

### **Myth 1: “If you don’t have a conflict you don’t have a film.”**

By Fernanda Rossi

[www.fernanda-rossi.com/writer](http://www.fernanda-rossi.com/writer)

#### **The myth in all its glory**

You might have heard the “conflict” predicament uttered with different levels of conviction by funders, investors, and distributors. Or, at times, repeated by some self-appointed *dramatic conflict police officer*—often a well-intended yet misguided filmmaker that searches for answers to his or her story structure conundrums in screenwriting textbooks, or worse, documentary books and articles that were based on screenwriting books!

If you haven’t heard it in those exact words, variations include demands about acts, characters, and climax. Responding to these demands might cause you to panic because you can’t articulate the conflict of your doc. Or you might gulp because you know all too well that it has no dramatic conflict—not yet, not ever. No reason to fret, it’s just a half-true verdict that has remained unexamined for too long. Time to reconsider!

#### **Possible origin of the myth**

There is no hard data that demonstrates the precise moment at which the myth took on a life of its own. Some speculation and anecdotal evidence points to three concurrent events that together gave birth and validation to this myth:

First, it’s the United States of America we’re talking about. Hollywood reigns supreme. For better or worse, it sets the tendency of the predominant model for storytelling. Three acts, a conflict, a hero, a villain—you get the picture (and please excuse the simplification). Therefore schools, workshops, trade publications, and the like will further the Gospel of What Brings in the Money. But why would a documentary filmmaker care about fiction storytelling models? Well...

Some time around the creation of cable TV, the need to fill channels and hours of programming put some extra pressure on acquisition and development departments. The word conflict, or hook, or more recently just *story*, started to mean entertainment, i.e. something marketable, even for documentaries and factual programs. Everything else was considered boring or too highbrow or not sellable. And in a free market of supply and demand, the demand won. Filmmakers would do their best to fit their square film in the round peg of Hollywood storytelling.

At the same time, digital technology entered the scene. Suddenly filmmakers were shooting a little more than the customary 30 or 40 hours of 16mm. With an average of 100–150 hours of footage, filmmakers could afford to wait for that apparently valuable conflict to happen, if it ever did. By chance or by choice, documentary storytelling started to be ruled by a new master.

### Some truth to it

The 2009 Oscar® nominated *The Garden* by Scott Hamilton Kennedy, which I had the pleasure to doctor, is a fine example of a conflict driven story. Past Oscar winners were not so conflict driven. They fared well financially and critically nonetheless, whether it involved penguins, passion for guns, or Indian children. Let's rewind a few decades to the masters of documentary making... Alas, no dramatic conflict anywhere to be seen; characters, yes; conflicting issues, yes; two opposing forces, ah-ha. Conflict-driven stories do exist and do work. They are a minority.

### The real deal

Nothing wrong with following a conflict-driven model when, and that's a huge when, the story naturally has a conflict. The problem arises when you, dear filmmaker, feel you *must* have a conflict or force one into the film, or—gasp!—create one. Furthermore, when the shoot never ends in the hopes that some dramatic conflict will manifest itself, or the editing stalls because of a supposed lack of structure, then what was an inoffensive myth becomes a vicious force to reckon with.

### What to do

If your story is not of the David and Goliath type, rest assured that 100 years of documentary filmmaking without dramatic conflict can't possibly be wrong. There are many ways to tell a story and many story elements to consider. *No conflict* doesn't mean *boring essay*. It means asking further questions about what will sustain the story. There are arcs to climb, suspense to build, and a tight balance among all story elements at play, all of them, not just the conflict, if there was one.

There are also identification and empathy, curiosity and interest. True you might need more knowledge of the craft to make a story work without a conflict, since a model which you aren't being bombarded with by every media outlet may not come as second nature.

And you might want to consider the person you're pitching to, he or she might also be struggling to bridge the gap between those same two worlds. Therefore when asked what's the conflict of your film, smile with confidence and say, "Let me tell you all the issues at stake in my story."

Ultimately some might want to be entertained, but we all want to be engaged and for that you don't need a dramatic conflict.

### To think further

Maybe the documentary form is too broad and it's time to be more specific about genres to avoid confusion. Maybe it's time to become less lax about terminology and case scenarios, backing up arguments with data instead of validating opinions with a salary, a title, or an award. In all cases, may filmmakers make their films by choice rather than by default.

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Internationally renowned writer and speaker Fernanda Rossi has collaborated in more than 500 fiction scripts, documentaries, proposals and fundraising samples. Two documentaries were nominated for the **Academy Award®**, and another was nominated for Best Script for the **Wildscreen Panda Awards**. Many others screened and were awarded at festivals such as **IDFA, Hot Docs, Sheffield Doc/Fest, Sundance, DOCNYC** and broadcast on **PBS, HBO** and **BBC**. The treatments she has written won funding from **ITVS, NYSCA** and the **National Film Board of Canada**. Fernanda Rossi has given her signature seminars on story structure, proposals and demos in more than 15 countries for over 40 film organizations, festivals and markets. In addition, she is a trainer and mentor for special programs and a grant evaluator for foundations. Her book ***Trailer Mechanics: How to Make Your Documentary Fundraising Demo*** (2nd Edition) is, according to industry professionals, the bible on demo production.

### Story Strategies: Debunking Storytelling Myths / Myth 1

by Fernanda Rossi • edited by Marcia Scott

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