

Documentary Filmmaking: Capture Your Story

Objectives:

- How to interview your subject
- How to shoot an interview

As filmmakers you are storytellers and the main component that helps tell the story are characters. Audiences attach themselves to, and have emotional connections to, the lives portrayed on screen.

Documentaries are the same as fictional films: they are stories told by people. It is important to remember that especially when approaching production of your documentary.

Task One: Shoot Your Three Minute Documentary

How to Interview

The story in your documentary is mostly going to come from interviews you'll be conducting with the people your story is about; so you need to think carefully how you're going to conduct the interview with each person.

- **Prepare Your Questions-** The questions you choose to ask the interviewee need to be relevant to the subject of your story. Don't ask closed-ended questions either, questions where the answer can only be yes or no, ask questions that force the interviewee to think and give you a detailed answer.
- **Create a Relaxed Atmosphere-** You might be slightly nervous interviewing someone you haven't met before but the interviewee will be just as, if not more nervous, having a whole crew sit around and record them answering questions. You need to make sure your interviewee is calm and relaxed. Even before the interview begins make sure they have had a copy of the questions you intend to ask so they can have some preparation time. On the day keep professional but friendly too: talk them through exactly how you intend the interview to begin, ask them to voice any concerns and reassure them they are doing well before and after recording the interview.
- **Don't interrupt!** The worst thing that can happen is if you have shot an amazing interview but all you can hear is yourself: "Yeah", "hmmm", "absolutely". It can be very easy to verbally acknowledge their answers and reassure them. As the interviewer, you need to keep quiet (unless you're asking a question of course) but there are ways of communicating with your interviewee: nod your head in reassurance and keep eye contact with them as much as you can.

On a film set, most of the attention is on the actors. If they're not looked after, they will not give you the performance you want. On a documentary production, if you don't look after your interviewee, they won't be as compelled to give you detailed answers.



How to Shoot

A lot of what you need to know about shooting a documentary interview will be very similar, if not the same, as shooting a fictional drama but there are certain things to keep aware of.

- **Composition and the Rule of Thirds-** When thinking about what shot to use for the interview, think about the rule of thirds: dividing the frame into thirds, both horizontally and vertically, and positioning the interviewee at the intersection of the lines or along one of the lines.
- **Your Subject's Eye Line-** You want the interviewee's eye line to be looking just past the camera: that way the audience can connect with the subject by seeing their eyes but the interviewee isn't making anything too tense by staring directly into the camera!
- **Think About the Background-** Make sure there isn't anything distracting behind the interviewee that will distract your audience when watching the interview. You could even put in a prop or two that has some relevance to your subject.
- **Shoot B-Roll Footage-** The whole documentary can't just be interview footage; your audience will get bored very quickly. You need to capture B-Roll footage: supplemental footage that is intercut with your interview footage. These shots could be of your interviewee going about their daily lives or doing something that is relevant to the subject you are exploring.

Shooting with a Mobile Device

Nowadays you don't need an expensive DSLR camera to shoot films. Nearly everyone has a phone that will shoot HD footage and a lot of people even have mobile devices that shoot 4K! More and more production companies are using mobile devices to shoot projects from news programs to web series to full feature-length movies. You can use the camera application that your mobile device already has but there are also plenty of free applications you can download that will mimic the display and features of an expensive DSLR camera. For iPhone and iPad users there is MAVIS and for Android users you can download Cinema FV-5 Lite.



Gavin Spoons - NUA

Conclusion:

You can never predict exactly what will happen when shooting a documentary but knowing how to conduct interviews and how to shoot an interview alongside B-Roll footage will make sure you are prepared as you can be. Whatever application you end up using to help with shooting, have a play around with the functions available and do some test shoots before going into production. Have fun with it!

Further resources:

[Screenskills](#)

[BFI Film Academy](#)

[Doc Society](#)

Useful Links

Creative Careers: <https://discovercreative.careers/#/>

UCAS: <https://www.ucas.com/>



NORWICH
UNIVERSITY
OF THE ARTS



[@norwichuniarts](#)



www.nua.ac.uk