

GREEN STORYTELLING CHECKLIST – DOCUMENTARY FILM

A tool from the Green Storytelling Initiative



For documentary filmmakers, directors, writers, dramaturgs, producers, editors, and funding organizations to consider the ecological impacts of factual stories as early as in the concept development and research phases.¹⁾

WHAT WE WANT:

- Documentary films have a special power to make reality feel real, affect us emotionally, and get people to contribute to social change. We want to encourage the targeted use of this power for environmental issues.
- We're here to help documentary filmmakers bring ecological and sustainable ideas into their work while sparking creativity—**without restricting their artistic freedom.**
- Our goal is to show how documentary films can be made sustainably from the first idea to distribution—in respect to content, storytelling, and production.

WHAT WE DON'T WANT:

- The checklist isn't meant to dictate themes or opinions, but rather to get you thinking.
- We're not trying to teach a one-sided lesson about ecological themes. We want to encourage you to tell stories that are moving, multi-layered, and authentic.

¹⁾ This checklist applies to documentary project development, treatments, or scripts. For staged reenactments, the fictional [Green Storytelling Checklist \(HERE\)](#) can be consulted as well. For the respectful treatment of animals and their habitats, please refer to the [Animal Storytelling Checklist \(HERE\)](#).

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A DEFINITION OF “GREEN STORYTELLING IN DOCUMENTARY FORMATS”

Green storytelling in documentary formats means integrating ecological themes into real stories in an authentic, responsible, and thoughtful manner.

It combines cinematic storytelling with sustainability awareness—in three complementary areas:

PRAGMATIC GREEN STORYTELLING

Production-related sustainable decisions

Pragmatic green storytelling means thinking about the environmental impact of producing a documentary from the very first idea.

How can the choice of subject matter, research locations, and filming conditions be structured in a way that minimizes environmental impact while still allowing for creative solutions

IMPLICIT GREEN STORYTELLING

Behavior, selection, and portrayal of protagonists, as well as the overall perspective

Implicit Green Storytelling portrays climate change, the climate and biodiversity crises, environmental degradation, resource-efficient and environmentally friendly solutions, as well as sustainable lifestyles, without placing these issues at the forefront of the narrative.

This reflects the fact that our everyday lives are increasingly shaped by these challenges.

EXPLICIT GREEN STORYTELLING

Thematic Integration and Narrative Focus

Films that deliberately place ecological themes, conflicts, or potential solutions at the center use explicit green storytelling.

In contrast to implicit approaches, sustainability is openly addressed here—through the choice of subject matter, narrative style, or the statements and actions of the protagonists.

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CHECKLIST

Note: Not all points will apply to every project, especially since documentary storytelling is based on real-life circumstances.

PRAGMATIC GREEN STORYTELLING

Production-related sustainable decisions

- Is the choice of filming locations guided by the principle “as close as possible, as far as necessary” to reduce travel and carbon emissions? ☐
- Can local film and media professionals be hired for the shoot and/or can local experts be involved in project and production planning? ☐
- Is it possible to reduce the number of locations? Can archival footage be used or interviews conducted via video call? Can animations or graphics reduce the need to shoot individual scenes ²⁾? ☐
- Can filming take place at times of the year and/or day that allow for resource-efficient work (e.g., using natural light, avoiding additional heating or cooling measures)? ☐
- Can energy-intensive or environmentally harmful filming situations (e.g., complex technical setups, high-power equipment, unnecessary transportation) be avoided or reduced? ☐
- Is the ecological sensitivity of the filming locations considered? Have potential disturbances or damages of filming in sensitive ecosystems (e.g., breeding grounds, wetlands, or forests) been assessed and avoided or minimized? ☐
- Have local communities been approached to include considerations how locations might be affected by environmental issues that are not directly related to the subject matter of the film (e.g., a documentary about a racetrack might show the impact of motorsports on climate, animals, and the environment in a broader sense)? ☐

²⁾ For AI-generated images and other digitally produced content, the AI's own energy consumption should be weighed against the filming resources saved.

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IMPLICIT GREEN STORYTELLING

Behavior, selection, and portrayal of the protagonists, as well as overall perspective

- Can sustainable everyday actions or dealing with ecological changes be made visible through the protagonists' everyday lives (perhaps because it grows out of their work, their surroundings, or their outlook on life; e.g. a protagonist who happens to be a biologist)? ☐
- Is it shown that the climate crisis is already a reality and shapes many aspects of everyday life? ☐
- Are everyday, credible behaviors shown where ecological responsibility is evident (e.g., the conscious use of resources, such as repairing, sharing, reusing, and recycling)? ☐
- Are social conditions or infrastructures depicted that either facilitate or hinder sustainable behavior—such as good public transportation, regional markets, or, conversely, infrequent bus service and high costs for e-mobility? ☐
- Are traces of, e.g., climate change, environmental destruction, or species extinction visible in the central theme or in the protagonists' lived reality, and can these be woven into the narrative? ☐
- Does it become clear that the protagonists are part of their environment (and not separate from it) by letting audiences experience their relationship to natural processes, places, or conditions without further explanations? ☐
- Is it shown how the environment is altered by human action and how its ecological consequences (e.g., climate change or species loss) have tangible effects on the lives and decisions of the protagonists? ☐
- Are protagonists portrayed in their potentially “imperfect sustainability”, e.g., as people who want to act sustainably but also make contradictory decisions in their daily lives (e.g., driving a car even though they know it's environmentally problematic), without judging them? ☐

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EXPLICIT GREEN STORYTELLING

Thematic integration and narrative focus

- Is an environmental issue at the center of the story, or does it shape a major narrative thread? ☐
- Are we following people who are actively grappling with environmental/ climate issues? ☐
- Do the protagonists undergo a change or develop a new perspective— toward more conscious, sustainable thinking or action? ☐
- Does the film encourage reflection, inspire visions, and open up new perspectives for the audience, while also pointing toward potential solutions? ☐
- Are the consequences of inaction or of ignoring ecological problems also made visible? ☐
- Is problematic or environmentally harmful behavior shown as part of societal or individual challenges—without moral oversimplification, but with critical reflection? ☐
- Does the film show the concrete effects of environmental problems on the lives of the protagonists? ☐

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About the authors:

The “Green Storytelling Checklist for Documentary Formats” was developed by Dr. Julia Dordel and the Green Storytelling Initiative³⁾ and further refined during a workshop with filmmakers as part of the Film & Media Forum 2025 (Rebecca Bloecher, Tatjana Fallmann, Laura Saenger, Orla Wolf). With the collaboration of film and media scholar and Green Consultant for Film & TV Dr. habil. Thomas Klein (University of Hamburg, Partnernetzwerk Medien).

³⁾ The Green Storytelling Initiative (in alphabetical order)

- **Dr. Julia Dordel**, screenwriter, producer / Film & Medienbüro Niedersachsen e.V.
- **Judith Gridl**, screenwriter, / journalist, Bayerischer Rundfunk
- **Julia Hoepfner**, nordmedia – Film- und Mediengesellschaft Niedersachsen/Bremen mbH
- **Ron Kellermann**, Dramaturg
- **Judith Niemeyer**, Producer & Green Consultant / Professional Association Green Consultants Europe e.V.
- **Dr. Maike Sarah Reinerth**, Film and Media Scholar, University of Copenhagen
- **Christiane Scholz**, MOIN Film Fund Hamburg Schleswig-Holstein

Get involved: This document is a living document and is open to further development. Your feedback to dordel@filmbuero-nds.de is not only welcome but an important part of this process.

Let's continue to think ahead and experiment together. Best of luck with your documentary projects!



Film & Medienbüro
Niedersachsen



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BABELSBERG
KONRAD WOLF



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