

Key points of choosing topics for Documentary

As a filmmaker, you may have done several short reports on certain topics. Now you have become an expert in that field and you might want to do a feature-length documentary. Here are a few things to keep in mind when you want to shoot and edit a longform documentary.

1. Make a plan

Longform documentaries mean a lot of work and preparation before you start shooting. Sit down and focus before you start shooting! Think about how you would like your final story to look like. Ask yourself: what is the story I want to tell? And do not lose your point by bringing in too many aspects. Otherwise you might end up telling the story of the whole mankind. Make a schedule: how many days do you need for shooting over what period of time? When do you want to edit the documentary? Be strict to yourself and set yourself a limit: rough guess: seven days for a 30-minute documentary. I promise it will take a little longer.

Other questions you'd better start thinking about at this point

What else do you need besides interviews and b-roll? Do you need animated infographics? Where do you get your music from? Who is your audience and who will show your documentary? Which length do they want? Is it a one hour documentary? Can you split it up into episodes? Or do you have enough to tell it in several episodes? If you are a beginner start on a small level, e.g a 30-minute doc or five episodes around eight to ten minutes.

2. Find protagonists

Who is the most important person in your story? Will there be a reporter in front of the camera who leads me through the whole experience? What is his/her quest? What does he/she want to find out? Or do you want to follow somebody who is deeply involved in the topic and is facing a challenge or fighting an injustice? Decide which person will be the one we can stick to when watching your final documentary. Who else will be visible in your documentary? What role does he or she play?

3. Prepare your gear / care for sound

How do you want to shoot it? What camera do you want to use? Today you can do short reports and even longform documentaries with your smartphone. But keep in mind that you might have long days of shooting where you need an awful lot of storage and battery power. You might be better off with a DSLR

if you have one. And in some spontaneous situations, you will only have your smartphone for shooting. No matter what camera you end up with: Make sure to backup your footage on external hard disks on a regular basis. It is very likely that you will collect several hundred gigabytes of footage for a long-term documentary.

But the most important gear aspect: Care for the sound! You need good microphones. It is one of the most important things to have. Good sound quality brings us closer to your protagonists. Crappy sound is a no-go.

4. Interview your most important protagonists more than once

In short reports you meet them once, do a quick interview, get some soundbites, done. The long form is totally different. Do more than one interview with your protagonists. Speak to them on the phone to find out who they are and what they really care about. Ask them what they do when they don't talk? How does their work look like. You need this to plan your b-roll shoots. Do the first video interview in the very beginning of the shooting period. But also remember to get good sound bites of them in everyday situations. Sit down with them for a final interview and sum everything up. Your protagonist will change during the process and it is great if we can experience that in your documentary.

5. Shoot tons of b-roll

Interviews are important for your movie. But there is nothing more boring than a documentary that shows one talking head after another. You want to see something happening. What actions do your protagonists perform? Where do they go? What do they craft with their own hands? Whom do they meet? What do they experience in the period of shooting? Sometimes you have to be patient and visit them again and again over a long period of time, e.g. a politician at the beginning and the end of an election term. How did the burden of the job change him or her? What did he or she experience besides giving statements and interviews?

6. Edit wisely

Once the shooting period is over, it is time to transcribe all the interviews and write down the time code. I know — that is an awful lot of work. But it also saves you an awful lot of work when you are trying to find that one important soundbite in your hour long interview footage. Update your plan in case you haven't done that a hundred times at this point. (What plan? Are you kidding me? Go back to point No. 1).

7. Think in chapters

Don't try to tell me all important aspects in the exposition of your documentary. Take your time to build up tension. Ask the key questions in the beginning, but give all the answers throughout the movie. Tell the story bit by bit and don't be too nerdy. Build up one piece of information after another. Do not overload it. The best documentaries are the ones that I can understand and follow through without having a lot of background knowledge. You do not make a documentary for experts, you make it for your audience. What do they need to understand the story?

8. Look for twists and turns

There will be moments on camera that you did not expect beforehand. Look for these unexpected and spontaneous situations, where your protagonists were startled or doubtful or overwhelmed by something. It helps your audience to establish a deeper connection with them. It lets us follow your story with more passion and awareness.