

# 10 Tips for Dramatically Improving Your Videojournalism Stories - The Digital Journalist

After spending the past few years scrutinizing short non-fiction feature videos on journalism Web sites to determine if they're worthy of inclusion on [KobreGuide.com](http://KobreGuide.com), we've reached this conclusion:

The problem with many videojournalism stories is that they are neither good video, good journalism, nor good stories.

Based on common flaws we continually bemoan, we offer these 10 simple pointers for videojournalists who want to dramatically improve their work in all these arenas.

## 1. FIND THE NARRATIVE ARC

The trouble with many stories is that they're not stories at all – somebody just turned on a video camera and asked the subject to talk about themselves. Can you blame audiences for not tuning in or staying to the end? How is this any better than home video of Aunt Sylvia shrieking "Mazel Tov" to the newlyweds?

Besides a beginning, middle and end, a good story has a memorable protagonist who surmounts obstacles en route to achieving a goal that we care about. Remember Aristotle's dramatic elements? (Plot, theme, character, dialogue, rhythm, spectacle.) Classic dramatic structure? (Exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, denouement). If they were good enough for Greek tragedy and Shakespeare comedies, they'll suit you fine. If you left them behind in English Lit, now's the time to reacquaint yourself and dust them off. Lost your old textbooks? That's why God invented Google.

OK, we admit not every video story will naturally adhere to these paradigms – real life doesn't always work out that neatly, especially when you're on deadline. However, if you train yourself to become conscious of these tried-and-true storytelling components, and strive to incorporate them in your work, we guarantee your videos will draw bigger audiences.

And here's a corollary: Once you've established your core theme and structure, pare away anything that doesn't directly relate to it. Sure, you shot tons of gorgeous footage,

captured memorable quotes and moments, but if they don't advance the story, lose them. (Or save them for the "deleted scenes" section of your "greatest hits" DVD.)

## 2. SPOTLIGHT A CENTRAL CHARACTER

Stories about trends and issues can be made infinitely more gripping by focusing on a single person whose personal story encompasses it. To paraphrase someone who said it better than we could: Spielberg didn't win an Oscar for making a movie called "The Holocaust"; he won it for making "Schindler's List."

Specific human stories trump vague big-picture generalities every time. So if you're tempted to tackle a report on the effectiveness of anger-management clinics, find one participant to document. Let's see the sessions through his eyes. Finding the right person to represent your video will require legwork – they say everybody has a story, but not every story lends itself to good video. You'll need to put out feelers and even meet several potential candidates until you find the one that is accessible and articulate. Find someone who has a personality, voice and manner that will hold the attention of the viewer through the entire piece.

This doesn't mean your story should focus exclusively on one individual; rather that person will serve as the central hub from which the story's elements will grow. In the case of the anger-management "student," we still would like to hear from his coach, his friends, his coworkers at his office, and his family at home, to see if *they* think the lessons are taking hold.

Looking back on *KobreGuide's* "Hall of Fame," we're reminded how, in the best video stories, one person represents or speaks for the bigger situation. In fact, we invited *KobreGuide* reporter Kathy Strauss to select a half-dozen stories that best illustrate this – [you can read her report here](#).

## 3. CONDUCT BETTER INTERVIEWS

Asking your subject to state his name and what he does is not an interview. We realize that most photographers have heretofore only had to garner enough correctly spelled proper nouns to write a short caption. Asking a series of conversational questions that elicit meaningful responses – and thinking on your feet fast enough to concoct appro-

priate follow-up questions -- is an art form. Those "60 Minutes" guys make it look easy, but it's not. It takes training, experience, and skill.

Ask a veteran reporter to let you observe her conduct an interview. Here's what we personally advise: Ask questions that will help you build your dramatic arc. In a nutshell: How did you get started doing this? (Beginning/Exposition) What obstacles have you encountered along the way? (Middle/Conflict) How did you overcome them? (Middle/Resolution) What is your ultimate goal? (End/Denouement).

By far the most important question, infrequently posed, is "Why?" That should be, but rarely is, the heart of every story. If you're looking for a solid follow-up question, that would also be: "Why?" It's also a good follow-up question to the follow-up question.

Be sure to *listen* to responses, and not just leap to the next question on your list, or you'll find yourself with quotes that beg for clarification or expansion.

Sometimes the best interview technique of all is to keep your questions short and direct, and then shut up and let the subject speak. You'd be amazed at how often amateur interviewers feel the need to fill an awkward silence by babbling, or a compulsion to match the subject's personal revelations and insights with their own. You're there to get *their* story, not to give them yours.

Professional journalists (and trial attorneys!) know that the best responses come after the subject has offered his pat response, and you just pause and regard him in stony silence. He'll feel compelled to keep talking, and that's when you get the juicy quotes.

#### **4. FOR GOOD JOURNALISM SEEK MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES**

No matter how compelling your protagonist, it's still necessary to augment and balance what they say with other opinions. A key step in preparing your story is to put together a list of interview subjects, and select the ones that need to be on-camera.

To achieve that elusive journalistic goal of objectivity, it is not necessary to report all sides of every story -- nor does every expressed opinion need to be counterbalanced with an equal and opposite opinion. But a story's credibility hinges on the audience's perception of whether the reporter took pains to put everything in context, and to verify

facts with several disparate sources.

If your video profile of a dance teacher who tells us how she has dramatically changed the lives of her students doesn't allow us to hear her students' viewpoints (to use an actual example), the story is incomplete and unsatisfying.

Also, a story's dramatic value is heightened by the presence of a contrarian or at least countervailing point of view. Sometimes it makes sense to find an alternative perspective simply because it represents a voice we haven't yet heard in an otherwise familiar discussion. Such is the case with the *San Francisco Chronicle's* "My Two Dads" — gay marriage as seen by the daughter of two men. For "One Man Brand," MediaStorm guided two Reuters shooters into giving us a fresh look at "The Naked Cowboy," that Times Square icon who sings in his underwear, by telling his story from a previously untapped perspective -- his girlfriend's.



My Two Dads: Sometimes it makes sense to find an alternative perspective simply because it represents a voice we haven't yet heard in an otherwise familiar discussion. Such is the case with this depiction of gay marriage as seen by the daughter of two men. (San Francisco Chronicle)

[ [view video](#) ]

## 5. REPLACE WALLPAPER and B-ROLL WITH SEQUENCES AND SCENES

Most videographers think in terms of "coverage" — grabbing lots of footage of their subject(s) talking, walking, interacting, along with establishing shots or long pans of the locale, so that we'll have something to look at while the reporter (or subject) prattles on. That's called "wallpaper" and it's boring. Sure, it might work for TV news, where the headline/ deadline mentality screams for "grab and go" footage. But now you're a storyteller. Stories require scenes.

Wallpaper refers to general scenes that run while the narrator talks. They exist just so there is some video rolling while the narrator or expert pontificates. One step better than wallpaper is "b-roll," which correlates the images with the specific subject of the

narrator's voiceover. B-roll verifies what the narrator is saying but does not further the story by itself.

The best video, however, is actual natural sound (nat sound) video sequences that show the viewer what is happening and let the viewer hear what is taking place at that moment. Sequences with natural sound allow the viewer to draw his own conclusions about the character of the story. Sequences essentially allow the viewer to observe and eavesdrop. The best videos are built from a series of sequences.

A sequence usually is made of several individual shots. A group of sequences constitutes a scene. A scene is the building block of all dramatic narratives. Once you consciously shoot with fully formed scenes in mind, and edit your footage accordingly, your work will look more cinematic and visually arresting. Best bet: Start by watching Prof. Kobre's short [video tutorials](#) on the art of sequence construction.

## 6. SHOW, DON'T TELL

Despite the fact that video is a visual medium, most of the time we're treated to little more than talking heads with a smattering of b-roll. And we wonder why audiences are bored, and opt instead to search for stupid animal tricks on YouTube.

Solution: prepare and think through your story ahead of time. Pre-interview your subjects. Seek out appropriate backdrops and locations. Look for situations where people are *doing* rather than *describing*.

We'd rather watch a guy carve a banjo fretboard than drone on about how difficult it is. It's one thing to have a racecar driver describe the thrill of 200 mph laps; it's another to mount your camera on the hood and put your audience in the driver's seat.

### **How to Edit a Video Sequence**

Ken Kobre demonstrates how to take 15 video clips of the same subject, a French flower merchant, and edit them into a sequence that can be used for a larger documentary:

SEE more video tutorials by Ken Kobre:  
<http://kobreguide.com/content/howto/video+tutorials>

## 7. MAKE IT SELF-CONTAINED

Too many videos rely so heavily on accompanying text stories for significant information that if you haven't already read the story, you'd have no idea whatsoever what the person in the video is talking about – or even who they are. That's not good.

Ideally the video and text story (and other multimedia elements – maps, charts, graphs, timelines) should augment and complement each other, and at the same time stand on their own. What's happened is that photographers, accustomed to "illustrating" a story with a photo, are taking the same approach with video, and simply offering up a photo that happens to walk and talk. That's a video illustration (or sidebar), not videojournalism.

What's even more maddening is when Web site organization is so poor that neither the story nor the video link to each other, so if you stumble across one, you aren't even aware of the existence of the other. Especially since videos can now be embedded on other Web sites (without any accompanying text or explanation), it's strongly advised

that all pertinent information – including title, date, and credits – are incorporated into the video itself.

## 8. FOCUS ON NAT SOUND AUDIO

We think of video as a visual medium, and so we miss opportunities to tell stories aurally. No, we don't mean subjecting viewers to more interviews. We're referring to natural sounds that will enhance the audience's experience by engaging another sense.

While it's a proven truth that we better remember things we see rather than just hear, all it takes is a visit to your local cinema to confirm the importance of audio in the overall film-watching equation. We're not advocating music soundtracks or special effects, but rather that you keep your ears as well as your eyes open for ways to invite your audience into the world you're introducing them to.

Be on the lookout (listenout?) for specific sounds that represent the total picture. We encourage you to listen carefully to NPR programs and other radio feature stories that rely totally on audio to tell their tale.



*Hungry: Living with Prader-Willi Syndrome* – Natural sounds can help tell your story. In the opening seconds of this video about a boy whose genetic disorder causes insatiable hunger, we hear the distinctive sound of an unseen fork scraping a plate, food being chomped. Later, demonstrating the boy's painfully interminable time between meals, we hear the incessant ticking of a clock.

([ExploreHoward.com](http://ExploreHoward.com))

[ [view video](#) ]

For videojournalism examples, look no further than this extraordinary story, "[Hungry](#)," about a young son afflicted with Prader-Willi Syndrome (insatiable hunger), and his father who cares for him. In the opening seconds, we hear the distinctive sound of an unseen fork scraping a plate, food being chomped. Later, demonstrating the boy's painfully interminable time between meals, we hear the incessant ticking of a clock. This multi-sensual immersion creates an empathic audience response, resulting in a more emotionally charged viewing – and listening – experience.

## 9. SHOOT BEFORE & AFTER, NOT

## JUST DURING

Too often, videojournalists show up to cover an event, but the event itself is not the story. It is a moment in time. The real story usually started before the event, and continues afterward. See if you can arrange to be there to chronicle the entire narrative.

Good stories are about change, and the event will usually epitomize a turning point “ in other words, a dividing line between the way things used to be and the way they'll be from now on. Whether it's an announcement (e.g., anti-drug program to lose funding) or an award presentation, great videojournalism takes us behind the scenes and shows us the impact of that pivotal event.

Best bet: Seek out "process" stories that lend themselves to natural dramatic structures, and enable us to observe change through a series of steps (or scenes). Following a contestant in a competition is a perfect example, provided we get to see our protagonist preparing for the event and the aftermath of winning or losing (immediately after, the next day, or even a month later). MediaStorm proved that formula works, with "[An Apollo Legend](#)," which is well worth your inspection.

## 10. STEAL FROM THE BEST

Movies and TV have been around a long time, and even though videojournalism differs significantly from them, there's much that we can learn from a century of motion picture and documentary filmmaking history.

Whether you're on your living room couch or at the local gigaplex, pay attention to how shots are framed, composed and lit; listen to the dialogue “ and the silences. Study camera movement and editing techniques. Observe how scenes are woven together, and how they flow into each other. Videojournalism may be a new dialect, but there is much to be derived from absorbing the established vocabulary of cinema.

Videojournalists constitute a small but growing community “ become an active participant. You're in on the ground floor, a pioneer. E-mail links to your stories to your colleagues and confreres, and humbly invite their feedback. Visit [KobreGuide.com](#) daily to see what your top-ranked peers are producing, and learn equally from their triumphs and their missteps. Study what works and what doesn't. At every juncture, consciously



consider how you would have approached the same story. What would you have done differently? What could you have done better? When you discover techniques you like, put them to work in your videojournalism stories. Be grateful when others try to emulate you.