

Video & Scriptwriting / Documentary Structure

Structure interview questions and shot sequences for talking heads — production-ready interview workflows.

Difficulty: Intermediate

Model: GPT-4 / Claude / Gemini

Use Case: Interview Production, Talking Heads

Updated: June 2026

Why This Prompt Exists

Bad interviews sink documentaries. Too many filmmakers ask generic questions, get generic answers, and have no shot plan — resulting in unusable footage.

You get:

- answers that are too short or too vague (can't edit, can't use)
- questions that lead the witness (biased, untrustworthy)
- no coverage for editing (single angle, no cutaways, no reaction shots)
- bad framing or lighting (unprofessional, distracting)
- no B-roll plan (nothing to cut away to)

But interview segments have structure:

- establishing shot: subject in environment (context, location)
- two-shot: interviewer and subject (relationship, context)
- close-up: subject talking (primary footage)

- cutaway: hands, objects, environment (editing coverage)
- reaction shot: listening, thinking (emotional response)
- insert: photos, documents, objects (visual evidence)

Without design, interviews fail.

This prompt designs interview segments with shot plans.

The Prompt

Assume the role of a documentary interview specialist who plans talking head segments.

Your task is to design interview questions and shot sequences.

Generate:

1. INTERVIEW SUBJECT INFO

- Name/Role: [description]
- Relationship to topic: [expert / witness / participant / family]
- Emotional arc: [starts [emotion], ends [emotion]]

2. QUESTION SEQUENCE

Order	Question Type	Question	Purpose	Expected Emotion
1	Warm-up	[easy, factual question]	Comfort, context	Neutral
2	Context	[background question]	Establish credibility	Neutral

3	Narrative	[story question]	Get specific story	Varies
4	Emotional	[feeling question]	Access emotion	Emotional
5	Reflective	[meaning question]	Extract significance	Reflective
6	Closing	[final thought]	End on strong note	Pensive/Resolved

3. QUESTION TYPES

Type	Format	Purpose	Example
Warm-up	Factual, easy	Build comfort	"What's your name and role?"
Narrative	Tell me about...	Get specific story	"Tell me about the moment you found out."
Emotional	How did you feel?	Access emotion	"How did that feel?"
Reflective	What does this mean?	Extract significance	"Looking back, what does that day mean?"
Behavioral	What did you do?	Get action	"What did you do next?"
Sensory	What did you see/hear?	Create vivid imagery	"What did you see when you walked in?"

4. SHOT SEQUENCE FOR INTERVIEW

Shot	Size	Angle	Timing	Description
1	WS	Eye-level	10s	Subject in environment (establishing)

2 MS (two-shot) Eye-level 5s Interviewer and subject (context)
3 CU Eye-level Throughout Subject talking (primary)
4 CU (off-angle) 15-degree 2-3s per cut Interviewer listening (reaction)
5 CI Varies 2-3s Hands, objects, details (cutaways)

5. INTERVIEW SETUP GUIDELINES

Element Recommendation Why
----- ----- -----
Background Simple, relevant, not distracting Focus on subject
Lighting Key + fill + rim (3-point) Professional, flattering
Camera height Eye level Natural perspective
Subject position Looking just off-camera (to interviewer) Engaged, not staring at lens
Eye line 15-30 degrees off lens Conversational feel

6. COVERAGE REQUIREMENTS

Footage Type Minimum Duration Purpose
----- ----- -----
Wide establishing 30s Location context
Two-shot 30s Interviewer-subject relationship
Close-up (primary) 5-10x interview length Main footage
Cutaways 2-3x interview length Editing flexibility
Reactions (listening) 1-2x interview length Emotional responses
Inserts (props/docs) As needed Visual evidence

7. COMMON INTERVIEW MISTAKES

Mistake	Why It Fails	Correct Approach
Yes/no questions	Short answers, unusable	Open-ended "tell me about..."
Leading questions	Biased, untrustworthy	Neutral, curious tone
Single camera angle	No editing flexibility	2-3 camera angles minimum
No cutaways	Jump cuts visible	Get B-roll and inserts
Interrupting subject	Lose authentic moments	Let them finish, pause
No emotional questions	Flat, unengaging	Ask how they felt

INPUTS:

Topic of documentary:

[E.G., "Surviving a natural disaster"]

Subject role:

[EXPERT / WITNESS / PARTICIPANT / FAMILY / BYSTANDER]

Key story moment to capture:

[E.G., "The moment they realized danger"]

Emotional arc:

[E.G., "Starts calm, becomes emotional, ends reflective"]

RULES:

- Start with warm-up questions (builds comfort, gets them talking)
- Ask open-ended questions (never yes/no – "tell me about...")
- Listen for emotional moments (pause, let them sit in it)
- Get specific sensory details (what did they see, hear, smell?)
- Capture cutaways (hands, objects, environment, reaction shots)
- Two cameras minimum (wide + tight, or A + B angle)
- Roll cutaways after interview (keep them in same position)
- Transcript everything (don't trust memory)

How To Use It

- Start with warm-up questions — builds comfort, gets them talking.
- Ask open-ended questions — never yes/no; “tell me about...” instead.
- Listen for emotional moments — pause, let them sit in it, don’t rush.
- Get specific sensory details — what did they see, hear, smell, feel?
- Capture cutaways — hands, objects, environment, reaction shots, inserts.
- Two cameras minimum — wide + tight, or A + B angle for editing flexibility.
- Roll cutaways after the interview — keep them in the same position, same lighting.
- Transcribe everything — don’t trust your memory; you’ll need to find quotes later.

Example Input

Topic of documentary:

“A documentary about first-generation college students”

Subject role:

“PARTICIPANT (student, first in family to attend college)”

Key story moment to capture:

“The moment they received their acceptance letter”

Emotional arc:

“Starts nervous and uncertain, becomes proud and hopeful”

Why It Works

Most documentary interviews ask generic questions, get generic answers, and have no shot plan — resulting in unusable footage that can't be edited.

This framework improves outcomes by forcing:

- question sequence planning (warm-up, context, narrative, emotional, reflective, closing)
- question type classification (warm-up, narrative, emotional, reflective, behavioral, sensory)
- shot sequence design (establishing, two-shot, close-up, reaction, cutaway, insert)
- setup guidelines (background, lighting, camera height, eye line)
- coverage requirements (minimum footage for editing flexibility)

Failure modes this prevents:

- Yes/no questions that produce short, unusable answers
- Leading questions that bias the subject (untrustworthy footage)
- Single camera angle with no editing flexibility
- No cutaways, making jump cuts visible
- No emotional access (flat, unengaging interviews)

This improves on: Generic, unprepared interviews. Structured interview design yields usable, emotional footage.

Related to: DS-01 (Mode) for overall approach; DS-03 (B-Roll) for supporting footage.

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