

Documentary Project Proposals

Due, beginning of class, Thursday, September 12

Submit a brief, typed, synopsis of 2 ideas for documentary projects. (One paragraph each is sufficient.) Each series should be social in context, involving or related to people in society. Landscape or commercial work is unacceptable.

Start with a commitment statement: just a subject, a verb, and an object. Having this will help you keep focus. Then discuss: shooting locations/s, organizations, individuals involved and the narrative line. The narrative should contain some conflict, complications or tension and the characters involved.

Example: From Dai Sugano's video "Uprooted," about the destruction of a mobile home park by developers.

Commitment statement:

Two neighboring families (subject)
uprooted (verb)
from their homes (object)

narrative line

introduction of the people
what residents try to do to stop the destruction of the park

conflict or tension

whether the homes will be saved
what will happen to people if they are not saved

characters

selected resident families
the developers

Consider:

- Look for a story, not an issue. This almost always means working with either a group of people or an individual.
- Can the subject's story be told as a visual narrative? Is the subject visually interesting?
- Projects should be in a location that can be visited multiple times. A weekend visit to a distant location makes creating a successful documentary unlikely.
- Projects should not be too broad in nature.
Example, poverty is too broad a topic to develop into a strong documentary. What about poverty can be discussed with images -- hunger, housing, joblessness? Even these issues are too broad for a documentary film. The concept could be further narrowed to some aspect of aspect of hunger such as: a food bank, a school's nutrition program, an organic farm, etc.
- What special equipment is required for the project? Does the film require supplemental lighting, mics, multiple camera bodies or specific lenses?
- Does the project require special access or permissions?
While documentary projects don't always need model/property releases, get permission when working with minors, on private property, in hospitals, courtrooms, or schools. If you are working with 1 individual they must be willing to let you into their life at an in-depth level for the project to be effective. People may be willing to participate, until the film becomes more personal or time consuming than they anticipated. Make sure the subject is aware of the type of access and time the project will require.
- What does the subject represent?
The best projects look at small subjects as a way of discussing a more universal idea or truth. Don't decide exactly what the broad perspective is ahead of time, but be aware of this important concept.