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Joan makes it sound right - the art of commentaries

by Joan Rennie

Most video makers find writing a commentary for a video to be far more difficult than any other aspect of video production.

A few individuals will make a commentary while actually taking the shots. While this is an excellent way to remember the names of the places that are included in the video the quality of the sound recording is rarely good – spoken as it is from underneath the back of the camera. And as the words spoken have not been carefully thought out they are usually short statements rather than a fluid story.

Most people would prefer not to put commentary on their videos. It is because of the video's audience that commentary is required. Unless the video maker is prepared to stand beside the television while the video is playing and explain the places and events that are illustrated it is important to record commentary on the video.



The author assures us this is a non-alcoholic Christmas drink!

The Listener

Before any commentary is made it is important to know who your audience is.

- ☛ Will you be speaking to adults or to children, are they arm-chair travellers or travelling companions?
- ☛ Is the video instructional and if so is it for university trained experts-in-the-field or for complete novices to the subject?

No matter who may be in the audience when the video is played, you must attract and keep their attention. The tone and delivery of the commentary is very important.

Approach

A passive commentary could be formal and distant and this could result in a mental “switch off” by the audience. Only if an exam result depends on the knowledge being given will the audience sit quietly and absorb the words that have been written and are delivered in this way.

An active commentary is alive and “happening” and the lively choice of words and the immediacy of the subject will have the audience sitting on the edge of their seats and instil in the viewer the feeling that he or she is actually involved in the story or event.

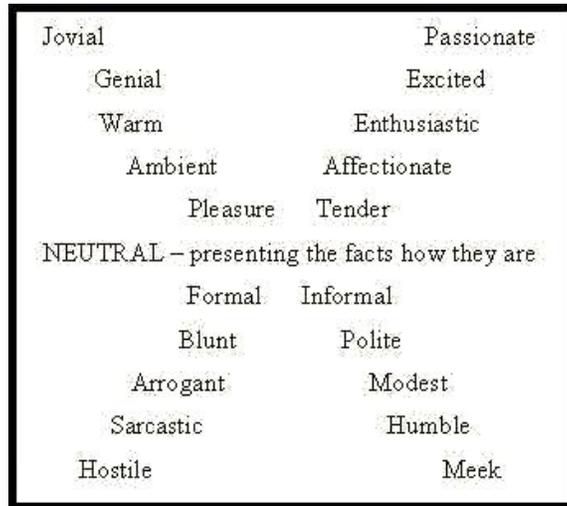


It is a good idea to assume that your audience is bright and intelligent and therefore does not need the commentator to read the signboard that is shown or the hotel name board captured in close up. Nor is it necessary to state the obvious, for instance, “A brown cow is standing in a green field” when the picture shows that there is a brown cow standing in a green field!

Most video makers are aware of this “to be avoided” fault and yet many still make this mistake. Instead of saying “The kookaburra sat on the gate post” (past tense/passive) try “The kookaburra is a large kingfisher that can sometimes be tempted to eat food scraps from your fingers”, a sentence that not only identifies the bird but gives a little insight to its people friendly disposition. It is also “active” and in the present tense.



Imagine there to be four directions in which a commentary can be written. Choose your own direction according to the video to be made:



Be sure of who your audience is and what you want them to see and hear. Know yourself what you would like your audience to see and hear. The audience will look at the video searching for the reason for it. Be sure you show the video in such a way that your choice of meaning is clear because everyone is capable of seeing things differently.

Personal attitudes will show through the video so if you have an opinion that differs from that of the central character, your video may unconsciously be manipulated to show that character's opinion to be flawed.

Preparation

Very few people are able to deliver a commentary without sitting down and preparing it beforehand. Ad-libbing is a skill that very few people are good at. When recording the commentary separately it is possible to correct errors and delete unnecessary sentences and words in an audio editing program - so an ad-lib commentary can work very well.

Always try to remember that a video should tell a story. Our videos should never be a collection of random but attractive shots that say nothing and go nowhere. Have a structure to the video and the audience will enjoy watching it and will be able to talk about it later.

Writing a commentary for a random collection of shots is extremely difficult, a video should tell a story so if the images do not show that story, the commentary should be written in such a way that the audience hears a story while watching the accompanying images.

How to write the words to be spoken

For some people writing comes easily but most video makers have to put a determined effort into stringing words together.

We really should not find this difficult since all of us are able to hold a conversation. The difference, of



course, is that there isn't a second person to prompt further responses by asking questions.

Commentaries can be made after the video has been edited or written knowing the camera footage and before the editing has been started. Assuming the video has already been edited, watch the first part of it and ask yourself - as if you were someone in the audience - "what is happening here and where is it?" Write down your answer.

Look at your answer and see if you can say it differently. Often the first words you think of are not the ones that should be used. Always write down what you want to say, read it a few times and if it sounds too uninteresting it needs rewriting!

Once the first sentence or sentences have been written watch the next part of your video. Again ask yourself "where?" and "what?" and possibly "why?" This questioning will make you look for a way in which to give the audience the necessary answers.



Always read your words out loud after you have written them down because the way you speak out loud is not the same as the way you read silently to yourself. If your words do not sound natural you will probably stumble over them when you come to read them for the recording. Can't, won't and other abbreviated words we use without thinking about and should be used in your commentary in preference to can not and will not.

Always read your script and if you sometimes make common grammatical errors, for instance you normally say "a hotel" and you know that it really should be "an hotel", go with the one that you feel flows better - no one will notice! Small grammatical errors are not important unless your video is for commercial distribution.

Once you have written a few sentences give them a try with the video playing - but not recording them. Play the video and as the first of the scenes for voice over comes along start to say your chosen words. Look up when you get to the end of the first group of sentence to make sure that the sentence is not longer than the pictures allow. It is better that there is a little bit of a space before the next voice over is required rather than have the description of the first part of the video overlap the next, totally different scene.

If the sentences are too long, see if you can reduce the number of words or maybe read them slightly quicker. Play the video again and be comfortable with this section before moving on to the next.

How much information?

It is possible to give too much information. Many books will advise you to draw your information for your holiday location videos from travel brochures. This advice is good just as long as you read the information and then write it in your own words and in words appropriate to the images you are showing. The exact number of islands in the bay and the dates they were catalogued and who lived on them (unless they are very famous) can be glossed over rather than given in great detail.

Rather than gather information from just one source, find several sources. The Internet is one source that is waiting to be tapped. When you have your collection of information, read through everything, making two or three word reminder notes on each new piece of information that is found. Put the brochures books and Internet printouts away so there is no temptation to quote directly from anyone of them and start to build up your commentary from your jottings.

Perhaps the video camera picked up some of the guide's commentary in one of the wonderful places you visited unless the sound is really clear and audible without too much other sound, do not use it in place of commentary. It is much better to write down what is said and create your own commentary from it.

The soundtrack should be replaced with sound from another part of the video so the guide's commentary does not conflict with your own. It may be better to keep the original sound track but reduce the volume (if the guide is close enough to be heard) so that the sound of the guide speaking can just be heard. If you use the information and write a commentary in your own arrangement of words it will not be obvious that you are repeating the difficult to hear words that are on the sound track.

How much?

Commentary can span the entire length of the video or it can be a few words scattered through the video. The amount of commentary to be given depends on the content of the video, an instructional video will need a great deal of commentary but a descriptive video will not need as much because the pictures will tell some of the story.

There is a danger that the commentary is too short and that when the voice over is heard after several minutes of video with music, ambient sound and no voice, it makes the audience start with surprise.

Delivery

Do a few breathing exercises before you start to make a voice recording:

- ☞ Breathe in through the nose deeply, count to four as you breathe in.
- ☞ Breathe out by gently blowing, count to four as you breathe out.
- ☞ Do this about three or four times.
- ☞ Breathe in as before and as you breathe out say “Aah” and
- ☞ do this three or four times but using different vowel sounds.

Either stand or sit but have the back very straight and the head held high. Put the script, written in clear large print at eye height so you do not have to look down and squash your voice box. Read through the script as though to a room of people but do not record this first reading.

Read the script again until it can be read without mistakes.

When you are ready to record, position the microphone so that it is not too close to your mouth and make your first recording. Read the script and pause for at least one second after each sentence.

Turn off the microphone and play the recording back to listen to the quality of it. If the microphone has been placed too close to the mouth there may be “popping” sounds at every letter “P” and “T”.

If the sound is too low it could either be you or the equipment. If it is you, it is because you are shy about being overheard by someone outside the room you are in. If it is the equipment it could need a level to be raised.

Have a second try and compare it to the first. When mistakes are made during the voice recording, stop speaking for one second and repeat the entire sentence again. There is no need to stop recording.

Be sure that there will be no interruptions while you are recording your commentary. Take the phone off the hook while you are recording and ask other members of the household to respect your wish to be alone for a few minutes and move the ticking clock from the shelf!



It is important that the voice should sound interesting, with colourful rises and falls of intonation. A flat voice will soon lose the audience even if the content of the commentary is good. As long as your voice sounds interesting and the video is also interesting the combination will entrance your audience. The commentary compliments the video, the video will be remembered - which is more than might happen if there were no words used at all.

- Joan Rennie [This article appeared in *Lamphouse* the magazine of Queensland Movie Makers (Australia) and is used here by kind permission of the author and the magazine editor Stewart Gordon.]