

Where do you start when making a documentary-style video? First, of course, you pick your subject matter.

Any subject with some depth will make a good documentary. The more people affected by the topic, the larger your potential audience. There are no set rules on how broad, or how narrow, the topic can be but generally, you want to be fairly focused. For example, covering the entirety of World War II in one show would not be a good idea, you'd be better off covering just a slice of WWII in one show. To cover the entire war you'd probably need fifteen or twenty segments.

But generally speaking, the best advice really is to go with the flow and make decisions as you go along. Making documentaries is a very fluid task.

Once you have a basic subject matter, do some research to get a decent grasp of the big picture. Figure out who the experts, movers and shakers are on this particular topic. Then, call them up on the telephone. Talk to as many people as possible during the pre-production stage. You are NOT trying to set up video interviews at this point. You want to talk by phone to everyone you have time to speak with. Interview them casually as you speak to them on the phone and take plenty of notes. It helps to have a headset so you have two hands to type.

Always write down who you are speaking with, when you speak with them, the number where you reached them and the gist of what they say. Use the conversation to get a good feel for their opinions and how well they present themselves. Generally speaking, you really only want to videotape those people who present themselves well and sadly, not all do.

Always ask who else they know that you should talk to. One expert leads you to another, then to another and so forth. Also, and this is very important, ask your experts for "regular" people they know who have been affected by the subject matter. Ask them for real world examples and make notes of it all. Call everyone on the phone and always take notes.

Have the experts written articles or books on the subject? Find out, get a copy and read everything.

You will probably end up hanging your finished story on the “real” people you find. Experts are usually your best source to finding the “real” people. “Real” people are usually more relatable to an audience. Honestly, experts tend to be a bit dull, not always of course but over the years, one thing that became crystal clear to me is that often, the smarter someone is, the more difficult they are for your average Joe to relate to. Often, experts have a difficult time explaining things so your average Joe can even understand what they are saying. It is your job to understand it and translate it into everyday language.

So in the final video, the real people will probably be more prominent, but in the pre-production phase, you usually begin by locating experts.

As you talk to people on the phone, evaluate how well they would probably perform on camera. Do they speak clearly and articulate well? Are they saying things that advance the ideas you think are important? If so, ask them to consider an on-camera interview. If not, tell them you are just calling for background info. Never close the door on calling them back or videotaping an interview. Sometimes experts act as consultants and you speak to them a lot during the project, but they never appear on camera.

You can spend days on the phone researching this way and you will learn a whole lot. Use this information to further outline and plan the story you will be forming. In my opinion, the more angles you cover the better. I am a big fan of giving all sides of the story a chance. You may have heard that every story has two sides. Actually, I think every story has hundreds or even thousands of sides. The question is: Do you have the time, energy and money to track them all down?

If you are producing an hour long show, you could possibly use up to twenty on-camera interviews. You may not need that many, but I think a quality documentary interviews as many people as practical. Having said that, I have seen well-done shows with only one or two interviews. It depends on how deep you want to go, your budget and what finished length you are shooting for. A simplistic documentary might only have one interview. Or, it might be a really in-depth interview with one very important person.

Now, where do you find these experts? Lots of places: Academic institutions, professional associations, government offices, support groups, businesses, associations, heck even the neighborhood bar. Depending on how you define “expert,” they are everywhere.

Generally, people love to talk about themselves and their expertise. Most people will be flattered you asked and will be happy to share with you.

As a member of the media, you have to approach most experts by contacting a public relations department first. The PR department should know all the people within their institution and have a good idea of their expertise. So even if you do not have a name, you can call the PR department of a local university or other institution and ask who would be an appropriate expert for you to speak with.

Academic institutions are much easier to deal with than corporations. They usually want the publicity. Mom & Pop stores are usually the very easiest to deal with and are often quite welcoming.

Trying to get an interview with a corporate representative can be a royal pain. It’s either an exercise in mind-numbing bureaucratic voice mail hell and outright stonewalling or avoidance. Corporations are very wary of news and documentaries because they do not trust anything where they cannot strictly control the message.

As a documentary producer, I often felt like PR departments were the bane of my existence.

And be warned that you can NOT just barge into a store or business and begin videotaping without permission. I’ve spoken with lots of novices who had no idea of this very important fact. If you do such a thing, you are likely to get arrested. Honestly, this is one way corporations manage to have so much control over what the public learns. If they do not want to talk to you, they do not have to.

After you have done all this research, you are ready to outline what seems to be a practical finished version of your show. Decide who and what you want to actually videotape. Call them up and get it scheduled. Now you are largely done

with the pre-production phase, although as with most video production projects, you might need to revisit preproduction.

Documentary production is fluid by its very nature. You must learn to be flexible and the precise content of your show can not be determined until you get out there and actually videotape everything. Sometimes you get things you were not expecting and other times no matter how hard you try, you won't be able to get some things you really want.

Whatever interviews you shoot, transcribe them word for word. Now this is the biggest pain in the butt ever but you have to do it. The benefit of transcribing the interviews is enormous. To put the final script together, you have to know precisely what you have recorded and precisely where you can find it, such as: on Tape #39 at time code 23:53:12.

When you put the final script together, you will refer back to the transcripts a million times in order to find the exact portions of the interviews you want to use. The larger your project, the more this is true.

If you don't transcribe, you will NEVER remember well enough what people actually said. You cannot spend the time to sift through all your video over and over to refresh your memory about what is there. You have to have it all on paper for quick, easy reference.

Plus, video making is usually a team effort and the interview transcripts are one more tool you have to share with others who are working with you so everybody knows what is going on.

Also, keep a record, or log, of all the video you shoot. So don't just log the interviews, but all the cover video as well. In order to avoid a mess, do yourself a favor and be extremely organized as you gather your video. Label everything clearly.

One of the most frequent questions I get about documentary production is where do you get ideas for video shots? The answer to that is way different than you might think. By the way, the cover video is referred to as B-roll, which is a very

common term in documentary making. Your interviews, or talking heads, are called the A-roll although that term is not as common.

Start by taking some b-roll video of every single person you interview. Take video of them doing whatever it is they do. Hopefully, it will relate directly to your story but if not, you can still make it work by tailoring your narration so the video seems logical. I cover that more in the scriptwriting tutorials.

If you are interviewing a scientist, get video of them working in the lab. If you are videotaping a boxing expert, get video of them working out and practicing their moves in the ring. If you are videotaping a truck driver, get video of them driving the truck plus video of them washing or maintaining the truck. As a last resort, get some kind of generic video of them walking down the sidewalk or hallway.

I often asked people, "What would you be doing right now if I were NOT here?" Then I would take video of them doing that, whatever it was because I wanted to capture that person's reality.

In addition to getting video of them working, get video of them relaxing. What do they like to do? Read? Watch TV? Cook? Play with the kids? Take video of them doing whatever they like to do and you can make it work by writing your narration properly.

Needless to say, you have to make a determination about how prominent this particular person is going to be in the finished show and shoot an amount of b-roll that is appropriate for their finished role. You don't need to shoot a ton of b-roll of someone who is just going to be a minor player in the finished show.

As an example to illustrate how to select b-roll for your show, I dug up this old story I worked on about liability insurance. The actual subject matter was about how the gigantic rise in liability insurance premiums was strangling businesses. Sounds boring, right? How in the world would you visualize a story about something as bland as liability insurance? Show documents? Maybe, but that is the boring way to do it.

We found experts who told us about real people and real businesses who were feeling the strain. One of those businesses happened to be a historic railway

museum that ran an old coal-fired steam locomotive. So we went for a ride and I took video of everything that moved. Workers stoking the fire. Shoveling coal. Ringing the bell. Visually exciting stuff for a boring subject.

Now if you had asked me in the very beginning how I was going to visualize liability insurance I never would have said by taking shots of a guy shoveling coal and another guy ringing a bell. That never would have entered my mind. But by following the basic procedures I have outlined here, it became the logical video to use. We told their story.

Once you shoot everything you need to shoot, it is time to write your script and edit. Again, the interview transcripts and b-roll logs are critical for this process. Go through your transcripts with different colored markers. Highlight those sections that you believe would be good to use. Double check those sections to make sure they are as good on video as they seem on paper. Actually, when transcribing my interviews, I always got in the habit of adding a note if something looked terrible on camera even if the words being said were great. I mean, people can stutter or even burp or something on camera and I certainly did not want to use that sort of thing so I included it in the transcripts.

The next step is to piece things together on paper in a logical fashion. You're not in the edit room yet, you're just working on the written script. Editing on paper is a lot faster and cheaper than editing on video so you want to do it all on paper first.

I always used the interview portions, also called soundbites, as the framework for my stories. Essentially, I was stringing together soundbites and joining them together with logical narration. Often, the narration paraphrased the interview portions I elected NOT to use.

The criteria for selecting soundbites is not carved in stone, but generally you want to use the interview segments that are not only important, but are well-spoken, concise and easy to understand. Having interviewed thousands of people over the years and transcribed them word for word, I am here to tell you that even the most intelligent people do NOT always speak clearly. Sometimes they ramble like

crazy and do not even use sentences. The best portions tended to be when people were summarizing things.

Once you have a written script, get your narration recorded and start editing. Add music, graphics, sound effects and so forth where appropriate. Again, I advise you to keep a fluid mindset and rework things as needed. Eventually, you'll actually be done! Now I must add to that some words of wisdom I learned from one of my first video production instructors. He said, "You're never really FINISHED with a video, you just stop working on it." And yes, if you are passionate and obsessive like I am about video making, and most documentary producers are, you will definitely feel that way. At some point to be determined, you just call it DONE!

I sincerely hope this tutorial helps you get started on the road to documentary filmmaking. The world needs more documentaries! If you want to go into even more depth, please check out my additional tutorials or contact me for personal coaching. Thanks for watching, I'm Lorraine Gula with Video Production Tips.