

**ALLIANCE OF  
DOCUMENTARY  
EDITORS**

# **GUIDE FOR DOCUMENTARY EDIT SCHEDULES**

Created and recommended by the  
Alliance of Documentary Editors (ADE)

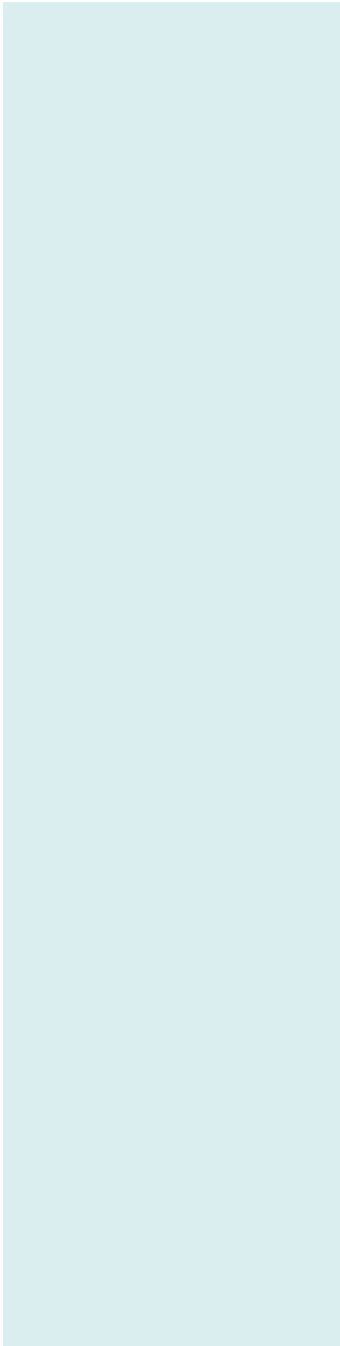
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# WHO WE ARE

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In fall of 2018, the Alliance of Documentary Editors (ADE) was formed by a small group of career editors and assistant editors (AEs). Since then, we've grown to over 1,000 members nationwide.

ADE advocates for better working conditions and codified ethical standards in the edit room, and champions diversity, inclusivity, and mentorship in documentary post-production.

The logo for the Alliance of Documentary Editors (ADE) is a teal-colored rectangle with a white border. Inside the rectangle, the words "ALLIANCE OF DOCUMENTARY EDITORS" are written in a bold, white, sans-serif font, stacked in three lines.

**ALLIANCE OF  
DOCUMENTARY  
EDITORS**

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# BACKGROUND

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With the explosion of interest in documentary, both theatrical and episodic, there is an ever greater need to clarify the standards for our field.

**The Alliance of Documentary Editors (ADE) is creating a series of guides for documentary editing.** This first guide is focused on one of the most pressing issues for documentary editors: **Edit Schedules.**

The editing process for every documentary, from the smallest short film, to the award-winning feature, to the epic series, begins with an edit schedule. Editors are rarely invited to participate in the scheduling of a documentary, but the results of an unrealistic schedule are felt most keenly in the edit room.

At the same time, independent producers hired to manage series or oversee multiple productions are often working with budgets set when a series is commissioned, and therefore have little flexibility to adjust unrealistic edit schedules. As more producers and directors shift into documentaries from other genres, understanding what makes for a good documentary schedule has become even more crucial.

This **Guide for Documentary Edit Schedules** was created with the input of hundreds of professional editors and assistant editors currently working in documentary film and television. It is not meant to replace union guidelines (most documentaries are small, non-union productions). Rather, we created this Guide to help producers, directors, and distributors plan a realistic documentary schedule, ensuring the most efficient and cost-effective edit while maximizing the creative contributions of the edit team.

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# DEFINITIONS

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The difference between “documentary” and “reality TV,” and “unscripted” can be the source of endless debate.

For the purposes of this guide, when we talk about **documentary** we are referring to content that:

- **Does NOT have a set formula prior to edit** *(eliminating competition shows, game shows, and reality shows that follow pre-set structures).*
- **Does not have a script or “soft” script for the cast to follow in scenes** *(eliminating reality TV).*
- **Is not a news magazine show** *(60 Minutes, 20/20, etc.)*

*“Editing a documentary is akin to someone handing you a bag of sentences and asking you to write a book.”*

— Travis Swartz  
Producer

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# WHAT DO DOCUMENTARY EDITORS DO?

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Documentary editing is an intensely creative process that is little understood outside of our field. The difference between what documentary editors do versus other editors can be boiled down to one main factor:

## **The Documentary Editor is also a writer.**

The editor works in close collaboration with the director and producer to create an outline of the film or show, and then shapes every scene from scratch using vérité, interviews, archival, and even animation. It's an exploratory process. In this way, the documentary editor is shaping, or 'writing' every scene of the film, as well as the entire spine of the project.

A popular misconception is that the editor's job is merely to "stitch together" the film per the vision of the director. In most documentaries and documentary series, there is no script. Experienced directors, producers, and editors know that it is in fact in the edit that the vision or story is discovered and/or written.

Because the documentary editor is also writing and shaping the story, **the edit schedule for documentaries is necessarily much longer than reality TV or fiction.**

*"In documentary filmmaking, the editor is your closest collaborator. The documentary editor works much like a writer would on a narrative feature."*

— **Elizabeth Chai Vasarhelyi**  
*Director*

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# BEFORE THE EDIT BEGINS

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Because documentaries have longer schedules than other genres, it's important to begin an editor search early. Many editors will have already chosen their next project months in advance. In addition, documentary editors, if hired early, will often begin collaborating with directors and producers long before they start editing, giving input on schedule, shoots, and the organization of the edit room.

## WHEN SHOULD AN EDITOR BEGIN?

**Typically, a documentary editor begins after the majority of footage is shot, but while there is still some key shooting left.** If the editor begins too early in production, they may run out of scenes to cut, or end up cutting scenes that become irrelevant later. If they begin after production is completely wrapped, there is no room to adjust shoots based on the edit.

## WHEN SHOULD AN ASSISTANT EDITOR BEGIN?

**Ideally, the assistant editor begins working a few months BEFORE the editor.** The editor should be consulted about hiring the assistant, as many editors prefer to work with the same assistant on multiple projects. The editor will often communicate with the assistant in advance to set up a plan for organizing footage.

If an editor begins working without being consulted about the organization of the project, the first several days or even weeks of edit time may be spent re-organizing the project and/or re-transcoding footage.

*“With a narrative film, you start with the script. In a documentary, it might be 3 months before you have the first idea of what the story actually is.”*

— Joe Bini, *Editor*

In order to make the best use of an editor's time, the following should be as complete as possible before the editor begins:

- All existing interviews should be transcribed, time-coded, and brought into the system, including using Avid Script Sync if possible.
- Interviews in foreign languages should be translated with time code, and subtitled.
- Shot footage should be transcoded to a universal format, brought into the edit system, and organized in a clear way. Multi-cam footage should be grouped and strung out. Many editors prefer to work with lower-resolution proxy files for the offline edit, as it cuts down on needed drive space and rendering time.
- If there is archival footage and images, the process of researching, organizing, and importing should have begun.

**Proper organization is one of the single most important factors influencing how quickly an editor can work.**

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# FEATURE DOCUMENTARY SCHEDULES

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Documentary editing requires enormous creativity, experimentation and risk taking, all of which take time. It also involves months of processing, organizing, and just watching the footage shot in order to understand the material. On average editors require 2 hours to screen and take notes on every hour of footage.

Scheduling a documentary is a daunting process, based on myriad factors. However, data gleaned from decades of experience and hundreds of films make it possible to create basic guidelines.

For an average documentary, a good rough guideline for scheduling is:

**1 month of editing per 10 minutes of finished content.**

So on average, a 90-minute feature will take 9 months of editing. A 60-minute film will take 6 months of editing. And so on.

Documentaries following multiple characters that interweave complex storylines often edit for well over a year. Documentaries that follow one straightforward story or have limited vérité may take less than 9 months.

Variations on this schedule depend on:

- The experience of the director, producer and editor
- The number of main characters and story lines
- The amount of vérité footage shot
- The complexity of the story
- The number of editors hired
- The amount of collaboration between director and editor
- The presence or absence of a dedicated and experienced assistant editor

For a deeper dive into the schedules of three different documentaries, we recommend Jacob Bricca's book: *Documentary Editing: Principles & Practice*.



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# DOCUMENTARY SERIES SCHEDULES

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The popularity of the documentary series is on the rise. Faced with high demand for quality documentary content, many distribution outlets are turning to experienced reality TV production companies to help see projects through to completion.

While ADE understands the advantage of working with a full-service production company that is equipped to handle the staffing and technical needs of an extended series, it is not always the best fit for documentary.

The culture clash between reality TV and documentary is having unintended, negative consequences in the edit room as producers are pressured to create ever shorter schedules. The ability of the editor to create high-quality programming is undermined when they attempt to follow a post-production formula and schedule that has worked for reality TV.

Data collected from our members shows that a TV-hour (42-60 min) billed as “documentary” is currently scheduled with 8-12 weeks for editing. This falls far short of the “1 month per 10 minutes of content” guideline and inevitably leads to very long work days, working weekends, hiring more editors, and often scrambling to add weeks on the end when the schedule isn’t met. Both producers and editors end up stressed out and frustrated.

## **This is NOT a good model for documentaries.**

It’s not sustainable, it allows no time for creativity and discovery in the edit, and it will not lead to the kind of high-quality storytelling we all aim for.

*“Watching down all the footage at the beginning of the process, without feeling rushed, really matters.*

*You won’t just see and understand all the content that you have, but your initial emotional reactions to how things actually play out on camera, in real time, can help reveal the story and are probably indicative of what your audience will feel at different points in your film.”*

**— Steph Ching**  
**Editor**

In fact, our members report that when they are hired to edit episodic documentaries on a short schedule, the production inevitably becomes chaotic and stressful as producers realize it is not possible to meet their deadlines with quality work. They must then choose between missing deadlines, or sending poor work along to executive producers who then become anxious about their investment.

**As a result, decisions intended to keep the budget low end up driving production costs much higher than they would have been if adequate time had been scheduled in the beginning.**

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# DOCUMENTARY SERIES SCHEDULES *(continued)*

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## There is a better way of doing this.

If producers want to attract experienced editors, create high-quality documentary series without losing control of the budget, and maintain a work environment that people will choose to return to, consider following the documentary model:

- Hire documentary editors who have experience ‘writing’ the story and include them in the process of structuring the narrative.
- Make better use of the creative talents of assistant editors, and consider hiring an associate editor.
- Bring the editor in early to weigh in on shooting needs, and help outline the episodes.
- Consult your editor(s) before hiring a story producer. While an experienced story producer sometimes helps, an inexperienced story producer will actually slow things down.

**From the editor’s perspective, the ideal edit schedule for a series falls between 16-18 weeks for a TV-hour episode (42 min) & 20-24 weeks for a full hour (60 min).**

Some series that are more scripted in advance, or follow an established format, may be able to complete editing on a more accelerated schedule.

On the other hand, many of the excellent documentary series that are considered standard-bearers of quality in our industry took much more time, such as *The Jinx*, *The Making of a Murderer*, and the Oscar-winning *OJ: Made in America*.

There are multiple factors that affect documentary series edit schedules, including:

- The experience and organization of the producer(s) and/or director(s).
- The style of documentary: archival-driven, vérité-driven, interview-driven, narration-driven.
- How much support staff will be available: assistant editors, archival researchers? Is the director involved in the edit process?
- The amount of footage: a vérité-driven or archival-driven documentary that has amassed hundreds of hours of footage over a number of years will need more time.
- Length of episode. You can’t simply cut the schedule in half or double it for a half-hour episode or a 90-minute episode. A longer episode is more akin to a feature film and may require a longer edit schedule.
- Number of editors. Keep in mind that adding editors does not shorten edits by the same factor. Two editors will speed up an edit, but not be twice as fast.
- The first episode of a series usually takes much longer than subsequent episodes.

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# HUMANE WORK HOURS

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## **Documentary editing is a marathon, not a sprint.**

Documentary editors work on difficult subject matter, doing intensely creative and emotionally exhaustive work for months at a time.

Asking editors and assistant editors to work long hours and weekends may seem like a way to shorten schedules, but it usually backfires. Long workdays burn out editors and AEs and result in sub-par work.

We recognize that on production shoots, and in the editing of commercials, some reality TV and fiction, the typical 'work day' will often stretch to 12 hours.

## **THIS DOES NOT WORK FOR DOCUMENTARY.**

**The typical work day for a documentary editor and assistant editor should be 8-9 hours,** which includes a lunch break as well as other breaks as needed throughout the day. These hours should be set BY THE EDITOR, who can better decide when and if to stay longer. Editors should not be asked to work weekends, except in extremely rare occasions where they should be compensated.

Similarly, assistant editors should be protected from long hours whenever possible. If an output is due at the end of day, AEs should be allowed to come to work late to make up for time they'll spend when everyone else is done. Weekend work for AE's should be rare and compensated.

*"There's a lot about editing documentaries that is like life lessons.*

*You have to try stuff that doesn't work in order to figure out what does work. I have a lot of embarrassing sequences I would never want anybody to see. They ended up being dumb ideas, but they're all a part of getting to a place where you can feel what's right for the film and what isn't."*

**— Lindsay Utz  
Editor**

## **Working longer hours does not mean more work gets done.**

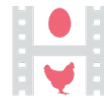
Documentary editing has traditionally been a place where humane work conditions were the norm, where editors and assistant editors could have families and lives outside of the edit room.

**At ADE, we believe that humane work conditions are critical to creating great content as well as a healthy, diverse pool of editors and assistants.**

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# ENDORISING ORGANIZATIONS

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CHICKEN & EGG PICTURES



Documentary Producers Alliance



The **Karen Schmeer**  
Film Editing Fellowship



**For more information:**

**[allianceofdoceditors.com](http://allianceofdoceditors.com)**

If you are an independent documentary film editor,  
we invite you to join the ADE.

**Contact us:**

[allianceofdoceditors@gmail.com](mailto:allianceofdoceditors@gmail.com)

