

HANDOUT: 11 HELPFUL TIPS FOR MAKING A DOCUMENTARY

1. Always write the script before you start creating the documentary!

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
 - 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 okay, just don't take the narration!)

3. Do a storyboard so that you know you have the visuals to support your narration

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

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

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.

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

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

8. Don't go crazy with the transitions

- At some point, they just get annoying
- Mix it up, use a variety of transitions, and concentrate on using the less noticeable ones

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
 - a. Use instrumental music only, unless there is some lyrical music that relates to the topic and is used unobtrusively
 - b. Check www.freeplaymusic.com for copyright-clean, instrumental music that can be tailored to the length you want
 - c. Classical music is also good
- Balance music volume so that it is not competing with the narration

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

- Credits do NOT need to be your complete bibliography. Credits will be much briefer, usually only listing major sources of information.

11. Make backup copies of your project and make sure it plays on a variety of formats and machines.

- Check with your teacher or event coordinator to double-check what technology is going to be available at the competition.
- History Day recommends that all students bring their documentaries as DVDs formatted to play on a standard, non-computer based DVD player (like the one attached to a TV set). Remember that this is different than saving your documentary on a DVD. When you format your documentary as a DVD, you should be able to play it on any DVD player.
- Test your documentary on different DVD players, including those not attached to a computer.
- If your project does NOT play on a standard DVD player, you may need to bring equipment with you to the competition.