

How to Make a Documentary - Part 1

Randal K. West
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Few other communication forms have the power to reveal a unique perspective, capture imagination and even motivate change. In this three-part series on how to make a documentary, you'll discover how you can move your story from dream to distribution.

Walk onto the working set of any television production studio and almost every person on the crew has a documentary they are just posting, getting ready to shoot, or trying to fund. Why? Because everyone from the Director of Photography to the Key Grip has a story to tell, they feel compelled to share their stories with a larger audience.

True, the percentage of would be documentary filmmakers is potentially greater within the film/television community than among antique car salesmen, but there are many people from all walks of life who want to share their story or a significant piece of history through documentary filmmaking. In today's world dominated by high tech gizmos and reality TV, documentaries have never been more popular and the equipment to shoot and edit them more accessible and inexpensive.

Is Your Story Compelling?

The founder of our agency and I were approached one day by a reasonably well-known and respected individual in our community. He wanted to pitch a documentary idea to us for possible production by our company. The man went on to explain that although he still seemed to exist as a "regular" guy in our community, since his divorce he had lost everything and was living between his car and an abandoned building. We asked many questions, but despite his having managed to hide his status from the rest of the community, there just wasn't a strong enough plot line to hang a documentary on. We felt horrible for the guy but there was no universal truth, no significant lesson to be learned that we felt warranted filming a documentary.

Two months later a woman named Patti Miller came to my office and described how 40 years ago as a Drake University junior, she had traveled to Mississippi to participate in the Freedom Summer, in order to help African Americans sign up to vote. Patti, "a lily-white Iowa girl" was fundamentally affected by her experience, an experience shared by others who had participated. She pointed out that the fortieth anniversary of Freedom Summer was approaching and many of the volunteers were now in their fifties and sixties. Patti's story was a part of history that could easily start to slip away and the 40-year anniversary presented a seminal opportunity to share the story. The story moved me, and my crew and I headed to the South to start filming. Patti's story had universal appeal and importance. We decided that we would tell this story of national racism, politically controlled hatred, and

the individuals who fought oppression, through the very personal eyes of one Iowa undergraduate female, alone and out of her home state, for the first time in her life.

Tell Me a Story

What's your story? Is it universally applicable? Is it simply a slice of life anecdote, but very funny or very profound? Would someone who doesn't know you care or benefit from becoming aware of your story? Is it a scholarly piece addressing an issue or topic discovered through research and others should be made aware of? Could others benefit by seeing the world through your eyes, watching you follow a particular person or group of people around as they do what they do? If you can find a way to turn your personal experience into a universally shared or recognized experience, you have the foundation for building a documentary. At this point, identify your eventual audience and keep them in mind as your documentary morphs toward its final form.

Putting it Together, Bit by Bit

So, you've got your story, now what? Old fashioned as it may seem, try to get all the elements of your story written down in simple outline form using 3x5 index cards. Keep it loose, put each element on one 3x5 card so you can shuffle and re-shuffle them. Lay your story out and look at it. Examine all your possible elements. (Of course, you can do this with a computer too, but the index cards work well for sorting out thoughts and ideas.)

If you have old 8mm film from your youth, log it and list it as an element. Do you have old photos or access to old newspaper articles? Who are the people you want to interview and what subject matter will they cover? Record every element and every topic on a card and separate the cards with only one topic or element per card. Lay them out in an order that makes sense to you and use this to create your first outline. *Keep these cards!* You will use them over and over again.

Dramatic Structure

Every story needs three things, a beginning, middle, and end. You must define where these points exist in your story. Does your story have a great hook that will involve the audience from the outset and hold them? Is it most effective when told chronologically or should it jump around in time? Will your story be narrated, will you write the narration, or will the subjects you interview tell the entire story in their own words? Will it be a combination? You must discover what is most dramatic and engaging about your story and tell it in a way that highlights those points.

Tone and Treatment

How do you want your story heard? Do you want to create a formal documentary with voice-over narration and drops to interviews and B-roll, or do you want to do a cinema vérité piece where the camera seems to just exist as it captures everything around it? Many documentaries these days have the raw reality look of the "Cops" TV show with hand-held cameras loosely carried on shoulders. Other documentaries use guerilla tactics; they surprise people by simply shoving a microphone in their face. Michael Moore is famous for this.

An Emotional Center

Regardless of your choice of treatment or subject matter, almost every documentary needs an emotional center. The audience needs someone or a group of "someones" to care about. A message or idea is not enough. The characters in your documentary will carry your plotline as strongly as your storyline. Very few documentaries based solely on intellectualism succeed. Give your documentary some heart and some emotion. Give us someone to root for.

Formulating a Plan

As soon as you have determined the structure and treatment of your documentary, you are ready to take your outline and create a projected timeline and budget. In order to create a budget you must decide the format in which you want to shoot your project. Will you shoot film or video? What type? How often will you need sound? Will you be lighting with instruments or will you be shooting in available light? How many days and in how many locations will you need to shoot? How big of a crew and how much equipment will you need? How long and with what means will you edit?

After you answer these questions, you will be in the best position to get close to a bid for creating your project.

Go Find Some Funding

Collect your outline, timeline, bid and distribution plan (distribution will be fully covered in part three of this series but it must be fully fleshed out in your pre-production planning if you wish to raise funds from someone other than your parents or credit cards). Create a printed proposal using these elements to pass for your fund-raising efforts to support your project. Documentary film budgets can run the gamut from low-budget to multi-million dollar ventures, but many make it on a very limited amount of hard capital. Documentary filmmakers as a group are notoriously successful at getting "sweat equity" from people who volunteer their equipment and their expertise for a stock in the project. There will always be some hard costs though, and if you are not in a position to cover them yourself you should see an attorney and get help setting up a simple system that will enable you to accept funds on behalf of your not for profit project. Some filmmakers seek financial support by asking existing non-profit organizations to sponsor their project, then take in the funds, and allocate them back to the filmmaker.

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How to Make a Documentary Part 2 - "Fulfillment of the Dream"

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Considered an art form by many, documentary video production has its own special challenges and rewards. In this second of three parts series on how to make a documentary, we'll explore how to plan your approach, find your subject and begin the process of bringing your vision to fruition.

Once you've chosen your topic for your documentary, you still have many choices facing you. How do you want to approach your subject? Will your documentary seem to have a passive feel? Will the story be told by the people who are interviewed as the story comes out in their own way, or will an aggressive interviewer (e.g., Michael Moore) drive the interviews, or will you mix interviews with written narration to be delivered in voice-over? Will your documentary be a balanced view of an issue where both sides are equally and fairly explored? What criteria should help you make these decisions?

Point of View

Whose story is it really? You can choose to not have a "voice" in your documentary and make it "news" style and as impartial as possible, or you can choose the individual or group that is most affected by your story and let it be their story. This doesn't mean you can't explore both sides of an issue; it just means that you are going to put a real face on one side of the issue and allow them to personalize the story. A compelling documentary should not only be factually correct, but it should be engaging and emotionally compelling. You can also personalize both sides of a story. We have said for years in the advertising business, "don't just sell the steak, sell the sizzle." Find the sizzle in your story, because that is what is going to eventually get you distribution, and remember that even a personal story should have some universal appeal.

Sound Issues

Never take sound for granted. Nothing ruins a video that is shot on a budget quicker than bad sound. I always fight to get a sound person who is solely responsible for sound, because it is that important to me. If we truly can't have the extra body, I will listen for sound as I direct, as I don't feel a camera operator can split his attention well enough to both shoot and listen effectively at the same time. That said, there have been times when I have both shot and monitored sound; you just increase your percentage chance of having a problem. Use a lapel mic on the person you are interviewing and if possible put a pole mic on the other channel right out of your shot. Blending these two microphones together in post will give you a rounder and fuller sound. If you only have access to one mic, make sure the sound is as pristine as possible. Listen to the room before you shoot and turn off air changers if you can. Also take the time to record room tone (everyone sitting in the room making no noise for 30 seconds) or outside ambient sound, as this will help your editor remove background noise in post.

Shooting

If you don't know the camera well, you can probably survive mostly on factory settings. You do want to be aware of the iris setting and watch for backlight that becomes overwhelming. Always white balance every time you change locations. When in doubt, keep your shots simple and clean. As you gain confidence you can shoot "walk and talks," but when you're just starting out, find a safe pretty environment to shoot.

Conducting Interviews

I rarely have a subject speak directly to the camera. Unless they are doing a direct appeal to the people watching the video, they should not speak directly to the lens. Sit directly next to the lens, either to the left or right with your eyes at the same height as the lens, and have them speak directly to you. Don't feel like you have to just jump right into the subject of the interview. If you don't know them, spend some time getting acquainted. Ask about what they like to do. Find out who they are and then lead them into the subject you want.

The cheapest component of your project is the videotape, so let it roll. This is a technique to make them feel more at home in front of the camera, but sometimes you also discover gems you didn't think you'd find. Also, listen! Don't be so wrapped up in the questions that you have planned to ask that you don't listen to what is actually being said. Ask unscripted follow up questions and closely explore their reactions. Let them control some of the content of your interview. Be very open to finding a surprise and letting it blossom into something wonderful.

B-roll

Keep track of everything your interviewer says and keep in mind possible B-roll shots that could highlight this dialog. A-roll is when the camera is on the subject and the words are coming out of their mouths. B-roll is footage without sound that is shot to break up the talking head portions of an interview and is inserted in place of the talking head during the postproduction process.

Documentaries many times rely on old pictures or licensed stock footage, but those elements can be expensive even for smaller projects and the licensing can limit how and where you can show the finished piece. Reenactments are a way to create footage that can help fill the needs of the project. If you are doing a piece about the 60s, you can find old civic buildings that still look as if they are in the sixties. Go to someone's attic or to a thrift store, locate appropriate wardrobe, and create your own footage. You can pull this footage into sepia tones or make it black and white in post. You can blend this created footage with the old photos you can find and it will give the piece a sense of movement.

Discovery in the Moment

If your documentary is taking a person back to an event or a moment that changed his/her life, if you can afford it, don't just talk about it but go there. Shoot the first time they see this place after so many years and let them just describe what and how they feel. If there is a significant person who helped them at one time, don't just talk about it, shoot them meeting again, and get the energy of that exact moment.

Finding your Vision

Every documentary should begin as a blank sheet of paper or a canvas to paint upon. What colors you use and what format should come from a combination of you as an artist and the content of your story. Content should always dictate form, but you are in this equation as well and it will be your passion that drives this project. Five filmmakers could attempt the same topic for a documentary and each would most likely create a piece that only resembles the others by subject matter and that is as it should be. Find what excites you, then find your own means to express it.

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Sidebar: Why Doc?

Documentary filmmaking is the art of telling real stories in imaginative, entertaining, and insightful ways. A documentary can retell an old story with a new twist, or present a never before heard of issue, person, place, or event that has universal appeal. It can be fair and impartial, presenting both sides of a split issue, or pure propaganda. A documentary provides its audience with an intimate look into the lives and worlds of the people and

places captured therein. There are documentaries that explore major historical events and ancient civilizations, documentaries that take us from the bottom of the ocean to the top of Mt. Everest, works that can show us the lives of a local quilting group, or teach us to ride the most powerful and impressive ocean waves. Documentary filmmaking is about finding a subject that you are passionate about and using the medium of video/film to share that passion with a larger audience. The key to finding a good subject for your documentary is starting with a personal experience or opinion that you know is shared or opposed by others, and finding a way to educate your audience about that subject in an entertaining and thought provoking way.

Next Month

Share the Dream. Distribution: How do you get that video seen? First you should determine Who is your audience and Where they will most likely go to view your Masterpiece.

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