

EVERYTHING ABOUT DOCUMENTARIES

What is a documentary?

A **documentary film** is a nonfictional motion picture intended to document some aspect of reality, primarily for the purposes of instruction or maintaining a historical record. It ideally represents reality in a dramatized or naturally 'documented' manner.

Documentaries bring viewers into new worlds and experiences through the presentation of factual information about real people, places, and events, generally -- but not always -- portrayed through the use of actual images and artifacts. But factuality alone does not define documentary films; it's what the filmmaker does with those factual elements, weaving them into an overall narrative that strives to be as compelling as it is truthful and is often greater than the sum of its parts."

Documentaries can be funny, poignant, disturbing, ironic, absurd, inspirational, amusing, shocking or any combination. It is a genre of movie making that uses video & film scenes, photographs and/or sound of real people and real events which when edited together creates a particular story, viewpoint, message or experience.

Traditionally, documentaries are 30 minutes to 2 hours in length (to fit within a television schedule or for theatrical release). **However**, documentaries are often shorter in length, especially in recent years with the advent of the Internet and web video.

Steps involved in making a successful documentary.

Tell a story you care about

Start with a subject that excites you. If you're lukewarm about the subject matter, chances are, the final movie will be too. Make a documentary you're passionate about and makes sense to YOU. There will be plenty of people who don't "get" your idea. But if YOU get it, that's what counts.

Research

Learn everything you can about your documentary subject. Sometimes the story lines are obvious, sometimes not. Do a lot of digging and follow leads. This is where you put on your reporter hat. Gather facts and search for leads on interesting characters and story lines. The gems of your story are sometimes buried deep out of sight.

Make a Plan

Create an outline. Think about HOW you're going to tell your story. What's the structure? The style? Is there existing footage or photos that help tell your story or will everything need to be shot brand new? Who is your primary character(s)? What are your core story points? What are the elements of your story that are compelling and/or make you "tingle" with intrigue? How can you create that intrigue for your audience? Is there some existing situation you can film or do you need to create the moment?

Create a Shot List

This is a list of the footage and interviews you'll need to make your movie. Think of it as your list of "ingredients". Depending on the complexity of your project, you may or may not need to create a budget.

Start Shooting

Keep in mind HOW your movie will be viewed because that can dictate your shooting and storytelling style. Make sure when you're shooting an event to capture a variety of angles including close-ups (faces, teary eyes, expressions, butterflies on flowers, etc.), medium shots (close to a person's body being taken from waist and up usually) and wide shots (long distance and landscapes).

Write a Script

Once all of the footage is shot and you've gathered the various production elements, time to start organizing it into a script. Pinpoint the most compelling elements of your story and start crafting "mini-scenes" around those events. Remember, a script isn't necessarily what's spoken or a voice-over. A script describes what the audience is seeing AND hearing. It may not have a technical format, but it can be just a story scribbled on paper.

Begin Editing

This is actually one of my favorite parts of the process. It's like putting together a great big puzzle! First you'll need to choose your video editing computer and video editing software. Once you're all set with equipment, you'll start putting down your clips of footage one right after the other in a sequence. The art with editing is to create a "roller coaster" ride of emotion, some parts fast, some part slow to create a dynamic viewing experience.

Check Legal and Copyright Issues

Even though this is near the end of the list, it should actually be something you keep in mind from the very beginning and throughout the ENTIRE filmmaking process. No trademarks, copyrights or product promotions must be done without permission.

Distribute!

Of course, now that you've done all the work making your documentary, you want people to see it, right? YouTube and likewise platforms always attract audiences. You may also share it through your friends for casual viewing. If it is good enough, I recommend you to send them to film festivals.

At the end of a day a great documentary has to have a strong vision, and it must be an inspiration along the way. Everyone else in the process after you must be truly inspired to serve the goal. Only when everyone is on the same page can the documentary achieve its intended goals. But above all, YOU MUST BE CONVINCED YOURSELF!