The documentary treatment - samples

The documentary treatment, like the drama treatment, tells the story of the film as you plan to have the audience experience it, either stating or implying the style in which it will be treated/told. But since documentaries may utilise a wide variety of resources not used in a straight drama, the documentary treatment should specify these, e.g. interviews, reconstructions, archival footage, photographs, maps, diagrams, graphics, etc.

As an example here is a portion of the treatment for a documentary film called *Washed Away by Progress*

**Washed Away by Progress - Treatment**

**Scene 1 - Introduction**
Fading up on low aerial shots of Lake Monroe and the surrounding terrain, a voice over describes it as a jewel of southern Indiana. The camera brings us down to lake level showing boaters, swimmers, water skiers and hikers. A series of short sound bites from these people help outline the fact that Lake Monroe is more than just a water supply and flood control project; Lake Monroe is a major source of recreation, income, and represents a heightened quality of life for residents and tourists in southern Indiana. But nothing comes without a price.

**Scene 2 - Conflict**
Over an acoustic guitar playing in a minor key, a series of black and white images show portraits of people outside their homes, children, families and farmers and people working. Bill Miller and Bob Cross describe the people’s emotional pain and how against their wishes these people we see were forced to leave their homes. The last sound bite explains how the move was one of necessity ordered by the Army Corp of Engineers.

**Scene 3 – The necessity**
From an aerial viewpoint we see the scenic hills and community of Bloomington as David Cable and/or Chuck Parrish of the US Army Corps of Engineers review the problem the region faced in its quest for a water supply in the 1940s. We cut from the interviews to Leonard Springs and Twin Lakes, two failed attempts at reservoirs. The interviewee tells us that public officials were getting desperate to find an adequate source of water in a timely manner. They tell us that after extensive surveys it was determined that the Salt Creek watershed was the area’s best hope for a water supply. During the last sound bite they explain that unfortunately several communities had to be displaced by the lake, including the town of Elkinsville.

**Scene 4 – Elkinsville lives and stories**
We revisit some of the black and white images accompanied by old-style instrumental folk music. Dissolving from picture to picture we move closer in as voiceovers describe some of the town’s former residents. Pausing on one still image we dissolve to an interview with the person in the present day- some 50 years after the picture had been taken. Using this same technique- dissolving
from a black and white photo to the present day interview, we visit another former resident. Cutting between the interviews, we hear of what kind of homes, schools and buildings they grew up in. Both interviews end on what they felt when they heard they had to pack up and move.

Scene 5 – Eminent Domain

"No one likes to force people to move from their homes," marks the beginning of this brief segment exploring the idea of eminent domain. An interview with a public works official or city attorney, Linda Runkle is juxtaposed with an Elkinsville resident, “Leaving my home was the hardest thing I ever did.”

Another way of writing the treatment could be as prose, without scene breakdowns but still as the viewer would experience it. Here is an example from a film called Eternity:

Ruth Ridley is the strong and feisty daughter of the preacher John Ridley. She sits in the studio before a beautiful, stylised landscape of a sea at sunset. She explains the influence her father had on Arthur Stace, who was later to become known as ‘Mr Eternity’. A photograph of John Ridley appears. It was Ridley’s sermon, ‘Echoes of Eternity’, which supposedly converted Stace to Christianity in the 1930s. It was after this sermon that Stace took a piece of chalk from his pocket and wrote, in beautiful copperplate script on the sidewalks of Sydney, the one word that would influence many for the next four decades: ‘Eternity’.

The image of Arthur Stace appears, recreated, as he walks away from the Sydney Harbour Bridge, wearing a dark coat and Depression-era hat. 1920s archival footage of two male swimmers, seen from overhead, lying on a cliff face. The turbulent sea hits the cliff as the sea runs over their bodies. John Ridley’s poetic sermon booms loudly as the sea returns to hit the cliff face.

In both cases the reader can tell what resources will be used: interviews, photographs, narration, graphics, reconstruction and archive footage. It is also essential to include brief background material on the subject or characters, and evidence of your access to them, do so in a separate appendix, so as to preserve the narrative flow of the treatment itself.

The documentary treatment is a statement of intent. It is a description of the film you want to make, given what you have access to when the filming begins. This has to be based on actual research. The making of a documentary may involve the elements of discovery and even surprise but the more you plan your framework the better the result.

The final paragraph should be a summary of the issues you are dealing with and what you want the audience to think about. Here is a sample from a film called Volunteers about political activists in the US today:

Our film will ask why were the political actions of the late nineteen-sixties so effective in capturing the attention of so many people and creating a genuine passion in main-stream America while today’s activist seem incapable of gaining even modest recognition? What is wrong with the political activists of today? What are today’s organisers doing so wrong and what were the organisers in 68 doing so right? These are the questions we will try to answer.