Name: _____ Date: _____

# How Did MrBeast Build a YouTube Channel?

Reading level 10 (6th grade) · 1217 words

How does one person build a video channel with more than 500 million subscribers? On June 12, 2026, YouTube's blog said Jimmy Donaldson, who makes videos as MrBeast, was the first individual creator to reach 500 million subscribers. This book follows the craft behind that number. How are his videos cut? How are they tested? Who picks the picture? It starts with one person and a camera, and it ends with a big team.

It began small. His channel was then called MrBeast6000. Donaldson put up his first video in February 2012, when he was 13. His early videos were Minecraft and other game clips. Some guessed how much other YouTubers earned. One report said they got only about a thousand views each. By mid-2016, one report said, his channel had around 30,000 subscribers. He has said he was still a teenager when he had 8,000. Growth was slow at first.

He was also studying. In a 2021 interview, he said he saved for months to buy a microphone. He added that it was far worse than the one in front of him that day. He and his friends spent hours on long video calls. They pulled other creators' videos apart to see what worked. One day, he said, they talked for 18 hours. His advice to new creators is the same: study YouTube, and watch a lot of it.

In January 2017, he posted a video of himself counting to 100,000. The counting took about 40 hours. He sped up some parts to keep the video under 24 hours. Within days, at least tens of thousands of people had watched it. It was the video that made his channel take off. Next came a count to 200,000, a 24-hour fidget spinner video and a 10-hour music marathon. In one interview, he put his plan as a question: what do people want to see?

As the videos grew, so did the work, and he began to hire. In 2021, he said his first hire was an editor. He said he was so picky about how he wanted a video to look. After that, he hired someone new about every month. An editor turns hours of raw footage into the few minutes a viewer sees. He wanted that job done exactly the way he pictured it.

The first ten seconds matter most, he says. He called them the part people undervalue the most. He has also said that the longer people watch something, the more likely they are to keep watching. For a longer video, he suggests a side story in the middle, to give people a second reason to stay. When someone talks to the camera, he says, a shot with no cut gets boring.

YouTube can measure that leaving. Its retention graph shows when viewers are watching and where they drop off. A dip means people skipped or quit at that moment, and a slow fall across the whole video is common. A spike means more people watched, rewatched or shared a part. Donaldson has his own rule, too. He said he told a friend who makes videos

that a video with under 70 percent retention meant something was done wrong. That is his rule, not YouTube's.

His videos are not scripted. He has called the filming run and gun. The crew shoots a huge amount and finds the story later. He says a video needs a big story that holds together. It also needs small moments where every second is fun. In March 2024, the writer Taylor Lorenz described his kind of editing as loud sound effects, fast cuts, flashing lights and zero pauses. That same month, he said he was slowing his videos down. And if he is even a little bored, he has said, he cuts it.

Then there is the picture. In 2024, his thumbnail designer, Chucky Appleby, said the team makes about 50 ideas for the thumbnail and title of each video. It changes shirt colors, outfits and backgrounds. That makes hundreds of versions. His rule for a picture is simple: make it easy to understand. Appleby began by remaking the early pictures with stronger color and contrast. Since 2019, a big picture of Donaldson's face has been in the thumbnails. Donaldson has called it brand recognition.

Titles have rules, too. In a January 2023 interview, Donaldson said a title should ideally have fewer than 50 characters. It should be short and simple. He has said the thumbnails on the most-watched videos tend to be clear, with little clutter. Appleby warns that crowded pictures often fail at small sizes. He adds a rule about trust. The picture makes a promise, and the video must keep it. Trust is what makes people come back and click.

How does the team choose among all those versions? They test. YouTube has a tool that lets a creator compare up to three titles and thumbnails on one video. Different viewers see different versions. The winner is the one with the most watch time, not just the most clicks. A test should end within two weeks. A trick may win a click, but it can lose the viewer a moment later.

One test asked whether Donaldson's mouth should be open or closed. Appleby described a run of about 30 videos. The closed-mouth version had more watch time every time. The overall gap was small. But the result was steady, and it convinced the team. In 2023, the team found that closing his mouth did better. A March 2026 article quoted Donaldson: in every A/B test, the less cringe expression won. The team now makes closed mouths its standard. The reports did not give watch-time numbers, so the size of the effect is unknown.

By 2023, one report said he employed more than 250 people, from writers to editors to producers. In January 2023, he said he still approved every idea before it was filmed. On some videos, he has said, the footage was so large that one person could not watch it in five lifetimes. He has also said most people should not copy his way of working, because it needs a big team. He also called himself technically the product, and said it all falls apart if he does not show up.

A big audience can also be pointed at a project. On October 25, 2019, Donaldson and Mark Rober launched #TeamTrees. Rober is a former NASA engineer, and hundreds of other YouTube creators helped. The goal was to plant 20 million trees by 2020, one tree for each dollar given. The Arbor Day Foundation ran the planting. An outside accounting firm later checked that more than 24 million trees had been planted. The campaign's site now lists more than 25 million.

Donaldson has said his first 500 videos did not deserve a million views. In a January 2023 interview, he said many people plan their first video for three months. He told new creators to make a hundred videos and improve something each time. In May 2025, he told Guinness his advice was to keep failing until you succeed. On November 17, 2022, Guinness World Records verified his channel at 112,193,139 subscribers. That was a record for an individual male on YouTube at that time. On June 12, 2026, YouTube's blog marked 500 million.

## Questions

**1. What did the 2017 counting video show about his channel?**

A. It began as a big team project
B. One simple idea could draw big numbers fast
C. It was seen by very few people

**2. Why did Donaldson say his first hire was an editor?**

A. He was picky about how a video looks
B. He wanted help with money
C. He had run out of ideas

**3. What does YouTube say decides the winner in its title and thumbnail test?**

A. Most clicks
B. Most watch time
C. Most likes

**4. Who set the 70 percent retention standard?**

A. YouTube
B. The thumbnail designer
C. Donaldson himself

**5. In "the picture makes a promise, and the video must keep it," what does promise mean?**

A. A birthday gift
B. A sign of what the viewer will get
C. A fast cut

**6. What happened in the mouth test?**

A. Closed-mouth versions had more watch time in about 30 videos

B. Open-mouth versions won most of the time

C. The test showed no difference at all

## Words to know

retention: viewers staying

thumbnail: small video picture

editor: footage cutter

footage: raw video

spike: sudden rise

# Answer key: How Did MrBeast Build a YouTube Channel?

1. B. One simple idea could draw big numbers fast
2. A. He was picky about how a video looks
3. B. Most watch time
4. C. Donaldson himself
5. B. A sign of what the viewer will get
6. A. Closed-mouth versions had more watch time in about 30 videos