

The Docu Doctor's Clinic

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photo by
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Storylines Times N – Part II

(Reading time: 5:05 minutes)

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Note to readers: This is part two of a case study on how to manage multiple storylines. Read the previous issue as a reminder or introduction.

Once the hierarchy of storylines was settled in *My Father, the Terrorist?* by Safiya Rander and Suzanne Abate, it was time to discuss differentiation.

Differentiation is the separation of a film's different storylines, so as to avoid a flat or confusing muddle. Sometimes differentiation arises naturally from the content, as when a film explores different themes. Sometimes separate characters have their own distinct story arcs and bring the much-needed contrast between storylines.

However, more often than not, the very nature of documentaries makes all these elements overlap. In *My Father, the Terrorist?*, theme threads had a great deal in common—most notably Safiya herself. In Storyline A, she tirelessly questioned her family, warning them how changes in Canadian law would threaten their father just because of his Muslim identity. In Storyline B, she conducted interviews about the increasingly oppressive political climate. C consisted of her letters to Canada; and in D she was the on-screen narrator, reflecting on her journey of transformation.

Safiya's multiplicity of roles meant that staple solutions such as keeping themes and characters to their own storylines wasn't a possibility. However, we had some advantages: the story arcs had the potential to be very distinct, though they were unbalanced in their distribution throughout the film. We went scene by scene, strengthening Storyline A by clarifying its trajectory: Safiya slowly moves her family from denial to a realization of their situation.

Storyline B was full of relevant information about political events and new laws, but this very density was overpowering the film. Through much discussion Safiya and Suzanne condensed the information, throwing high fives every time they agreed on what to let go. Thanks in part to having already defined the hierarchy of storylines, they could drop a few things and shorten almost every scene.

For the letters to Canada, in which Safiya displays her changing relationship with her country, we needed more of an arc: the letters needed to appear at equal intervals so as not to lose momentum. Safiya and Suzanne were thrilled to add something for once, instead of taking out. And once everything else was in place, Storyline D fit in perfectly at the end of each section, becoming a natural transition and a resting place in a very textured film.

Most filmmakers would be content with such progress; but style is another tool worth considering in order to emphasize differentiation—especially when the filmmaker is a visual artist.

Storyline A was sheer vérité: no stylistic confusion there, and with no other story line in vérité style, the main plot was standing out strong. B was benefiting from Safiya's visual experimentation, presenting slates and graphics that clarified the mounting oppression from the government. However, the graphic elements were coming and going too abundantly: we needed to find more focus. Slates became sparse; and for other graphics, Safiya decided to insert complementary information on black censorship strips that covered the eyes and mouths of her interviewees. It was a stroke of genius and a much-welcomed visual pun. For Storyline C, Safiya's letters were typed on the screen. And D, her journey, was quite experimental, with distant, shaky shots that captured random moments.

Now we were really done. No storyline had been harmed in the making of this film.

Conclusion: Story lines are like lanes on a road. When changing lanes, the turn light must be on as to not crash with other cars.

Doctor's Credentials: Internationally renowned speaker, author and story consultant **Fernanda Rossi** has doctored over 300 documentaries, scripts, and fundraising trailers including the 2009 Academy Award® nominated **The Garden** by Scott Hamilton Kennedy and the 2007 Academy Award® nominated **Recycled Life** by Leslie Iwerks. In addition to private consultations, lectures, and seminars worldwide, she has served as festival juror and grant panelist. Ms. Rossi shares her knowledge and research of story structure and the creative process in columns and articles in trade publications. She is also the author of the book **Trailer Mechanics: A Guide to Making your Documentary Fundraising Trailer**.

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