



HOW TO HOLD A SUCCESSFUL ROUGH CUT SCREENING

Getting feedback on your rough cut is critical to the post-production flow. This guide will explain the steps to prepare for and conduct a successful rough cut screening.

One thing to keep in mind: if you showed a perfectly edited film (for example, *Encounters At The End of the World*) to a test audience and asked for their feedback on your rough cut, they would instinctively find something wrong with it. In other words, people tend to think giving feedback means pinpointing what's not up to snuff. This guide will stress the importance of getting feedback on what's *already working* with your film, as well as what's not. As a director, you need to know that.

PREPARATION

Who to Invite

There are three types of people you should show your rough cut to: 1) experts on the topic who serve as your advisors; 2) seasoned documentary professionals, and 3) people representative of your film's target audience.

Each audience should be handled differently. This guide is geared more toward showing your film to a group of everyday people who will likely want to see your film when it's released. But let me first say a word about the first two groups. Experts on your subject matter, including any advisors, should watch your documentary mid-post production with an eye out for accuracy and balance. If you need to do some key fact checking, or if your essay-style doc depends on an argument that one of your advisors deems invalid, you'll want to handle these problems now--before heading into the fine cut.

As for documentary professionals, including filmmakers, editors and story editors (consultants), this group of peers should watch your rough cut at their own special screening, so they can talk shop without alienating anyone or having to dumb down their use of terms like "protagonist", "story arc", etc. For your third group, roughly a dozen people who are representative of your documentary's intended audience, your approach will require special care outlined in this

Where to Hold the Screening

While it's OK to give advisors and documentary professionals a copy or link to your rough cut and ask them to get back to you, filmmakers with a budget for screenings may want to rent out a screening room at a local filmmaking agency.

This arrangement builds esteem for your film, encourages invitees to take the event seriously, and creates a nice pre-release buzz for your film. In addition, filmmaking professionals will appreciate the face-to-face networking opportunity. For our third group, the everyday people who will see your film, it's fine to hold a screening in the living room of a friend who has agreed to host for you. In fact, a host is advisable, given that you will likely be a bundle of nerves. Your job will be to listen (more on that later) so don't burden yourself with the traditional tasks of hosting: taking coats, offering refreshments, clean up.

Helpers

Enlist your staff and friends to help out. You'll need a greeter, cook, host and clean up crew. You may also need audio/video technical assistance if your gathering is in a screening venue. I highly recommend getting a note-taker. Having someone other than yourself take notes during the verbal feedback part of the screening allows you to stay present to absorb all the comments.

Sign In Table

A sign in table at the front door serves two functions: it gears the guests toward the seriousness of the event, and it pads your mailing list with the people who are likely to give donations and who will want to know about your film's release.

Refreshments

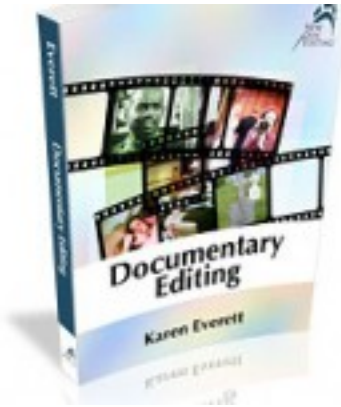
Feed people. Before the screening. Not a lot, just some light refreshments (protein will help keep people alert) to encourage conviviality and boost blood sugar for the requisite concentration. I advise against serving alcohol, again because you want people to stay mentally sharp, but if you do serve alcoholic beverages just open a bottle of wine rather than mix a blender of cocktails. Appearances matter, and this is not a party.

Transcripts

A complete and accurate, word-for-word transcript of your rough cut is expected at screenings for advisors and filmmaking professionals. Ideally the transcript is formatted in a way that is easy to follow, for example, sound bites might be in all caps, or you might have the dialogue on the right side of the page and images listed on the left side. Include page numbers for easy reference. For the third group, average folks, a transcript is not required.

Questionnaires

Before your screening, write up a 1-2 page questionnaire that you will hand out to your guests directly after the screening. An anonymous questionnaire will solicit people's truest feelings; and they won't have to worry about hurting your feelings. Begin the questionnaire with an open-ended question such as "What did you think of the film?" For the second question, I like to ask, "What did you like about this film?" or "What's working well in the film?" Since people tend to focus on giving criticism and forget that you need to know what's working well, it's important to include this. And it's also helpful for the filmmaker's delicate ego to have positive feedback near the top of the questionnaire. Ask how the film could be improved, and then ask about anything you are specifically concerned with, for example, "Do you like the music?" "What did you think of the old man character" "Did the film take too long to get going?"



"Documentary Editing" by Karen Everett

DURING THE SCREENING

Before the Film Plays

Greet, thank and mingle with each guest for 30 minutes before the screening. Then ask your host to announce that the screening will begin and guests should get settled. Have your host introduce you, and then it's your time to shine. Since this will be the only time during the evening when you will be seriously transmitting information rather than receiving it, so I recommend practicing this 5-minute introduction.

First, thank your guests and let them know how valuable their feedback is. Explain that you need to know what's working in the film as well as what's not working. You want to know what they like about the film. Explain that you specifically want to know if there was anything in the cut that was *confusing*.

If there are any significant materials missing from the rough cut, let your audience know. For example, "We're using temporary music and narration, not the final." Or, "We're going to shoot one more interview with an expert which doesn't appear in this cut." Explain that because this is a rough cut you haven't finessed the edits, music, or many other little things. Then stop. Many filmmakers over-apologize for the shape of their rough cut, and test audiences don't want to hear it. They want to get on with the show!

Finally, tell your audience how long the cut is and inform them that immediately after the screening you will be handing out anonymous questionnaires. The questionnaires are designed to solicit their honest, first-impact impressions. They should use this quiet time to reflect,

write and share their feedback on what worked and didn't work. Ask them if there are any questions and then press play.

After the Film Plays

When the film is done screening, turn off the TV, raise the lights and have someone immediately hand out the questionnaires and pens. Quickly stand in front of your group, quietly thank them for their attention and ask them to take 15-20 minutes to give their feedback on the questionnaires. Explain that this is an introspective time and that there will be a group discussion afterwards. If they need to use the restrooms, that's fine. Keep your announcement brief. Your audience needs to hear their own thoughts, not yours.

After fifteen minutes ask if anyone needs more time, say you'll allow five minutes more, and then begin the group discussion. Remind people that it's very important for you to know what's working as well as what's not working and suggest that they begin their comments with something they liked about the film. Throw out an opening question to get things started such as, "What did you guys think of the film?" Then sit back and listen. If you are a first-time filmmaker, listening may be the hardest part of the evening for you. Your instinct will be, understandably, to explain your reasons for doing things, explain the stories behind certain scenes, and most deadly of all, explain what something means (and why your confused viewer shouldn't be confused).

To help you curb that tendency to justify your rough cut, keep in mind the following key observations. First, if your viewer is confused or if they didn't like something, they are right. You can't argue with someone's taste or lack of understanding. Do you really want to waste your time justifying and explaining what you meant to convey in a scene? Of course not! You certainly won't be able to do that with the tens of thousands of future viewers. So say "thank you" and ask for clarification if you're confused by their comment, and then shut up. Let your note taker take notes.

The second thing to keep in mind is that your test audiences are usually *right* about what's *not* working in the film. They are rarely right *about how to fix it*, according to Jon Else, a veteran filmmaker. So graciously accept their feedback (this is *valuable* information) and know that later you and your expert post-production team will tackle solving the editorial problems. Don't take viewers' fix-it advice too seriously unless your viewers are seasoned filmmaking professionals. But do pay attention to any problem that's mentioned more than once.

Third, remember that people from whom you solicit feedback can't help but put most of their energy and attention onto what's not working. They think that's their job. Knowing this, you can tell the defensive little voice in your head to cool it and keep mum. Allow 20-40 minutes for discussion. Half way through announce how much time is left and ask to hear from people who haven't spoken, especially if a few people have been dominating the discussion. Be on the alert for discussion dominators, because they can easily skew the group-think into a certain "take" on the film (fortunately you have their first impressions already documented on the questionnaires). If you feel certain voices are dominating or skewing the discussion, thank them and then change the subject. For example, "I'd really like to know what people thought about the pacing. Did the film move along at a good pace? Were there times where you felt bored? If you haven't spoken yet, I'd love to hear your thoughts."

At the appointed time, graciously thank everyone for their valuable feedback. At this point, the host should take over, invite people to have more food, or not, and tell people when the gathering will end. I suggest ending fairly quickly because you've still got some serious work head of you.

After the Guests Leave

In an ideal world, your clean-up team dives into tidying the house while you and possibly a trusted co-worker squirrel away to review the questionnaires. No doubt you're anxious to read viewers' first impressions but if you can't find the privacy to do this, then wait until you get home. Remember as you head into this exciting and vulnerable moment, your viewers are going to stress what's not working and you as a human being are likely to focus 90% of your attention on the negative comments. So I suggest reading your questionnaires with a grain of salt and every time someone says something good about your film, read it twice, *feel* it, circle it, let it sink in, congratulate yourself and then move on.



The purpose of this initial reading is to get an overall sense of reaction to your film and satisfy your insane curiosity. It's important to limit the evening's reading to that. It's been a long day, likely full of emotional ups and downs. Bottom line: this is not the time to start solving problems. Your job is to get a general impression of the state of your film. Tomorrow you will focus on troubleshooting structural issues and whether or not you need a story editor (consultant) to help.

For that, you'll want to check out [The Story Doctoring Kit for Documentary Filmmakers](#), which shows you how to use your rough cut feedback to solve your film's problems and edit a riveting fine cut.

Karen Everett, owner of New Doc Editing™, is an award-winning editor and story editor who helps documentary directors convey their vision by adapting screenwriting techniques to films about real life. She has edited and consulted on dozens of award-winning documentaries. During the past fifteen years, Karen Everett has been teaching editing at UC Berkeley's Graduate School of Journalism, the top-ranked documentary program in America. Karen has directed and produced five documentaries, including the critically-acclaimed PBS biography *Shall Not Be Removed: The Life of Marlon Riggs*. The latest, *Women in Love*, is available through Netflix. To learn more about Karen's editing and story editing services, schedule a free consultation by emailing info@newdocediting.com.