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	READ TIME	CATEGORY
Documentary Teams	12 min	Research

THE ARCHIVE BEHIND THIS GUIDE

162,000+	121	1930s-1980s	1,600+
searchable clips	countries	decades covered	physical source reels

Archival research fails in a predictable way. A team pulls two hundred clips it likes, and six weeks later the editor finds that half are undated, a third have unclear rights, and few map to any sequence in the cut. The fix is not more searching. It is a workflow where every clip enters the project with a date, a rights note, and a job in the timeline.

This guide walks through that workflow in six steps, from the one-page brief to the pull request you send when a moment is missing. Each step includes a template table you can copy straight into your own tracking sheet.

The workflow at a glance

1. Write the brief: One page: years, places, scenes, constraints
2. Search year + place: Anchor every query to a date and a location
3. Build the shot list: Every clip maps to a sequence ID
4. Log rights inline: Source and license notes on the same row
5. Audit continuity: A weekly anachronism pass on the whole pull
6. Send pull requests: One format the archive can act on fast

01 Define the Editorial Brief Before You Search

Write the brief in one page before pulling any clips. The brief is what keeps a research pull from drifting into a folder of nice-looking footage nobody can cut.

A useful brief is checkable. “Postwar optimism” cannot be verified against a clip. “Chicago, 1946 to 1952, storefronts and street traffic, color preferred” can. Push every line of the brief toward something a researcher could confirm or reject in ten seconds.

- 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.

ONE-PAGE BRIEF TEMPLATE

Field	What to write	Example
Story period	Start year, end year, milestone years	1946 to 1958; polio vaccine announcement, April 1955
Locations	Country, state, city, neighborhood	Chicago; South Side; Riverview Park
Scene priorities	Ranked list of scene types	1. street life, 2. school events, 3. home interiors
Visual constraints	Color, camera style, crowd density	Kodachrome color preferred; tripod or steady handheld
Rights constraints	Distribution and clearance limits	Festival plus streaming; no editorial-only clips

02 Search by Year and Place First

Home movie archives are not keyword libraries. The camera operator never tagged the footage, so the most reliable index is when and where a reel was shot. Anchor every search to a year and a place, then refine by activity and mood.

- Start wide with decade plus country, then narrow to year plus city as results allow.
- Search place names the way locals wrote them: neighborhoods, landmarks, and event names beat generic terms.
- Treat activity words as filters, not starting points. “Parade” inside “1950s Ohio” outperforms “parade” alone.
- Log every promising clip ID the moment you see it. Re-finding a clip later costs more than logging it now.
- When a search comes up dry, widen the year range before widening the geography. Amateur reels are often dated a year or two off.

> **Why year and place works**
> Home movies were shot by families, not producers, so nobody wrote shot descriptions. What nearly every reel does have is a time and a town. Searches that lead with year and place surface footage that keyword search never finds.

03 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?

SHOT LIST ROWS, ONE PER CANDIDATE CLIP

Seq	Function	Year / Place	Shot notes	Status
04	Establish	1952, Detroit	Elevated view of a downtown intersection, heavy foot traffic	Licensed
05	Detail	1950s, Midwest	Close on hands at a soda fountain counter	Shortlisted
06	Contrast	1948, rural Ohio	Farm kitchen interior, family at the table	Verify date
07	Transition	1953, Route 66	Car window view, motels and neon signs at dusk	Alternate found

04 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.

RIGHTS COLUMNS TO ADD TO THE SHOT LIST

Column	What to record	Why it matters
Source + clip ID	Marketplace URL and item ID at discovery	Re-finding an unlogged clip can take hours
Owner + date	Contributor name and acquisition date	The first question in any clearance review
Restrictions	Model, property, and territory notes	Editorial-only clips cannot move into promos
License decision	Shortlisted, licensed, or rejected	Stops rejected clips from re-entering the cut

> **Old does not mean public domain**
> Footage age alone does not determine copyright status. Treat every clip as rights-managed until its license path is confirmed in writing, and record that confirmation in the sheet.

05 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.

ANACHRONISM CHECKLIST

Check	What gives a date away	Example
Vehicles	Model years visible in frame	A 1957 Chevrolet in a scene logged as 1953
Signage	Prices, brands, phone and postal formats	A ZIP code on a sign places footage in 1963 or later
Flags	Star count on US flags	A 50-star flag dates a scene to July 1960 or later
Fashion	Hemlines, hats, hairstyles	Miniskirts in a shot labeled early 1950s
Events	Banners, posters, campaign material	An “I Like Ike” poster brackets a scene to 1952 to 1956

06 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

PULL REQUEST EXAMPLE

Field	Example
Year or range	1955 to 1959
Location	Miami Beach, hotel pool decks
Action and subjects	Families swimming, diving boards, poolside sunbathing
Tone and pacing	Bright, celebratory, saturated color, relaxed pacing
Deadline and rights	Rough cut locks March 14; worldwide streaming clearance

Direct Links for Research Teams

Browse indexed year and place collections in the Archive Index, check how footage provenance is documented on the Archive Integrity page, then send precise pull requests through Request Footage.

Archive Index — stockfilm.com/all-collections

Request Footage — stockfilm.com/request-footage

Archive Integrity — stockfilm.com/archive-integrity

Curated Collections — stockfilm.com/curated

Browse the Full Archive

stockfilm.com | Authentic 8mm and Super 8 Archival Footage