

Documentary Lab – FAQ

Frequently asked questions about Firelight Media’s Documentary Lab. This document will be updated as needed. [Last updated 02-26-26 11:37am ET]

[The Documentary Lab](#) is Firelight Media’s longest-running artist program. This 12-month fellowship is designed to nurture filmmakers of color working on their first or second non-fiction feature film. The Documentary Lab provides holistic support for fellows’ projects and careers through professional development, customized mentorship, and a \$25K project grant. Throughout the fellowship, filmmakers build a network within the documentary ecosystem, connecting with Firelight alumni and forging industry relationships across the field.

Over the last decade, the Documentary Lab has grown from a mentorship program into a robust talent incubator that has supported approximately 150 emerging filmmakers of color and granted over \$2.3 million toward productions. The fellowship brings together a cohesive cohort and connects them to an extraordinary community of Firelight Media alumni, while also building relationships across the independent documentary field.

1. **WHEN IS THE APPLICATION OPEN CALL?**

- a. The Documentary Lab application will open on Monday, April 6, 2026 and closes at 11:59pm (ET) on Monday, May 4, 2026.

2. **WHAT MAKES A PROJECT A GOOD FIT?**

- a. The 2026 Documentary Lab will only accept projects in post-production. In an effort to be responsive to the changing landscape in the documentary field, all the projects in the fellowship will be aligned at a similar stage, allowing the 12-month program to focus on story development and project feedback to help move films significantly closer to completion. Filmmakers

should be prepared to have intentional conversations about how to reach their ideal audiences, and be strategic about moving their films out into the world.

Selected filmmakers should have completed principal production, and be focused on the edit of their films by the start of the Doc Lab fellowship in September 2026. Filmmakers will be presenting work-in-progress cuts for feedback throughout the fellowship.

3. WHO IS ELIGIBLE TO APPLY?

- a. The Documentary Lab eligibility requirements are as follows:
 - i. Only the director of the film is eligible to apply and participate in the program. Co-directors may participate if they meet all eligibility requirements. If you're applying with your co-director, please indicate that in your application. We cannot accept more than 2 directors per project.
 - ii. This program is intended for BIPOC filmmakers based in the United States or U.S. territories (Puerto Rico, U.S. Virgin Islands, U.S. Samoa, Guam/Northern Mariana Islands).
 - iii. The project must be a long-form/feature-length documentary; the fellowship does not accept short documentaries, series, or fiction projects.
 - iv. Applicants must be emerging documentary filmmakers directing their first or second feature-length documentary.
 - v. **NEW FOR 2026: We are only accepting films that are in POST-PRODUCTION. The film must be a work in progress. Completed films, or films in development, production or pre-production, are not eligible. Be sure to review FAQs if you have further questions regarding your eligibility.**
- b. Filmmakers are not eligible to receive support through Firelight Media's artist programs if:

- i. The filmmaker is applying with a project that is a student film or related to ongoing coursework.
- ii. The filmmaker is re-applying to a program they previously received support from.
- iii. The filmmaker is contracted with another Firelight Media artist program and has not completed the final deliverables by the time they are selected for this program.
- iv. The filmmaker is employed by Firelight Media, Firelight Films, or is a member of the board of directors.
- v. The filmmaker does not hold the majority of the intellectual property of the film.

4. CAN I APPLY WITH A CO-DIRECTOR?

- a. Yes, you may apply with a co-director as long as both directors meet our eligibility criteria. In the application, please delineate your roles and discuss the creative partnership.

5. WHAT DO YOU CONSIDER FEATURE-LENGTH?

- a. Firelight Media's definition of a feature-length film is in alignment with the industry standard, which is 40 minutes or longer. Usually, Documentary Lab films end up being from a broadcast hour to 90 minutes in length.

6. DO I HAVE TO HAVE FUNDING ALREADY IN PLACE IN ORDER TO BE ELIGIBLE OR HAVE A COMPETITIVE APPLICATION?

- a. No, you do not need to already have funding in place, but it's good for us to know your fundraising strategy and that you've done your work thinking about where else you'll be looking to apply for funds.

7. DO YOU WANT US TO NAME THE SPECIFIC GRANTS WE PLAN TO APPLY TO IN THE APPLICATION?

- a. Yes, you should summarize fundraising strategies, especially if you have pending grant applications that have already been submitted or that you plan to submit.

8. COULD YOU EXPAND ON THE "MOTIVATION TO APPLY" SECTION OF THE APPLICATION? WHAT KINDS OF INFORMATION WOULD BE HELPFUL HERE?

- a. This is a critical portion of the application. We hope to get insight into why you want to be in the Documentary Lab Fellowship, why you want to be a part of the Firelight Media community, and what you hope to accomplish over the 12 months. Please consider the areas you hope the Doc Lab experience will continue to help you grow, the areas you are still looking to be supported, and what progress you hope to make with your project over the 12 months of the fellowship.

9. DOES THE 20-MINUTE MINIMUM WORK SAMPLE NEED TO BE ONE 20-MINUTE LONG SEQUENCE, OR CAN IT BE SEVERAL SHORT SEQUENCES ADDING UP TO 20 - 45 MINUTES?

- a. The work sample does not need to be a continuous sequence. The work sample length and format may depend on where you are in the post-production process. For example, filmmakers who state they are at the Rough Cut stage will likely submit a longer sample or the full Rough Cut. Filmmakers who are earlier in the post process may submit several separate scenes that add up to 20 minutes.

10. WOULD FIRELIGHT MEDIA HAVE SHARED COPYRIGHT OVER THE FILM CREATED?

- a. Documentary Lab fellows would need to credit Firelight Media with a logo placed among the other funders and a credit, but in no way would Firelight Media be sharing the copyright with the filmmaker of the project. All of our fellows retain copyright and all editorial control over their films.

11. HOW MANY FELLOWS WILL BE CHOSEN?

- a. The Documentary Lab usually selects around 10 projects to participate in the program. Of those 10 projects, roughly two are directed by a pair of co-directors.

12. WHAT IS THE REVIEW AND NOTIFICATION TIMELINE?

- a. The review and notification timeline is as follows:
 - i. Application review period - May-July 2026
 - ii. Panel review meeting - Late July 2026
 - iii. Finalist Interviews - August 2026
 - iv. Final Notifications - Late August 2026

13. WHEN DOES THE FELLOWSHIP PERIOD START?

- a. The 12-month Documentary Lab program begins in September.

14. WHAT ARE THE COMMITMENTS FOR PARTICIPATING IN THE DOCUMENTARY LAB FELLOWSHIP?

- a. Cohort Orientation (September 2026)
- b. Monthly Mentorship (Office Hours & 1:1 Sessions)
- c. Cohort Gathering
- d. Work-in-Progress Feedback Sessions
- e. End of program (September 2027)