

THE MECHANICS OF STORY MAKING - THE STORY COMES FIRST IN FILM, EVEN BEFORE PICTURES!

If you get all the elements of a story right, then the pictures will follow.

Here are some ingredients to think about:

QUESTION – What is the overall question the film is trying to answer? Without this, a film can be really unfocused. The question should also be considered within each scene or sequence, and there might sometimes be sub questions, but they should always be pointing toward the original question.

QUEST / CHALLENGE – What is the film’s quest? What problem is the film trying to solve? If there is no journey for the characters or contributors to go on in order to make a discovery or fix something that’s wrong, it’s probably not going to be a very engaging watch.

PLOT VS STORY / WHAT’S IT ‘REALLY’ ABOUT? – the plot is the obvious sequence of events that happen in film. Whereas the story is how it happened and why. The story is often the moral meaning you take from a film at the end, and is usually universally understood. For example, you might be watching a documentary about identity theft, but what its really about is greed – from both sides of the coin – from the identity hackers, but also from the victims who give away their details freely in order to win a sum of cash (for example). These story ‘themes’ are often what move us emotionally, and are carefully woven into story by the film maker, but we are often not aware of them as a passive viewer.

Here are some themes to consider, although the list is not exhaustive:

- **Survival**
- **Love**
- **Death**
- **Ethics and Values**
- **Sacrifice**
- **Good vs Evil**
- **Coming of Age**

Some other story devices include:

- **STORY ARC & THE THREE ACT STRUCTURE** – set question/quest, crescendo/often a fail, and then an outcome/resolution/transformation
- **CHARACTERS** – having good gobby and truthful contributors, who talk authentically is really important; the more time you can spend filming a character the better, in order to reveal authenticity, personality traits and conflict
- **CARE, CONFLICT & TENSION** – capturing scenes where there is disagreement, a climax (such as emotional breakdowns or outbursts), can help to show a character’s struggle, leading viewers to ‘care’ about the film and the people in it
- **HUMOUR** – even with the grimmest darkest subjects, humour can be introduced. This was the case on my documentary ‘MND and 22 Year Old Me’ – a story about a young woman’s fight with motor neuron disease, but with the light hearted touch of a twenty something year old, who saw the funny side, and just wanted to live a normal life like everybody else.
- **ANGLE** - in news or shorter films, the word ‘angle’ is thrown around a lot. When I was early in my career as a researcher on Nickelodeon news for kids, I asked my producer, how do you find the angle to a story? I was asking specifically about a story I was doing on the rise in cost of football kit. We had set up an interview with footballer David James and a young gobby 12 year old reporter was going to interview him. After much discussion, we settled on the fact that ‘angle’ comes down to ‘who does this story affect in a negative or positive way?’ eg. what kid will really be able to afford the crazy cost of a football kit?

Sometimes, you can’t do everything, and it’s okay not to fulfil all these rules. For example, if you’re making a short campaign film, you might only be able address the question and show the start of a quest as there might not be time to follow characters on a journey over a long period of time capturing dramatic moments and conflict. But you can think about ‘showing’ or illustrating or giving examples, instead of just ‘talking’ about a subject in a straight interview style. The more you can show real people and real lives, and give examples, rather than just talking about an issue or a problem, the more engaging your film potentially will be.

