Chapter Seven

C. A. Tuggle and Forrest Carr

TELEVISION NEWS STORY FORMS— THE VO

In television news, there are five basic story forms: **readers** (or "tell" stories), **voice-overs (VOs), voice-over to sound on tape (VO/SOTs),** reporter **packages,** and **donuts.** Beginning writers and associate producers are the people primarily responsible for taking information from story notes and compiling it into story form to be read by an anchor as a reader, a VO, or a VO/SOT. If a story involves no video or other visual over the face of the anchor, then it's called a reader. Sometimes, the viewers can see the anchor's face for the duration of a story and also see a graphic over his shoulder. That story would still qualify as a reader, because the viewers see the anchor for the entire story. Because there's not much production value associated with reader stories, they're usually quite short and might include a promise of video once it becomes available.

Midday anchors Gayle Guyardo and Bill Ratliff on the news set at WFLA-TV in Tampa.

A voice-over is any story that's read by the anchor and also incorporates video, a full-screen graphic, or some other visual. The term "voice-over" simply indicates that the anchor's voice is heard "over" some visual. The acronym VO usually indicates that she's talking over a piece of video. If she's talking over a graphic, many news operations label the story a VO/g to distinguish between the two. Later, we'll get to the longer story forms, such as VO/SOTs and packages. In this chapter, we'll concentrate on VOs.

Voice-over stories serve an important role in a newscast. They help the producer vary the pace of the show, while allowing us to deliver useful and interesting information in short form. VOs work very well when we cover events and a comment from someone at the event really wouldn't add that much to the story, when there's no real issue involved, or when there's only a limited amount of interesting information to impart to the viewers. A downtown street fair would probably warrant VO coverage only. It would involve nice colorful video and would be a way to highlight a part of the community; however, there's no controversy, and someone saying "I enjoyed the petting zoo" doesn't add anything, so a 20- to 30-second VO would suffice. The street fair isn't as important as other stories in the newscast are, so less time would be devoted to it.

The relative importance of the story isn't the only reason for assigning the story VO status. We might be getting late-breaking video from the satellites and have no time to put together a longer piece, so we would quickly edit some of the compelling video and give the few details that are available. Perhaps a trial has generated a couple of

important bits of interesting information, but not enough to warrant more than 20 or 30 seconds. The information might be good, but there just isn't much of it.

Also, what might be a full-blown reporter package on a slow news day can be reduced to VO status simply because other news takes precedence. A producer might feel compelled to include the story, but simply can't give up the time in a packed news show to make it a long piece. Something a reporter has been working on all day might occupy only 30 seconds of news time when all is said and done.

The flip side of that is what's known as "trying to make chicken salad out of . . ." (you fill in the rest). Some days, the news managers are sitting around trying to figure out what to cover, especially as the lead story, because it seems *nothing* is going on. On those days, a compelling VO can give the show a kick start and perhaps even lead to a short series of related reports. Matt Morin is a producer at the NBC affiliate in Plattsburgh, New York, and remembers just such a day.

Because it was *so* slow, the news managers were considering a story about a stolen exotic bird as the lead story on the evening newscast. But they decided to take a look at what was happening in world and national news before making the decision. About the only thing worthwhile was the outpouring of support for victims of an earthquake in Turkey. However, to that point they knew of no local groups organizing relief efforts, and no one was aware of a large population of people of Turkish ancestry in upstate New York. They decided to do some digging though, and a reporter learned that there were a few Turkish students at a nearby university and at another small college in the area.

As the day progressed, the death toll from the earthquake continued to rise. The news team learned from the Turkish students that there were other Turkish people living in the area, and the story of what they went through waiting to hear of the fates of loved ones and friends made a solid story for the reporter. So the newscast opened with compelling video of the quake site as a VO, progressed to the reporter package about how the local Turkish community was dealing with news of the tragedy, moved on to a VO/SOT about the local Turkish students and the impact on them, and then moved to a quick VO/graphic about how local residents could help through the Red Cross. The first VO included the latest information about the death toll and tales of survival, and served as a "scene setter" to pieces 2 and 3. The second VO put a wrap on the segment. The two short stories added both pace and context. By the way, the stolen bird story wound up as a VO, item number 11.

The Mechanics of a VO

Information for a VO can come from a number of sources, such as story notes compiled by a reporter or videographer, news releases, wire services, video feed services, and the like. Story notes might be

very brief, requiring the writer to expand on what's provided either by incorporating related information or by contacting the reporter or videographer (who might have gone on to another story assignment) for more information. The writer might also contact a source indicated in the story notes for clarification or additional information. In the case of news releases, the writer's primary task is taking the information and boiling it down to the essential elements. In the case of a script sent by a wire service or feed service, the primary task is to rewrite the information, putting a local "angle" on the story.

Writing from Video

The basic facts gathered at the story site or from newsmakers obviously give us a good starting point for what we should write. Who, what, when, where (and when we know them, why and how) are important elements in any news story. But if that's all we write, then we've created news print with wallpaper video over the top of it. In television, it's vital that we write from the video. In other words, what we see on the video should lead us to mention specific things in the script.

Now, we're not talking about play-by-play, as in "here's the mayor leaving her office, and here she is entering the council chambers" kind of stuff. But there should be a definite connection between the video and the words. If we mention the mayor, we should see the mayor. Some in the business call not having a picture to go along with a mention of someone or something specific the "not-seen-here syndrome," as in, "Mayor Smith, not seen here. . . ." So if we don't have a shot of the mayor we might want to refer to the project or the meeting rather than to the mayor—whatever it is we have video of.

Likewise, if we have a shot of a child jumping up and down, we might not write "little Jane Brown was jumping up and down," but instead, perhaps we would write something about the excitement of the moment. The video and the script should always match *thematically.* So let's be sure if we mention Jane specifically we have a shot of her, and if we write about her painting a picture (or say something about artistic expression), we don't see her reading a book. If we have a shot of the coach sweeping out the dugout, maybe we could make reference to the concerns he had coming into the season "being swept away." *The visuals should drive the writing, and then how the story is written will logically drive how the visuals are edited.* News Director Dan Dennison of KHON-TV in Honolulu calls it having stories that are high on the **SWAP** scale—working toward *synchronized words and pictures.*

Here are some examples:

Example 1

GAS PRICES—Version 1

On cam	FIGHTING IN THE MIDDLE EAST IS PUSHING UP GAS PRICES HERE IN THE U.S.
:00 Take tape	(vo)
snd under (VO)	
[Editor: show invasion video]	ISRAEL SENT TROOPS AND TANKS INTO THE WEST BANK DURING THE WEEKEND.
	THAT HAS SOME ANALYSTS WORRIED THE ARAB STATES MIGHT RETALIATE WITH A CUTBACK OR EVEN A SHUTDOWN OF OIL PRODUCTION.
	IT HASN'T HAPPENED YET BUT FEAR OF SHORTAGES HAS SENT PRICES AT THE PUMP SOARING.
	IN SOME AREAS THE PRICE OF GASOLINE JUMPED 25 CENTS A GALLON OVERNIGHT.

:30 Tape out

What's wrong with this story? Our short VO about how fighting in the Middle East is affecting oil prices begins well enough with "generic" video of soldiers in battle. But it continues to show combat long after the copy has turned to what's happening at the pump. Our video has become **wallpaper**—pictures shown for the sake of showing pictures without a direct connection to the copy. In television, we use pictures to support the copy, but in the example above, after the third sentence the pictures actually *conflict* with the copy. What sense does it make to show video of tanks rolling through streets when we're talking about people filling their gas tanks?

Here's another example.

Example 2

FIRE ECONOMY—Version 1

| On cam | AS IF PROPERTY DAMAGE WEREN'T ENOUGH . . . NOW THIS SUMMER'S WILDFIRE SEASON IS HURTING ARIZONA'S ECONOMY. |

:00 Take tape	(vo)
snd under (VO)	DURING THE PAST FEW WEEKS FOREST FIRES HAVE CONSUMED THOU-SANDS OF ACRES AND BURNED DOZENS
[Editor: at :00 show flame video]	OF HOMES IN SOUTH AND CENTRAL ARIZONA.
	SOME OF THOSE FIRES ARE STILL SMOLDERING.
	THE SUMMER TRAVEL SEASON IS VERY IMPORTANT TO THE STATE'S ECONOMY.
	BUT TOURISM OFFICIALS REPORT VACANCIES ARE UP BY 75 PERCENT. THE GOVERNOR HAS PROMISED DISASTER RELIEF.

:30 Tape out

This VO begins appropriately with fire video as the copy discusses the recent history of the fires, but when the story switches gears to discuss the effects on resorts, motels, and restaurants, the video continues to show towering flames.

So how can we solve this problem? A step in the right direction is to choose the correct visuals to go with the copy. In the gas prices example, the problem began when the copy switched to prices while the viewer was still seeing video of warfare. Could the producer have solved the problem by substituting "generic" pictures of people pumping gas? Not totally. Certainly, a quick shot of people gassing up would have been appropriate—for a sentence or two. But if it drags on too long then that video, too, will become "wallpaper." What about the fire story? Would "file" video of hotels and restaurants at the appropriate point have solved the problem? Again, such video would have improved the situation—but if it drags on too long, it becomes a new problem.

The general problem in both cases is that we have only "generic" video to support the copy—generic warfare, generic gas pumps, generic hotels, generic restaurants, and so on. These "generic" pictures are like the repeat patterns on wallpaper—hence the term. The best solution is to provide *specific* video. In the gas prices example—do we have pictures of people pumping gas *today*—including shots of the *current* prices at the pump? In the fire story, do we have pictures of empty resorts, motels, and restaurants shot *today?* (And while we're at it, can we get some interviews with people today who are affected by these stories? Maybe these items are worth more than a VO!)

If we get the "fresh" *specific* video, then copy should reference it in some way, *specifically.* Below are examples of how both of these stories might look with wallpaper removed.

Example 3

GAS PRICES—Version 2

On cam	FIGHTING IN THE MIDDLE EAST IS PUSHING UP GAS PRICES RIGHT HERE IN THE BAY AREA.
:00 Take tape	(vo)
snd under (VO)	ISRAEL SENT TROOPS AND TANKS INTO THE WEST BANK DURING THE
[Editor: at :00 show invasion video]	WEEKEND.
[Editor: at :03 show oil field video]	THAT HAS SOME ANALYSTS WORRIED THE ARAB STATES MIGHT RETALIATE WITH A CUTBACK OR EVEN A SHUTDOWN OF OIL PRODUCTION.
[Editor: at :09 show pump vid]	THAT HASN'T HAPPENED YET. . . BUT FEAR OF SHORTAGES HAS SENT PRICES AT THE PUMP SOARING.
	WE CHECKED SEVERAL STATIONS HERE IN TOWN THIS MORNING . . .
[Editor: at :15 show price]	THE LOWEST PRICE WE FOUND WAS A BUCK FIFTY AT THIS SUNMART STATION AT THE CORNER OF HAWTHORNE AND FIRST IN TAMPA.
[:30 tape out]	(on cam)
On cam	THE OWNER TELLS US THAT'S 25 CENTS MORE THAN YESTERDAY. OTHER STATES ARE REPORTING SIMILAR HIKES.

Example 4

FIRE ECONOMY—Video Match Version

On cam	AS IF PROPERTY DAMAGE WEREN'T ENOUGH . . . NOW THIS SUMMER'S WILDFIRE SEASON IS HURTING ARIZONA'S ECONOMY.
:00 Take tape	(vo)
snd under (VO)	DURING THE PAST FEW WEEKS FOREST FIRES HAVE CONSUMED THOUSANDS

[Editor: at :00 show flame video]	OF ACRES AND BURNED DOZENS OF HOMES IN SOUTH AND CENTRAL ARIZONA.
[Editor: at :06 show last year resort vid]	THE SUMMER TRAVEL SEASON IS VERY IMPORTANT TO THE STATE'S ECONOMY . . . AND LAST YEAR . . . BUSINESS WAS BOOMING AT THIS RESORT IN VISTA FLAMANTE.
[Editor: at :14 show today video, starting with empty parking lot]	TAKE A LOOK AT THAT SAME RESORT TODAY: THE PARKING LOT IS MOSTLY EMPTY.
	THE STATE SAYS IT'S LIKE THIS ACROSS THE AREA WITH VACANCIES UP 75 PERCENT.
:30 Tape out	(on cam)
On cam	THE GOVERNOR IS PROMISING DISASTER RELIEF.

In both cases, the "nonwallpaper" versions of these stories are more interesting because the copy is about specifics, not statistics. Also note that in both instances, part of our solution for getting rid of the wallpaper video was to come back on camera for the final line. There's nothing dishonorable about an on-camera shot—and some operations prefer to end stories with an on-camera tag, particularly if a different anchor will read the next story.

Literal Video

One sin almost as bad as failing to match the copy to the screen is that of taking the video *too* literally. Your pictures should support your copy, but that doesn't mean your copy has to be a slave to the pictures. You're writing a story, not a slideshow and certainly not a video catalog. For instance, if you begin your story with a shot of the sunrise, you don't have to write, "The sun burst over the horizon in a huge orange ball of flame at 5:15 A.M. this morning." You can use the picture to support in a general way the idea that your story is about a new day or what it might bring. "Sunrise was not a welcome sight to dozens of weary volunteers who faced another grueling day of battling the wildfires."

Here's another example. Imagine that you have a shot of a woman crying, with tears rolling down both cheeks. You don't have to write, "Tears rolled down both cheeks as Linda Jones began her press con-

ference." You can write, "It was with uncommon bravery that Linda Jones approached the podium this morning to share her grief with the community."

In neither case are we using the video as "wallpaper" because it's specific, and we're referencing it specifically in copy. In both examples we're using the video to support our copy thematically, rather than literally.

"Thematic" video can be used in other ways. Let's revisit a paragraph from our fire season story:

> TAKE A LOOK AT THAT SAME RESORT TODAY: THE PARKING LOT IS MOSTLY EMPTY.
>
> THE STATE SAYS IT'S LIKE THIS ACROSS THE AREA WITH VACANCIES UP 75 PERCENT.

With the words "take a look," we began showing video of a specific item, which in this case was the empty parking lot. It's okay to continue showing video of that same specific resort to cover the next sentence, even though that sentence is general in nature, because it's about what's happening at *other* resorts. Use of sustaining video to support a general theme in this way is permissible, but don't let it drag on for too long.

The fire story also provides an example of the same process in reverse: starting general and going to the specific, as follows:

> THE SUMMER TRAVEL SEASON IS VERY IMPORTANT TO THE STATE'S ECONOMY . . . LAST YEAR . . . BUSINESS WAS BOOMING AT THIS RESORT IN VISTA FLAMANTE.

In this case, we'll cover the first sentence with video of the resort packed with tourists last year. This supports the theme of "travel" in a general way. The second sentence transitions from a general statement to a very specific one about the very resort we're seeing. This is also an acceptable use of video.

The key to these examples, and what sets both of them apart from "wallpaper" video, is the fact that both contain specific references—and we move quickly to other video once we've made our point.

Writing from File Footage

Sometimes, despite your best efforts, all you have is file footage. There's no prohibition against using file, especially if it shows something specific. Often, we have to use file because we're writing about something in the past. So if you mention last year's record snowfall,

you'll have to get file footage of that. Also, even in the cases when we know the tape doesn't show what the script is mentioning, there are ways to downplay the discrepancy. For example, let's assume that Johnny Famoussinger was killed in a plane crash half an hour before airtime, and no video of the crash site is available yet. We might choose to use file tape of a recent concert, but of course that has no direct relation to today's story. Making a reference to the specific video we have at the beginning of the story makes the use of this piece of file tape more acceptable. The story would begin something like this:

Singer

	(Gayle)
On cam	POP SUPERSTAR JOHNNY
	FAMOUSSINGER IS DEAD.
:00 Take cass snd under (VO)	(vo)
	SHOWN HERE AT A CONCERT LAST
	MONTH . . . FAMOUSSINGER WAS
	RETURNING TO GOTHAM CITY FROM THE
	WEST COAST EARLY THIS MORNING . . .
	WHEN HIS PRIVATE JET WENT DOWN
	IN A REMOTE PART OF THE ROCKY
	MOUNTAINS. . . .

Making a reference to the video we're seeing makes it more acceptable for use in relation to a story that has nothing to do with the concert. It's important to write from the video throughout, but in cases like this we have no video to go with today's story other than the file tape. So, a direct video reference at the top is about the best we can do. Failing to reference the video can lead to some confusion. In this example, we'd be talking about Famoussinger returning when the footage is of him singing. Giving the viewers the visual reference at the top alerts them that what they see is what they're going to get.

Improper Use of Video—or, "When Wallpaper Strikes Back"

When a producer or reporter uses video as wallpaper, file tape frequently is part of the equation. One good cure, as we saw above, is to make specific reference within copy to the pictures. If you can't figure out a way to write such a reference into the copy, then this is a

strong clue that you shouldn't be using the tape. The rule is particularly important when it comes to use of file tape containing identifiable faces.

The truth is that television news has a horrible habit of turning real human beings into objects for the purpose of illustrating general problems or issues. For instance, to cover a story involving the latest report about the number of people with sexually transmitted diseases, an assignments editor might say to a photographer, "Go out and spray some video of people walking around downtown." Chances are, you've seen a story just like this: The copy mentions a general health problem such as obesity, AIDS, heart disease, or whatnot, while the video shows throngs of "generic" people. If the shot is very wide, the storyteller might get away with it (although that doesn't mean it's right). But what if it's not so wide? What if there are recognizable faces in it?

Using pictures of people in this way is a form of wallpaper video. But it's worse than other forms of wallpaper because instead of using generic pictures to illustrate a story, we're using *specific* pictures. There's no such thing as a "generic" person. Every face has attached to it a real person with a real name and a real address and real rights, who's real likely to hire a real good lawyer to hit you real hard with a real ugly lawsuit. If there's a recognizable face in your video, then that video is *specific,* not generic—and some might construe your story to be *about that individual.* So if you're using a "crowd shot" to illustrate a story about something negative or embarrassing such as STDs, and Ethel Icetea recognizes herself in your video, she isn't going to be happy. If she gets a call from her neighbors kidding her about it, she's going to be less happy. You might then get a call from the law firm of Ketchum and Cheatham that will negatively affect *your* happiness.

Some assignment editors who are savvy enough to realize the danger of having specific faces in generic video might say something like this to the photographer: "We're doing a story about juvenile delinquents hanging out at the skateboard park downtown. Go spray me some pictures of some kids—but no faces." So Joe Grabbenshoot brings back video of hands, feet, and torsos, which then hits the air covering portions of your juvenile delinquent story. Trouble is, your video shows the only kid hanging out downtown today who happened to be wearing a barbed wire bracelet in combination with a Marilyn Manson T-shirt and a bicycle chain belt—and he recognized himself. So did his friends. Phone call holding for you on line two.

This kind of video misuse gets on the air in other ways, too. Imagine your medical reporter is doing a piece involving the latest statistics about the problem of babies being born addicted to crack. She says to

the editor, "Grab some of that delivery room video we shot last month." In goes the video to cover part of your track, and guess what? Ethel Icetea was delivering her baby the day you shot that video, and now thanks to you her friends are calling her to ask whether she's gotten over her little crack problem.

Here's an even more common example. You're the crime beat reporter. You're doing a story about the latest crime stats. Drug arrests are way up. This doesn't surprise you because you've been on four really cool crack dealer roundups in the past year. So you say to the editor, "Cover this with some of that great arrest video we got last summer." The editor pulls up a dramatic shot of police slamming some handcuffed guy against a cruiser and slaps it into the story. Trouble is, little did you know that prosecutors had dropped the charges against this particular guy a few days after his arrest. He was innocent. And by the way, the guy is in the lobby and would like to have a word with you.

It's possible to victimize businesses in this way as well. An assignment editor in one medium market reportedly once sent a photographer out to "get **b-roll** of banks" to support a story about financial trouble in the state's banking industry. At least one of the banks the photographer shot was in perfectly good financial shape, and its managers were none too pleased to suddenly see its sign flashed in a story about failing banks. It's said that money exchanged hands because of that one.

The cure for each of these scenarios is the same one we applied earlier in this chapter: Make a specific reference to the video. If you're showing a group of people walking down the street, then you should tell us what that specific group of people has to do with your AIDS story. If you can't make the link then drop the video. Similarly, if you're showing some guy being thrown up against the hood of a car in handcuffs for your story about street crime, your copy should tell us who that person is and how he's related to your crime story. Chances are that a year after this video was shot, you either don't know who the guy is or don't know what happened to his case, or both—which means you shouldn't use the video.

Bottom line: The viewer has a right to expect that the pictures you're showing are directly related to the words you're speaking. Such is the visual language of television. If those pictures are specific and show a particular and recognizable individual, business, or organization—then the audience will believe the story is about those individuals or institutions. It's worth noting that the word "recognizable" sits on a slippery slope. The individual doesn't have to be recognizable to the public at large—only to the individual or that person's friends. The same is true of businesses. So check your video very carefully. Raise

red flags if your pictures portray (or appear to portray) any individual or organization in a less than favorable way. If the story is *supposed* to be about those people or places, then proceed. But make sure the connection is deliberate, not accidental.

And by the way, the word "spray" as it's commonly used in newsrooms can be an indicator that something bad is about to happen, because it's commonly taken to mean the act of pointing the camera in a general direction and capturing video in a quick, sometimes indiscriminate fashion. The act of capturing video for use in a television newscast should always be very deliberate.

Poster Children

Let's say you've done your homework and you're absolutely certain of the identity of the person you plan to use in your file tape. You're also certain that the person does have a direct connection to the story you're trying to illustrate, and you plan to make this connection plain in your copy. You're free to proceed, right? Actually, you should pause for just one more question: Is it *fair* to use this person in the fashion you're proposing?

If the mayor throws an ashtray at a citizen during a city council meeting, then that video is fair game every time you do a story about the mayor's temper. But what about the guy in your arrest video? Do you really want to drag this man out and parade him around every time you do a story about street-level drug busts? Even if he was guilty, how many times does his family deserve to be subjected to those pictures of him being thrown up against that car hood? Similar considerations apply to the victims of crimes and accidents. If you've been in television very long at all, chances are you've had a discussion like this one: "Jane, we're doing another piece about the Death Ramp tonight. We'll need the pictures of that great accident from last December." So tonight on your newscast some poor schlub who spent weeks in the hospital after that accident gets to see himself being pried out of the burning wreckage of his car and then wheeled out on a gurney for the 18th time. Typically, when charity organizations choose a poster child, it's a voluntary arrangement. Releases are signed. Money might change hands. Who wants to be poster child for Fatal Accident Week? Or Crime and Violence Week? No one. But in television news, we don't ask. We just do it—and we'll use those same pictures again and again.

The next time you propose to do this to someone in a story for which you're responsible, give it some thought. How many times has this particular person been used as "file tape"? Is it really necessary? Are there viable alternatives? Approach these questions with a sense of humanity.

Graphics

But what, you ask, do I do if I need to mention something for which I have no appropriate video, file or otherwise? The use of graphics has become increasingly important in television news for that very reason. It's particularly difficult to visually depict a lot of numbers using video, but it's fairly easy to do so with a graphic. Your story might be about crime figures: assaults are down, armed robberies are up, property crime is down, other types of crime have remained constant. You probably won't be able to get your hands on video of each of those crimes taking place, but you can ask a talented (and VERY valuable) graphics person to put together a **full-screen graphic (FSG)** titled "Crime Statistics" that shows the numbers of each type of crime as compared to a previous period of time. Or maybe you need to write about the effects of gas leaking out of underground storage tanks. You're probably not going to persuade your shooter to go dig a hole and crawl down into it to get some shots, and besides, that wouldn't be as effective as an animated graphic showing the storage system and how a leak can occur. So when you don't have video of something specific, either don't write specifically about it, or consider using a graphic as your visual support.

When you use graphics, make sure the elements match the script from top to bottom or from left to right, depending on how the graphic is designed. Also, don't try to cram too much information onto an FSG. When that's the case, the graphic is "too busy" and difficult to read. Use bullet points that the anchor might read as bullet points, or might elaborate on. Having each new bit of information "reveal" as the anchor gets to it also adds to the pacing and look of the piece, and keeps the viewer from "reading ahead" and thereby paying less attention to the anchor than to what's on the screen. The idea is that as the anchor is saying "the number of armed robberies in the Hooverville metro area increased 17 percent compared to last year," the viewers see something such as "ARMED ROBBERIES UP 17%" on the screen. Just as is the case when we're writing from video, what the viewers hear and what they see must match when we're using graphics. The "matching" theme applies to **over-the-shoulder (OTS)** graphics as well. You'll want to find the single frame of video (a close-up shot) that best illustrates your story for the OTS, and then make sure that the wording at the bottom is wording the anchor will actually use during the on-camera lead. So if you pick a cute shot of a kitten for the OTS for your story about the animal shelter and ask someone in graphics to add the words "Furry Friends" to the bottom of the graphic, we should hear the anchor say the words "furry friends" at some point before we go to video.

Following are examples of some of the most common ways stations use graphics.

Bullet Points

A bullet point consists of two or three words of text summarizing a statement or point presented in copy, usually set off by an asterisk, circle, square, or some other form of demarcation at the beginning of the line. Reporters or producers typically use bullet points when they need to cover a difficult passage and no specific video is available to support the copy. For example, imagine the city council is ordering the police chief to take a series of steps to reduce expenditures. When you're explaining those steps in your copy, you can either show video of city council people sitting around or video of cops at shift change. Both would be "wallpaper" used in this way. The better option is to extract bullet points from the specific steps the council is ordering, then present those points on-screen over a color background, preferably one that an artist has composed with your station's logo and artwork or an icon to support the theme of the story.

Quotes

This technique is similar to the use of bullet points described above, except that in this case instead of extracting bullet point summaries we'll excerpt full quotes. This is useful in a number of scenarios, including:

- Presenting excerpts from a formal statement given by someone who is either unwilling or unable to go on-camera
- Pulling quotes from a document used in an investigative story
- Quoting court testimony
- Giving text support to a hard-to-understand audio track, such as a 911 tape, undercover audio introduced as evidence in court, a phone conversation, and so forth.

In such instances, we would typically use quotation marks on-screen.

Charts and Graphs

When presenting complex statistics, simply flashing the numbers on-screen can be confusing. Good old-fashioned bar charts, line graphs, and pie charts often do a better job of showing the meaning of numbers in relation to one another.

Locator Graphics

Viewers often find it difficult to relate to addresses or to the names of small towns or obscure locations. Full-screen maps do an excellent job of making such locations meaningful.

General Information

When your copy contains lists, numbers, or general information such as the name of someone who's giving an interview by phone, full-screen graphics support will help the viewer grasp the information.

Weather Graphics

Weathercasts make use of a wide range of full-screen graphics, everything from maps showing weather fronts and radar images to "list" graphics supporting the forecast.

Explanatory Graphics

Sometimes you find yourself needing to explain a concept for which there just aren't any good pictures. In such cases you'll need original artwork. Probably the most common use of original artwork in local television is in the area of medical reporting. For instance, if you're giving an explanation of how a quadruple bypass works, b-roll of doctors and nurses bending over a patient on the operating table isn't going to provide much help. Quite literally, you'll need to draw the audience a diagram. It's the only good way to show the problems of restricted blood flow to the heart and how the bypass operation resolves that.

Graphics of this sort are useful in many situations when you need to provide an explanation of something involving something about which pictures don't tell the story of the larger concept involved or where cameras can't go. All of us saw this type of graphic use in action in the days following the terrorist attacks against the World Trade Center; virtually every news organization everywhere used graphics to show how the fuel-fed fires inside the buildings weakened the support girders and ultimately caused them to fail. In a story about corrosion inside the Sunshine Skyway Bridge, WFLA-TV reporter Mark Douglas found himself needing to explain a method of construction that uses steel tendons under tension to hold concrete columns together. For this purpose he asked a graphics artist to render a cross-section of a bridge column. (It's worth noting that in the station's converged environment, the artist who did the work happened to be a graphic artist for the *Tampa Tribune*, who generated the artwork for the newspaper version of the story. A television artist then adapted the artwork for use in the broadcast report.)

Sophisticated graphics suites also have animation capabilities to show effects progressing over time. Again, the more sophisticated the technique, the longer it takes to render. Reporters and producers are well advised to keep this in mind when asking for graphics.

Thematic Graphics

This category involves the use of art to establish an overarching visual "theme" for a story. This visual theme then appears on all graphics for the entire story. In many cases these "themed" graphics can support the story in all the ways outlined above—extracting bullet points, giving quotes, presenting explanations, and so on. Sometimes themed graphics have no purpose other than to give visual support to the theme or tone of the story.
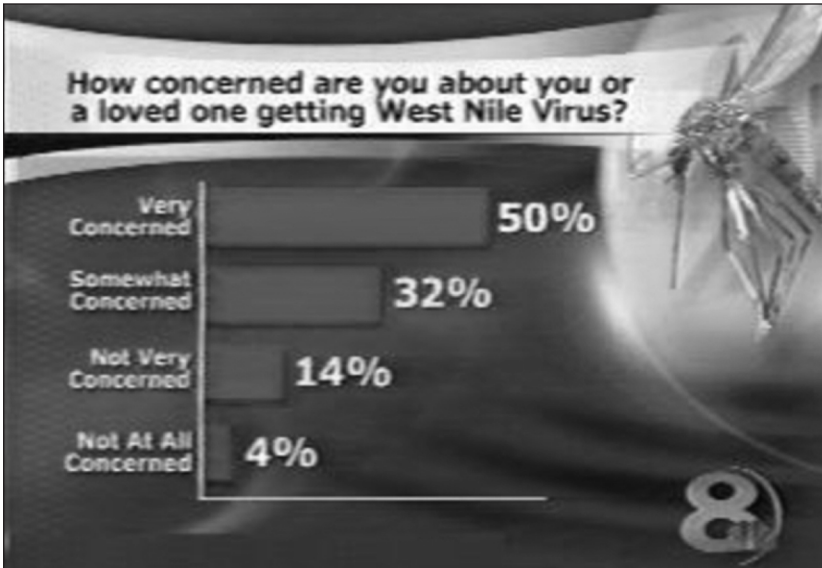
Branding

No discussion of graphics use would be complete without some mention of "branding." Almost every full-screen graphic has the *potential* to support the news organization's brand. Some TV newsrooms pay little or no attention to branding. Others, such as WFLA-TV, are passionate about it. Most of the station's full-screen graphics will bear the "Eight On Your Side" logo somewhere on them.

It's also quite common for stations to use full-screen graphics or animations for the sole purpose of carrying out a branding function. Thus a station's top story might be preceded by a flashy graphic bearing the words "BIG story," usually accompanied by some cheesy "swooshing" sound effect. Many stations have "franchises" of various sorts—medical, consumer, investigative, and so forth—and will often precede such reports with a full-screen "stinger" flashing the station's logo with a few notes of its station music or a sound effect of some sort. Branding style and usage vary dramatically from station to station—and as always, there's no accounting for taste. But the goal is always the same: to achieve a uniform station "look" and to impress that look on the mind of the viewer.

A Final Thought about Graphics

Of course, graphics are used in VO/SOTs as well as VOs, and are pre-produced for insertion in packages too. Good graphics are a big help when illustrating stories that are "video poor" or when we need to use numbers or other statistics, but don't use graphics as a substitute for good pictures. When you do have good video, take advantage of it. Videographers are told to concentrate on *tight shots of people doing things*, because that makes for compelling video. Writers need to look

Bar chart: This graphic helps support a story about a viewer poll measuring concern about a public health threat.

Branding graphic: The sole purpose of this visual, which was part of an animated package open or "stinger," is to brand the story.

Explanatory graphic: This graphic uses bullet points drawn from the story script to provide visual support for storytelling.
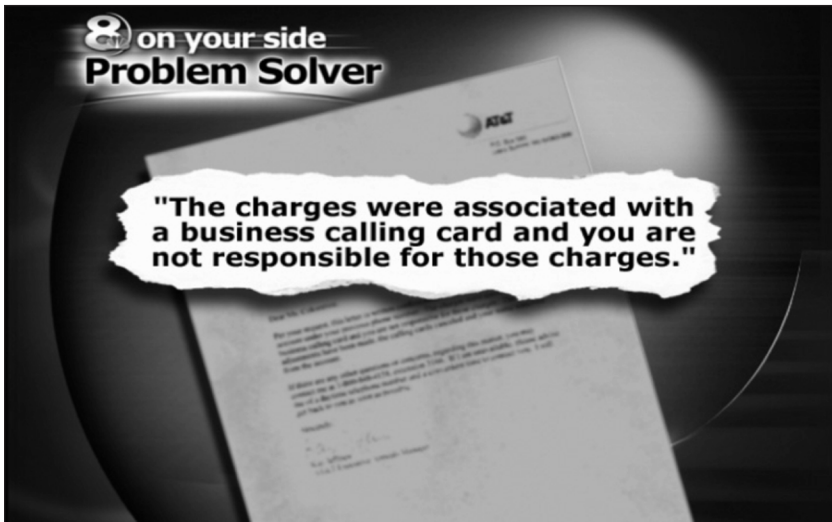
Quote graphic: This graphic excerpts an exact quote from a document referenced within the story.

for those compelling pictures when **logging** tapes (making a list of the shots, including a description of each usable shot and where it's located on the tape) and let those shots drive the story. Utilize your video to its full extent, and do the same with the natural sound you have.

Use of Natural Sound

What we hear is just as important as what we see. A VO about a fund-raising concert can be more effective if the anchor pauses for a few seconds when we go to the tape to allow for some "nat SOT full" to let the viewers hear one of the bands. Then she can tell us more as the sound of the band continues "under" her voice. Pieces that have no **natural sound** are "flat." When we go somewhere, we experience sights AND sounds. The news crew serves as a surrogate for the viewers, and needs to give audience members as much of the ambiance of the scene as possible. That means incorporating natural sound, including frequent use of nats full. This is an especially important pacing element in packages, and we'll discuss it further in Chapter 9. In radio and in TV, the liberal use of natural sound makes the difference between mundane pieces and really good broadcast journalism.

A Lot to Say in 30 Seconds or Less

Although there's no set length for any broadcast story, VOs on local news programs typically run about 20 to 30 seconds. In a series of back-to-back VOs, some might be as short as 10 to 12 seconds, and in rare circumstances a VO might run as much as 40 to 45 seconds. Generally though, you can expect a VO to be about 20 to 30 seconds in length. It's not uncommon for viewers to see the anchor briefly at the beginning of a VO and perhaps again at the end. However, it's still a VO and not a reader because at some point in the story we see something other than the anchor's face.

Writing from the video is so important that we'll mention it several times throughout this book. Having the video to tell part of the story helps, but in many cases, we can't fit all the information that's available into the time limit we're given. Information *will* be left out. The key is not to leave out any major information. VOs are challenging because television news writers must capture viewer attention, impart the most relevant information of the story, and perhaps even transition to the next story, all in 20 to 30 seconds.

It's difficult to be very creative in such a short amount of time, and many of us making the transition to broadcast are caught in the "flowery words and phrases" mind-set we learned when writing much

longer stories and essays. The creativity in broadcast writing doesn't come in how many dependent clauses and rarely used words we can stick in one sentence. Instead, creativity is often evident in the ability to tell a story so that people who don't know anything about what happened can understand what we're telling them right away. As with any good piece of broadcast writing, an informative VO gives viewers the most pertinent information and relates to what the pictures are showing.

Broadcast writers do have room to get creative with their writing, depending on the type of story they're dealing with. This is frequently the case with soft news or feature stories. We still have to use clear, understandable words and short sentences, but the English language is a wonderful tool, even when you're operating within severe time constraints. Chapter 4 contains a lot of information about writing creative news copy, but here's a quick example of how to change a lackluster story into a better one. The following very average copy is taken from an actual newscast that hit the air exactly as presented below. Note that the available video consists entirely of a giant pumpkin and the farmer who grew it. A suggested rewrite follows. We'll explain what the markings on the left side of the page mean in the "Providing Directions" section that follows the examples.

Pumpkin (Early Version)

	(Ted)
On cam	IT'S ALMOST TIME FOR HALLOWEEN . . . AND WHAT WOULD HALLOWEEN BE WITHOUT PUMPKINS?
:00 Take tape	(vo)
nat snd under (VO)	FOLKS ACROSS THE COUNTRY ARE GEARING UP FOR THE HOLIDAY, MAKING COSTUMES . . . BUYING TREATS . . . AND HARVESTING PUMPKINS FOR THIS SEASON.
	MILTON BARBER MAY NOT WANT TO BUTCHER HIS PUMPKIN BECAUSE IT'S A WORLD RECORD PUMPKIN.
	THE WINNING PUMPKIN WEIGHS A WHOPPING 743 POUNDS.
	BARBER SAYS HE'S NOT SURE WHAT HE'LL DO WITH THE PUMPKIN BUT HE DOES PLAN TO SELL THE SEEDS.
:40 Tape ends	

The story as written contains all the pertinent information, but it certainly isn't very memorable. The following example takes the same set of facts, presents them in a different way, and still takes only 40 seconds to read. After reading both, decide which of the two you prefer.

Pumpkin (Later Version)

	(Ted)
On cam	EVERY OCTOBER SOME PERSON
OTS	PRETENDS TO HAVE PRODUCED THE
	PLANET'S MOST PRODIGIOUS PUMPKIN.
	THE PERSON MAKING THAT CLAIM
	THIS YEAR MIGHT HAVE A CASE.
:00 Take tape	(vo)
nat snd under (VO)	MILTON BARBER OF PITTSBURGH IS
	PLEASED AND PROUD TO BE THE OWNER
	OF AN OUTRAGEOUSLY OVERSIZED ENTRY.
	IN FACT . . . MILTON'S PONDEROUS
	PRODUCE WEIGHS ROUGHLY FOUR
	TIMES MORE THAN MILTON HIMSELF.
	IT'S A VERITABLE VEGETABLE ON
	STEROIDS . . . THIS PUMPKIN CRUNCHES
	THE SCALES AT A STAGGERING 743
	POUNDS.
	THAT'S ENOUGH TO GIVE A FOUR-
	OUNCE SERVING TO EACH OF ABOUT
	THREE THOUSAND PEOPLE!
	WHAT'S HE GOING TO DO WITH ALL
	THAT POTENTIAL PUMPKIN PIE?
	WELL, HE COULD TURN HIS ENTRY
	INTO THE JACK-O-LANTERN THAT ATE
	PITTSBURGH.
	BUT WHETHER HE DOES THAT OR
	NOT . . . MILTON DOES HAVE ONE THING
	IN MIND.
	HE MAY WELL WIND UP TURNING
	THE WORLD'S BIGGEST PUMPKIN INTO
	THE WORLD'S BIGGEST PUMPKIN PATCH.
	MILTON PLANS TO SELL THE SEEDS.
:50 Tape ends	

Providing Directions

Writing a VO so that viewers can understand the story (and perhaps even get a kick out of it) is only part of the writer's responsibility. Other people in the news operation also have to understand what the writer has in mind in relation to the video or other visual elements of the story. If the story is structured so that viewers are supposed to see the anchor and an over-the-shoulder (OTS) graphic for the first sentence, the script has to indicate that.

Television news scripts are set up in split-page format. The right side of the page is what the anchor is supposed to read. It also includes a bit of information to help cue the anchors as to who reads the story and when the video appears. That information is placed in parentheses and isn't in uppercase, so the anchor knows not to read it. (Some stations do it differently, putting the anchor copy in upper/lowercase and directions all uppercase. The key is to set directions and copy off from one another somehow.) The left side of the page contains directions for the control room personnel. If those directions are incomplete or missing, the show director has to guess at which point to incorporate the tape, or if there's even a tape associated with that particular story. Having the tape appear too soon or too late throws off the flow of the story. Anchors can adjust their read rate when the tape is a second or two early or late, but several seconds of discrepancy almost always result in noticeable errors on the air. You don't want your anchor to be talking about "this little boy" at the time that the tape is showing a female police officer.

In the pumpkin example above, the writer intends for the viewers to see the anchor (Ted) for a brief period of time before the video appears. That's what the "on cam" marking means. There would also be a small graphic over one of the anchor's shoulders. The director will then "take" the video at the point indicated on the script. The anchor knows that his face is no longer on the screen at this point, because of the (vo) indication on the right side of the page. So, he can read directly from the hard copy of the script and keep an eye on a video monitor at the same time to make sure the script and the video are matching. If they aren't, he can vary his read rate.

We line up the directions on the left with the place in the copy at which the directions are supposed to be applied. Go back and look at the pumpkin example. We've asked the director to take the video when the anchor is saying "folks across the country" in the "before" example and when the anchor is saying "Milton Barber of Pittsburgh" in the "after" example. We've also indicated on the script that the video is accompanied by natural sound, the sound of the people in the pumpkin patch, for example, and that the natural sound is to be played "under" the anchor's voice. When the director calls out "take

VTR three" (in this example, let's say the tape in question is being played through machine three), she also indicates to the audio person to "track" it, meaning to play the accompanying sound.

All tapes start at :00, so when the director takes the tape he or she also resets a timer in the control room. Writers also indicate how much time is on the tape. In that way, if the timer is up to :38 on a piece accompanied by a 40-second tape and the anchor still has two sentences to read, the director knows it's time to quickly cut back to the camera shot of the anchor before the tape goes to black on the air. In an effort to keep this from happening, writers and producers time the part of the script intended to be "under" video beforehand and ask tape editors to provide 10 seconds of tape beyond what's needed.

So, if someone read the "before" pumpkin example and it took :30 to read it, the tape editor would be asked to provide :40 seconds of tape. That video **pad** is critical, and we indicate the amount of tape provided including the pad. This alleviates a lot of panic in the control room. A quick production note: The 10 seconds of pad isn't a new shot but a continuation of the shot that covers the final seconds of the VO. Just as we don't want the video to run out, we also don't want the shot to change just before the director punches out. So the final shot on a 40-second piece of tape would run from about :25 or :26 all the way to :40—or as close to :40 as that one shot will get you.

Also, notice where the "tape ends" marking is positioned. It comes at the bottom of the script. This indicates that once we've taken the tape, it's supposed to continue until the end of the script. If instead we had wanted to see the anchor for the final sentence of the script, we would have positioned the "tape ends" marking at the end of the preceding sentence and added an "on cam" marking at the beginning of the final sentence. It's very important to include these directions, and we'll introduce you to others as we discuss other television news story forms. Remember, television is a visual medium and news writers have to provide information to the folks on the technical side so that the pictures and the words will match up.

Now let's look at a few more examples. First, a reader story.

Boys Ranch

	(Colleen)
SS: BOYS RANCH	ARIZONA BOYS RANCH HAS FILED AN APPEAL TO KEEP THE STATE FROM SHUTTING DOWN THE PROGRAM FOR DELINQUENT YOUTHS.
	THE BOYS RANCH ACCUSES THE STATE OF WRONGLY REFUSING TO RENEW

ITS CHILD-CARE LICENSE.

    THE GROUP'S ATTORNEY CLAIMS
THE STATE SINGLED OUT THE MARCH
DEATH OF 16-YEAR-OLD NICHOLAS
CON-TRER-AZ BECAUSE IT DOESN'T
LIKE THE PROGRAM.

    THE BOYS RANCH HAS BEEN IN
OPERATION FOR 49 YEARS.

The only marking we've provided for the director on this example (other than the title of the story) is the notation "SS: BOYS RANCH." That lets the director know that the story begins with the anchor (Colleen) on-camera and an image out of the still store machine appearing over her shoulder. Because no other markings appear, the director knows no tape is involved and that we'll see the anchor's face for the duration of this short story. "SS" stands for still store, and this particular image will include the written title "BOYS RANCH." Colleen knows not to read her name even though it appears on the right side of the page because it's in parentheses and is in upper- and lowercase. The procedure at this station is to put the script in all uppercase.

Now we'll look at a few examples of different ways of dealing with VOs, either as individual stories or as part of a story set.

Periodontal

	(Colleen)
On cam	THERE'S A NEW WEAPON TO HELP KEEP YOUR TEETH HEALTHY.
ENG NATVO	(vo)
LENGTH :30	THE FOOD AND DRUG ADMINISTRATION HAS JUST APPROVED AR-TI-DOX . . . A NEW, PAINLESS TREATMENT FOR PERIODONTAL DISEASE.
	IT COMES IN THE FORM OF A TOPICAL GEL AND IS CONVENIENT TO USE.
	THE CURRENT TREATMENT USED TO FIGHT PLAQUE PROBLEMS AND BACTERIA REQUIRES ANESTHESIA AND CAN BE PAINFUL.
ENG OUT	

Notice that some of the markings we've provided for the director on this script are a bit different from what we've used before. All stations in this country speak the same language; it's just that the dialects can vary. The wording used for the various directions is usually a function of the newsroom computer system used in that particular station. Some of the more common software programs for writing television news are NewsStar, AP NewsCenter, EZNews, and Basys. In our earlier examples, we noted the place where the tape is supposed to start with the marking "take tape." This station uses the marking "ENG NATVO." In the next example, that point will be indicated by the marking "M2/VO." They all mean the same thing: this is the place to start the tape. The way we indicate the place at which the director should punch out of the tape in this story is with the marking "ENG OUT," which means the same thing as "tape ends." In one station, "ENG" means a videotape; in another, that's indicated by "tape," and in others, it's indicated by the particular type of videotape the station uses, such as "M2," "beta," "SVHS," and the like.

You'll notice that the time for the tape is indicated near the beginning of the script rather than at the end. It's simply a matter of getting accustomed to the conventions used in a particular station. Although the wording and the positioning of the director cues are sometimes a bit different, we give the director the same information in all of these examples: whether or not the anchor appears on-camera, if a tape is involved, and if so, where it starts, where it ends, and how long it is.

Daviscourt

	(Gayle)
SQ/SS	(SQ/SS)
	ADAM DAVIS AND JOHN WHISPELL
	HAVE NEW ATTORNEYS TONIGHT.
	BUT THEY STILL HAVEN'T ENTERED
	PLEAS TO THEIR MURDER CHARGES.
M2/VO	(M2/VO)
	THE 19-YEAR-OLDS ARE CHARGED
	WITH MURDERING CARROLWOOD
	REALTOR VICKIE ROBINSON LAST MONTH.
	ROBINSON'S 15-YEAR-OLD
	DAUGHTER VALESSA IS ALSO CHARGED
	. . . SHE'S ENTERED A NOT GUILTY PLEA.
	THIS MORNING, A HILLSBOROUGH
	JUDGE ASSIGNED BOTH MEN

                                COURT-APPOINTED LAWYERS.

                                    THEIR ARRAIGNMENT WAS DELAYED

                                UNTIL THE NEW LAWYERS GET

                                FAMILIAR WITH THE CASE.

M2/ENDS :35

This example is essentially the same as the one that came before it. We begin with Gayle on camera and an image from the still store (SS) squeezed (SQ) to fit over her shoulder. We then punch up the tape at the indicated spot, and it continues until the end of the story.

Orimulsion

                                            (Bob)

SS/CK/WALL   (SS/CK/WALL)

                                    THE FIGHT TO BURN ORIMULSION AT

                                A PARRISH POWER PLANT IS OFFICIALLY

                                OVER TONIGHT.

                                    TODAY, FLORIDA POWER AND LIGHT

                                CALLED IT QUITS.

M2/VO   (M2/VO)

                                    FOR YEARS THE POWER COMPANY

                                HAS TRIED TO GET PERMISSION TO

                                INTRODUCE THE CONTROVERSIAL FUEL.

                                    ORIMULSION IS A MIX OF WATER

                                AND A TAR-LIKE SUBSTANCE THAT'S

                                MINED OUT OF A RIVER IN VENEZUELA.

                                    IT DOESN'T FLOAT AND MIXES WITH

                                WATER.

                                    THAT MAKES IT MUCH MORE

                                DIFFICULT TO CLEAN UP IF THERE'S A

                                SPILL.

M2/ENDS :35

At the beginning of this VO, we're doing something a little different. Instead of having something out of still store squeezed over Bob's shoulder, we're going to position him in front of the **chroma key (CK)** wall and electronically place the still store image on the wall behind him. This is how weather maps, radar, and satellite images are projected behind the weathercaster. As a way to enhance the pace of the program and show off other parts of the news set, many stations (and network newscasts) have begun using the chroma key wall for much more than weather.

Let's look at one final example of how VOs are used. Often, a number of related stories are placed back-to-back, and we transition from script to script without seeing the anchor between stories.

World Tonight

	(Colleen)
	MAKING HEADLINES IN THE WORLD TONIGHT . . . TWO RIVALS TEAM UP . . . TO FLY AROUND THE GLOBE . . . AND HISTORIC TALKS IN NORTHERN IRELAND . . .
ENG NATVO	(vo)
	FOR THE FIRST TIME EVER . . . THE POLITICAL LEADERS OF THE PROTESTANT AND CATHOLIC COMMUNITIES IN NORTHERN IRELAND SAT AND TALKED . . . FACE TO FACE.
	DAVID TRIMBLE AND GERRY ADAMS SPOKE OF WIDE GAPS BETWEEN THE TWO SIDES . . . AND SAID THEY'D USE THE TALKS TO GET TO KNOW EACH OTHER.
	THEY'VE PLANNED MORE MEETINGS.
WIPE ENG NATVO	(wipe vo)
	(Colleen)
	(vo top)
	STEVE FOSSETT AND RICHARD BRANSON ARE TEAMING UP . . . TO TRY TO FLY A BALLOON AROUND THE WORLD.
	BOTH MEN HAVE FAILED SEVERAL TIMES TRYING TO MAKE THE FLIGHT ON THEIR OWN . . . BUT SAY TEAMWORK WILL GIVE THEM AN ADVANTAGE.
	THEY SAY THEY'LL TAKE TURNS FLYING THE BALLOON.
WIPE ENG NATVO	(wipe vo)
	(Colleen)
	(vo top)

A FRESNO, CALIFORNIA, CORNFIELD
HAS TOURISTS TRYING TO FIND THEIR
WAY OUT OF A MAZE . . . THE MAZE IS
IN THE SHAPE OF THE STATE OF
CALIFORNIA . . . WITH A STAR TO SHOW
FRESNO'S PLACE IN THE STATE.
THE WALLS ARE 10 FEET HIGH . . .
AND THERE ARE 85 PLACES WHERE
VISITORS HAVE TO TRY TO FIGURE OUT
THE RIGHT WAY TO GO.

ENG OUT

In this example we start with Colleen on-camera and give a brief idea of the stories coming up. We get to the first of the three stories in standard fashion, but then transition to the subsequent stories by wiping from one tape to the next. Colleen continues to read, with video starting right at the top of stories 2 and 3. Some of the markings here might seem redundant, because if we're wiping to a new VO, it stands to reason that the second VO will start right at the top. But it's better not to look confused, and often in a series of stories like this, each is on a separate page. So it helps to reiterate at the beginning of tape 2 what the instructions were at the end of tape 1.

Conclusion

By now it should be clear that we have much more to deal with than just the words we write. The copy must support the video and vice versa, and there are other considerations as well. Some have called it writing in 3-D—having to consider the words, the pictures, and the sounds we have to work with. This is true even when structuring one of the most basic television story forms—voice-overs. The challenge of incorporating those elements effectively and of providing the script cues that go along with them becomes a bit more extensive when we get to VO/SOTs and packages. The production element of what we do is also important, but the bottom line is still the ability to craft the written part of the story. Use of over-the-shoulder inserts, chroma key, wiping between tapes, and other production techniques can add to the presentation of stories. But no amount of jazzy production can rescue a poorly written piece.

📁 DOs and DON'Ts for VOs

Do
- Write from the video.
- Grab viewer attention right away.
- Make sure everyone on the team knows what we're doing.

Don't
- Leave out times and other cues.
- Write generic copy for generic video.
- Leave out any major information.