

MAKE A DOCUMENTARY

Ian Hunt reveals how anyone can make their own documentary on a tight budget and with the minimum of kit

Why not have a go at making a documentary? It could be easier than you might think. There is generally no script, just an outline. There will need to be a shot list, but there are usually no actors, and you can make one with the minimum of kit. In fact, all you need is your DSLR and a tripod to get started.

Where to Start? Research an idea; find a subject that you think will be interesting both personally and to a target audience. Alternatively, go and find a client who needs to tell a story. Use your networks to find an ideal project.

At University, we are encouraged to work with external organisations to get experience of working on real projects and briefs. For the 2012 London Olympics, I was lucky enough to be working with Southwest's Inspire Programme, filming an Arts & Sport festival. Thanks to the success of that project I had the opportunity to work on producing a documentary for another project, also awarded the Inspire Mark - the 'Weymouth Bay' Coastal Access Project.

As this is a client driven project, the first thing I had to do was to meet the client and ask a series of questions. For example what is the project, who is going to want to see the final documentary and what are the key points that they want to get across. In many respects, it's the answer

to who will be the target audience for the documentary that is the most important, as this sets the theme. An example would be if the audience is predicted to be young schoolchildren, then you will need to keep the language simple so that they can understand it.

Interviews

Chances are, you will be conducting a series of interviews. You'll need to prepare a list of questions that you will ask the interviewee - remember to keep these simple and make sure they are not closed questions. I always get the interviewee to repeat back the question so that the



The Weymouth coast and stills from Ian's documentary





audience knows they are answering a question, otherwise this would be confusing. Conduct interviews in an environment that they will find comfortable, but balance that with production value. By this, I mean if you have the choice between filming them in a garden shed or a Cathedral, choose the Cathedral for obvious reasons. Always pick experts as your interviewee, rather than someone you just met on the street. We've all seen the news reports where they've managed to find a member of the

public who has no idea of what is going on, but happened to be in the area. Keep it interesting, think about the backdrop behind your subject, try and avoid plain backgrounds, but at the same time watch for inappropriate objects in the shot. Film whenever possible in natural light. DSLR's are quite good at working with low light levels, but watch for noise and colour balance in very low light conditions.

A-Roll
The A-Roll is usually going to be the footage from the interviews or of subjects directly related to the documentary. For example, if your documentary is about local transport you should show footage of buses and trains. The thing about footage of interviews is that, generally, there is only a limited amount of time that you can engage your audience before they lose interest; this is where the B-Roll comes in.

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An interview still from Ian Hunt's documentary (A Roll) along side a scenic still (an example of B Roll)



B-Roll
Basically, the B-Roll is everything else. Generally it helps if this footage is related to the documentary subject, but not necessarily. While conducting the interview look for things to film that confirm their relationship to the subject. For example, bookshelves filled with reference books on the subject, certificates on a wall, or maybe just photographs. You can also use B-Roll footage to show the passage of time, for example, the sun rapidly

setting using time lapse. Time lapse is a good way of showing something happening very slowly in real time, for example, over a period of hours or longer in just a few minutes on screen. Don't limit yourself to images that are only relevant to the subject - sometimes things just work. For example, in my documentary I managed to film some dogs playing on the cliffs and this, arguably, is the most remembered scene from the whole project.

Location filming
For this, my first foray into documentary, I had to shoot on location, in fact several locations along the Dorset coastline. As I was working on my own it was down to me what kit I carried and to make sure I had everything I would need with me. It would have been great to take everything, but climbing up steep hills carrying a tripod and camera would be hard enough so carrying anything non-essential had to be avoided. So what should you take? A choice of lenses, or at least a good zoom lens, some filters (graduated filters for landscapes), backup batteries and, most importantly, take lots of water to help keep you going.



Weymouth and Portland, where Ian's documentary footage was shot

A tripod is essential when filming in the open and a substantial one is probably needed. Most of the tripods, which are easy to carry are going to be too lightweight to remain steady in windy situations. However, I've found you can sometimes get away with this by keeping the camera low to the ground or position it on something off the ground so that you do not have to fully extend the tripod legs. Standing to one side to block the worst of the wind sometimes works, but not if the wind is coming directly from the front. Remember to turn off lens stabilisation when the camera is tripod mounted - you can hear the lens constantly moving and this may be picked up by the microphone.

Location sound
When filming in the open, wind is your enemy when it comes to sound recording. Even the gentlest of breezes can create that booming noise on your soundtrack, so protect your microphone from this by filming from sheltered locations. This is even more





important if, like most DSLR's, there's no way of monitoring the sound being recorded. My own personal experience is that the dead cat wind shield on your camera mounted microphone will have limited success. They help to limit the wind noise, but they do not eliminate it. This is even more of a problem when trying to conduct an interview in the open - remember the golden rule - have the microphone as close as possible to the subject. I use a camera mounted Rode Videomic, but this struggles when recording interviews in the open air on location. I've since had more success using radio

microphones or if your budget will not extend to one of those, buy a cheaper Lavalier microphone and a 5-metre cable extension.

Editing and titles

Editing for documentary in many cases will be simpler than for other genre videos. Generally there are limited reasons for using any special effects - a simple dissolve fade between clips does the job. My preference is to insert B-Roll video clips for transitions between clips of the interviews or scene changes, for example, different locations. For this documentary I used video clips of

sailing boats moving from left to right to provide continuation between the clips, even though they are not sequences of the same sailing boat, it still works well as a means of carrying the audience from scene to scene and location to location.

Use music where appropriate. It's unlikely that a documentary will need a music soundtrack, but an exception to that maybe a wildlife documentary. You may also need to record a separate narration in order to explain to the audience the significance of what they are seeing on screen for those clips for which you have no soundtrack from



the interviews to use for this purpose.

Next, generate the opening and closing credits. It's surprising how important this can be and take particular care not to miss anyone out. I asked the client to produce the list of contributors, but I still had to add people or credit organisations into subsequent edits. Another use of titles is to use these as transitions between video clips, which will also have the additional benefit of introducing the next scene or location. Handy if you do not have a sound bite or narration for the upcoming video clip. Using a title can be enough to inform the audience of what the following clip is all about. Contemporary editing practices call for rapid cuts between scenes. Transitions are usually instantaneous, with little time for a short dissolve.

Audience previewing

Preview your creation to an audience; in my case this was the client. The client wanted some changes made, which meant editing out scenes, changing the order, or dropping more scenes in, which may mean shooting additional footage. If there's no client involved ask a group of friends to watch and then ask them for their viewpoints afterwards. Or ask them to complete a short questionnaire. It's surprising what you may have missed, especially after all those hours staring at the screen when editing.

Summary

Do your research - getting this right is important to the success of the documentary, and make sure you have proof from several sources before committing to film. Getting

the facts wrong will effectively make the documentary worthless and damage reputations, including your own.

When filming on location, check the weather forecast, travel times and facilities at the place you are visiting. Be prepared to re-schedule for bad weather, especially here in the UK.

Above all, it's very prudent to get help - really this can be the most important decision you can make. An extra pair of hands to help carry your gear, hold a photographic reflector or microphone boom can make all the difference.

For your first documentary, keep it short - 15 minutes is a good target but be prepared, as for even such a relatively short time you will be shooting hours and hours of footage for the B-Roll. ■

|| GET HELP... AN EXTRA PAIR OF HANDS TO HELP CARRY YOUR GEAR, HOLD A PHOTOGRAPHIC REFLECTOR OR MICROPHONE BOOM ||



View the documentary at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CBOGW5MQswle>