

Course outline: Directing Documentary

The MA in Directing Documentary is a specialisation within the broader **MA in Film and Television**.

The Documentary Department at the National Film and Television School is dedicated to nurturing people who are wholly committed to the task of learning how to become such an author. We give them the means to acquire the essential craft skills and we foster their creative ambition. But in order to grow into great documentary storytellers, students have to embark on the testing journey of finding the voice that is authentically theirs. That takes time, hard work and great determination.

Year One is built around a series of practical exercises, increasing in length and complexity. These are designed to identify and focus on the particular techniques and content of a variety of documentary genres.

The key ones are:

- **Observation**

Understanding how to shoot and cut a documentary scene – assessed by tutors and the HoD in groups reviews (2 weeks)

- **Sound and Music**

Understanding the use of sound and music in documentary, and working with an editor, sound designer and composer – assessed by tutors and HoD's in group reviews (5 weeks)

- **Moment of Truth**

Producing and directing a short film narrative about an individual experiencing a moment of change – assessed by tutors and HoD's in individual and group reviews (9 weeks)

- **Question**

Producing and directing a short film that seeks to find answers to a question – assessed by tutors and HoD's in individual and group reviews (18 weeks)

Each exercise is preceded by a search through the relevant tradition for techniques and inspiration. You will collaborate with editors, sound designers and composers, and also work alone using a range of digital cameras. In addition to starting the process of becoming an original storyteller, there are two other important aims in the

first year: one is to help you become fluent and confident with camera and sound. The other is to teach you how to collaborate successfully.

Towards the end of the second term of the first year it's hoped that you will be able to do a short period of work experience, to give you a brief flavour of what a working life in the film and television industry might entail when you leave the School.

In **Year Two**, in addition to your dissertation, a visit to IDFA and another period of work experience, you'll be asked to complete two tasks:

- The **Graduation Film** is a project designed to encourage students to construct a film that challenges conventional approaches to character and event-led documentary making. It's scheduled to be made during the first 7 months of the second year, and is assessed by tutors and HoD's in individual and group reviews.
- To those that finish their **Graduation Film** by the end of the summer term and deliver their dissertation on time, the Documentary Department gives support to work on a bespoke **Development Project**. This is an opportunity for you to develop a viable proposal or taster for a documentary that you can take with you when you leave. The School will provide support in helping you find the idea, an introduction to crowd-funding (if appropriate), a fixed budget to cover the cost of producing project materials, and expertise in trying to attract attention from potential funders.

The year finishes with industry screenings of your work at the Graduation Showcase.

Year One

Foundation Course (1 week)

- a variety of different familiarisation sessions including a short film exercise, if time allows, overseen by the Head of Department
- first taste of the curriculum, the equipment to be used, and an introduction to the School's health and safety parameters

“Springboard” Cross Specialisation Introductory Workshops (1 week)

- masterclasses, seminars and talks
- an introduction to different aspects of the moving image, including cinematic and televisual language
- how the main crafts of cinema and television – directing, screenwriting, cinematography, editing, sound and music each relate to the way filmmaking conveys ideas

Introduction to cameras, sound and editing (2 weeks)

We start right at the beginning - how to use a digital 4k camera and sound equipment so that if necessary students can shoot entirely alone. The second week is an introduction to Avid editing, depending on resource availability.

Observation Module (2 weeks)

This module builds on the previous two weeks' study and explains the basics of how to shoot an observational documentary scene. It also develops the skills necessary to capture meaning in a situation by observation alone, without interference or manipulation. It's designed to help you realise first-hand the depth of insight into character and story available to you through well-managed observation.

Sound and Music in Documentary (5 weeks)

(Cross specialisation with editors, sound designers and composers)

This workshop is designed to let you explore the importance of sound in documentary and how it can go beyond creating atmospheres, to help develop character, story, ideas and emotions. Starting with the creation of a sound-track, directors will work closely with sound designers, editors and composers to experiment with the juxtaposition of sound and pictures. In the process you'll create a short film that expresses an idea, a character or an emotion with great economy of means.

Moment of Truth (9 weeks)

(Cross specialisation with editors, sound designers and composers.)

This module is about casting and story-telling in observational documentary filmmaking. Students are asked to make a short film that portrays a process of change. They need to find a situation and a central character that can embody that change and capture it in a very short time. It can be a defining moment in a subject's life or the building of a narrative that artfully reveals change to the audience. Both require the ability to do basic research, win the trust of a character and shape a story. The project is designed to help you work through all the different film-making techniques you've learnt to date.

Industry Work Experience (2 weeks)

The Department will endeavour to provide a two-week work experience placement in a particular area of the British documentary industry. It might be with a film or television production company, or it might be with a distributor or a commissioning team. They are voluntary, dependent on availability, and allocated by the Head of Department.

Question (18 weeks)

(Cross specialisation with production managers, sound recordists, editors, sound designers and composers)

This module introduces you to the basic principles of enquiry through film-making. Students are asked to identify a question about the world and to make a documentary film that attempts to answer that question. The heart of the task is not so much finding the answers but in identifying a subject that's ripe for interrogation, and to be inventive and tenacious in the film-making process. During the production you'll be introduced to working with a production manager, and with their help you'll be expected to build a production schedule and a budget, and to define the particular health and safety parameters appropriate to your story. It'll be your most sustained task of the year and at the end of it you'll be assessed on the extent to which you deliver a coherent, watchable and revealing piece of work – on schedule and on budget.

Year Two

Graduation Film (24 weeks)

(Cross specialisation with production managers, sound recordists, editors, sound designers, composers and digital effects students.)

This module brings together what students have learnt about themselves, about storytelling, and about the processes of filmmaking. To help you realise the film, you'll be expected to build a team of collaborators from the students with whom you've been working in the previous year. The film can be a piece of work that builds on established documentary film-making methods, or one that breaks conventions to challenge assumptions about the genre. But you'll be assessed on how well you deliver a documentary film that gives an audience revealing insights into a contemporary issue and the extent to which it does so with confidence, skill and creative flair.

Documentary Dissertation

As part of the work necessary to qualify for an MA, each student is required to produce a dissertation – the outline of which is delivered at the end of Year 1. The Documentary Dissertation final delivery date is 24th October 2023. (See pages 17-25 above.)

Development Project

For students who finish their graduation film project and deliver their dissertation on time, there is an opportunity to enlist the support of the School to help them prepare a viable documentary project that they can take with them when they leave the School. The Department will provide a small fixed budget, editorial support to research and develop ideas, equipment to produce filmed and edited material, and expertise with industry commissioners and distributors.

IDFA – International Documentary Festival (1 week)

Conditions permitting you will be a delegate to IDFA, one of the largest documentary festivals in the world. The Festival offers an opportunity to see a wide range of contemporary and classic docs, attend workshops specially designed for new filmmakers and the chance to make contact with people from the international documentary community.