12 HELPFUL TIPS FOR MAKING A DOCUMENTARY

1. **Always write the script before you start creating the Documentary.**
   - A completed script will guide your production process.
     - You will need to write seven major paragraphs: the introduction/ thesis, historical background, build-up, main event, short-term impact, long-term impact, and the conclusion.
     - You have 10 minutes total, which means your script will be about five to seven double-spaced pages.
     - Make sure to proofread your script several times. It can be helpful to have someone else look over your writing. Check if your script provides an argument and that you've proved the historical significance of your topic.

2. **Collect all of the visuals for your Documentary**
   - You might need more than you'd think:
     - Documentary = 10 minutes = 600 seconds
     - Average length of time each picture is on the screen = 5 seconds.
     - 600/5= 120 images
   - Other types of visuals: Newspaper headlines, video clips, interview clips, maps, drawings, cartoons, documents, title screens, talking head, etc.
   - Interview footage is a good way to fill the screen, but it's preferable that you show primary interviews over secondary interviews.
     - If you have interviewed a professor or another professional on the topic, consider overlaying the visual with images that reflect what they are saying
   - No fuzzy pictures. Period!
   - Good sources for visuals:
     - Scan from books
     - Take digital photos of books/hard copy photos
     - Google: Use medium or preferably large sized images only
     - Minnesota Historical Society Visual Resources Database (Minnesota history topics)
     - Other state historic museums, public libraries, and databases
     - Video clips from other documentaries (it's okay, just don't take the narration!)

3. **Use the [Documentary Storyboard Template](#) to match up your visuals to your script.**
   - Documentary-makers' mantra: "Say cow, see cow!"
   - Completing this storyboard template will also help you figure out what kind of visuals you need more of or are missing.

4. **Record the narration.**
   - The story must drive the visuals, not the other way around.
   - To avoid different background noises or changes in volume, record the script in chunks. Splitting it up paragraph by paragraph is a good way to maintain sound consistency.
     - Practice first. Use a colorful pen to keep track of where you should take breaths or pause by marking up your script.
   - Use a decent microphone. The ones built into computers aren't very good.
   - Don't speak too closely to the microphone - this can cause background noise like static. Talk over your microphone so you don't get "popping" noises.
   - Try to record in a quiet place so you can limit distracting background noise.

5. **Do an interview (or a couple!)**
   - Interviews provide a validating outside opinion and add spice to the flow of the documentary
     - Another way to think about this is, if you are making a claim, having an interview subject validate your argument or support your argument is a good way to show historical significance/check your research.
   - Good interview subjects:
     - Eyewitnesses
     - History professors
     - Authors
     - Newspaper reporters

- o Elected officials
- o Anyone else who can speak with a unique/authoritative voice on the subject
- ● You will need to factor in any interview clips into the total time of your Documentary, including transitions in the final production.

6. Insert your visuals.
- ● Keep in mind that you may change your mind about an image or video. That's okay!
- ● Not all images need motion or transitions.
  - ○ Pay attention to newspaper headlines, graphs, and charts. They can often get blurred if they are moving on screen. It is okay if these kinds of visuals stay in place, since you want your viewers to be able to read them and see them in connection to your story.

7. Save your project frequently.
- ● Make sure you have enough space on your computer. iMovie and Windows Movie Maker projects can take up several GB of space.
- ● If you need to transport the project from computer to computer, you will need an external hard drive or a large capacity flash drive.

8. Don't try to cram too much into your project.
- ● Talking faster makes it hard to understand your argument.
- ● Leave enough time to utilize title screens and dramatic pauses for effect. This will allow your points to sink in with the audience and indicate that you are moving on to the next part of your argument.
- ● Sacrifice interesting details so that you can include more historical context and analysis.

9. Don't go crazy with the transitions
- ● At some point, they just get annoying.
  - o Use a traditional fade to black.
  - o Not all photos need transitions either. Focus them when you are moving from photo to video, as photo to photo transitions are normally seamless.

10. Listen to your project with a critical ear and focus on the audio.
- ● Watch your Documentary once you've put together the audio and visuals
- ● Make sure narration volume levels are consistent, especially from one audio source to the next.
- ● Add music to create flow and build intensity/emotion.
  - a. Try to use instrumental music, unless there is some lyrical music that relates to the topic and is not distracting.
  - b. Check www.freeplaymusic.com for copyright-clean, instrumental music that can be tailored to the length you want.
  - c. Classical music is also good, but can get boring if the piece isn't fitting.
- ● Balance music volume so that it is not competing with the narration.
  - o If the volume of your narration is at 100%, you may want to lower your music to at least 20%.

11. Add a brief credits screen to give credit for music, research archives, interview subjects, and any "special thanks" you'd like to give.
- ● Credits do NOT need to be your complete bibliography. Credits will be much briefer, usually only listing major sources of information.

12. Make backup copies of your project and make sure it plays on a variety of formats and machines.
- ● Check with your teacher or event coordinator to see what technology is going to be available at the competition.
- ● Minnesota History Day recommends that all students save projects to a flash drive (and be sure it plays on multiple computers) or upload it to the internet (YouTube, Vimeo, Google Drive, the Cloud, etc.) as another backup option.
- ● Test your Documentary on different platforms and devices, including those not attached to a computer.