Making a documentary

Introduction

Documentaries present real situations and people more convincingly than feature films. And yet, just like feature films, making a documentary is a complex process that involves a lot of creativity to tell a story.

Documentaries deal with historical events, social and natural phenomena. They can have a very personal or lyrical mood. They are a common on TV, but they have also become popular as a cinema genre – take for example Michael Moore's *Bowling for Columbine*, Al Gore's *An inconvenient truth* or Morgan Spurlock's *Supersize me*.

Documentary films often serve as a historical record of what's happening in the world at a given time.

Vision *in action*

1. Research your topic well and find relevant people who are prepared to speak in front of the camera. Plan how you'll get interesting visuals, including archive material and shooting on location.
2. On location, shoot as much as you can because the circumstances will have changed the next time you come back. Ask more questions that you think you need to, and film a wide range of image material. Make sure recorded interviews have a good sound.
3. Be flexible. Let the story and people lead you, even if it's in a direction you didn't plan for. You can decide what to use at the editing stage. You might even have some material leftover for your next project.
4. Work in small teams so you can be flexible and don't scare people away.
5. Be friendly and thank those people who are prepared to help you – even when filming is stressful and you're not feeling very friendly.
6. Get the legal stuff right: secure permission to film and broadcast images of locations and people, and the right to use image and sound produced by others.
7. Leave plenty of time for editing. Be flexible, try out different things and see what works best. Re-edit as many times as necessary until you are completely satisfied with the result.
8. Share your film with others. Look at different screening options (for example film festivals, events connected to the topic, relevant TV stations) or organize a screening yourself.

Equipment and tools

Researching a documentary and getting ready to film involves calling people and discussing your idea, visiting locations, research in libraries, archives and online. The equipment you'll need for this includes a phone, a

computer, and perhaps a car or another mode of transport.

When it comes to filming, you'll obviously also need a camera and sound equipment. An additional microphone that connects to the camera or another external sound-recording device is really important in documentary film-making; you'll use this a lot when you interview people. A tripod and additional lights can also be very useful.

Main section

The key to making a good documentary is presenting the topic in an interesting and clear way, with high-quality image material and good composition for dramatic effect.

The advantage of documentaries over feature films is that they can be made on a low budget and with a small film crew. They are therefore an excellent genre for presenting new, less well-known topics, or for sharing ideas that are interesting to a specific audience.

Documentaries are a great way for young filmmakers, youth groups, and anybody who doesn't have access to a studio, expensive equipment or a lot of money, to express themselves through film. They are also well suited to people who prefer to work alone or in smaller groups.







Shooting on location

Although the main purpose of documentaries is an objective representation of reality, you'll always have to make a decision about what you show and how. There will be different angles and points of view to choose from, as well as different types of narration, aesthetics, ways of editing, and different people/objects/animals to select from. The documentary maker always puts their personal, subjective mark on the film.

> *The documentary genre is still developing. That's why it's a good idea to watch and analyse documentaries by different filmmakers and from different sources – this will help you work out what you want to do with your own project. As always, you'll learn the most by actually filming, editing and experimenting.*

Elements of a documentary

Every documentary consists of one or more of the following elements.

1. Image material
2. Interviews
3. Survey
4. Archive materials
5. Facts (can be presented with graphics or in some other form…)
6. Narration (voice-over)
7. Fiction or animated sequences that recreate or explain real events

We look at some of these in detail in Producing TV news and/or a reportage. Here we focus on applying them in practice.

> *See how the different elements are used to document the following story:*
>
> *A young singer-songwriter is trying to make a breakthrough. Her first major performance is this month*
>
> *Image material: the singer is in the studio practising or writing new songs; images from her everyday life, meeting friends/producers, buying new instruments, performing at a friend's birthday party; preparations for a major performance; finally on the big stage*

Interviews: with the singer, relatives, friends, teachers, producers

Survey: with fans

Archive material: videos and pictures from the singer's childhood; earlier performances

Facts: how many songs she has written, how many performances given

Narration: voice-over describing the singer and her life

Fictional or animated sequences that recreate or explain real events: fictional scene of the singer getting her first instrument as a child or writing her first lyrics, animated map of performances

You don't have to use all of these elements in your documentary, just choose the most appropriate ones.

Process of making a documentary

The process of making documentaries is a complex one. You often start with the idea you want to present and a direction in which it could develop. But, once you start filming, the material you collect might not be as good as you hoped. You might not find the right people, or your sources might offer other, unexpected and previously unknown information. This can lead the story in a new, more interesting direction.

Have you ever wondered why professionally made documentaries often have a very neat narrative? An example would be a documentary that asks the question 'Is this Nefertiti's mummy?' at the start, shows people looking for the clues, and ends with a clear answer: 'No, it isn't.'

This might be because the research was completed before shooting even started. This allows you to write the script using everything you've learned from your investigation, gradually getting closer to the answer, which you already know. The documentary is filmed in a way that suggests the researchers in the film are finding things out while you are filming them. For dramatic effect, it can even show the researchers following a clue that you already know is useless or wrong.

The more you find out before you start filming, the more control you'll have over your script. The disadvantage of this approach is that the scenes will not be shot during the actual research, and this might make them seem obviously re-enacted.

You might end up with hours of material, which must be edited to give the film a clear message and make it worth seeing. You'll have to decide what to use and what to leave out. You can save some of the material you don't need, and use it in a different project.

Using the above example of a documentary about a musician/songwriter, here are the steps to follow if you're making a documentary:

1. Define the main idea

What do you want to show or engage people with? What worries or intrigues you? What is the main question or conflict that the documentary will try to find an answer to? How can you present the journey in an interesting way?

> *Your friend is a singer-songwriter. You like her music and want to make a documentary about her. This month she is giving her first major performance.*

2. Write a synopsis – a short description of what happens in the film.

> *A young singer-songwriter is trying to make a breakthrough. Her parents discovered her talent at age 5 and bought her her first instrument. She learned to play at the local music school and soon started performing at local events.*
>
> *She gradually developed her skills and at the age of 17 recorded her first solo album. She started to perform at small events throughout the region and finally got an invitation to perform at a big festival in the capital. She is now preparing for the performance.*
>
> *Viewers follow the young woman's path, feel her hopes, fears, and her desire to make*

3. Choose a structure for your documentary.

There are several types of structure for documentaries.

Narrative: narrator or interviewees tell the story from beginning to end.

> *The narrator tells her story – how she started playing and writing songs as a child, her first performances, how she got better at songwriting and playing, when she decided to make a profession out of it, how she got the invitation to perform at the big festival, how the performance went.*
>
> *OR*
>
> *Record interviews with her, her parents, brothers, sisters, music teachers, friends and fans. Combine the answers in a way that tells the singer's life story from childhood up to the present.*
>
> *The main questions could be: Will she get her breakthrough and begin a career in music? And will the people in her life take her new profession seriously?*

Argumentative: you begin with a basic hypothesis or theory, and throughout the film the narrator or interviewees make arguments for and against (deductive method). Or vice versa: the narrator or interviewees make arguments for and against something, and we suggest a theory at the end of the film (inductive method).

> *The basic hypothesis – that the singer-songwriter is good as what she does – is set at the start, and all the answers support or oppose it.*
>
> *OR*
>
> *We claim in the beginning, that being a musician is not recognized as a serious profession in the country, where the musician lives, and the answers given in the documentary support or oppose this thesis. 1*

Descriptive: the narrator or interviewees talk about, or describe, one subtopic at a time.

> *Everything the narrator/interviewees say is 'sliced' and put back together in defined subtopics – the singer's motivation, her lyrics, hopes, fears, beginnings, future plans, everyday life.*

Poetic: you aim to evoke particular feelings rather than presenting facts or arguing specific points.

> *The singer is presented through her lyrics. The image material you use is more lyrical, and can include scenes from nature, as well as graphics or animations.*

Combined: different styles and elements are used together. Many documentaries take this approach to structure.

> *Use interviews AND narration, or add a poetic element to the narrative, alongside realistic shots.*

4. Decide on the style of your film.

Will your film be poetic, or realistic and hard-hitting? What kind of shots will you need? Think about their length, the style of lighting, whether you'll be using a hand-held camera or a tripod, static or moving shots.

5. Research the topic, write a synopsis, prepare the interview questions and make a list of the different types of image material you'll need.

Research the subject of your documentary in more detail if necessary. This includes reading about its history and finding out hard facts.

After that, try to find to people who might have more information for you. These will be your interviewees, and they must be prepared to talk in front of the camera. They will ideally be positive, interesting and competent people who can speak clearly about the subject.

Make a research on image material that you will need to show relating to the story and the statements of your documentary. Make a filming plan and think about where you'll get archive material from.

6. Filming

Film the interviews or surveys, and any other visuals you need. Get your archive material.

Shoot as much as you can on location because the circumstances will have changed the next time you come back. Ask more questions that you think you need to, and film a wide range of image material. Make sure recorded interviews have a good sound.

Remember to keep an open mind while you film. Let the story and people lead you, even if it's in a different direction from the one you planned. You can decide what to use at the editing stage, and you might even have some material leftover for your next project.

It's also important to think about 'public relations'. Work in small teams so you can be flexible and so you don't scare people away. Be friendly and thank those people who are prepared to help you – even when filming is stressful and you're not feeling very friendly.

Last, but not least – get the legal stuff right. Secure permission to film and broadcast images of locations and people. You'll also need to obtain rights to use image and sound produced by others.

7. Check the material and see what's usable.

Look at your shots, organise them and give them titles; this will give you a clear idea of the material you have and how you might edit it. And transcribing interview answers helps you see what sort of narrative is beginning to form. Make a list of image material.

> *This step will take some time, but it will help you get to know the material better. This is especially important if you were not a camera operator.*

8. Make a draft edit

Organise the available material as necessary for the documentary's narrative, and see if you need anything else. See if you need any more answers or image material, and decide how/where you'll get them.

If you plan to use graphics, animation or fictional sequences, prepare and shoot those as well.

9. Editing

Be creative! Try different options and angles. Add graphic materials, music, voice-over, and remember to show your friends or colleagues the film to check if they understand it.

> *Editing has a really important role in documentary film-making. There are many ways of editing a story, and you'll need patience and experience, but don't give up!*

Practical advice:

- You can make interviews, or parts of interviews, more interesting if you film the interviewees while they are walking or doing something – for example, interview a singer while she's tuning her instrument or walking to the studio.
- Images say more than words, so try to tell the story trough visuals.
- Use longer shots where you have a lot of off-camera speech or voice-overs, for example from the interviews or narration.
- Make interviews spontaneous by being open and friendly. Ask simple questions to begin with, so interviewees can get used to the camera. And do ask more questions than you think you'll need; sometimes answers to these can be really useful.
- Capturing the Moment is more important than perfect composition and framing.
- Make sure you have screening permission from people and locations. If the interviewees are young people, get permission from their parents/guardians.

Examples of documentaries

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LoY6Uti1WXY

Video: I am not a copata (Slovenska filantropija, Pankultikum, Greg Whistler) – ENG

Video: Ganz normal anders (produced by users of WTV) – DE

[vimeo clip_id=86480378 width=1000 height=]

Video: Peter pan bakery (Peter Haas) – ENG

Video: Posavski prostovoljci v akciji (LIJAmedia) – SI

Exercises

Make a short documentary. Think of a topic that interests you and that's local to you – a local young person, event or tradition, or a sport that's popular in your town.

Decide what film structure you will use and prepare as necessary: do the research, write a synopsis, find people to talk to, prepare questions for interviews, make a list of image material. Then film and edit!

Common mistakes

1. The movie is too long or it isn't very interesting to a wider audience.
2. Explaining the story in too much detail.
3. The interviews are too long, or the interviewees speak monotonously.
4. There isn't enough image material, or it isn't very diverse.
5. The story is incoherent and unclear.

Related topics and links to external resources

Chapters: Producing an interview / Producing TV news items and reports / Sound, music and sound effects / Film structure

Methodology

If you're working with young people, they would most probably like to be actively involved – going on location, filming interviews and so on.

The hard part for most of them will be the editing. It's very likely that there will only be a few people interested in this part of the process, since it requires a lot of time, patience, and good knowledge of editing programmes.

Try to find other activities to keep the rest of the group busy. For example, they could make a poster or a website that sums up the documentary, a photo collage with images from the shoot, or a presentation about the film. Or organize editing sessions separately from activities of the rest of the group.

Terminology

image material, interviews, survey, archive materials, facts, narration, recreation of real events, narrative structure, argumentative structure, descriptive structure, poetic structure