforded them a strong knowledge base and support infrastructure to draw on in post-Katrina New Orleans—a filming situation that pushed the limits of safety and access and defied any traditional preproduction measures. Deal and Lessin’s past work also established a dedication to socially critical documentary, highlighting the real-world effects of governmental and bureaucratic failure. The central question of their documentary came down to: What does Katrina and its aftermath reveal about what’s really going on in the lives of black Americans?

It is important to emphasize the distinction between a central question and a preconceived point or conclusion you have in mind. If the filmmakers of *Hoop Dreams* had started out telling themselves and their subjects “this is a documentary about the myth of cultural mobility and the exploitation of black youth with dreams of NBA (National Basketball Association) fame,” they would probably never have secured participants willing to let the crew into their lives. Furthermore, the power of *Hoop Dreams* rests in the simultaneous hope and fear we feel for its characters. The filmmakers could never have mustered the passion and commitment needed to follow characters for over four years if they did not believe in them as players with promise and genuinely hope for their success.

If Deal and Lessin had gone to New Orleans with the notion that “this is a project about the failures of FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) and the disenfranchisement of black Americans in New Orleans,” they would simply have been playing the same superficial note pounded out in the popular press at the time. They would have set themselves up to make a Griersonian documentary that turned Hurricane Katrina and New Orleans into a discrete problem moment personified by helpless victims. As we will see, the project that found them proved far more specific in its characters and far more expansive in its perspective. Beginning a documentary endeavor with a period rather than a question mark in mind dramatically curtails opportunities for growth, listening, complexity, and openness to the unanticipated gifts that inevitably present themselves during the production process. If you have a central premise or point, turn it into a question and watch your process open up as a result.
With essayistic documentaries in particular, questions are often the genesis for the project, with larger ideas of subject and meaning crystallizing later through the production process. Grace Lee begins her essayistic documentary *The Grace Lee Project* (2005) with a series of inciting questions about her incredibly common name:

Smart, nice, quiet, accomplished. Are all Grace Lees cut from the same cloth? I’ve heard of violin prodigies with my name. Devout Christians and girls who went to Harvard at age 16. Hearing about all these amazing Grace Lees made me wonder what went wrong with me? . . . How did I wind up with a name that essentially makes me the one loser in a sorority of Super-Asians?

The documentary chronicles Lee’s process of seeking out and profiling what proves to be a diverse group of Asian American women who share her name. Funny and disarming, Lee’s initial queries lead her on a journey that raises powerful questions about racial and gendered stereotypes, ideas of the Asian “model minority myth” and the factors that influence conceptions of self and success in American society.

Even if a work does not have central characters or aim to tell a story, it is still about something. The need for a driving question still applies, perhaps even more strongly, if a work does not have a clear narrative to hold it together. As described in Chapter 2, the genesis for Darren Solomon’s interactive website *In B Flat 2.0* (2011) came from a serendipitous realization that it was possible to have more than one embedded YouTube video play simultaneously on a web page. He was aware of the predigital work of minimalist composer Terry Riley who in 1964 composed *In C*, a score consisting of fifty-three musical phrases and a series of open-ended instructions and suggestions to their playing. Solomon’s discovery about video embedding and playing led him to question how this Web 2.0 capacity (by which we refer to a second wave of Internet applications that move beyond

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**Figure 3.1** The central Grace Lees featured in *The Grace Lee Project*. Top, left to right: activist Grace Lee Boggs and filmmaker Grace Lee; pastor’s wife and youth fellowship leader Grace Lee; high school student and artist Grace Lee. Bottom, left to right: PK (pastor’s kid) Grace Lee; Grace Lee, friend and mother, who turned her and her son’s life upside down to help a friend and her children who were experiencing domestic violence go into hiding; a blurred-out Grace Lee and her girlfriend living in Seoul, unable to show her identity on camera because of familial and cultural stigma around her sexuality.
single-source information generation and transmission to social media possibilities for collaboration and interaction) could be used to extend the collaborative, improvisational potentials of Riley’s work. In B Flat 2.0 addresses Solomon’s central question in two innovative ways: (1) producing an experience in which the composition process was also collaborative; and (2) extending the improvisational capacities of performance not only to the musicians but also to the site visitors, transforming audience members into interactive participants.

**Narrative: Theme, Story, Plot**

Works like In B Flat 2.0 underscore that not all documentaries rely upon central characters or a storyline. And yet the power of many documentary works lies in storytelling and narrative strategies. The frequent tendency of many to use “narrative” as synonymous with “fiction” belies the fact that most documentary works have a driving narrative that is personalized and made specific by the stories and experiences of particular communities or individuals.

In understanding the narrative possibilities of documentary, it is useful for us to differentiate between the terms theme, story, and plot. Theme refers to the larger messages or ideas of a work. Story encompasses the particular contexts and characters that can vivify a theme and connect it to real-world experiences, histories, identities, and stakes. Plot involves the mechanics of constructing story—selecting what content to record or what materials to compile from the infinite assortment that life offers and then deciding how to organize and present these components to allow a story to unfold. As we’ll see in Chapter 7’s discussion of a documentary teaser—a brief scene or selection of material appearing before the main title card—the most evocative way to begin a story and introduce its larger themes may be through an achronological plot, “teasing” audiences with a dramatic event or moment from later in the story that prompts curiosity or suspense to learn more.

Both Hoop Dreams and Trouble the Water progressively develop larger thematic indictments of the American dream. The myth that anyone can make it in America despite his or her social predicament deflects any real critique of endemic social inequalities and implies that poverty, unemployment, crime, or the need for social assistance are matters of personal failure rather than social injustice or systemic failure. Using basketball and a storm, respectively, our filmmakers get at this theme through very different stories.

The makers of Hoop Dreams planned to make a short documentary about a neighborhood pastime, but upon discovering their two central characters, Arthur Agee and William Gates, their story changed. Agee and Gates, both young, talented, black street ball players about to begin high school, are spotted by Earl Smith and recruited to play for St. Joseph High School, a predominately white, suburban, private Catholic school. Given partial scholarships to afford the tuition, the boys and their families are promised access to a college education through basketball scholarships by St. Joseph’s head coach, Gene Pingatore. The filmmakers soon realize that the story of their documentary is seeing how two disenfranchised youth with talent try to raise themselves and their families up by chasing the dream of playing professional basketball.

Deal and Lessin arrived in New Orleans with the intention of focusing their Hurricane Katrina story on a Louisiana National Guard regiment who were not in the state to assist in the early days after Katrina because they had been federally co-opted and deployed to Iraq. The filmmakers thought the story of these guardsmen and women being absent at precisely the sort of moment for which the National Guard was established, then returning home from a war zone to deal with the disastrous aftermath of Katrina in New Orleans, would be an
emblematic story of national and local administrative failure with great potential characters and visuals. On the ground, however, this story was quickly scuttled by a National Guard public relations officer who denied them access, ironically citing Fahrenheit 9/11 (the officer did not know at the time that Deal and Lessin actually produced Moore’s documentary!) as the documentary that effectively closed the doors for all subsequent documentary crews.

The ultimate story of Trouble the Water found them. While Deal and Lessin are shooting material at a Red Cross emergency station, twenty-three-year-old Kimberly Rivers and her husband Scott Roberts literally step into frame. The documentary opens with a teaser of this first encounter captured on tape, with Rivers telling the camera:

That’s my purpose in living now so I can tell people what I been through, man. Yeah man, what I got? Woo! I’ve been saving it because I don’t want to give it to nobody local you know for them to mess around and put it on local stations. This needs to be worldwide. Cause all the footage I’ve seen on TV, nobody ain’t got what I got.

Rivers refers to footage she shot with a Hi-8 analog video camera of Hurricane Katrina hitting her Ninth Ward neighborhood. Like many of their neighbors, Rivers and Roberts stayed behind because they could not afford to evacuate, having no means of transportation. Fifteen minutes of selects from this arresting footage—Rivers corrals her neighbors up into the unfinished crawl space beneath her home’s roof, the levees break,
water rises to the rooftops, and the group tries to navigate the post-Katrina waters—is interspersed throughout the work. But the documentary’s story is not the visceral shocks of Rivers’s footage but her own journey. Trouble the Water tells the story of an aspiring rap musician and former drug dealer (made to fend for herself when her crack-addicted mother died of AIDS) who is searching for meaning, purpose, and a place to call her own.

Each of the stories we just described for Hoop Dreams and Trouble the Water could be plotted out in an infinite number of ways depending on the modes selected, the time span covered, the stylistic choices made, or the number of characters included. Should the narrative withhold information from the audience, allowing for surprise? Or should it reveal more to us than the characters know in the moment, creating suspense? Should the plotting break chronology to advance a present-day story thread while also parceling out glimpses of backstory? All these structural, practical, and aesthetic decisions add up to the plot, with the filmmaker controlling how the story will unfold to audiences and how it will be received.

The chronological structure of high school seemed a natural plot trajectory to follow in telling the stories of Agee and Gates, so the filmmakers committed to the daunting task of shooting their subjects for over four years. They also realized that staying within the high school and at the games for such an expanse of time would reveal only a portion of the story. They sought and received access to Agee’s and Gates’s home lives and families, recording their struggles on and off the court including family tensions, personal setbacks, and financial hardships. These choices in breadth and depth permitted the filmmakers to plot a gripping story in which audiences are willing to invest a great deal of emotion and energy.

Deal and Lessin chose not to document Katrina from an outside-in, holistic perspective like the news crews and helicopters hovering about New Orleans did. They decided instead to follow Rivers and her husband exclusively in the days and months after Katrina as the couple try to rebuild their lives. The term “follow” is appropriate because Rivers truly leads the filmmakers. She is not a passive subject but an agented participant and collaborator. She allows Deal and Lessin to come along on her journey, not to piece her old life back together but to seize this most recent bout of adversity as an opportunity to transcend her past and become something new. The plot unfolds organically from Rivers’s actions and choices. The filmmakers do break chronology in their plotting, however, deftly weaving back and forth between Rivers’s video footage of the storm and the couple’s post-Katrina journey. This oscillation in the plot moves the story forward while keeping the ordeal of Katrina fresh in our minds throughout.

**World and Scope**

Our differentiations among theme, story, and plot should not lead to the misconception that the creative process of planning a documentary always begins neatly, with a theme falling into our laps from which we readily identify a story and make specific plot choices. Quite often it is just an incident or a character that first arrests us, and the full story, with its larger thematic questions, evolves much later. As a rule, however, documentary ideas usually start either too large or too small.

If a student came to me and said that he wanted to follow a talented basketball player trying out for the NBA, I’d ask what the project is really about beyond the plot. Similarly, if a fellow filmmaker told me that she was making a documentary about race, class, and the American dream, I’d point out that America’s a pretty big place, and that’s a lot of history, sociology, and politics to tackle. I’d immediately want to know more about the world and scope of her project.
By the world of a documentary, we mean the characters, locations, and communities it explores in telling its story or framing its questions. The world need not be large, as we saw with the videos of Sadie Benning in Chapter 1, who in most of her early works never even left her bedroom and still managed to make broader social charges that were received across the globe. Hoop Dreams remains rooted in the specific realities of Chicago’s inner city, Trouble the Water in New Orleans’s devastated Ninth Ward. Though both sets of characters want to change the conditions of their neighborhoods, their identities are inescapably determined by these places. Despite the forays that Agee and Gates make in going to college and that Rivers and Roberts make to start a new life in Memphis, all wind up back in their neighborhoods: Rivers and Roberts within the narrative scope of Trouble the Water, Gates and Agee several years after the release of Hoop Dreams, forever changed but called to work as advocates for their communities.

Locating a story within a circumscribed location or community permits a specificity that deepens character engagement and the complexity of arguments. A fixed number of characters permits identification, empathy, and a stronger narrative coherence. But a maker must consciously calibrate the scope of his or her project. How many characters are necessary, for example, if the goal is to share a range of perspectives? Perhaps focusing on one character is a more sensible choice than selecting several; the example of one, if handled well, can afford depth and identification while still providing a gateway to the consideration of larger issues and questions.

In Kimberly Rivers, Trouble the Water has a single protagonist. First with an old video camera she bought on a street corner for $20 in the days before Hurricane Katrina and later as Lessin’s and Deal’s guide, she grants us access to her private struggles and also to a host of other characters, including her husband Scott Roberts, her elderly neighbors (whom she and Roberts somehow get up into their home’s unfinished attic crawlspace to weather the storm), and fellow Ninth Warder Brian, who can’t get any help after the storm because before Katrina he’d been living in a group addiction recovery home and does not show up in any address registry.

In Hoop Dreams, St. Joseph’s coach Pinagotre taps Gates as his “next Isaiah Washington” after freshman year, and he finds a private donor to cover Gates’s tuition balance. Agee’s St. Joseph High story is far less of a fairy tale. No additional donor is recruited for him, and early in his sophomore year, when his family falls behind on payments, the private school sends him packing despite all their initial recruiting promises. Agee winds up playing at the underfunded public high school, Marshall High. This shift necessitates broadening the world of the documentary but further cements the plot, not only as a four-year tracking of the boys across high school but as a comparative journey of two boys pursuing their hoop dreams under very different conditions—inner-city turmoil versus prep-school advantage. The decision to follow two characters rather than one or the other is a strong choice of scope because the story becomes a comparative one about the variables beyond intrinsic talent (advantage, opportunity, money, education) that influence the odds of success.

A documentary’s scope also has temporal dimensions. What is the time span covered by a documentary’s plot, and how does this influence the story that can be told? Is that time span informed by the realities of the world being documented or is it also affected by external realities such as a delivery deadline you need to meet or the amount of funding you have to sustain production? What is the intended duration of the finished work, and how does that affect the choices you make in plotting this story?

Trouble the Water runs for ninety-six minutes and covers two and a half years in the lives of Rivers and those around her. In that time, we see Rivers transition from...
self-proclaimed hustler to community activist, strong in her faith and confident to stand up against oppression through her return to her music and a renewed commitment to her neighborhood. The storm may have washed away possessions but she has channeled her anger productively and found her voice. Rivers’s husband Scott Roberts, has moved on from using and dealing drugs, committing himself to a job opportunity with a construction company, rebuilding New Orleans while making a wage and learning a trade.

Rivers tells us, “It's our home, our food, our neighbors, our problems. That's where I wanna be at.” Meanwhile, many of the neighbors we have met cannot afford to return because rents have quadrupled, and Brian, unable to find work in Memphis, relapses and returns to New Orleans to work for a church and live in their assisted living house. The infrastructure of New Orleans will never be the same, but the documentary’s considerable scope of time is long enough for us to see how a world after Katrina has affected the lives of a select group of characters and has influenced their choices.

By following Gates and Agee through four years of high school and into their first years of college and junior college, respectively, Hoop Dreams allows audiences to experience tremendous change in its characters. The young men grow up physically and emotionally on screen. Gates sustains a series of life-altering knee injuries, has a daughter at age fifteen, and never makes it “down state” for the state championships, although he does manage to lock in a scholarship at Marquette University. Agee’s public school team makes it to the state finals, finishing third. We watch as his parents separate and get back together and separate once more—his father Bo gets hooked on drugs, abuses his wife Sheila, gets clean, and finds God. The electricity and gas are shut off and turned on again as Sheila tries to raise a family on $200 a month. Sheila struggles and achieves her dream of getting an advanced nursing degree; Agee gets a scholarship to Mineral State Community College.

The filmmakers shot over 250 hours of footage and produced a documentary that runs for 170 minutes. This is exorbitant by any measure, but the running time is necessary to get deep and specific with the long, twisting, and arduous trials that the Gates and Agee families weather in the name of opportunity. The result is a far cry from the originally planned thirty-minute PBS piece on street basketball. Certainly a thirty-minute piece could be made that touches on some of the thematic issues at play here, but a much shorter scope of time in the boys’ lives and more focused plotting would be necessary to elicit any sort of depth or detail.

Longer is not necessarily better when it comes to the running time of documentaries, however. With the emergence of streaming media contexts, short-form documentary works are becoming far more commonplace. Film festivals program many more short-form works than features. Questions of length will influence the time span covered in the documentary, the scope of the story addressed, and the plot strategies engaged. In short, world, scope, story, plot, and theme are all distinctly correlative.

Considerations of world, scope, and theme also apply to more experimental works without central characters or storylines. Filmmaker James Benning, father of Sadie Benning whose work was discussed in Chapter 1, is known for his “landscape films” such as 13 Lakes (2004). The world of his film is American lakes, and its scope entails thirteen different lakeshore sites across the United States. He initially set out to record the thirteen largest lakes in the U.S., but he soon found that five of these were in Alaska and frozen over for much of the year, which he felt would lead to logistical challenges and a narrowing of aesthetic differentiation. He then amended his plan to instead seek out a diverse array of large lakes, each with distinctive environmental or cultural features, some of which he described to audiences at a Los Angeles Filmforum screening in 2007:
Lake Powell because it’s man-made on the Colorado river and it flooded a lot of Anasazi culture.

... Lake Pontchartrain, because it is near a large city and it has the longest bridge across any lake in the U.S.—twenty-three miles long. Okeechobee in Florida because of the swamps. Moosehead Lake in Maine because it’s in such wilderness. Lower Red Lake because it was completely surrounded by the Chippewa Nation that doesn’t allow any type of real estate speculation so the lake is pretty pristine...

Temporal considerations also contributed to Benning’s scope. Shooting on 400-foot loads of 16mm film, the maximum possible length of a shot is ten minutes. Benning adopted this technical parameter as a structuring principle and further limited the scope of his film to a single static perspective of each lake. The feature-length film thereby consists of thirteen ten-minute shots that compositionally, each bisect the frame with equal parts water and sky.

Benning eschews central characters from his world and offers up no explicit narrative, not even naming or contextualizing his site selections within the running time of the film. And yet his careful selection and ordering of these ten shots is a form of plotting, producing a distinctive structure and a progressively unfolding experience for audiences. Though individuals are given license to assign personal associations and meanings to the film, Benning’s choices do suggest some distinct organizing questions and themes. Certain encroachments such as the distant water skiers seen and heard looping through the frame at the Salton Sea, train whistles audible at Lake Okeechobee, even illegal target practice gunshots ringing out at Crater Lake, amid the sounds of tides, weather, and birds, challenge viewers to contemplate the relationships between humans and the environment and our often-romantic distinctions between nature and culture. The pace and structure offered up by Benning’s choices in world and scope also “denature” our viewing practices and challenge our audience expectations, prompting us to reflect on notions of time, presence, and observation in an increasingly rapid, urbanized, virtualized, and selectively narrativized culture.

**Who Is Your Intended Audience?**

When delving into a subject you feel passionately enough to build a documentary project around, the impulse to the question posed above may be to respond immediately...
“everyone.” This can set the bar of success unrealistically high for your project and also cause you to produce a work that does not resonate with or effectively reach those who might be most affected by it. We will talk about planning distribution, outreach, and engagement strategies for your documentary and defining success for your project in Chapter 8, but determining your target audience needs to happen much earlier, in the development process. Your intended audience should profoundly shape what your documentary is about and how you approach your subject matter.

Great lessons in defining audience came during the height of the U.S. AIDS crisis in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when various community-based groups felt that government health organizations and mainstream media were not responding to the epidemic in a timely, detailed, and locally specific fashion. Activists such as Greg Bordowitz and Alexandra Juhasz therefore took the charge of creating specifically targeted AIDS media. Bordowitz, in conjunction with New York’s Gay Men’s Health Crisis and co-producer Jean Carlomusto, created the Living With AIDS public access cable program. This weekly show specifically addressed the concerns of those already afflicted with the virus and their caretakers.

Bordowitz also created short video works tailored to specific New York populations—videos for at-risk gay men to be played in bars and theaters, informational videos on alternative medicine treatments open to immunologically compromised patients, and documentation of activist rallies by ACT UP to demand more funding for AIDS research and access to existing medical treatments (Bordowitz 181). His video collaborations with teenagers on safe sex and AIDS prevention, such as It Is What It Is... (1992), are direct and unabashed, and through his mentorship they are produced by teens for teens.

Alexandra Juhasz produced three segments for the Living With AIDS program, each tailored to a specific audience—Women and AIDS (1988), Prostitutes, Risk, and AIDS (1988), and A Test for the Nation (1989). Though certainly more progressive and careful to close the gap between subject and maker than most, Juhasz still felt she was talking about, for, and down to her intended female audiences. In 1990, she teamed up with the Women’s AIDS Video Enterprise (WAVE) to produce We Care: A Video for Care Providers of People Affected by AIDS. Modeling the possibilities of the participatory mode of documentary, this process was a collaborative one in which Juhasz worked with a group of urban, low-income women of color, training them in video production. They produced and appeared in the video, speaking about the ways in which AIDS affects their lives, and put the resultant work to use in their communities.

In her book AIDS TV, Juhasz uses the WAVE experience as a detailed case study of community-based media. Writing on We Care, Juhasz references Carmen (a participant whose husband is HIV-positive), stressing powerfully the importance of identifying and engaging a specific target audience in shaping what a documentary project is about:

My understanding of “theory” recognizes that chicken and rice at Carmen’s house is not simply a part of putting theory into practice but it is part of theory itself. Knowing about the details and difficulties of her life alters my ideas about her, and my ideas about her relationship to the WAVE project and video production. Cross-cultural, cross-class, cross-town friendship—the sharing of a meal, the enjoying of wedding photos, the pleasures of hospitality—organizes our abilities to produce video together, organizes the videotape we produce, explains its content and form as much as any abstract idea about education, representation, or AIDS.

Rather than making a general video about AIDS prevention aimed at “everyone” and specifically satisfying no one, and rather than seeking out airtime or funding from a major
corporate television network. Juhasz and Bordowitz identified target communities in need of vital information, partnered with organizations already working with these affected communities, tailored their subject matter specifically to these individuals by engaging them in a participatory process of development and production, picked up consumer-grade half-inch VHS camcorders, and made videos. Information was delivered directly to their target audiences without the political red tape of major state and national health organizations, which were moving at a snail’s pace in supplying this same information in generalized, top-down fashion.

Tying this discussion of audience back to Hoop Dreams and Trouble the Water, both documentaries received film festival acclaim and theatrical distribution. Box office returns for Hoop Dreams in particular showed the documentary’s appeal to a mass audience. Even so, both documentaries were careful in the crafting of world and scope, favoring the close following of specific individuals within their respective communities rather than resorting to more generalized expository structures with sociologists and experts discussing poverty and race from an outside perspective. Simultaneously, the closely examined personalities and daily struggles of these characters also invite a broader audience—potentially removed by race, geography, and other variables of identity or circumstance—to watch, learn, and empathize. The choices made by the filmmakers in each case to stick with the lived realities of a select number of individuals are what permit both Hoop Dreams and Trouble the Water to have such breadth in the audiences that they have affected.

The process of getting a documentary made is too challenging and time consuming for you to make something that doesn’t ultimately reach your intended audience. When deciding what your documentary is about and how you plan to approach its telling, you should also be researching any existing media on your topic and scrutinizing how these works succeeded or failed in reaching and engaging your intended audience. Were the works too general? Too specialized? In the wrong language(s)? Not relatable in their choice of characters? Is there preexisting knowledge already understood by your target audience cohort that you can skip over in your plotting, providing only a short expository recap for the uninitiated and saving your running time for more valuable and focused matters? Are there particular modes or traditions of storytelling familiar to your audience group that you can engage to structure your work and increase your audience’s ability to relate? Perhaps most importantly, what are the most vital questions or areas of concern your audience needs to see addressed? How can you engage the community directly in defining these areas and collaborate with community members in the development, realization, and distribution of your project? By addressing these questions, it will soon become clearer what your documentary should be about, and your odds of reaching and engaging a target audience will be far greater.

**Documentary Function**

In determining what your documentary is about, you should also clarify what function you hope it will serve in the lives of audience members. Ask yourself:

*What do I want audiences to come away thinking, feeling, or doing?*

In Chapter 1, we touched upon the range of functions a documentary might serve beyond simply to inform. Frances Reid and Deborah Hoffmann’s Long Night’s Journey Into Day (2000) examines South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, an organization set...
up to consider amnesty for perpetrators of crimes during the divisive and bloody apartheid years. Black and white perpetrators meet face-to-face with the families of their victims, confronting the horrific events that will forever bind these strangers to one another. The documentary alternately calls upon its participants to 
confess, to testify, to apologize, and to forgive. We as viewers are called to bear witness and to remember. Reid and Hoffmann would most likely see the overarching intent of their work as being to heal.

Knowing what function your documentary will serve is one of the most crucial ideation steps because it will influence the modes you select, the stance you take, the rhetorical strategies you engage, and even the aesthetic plan you design. If you are struggling with the central theme of a work, often searching out possible functions can prove the key to unlocking a theme.

Functions are most helpful to ideation when they are boiled down to a single infinitive action verb. In a sense, functions are analogous to actor intentions or actions. An actor often seeks a single playable action through which he or she can focus their performance. This action is geared toward deriving a result or a response from another character in a scene. Think of your audience as that other character. What verbs can you select that will help you achieve your desired response in audiences?

You should make a habit of brainstorming a list of possible functions. Don’t initially censor or limit yourself based on what you think a documentary can or cannot do, or with preconceived notions of what a documentary should do. Beyond to inform or to entertain, in making a documentary about two inner-city kids trying to make it to the NBA one might seek to inspire, to demythologize, to romanticize, to politicize, to humanize, or to advocate. Hoop Dreams ultimately demythologizes professional basketball as a viable route out of poverty. It exposes the complex system of exploitation and pressure such a dream preys upon in dangling a carrot of exceptionalism to youth rather than socially addressing the root causes of social disparity and racism. The documentary puts faces to racial and economic inequity and entertains with twisting and turning drama that would not be believed were it fiction. The economic success of Hoop Dreams shows that entertaining, character-driven documentaries can be a way to get audiences interested and watching, then helping them to contend with larger social issues along the way.

Making a documentary about the emergency and reconstruction responses to Katrina, a maker might want to indict, to investigate, to demand, to apologize, to repair, to memorialize, or to give voice to those without access to the means of production. Trouble the Water gives voice to Rivers, indicts state and local governments, and inspires individuals to ask questions and to act. These functions were realized without polemics; they were realized by putting a human face onto a disaster through use of the participatory and autobiographical modes. We can see that many different documentaries could have been created based on different intended functions and that such choices directly affect the rhetorical strategies engaged to achieve these specific aims.

With the Internet, social media, and the diversification of online delivery platforms, the simultaneous capacities to reach a broader audience and to more strategically define and target a niche audience have both increased. In Chapter 8, we’ll explore these possibilities and ways to further identify your audience, to develop outreach strategies for building community around a work, and to provide engagement opportunities to help audiences understand and act upon your intended functions. For now, know not only that understanding your target audience and the intended impacts of your project will help to develop the form and function of your work but that funding and granting agencies are increasingly demanding comprehensive distribution, outreach, and engagement plans as part of application materials, even at the developmental stage of a project.
Rhetoric: The Art of Persuasion

What are the criteria by which we judge and assess a documentary’s claims? Some say that with the increased pace of visual culture, no one will pay attention to a maker’s message unless it arrives in high-tech style, with fast-paced editing, kinetic camera angles, slick motion graphics, and a contagious soundtrack. This section will examine Rhetoric, a series of lectures dating back to the fourth century B.C., in which Greek philosopher Aristotle develops the case that a compelling oratorical argument must combine different types of evidence, as well as anticipate and address counterarguments. We will explore how such strategies might be of utility in crafting arguments in contemporary documentary practice.

Aristotle posits that rhetorical strategies should go beyond specialized knowledge, prioritizing social concerns and realities and presenting them in an accessible way. He designates three types of appeals:

- Appeals through character: those residing in the ethos or character of the speaker
- Appeals to emotion: those appealing to the pathos or emotions of the listener
- Demonstrative proofs: those underscoring the logos or actuality of things.

Aristotle argues that a successful speaker should engage all three of these forms of appeal in shaping an argument, avoiding “irrelevant pleading” or extraneous information. Rather than perpetuating myths of objectivity, rhetoric at its essence involves taking a stance and then arguing it as effectively as possible. Contrary to the myths of objectivity dismantled in prior chapters, many documentaries take a stance on a particular issue, aiming to compel audiences to take particular actions. This is what has traditionally distinguished documentary practices from journalism. Even if not adopting a specific position, most documentary works at least seek to frame central questions on an issue and to compel audiences toward deeper thought and reflection. Taking a stance or having a point of view in a documentary is fine, as long it is openly presented and not intentionally masked. Contextualizing and situating one’s stance is what distinguishes documentary practices from propaganda.

Aristotle also underscores that a persuasive argument should address all sides of an issue so that one’s detractors cannot make unfair use of arguments left unaddressed. After reading this chapter, Project 3: Gaining Perspective in Appendix C will take you through the process of researching differing perspectives on an issue, creating a short documentary that presents your distinct stance while also anticipating, incorporating, and responding to alternative or opposing positions.

Underneath all of Aristotle’s points runs a fundamental belief that rhetoric should be focused on the pursuit of greater truths and social justice, not misappropriated for fraudulent or duplicitous ends. This alludes to what we will develop as a professional gaze in Chapter 5, akin to the medical profession’s Hippocratic Oath. For documentary practitioners, social justice and the greater good can be defined in many ways, but I hope each of us realizes the incredible power of time-based audiovisual media and the particular responsibilities that come with making claims to reality through documentary. Each of us has tremendous potential for telling stories and framing questions heretofore muted or relegated to the periphery, fostering dialogue and conversation in a public sphere, and defining our own professional ethos from behind the camera.
A Sense of Ethos: Character Development

Aristotle tells us that the value we put on what a speaker says has very much to do with the sense of ethos or character we attribute to that speaker. We’ve talked in preceding chapters about the so-called expert figure in documentaries and the instinct to confer truth-value or authority to a disembodied narrator’s voice or to any on-screen talking head once an identifying lower-third text chyron comes up over their image. By Aristotle’s standards, however, each speaker must earn the credibility of the audience, regardless of title and previous renown: "This trust, however, should be created by the speech itself, and not left to depend upon an antecedent impression that the speaker is this or that kind of man" (1.2).

It would be naïve to say that the credentials or popular persona of a figure do not inflect the level of attention or credibility we afford him or her, but this idea that the probity or the integrity of a character must be proven by his or her words and actions during the speech, or in our case the documentary, is important for two reasons. First, there is a democratizing sense to the idea that each speaker, regardless of status, has potential documentary value. Second, simply having an expert or recognized name in your documentary will not immediately enrich your project. If your project contains human subjects, you will need to present these participants in a way that encourages audiences to confer a sense of ethos onto their contributions. Trust is not guaranteed, but rather earned.

Davis Guggenheim’s *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006) utilizes a polarizing public figure—former senator and vice president Al Gore—as the central character and guide in its crusade against global warming. Guggenheim and Gore both knew that Gore’s involvement in the contested 2000 presidential election between him and George W. Bush was likely to divide audiences along partisan lines, preventing them from taking the documentary seriously. Accordingly, they address and defuse the issue right from the documentary’s start. Standing in a darkened auditorium about to deliver a presentation on climate change, Gore introduces himself to the diegetic audience (remember, by diegetic we mean components that come from inside the world of the project as opposed to nondiegetic score, titles, or voice-over) and accordingly reintroduces himself to nondiegetic viewers of the documentary, declaring, “I am Al Gore, I used to be the next president of the United States of America.” Gore counters on-screen laughter from the crowd, and perhaps our own as well, with a wry smile. “I don’t find that particularly funny,” he quips, prompting more laughter. The elephant in the room disappears a bit, and Gore’s ethos as a man who can face the realities of the world, be they personal or global, lays a foundation on which he can build.

Gore is careful never to personally reference the administration of George W. Bush. Instead, Guggenheim fleshes out the cultural and historical moment more explicitly for Gore. A minute-long montage of archival news clips and footage tells the story of the 2000 presidential election recount, the Supreme Court’s decision in favor of Bush, and Gore’s own acceptance of this outcome at his concession press conference where he states, “While I strongly disagree with the court’s decision. I accept the finality of this outcome.” Gore does not have to openly indict the Bush administration for its failure in response to Hurricane Katrina. Rather, Gore talks to us about increasingly violent and erratic storms caused by global warming, and Guggenheim lets images of Katrina, its devastation, and the response failures of the Bush administration and FEMA be voiced by New Orleans mayor Ray Nagin, during a September 1, 2005 radio broadcast excerpt:
You've gotta be kidding me. This is a national disaster. Get every doggone Greyhound bus line in the country and get their ["asses" is bleeped] moving to New Orleans. That's, they're thinking small man, and that's a major, major, major deal. . . . Let's do something. Let's fix the biggest damn crisis in the history of this country.

Gore also never indicts Bush directly for attempting to politically downplay the scientific reality of global warming; instead, we see Gore reacting in real time as he reads an online New York Times article about White House Environment Office chief of staff Philip Cooney, who was caught editing National Academy of Sciences reports about the causes of global warming. Gore uses the specific example of Cooney to make his points rather than making broad, unsubstantiated characterizations of the Bush administration at large, which would only undermine his message.

Gore's ethos is not presented as that of a defeated, embittered presidential candidate, but rather as a public servant whose own commitment to alerting the country of climate change dates back to the 1960s and continues as his core mission. Adding to this sense of character, Gore does not try to highlight successes but rather admits the extreme difficulty he's had in getting the message across. Gore commiserates:

I've been trying to tell this story for a long time, and I feel as if I've failed to get the message across. I was in politics for a long time. I'm proud of my service. There are good people who are in politics in both parties who hold this at arm's length because if they acknowledge it and recognize it then the moral imperative to make big changes is inescapable.

Through confessing his own frustrations, Gore not only builds ethos but also seeks to transform global warming from a political issue to a moral issue.

An Inconvenient Truth engages in rhetoric of the true form intended by Aristotle—it is essentially a recorded speech. The choice to analyze this 2006 film in detail, despite a more recent 2017 follow-up project An Inconvenient Sequel: Truth to Power (executive produced by Guggenheim and directed by Bonni Cohen and Jon Shenk) comes precisely from the rhetorical challenge of transforming a self-described “slideshow presentation” by Gore into an engaging documentary. Interviewed in a humorously titled 2016 Grist article, “The Slideshow that Saved the World,” Gore recounts that he'd been collecting images and data, building and refining a public slideshow presentation about climate change, since 1989. Producer Laurie David saw Gore deliver an eight-minute version of this presentation in 2004. She'd been struggling to find rhetorical approaches that could convey the perils of climate change to audiences in a way that would engage them and thought Gore's 15 years of slideshow tinkering had paid off. Gore recalls:

She came up to me afterward and said, “This has to be made into a movie.” And I thought that was a bad idea, if not a crazy idea. I did not see how in the world a slideshow could become a movie.

(Armstrong et al.)

In taking on this challenge, Guggenheim and his team record several different live deliveries of Gore’s slideshow, a presentation he has given over a thousand times around the globe. He intersperses the presentation with filmed sequences of Gore on the move: to his next speaking destination, driving to and from airports, walking through terminals (not taking a private jet), sitting on planes and in hotel rooms, continually revising the order of slides in his presentation, and researching news on his laptop computer. He is characterized as a lone man traveling the world, propelled by his desire to get the message out. The use of the public speeches not only enlivens the information but also builds Gore’s ethos. With
live audiences in each speaking context, we receive not only the information but also a
diegetic crowd’s reaction to it—gasps, groans, laughter, applause—all in real time. The
inclusion of audiences in the diegesis of *An Inconvenient Truth* gives all of Gore’s facts and
figures a place and a present tense, rather than leaving them floating in an expository void.
We as viewers, in a theater or at home, effectively become extensions of this diegetic
audience and are prone to identify and align ourselves with their positive, spontaneous
responses to Gore’s character.

**Feeling Pathos: Emotional Truths**

Despite traditional conceits of objectivity, emotional appeals definitely have a place in
documentary. Putting faces, voices, and emotional realities to larger sociopolitical issues—
appealing to pathos within a mix of other rhetorical approaches—is one of the great
communicative possibilities of character- and story-driven documentary practice. Despite
historical precedents to the contrary, such as the stiring of emotion and blind Nazi party
loyalty inspired by Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will* (1935), audiences are generally
smart, their sensors finely tuned to calibrate between sincerity and manipulation.

In Errol Morris’s *The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara*
(2003), a clip of a *CBS Reports* program from the late McNamara’s time as secretary of
defense shows his polarizing nature, hailed by some as “the first secretary to exert civilian
control over the military” and derided by his opponents as “a con-man, an IBM machine with
legs; an arrogant dictator.” Rather than trying to ignore or downplay McNamara’s polarizing
quality, Morris foregrounds it, for therein lies the documentary’s great intrigue and drama—
what does this man have to say for himself? McNamara is a captivating figure, both pictured
in his prime and shown as Morris interviews him: an older man, often diminished, his voice
warbling and catching at times, and more than once prompted to fight back tears. Morris
invented a system called the “interrotron,” by which he and the interviewee each look into a
camera on which the other’s image is superimposed, meaning that interviewees look directly
into camera as they speak. As a result, subjects in the completed documentary break the
fourth wall, the imaginary barrier between action and audience. This rupture gives us the
sense that characters are directly addressing us as viewers, which may prove disconcerting
at first, but in Morris’s character-based documentaries the effect is disarming, heightening
our emotional engagement with his human subjects.

Morris and his editors divide *The Fog of War* into eleven sections, each titled with a
different lesson that McNamara learns during his filmed retrospection. McNamara seems to
be speaking directly to the human capacity for pathos in “Lesson #1: Empathize with your enemy,” and “Lesson 2: Rationality will not save us.” Both sections relate incidents surrounding the Bay of Pigs invasion and the Cuban missile crisis, when the United States, under Kennedy, stood at a nuclear stalemate with the combined forces of Castro’s Cuba and Khrushchev’s Soviet Union, each side apparently ready to push the button.

McNamara tells us of a personal conversation with Fidel Castro years after the conflict’s resolution, when Castro acknowledged that not only were 163 Soviet nuclear warheads pointed at the United States from Cuba at the time but he had personally recommended that Khrushchev push the button. McNamara gets agitated and shaky remembering Castro’s resoluteness, his willingness to “pull the temple down on his head” simply on a matter of principle. The emotion and incredulity that still rise up some forty years later in McNamara is powerful evidence of how close to the brink of nuclear war the world came.

More overt emotional appeals come as McNamara talks of meeting and courting his wife, Margaret Craig. His undeniable charm comes through while relating anecdotes such as Margaret, still his fiancée at the time, calling to get his middle name for the wedding invitations. He replied, “It’s Strange.” She retorted, “Fine, but what is it?” not realizing that the S. in Robert S. McNamara did, indeed, stand for Strange. The costs of public service and a high-pressured position as secretary of defense also hit home when McNamara tells us,

You know it was a traumatic period. My wife probably got ulcers from it, may even ultimately have died from the stress. My son got ulcers. It was very traumatic. But they were some of the best years of our life and all members of my family benefited from it. It was terrific.

His voice gravelly and wavering, eyes watering, suddenly McNamara is just an old man, though many alive at the time of McNamara’s resignation would argue the man’s “crocodile tears” were frequent and not to be taken for their weight in water.

Morris does not let McNamara off easily, however, denying his subject the ability to drift off into what the filmmaker has jokingly termed in interviews “the fog-of-war-ate-my-homework excuse.” Such a defense—claiming the infinite complexities and details that lead to war make no one individual accountable—is precisely the one used by Nazi war criminals and civilian collaborators in the aftermath of the European Holocaust (“I was only following orders”; “I only worked the switcher on the train tracks”). Once McNamara’s eleven lessons have ended, Morris adds a final “Epilogue,” in which he presses McNamara further, asking, “Why did you fail to speak out against the war after you left the Johnson administration?”

Figure 3.6 Frames from The Fog of War. Left: former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, diminished and humanized in Morris’s frame. Right: McNamara at his prime in a CBS Reports segment half a century earlier, frame. Right: McNamara at his prime in a CBS Reports segment half a century earlier.
The heretofore effusive and open McNamara suddenly clams up: “I’m not going to say any more than I have. These are the kinds of questions that get me in trouble. You don’t know what I know about how inflammatory my words can appear.” But certainly we do after 105 minutes of McNamara speaking openly while offering up details with abandon.

Morris pushes: “Do you feel personally responsible for the war? Do you feel guilty?” McNamara refuses again: “I don’t want to go any further on this question. It just opens up more controversy.” Morris seems to realize this line of questioning will not go any further: “Do you get the feeling that you’re damned if you do and if you don’t, no matter what?” McNamara takes the out, his legendary glibness revealing itself for the first time in the documentary: “Yeah, yeah, that’s right. And I’d rather be damned if I don’t.” The Fog of War’s closing moments offer a final emotional display as evidence, leaving each of us to weigh for ourselves whether to damn or exonerate the late secretary of defense.

Building with Logos: Demonstrative Proof

Demonstrative arguments appealing to a sense of logos are certainly based on data or material evidence, but audiences are watching closely to see how you as maker frame and present such information. In Rhetoric, Aristotle writes:

Even if our speaker had the most accurate scientific information, still there are persons whom he could not readily persuade with scientific arguments. True instruction, by method of logic, is here impossible; the speaker must frame his proofs and arguments with the help of common knowledge and accepted opinions.

(1.1)

This encapsulates the challenges Gore and Guggenheim face in An Inconvenient Truth. Not only must they present a case for the reality of global warming and its effects but, more important, they must convince audience members that altering their own daily choices can have an effect on reversing formidable trends.

Gore realized long before the documentary project, when designing his slideshow, that he needed to find ways to also make the data on climate change accessible and engaging. He uses a number of strategies to provide a sense of logos to his claims, while still entertaining audiences. The documentary contains many charts and figures, which are to be expected and would certainly be missed by his detractors were they not present. But more powerful than the facts and figures alone is how Gore and Guggenheim present them.

The first inclination of many makers would be simply to cut, full screen, to the charts and graphs Gore already has prepared. We’re familiar with such commonplace graphics in documentaries, which seem removed from the diegetic world of the characters, floating in some amorphous, expository space along with a disembodied narrator’s voice. Not so in An Inconvenient Truth. All data slides remain rooted in the reality of the auditoriums where Gore speaks; Gore and his audiences are always placed in physical proximity to the data. Gore stands in front of large screens in his assorted speaking venues. The projections at times dwarf him, giving their data a daunting gravitas that could never be achieved by more conventional nondiegetic presentations.

In one pivotal scene, Gore and Guggenheim need to underscore the exponential projected increase in atmospheric carbon dioxide levels by 2056 if the current rate of increase is not curtailed. To produce what he calls the necessary “aha” moment in audiences, Guggenheim and his crew constructed a ninety- by forty-foot screen on a sound
stage in order to present a graph of 650,000 years of Antarctic carbon dioxide/temperature correlation data to an assembled audience. With the size of this screen, Gore must physically walk forty feet to trace back carbon dioxide levels in the atmosphere over the past seven ice ages, underscoring that over all of those 650,000 years, despite fluctuations, carbon dioxide levels never surpassed 300 ppmv. He also shows the temperature graph for this same period, underscoring the consistent correlation between increased carbon dioxide and increased temperature. Gore then reveals the unprecedented carbon dioxide concentrations for 2006, which broke 400 ppmv, the top of the visible y-axis scale on his graph. To the audible surprise of the assembled audience members, he then gets onto a scissor lift crane and raises himself up as he extends the graph to show the “projected concentration after 50 more years of unrestricted fossil fuel burning.” Fifty years is a blip on the x-axis, given the sheer breadth of time the graph visualizes, but this makes the change on the y-axis even more dramatic: a vertical line upward into the rafters of the sound stage, requiring the crew to change in the vertical aspect ratio of the projection screen. This highly performative act of data visualization is both comedic and unnerving and adds another time-based element to its rhetorical impact: it takes a full thirteen seconds of screen time (punctuated by nervous laughter from the audience) for both Gore and the graph’s line to stop climbing. The height of this rise is further underscored by camera operation: a close panning shot across the graph’s lines suddenly requires a sharp upward tilt of the camera to reach its termination point. Framing is also used to determined effect: with an edit, Gore is back on the ground again (Guggenheim recounts in the Grist interview that Gore apparently got temporarily stuck on the scissor lift, not knowing how to get it down again), dwarfed in the wide shot composition required to capture both him and the graph’s projected peak.

Also impactful is Gore’s delivery of photographic evidence: before/after shots of receding ice caps, melting permafrost, and seas turned to deserts. At one point, Gore and Guggenheim utilize a pair of photographs depicting the decline of the Upsala glacier in Patagonia, Argentina, orchestrated by renowned photographer Daniel Beltrá as part of his work with the international environmental advocacy group Greenpeace. During a trip to the region with Greenpeace in 2004, Beltrá was able to match exactly the perspective of a 1928 image of the glacier from the Archivo Museo Salesiano’s collection and take a new photograph seventy-six years later. Side by side in the documentary, the archival image and Beltrá’s photograph offer striking evidence of the glacier’s melting. The spectacle of such shifts, presented side by side, elicits a visceral response in diegetic audiences and us as viewers.
Gore dramatizes and personalizes his data with real-world examples and implications, linking a rising carbon line to moving image footage of crumbling ice shelves, drowning polar bears, dramatic weather, droughts and floods, collapsing ecosystems, rising water levels, infectious disease vectors, global deforestation, and food shortages. Lest these all sound like issues occurring “somewhere else,” he brings his examples home to the United States: pine beetle infestations; oil pipeline collapses on thawing permafrost in Alaska; hurricanes; spreading West Nile virus; potential sea level increases in Florida, Manhattan, and San Francisco Bay; and the potential of 100,000,000 global refugees seeking asylum, all due in considerable part to the United States’ status as the highest producer of carbon emissions on the planet for over a century (China overtook the U.S. in 2007, the year after *An Inconvenient Truth*’s release).

Other techniques for visualizing data employed by Guggenheim and Gore include animated simulations and the use of cartoon sequences to break down complex ecological cycles into accessible narratives. In fact, directors Bonni Cohen and John Shenk utilized a controversy around one of *An Inconvenient Truth*’s animated simulations to structure a promotional trailer for their follow-up project, *An Inconvenient Sequel: Truth to Power*. A brief one-minute excerpt, released soon after the film’s January 2017 premiere at the Sundance Film Festival, reveals that Gore continues to update and present his traveling slideshow a decade later. Speaking to another diegetic audience, he recounts “the single-most criticized scene in that movie” was an animated simulation over a satellite image of New York City that projected the combined effects of climate change-induced sea level rise and superstorm surges could impact parts of lower Manhattan to the point of submerging the site of the World Trade Center Memorial. Gore claims detractors scoffed at this simulation as a ridiculous exaggeration. Cohen and Shenk cut to a montage of archival video material of lower Manhattan during Superstorm Sandy in 2012, with streets and subway stations filling with water, and then pull out slowly on a still image of the submerged 9/11 memorial construction site, as New York Governor Andrew Cuomo, speaking at a press conference during Sandy’s aftermath, claims, “There is a wakeup call here. And that is climate change and our vulnerability to it. It was true ten years ago. It was true five years ago. It is undeniable today.”

**Rhetoric in the Digital Age**

Since the time of *An Inconvenient Truth*’s release, capacities to collect, store, analyze, and visualize data have completely transformed. We live in an era of big data, where networked
technologies and geospatial devices and systems are producing data sets of unprecedented size and scope, about every aspect of the physical world, culture, and even our own bodies (think about the explosive popularity of health and fitness apps). This opens up concerns around surveillance by a sphere of public authority, as discussed in Chapter 1, but also real opportunities to use data visualization not only to support documentary claims through appeals to logos, but arguably, as introduced in Chapter 2, to produce new forms of interactive documentary and database narratives.

*Network Effect: Human Life on the Internet* (2015) by Jonathan Harris and Greg Hochmuth is an interactive web documentary that meditates on our culture’s increased obsession with life increasingly lived on and through the Internet. Accessible at www.networkeffect.io, the interface presents visitors with 100 physical human behaviors, described by simple verbs, from “ache” to “yawn,” on a scrolling, alphabetized text interface. Selecting one elicits an audiovisual overload of data drawn from a continuously updating cache of over four million data points to date, including:

- 10,000 appropriated YouTube video clips demonstrating the behaviors, compiled by enlisting crowdsourced labor from Amazon Mechanical Turk workers
- 10,000 audio clips of voices reading Tweets mentioning the behavior, also compiled through Amazon Mechanical Turk tasks
- Proclivity for engaging in the behavior over the past century, broken down by gender, determined by querying for mentions of the behavior within all the digitized texts on Google Books and analyzing associated pronouns
- News headlines since 2004 related to the chosen behavior, pulled by a Google News crawler
- Reasons individuals engage in the behavior, aggregated via a system that queries Twitter for all instances of the behavior mentioned in a tweet preceded by “I” and followed by “because”
- A global estimate of how many individuals may be currently engaged in the behavior, calculated through “wisdom of the crowd” survey technique (Mechanical Turk users were surveyed and asked to provide estimates; 100 surveys were conducted for each of the 100 behaviors, with the results averaged).

In order to not perpetuate the very online living it critiques, the site uses the Google App Engine and your IP address to identify your location and cross references this with the United Nations and World Health Organization data sets for average life expectancy in your country from Wikipedia. The site launches a timer countdown, giving you a minute of visitation time per decade of estimated lifespan:

**YOUR TIME HERE IS LIMITED**

From your IP address, we see you live in The United States, where the average life expectancy is 78.4 years—so after 7.84 minutes (7:50), your access will be blocked for a day, so you can get back to your life.

*Network Effect* is startling in its poetic and interactive mirroring of our postmodern condition. It reminds us that the Internet doesn’t simply permit us to access data; our online activities also produce it. Every browser search we execute, every hashtag we use, and every video we upload become data points waiting to be analyzed, interpreted, and presented as rhetorical evidence. It also underscores that data do not necessarily only appeal to our logos. Data visualization is *storytelling*, and digital design and motion graphics...
capacities have transformed static infographics into spatialized, time-based, audiovisual experiences. The way we present data in a documentary can sway the sense of ethos we have about a certain group or individual and also elicit powerful pathos, capable of transforming our feelings and beliefs. As you select your methods of presenting data, however, make sure form supports function. In the words of statistician, artist, and data visualization pioneer Edward Tufte, who appears in the aptly titled “The Art of Data Visualization,” a 2013 episode of the PBS series Off Book, “Style and aesthetic cannot rescue failed content. If the words aren’t truthful, the finest optically letter-spaced typography won’t turn lies into truths.”

Choosing Your Rhetoric

How does one choose the right balance of evidence and rhetorical strategies for a documentary? There is no absolute formula to follow. Every topic and its chosen modes of presentation will warrant their own approach. We’ve already seen that demonstrative proofs are less of an issue in The Fog of War, but they serve a vital function in An Inconvenient Truth. Some works may be entirely successful in their aims by focusing on only one arena of evidence. Aaron Valdez’s remix work States of the Union: Bill Clinton (1998), discussed in Chapter 2, reduces a seventy-four-minute State of the Union address by Clinton down to its instances of empirical rhetoric. The rapid-fire montage of numbers is certainly demonstrative material, but dissociated from context, they lose any sense of logos; we’re left only with Clinton’s delivery and the attendees’ effusive applause. Valdez reveals that these addresses are in fact presidential performances, and statistics are rhetorical tools intended to inspire pathos and build the president’s ethos in the hearts and minds of the nation.

In Anyone and Everyone (2007), the focus is “coming out” and the struggles of parents to come to terms with a gay child. Despite global progress on queer issues, helping parents to accept their LGBTQ children requires more than statistics. Poet Susan Polis Schutz had never made a documentary before directing Anyone and Everyone, but she is...
the parent of a gay son—U.S. Congressman Jared Polis. Jared came out to his parents before coming out publicly. Susan remembers her shock, unable to talk to anyone specifically about Jared at the time owing to the fact he was not out publicly. She decided a documentary that broke the stigma of speaking about these issues could have the widest impact in helping other parents. Anyone and Everyone therefore consists entirely of interviews with parents and their mostly adult (one teenage) gay children.

A young Southeast Asian American man and his Indian, Hindu parents appear backlit and unidentified, the mother telling us, "We are well known figures in our community and the issue might create some animosity. So I would rather not recognize myself." The son, now a grown man and attorney integrated into American culture, talks of his father giving him a stone meant to cleanse him of his gay desires, at first urging him to marry a woman and hope the desires subside, then later asking him to at least marry a lesbian in order to keep up appearances in the Indian community. The mother talks about wondering what she did wrong to produce a gay child and admits contemplating suicide.

Parents and children from a range of religious and ethnic backgrounds—Mormon, Catholic, Native American, Japanese American—in turn recount the moment when the "coming out conversation" occurred. Despite their differences, the parents experience similar trajectories of shock, personal blame, denial, grief, and various levels of ultimate acceptance and pride. Children speak of the painful split between living a life true to themselves and the potential familial repercussions this might cause. A son tells of fearing his father’s response, remembering his father once bragging about his participation in a gay-bashing incident. A Japanese American mother recounts that she’d never heard of Asian gay people before and assumed her lesbian daughter was simply confused from reading too much critical theory. Direct descendants of the founding members of the Mormon Church talk about choosing their gay son over the church that had been central to their lives for generations.

Each participant cultivates a strong ethos and credibility through their candor, and their own emotional vulnerability inspires tremendous pathos in viewers. Ultimately, these testimonies also constitute demonstrative evidence of a sort, underscoring that LGBTQ people are "anyone and everyone." If you as a viewer have prejudices against LGBTQ individuals (or by extension, individuals different from you on any number of registers of identity, belief, or background), chances are “those people” are your neighbors, fellow congregants, even your family members. To parents and children struggling over this issue, Anyone and Everyone’s participants offer proof that turning away from one another can lead to pain, silence, and death but that talking openly about these matters can in fact be healing and empowering.

All three categories of rhetorical appeal proposed by Aristotle can in turn be expressed through a series of technical, creative, and ethical decisions, from the framing or camera movements you employ to the data visualization strategies you engage, to the subjects you

Figure 3.10 Descriptive monikers of identity and a panoply of faces stream across the screen at the beginning of Anyone and Everyone. This visual rhetoric underscores the documentary’s theme: that gay people are a part of every community and culture.
select to follow or interview, to the interactive interfaces you design. Every maker must think through these variables and develop clear strategies particular to the topic, form, audience, and intended function of their project.

**Structure: Organizing Reality**

As we’ve already seen in this chapter, defining who your audience is and what function you wish your documentary to serve will distinctly shape the story you tell. Together, decisions about the world and scope of your project, your rhetorical strategies, and whether or not you intend to engage characters and plot a story or instead use other means of cultivating a central theme or question will all inform the structure of your work. By *structure* we refer to the ways in which content is selected and ordered to produce meaning and experience. The simultaneously challenging and invigorating fact of documentary making is that reality does not follow a script. Having a sense of a possible structure for your documentary will offer a road map, informing the choices you make through the development, production, and postproduction processes. In this section we’ll first examine the principles of what we’ll term linear, story-driven documentaries. We’ll then introduce episodic structures, which can certainly still contain characters and aim to tell stories but which open up possibilities for serialized and interactive works. Finally, we’ll explore more thematic structures, which may have narrative aims but which also afford more experimental and interactive possibilities.

**Linear Structure: Aristotle and Hollywood**

Hollywood’s structuring of fictional narratives has relevance to documentary storytelling as well. Its examination also brings us back to Aristotle. Aristotle’s *Poetics* (from *poïesis*, the act of making) is a series of lectures written around 350 B.C. analyzing the Greek tragedies of Sophocles that had been written a century before his own time. Aristotle wanted to explore what made audiences continue to come and see these works despite knowing their endings. From his analysis, he compiled the key components of drama:

- A central *protagonist* exists in a world/setting of distinct temporal and spatial continuity.
- This character has a *goal* and takes action toward its realization.
- Such actions are linked by causality—A leads to B, which necessitates C—advancing plot in a motivated fashion.
- An *antagonist* (or a series of oppositional forces, perhaps even from within the protagonist) deters the protagonist from his or her goal, leading to *conflict*.
- Conflict creates dramatic tension, which spurs audience engagement and investment.
- Selecting and ordering the information presented to the audience creates *suspense*—the desire of a spectator to continue perceiving/receiving and hoping/wondering—and the need to continue experiencing the character’s journey and seeking its outcome.
- The obstacles encountered by the protagonist increase in magnitude, leading to a *climax*.
- The consequences of this climax resolve the question of whether the protagonist succeeds or fails in attaining his or her goal. This provides a sense of termination and *catharsis*. 
Inherent in these dramatic components is a linear, three-act dramatic structure with a beginning, a middle, and an end. The Hollywood model often breaks these acts down further into eight potential sequences, each with a distinct utility in developing character and advancing story. Each sequence is comprised of a grouping of scenes linked by a distinct sequence tension or question. One could argue that there are in fact eight small films within a well-crafted Hollywood fiction film, each with its own question/tension and a beginning, middle, and end. The result of one sequence determines the question/tension of the next. This leads to an overall structure of the film, with a beginning comprised of introducing the world and the characters and establishing a question or goal, a proportionately longer middle in which we explore the relationships of the main character and see him or her make substantive attempts toward realizing a goal or answering a driving question, and an ending that synthesizes knowledge or changes that have resulted from these actions and proposes a new world view. Sequences, each with their own inherent structure and tension, break up the experience of watching a film, permitting dynamic pacing and dramatic shifts to impact audiences rather than losing viewers in a nonstop stream of information.

Documentary makers can definitely take cues from this model when struggling with the task of translating their larger story into a plot that engages audiences and that they can follow. A linear structure often features a goal-oriented protagonist situated within a discrete spatiotemporal reality, actively making attempts to reach a goal, with these attempts resulting in causally linked plot points. Short-form works with character-driven stories may not have eight sequences but they can also benefit from engaging Aristotelian principles, particularly in the clear establishment of a character’s goal, identification of stakes or obstacles, advancement of story through causal linkages, and resolution through synthesis or catharsis.

It is important to note that the “linearity” we refer to here is more grounded in causality than chronology. A present-day incident can directly motivate cutting to a prior history or incident that contextualizes or deepens its understanding. Such an achronological plot choice is still causally motivated and advances the larger narrative. When the antagonistic force in a documentary is not a specific person or social entity, but rather conditions or issues in a character’s past, breaking chronology to provide necessary backstory or historical perspective is quite common.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ACT I</th>
<th>ACT II</th>
<th>ACT III</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Introduction of world and characters. Inciting incident occurs that clarifies the central problem of the protagonist’s life.</td>
<td>3. Protagonist forms alliances with supporting characters and plans a first approach toward her goal.</td>
<td>5. While planning a new approach, relationships between the protagonist and supporting characters deepen. We are permitted access to their internal worlds.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Through interaction with the antagonist, the protagonist is driven to realize her goal and resolves to take action to achieve it.</td>
<td>4. First approach is attempted and fails. Protagonist realizes that she must change her strategy and worldview entirely.</td>
<td>7. The results of the attempt are revealed. Our protagonist must face the implications of her actions and the consequences.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MIDPOINT</td>
<td>6. The final attempt or approach is engaged, and quite often the initial results look grim, leading to the lowest or most challenging moment the protagonist has yet faced.</td>
<td>8. The protagonist and supporting characters process how their world has changed as a result of all the events that have transpired. Some catharsis or perspective is offered.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 3.11 Hollywood traditionally divides the three-act structure of linear, feature-length fiction films into eight discrete sequences, each with its own beginning, middle, and end, and with its own sequence tension. The use of a female pronoun in this table already constitutes a break from the tradition of classical Hollywood narratives, which more often than not still feature a male protagonist.
Quite often documentaries are not successful in their narrative aims because they simply consist of a lot of middle. By "middle," I mean that the makers have not constructed a beginning that effectively frames a question or issue and underscores the stakes that a social subject or larger community holds in having it addressed. Many documentaries also fail to craft a sufficient ending. Endings need not be happy, nor must they neatly tie up all the loose ends. Most world issues worth exploring through documentary will never permit such a tidy wrap-up. But delivering on the question of function we asked earlier (What do I want audiences to come away thinking, feeling, or doing?) will require some form of synthesis, arrival, or shift at your project's close in order for its impact to extend beyond the credit roll.

Episodic and Thematic Structural Variations

Potential limitations of the linear structure just outlined by way of Aristotle and the Hollywood fiction model are probably already emerging in your mind. What if my documentary does not follow causally linked, sequential events? What if it addresses multiple spaces and times that are not ruled by a clear, unifying chronology? What if I have multiple protagonists, or no human subjects at all? Not every documentary is a Trouble the Water or Hoop Dreams, in which the overall thematic question can be embodied and played out through the goal-oriented experiences of central characters. Even then, though Trouble the Water is distinctly linear in following Aristotle’s components of drama, it does play extensively with breaks in time through its structuring. In contrast, Hoop Dreams moves unwaveringly forward in time, with twists and turns of reality causally advancing the story, but closer analysis might lead us to designate it more of an episodic structure than a linear one. To complicate matters further, a documentary like Errol Morris’s The Fog of War has both a singular protagonist and a clear adherence to historical chronology, but in the end we might argue its structure proves far more thematic than linear or episodic.

Before analyzing the reasons behind such designations, let’s develop working definitions of these structural variations. An episodic structuring may still have a singular protagonist and adhere to chronology, but the scope of time covered may be so great that the distillation of larger periods or episodes in the life of the protagonist will need to be crafted (childhood, the early years, the war years, etc.). Alternately, a documentary that engages multiple characters or case studies might yield an episodic feel, with distinct sequences designated to the exploration of each. In short, successful episodic structures still contain discrete sequences or modules, each with its own inherent question and its own beginning, middle, and end, but these sequences may not be linked by causality as in the linear structure but rather by factors such as time period or character. In a thematic structure, events and sequences are not related through chronology or causality, as much as by thematic focus. Each sequence still contains an inherent unity and point, and together all the sequences add up to a synthesizing claim, but the links along the way may be far more conceptual or associative rather than literally derived from chronology, causality, or characters.

In Trouble the Water, Rivers and Roberts’s two-year struggle to rebuild their lives after Hurricane Katrina is interspersed with jumps backward to Rivers’s gripping footage shot during the storm itself. Thus, we have periodic breaks in chronology that deepen our factual and emotional understanding of what the couple went through. Trouble the Water is still very much a linear documentary guided by chronology and causality. These jumps backward are too short to be considered sequences on their own, but rather function as interludes and a structural motif. The interspersed scenes of Rivers’s storm footage adhere to a causality and
chronology of their own. In one, we see water rising up over the front porch. The next time we revisit the footage, Rivers has managed to get all her neighbors up into the crawlspace between her home’s ceiling and roof while the water fills her home below. The documentary’s main plot is therefore situated in a post-Katrina world, but parallel to this is an equally linear, causally driven b-story or subplot that tells of what happened to Rivers and her community during the storm. This keeps the realities of the storm fresh in our minds as the months pass, the media’s cameras and helicopters move on to other stories, and the struggles of those affected by Hurricane Katrina recede from the spotlight.

Hoop Dreams follows a powerfully causal structure as Gates and Agee pursue their lifelong dreams of playing professional basketball in the NBA. Although both young men are offered places at St. Joseph High School, Agee’s freshman year performance both on and off the court leads to only partial scholarships for his sophomore year, and his family must withdraw him from the private school and send him to public school. This split necessitates a similar structural split, with the documentary following Agee’s and Gates’s increasingly divergent paths, playing basketball at two different schools under dramatically different socioeconomic conditions. This alternation, combined with the amazing breadth of time covered in the lives of Agee and Gates—five years in all—makes for a distinctly episodic structure. Groups of scenes are organized around unifying sequence tensions to create distinct episodes which might be summarized as follows:

- Hoop dreams—introducing Agee, Gates, and dreams of the NBA
- Opportunity knocks—St. Joseph High School recruitment and the promise of opportunity
- Junior troubles—the realities and pressures of life on and off the court
- Courtside courtships—team recruitment pressures in the senior year
- Getting upstate—dreams and disappointments of the Illinois State Championships
- Sign on the dotted line—the bittersweet truth of college basketball
- Hoop realities—an epilogue comparing initial hopes and hard-earned life lessons.

Such structuring effectively punctuates the run-on sentence of life, permitting discrete episodes to emerge from the otherwise overwhelming span of time and events that the project tackles. In turn, the sequences build off one another, both framing and answering the larger question of the documentary—what do the myth of professional basketball and its associated promises of fame and fortune reveal about the realities of race, class, and cultural ascendancy in America?

Former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara is the sole protagonist of Errol Morris’s The Fog of War, and he serves as the lens through which we explore U.S. military policy, his role in shaping it, and the lessons he has arrived at through retrospection. The subtitle of the documentary is Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara, and Morris separates his project into eleven sequences, each prefaced by a title card introducing the lesson to come:

- Lesson #1: Empathize with your enemy.
- Lesson #2: Rationality will not save us.
- Lesson #3: There’s something beyond one’s self.
- Lesson #4: Maximize efficiency.
- Lesson #5: Proportionality should be a guideline in war.
- Lesson #6: Get the data.
• Lesson #7: Belief and seeing are both often wrong.
• Lesson #8: Be prepared to reexamine your reasoning.
• Lesson #9: In order to do good, you may have to engage in evil.
• Lesson #10: Never say never.
• Lesson #11: You can’t change human nature.

Unlike Trouble the Water or Hoop Dreams, Morris’s documentary covers historical events and decisions made in the past, processed through the filter of time. McNamara reflects on the choices he once made—at times defensive and full of excuses, moments later dejected, then experientially moralistic, and finally unrepentant. The project follows the general chronology of history, refracted through the present-tense moment of McNamara’s interview, but time and causality are not the organizing principles here. Rather, the work is structured by ideas and themes—McNamara’s life distilled down to his eleven lessons, each culled from a life’s experience and related in a documentary built around the processes of memory and reflection.

One could also make the case that these eleven sequences give the documentary an episodic feel. The purpose of offering three superstructures for consideration here is not to draw rigid demarcations between them. A thematically structured documentary may well have far more noticeable distinctions between its sequences than a linear documentary, certainly making it feel more episodic than a work organized linearly. But the process an editor would go through to plan a paper cut (the preliminary editing strategy worked out on paper before cutting commences) for a thematically structured work is a very different one than that of an episodic approach. Here, in The Fog of War, the eleven lessons are not distinguished by different eras or characters but rather by concepts and ideas, bringing such notions to life through comparative and contrasting examples.

Kirsten Johnson’s Cameraperson (2016) provides another compelling example of thematic structuring. Johnson, a seasoned documentary cinematographer on projects ranging from Michael Moore’s Fahrenheit 9/11 (2004) to Laura Poitras’s Citizenfour (2015) compiles raw, reflexive moments of footage from twenty-four different documentary projects she has shot over decades. To this mix she adds footage of her own family as well as material she shot for herself while traveling and filming for other professional projects. The locations span the globe, and though we do engage with several documentary subjects in the midst of highly intimate and emotional circumstances, there appears to be no central character whose journey we follow chronologically or causally. Cumulatively, over the course of the project the protagonist proves to be Johnson, herself, though we see her only once, reflected in a mirror. We feel and hear her presence throughout, as she adjusts the camera, asks for guidance from her directors, engages with subjects, and viscerally reacts to the realities unfolding before her lens.

Never employing voice-over or exposition, Johnson and her editor instead use thematic structuring to produce comparisons and juxtapositions between the disparate caches of footage, shaping representational questions and points of meditation for audiences. The theme of one sequence is directly expressed by renowned French philosopher Jacques Derrida, as Johnson attempts to follow him and a group of academics across a busy New York street. Reaching a median halfway across, Johnson stumbles, and the camera jostles. Derrida catches her arm, steadies her, and returns Johnson’s gaze through the lens, quipping to the others, “She sees everything around her but is totally blind. That’s the image of the philosopher who falls in the well while looking at the stars.” He points to himself, the star of the moment, and they all laugh. This precipitates a montage of handheld shots as Johnson attempts to follow documentary subjects on the move—a widow in a cemetery,
refugees trudging down a road, explorers in a cave, shackled prisoners shuffling to a vehicle, parade performers, a shrouded woman darting through an urban market, a politician dogged by news crews, shouting protesters, and a one-legged soccer player taking the field. The sequence makes us aware of the technical and physical challenges of documentary photography and also underscores the divergent range of historical conflicts, social forces, and personal impulses that displace and propel documentary subjects through the world.

Another sequence is comprised of a series of static, sustained shots of nondescript, largely desolate sites—an abandoned motel, a decrepit truck, a field of sunflowers, a city square, a brick courtyard, a skyscraper view, a building ruin, a guard tower, and a swimming pool. Mundane ambiences of birds and wind, or the occasional airplane, radio, or rumble of traffic, can be heard as superimposed titles reveal the thematic connection between these disparate frames: each is the site of human atrocity—mass rape, a hate crime, genocidal exterminations, military suppression of protesters, a terrorist attack, prisoner torture, and public executions. Through such thematic structuring Johnson produces an essayistic memoir that allows us to experience the matrix of technical, creative, and moral choices camera operators make with every shot and to meditate on the simultaneous failures and possibilities of documentary photography to document, to bear witness, and to memorialize the weight of history.

Thematic organization is perhaps the most challenging of the three structures because the associative links constructing the documentary are less overt than those in linear and

![Figure 3.12](#)

Frames from Cameraperson. Simple text overlays reveal the thematic connection between nine disparate global locations—each a site of human atrocity. Left to right and down subsequent rows: MOTEL MILJEVINA—headquarters for Serbian soldiers orchestrating mass rape; SHAWN ALLEN BERRY’S PICKUP TRUCK—used to drag James Byrd Jr. to his death; WOUNDED KNEE—site of massacre of hundreds of Sioux men, women, and children; TAHIR SQUARE—over 900 civilians killed between 2011 and 2015; NYAMATA CHURCH—site of massacre of 10,000 Rwandan Tutsis; WORLD TRADE CENTER—over 2,750 people killed in September 11 attacks; HOTEL AFRICA—execution site during Liberian civil war; GUANTANAMO BAY CAMP X-RAY—site of prisoner torture and abuse; BIBI MAHRU HILL SWIMMING POOL—site of Taliban public executions.
episodic structures. But when effectively utilized, as in Cameraperson, The Fog of War, or Alain Resnais’s Night and Fog (examined in Chapters 1 and 2), the effect can be powerfully meditative, emotional, and enduring.

**Structuring Serialized and Interactive Documentaries**

Serialized documentaries, or docuseries, which break up a story into separately released episodes, are becoming increasingly popular. *Making a Murderer* (2015) explores the tumultuous story of Stephen Avery, a man arrested, convicted, and subsequently exonerated for the rape and attempted murder of a woman, only to be arrested again and convicted for the murder of another woman. Directors Laura Ricciardi and Moira Demos followed Avery, his family, and his legal teams for ten years and released the project’s first season on the streaming subscription service Netflix as ten episodes, each approximately one hour in duration. The series is highly Aristotelian in its use of one man’s cliffhanging drama to question the integrity of law enforcement and the efficacy of our judicial process, but the sheer scope of the project made a serialized release an obvious choice. Analogous to our earlier discussion of sequences, each of these episodes has its own internal dramatic question, causal sequencing, and beginning–middle–end trajectory, but each episode also closes by setting up a new dramatic question, creating suspense, compelling us to watch more, and ensuring the larger structure or arc of the series remains clear.

Project duration and story scope are not the only reasons for serializing a project into episodes, however. Web-based platforms and mobile devices are not only making short-form works more viable and desirable but also leading to the proliferation of web documentaries that break up content into webisodes, each of which may only be a few minutes long. These may follow a continuing story or may be arranged by a more thematic logic, as with most of the series on Submarine Channel’s [www.minimovies.org](http://www.minimovies.org), a Dutch site dedicated to the production of documentary “minimovies”—works consisting of eight to ten episodes of three to seven minutes each that collectively tell a larger story. Titles include series such as *Being a Fish in Japan* (2010) by Mischa Kamp and Mascha Halberstad, in which the makers use a five-episode structure for what ultimately could be described as an essayistic documentary exploring Japanese culture’s deep and multifaceted relationship with fish. Each episode explores a different manifestation of this topic, using participatory interview strategies and poetic aesthetic approaches such as animation to engage a cast of central characters including a koi breeder, a tattooist and his client, a fishmonger by day/aspiring rock musician by night, high-end sushi restaurant proprietors, and commercial fish farmers. Each episode runs between four and seven minutes, and over the course of the series’ total twenty-eight minutes the central theme is refracted and plotted through dimensions of history and folklore, artistic expression, cuisine, identity, and commerce.

Interactive works often engage a more thematic structure, as evidenced by both *In B Flat 2.0* and *Network Effect: Human Life on the Internet*. Neither of these works contains a central protagonist, storyline, inherent chronology, or fixed duration, but their interfaces are highly refined and structured, providing frameworks, context, and instructions, and requiring you to become an active participant in order to experience their content. Other interactive works such as the documentary game *Fort McMoney* (discussed in Chapter 2) are highly vested in narrative and character, but place you in the position of protagonist. The structure of your experience is not fixed. In addition to deciding what areas of the virtual town to explore or whom to “interview” among the 100 integrated video clips, you also decide at
what level to participate in live online forums and how to vote in weekly referendums—actions that produce internal impacts upon the political, environmental, and economic future of Fort McMoney, the sim-version of the actual Fort McMurray oil sands region of Alberta, Canada documented. *Fort McMoney* was initially released in three separate episodes over the course of three months in 2013–2014, with the hope that the initial cohort of players would engage in a collective experience, maximizing participation and exchange in the game’s dynamic forum and referendum spaces.

Katerina Cizek’s web documentary *Out My Window: Interactive Views from the Global Highrise* (2010) uses a combination of episodic and thematic approaches to frame questions about urbanity, class, race, and power from within the halls and living rooms of high-rise residential projects in thirteen global cities. Funded by the National Film Board of Canada and hosted on their website, *Out My Window*’s main page uses the visual metaphor of an apartment high-rise as its interface design, permitting visitors to click on and navigate through thirteen different apartments. Each exposes visitors to a distinct individual or family’s story in a specific global context. Visitors track around photo-stitched 360° domestic space panoramas that are embedded with hotspots, which activate a series of video and audio clips. Clicking on one apartment leads visitors into the Havana apartment of musician and artist David Escarona Carillo and his partner. One hotspot, labeled “Underground Festival,” leads to a two-minute audio essay supplemented by photos and text, in which Carillo recounts his challenges in running Poesía Sin Fin, a spoken word festival that has been repeatedly shut down by the government’s Ministry of Culture but which persists by using private apartments as performance venues. A second, labeled “360° Music Video,” shows immersive 360° video footage of Carillo and other musicians and artists performing “Alamar,” a mix of song and spoken word poetry about the Alamar district of Havana where they live, as local children watch from the doorway.

Viewers can personalize their pace, stopping, going back, or leaving and returning to the site again when it is convenient. The notion of structure is also opened up, with participants able to choose their own route through the material. But ultimately the piece could be imagined as a thirteen-episode, character-driven approach to a larger thematic question: what can the high-rise apartment, once considered a modernist architectural symbol of...
progress, tell us about the state of urban development and socioeconomic systems of power in a globalizing, postmodern world?

**Developing Character Arcs**

In *Trouble the Water* Rivers starts out as a self-described hustler and ends as an empowered woman committed not only to her music career but also to the well-being of her neighbors and the future of her Ninth Ward community. William Gates begins *Hoop Dreams* as a young fourteen-year-old with dreams of the NBA and closes the running time a wizened nineteen, already a father, telling us, “People say, ‘When you make it to the NBA, don’t forget about me.’ I feel like telling them, ‘Well, if I don’t make it, make sure you don’t forget about me.’” Robert McNamara begins *The Fog of War* a man softened by age and reflection, but at the documentary’s end, when pressed by Morris to accept responsibility for his direct hand in the Vietnam War, McNamara suddenly reveals the old intractable persona of his heyday, telling Morris, “I’d rather be damned if I don’t.” In each case, the filmmakers take us on a journey plotted out by different criteria—be it causality, chronology, or thematic concept—but all three profile dynamic characters who arrive at a place different from where we first met them.

Each of the character arcs described above is significant, generated over the course of feature-length, character-driven documentaries. But even when dealing with supporting characters or experts appearing only in talking-head interview segments, an editor should look for ways to bring these individuals to a new place by the project’s end, where they reflect on what they’ve asserted, look ahead to the future, acknowledge shifts or growth in their perceptions, or synthesize key lessons or ideas. Many documentaries, especially those primarily situated in the expository mode, make the mistake of placing information and logos above character, ethos, and pathos. A skillful director (and editor) will find a way to ensure that the human subjects appearing in a documentary experience a character arc, no matter how small. Part of the responsibility for crafting such moments certainly lies with the director and what questions are asked during an interview or what events are documented in an observational scene, but skillful editors soon cultivate an eye and an ear for character arcs, pacing the words and actions of characters over time to create individual trajectories that enhance the larger sense of a documentary’s journey.

Isolating the obstacles or active challenges in your character’s life and structuring the shooting of scenes around such events will provide points of resistance against which your character can react, grow, and change. If prepping to shoot an upcoming event, don’t simply show up on the appointed day and record some decontextualized material. With...
forethought, there is in fact opportunity for three distinct opportunities to gather useful material: (1) preparation in the days and hours before the event; (2) participation in the activity; and (3) subsequent reflection upon or aftermath from the event. Engaging your character at all three stages will not only provide structure to move the plot along; the process will also permit audiences to directly experience a character arc through the stages of your coverage.

A visit to a significant location can also serve as the catalyst for an arc, permitting a character to step into and out of the evanescent realms of memory and time, still reined in by the physical reality of a specific place. A clear character-driven goal or inquiry can also function as the constant against which change or arc can be measured. In *Hoop Dreams*, pursuit of playing basketball for the NBA is the goal against which Gates and Agee measure every choice they make, derive their sense of purpose, and construct their sense of identity. Failure to reach that goal does not negate their existence but rather permits each to reflect on the hard-won experiential knowledge and changes brought about through pursuit of this goal. Each of these models underscores that character change can be measured only in relation to a structural constant, be that an imposed obstacle, an event, a location, a goal, or a driving question. Isolating this structural constant for your project will help you immensely in selecting events to shoot and in shaping dynamic characters later in the editing room.

## Establishing a Present Tense

Many documentaries, particularly interview-driven works, seem to float in a limbo of expository information removed from distinctions of place and time. This creates a lifelessness and a formal remove from the material presented. Both *Trouble the Water* and *Hoop Dreams* follow characters going through real-time, present-tense experiences within the worlds of the documentaries. But even *The Fog of War*, a work focused on America’s military history and McNamara’s own past, uses reflexive and participatory strategies to provide a present-tense immediacy to the 2003 interview setting that functions as the project’s backbone.

As McNamara reflects on the fog of war, he does so in explicit conversation with the newly launched, unilateral 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, occurring at the time of his interview. Lessons 6, 7, and 8 (“get the data,” “belief and seeing are both often wrong,” and “be prepared to reexamine your reasoning”), along with overt critiques of unilateralism, all emerge from McNamara’s past experiences. But both he and Morris are clear in their linking of this past with the global political situation of the filmed present. By the time of the documentary’s release, it was clear to audiences that there were in fact no weapons of mass destruction to be found in Iraq and that much of the intelligence used for substantiating war in 2003 was false, making the impact of McNamara’s lessons all the more chilling and prescient.

Morris first introduces us to McNamara’s present-day interview just after an apparent interruption of the proceedings for a tape change:

**MCNAMARA:** Let me hear your voice level to make sure it’s the same.
**MORRIS:** OK. How’s my voice level?
**MCNAMARA:** That’s . . . that’s fine.
**MORRIS:** Terrific.
**MCNAMARA:** Now I remember exactly the sentence I left off on. I remember how it started, and I was cut off in the middle, but you can fix it up some way. I don’t want to go back, introduce the sentence, because I know exactly what I wanted to say.
MORRIS: Go ahead.

MCNAMARA: OK. Any military commander who is honest with himself, or those he is speaking to, will admit he has made mistakes in the application of military power.

With many directors, such an exchange would be left on the cutting room floor for its reflexivity—its rupture of the timeless, ambiguous talking-head frame. Morris includes it, and the exchange serves as our first glimpse of and introduction to the elderly, present-day McNamara. The former secretary of defense may have become wrinkled, his voice more gravelly since his Pentagon days, but he is still very much the same personality—wanting to be in control. McNamara would rather expend more words in telling Morris why he won’t repeat a sentence than it would take to simply repeat it.

Morris’s voice heard asking questions off camera throughout the documentary, along with McNamara’s sometimes emotional and heated reactions, further establish this sense of immediacy, of watching a process as it unfolds. The project’s climactic scene occurs beyond the soundstage interview, with McNamara driving himself in a car. Morris is with him in the vehicle, however, and as detailed previously he asks some of the toughest questions yet. Behind the wheel of a moving car, McNamara has little recourse to stop the exchange or walk away, making the tension of this scene all the more riveting.

We’ve already explored the various strategies Davis Guggenheim employed to root Gore’s presentation on global warming in an immediate, present-tense world. Just as Guggenheim vivified photographs and other forms of data visualization in the active, present-tense contexts of Gore’s diegetic presentations to audiences around the world, you too can explore ways in your production protocols to activate such material in a present-tense space and time. For example, rather than simply cutting to archival or personal photographs as visuals in a dislocated, expository void, can you shoot a participatory interview with an archivist as they show you an archival collection or a documentary participant as they flip through a family album?

Every documentary, regardless of the modes or structure it engages, can firmly establish a present tense to its world in order to ground the project and provide it with a sense of immediacy and place. This will enliven the experience, fostering audience investment. It bears noting that this present tense need not be present day. Ken Burns’s The Civil War (1990) uses memoir and diary entries, along with wartime correspondence and military documents, to create a present-tense immediacy that is still very much fixed in the 1860s. The present tense of interactive works is afforded by the immediacy and participation required from you, the participant, as you actively navigate the work’s interface.

**Conclusion**

Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* is to argument and persuasion what his *Poetics* is to drama and story. Each explores what has made certain approaches and structures timeless in their ability to connect with audiences and to communicate feelings and ideas about the natural world and the human experience. We are well served by drawing from these traditions and making them our own, rather than trying to completely reinvent the wheel. From these first three chapters, you now possess the historical grounding and critical concepts to analyze works that you see and to develop complex, meaningful documentary projects of your own with decisive choices in content, rhetoric, and structure.