

The Documentary Film Process

What is a Documentary Film?

An objective and subjective artistic approach to non-fictional visual storytelling.

Documentary Film Best Practices:

Choose your topic

Research your topic and select subjects.

Contact them to set up a time to meet and walk through your location. This will familiarize your subject with you and help them feel more comfortable in front of the camera because they have already established a relationship with you. This also will give you shot ideas of what you would like to include on your actual shooting day. This will cut down on shooting time because you will know exactly the shots you need when walking into your location. Bring a friend to help take notes of locations of particular interest and any shot ideas or interview questions that are sparked from the walk through.

Script/Storyboard your documentary

After your walk through, you will have a greater sense of the look and feel of the documentary you are trying to create. If you are using Narrative in your documentary, begin to script it out. Capture the design of your documentary by creating a storyboard, a visual representation of your film. This is a great way to plan and arrange your shots. This is called "A Shot List".

Equipment Needs

Based on your walkthrough you now have a sense for what equipment you will need. You should consider locations when deciding upon equipment and ask these questions:

Are there power outlets? How many? Do I need extension cords? Where will I shoot my interview, inside or outside? Is lighting an issue?

Asking yourself these questions will help the actual shooting day run a lot smoother.

Create an equipment check list.

The Interview

Choose a room for the interview with minimum noise. Again, ask yourself these questions:

Is the air conditioner running? Are there any noises being produced by appliances? Is the interview room next to a noisy highway? Are the windows open? Always use a windscreen when conducting interviews outside.

Write Interview Questions (Do not share these with the interviewee. Only give him/her an overview of the questions you will ask. Prepping them with questions makes the interview feel rehearsed.

Rules of thumb for Interviews:

- Make subject feel comfortable.
- Eye Perspective: looking at camera or just off camera but not both. Off camera is more common.
- Have subject repeat back the question:
What is your name?
My name is

- Compose your shot so the camera is seeing from the subject's chest to head, also called a medium shot.

Release Forms

Have your subjects complete a release form granting consent to use their location and interview for any work that is published. You can find basic release forms online and tailor them to your needs.

Tips:

Always use a tripod.

Always level the tripod.

Always perform an equipment run through prior to the day of the shoot. (batteries charged, microphone working properly)

Please contact Brianna Derr for more information at bh022@bucknell.edu.