



Documentary Film Production

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Documentary film and video production is my personal favorite type and I am lucky enough to have worked on more documentary style videos than I can count.

Hi, I'm Lorraine Grula and welcome to my tutorial on how to make a documentary.

First, let's define what a documentary is. Technically, a documentary is a reality based film or video that is produced using a run-and-gun news style of shooting. Generally speaking, documentaries are NOT staged like a Hollywood movie, but that is not always true. If a documentary film stages something, they are probably reenacting something that actually happened.

Documentaries usually include a lot of interviews. In fact, I would consider interviews to be the backbone of any documentary.

Documentaries generally fall under the category of journalism, meaning that they are full of facts and legitimate information. At last hopefully it is legitimate information, but that's another tutorial.

However, documentary style production can be used for other genres too. Lots of TV shows, The Office is an example, contain interviews with the characters, which is an element of documentary style. So really what I am saying is that like video production in general, documentary style is not a rigid, carved in stone method. Reality TV shows are all documentary style although I am not confident that any of them follow the rules of journalism.

A documentary can be just a few minutes long or it can be full feature length. Either way, the basic style and process of production are the same. A good documentary is concise, no matter the length. You can pack a lot of information into a well-constructed five minute video. Longer videos still needs to be concise. Length is not an excuse to ramble.



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Documentary films are often low budget and usually have a small crew. They often rely on natural light or a simple 1 to 3 light set-up. A good documentary crew ALWAYS has a shotgun microphone running to pick up whatever sound might happen. This is called natural sound, or ambient sound and it is a very useful storytelling element.

The microphone directly above the lens is on all the time capturing whatever sound is occurring. For interviews, plug in a lapel microphone to get the best sound.

Documentaries go through the classic process of pre-production, production and post production.

During the pre-production phase, you select your topic and begin research. You then plan out what you want to shoot and begin scheduling. You hire crews if need be and outline what you want your finished show to be like.

Keep in mind that documentary making is a very fluid task. The three phases often overlap and until you are 100% done, nothing is carved in stone. Always give yourself room to change your mind.

The production phase is when you shoot all your interviews and supporting video, which is referred to as b-roll. You'll want to be fluid, like I said because sometimes exciting things will happen when you are out shooting that you never could have planned for. On the other hand, you can plan all day long and some things you want will never materialize.

Post production is when you transcribe your interviews, write your script and begin editing. Editing can be a very time consuming process and for the most part, editing is a planned process. Editing is NOT really for fixing mistakes, which is what a lot of novices think. Mistakes should be corrected out in the field. It is really a sloppy and ill-advised attitude to always think, "Oh we'll fix it in post." Fixing field mistakes in post is time consuming and expensive. Do not let yourself



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get into the crutch of thinking you will fix mistakes in post-production. Editing should be an artistic and creative process, not one where you mop up your errors.

That's it for this tutorial on documentary video making. If you'd like even more information on how to make quality documentaries, join us in the Video Production Tips membership, where I cover everything from storytelling, to interviewing people to how to get the best b-roll. Happy documentary making! I'm Lorraine Grula, thanks for watching.