



Notes from **Do You Want to Create a Documentary**

Central Missouri National History Day Workshop 30 October 2019

For today's students, Ken Burns invented what we think of as historical documentaries.

So, how do we go about creating a documentary?

Choose a topic that fits the theme.

Then be specific.

After that, get a LOT more specific.

Look at the impact and effect of your topic.

Provide example(s)

Create a thesis statement.

If you choose to create a NHD documentary about an individual, chronology is a problem. It is hard to fit a life into ten minutes.

Choose the approach you want to use.

There are six documentary modes:

Poetic – Goal is to create a feeling rather than a truth.

*Expository – Narrator explains via script and information is king
Ken Burns, A&E, History Channel etc.

Observational – Simply observe the world around you; gives audience first hand access to some of the topics most important, and private, moments.

*Participatory – Interviews, lots of archival material.

Reflexive – Filmmaker focuses on self and process of making film.

Performative – Stress subject experience and share emotional response to world; sometimes called “Michael Moore” style.

**Expository and Participatory styles lend themselves to the NHD goal.

Collect raw material.

Make an inventory.

Photographs.

Court documents.

Advertisements/flyers.

Interviews.

Newspapers.

Keep track of all your sources.

Be organized - develop a structure for yourself.

Prepare to deal with different formats.

Get help from archives and manuscript repositories.

When using the internet – **WARNING** – many inaccurate labels. Fact Check.

Framework of your documentary.

Start with thesis.

Include some characters.

Develop a story arc:

Act One – Exposition section – $\frac{1}{4}$ of documentary.

Set up so audience begins to care.

Inciting incident.

Climax.

Act Two – Conflict section – $\frac{1}{2}$ of documentary.

Rising action.

Setbacks/disappointments.

Mid-point plot.

Act Three – Resolution – Not always a happy ending.

Final struggle.

Order restored.

Put it all together.

Write an outline or use file cards to keep track of your plan.

Choose experts.

Develop a storyboard, a graphic representation of how your video will unfold, shot by shot.

Production.

Conduct and transcribe interviews.

Audio – using two synchronized cell phones works well.

Shoot other video backgrounds, e.g. with a court case, shoot some courtroom footage.

Post Production.

This is not a term paper; it is for the ear.

Use short, declarative sentences with active verbs.
Be conversational up to a point.
Avoid pronouns. Better to reuse a name.
Make sure your cases match.
Avoid clichés.
Use alliteration.
Make your text flow.
Write to match the video on the screen to connect the audio and video.

Some Miscellaneous Thoughts.

When you are including interviews, write into the interview. Do not introduce it so you deliver information the interviewee is providing.

Develop the graphic look of your documentary. Use the same font throughout. Any sans serif font, like Helvetica or Arial, is a good choice.

If you can find no other footage, animation can work to explain a complex topic.

Select your music carefully. It sets the tone for your film and in many ways is its own character.

Use your text to tell the story. Try title cards instead of placing your words directly on the video.

Have your final version proofed by someone who has never seen it.