

## Video & Scriptwriting / Documentary Structure

Match documentary mode to subject matter — genre-to-topic mapping for appropriate storytelling approach.

Difficulty: Intermediate

Model: GPT-4 / Claude / Gemini

Use Case: Genre Selection, Storytelling Approach

Updated: June 2026

Why This Prompt Exists

“Documentary” isn’t a style — it’s six different styles. Expository docs explain. Observational docs watch. Participatory docs engage. Most filmmakers use the wrong mode for their subject.

You get:

- voiceover narration for a verité subject (feels staged, inauthentic)
- observational approach for complex historical topic (no explanation, confused viewer)
- participatory for neutral subject (filmmaker becomes distraction)
- poetic for factual content (too abstract, no information)
- no understanding of mode conventions

But documentary modes have specific purposes:

- expository: voiceover narration, explains, educates — history, science, nature
- observational: fly-on-the-wall, no narration, pure observation — reality, daily life

- participatory: filmmaker engages, interviews, appears on camera — investigation, memoir
- verité: handheld, raw, unpolished, real-time — urgency, authenticity, crisis
- poetic: subjective, associative, artistic — mood, emotion, abstract themes
- reflexive: documentary about documentary-making — meta, deconstruction, process

Without mode classification, documentaries lack identity.

This prompt matches documentary mode to subject matter.

The Prompt

Assume the role of a documentary genre specialist who classifies modes.

Your task is to recommend documentary modes based on subject matter.

Generate:

## 1. DOCUMENTARY MODE CLASSIFICATION

Mode	Style	Narration	Camera	Filmmaker Role	Best For
Expository	Educational, explanatory	Voiceover (authoritative)	Stable, illustrative	Invisible	History, science, nature
Observational	Fly-on-the-wall	None	Handheld, discreet	Invisible	Daily life, reality, process
Participatory	Engaged, investigative	Filmmaker as character	Interview style	Visible on camera	Memoir, investigation
Verité	Raw, urgent, real-time	None	Handheld, shaky	Minimal,	

observer | Crisis, action, authenticity |  
| Poetic | Artistic, associative | Sparse, poetic | Stylized,  
expressive | Invisible | Mood, emotion, abstraction |  
| Reflexive | Meta, self-aware | Filmmaker narrator | Varied |  
Visible, deconstructing | Process, media criticism |

## 2. SUBJECT MATTER TO MODE MAP

Subject Type	Primary Mode	Secondary	Why
Historical event	Expository	Archival	Needs explanation, context
Scientific topic	Expository	Participatory	Needs expert voices
Social issue	Participatory	Expository	Needs perspective, engagement
Artist profile	Observational	Poetic	Watch them work, feel their art
Personal memoir	Participatory	Reflexive	Filmmaker as subject
Political crisis	Verité	Participatory	Urgency, authenticity needed
Natural phenomenon	Expository	Observational	Explanation + witnessing
Cultural tradition	Observational	Poetic	Witness + feel the culture
Investigative report	Participatory	Expository	Filmmaker as detective

## 3. MODE-SPECIFIC STRUCTURES

**\*\*Expository (30-60 min):\*\***

Opening Hook → Context/History → Expert Interviews → B-roll illustration → Explanation → Conclusion with call to action

**\*\*Observational (15-120 min):\*\***

Establishing scenes (fly-on-the-wall) → Following character → Natural conflict emerges → Resolution (or not) → Ending moment

**\*\*Participatory (45-90 min):\*\***

Filmmaker intro → Investigation journey → Obstacles encountered → Discoveries made → Reflection/Conclusion

**\*\*Verité (10-30 min):\*\***

Immediate crisis or action → Real-time following → No narrator, no interviews → Raw capture → Ending at natural pause

#### 4. MODE PROMPT TEMPLATES

**\*\*Expository:\*\***

`[Topic] documentary, expository mode, authoritative voiceover narration, expert interviews, illustrative B-roll, educational tone`

**\*\*Observational:\*\***

`[Subject] documentary, observational mode, fly-on-the-wall style, no narration or interviews, pure observation, vérité aesthetic`

**\*\*Participatory:\*\***

`[Topic] documentary, participatory mode, filmmaker engages with subject, appears on camera, investigative approach, personal`

perspective`

**\*\*Verité:\*\***

`[Situation] documentary, verité mode, handheld camera, real-time capture, no voiceover, raw and urgent, authentic`

## 5. MODE SELECTION FLOWCHART

Does the topic need explanation?

→ Yes → Expository or Participatory

→ No → Does it need urgency?

→ Yes → Verité

→ No → Does it need artistry?

→ Yes → Poetic

→ No → Observational

## 6. COMMON MODE MISTAKES

Mistake	Why It Fails	Correct Mode
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Voiceover in verité	Feels staged, fake	No narration
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Observational for complex history	Viewer confused	Expository
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Participatory for neutral science	Filmmaker distraction	
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Expository		
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Poetic for factual news	No information, frustrating	Expository or verité
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INPUTS:

Topic/subject:

[E.G., "Climate change impacts on coastal communities"]

Desired tone:

[E.G., "Urgent, alarming, but hopeful"]

Subject matter type:

[HISTORICAL / SCIENTIFIC / PERSONAL / INVESTIGATIVE / ARTISTIC /  
CURRENT EVENT]

Available resources:

[E.G., "Access to experts, archival footage, ability to film in  
locations"]

RULES:

- Expository docs explain (use voiceover and expert interviews)
- Observational docs witness (no narration, no interviews)
- Participatory docs engage (filmmaker is character)
- Verité docs capture (raw, real-time, urgent)
- Poetic docs feel (artistic, subjective, emotional)
- Reflexive docs deconstruct (about documentary-making itself)
- Mode determines everything: narration, camera style, filmmaker role
- Don't mix modes arbitrarily (have a reason)
- Test mode with sample audience before production

How To Use It

- Expository docs explain — use voiceover narration and expert interviews. Best for history, science, nature.
- Observational docs witness — no narration, no interviews, fly-on-the-wall. Best for

reality, daily life.

- Participatory docs engage — filmmaker appears on camera, investigates. Best for memoir, investigation.
- Verité docs capture — raw, handheld, real-time, urgent. Best for crisis, action, authenticity.
- Poetic docs feel — artistic, subjective, associative. Best for mood, emotion, abstraction.
- Reflexive docs deconstruct — about documentary-making itself. Best for meta, process.
- Mode determines everything: narration, camera style, filmmaker role, editing approach.
- Don't mix modes arbitrarily — have a reason for every stylistic choice.

Example Input

**Topic/subject:**

“A profile of a reclusive ceramic artist in rural Japan”

**Desired tone:**

“Calm, meditative, respectful, artistic”

**Subject matter type:**

“ARTISTIC”

**Available resources:**

“Access to artist, permission to film in studio, no archival footage”

Why It Works

Most documentary makers label their project “documentary” without considering which mode serves their subject — resulting in confused tone and ineffective storytelling.

This framework improves outcomes by forcing:

- documentary mode classification (expository, observational, participatory, verité,

poetic, reflexive)

- subject-to-mode mapping (which mode for which topic)
- mode-specific structures (how each mode is built)
- mode selection flowchart (decision tree for filmmakers)
- common mistake prevention (voiceover in verité, etc.)

**Failure modes this prevents:**

- Voiceover narration for a verité subject (feels staged, inauthentic)
- Observational approach for complex historical topic (no explanation, confused viewer)
- Participatory for neutral subject (filmmaker becomes unwanted distraction)
- Poetic for factual content (no information, frustrating)

**This improves on:** Generic “documentary” label. Mode-specific structure guides production decisions.

**Related to:** DS-04 (Narration) for voiceover guidance; DS-06 (Three-Act) for narrative arc.

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