

How to Write a Script for a Documentary

Before You Begin Shooting

RESEARCH! Once you've settled on your documentary idea, time to start digging. Leave no rock left unturned.

Create a List. Based on your research, start creating a list of potential characters/interviews, basic storylines, areas of potential conflict and emotion. Ask yourself, "what's at the heart of this story and how do I "show" that visually?"

Get Style. Decide the look, feel and style of your documentary. Search web videos or watch TV for ideas. Netflix is a great resource for documentaries.

Write a "shooting script" (pre-script/outline) – Often with documentaries, the script can't really be written until after the footage has been shot and you start piecing the story together based on what you "discovered" with your camera. However, writing an outline at the beginning can be an invaluable guide to point you in the right direction, especially to be able to look back as a reference when the chaos of shooting can get you off track. There WILL come that moment in the process when you say, "What was I thinking!?"

Get Creative. Think about some unique and creative ways you can spice up your movie and give it that "Wow" factor. "How to write a script" creatively involves adding special elements such as stop motion, time-lapse, animation/cartoons, recreations, etc. For example, in the 2008 documentary *Young At Heart*, the filmmakers used MTV style music videos to segue between scenes of their elderly singers. Perfect!

After Shooting is Complete

The very nature of the documentary is that it is "unscripted". It is meant to capture some aspect of "real life". Then it is up to the you (the writer) to take the messiness of real life and create some kind of story.

As the scriptwriter, you will need to examine all the "unscripted" & "raw" footage and create some sort of structure out of it.

It will seem daunting at first (you WILL feel overwhelmed at some point), but think of it as putting together a great big puzzle. It will look like a jumbled mess at first, but bit by bit, the big picture will begin to reveal itself as you mix and match the various pieces. How to write a script:

Transcribe your footage – This may seem like a tedious and boring task at first, but TRUST ME, you will thank yourself in the end. This is where you begin to "log" and categorize the various "pieces" of your puzzle.

Review the BIG picture. What are the main elements (characters and plots) that have surfaced through shooting process that create the tapestry of your overall story. What are the key "moments"?

Create Scenes. Take these "moments" and divide your documentary into mini-stories (scenes) that, together, create the documentary.

Build a Roller Coaster. Take these scenes and begin creating a "Roller Coaster" ride for your audience. What kind of "ride" are you taking them on? Think about the powerful moments in your story and how to write a script to build up those moments. A fantastic book that describes this process is *Writing Great Screenplays for Film and TV* by Dona Cooper.

Villain and Hero. Another important part of scriptwriting is determining the villain(s) and hero(s) in your story. A hero/villain can be a person, thing or event. (A tornado can be the villain).

BEGINNING, MIDDLE and an END. Of course, every story has a beginning, middle and end. If you can outline your story in these three general categories, then you can begin to fill in the details.

The Ending. If you have a lot of footage and information to work with, a simple way to clarify how to start building your script is to think about how you're going to END your documentary. Everything else leads up to that