

On finding the beginning, middle, and the end



Film editor Ann Collins on finding the narrative thread when cutting together a documentary, the relationship between editor and director, and why the story always has to come first.

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As told to Miriam Garcia, 3061 words.

Tags: [Film](#), [Process](#), [Beginnings](#), [Collaboration](#), [Creative anxiety](#).

How do you start the process of editing a film? Are you involved from the beginning, or do you start once you have all the footage?

It depends on the project. Sometimes I don't hear about projects until the footage is coming in. But sometimes filmmakers talk to me while they're in production and we have conversations and we start talking about story possibilities. I like to talk to people about the three-act structure, and the style of their film and coverage, because every editor wants coverage. Filmmakers usually say: "If you could get me an exterior, that would be great... If you could get lots of close-ups of that, too."

Usually on most films, there are still a couple of shoot days that directors save, so once you get to a rough cut, they can shoot an extra scene, an exterior, something abstract, or an additional interview. It's nice to have those extra shooting days where you can plan them based on how you're shaping things.

After you watch all the footage, do you start editing with a formula that works for you, or do you treat each project differently?

A large part of editing is just having an ongoing conversation with the director, where we're both telling the story to each other. I often look at the footage with the director so we can talk about why they shot what they did, and what they think the story is. Out of that conversation, I start to get a sense of the shape of the story.

I'm usually listening to the director to tell me their vision. I'm listening to the characters. And I'm watching the footage, which is kind of like being inside of a cinematographer's head hoping to see what they're finding, and to get a sense of their rhythm and their style of shooting, and trying to incorporate that into what I'm hearing from the director. It is an ongoing process, but it starts with absorbing all those different voices. And then trying to find the one kind of central, cohesive story that's emerging from all of that.

The opening scene of a film is so important because it welcomes the viewer into the world you're creating. How do you work on the opening scene?

It is definitely the last piece of the puzzle that gets put into place, and it's changing all the time. As the film emerges, ideas come up and things shift. It's a very fluid process. Sometimes, I cut an opening scene as a temporary one, just to find my rhythm, my pacing, and to start playing with the footage. Sometimes I have

something that feels like a beginning and then I move forward and cut through everything else, and kind of rough cut and assemble, build arcs and stories, and then I come back to that opening.

So it is often something that I cut first, but then it's something that I'm cutting many times along the way. And it's usually what I cut last because it's not until you really get to the end of the film that you know what the opening is, because at first, you don't know where you're going. Even after your first pass at it, you keep shaping it and shaping it.

Every film is its own universe. And you have to establish what that universe is to your viewer. Some universes have voices and you never see who the voice is or where the voice is coming from. Some universes have just images, others have music playing. Some feel very rough and dark, and others feel very smooth and elegant. So the style and the language has to be established. Questions like "Where are we? What's the emotional kind of entry into the story? Who or what are you encountering? What do you need to know in the first few minutes of the film? How can I quickly and efficiently tell you what you need to know, or communicate what you need to know?" So that the viewer can feel like he or she is in good hands, and emotionally engage in what's about to unfold and trust and go on that journey.

And what about the ending? Do you shoot different ending scenes in each project, or do you usually stick with one?

The whole time you're moving through the footage, you're looking for the ending. It's usually easier to find because the ending is kind of a summation of what's happened, but it's also sort of the leaping point out of the film. The ending, on one hand, is tying up all the loose ends. But on the other hand, it's kind of raising a question that you leave your audience with. Even if the question is as simple as, "What will happen next?" The ending is easier, because for the beginning you're looking for something mysterious, and for the ending you're looking for something very satisfying.

For this feeling about finding something that satisfies in the ending scene, do you mean particularly for documentary films?

Yes. In a narrative situation, the ending is mostly kind of found in the writing process. For documentaries, the one question I want every filmmaker to ask of their characters is, "How has this changed you? How have the characters been changed by this situation?" And the answer to that question is usually the ending. It's something that satisfies the initial question of the film. You never want to leave people feeling like, "Well, so what?" You don't want to wonder what happened. But you also you don't want to leave thinking to yourself, "Why should I care? Why did I care about that?"

I read [Aristotle's Poetics](#) and it is a great text for a documentary film editor. Especially because Aristotle talks about what the beginning, the middle, and the end of things are. And he defines an ending as the thing after which nothing can come. And it's a good rule. It seems really apparent, but it's the thing after which nothing can happen, that is your ending.

What comes to my mind when I think about the collaboration between a film director and an editor is that trust and patience are essential. What else do you think defines the perfect collaboration?

A lot of it depends on chemistry. I think we're both initially seeing if we click. You're right about trust. What I mean specifically is that I want to be able to take creative risks, and know that they will support that. I want to be able to go out on a limb for them. I want to be able to try things, and know that they share my spirit of adventure in that.

Ideally for me, a collaboration is when both people are caring for each other. The relationship between the editor and the director is a sacred one. You must nurture it. I really cherish the relationships I have with filmmakers, and I do try to nurture them; I try to make sure that they're at ease. I make sure that they know that I'm listening to them, and that I'm working on something. And that if I start taking the film in a direction that they're uncomfortable with, I'm happy to turn back and reestablish what their vision is.

But I'm also happy when they are willing to see where the process takes us. I like directors who push me creatively. I take things as far as I can see and then they come in with fresh ideas, and encourage me to go further. There's a really wonderful quote by the poet Rainer Maria Rilke where he says, "Love is not two people staring into each other's eyes. Love is two people staring off in the same direction." I think that that really encapsulates the relationship between a director and an editor, because you're sharing this destination that you want to get to. And when you have a good collaborative relationship, you trust that you both want what's best for the film. And you want to keep pushing, you want to keep working, and you want to keep editing until you get the film to where it needs to be.

Deborah Dickson, who's a great filmmaker and editor, said to me recently that what she likes in a relationship with a director and an editor, and I agree with her, is that if the director says, "Okay, this isn't good," then it's not good. And if the editor looks at something and says, "Okay, this isn't good," then it's also not good. That both parties agree that you're just going to keep going until it's where it needs to be. The only rule I have is that I don't keep track of who thought of what. If we are making a film together in the editing room, you are inspiring me, and hopefully I am inspiring you, and we are moving forward together on this project.

What's the difference between working with first-time filmmakers and experienced filmmakers? Do you think that one of them is more open to feedback, or willing to take creative risks?

It varies. I find that good, experienced filmmakers are very open to rethinking, trying new things, and open to feedback. That's what makes them good filmmakers. You could have someone who's a first-time filmmaker who's very open to things, or not very open to things, because they're nervous. It's more about personality, and it's a security kind of thing. It's something that hopefully you gain with experience. You can have a great, inspiring, supportive, strong, creative, brilliant first-time filmmaker, and hopefully you have that with an experienced filmmaker as well.

When you are editing a film, you have two voices to hear. One is the director's vision for the film, and the other is the footage itself, and what the film is telling you. Have you ever been in a position where the material doesn't match with the director's vision of the film?

I have had that situation. Hopefully it's something that you come to organically, where you start shaping the material and you're both starting to see that the footage isn't fitting the vision. Most documentary people know that the film is shifting a lot as you edit it. The film reveals itself to you. The footage reveals the story to you in ways that you don't see when you first start to think about it. And as you start working on it, it starts to emerge.

When a director is uncertain of what the vision of the film is, is this a challenge or an opportunity?

It depends on personality. If they're uncertain and nervous, not trusting me, and being argumentative, then that's a problem. But if they're uncertain and turning to me, then it's an opportunity.

I'm a big believer in process. The longer I edit films, the more firmly I feel that if you follow the process, the film will come together. I have sometimes worked with people who don't trust the process, or who are impatient. Or who want me to give them answers that I can't give them yet. And I say, "Here's what I'm seeing. Here's where we seem to be moving. Here's what I'm hearing from you. Here's what the footage is saying." But there's only so much I can know at the beginning of the process.

I imagine that you get a lot of requests from the director, the producer, and other people involved right away. How can you silence those voices?

Pretty early on into the process, once I've gotten through a lot of the footage, there usually comes a day where something starts to formulate. I either cut the best scene of the film, or I cut, for example, a temporary beginning. I cut something just to show everyone and to calm them down. It's not necessarily the most important scene in the film, but something really charming, or that establishes the mood of the film, or brings us into a character. The producers really like to see that, so I usually try to have something that everyone can look at

and respond to. Just to calm everybody, myself included.

If you are a filmmaker, what is the best way to approach an editor you want to work with?

Usually it's nice to get an email that kind of asks your availability. Because if you're not available, then there isn't a need for a big conversation. So sending an email saying, "I have a project, this is roughly what it's about. This is my schedule. I saw your work, or I met you at such-and-such place, I'd really like to talk with you more if you're interested." I don't worry about if it's a first-time filmmaker, or a seasoned filmmaker. I just want to meet with someone who is excited to tell a story. Because that's very contagious for me.

You edited the film Joan Didion: The Center Will Not Hold, where, besides the footage, you also had to review other texts and archival materials. When did you know that your research was done?

It is still not done! I started rereading her work chronologically and Griffin Dunne, the director, did the same thing. We were continuing to read her work as we were editing. We really wanted the writing to be the foreground of where the story was going, as opposed to an interview or some narrative kind of through line. I would work all day on the film in the editing room, sometimes alone, often with Griffin. And in the middle of editing, we would start pulling books off the shelves, and we'd be looking through things and rereading to see what went in. And then we'd work all day, and it was a very joyful and a wonderful collaboration.

As the film was shaping, I often needed to revisit something. We were telling her life story as well as the story of her writing, and the way those two things intersected kept shifting. So the research was eternal. Because what's so incredible about reading is that every time you read something, you're a different person. Or something else is on your mind, or you're thinking about something different. You can read one of her books and two weeks later you read it again and it feels very different to you because of where you are.

How do you know when a film is finished?

It's tempting to cut forever. And I would be perfectly happy to cut forever because it is such a fun process. But I would say, often times, your ending is dictated by your budget. Or you're lucky and you get into a film festival. But if those things aren't readily apparent, you kind of get to a place where you're like, "Okay, I know what the possibilities are, and they're not as good as this. This is what this film needs to be. We've covered all our bases. We're telling the best story we can. And we're done." It's nice when that happens on its own schedule. Instead of when you must finish for the Sundance deadline, or to submit to Tribeca, or TIFF.

That's a good way to see it, when you know that the possibilities aren't as good as what you have.

Or it's not getting better, it's just getting different.

You are an advocate about having the editing room separated from the production room.

It's really important for the editing room to be a very calm place. The mood should be light, no matter what the subject of the film is. It should be calm, an inspiring place. If there's too much stress of producing—stress of budget, stress of deadline, stress of schedule—it interferes with the ability to be creative. To be creative I have to be calm. To let that sort of inner voice speak, and to hear what the footage is telling me. And to sort of hear what the director is telling me. I think directors need the same thing. So I try to keep it very calm, and very separate. And to have it just be this place where we play, create, and make the film.

Sometimes I'm watching a film and I see a continuity error. Or I think, "How did they miss that"? Are you able to enjoy a film without looking at those details?

I always see those details! But I trust, and hope, that people will know that, if there is a continuity error, it's because you had no choice. Or because something else was coming first.

Your story has to come first. And making sure you look good as an editor must come second. Hopefully the cinematography looks its best, and the editing is seamless, elegant, and beautiful, and the story is engaging. But sometimes things happen in production and you just can't cut around them. If there is a bad cut, it's usually for a reason beyond everybody's control. So, I try to be forgiving of that, because they probably saw it, and they're probably really upset about it.

Ann Collins recommendations:

Halo Va Mouse Pad - I needed a mouse pad for the Avid, and my AP Julia found one that is perfectly round and shows an image of the moon tinted pink.

Chelsea galleries - I use *Artforum's* art guide app to help me sort out which shows I want to see, then wander through the neighborhood blissfully inspired.

The Brooklyn Bridge - I run over the bridge whenever I can to clear my mind. I never tire of its beauty, or of the thrill of seeing Manhattan rising before me.

Little Women by Louisa May Alcott - I read it when I was 10, and just reread it. Not only is it great storytelling and writing, it's thoroughly modern in its concerns about women and society.

LL Bean Daybreak Scuffs - Cozy felt slippers with snowflake appliqués, these give me something to smile about first thing in the morning and last thing at night.

Name

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Vocation

Film editor

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