

Documentary Editing — Workbook

This workbook turns the course into a project you actually finish. Work through one section per module, using your own footage where possible, and complete the templates as you go. By the end you will have a logged project, a tested paper-cut, a paced fine cut, and a clean delivery package.

From Hard Drive to Story Map

Set up an editable project, log your footage, and define the story before you cut.

Checklist: Project setup and backup

- Created the 8-folder structure (Footage, Audio, B-roll, Archival, Music_SFX, Graphics, Project, Exports)
- Confirmed 3 copies of all footage on 2 media types with 1 offsite (3-2-1 rule)
- Chose a single sequence frame rate and conformed mixed sources to it
- Generated proxies and confirmed 4K footage plays in real time
- Imported all interview audio (lav and boom) and synced to picture

Worksheet: Footage logging sheet

Fill one row per keeper clip as you review transcripts. Color-code story-critical (green), useful (yellow), and emotional (red). This becomes your selects index for the paper-cut.

Clip name / file

Timecode in

Timecode out

Character / source

The quote or moment

Theme tag

Color rating (green/yellow/red)

Technical issues (audio dropout, noise, etc.)

Exercise: Write your logline and find the story

Before assembling anything, force the story into language. Write each item out fully, then test it against your footage.

- Write a one-to-two sentence logline naming the protagonist, their want, the obstacle, and the stakes.

- State the difference between your subject (surface topic) and your story (deeper change or question).

- Name the single central dramatic question the film raises early and answers at the end.

- List the three to five themes your film is really about.

Exercise: Choose a structural model

Match your material to a structure rather than defaulting to chronology. Justify the choice in writing.

- Which structure fits best: three-act, character arc, question-and-answer, chronological, or thematic? Why?

- Where will you plant the central question, and where will it be answered?

- Which scene is your strongest, and where would it land in this structure?

Paper-Cut and the Radio Edit

Build and pressure-test the story on paper and in sound before committing pictures.

Worksheet: Paper-cut scene cards

Draft one card per scene in intended order. Fill these in a document so you can rearrange in seconds. Read the whole thing aloud and time it.

Scene number and working title

What this scene does for the story (purpose)

Quotes in order with timecodes

B-roll / verite notes (bracketed)

Question raised or answered by this scene

Transition into the next scene

Missing coverage or facts needed

Exercise: Pressure-test on paper

Read your paper-cut as an audience that knows nothing. Be ruthless; nothing is built yet, so cutting costs nothing.

- Is every new person introduced before they speak? Mark any who are not.

- Where does the middle sag? Try moving your strongest scene earlier and reread.

- Cut your second-favorite scene entirely and reread; did the film get better or worse?

- Did an outside reader follow it without confusion? Note exactly where they got lost.

Checklist: Radio edit and string-out

- Built a timeline of spoken word only, no B-roll or music
- Trimmed ums, false starts, and rambling while protecting natural breathing
- Made most cuts at the end of a complete thought, on the sentence downturn
- Listened with the monitor off and marked every spot attention drifted
- Produced a string-out, then tightened it into a shaped assembly

Exercise: Standalone statements and ethics

Audit your interview bites for usable, self-contained statements and log any rearrangements honestly.

- List three fragments that depend on a hidden question, and rewrite each as a standalone statement you can build from available pieces.

• Identify each Frankenbite you created and confirm it preserves the speaker's original meaning.

• For one compressed statement, ask: would the subject recognize themselves in this cut?

Pacing, Rhythm, and the Cut

Shape energy, convert hard cuts to sound-led transitions, and make every scene earn its place.

Worksheet: Energy curve map

Map the emotional energy of your assembly across its runtime so the saggy middle becomes visible. Rate each segment's energy from 1 (quiet) to 5 (peak).

Scene / segment

Approx. start time

Approx. runtime

Energy rating (1-5)

Information density (low/med/high)

Fix needed (tighten, raise question, relocate, add breath)

Exercise: Apply pacing principles

Use contrast and breathing room deliberately. Apply Murch's priority order: emotion, story, rhythm, continuity.

- Find one dense, fast sequence and identify the quiet beat you will place right after it.
- Find one emotional admission and extend the pause after it; describe what the audience does in that silence.
- Where is your information density too high? Name the facts you can cut or delay.

Checklist: Sound-led transition pass

- Converted abrupt straight cuts into J-cuts (audio leads) where introducing a new voice or place
- Used L-cuts (audio trails) to hold interview audio over B-roll of what is described
- Added an audio bridge across at least one hard visual change to unify it
- Set split-edit offsets between a few frames and one to two seconds, not dead on the cut

[] Confirmed no polished cut has picture and sound breaking on the exact same frame

Exercise: Scene tension audit

Treat each scene as a small film with its own arc. Cut or compress any scene that only delivers information.

- For three scenes, name the turn (the moment something shifts). If there is none, decide to cut or restructure.

- Which scenes end on an open loop that pulls into the next? Add one where a scene resolves too neatly.

- List one setup you can plant early to pay off later, and where the payoff lands.

Sound, Polish, and Delivery

Layer purposeful visuals and sound, run real feedback, lock, and export correct deliverables.

Worksheet: B-roll and clearances tracker

Track every supporting visual you still need and every asset that needs rights cleared. Start the clearances log on day one; rights issues kill delivery dates.

Scene / timecode needing coverage

Specific shot or archival needed (be literal, not generic)

Source (own footage / library / archive)

License type and status

Cost

Cleared? (yes/no)

Checklist: Sound and mix preparation

[] Set dialogue as reference level and balanced everything against it

[] Reduced hum, hiss, and noise on interviews (e.g. iZotope RX)

[] Laid a continuous ambient bed so cuts do not produce silence gaps

[] Filled audio holes with room tone and added fades to avoid pops

[] Replaced temp music with licensed or original cues

[] Confirmed a target loudness (e.g. around -23 LUFS broadcast, -16 LUFS streaming)

Exercise: Run a test screening

Screen for viewers who do not know the story. Watch them, not the screen, and record where their attention breaks.

- List the exact timecodes where viewers checked out, looked confused, or leaned in.

- Which problems did three or more viewers flag independently? Trust those.

- Separate their description of the problem (usually right) from their proposed fix (often wrong); write your own fix.

Checklist: Lock and delivery

- [] Picture-locked the edit before color, titles, and final mix
- [] Conformed proxies to full-resolution originals and verified sync
- [] Completed color grade, titles, lower thirds, and credits
- [] Exported the correct deliverable for the destination (web MP4 / festival ProRes or DCP / broadcast spec)
- [] Kept a high-quality master (ProRes 422 HQ or 4444) for all future versions
- [] Archived project, media, exports, music cue sheet, and clearances log under 3-2-1

Your Action Plan

1. Set up the 8-folder structure, conform frame rate, generate proxies, and confirm a 3-2-1 backup.
2. Transcribe and log all interviews, color-coding selects into a footage logging sheet.
3. Write your logline, central dramatic question, themes, and chosen structural model on one page.
4. Build a paper-cut of scene cards, read it aloud, and pressure-test the structure ruthlessly.
5. Cut a radio edit of spoken word only and refine it with the monitor off until it holds.
6. Tighten the string-out into an assembly with rough scenes and transitions.
7. Map the energy curve, fix the saggy middle, and add deliberate breathing room.
8. Convert hard cuts to J-cuts and L-cuts and audit each scene for a turn and an open loop.
9. Lay purposeful B-roll, clean audio, license or commission music, and prepare the mix.
10. Run a test screening, lock picture, finish color and titles, then export and archive correct deliverables.

