



# Australian Content Standard documentary guidelines

*‘documentary:  
a creative treatment  
of actuality’*

The ABA has released guidelines on how it will interpret ‘documentary’ for the purposes of the Australian Content Standard.

The standard applies to commercial television broadcasters, and it requires, amongst other things, that broadcasters show at least 20 hours of documentary programming per year.

‘Changes in program formats for factual programming have made it increasingly difficult to determine what a documentary is,’ said Lyn Maddock, ABA Acting Chair. ‘The ABA acknowledges that television formats will continue to change and evolve, but hopes the guidelines will provide greater certainty for producers and broadcasters in this area.’

The Australian Content Standard defines documentary as ‘a program that is a creative treatment of actuality other than a news, current affairs, sports coverage, magazine,

infotainment or light entertainment program’.

The guidelines elaborate on this definition. They look at what might constitute a ‘creative treatment’, and consider various programming types against the creative treatment test. They also seek to define characteristics for program types excluded from the definition.

The call for guidelines came out of a major review of the Australian Content Standard in 2001. This review concluded that, while the definition of documentary was broadly appropriate, guidance was needed as to the types of programming that would meet the definition.

The finalisation of the guidelines concludes a process that has included consultation with television broadcasters, the production industry, and film policy and funding agencies.

The guidelines are available on the ABA website at <http://www.aba.gov.au>



**Background**

The first part of the documentary guidelines looks at whether the program is a 'creative treatment of actuality'. The guidelines pose a series of tests that may indicate whether the program contains a creative treatment:

- The starting point for the program will be to explore an idea, theme or subject matter. The idea, theme or subject matter does not need to be serious. The program may adopt a critical approach, or present the theme in an original way.

- It will be interpretative, explaining or construing the idea in a particular way.
- It will be structured to form a narrative, and will not be simply a series of aspects of a common subject.
- Through the information conveyed, it will increase a viewer's understanding of the idea.
- It will be more than a 'how to' guide, a travel guide, or a vehicle to highlight goods and services.
- It is likely to have some enduring appeal and ongoing relevance.

The guidelines consider the 'creative treatment' test against a number of factual program formats, including reality,

reconstructions and travel programs.

In relation to reality television, the guidelines posit that certain types of reality programs may be considered a documentary, if their primary purpose is to explore an idea. If the reality program has a competitive element, with prizes offered to the winner of the scenario, the program is not likely to be a documentary.

In the second part of the guidelines, the program formats excluded from the documentary definition are considered.

Examples are given of particular programs that do and do not meet the test for documentary.