

Storytelling

by Eric Hanauer

The mechanics of shooting video underwater is fun and relatively easy. If you are in the right place at the right time with the right equipment, you should get some usable footage. What's hard is assembling that footage to tell a story. Yet this is what separates watchable video from failure. Telling a compelling story is the most essential element in successful films.

I've judged a few video competitions. Invariably, the winners are the people who tell the best stories, not necessarily those with the most sensational footage. The entries that rank in the lower half are what we call "moving stills." These are simply clips of marine creatures organized in no obvious manner, accompanied by music that may or may not fit the imagery. Although the artistry may be there, the story isn't.

At the bottom is the cringe factor. These videos lack focus, color correction, are shot from above looking down on critters, and suffer from shaky camera syndrome. They are poorly shot, poorly organized, and so poorly presented that it's a pain to watch them all the way through. A lot of the underwater videos you'll see on

YouTube fit this description.

Consider the Audience

You aren't making a video for yourself; you are making it for the viewers. Check your ego at the door to the editing room and become the audience. In order to do that, you need to visualize the audience, put yourself in their shoes, and talk directly to them. Who are they? What is their age and gender? What do they already know about your subject, and how much needs to be explained? What is the purpose of your video? Is it education, entertainment, promoting conservation, humor, or a combination of those?

Chances are your audience will be a mixture of experienced divers, non divers, adults, and kids. You'll have to decide whom you wish to speak to, how much to explain and how much to take for granted. Don't be afraid to aim high. Some

Karen Straus shoots a Nauticam RX100 system on the Kittiwake in Grand Cayman.



things may go over some heads, but be caught by others. Excellent examples of speaking to different audiences are the animated Pixar movies. Take “Wall-E” for example. For kids it’s fun and adventure and entertainment. For adults it’s a warning about a dystopian future when the world is abandoned to trash, and obese humanity becomes helplessly dependent upon machines. The people who produced that movie visualized their audiences and spoke directly to all of them.

One method I use is role playing. As I view edited versions of my video I’ll simulate being a diver, a non diver, a marine biologist, and an experienced filmmaker, one role at each viewing. I’ll imagine what’s going through their mind as they watch the film, and what their reaction might be. Has the biologist detected a mistake in explaining animal behavior? Does the filmmaker think my transitions are amateurish? Does the non diver understand what I’m talking about? Is the diver bored with all the explanation?

Another method is to show the video to one or two trusted friends who aren’t afraid to tell you exactly what’s on their mind. I’m not looking for praise here, but honest critique of what works and what doesn’t. Watch their reaction to your film. Are they laughing at the parts you think are funny? Are their eyes wandering when you think they should be involved? The bottom line: remove yourself from the picture and think like the audience.

Filter effect

During my careers I’ve been a teacher, a writer, a photographer, and a videographer. These pursuits have a lot in common. You gather all the knowledge or images you can, sort them out,



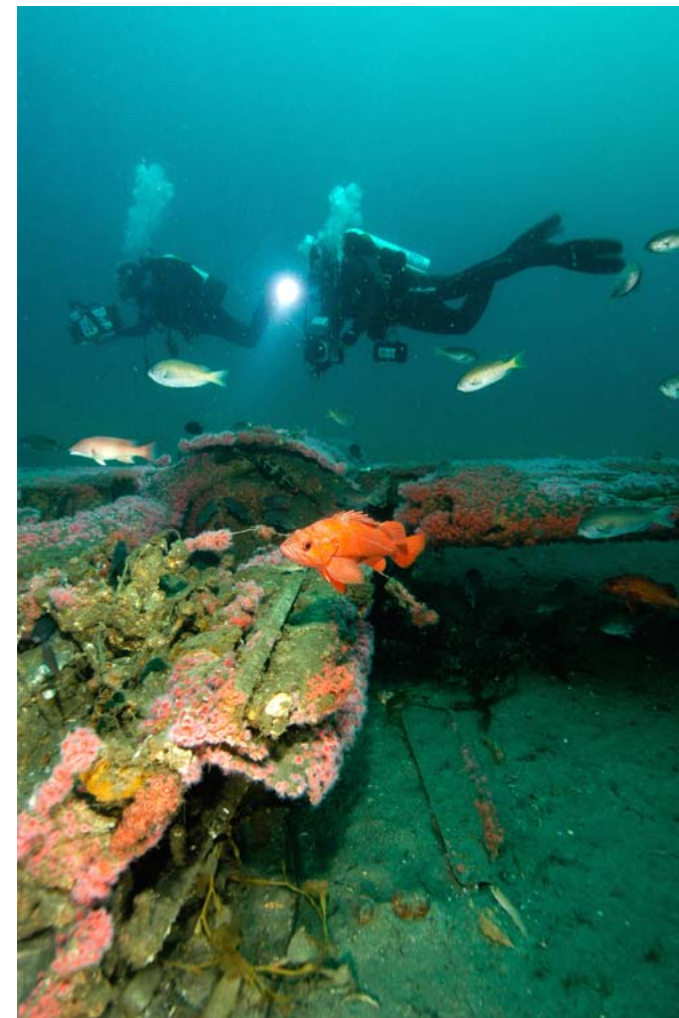
Karen works for a low angle on a stingray in Grand Cayman

discard the junk, file most of the rest, and pass along the best of it to your students, your readers, or your viewers. If you are passing along 10 to 20% of what you know, or what you’ve shot, the result will probably be successful. If you are passing along 50% or more, you are likely to fail.

You are the filter for the audience, and the eyes of the viewer. If you are telling, or showing them nearly everything you have, you need to learn or shoot more. So research your subject. If you’ve filmed humpback whales, learn about their life cycle, their migrations, their mating and parenting behaviors, and threats to their existence. Instead of just describing what the audience is seeing, tell them the backstory that’s not on the screen.

Grab Their Attention

Start out with a bang. If you don’t get their attention in the first 15 seconds, chances are the viewers will be tuning on to something else. This is especially true online. So don’t save that sensational clip for the grand finale, because nobody



Two videographers hover over the engine of a P-38 fighter plane from WWII off the coast of San Diego.

might be left to see it. Put your best shot right out front. Define your story in the first 30 seconds. Tell them what they are about to see and sell it. Save something good for a memorable finish, and fill in the rest with strong but not necessarily great footage. Above all, don’t overextend your quality clips and sequences to fill a time slot. If you’ve

only got two or three minutes of strong material, stop right there. Your audience will thank you.

Story Elements

The most common video produced by divers is the music video, with clips, sometimes unrelated, of marine animals. Music videos can work if the images are coherent and speak for themselves. Movies did this for the first 40 years of their existence.

The second most common is the trip video. This usually starts out at the airport, or divers on a boat, gearing up, jumping in, swimming, some animals, ascending, back on the boat, and a sunset. If you've ever surfed YouTube, you know what I'm talking about. In most cases, you'll tune out before the first minute is up. To see some examples of videos with strong story elements, open iTunes, click on podcasts, and look up "DiveFilm HD Video." Mary Lynn Price has curated nearly 150 short videos, most of them 5 minutes and less, from around the world. Nearly all of them tell a story, and best of all, they are free. It's a treasure chest of ideas for underwater filmmakers. Putting aside false modesty, some of my films are included. Following are a couple of examples.

Two years ago I went to the Bahamas to shoot tiger sharks, then to Guadalupe Island for great

whites. That's not unusual; thousands of divers had been there and done that. I wanted to show something different. It was called, "In search of a Man Eating Shark." I integrated statistics on shark attack fatalities (about 5 per year worldwide), comparing them with other causes of death, which ranged from texting while driving to smoking and mosquito bites. While showing and discussing the sharks, the statistics appeared as lower thirds. The final stat was 100 million sharks killed every year by people. And the closing statement was, "Most people who are afraid of sharks have never met one." (ehanauer.com/Videos.html)

On another occasion I accidentally left my camcorder running in the rinse bucket and inadvertently caught another camera banging against it. That was the genesis for "View from the Rinse Bucket." The story was told from the point of view of the camera. It complains that it does all the work and is exposed to all sorts of hazards, while Eric takes all the credit. Clips from various locations were integrated, all of it narrated by the camera. It finally concludes that camera life isn't all bad, that it's seen lots of interesting things, but ending up in the rinse bucket is the scariest place of all.

Common story elements may include emotion, visual appeal,



Get close and let the creature come to you.

action, unique moments, characters, newsworthiness, sense of place, and humor. Let's look at some examples.

Wounded warriors on a dive trip or a sea lion tangled in fishing line are emotional subjects. Visual appeal could be a swim through a kelp forest or a colorful coral reef. Sharks feeding, or marlins attacking a bait ball are action at its most intense. Unique moments might include a humpback whale mother and calf, or a manta cleaning station. An interview with a dive guide or a pioneer diver is character development. Diving after a typhoon or an oil spill is

newsworthiness. Sense of place could show fire walkers of Fiji or the stone money on Yap.

Humor is one of the hardest elements to pull off. Don't force it, and don't embarrass anybody. Some fishes are funny all by themselves, like frogfish and stargazers. I once flooded a camera (pilot error) and decided to make something out of a bad situation. So I had my wife, Karen, take it down without a housing. She tried to make it work, accompanied by rattling and crashing sound effects. Finally she took off the lens, looked inside, and finally tossed

it over her shoulder. It was called, “Don’t Try This With Your Camera.” (ehanauer.com/Videos.html)

In the movie “Bull Durham,” baseball veteran Crash Davis teaches rookie Nuke LaLoosh about using clichés in interviews. I can’t help laughing about that every time I hear an athlete on TV talking about teamwork and taking it one day at a time.

Underwater videos have their share of clichés. They include divers opening tank valves, jumping into the water, clownfishes, and most common of all, closing with a sunset over the water. Crash Davis would love it.

Building blocks

Editing a video is a lot like writing. When I first sat down to write this article, I had a bunch of jumbled ideas. I wrote them down as they came into my mind, then started out by expanding the ideas that came easily into one or two paragraphs. Eventually I moved on to the ones that needed more thought and more research. Finally I shuffled all the sections around to make a coherent story.

In video, clips correspond to sentences. Put together a few related clips into a sequence, and that corresponds to a paragraph. Continue to build sequences, then rearrange them to make a coherent video. You

don’t have to start at the beginning, because there is really no beginning or end until you see how the sequences flow into one another.

Some stories write themselves. You start with a bang and power through. Others have to be constructed bit by bit, sometimes starting in the middle and slogging to the end. Either way, once you’ve got some momentum going, it can carry you to the finish. The same process applies to video.

Don’t be a slave to chronology. Starting at the beginning isn’t always the best way. If the most interesting sequence occurred in the middle of your trip, use it as a lead or a teaser to grab the viewers’ attention. News reporters always try to cover the most important parts (who, what, when, where, how) in the first paragraph, then taper off as they reach the end. Most readers never make it that far. In the news business, failure to do that is called burying the lead.

Master the technology of shooting and editing. In last month’s article we covered the mechanics of white balance, focus, frame rate, and steady shooting. When editing, look critically at your footage. If it’s not sharp, trash it. If it’s shaky and can’t be corrected, use it sparingly and only if it’s essential to the story. Work on color correction and exposure in post. If you can’t correct it, trash it. People



will judge you on your worst clips, so show only your best. Just as the secret to good photography is a big waste basket, the secret to good video is a big digital trash bin.

Length

How long should your video be? It depends on your audience and your material. When I started shooting video, I went on a trip to New Zealand and shot about three hours of tape, on land and underwater. I edited it down to 20 minutes. About that time I became involved with the San Diego UnderSea Film



Exhibition. (sdufex.com) Now in its 15th year, it has become one of the most prestigious shows of its kind. I wanted to enter, but they had a maximum time limit of 5 minutes for each entry. I asked for an exemption, explaining that I’d already cut it down from three hours. They refused, so it was back to the edit room. When finally finished, I had to admit the 5 minute version was tighter, better, and more interesting than the 20 minute version.

Shorter is better. The sweet spot for YouTube videos is about 2 ½ minutes. Anything longer than

that has to be really good to hold a viewer's interest. Respect the audience's time, and move the story at a lively pace.

If you watch old movies on Netflix or TCM, you'll be struck by the languid pace of most of them. People now expect to see the plot develop early on, and to keep moving. More action is crammed into shorter time.

Voice-over

When I started out, I didn't like the sound of my own voice, and did everything possible to avoid narrating my videos. But after a while I realized how essential it was for moving the story.

You don't have to sound like Ron Burgundy to do a successful voice-over. Just be yourself and carry on a conversation with the audience. Avoid talking too much; let the images speak for themselves. Research your subject, and become an expert on the fishes and marine animals in your video. Add something to the images instead of just telling the audience what they are seeing. Fill them in on the background that isn't apparent. Talk about the life cycle of the animals, or about the location, or about what it took to make the images. When the sequence is mandarin fish mating, talk about how this happens only at sunset, that you had to wait

an hour for 5 minutes of action, that males joust for mating opportunities, that cardinalfishes lurk in the coral, waiting to eat the eggs.

This can't be done off the cuff. Write the script as you watch your footage. Practice reading it while watching it again, making corrections and deletions when you see how it fits. When you are ready to record, use a high quality microphone, not the one built into the camera. You'll need a mike or a voice recorder that has balanced sound and doesn't sound tinny. Good ones start around \$100.

Do the recording in a room with favorable acoustics. Wood or tile floors are echo chambers. A clothes closet with a carpeted floor absorbs echoes and can serve as a makeshift recording studio. Record each sound clip two or three times, using different emphasis and inflections. Counting down 3-2-1 before each take will help when editing. Speak in your own conversational tone; don't try to be a news anchor. If you really hate the sound of your voice, recruit a friend. One local filmmaker had a woman with a British accent do his narration. It sounded very classy, like something from PBS or BBC.

Music

I always thought Enya's music was made for underwater, and used it in my early efforts. Most filmmakers



Get close and let the creature come to you. (This also goes with 9 and 10)

3. Final Cut Pro X is an example of video editing programs that bring professional capability to anybody with a fast computer and the will to learn.

start out using one of their favorite songs as background music. Here are some reasons that's a bad idea.

First and foremost, music is copyrighted. That 99 cents you paid on iTunes only buys you the right to play the song on your electronic toys. Using it on a film that will be shown online, or in an exhibition, isn't covered, even if you showing it for free. As a fellow creative artist, how would you feel if somebody used your video in their work without your permission? YouTube rejects these, although a few fall through the cracks. The vast majority of competitions

automatically disqualify entries that use copyrighted music without signed permission from the artist's agency. For big time artists, that will cost big bucks if they even bother to respond to your inquiry.

Another reason is that a popular song may overpower your images on the screen in the audience's mind. So what's a filmmaker to do? If you have musical ability, there's software that allows you to write and orchestrate your own. Garage Band and Soundtrack in the Mac world, and Sony ACID Pro on PCs are examples. Or perhaps you know a musician



Chuck Nicklin checks out a point and shoot

YouTube, a longer one for entry in a competition, and perhaps a longer one yet for presentations to groups.

If you've shot wide, medium, and tight you have the building blocks for your story. Get the attention of the audience at the beginning and leave them with something memorable at the end. For example, a film about manatees can finish with a full face closeup and you could say, "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder." In a film about diving in Alaska, finish with a clip of divers in a hot tub saying, "Glacier diving was fun, but sitting in the hot tub is even better." If your subject is macro, you can close with a famous quote from Robert Capa: "If your pictures aren't good enough, you weren't close enough."

Eric Hanauer



who is willing to write and perform something that fits your video.

What most of us do is purchase royalty free music. Just Google it and you'll find dozens of sources. Some of them are even free. One that's unique is Sonicfire Pro (smartsound.com). These tunes can be stretched or contracted to fit your clips and sequences, as well as changing tempos and even instruments. It comes at a somewhat higher price, but lends a more professional, polished sound to your efforts.

Leave them thinking

You might make different versions of your film for different purposes. One could be for

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