

11 Helpful Tips for Making a Documentary

1. Always write the script before you start creating the documentary!
2. Make sure you have enough visuals for your documentary
 - You might need more than you would think:
 - Documentary = 10 minutes = 600 seconds
 - Average length of time each picture is on the screen = 5 seconds
 - $600/5 = 120$ images!
 - Other types of visuals: Newspaper headlines, video clips, interview clips, maps, drawings, cartoons, documents, title screens, talking head, etc.
 - No fuzzy pictures. Period!
 - Places to go for visuals:
 - Scan from books
 - Take digital photos of books/hard copy photos
 - Google Images – Use medium or preferably large sized images only
 - Libraries and museum
 - Take video from other documentaries (it is okay, just do not take the narration!)
3. Do a storyboard so that you know you have the visuals to support your narration
 - Documentary-makers mantra: “Say cow, see cow!”
4. Record the narration before you insert the visuals
 - The story must drive the visuals, not the other way around
 - Chop up your script into small chunks (1 or 2 paragraphs) to be recorded separately. This makes it easy to edit if you make a mistake.
 - Use a decent microphone. The ones built into computer are not very good.
 - Talk over your microphone so you do not get “popping” noises
 - Limit distracting background noises
5. Save your project frequently!
 - Make sure you have enough space (iMovie and Windows Movie Maker projects can take up several GB of space).
 - If you need to transport the project from computer to computer, be sure you have an external hard drive.
6. Do an interview (or a couple!)
 - Interviews provide a validating opinion and add spice to the flow of the documentary
 - Good interview subjects:
 - Eyewitnesses
 - History professors
 - Authors
 - Newspaper reporters
 - Elected officials
 - Anyone else who can speak with a unique/authoritative voice on the subject
7. Do not try to cram too much into your project
 - Talking faster just makes it harder to understand your project
 - Leave enough time to utilize title screens and dramatic pauses for effect and to allow your points to sink in with the audience
 - Sacrifice interesting details so that you can include more historical context and analysis

8. Do not go crazy with the transitions
 - At some point, they just get annoying. That point is usually when the audience actually starts to notice that there are transitions.
 - Mix it up, use a variety of them, and concentrate on using the less noticeable ones
9. Listen to your project with a critical ear toward the audio
 - Make sure narration volume levels are consistent, especially from one speaker to the next
 - Add music to create flow and build intensity/emotion
 - Use instrumental music only, unless there is some lyrical music that relates to the topic and is used unobtrusively
 - Check www.freeplaymusic.com for copyright-clean, instrumental music that can be tailored to the length you want
 - Classical music is also good
 - Balance music volume so that it is not competing with the narration
10. Add a brief credits screen to give credit for music, research archives, interview subjects, and any “special thanks” you would like to give
11. Make backup copies of your project and make sure it plays on a variety of formats and machines (DVD, VHS, Computer and LCD projector, etc.)