

11 Helpful Tips for Making a Documentary

Tip #1: Always write the script before you start creating the documentary!

Tip #2: Make sure you have enough visuals for your documentary

- You might need more than you'd think:
 - Documentary = 10mins = 600 seconds
 - Avg. 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 (*Just like the old days!*)
 - Take digital photos of books/hard copy photos
 - Google Images (*Use medium or preferably large sized images only!*)
 - Minnesota Historical Society Visual Resources Database (*Minnesota history topics*)
 - Take video from other documentaries (*its legal, just don't take the narration!*)
 - Proquest

Tip #3: Do a storyboard so that you know you have the visuals to support your narration

- Documentary-makers mantra: "Say cow, see cow!"

Tip #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 computers aren't very good.
- Talk over your microphone so you don't get "popping" noises
- Limit distracting background noises

Tip #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.

Tip #6: Do an interview (or a couple!)

- Interviews provide a validating outside 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

Tip #7: Don't 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

Tip #8: Don't go crazy with the transitions

- At some point, they just get annoying. And 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

Tip #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

Tip #10: Add a brief credits screen to give credit for music, research archives, interview subjects and any "special thanks" you'd like to give

Tip #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.)