

# DOCUMENTARY MAKING

For Digital  
Humanists

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Darren R. Reid and Brett Sanders, *Documentary Making for Digital Humanists*. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0255>

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Open Field Guides Series, vol. 2 | ISSN: 2514-2496 (Print); 2514 250X (Online)

ISBN Paperback: 9781800641945

ISBN Hardback: 9781800641952

ISBN Digital (PDF): 9781800641969

ISBN Digital ebook (epub): 9781800641976

ISBN Digital ebook (mobi): 9781800641983

ISBN Digital (XML): 9781800641990

DOI: 10.11647/OBP.0255

Cover image: Photo by Nathan Dumlao on Unsplash at <https://unsplash.com/photos/McztPB7Uqx8>. Cover design by Anna Gatti.

## 17. The Two-Page Film School

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Fig. 54 Watch the video lesson on conducting interviews. <https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12434/c9b0163c>



If you are setting out to make your first film, the amount of practical advice available can feel overwhelming. In this book, much of this advice has been distilled down to the basics, but it can be distilled yet further. As *Sin City* (2005) director Robert Rodriguez once put it, ‘everything you need to know about filmmaking... You [can] learn it in ten minutes.’ That is a generous assessment, but Rodriguez was really referring to the technical aspects of the production process, something he was keen to demystify throughout much of his career. Rodriguez believes it is possible to learn the necessary filmmaking techniques in just ten minutes because he understands that there are a core number of rules which, if followed, will allow for the capture of competent, usable footage. Everything else is practice, dedication, and imagination.

Rodriguez tells us that mastering the technical aspects of the process is not the time-consuming part. It is developing one's own voice and vision that takes time; indeed, Rodriguez spent most of his childhood learning how to be a filmmaker.<sup>1</sup> He was not, however, willing to allow the intimidating mechanics of filmmaking stop him from transitioning from hobbyist to professional. In that spirit, this chapter distils the core lessons of the preceding chapters into a simple, two-page film school — the ultimate distillation of the preceding chapters' practical advice. In the above video lesson, we will take you step-by-step through the process of setting up a one-camera interview. Below, we have curated the core lessons you need to remember when you are in the field:

1. Set your camera up to shoot at 24 fps and, if you can change the shutter speed, set it to 1/50 or 1/48.
2. Leave the white balance on automatic unless you want to change the colour profile of the image you are capturing.
3. The more you zoom in to an object (using an optical zoom), the more you will flatten your footage — objects in the distance will appear much closer to those in the foreground the more you zoom in.
4. Download a light-meter app for your smartphone. This will allow you to aim your phone at a scene and it will then tell you the settings that you need to put into your camera. If you are using a DSLR as your main camera, make sure you lock the shutter speed (in both the light-metre app and the camera) at 1/50. The app will then tell you what settings you need to change on your camera in order to capture correctly exposed footage.
5. Have your subject's face angled towards your main light source.
6. To backlight a subject, place them in front of a bright light source and adjust the exposure on your camera until you achieve your desired effect.

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1 Robert Rodriguez, *Rebel Without a Crew: Or How a 23-Year-Old Filmmaker with \$7000 Became a Hollywood Player* (London: Penguin, 1996).

7. Never rely on the internal microphone in your camera. Get a good-quality lavalier microphone (which start as low as \$30–50) which can record directly to your smartphone. For clearer run-and-gun sound (when you cannot mic up a subject), buy a directional microphone that you can attach to your camera.
8. Always stabilise your footage. Use a tripod for a stationary image or some kind of rig (including a folded-up tripod) to allow you to go handheld.
9. Double or triple check to make sure you have focused on the correct part of each frame you are shooting.
10. Compose your shots using the ‘rule of thirds’ as your guide.
11. Watch DVDs with director commentaries — every one of them is a micro film school.
12. Use your limitations to your advantage. Problems require imaginative solutions to overcome them. Respond with the equipment and resources at hand in the best way that you can manage. In other words, think on your feet and be prepared to adapt. You do not need expensive equipment to make a compelling film. You need to use your resources, whatever they are, in the most effective and imaginative way possible.

