



DOCUMENTARY STORY FOCUSING EXERCISES

For Character-Driven and Essay-Style Docs

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Exercise 1: Questions to Focus Story Concepts for Character-Driven Documentaries

Who is the protagonist and what do they want?

What is the inciting incident that kicks off the story? Is it captured in your footage, or will you recreate it? If so, how?

What is the film's central question? (It's always some version of "Will the protagonist get _____ (their goal)?")

What obstacles stand in the protagonist's way? (Name three.)

What are the possible climaxes?

Does the climax answer the central question?

What is the resolution or denouement? How is the protagonist's life different?



Keeping Your Viewers
Glued to the Screen

Exercise 2: Defining the three acts in three sentences (for Character-Driven Docs).

Act 1 _____ (protagonist) wants
_____ (goal) when _____ (event
that gives rise to the goal).

Act 2 In pursuit of _____ (goal), the protagonist encounters _____,
_____ and _____ (obstacles, complications, challenges—
place in order of escalating difficulty).

Act 3 The protagonist finally reaches/doesn't reaches their goal after
_____ (climactic scene) happens.

Exercise 3: Crafting the Essay-Style Doc

Part 1: Stating the Thesis (Film opening)

1. What is the simple, central concept you are trying to convey? (It should be simple idea, such as “global warming is real”.)
2. Turn this idea into a question, for example, “Is global warming real?”
3. Decide whether you film will make propose a central thesis, or ask a central question. Which works best for you film?

Part 2: Making the Arguments (Bulk of Film)

4. List the arguments that support your central thesis. (If you are posing a central question rather than advancing a central idea, then list the possible answers to that question.)
5. Now place your arguments (or answers) in order of importance, with the most impactful one last.



Part 3: Defining the Meaning (End of Film)

6. Now that you've proven your central thesis, or explored possible answers to your central question, what does it all mean? What implications does it have for today, or the future? (For example, "global warming is real", and that means "we need to do something about it now".)