

RESEARCH PLAYBOOK

Documentary Archive Research Guide

A practical workflow for turning archival footage research into an edit-ready shot list with rights notes and source verification.

AUDIENCE

Documentary Teams

READ TIME

8 min

CATEGORY

Research

01 Define the Editorial Brief Before You Search

Write the brief in one page before pulling any clips.

- Story period: start year, end year, and milestone years.
- Primary locations: city, state, country, and neighborhood-level targets.
- Scene priorities: street life, transportation, workplaces, home interiors, rituals.
- Visual constraints: color vs black-and-white, handheld vs tripod, crowd density.
- Rights constraints: marketplace-only, exclusive, or festival-safe alternatives.

02 Build a Shot List That Mirrors the Timeline

Create a timeline table with sequence IDs. Every candidate clip should map to one sequence ID, one location, and one narrative function.

- Sequence function: establish, transition, detail, contrast, or evidence.
- Emotional tone: intimate, celebratory, tense, ordinary, reflective.
- Continuity value: does this clip help bridge a known story jump?

03 Track Source Integrity in the Same Sheet

Don't separate visuals from rights metadata. Keep source, license path, and usage notes on the same row as shot notes.

- Source URL and marketplace item ID.
- Owner/contributor name and acquisition date.
- Known restrictions, model/property concerns, and territory notes.
- Final license decision: shortlisted, licensed, rejected.

04 Run a Historical Continuity Pass Weekly

Once a week, audit your pull for accidental anachronisms (vehicles, signage, fashion, architecture, flags, events) that break period continuity.

- Label suspicious clips as “verify date” instead of deleting them immediately.
- Escalate unclear scenes to researcher review with a 24-hour turnaround.
- Maintain a “safe alternates” column for every must-have sequence.

05 Keep a Ready-to-Send Pull Request Format

When your team needs help locating a missing moment, use one request format so search and licensing teams can move quickly.

- Year or year range
- Location (as specific as possible)
- Visual action and subject details
- Tone and pacing preferences
- Delivery deadline and licensing constraints

Direct Links for Research Teams

Browse all indexed year-place collections in the Archive Index, then submit precise pull requests through Request Footage.

Archive Index — stockfilm.com/all-collections

Request Footage — stockfilm.com/request-footage

Curated Collections — stockfilm.com/curated

Browse the Full Archive

stockfilm.com — Authentic 8mm & Super 8 Archival Footage