

# HANDOUT: 11 HELPFUL TIPS FOR MAKING A DOCUMENTARY

**1. Remember, your documentary must have a thesis statement that you prove, just like any of the other project categories.**

**2. Always write the script before you start creating the documentary!**

**3. 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](http://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.