



What to look out for when doing an interview for a documentary



If they have to choose between documentaries and fiction most schools prefer the latter. Maybe they believe it is easier from the perspective of shooting and implementation. Then again, maybe they want to share a story or an incident.

A documentary, beyond the collection of photographs, videos or any other kind of resources it needs, or rather demands a face-to-face interview. The people interviewed might be scientists, witnesses of an incident we are describing, or might have been involved in it one way or another. They are the ones who give authenticity to the story, giving it details and backbone.

So we have to give a lot of attention to these conversations, beyond the plot of the documentary. The way we shoot them (technically) and the way we handle the conversation with the interviewee is important.

Let's examine the technical matters first.

There is no doubt that sound is the most important part in an interview. No matter how complete an interview is in terms of meaning, if the sound is not clear, the result will be indifferent.



- Try to record your interviews indoor in order to avoid annoying sounds (air, voices, noise etc.)
- Always have a few seconds of recording before hand with the natural sound of the place. It will be needed in the editing of the interview.
- The best way to record is a tiny microphone called lavalier. But if you have another microphone you can use it, just make sure that the sound is loud and clear.
- The interviewee should be properly lit. In order to achieve that we can put him/her in front of a window for natural light. Turn their face towards the window so that it is fully lit or with a profile to the window in order to have a contrast. To reduce this contrast put a big white surface on the side less lit.



Side Lit

Front Lit

- The reporter who asks the questions should sit opposite the interviewee.
- The camera should always be stable on a tripod and facing the interviewee's eyes, a bit more right or left from the reporter.
- The frame is our choice. A medium shot is suggested, as it can catch possible hand or body movement. In addition, a medium shot shows some of the surroundings, giving information about our story.

Let's see now how to control an interview.

- It's the interviewee who is on the starring role not the interviewer. So, we should let him talk and not interrupt him. It's



important to make sure he has nothing more to add before asking him the next question.

- In case the interviewee is stressed, we could start the conversation from somewhere else. Asking him for example, what he did today or something that he can say at ease.
- The questions we ask, should NOT be answered with a yes or no. We are interested in the development of the answer. So we could start with a phrase like “Tell us”. For example, “Tell us about your childhood” or “Tell us about the event”.
- If he remembers something sad for him, we do not cut the recording or ask another question. We let emotions develop too. If there’s nothing else to say, we go on.
- We never dictate the answer.
- We should always remember that an interview is like a discussion and not like an interrogation. In other words it should be just like our grandpa telling us a story.
- In case the sound or the picture can’t be recorded, we should stop recording until we fix the problem.
- In the end we may ask the one who is interviewed if he/she wants to add something.

The best part of the documentary is that you don’t know what will come out of the interviews. From the beginning be sure you ask the appropriate questions and the camera is fully charged and has a lot of free disk space!