

Filming History

Making short films about
historical places, people and events



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Published by

Cadw
Welsh Government
Tŷ'r Afon
Bedwas Road
Caerphilly
CF83 8WT

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About this guide

Making films or videos is a great way to explore and explain history. This guide will show you how to make different kinds of history films.

This guide is published by Cadw, the Welsh Government's historic environment service.

It takes you through the process of planning, filming and editing short films about history.

It starts by looking at the kind of films you could make, with some examples.

Then it looks at what you could include and where to find archive media you can use. It shows you how to write a film script and plan your shots.

Then it explains how to film a shot, and how to record presentations, interviews and dramatic re-enactments.

Finally, you'll see how to organise your edit, add extra shots and share your finished film.



Planning your film

What kind of film could you make?

There are lots of different kinds of history films. Here are some examples you could look at.

Simple biography

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v8A9gvb5Fh0>

Your film could tell someone's life story. This example uses archive video and stills, voiceover and an interview to show the life of Rosa Parks.

Movement has been added to the stills to give them life. This is called the 'Ken Burns' effect.

Presentation with re-enactment

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p08vtm3>

This clip about Llywelyn the Great is part of a longer TV episode. It uses voiceover, presentations to camera, still images with movement, and music.

The presenter, Huw Edwards, plays an important part in the film. There are also dramatic reconstructions, including close-up images and sound effects of battle scenes.

Report of an event

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w8kwBAc_FrA

This news report explains an historical event (the Chernobyl disaster) using voiceover, archive video and maps.

Visit to an historical site

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KxzOQwktMCc>

Here, YouTuber Tom Scott talks about Newport Transporter Bridge. He's filmed lots of different shots and angles to illustrate his pieces to camera.

Animation

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OY4Tx4pAQvM>

<https://www.intofilm.org/films/19747>

This stop motion animation by Osian Roberts tells the story of an historical event (the flooding of Tryweryn) with original music and voiceover.

Deciding on the basics

Start by deciding about the film and its subject.

What's the film about?

You could make a film about a *person*, like Owain Glyndwr or Betty Campbell.

You could focus on a *group of people*, like slate quarrymen in North Wales or Somali seamen in Cardiff.

You could make a film about a *place* such as a local quarry, factory or castle.

You could explain an important *event* like the Aberfan disaster or the flooding of Tryweryn.

You could look at a *process* like people moving from the countryside to cities, or people from other countries coming to Wales.

Don't try to cover too much. You could make a film about one building rather than a town, one soldier rather than a regiment, a few years rather than a century.

Who's it for?

Think about who's going to watch your film. Is it for younger children, adults, or people your own age?

Where will people watch it: in school, online, in a cinema or at an event?

What kind of film will it be?

There are lots of different kinds of historical film.

- You could make a documentary that tells a factual story.
- You could make a drama, or a re-enactment of an historical event.
- You could base your film on a voiceover, or a recorded interview, and edit the images or video to fit it.
- Your film could be led by a presenter. You'll need someone who is confident and can speak clearly.

You could combine several of these techniques.

How long will it be?

Decide how long the film should be.

It's easiest to keep it short: no more than three minutes, and maybe less. If it's longer it will take a long time to do properly.

What equipment do you have?

You can make a good film with any kind of video camera, a phone or a tablet. But some kinds of things are difficult to do with basic equipment.

You should plan your film based on the equipment you have. If you don't have a good microphone, it'll be hard to film a presenter outdoors, especially when it's windy. So it might be better to base your film on a voiceover, which you can record indoors.

What you could include

Your film could include lots of different kinds of images and sound.

Archive images

You can use old pictures and film to show people, places and things in your story. These can include photographs, paintings, documents, maps, and film.

To give a general sense of the period, you could use other images from the period such as street scenes.

It's important to use big (high resolution) images, especially if you're planning to just use part of the image. Small images won't look good when you enlarge them to fill the screen.

Maps

Ordnance Survey maps are in copyright for 50 years. But you can use current OS maps in your film if your school or organisation applies for a [free media licence](#).

Original media

You can include media that you make or film yourself. These could include

- video clips or stills of places, people or objects
- interviews
- presentations to camera
- reenactments of historical events

You could also include drawings, paintings, charts, graphs and animations.

Sound

Sound is really important in film. Your soundtrack could include voiceover explanations, sound effects and music. You might also be able to find archive audio such as interviews.

Be careful not to use copyright music.

Animation

You can animate drawings, clay models or toy figures.

You can get stop motion animation apps and programs for phones and tablets. You could also animate with a camcorder connected to a computer.

You'll need a tripod. It's important to keep the lighting consistent.

With models, you could make your own background out of a cardboard box.

You could also use the 'chromakey' effect. Here, you film with a special green background which you replace with an image or video when you edit the film.

Here's how you could use different kinds of media - original video, a map and stills - to tell the story of an historic building.

After the second shot, the images are 'cutaways'. We can still hear the presenter but the images change to show what he's talking about.



The film starts with a busy shopping street in the centre of Cardiff.



A presenter shows us an unusual building.



He explains that it's in a Venetian style because it was built next to a canal.



The next cutaway is an old map showing where the canal used to run.



A video clip shows part of the canal's route.



This cutaway is an archive photograph.

Telling your story

Research your subject

You can research your topic using books, newspapers, magazines and online search.

When you find a web article with information about the subject, check whether it seems reliable.

What kind of website is it? Is it published by an organisation or an individual? What can you find out about them?

Then check who wrote the article. How are they qualified to write about the topic? Why did they write it? Do they have a particular reason for writing it?

If they've included links to other sources, check that the links work.

Wikipedia can be useful, but anyone can edit it. So it's best to check the original references which come at the end of the article.

You could also interview witnesses (people who were there) and experts.

Work out how to tell the story

It's important to get people's attention from the start.

You could do this with an unusual image, a surprising fact, exciting action or something that people feel strongly about.

You could start by asking a question which your film goes on to answer.

You don't have to show events in the order they happened in real life. You could start with the most important, dramatic or difficult event, then go back to show the events that led up to it.

You could start in the present then go back to the past. For example, you could show someone's name on a war memorial, then go back to tell the story of what happened to them in the war. Or you could start with a modern hospital, and go back in time to explain the founding of the NHS.

Don't include everything you find out about your subject. Make sure you only include facts or events that are interesting and relevant to the story.

Finding archive media

It's important to choose the right images and sound for your project.

Online sources

[People's Collection Wales](#) is a useful source of stills, film, maps and sound. Most of it is free for non-commercial use. You'll need to register to use it. You can search for a particular place, and for different types of media.

The [National Library of Scotland](#) has old Ordnance Survey maps for the whole of the UK. You can search by place and period. It's a bit complicated to use.

Google search

When you look for images on Google, it's important to limit your search to ones you can use.

Click Tools (below) under the search bar. Set the image size to Large (so it's big enough for video), and set Usage Rights to Creative Commons.

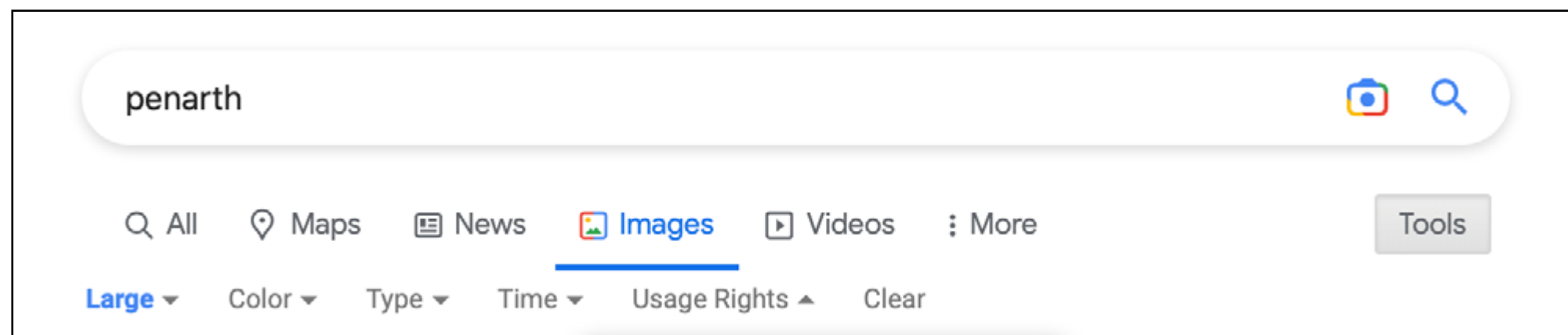
Which media can you use?

Most pictures, stills and sound are subject to copyright. You can't use them without permission and you might have to pay. Some older media are out of copyright (normally if the creator died more than 70 years ago).

Some material has a [Creative Commons](#) licence, which allows you to use it with some restrictions. You may need to provide a credit for the person who made it (or who owns it now). This is called attribution.

Some older material is in the public domain. This usually means that you can use it.

When you find an image you want to use, write down where you found it. If you need to provide attribution, make a note of who you should credit.



Writing a script

Write a script for voiceovers or dramatic re-enactments.

Script format

If your film includes acted scenes, write a script following the format on the right.

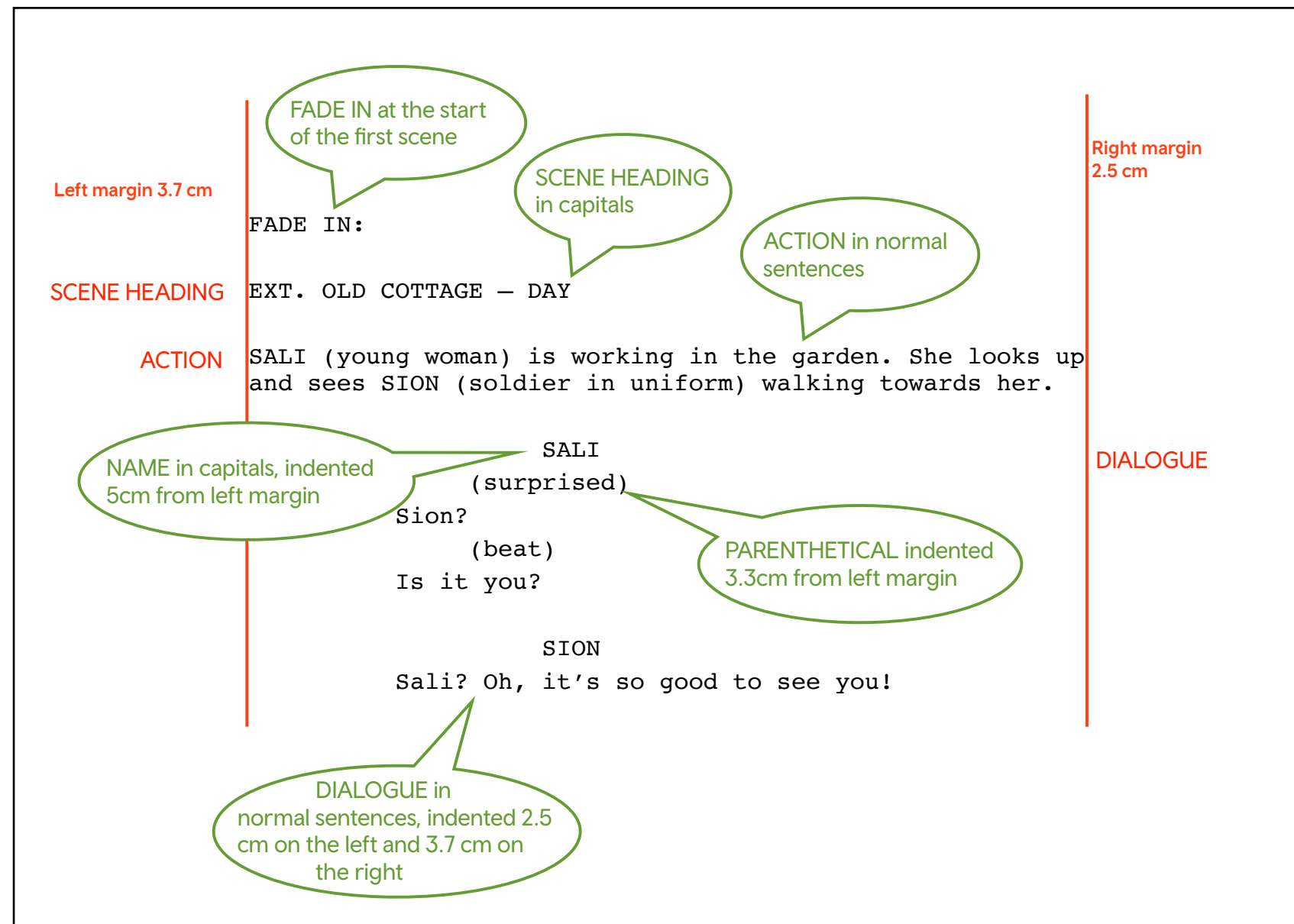
The SCENE HEADING says whether it's outdoors (EXT.) or indoors (INT.), then the location, a dash, and the time of day.

In DIALOGUE, character names are indented. The lines of dialogue are indented but not as far.

You could add suggestions for the actors ('parentheticals') in brackets.

You should also write a script if your film is based on a voiceover (or presentation). Use a similar format.

If your film is an investigation, or based on interviews, you may need to wait until you've looked through all your clips before you can finalise the script.

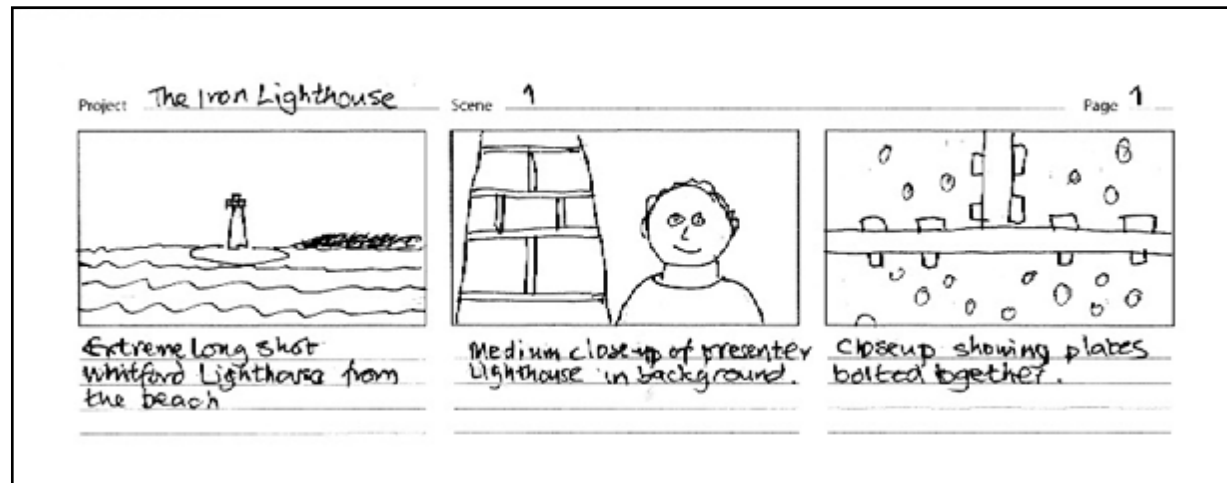


Type your script in 12pt Courier.

Insert an extra line break after FADE IN, the SCENE HEADING, ACTION and a character's DIALOGUE.

Planning your shots

If you're filming your own video, you'll need to plan your shots carefully.



Storyboards

A storyboard is a set of pictures that shows each shot in a film sequence. It's really useful for planning your film.

There's a storyboard template you can use on [page 26](#).

Some of your shots should show the whole scene. Others should show faces or details. The pictures on the next page show the most important shots.

Shot list

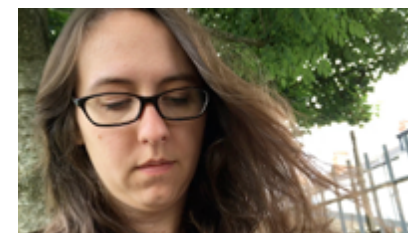
You could also make a list of shots to take with you on location.

Five shots

If you're filming someone with an artefact (such as an object, book or picture) you could use these five shots:



Film their hands holding the thing.



Film their face looking at it.



Film a shot that includes their hands and face.



Film the thing from over their shoulder, or from their point of view.



Film a creative shot, such as an unusual angle or a detail.

Shots you could use

Make sure to film a variety of shots, with plenty of close-ups.



You can use an extreme long shot that shows the whole place or space.



To show people in a place, you could use long shots (head to foot)...



...or mid shots, from the hips to the head.



A close-up shows someone's face, or a detail of something.



A medium close-up (head and shoulders) is ideal for an interview or presentation.



Close-ups can also show details of objects, buildings or documents.

Getting ready to film

Check these things before each filming session.

Permissions

Do you have written permission to film at the location?

Do you have written agreement from everyone you're going to include in the film (or their parents/guardians)?

Many schools have general filming permissions that cover most children. But it's important to check that you don't include anyone who shouldn't be filmed.

Location

Is the location safe, or are there any hazards that you should take into account? These could include tripping or falling, running water, roads, tides and electricity.

If possible, visit the location before your filming day so you can work out what to film and where you can film from.

Check whether there will be any problems or distracting noises. You could use the location recce form on [page 27](#).

What will you need?

Make a list of everything you'll need for each day of filming. Include people, equipment (eg cameras, microphones) and props or accessories. You could use the call sheet on [page 28](#) to help you plan.



Filming your shots

Filming a shot

Take your time to set up each shot carefully, and make sure you film enough.

Get the camera ready

Check that the settings are correct, the battery is charged and there's enough free space for video.

Check the light

Make sure there's enough light. Try to film with the light behind you.

Frame your shot

Frame the shot carefully. Check that the background isn't distracting or confusing.

Lock exposure and focus

To stop the exposure changing while you film, lock the exposure.

On most phones or tablets you can touch and hold on the screen. If the picture looks too bright or dark you can adjust it. Make sure the right part of the shot is in focus.

Keep the camera still

Use a tripod if you can. You could also lean against something or rest your elbows on a table.

Check the sound

If sound is important for your shot, be quiet and listen for half a minute before you start filming.

It's easier to record speech with a separate microphone. You can get affordable clip-on 'lavalier' microphones.

If you're using the built-in microphone, make sure you're close enough to pick up the voice clearly.

Check the sound: record a sentence or two then play it back.

Record half a minute of background 'room tone': this can make sound editing easier.

Film enough

If there's no action in your shot, film at least ten seconds.

Start filming at least five seconds before people talk or start acting. You can give them a hand signal or say 'action' when you want them to start. Keep filming for at least five seconds after they finish.

Film extra shots

It's always a good idea to film extra shots of details and important things in the scene. These are called 'B-roll'.

You can use them to show more about what the place is like, or as 'cutaways' to cover edits that look wrong.

Filming a piece to camera

In a piece to camera, the presenter talks directly to the viewer.

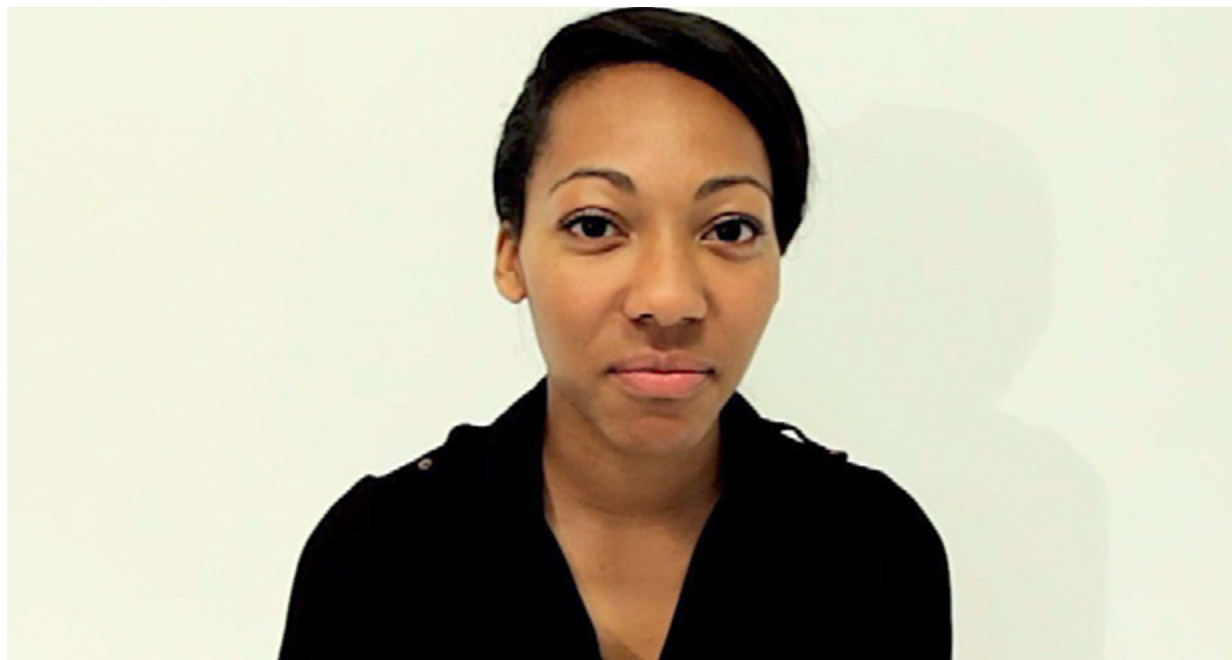
Getting ready

Write a script for the presentation. Make sure the presenter practises and learns it.

Setting up the shot

Unless you have a separate microphone, you'll need to be fairly close to the presenter.

Frame your shot carefully.



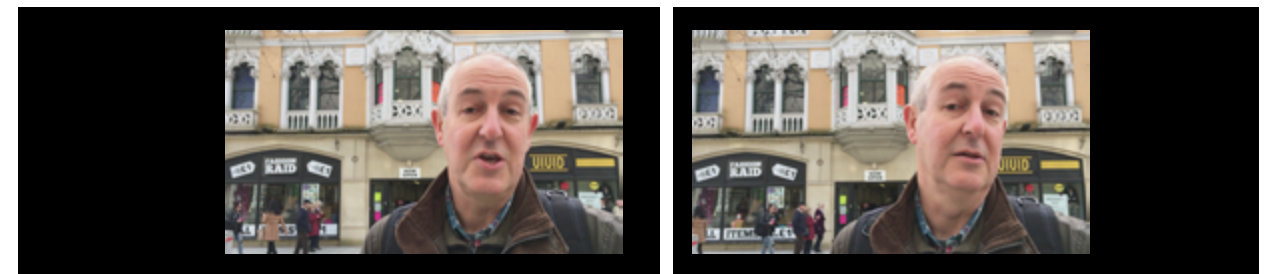
The presenter should look straight at the lens. The camera should be at their eye level, or very slightly above.

Making it easier

A lot of people find it hard to make long presentations to camera. Instead, you could film the video in short sections, and then add 'cutaways' (see p24) to cover the parts you edit out. You can film extra shots of things in the scene, or use archive photos and film, as cutaways.

You could also do it like an interview by asking questions. Make sure the presenter answers in complete sentences so you can edit out the questions.

Cutaway



If you edit straight between two different parts of the same presentation, you'll get a distracting 'jump cut'. You can hide this by adding a cutaway.

Filming an interview

Who to interview

If your film is about something recent, you could interview people who were there. So if your film is about a person, you could talk to someone who knew them. If it's about a factory, you could talk to people who worked there.

You could also interview experts. These could include people who've studied the topic or written about it.

You could base an interview on a photograph or object. Who's in the picture, when was it taken and what does it show? What is the object and where did it come from?

You could also film a **vox pop**. This is a special kind of interview where you ask the same question to several different people. Then you edit their answers together.

This is a good way to collect different opinions. (Vox pop is short for *vox populi*, which means 'voice of the people' in Latin.)

What to ask

It's important to ask 'open' questions.

"Was Aneurin Bevan a controversial figure?" is a closed question because you can just answer Yes or No.

Instead, you could ask "What did people think of Aneurin Bevan?"

Who, what, where, why, when and how are a good starting point.

If you can get the interviewee to repeat the question in the answer, you can edit out the interviewer.

So the answer to "Who's in this picture?" would be "The people in the picture are John Jones and his family" rather than "John Jones and his family."

Don't talk over the interviewee. Don't say 'Yes' or 'I see'; nod instead.

Listen to the answers. You might need to ask extra questions to get them to explain in more detail.

How to film it

Set up the shot carefully. Use a tripod if you can. A medium close-up (right) is usually best.

The interviewer should be next to the camera (A, bottom right) and fairly close. Remind the interviewee to look at them, not the lens.

Check the sound by recording and playing back a test question and answer.

Start filming. Wait a few seconds before asking the first question, which should be simple and easy.

When the interview is finished, keep filming for a few seconds before you pause filming.

Film a few extra 'B-roll' shots of the room/space, objects and details.

If you want to film the questions as well as the answers, move the camera to film the interviewer asking the questions again.

You can cut the questions and answers together when you edit the film.

Check what you've filmed (including sound) before you leave.



Interviewer

Interviewee

Put the camera next to the interviewer (A). If you need to film the interviewer as well, move the camera (B) and get them to repeat the questions. Keep both camera positions on the same side of the line between the two people.

Filming a re-enactment

You could film dramatic re-enactments of scenes from the story.



Keeping it simple

You could use a few close-ups instead of a full re-enactment.

The BBC clip [Llywelyn ein Llyw Olaf](#) uses close-ups of horses' hooves galloping, somebody drawing a bow, splashing waves, and the backs of advancing soldiers.

This suggests the idea of a battle, without having to film the whole scene. Added sound effects makes it seem more realistic.

Detailed reenactment

A full reenactment of an event will take longer. You'll need to write a script, and then create a storyboard to work out how you'll film it.

You'll also need to think about locations (where to film) and costumes.

Your actors will need to learn their lines and rehearse.

It's important that nothing modern appears in any of the shots. Using a zoomed-in or telephoto lens can make it easier to control what you include in the shot.

Putting it together

Planning your edit

When you've filmed everything, you'll need to plan how to edit it together.

Project: Venice, Cardiff		Group: Tom, Rhian	Page: 1
Narration/interview	Image	Sound	
I'm standing here on Queen Street surrounded by mostly twentieth century buildings. But this one behind me is very different.	1428 Nigel presentation to camera	014.mp3 Street sound	
It looks Venetian. So why is that?	1431 Long shot of Queen Street Chambers		
It's because it used to be right next to Cardiff's first great canal.	1445 Detail of gothic window, Queen Street Chambers		
The Glamorganshire Canal ran right through the middle of Cardiff.	OS1124 Detail from 1850 OS map	Street sound fades out	
It brought iron ore, coal and limestone from Merthyr to Cardiff Docks.	11253.jpg Archive image - steam driven barge	Background crowd talking Steam hissing	

Start by looking through all your material. If you've filmed your own video, decide which clips are the ones to use.

If you've interviewed someone, write a list of the parts of the interview that are most useful.

You can use a planning sheet like this to work out how to edit your film. There's one on [page 29](#).

Recording a voiceover

You could base your whole film on a voiceover, or just add voiceover to some parts.

Write a script and practise reading it out. If anything is too difficult or sounds wrong, rewrite it.

Try to find a quiet space. Rooms with carpets are best as they have less echo. Listen out for background noise before you start recording. Use a separate microphone if you have one.

Most programs have a microphone icon to select the voiceover tool.

Check the sound levels. The loudest parts should fill most of the green, but never go into the red. If you can't adjust the level, just move closer or further away.

The program will count you in, so make sure you don't start until after the countdown has finished.

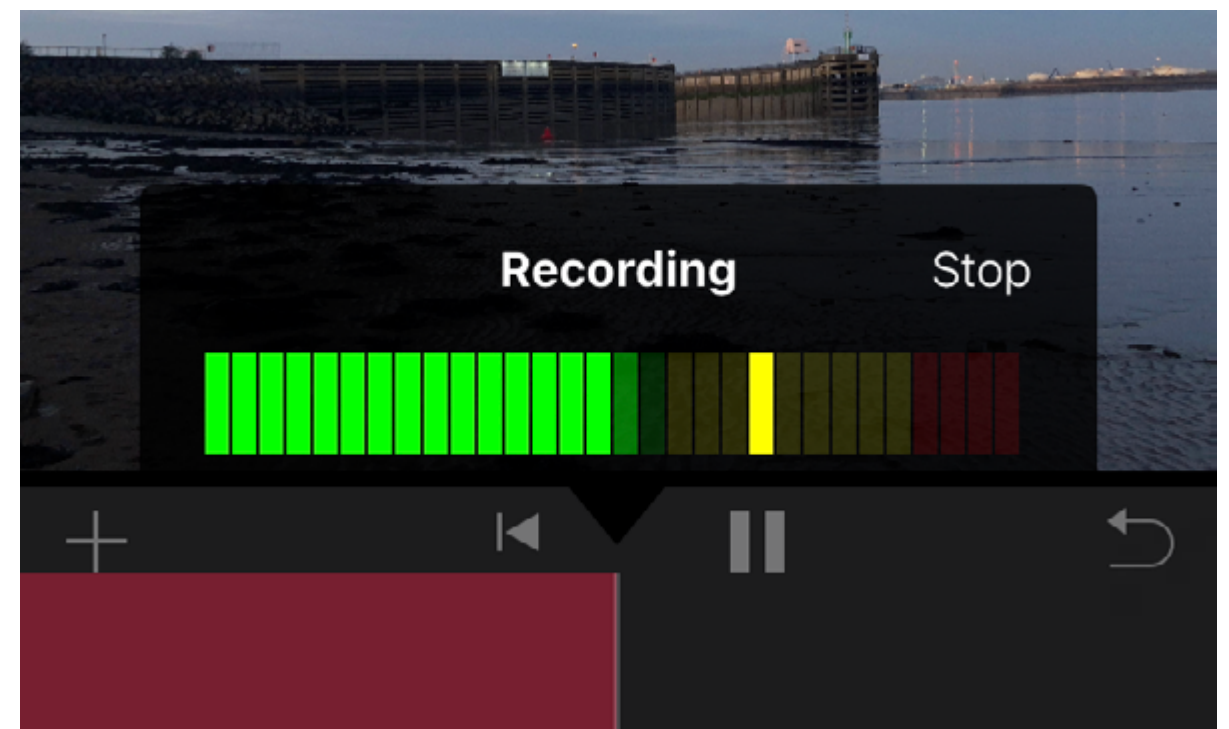
Make a test recording of the first sentence or two, then play it back. You'll probably need to speak more slowly and clearly than usual.

Take care not to play with microphone leads or knock the table while you're recording.

If you make a mistake, don't stop. Carry on speaking from just before the mistake, then edit it out afterwards. Keep recording for a second or two after you've finished talking.

You don't have to do the whole recording in one go. You might find it easier to do a couple of sentences at a time.

Always play back your recording to check it.



Check the level of your audio. At its loudest, it should fill the green but never go into the red.

Editing and sharing

Get started

Set up your editing project.

To make it easier to find the clips you want, you could organise them into a single folder (or Album or Gallery in a mobile Photos app).

Choose the part you need from the first clip and add it to the Timeline. Add the next clip, and so on. Then play the clips together. It's best to edit all the clips together (a 'rough cut'), before you start on fine adjustments.

You can change the order, and make clips longer or shorter so that the pace is right.

You could use cutaways (see next page) to show what a presenter is talking about, or to cover breaks in a interview or presentation.

Sound

Make sure the sound isn't too loud or too quiet. Check the levels of the different sounds and make sure you can hear speech clearly. You can usually adjust sound levels and add fades at the beginning or end of clips.

A mobile editing app (right). The clips go together in the Timeline at the bottom of the screen.

Transitions and effects

It's usually best to use simple cuts - where one clip goes straight to the next - rather than dissolves or fades. Only use effects if they really help to tell the story.

Many programs include the Ken Burns effect, which lets you add movement to still images. This can look very effective as long as your stills have a high enough resolution.

Editing to a soundtrack

You could start with a soundtrack such as a voiceover, and edit your clips to illustrate it. If your program can add markers to the timeline, these can help you position the edits correctly.





The presenter introduces the subject



Cutaway

Presenter explains that the building is in the Venetian Gothic style



Cutaway

Presenter talks about the route of the canal

This sequence starts by showing the presenter talking. His voice continues, while the video changes to cutaways of the building and a map.

Cutaways

A cutaway is a clip you add above the main video track, when you edit the film. The picture changes, but you can still hear the sound from the original clip (see above).

Cutaways can be useful for showing what someone is talking about. You can also use them to hide breaks where you've edited out part of an interview or presentation. If your editing program has markers, you can add them to your timeline to help you position the cutaways.

Titles and credits

You can add titles at the beginning and credits at the end.

You can also add captions (to show someone's name and job) or subtitles.

Sharing your film

When you've finished your film, export it as a video file.

Full quality HD (1080p), MP4 is best.

When you've exported it, check that it plays properly.

You could arrange a screening in your school or another local venue.

Project

Scene

Page

Location details

Film title _____

Name of location _____

What kind of space is it? _____

Which scene(s) is it needed for?

When will you need it? _____

Is there enough space to get the shots you need? _____

What is the light like? _____

Is there any background noise? (Be quiet for a minute and listen.)

If yes, what can you do to reduce it?

Are there likely to be any interruptions? (eg other people needing the room, bell going off etc)

Are there any potential dangers at the location? Yes No
If yes, list them here, then carry out a risk assessment.

Do you need permission to use the space? Yes No
If so, who do you need to ask? _____

What are their contact details? _____

☐ Tick this box when they've given you permission.

Additional notes:

Call sheet

Use one copy of this form for each filming session.

Film title		
Date	Start time	Wrap time
Crew		
Role	Name	
Director		
1st AD		
Camera		
Sound		
Location		
Location contact no		
Scene number		
Summary of action		
People		
Character name or role	Individual's name	
Extras		
Equipment		
Props	Costumes/Makeup	

Documentary script

Project:Group:Page:

Narration/interview	Image	Sound

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Picture credits

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P6 (map) National Library of Scotland; (bottom right) Cardiff Central Library; P13 The Welfare Ystradgynlais (photo by Natalie Hemingway).



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Welsh Government