

How To Interview Someone for a Video Documentary

Prepare your questions

Think ahead about the type of questions you want to ask your interviewee. What kind of information are you looking for from this particular person and what are the type of questions that will best get them to give you the information you're looking for? No need to go crazy. 5-10 questions is usually enough.

Avoid "yes" or "no" answers

Your questions should be asked in such a way that you won't get "yes" or "no" answers. You need your documentary interviewees to give you substantive answers that you can use in your video edits. Instead of "Are you happy with the outcome of the court case?"

Ask, "What is your response to the outcome of today's court case?"

Prepare, but be spontaneous

Even though you have prepared questions in advance, allow yourself to veer off from questions if the interviewee says something interesting or unexpected that you'd like to explore further. Sometimes the unplanned "spontaneous" questions & answers create the best moments.

Get the interviewee comfortable

When the video camera rolls, ask easy questions to warm them up. Ask them what they had for breakfast, where they are from, how many kids in their family.. anything to get them talking and comfortable. This is a key interviewing tip!

Don't give out specific questions in advance

I cannot stress this point strongly enough. It's perfectly acceptable to give someone a general idea of what the interview will be about, but do not give them your list of questions. If you do, they will try to memorize their answers in advance and you will lose spontaneity and freshness. Your interview will end up feeling stale, unauthentic and rehearsed.

Have them repeat your question

This is a great idea, especially if you plan to have no narration for your documentary. Get the person to repeat back your question in their answer. This will help you with the video editing and storytelling later during the editing process. For example, you ask, "How are you feeling?" The interviewee says, "How am I feeling? I'm feeling excited!"

Proper positioning of interviewee

If you are the person both shooting AND interviewing, the person may end up looking into the video camera, which gives the feeling of a personal and direct connection with the person talking. However, the off-camera approach is most common. The interviewer sits or stands right next to the camera so that the interviewee is looking just off camera. You get your best results if the interviewer (you) is standing right next to the camera, that way you can see the full face of the person you're interviewing and not a profile, which can be unattractive and distracting to the viewer because you can't see their eyes and facial expressions very well.

Keep your mouth shut

Stay quiet when the other person is talking. You don't want to hear yourself in the background. (Watch out for the "hmmmm", "Oh right..") Just ask the question and then keep quiet. It's good to nod, and make gentle facial expressions, just no sound. Unless of course, YOU are part of the story and the camera has both of you in the shot.

Ask for final comment

Here's a great video interviewing tip: at the end of the interview, always ask the person if they have any final thoughts. Ask them if there was anything you missed. This can sometimes bring out some great information you hadn't thought to ask about.

Don't stop filming when the interview is "over"

Especially when you have someone who is nervous and never got quite comfortable with the interview. When you're done with your official questions, say "OK, that's the end of the interview." Make sure the camera continues to roll at this point because often the conversation will continue. Psychologically, the person no longer feels the "pressure" of the interview and will loosen up. This is the time I have often gotten the best quotes of the interview!

Interviewing tips for documentaries

Bonus Interviewing Tips

Have Energy!

If you are bored and reserved, your interview will emulate you and you will end up with a boring interview. So create energy within yourself when asking the questions and your energy will rub off and help create a more dynamic interview.

Ask How They "Feel"

The best part about a film vs a book or article is that you can "see", "hear", "feel" what's happening on screen. You are not completely utilizing the film medium if you are just relaying FACTS. Film is about sharing an emotional ride with your audience. So when you're interviewing your subjects, make sure to include questions that get to the emotion. "How do you feel about..." "What's in your heart about this issue..."

Be Curious & Open

Your ultimate goal with your interviews is to get the subject to "perform" at their best. What does that mean? You want them at their most "natural" "authentic" state where their true selves feel comfortable to come through. They need to be relaxed and "in the flow" and not self-conscious. Don't come at them with a judgmental spirit or hard-core agenda.. try to be genuinely open to understanding where they're coming from. Even if that person's beliefs or values are completely contradictory to your own, you **MUST** approach that person with a genuine, warm and open heart that will make them feel "safe" giving you their most personal insights. If you can achieve this atmosphere of trust and human connection, you will get amazing interviews.

Follow these simple interviewing tips and you'll be on your way to making great documentaries!